

# Broken

By: Kristina Udice

Three tiny heads, with tendrils of hair the colors of leaves at the height of autumn, run screaming and laughing down a hill splashed in vibrant greens, the grass holding on with all its might to the splendor and richness it held in the summer months.

A golden retriever runs beside them, though his age is evident in his pace as he falls slowly behind. But his tail wags as though he were just a puppy, like it did when they first brought him home and introduced him to their world. His eyes still gleam with that effortless love, the same twinkle seen in the eyes of these young girls. Sisters—the oldest no older than 13, the youngest no younger than 6, and the third falling somewhere in between.

But they laughed like their age made no difference. Because it didn't. Because they were sisters who loved each other and laughed with each other and cared too deeply for their young minds to truly comprehend.

The two oldest run from the youngest, tossing back and forth a ball that the youngest has no chance of retrieving. She knows it too, but she tries anyway, goes along with the game because these are her sisters and this is what they do. They run and skip and play hopscotch until the sun starts to set and their dog falls to the cement in exhaustion, chest heaving and tongue lolling in an image of cinematic perfection.

Their mother, who peaks out every few minutes, just in case, finally calls them in. The house is cool and the tiled floor shocks their sweaty toes. But before they know it, they're filing into the kitchen, jumping onto their respective counter top chairs, and devouring the soup their mother has prepared. It's silent for a few minutes, the house engulfed with the calming sounds of spoons against bowls, and the sloshing of soup inside the messy mouths of children.

All is at peace, and no one wants for anything more than a warm bath and a bowl of chocolate ice cream.

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It's not all fun and games in the Matthews household. Sometimes there's laughter and popcorn and Yahtzee nights. There's teasing and practical jokes and family vacations to Florida where no one wears enough sunscreen and everyone comes back looking like a lobster. Those are the fun times. Those are the good times. Those are the times Madison tries to remember on the nights that aren't so good.

On those nights there's yelling and banging and anger. There's holes in walls and broken glasses and family meetings when their mother and father sit the girls down

and ask them how they'd feel if they got a divorce. Those nights end in tears. Those nights aren't good at all.

But Madison tries to stay strong; she's the oldest after all. She has to take care of her sisters. She has to be there to hold them when they cry, she has to be there to tell them that mom and dad are just having a little fight, she has to be there when they cry themselves to sleep and sometimes all she can do is lie there with them in the dark until their sniffles stop and their breathing evens out. Only then is she allowed to crawl into her own bed and let her own tears fall. But she never cries as long as she probably should. She can't.

By morning, everything has settled. Their mother makes them waffles and their dad kisses them all goodbye before he goes to work. Any evidence of the night before is washed away, glass picked up and voices even. And the youngest girls forget it all like a bad dream.

Madison tries, but she can't, so she settles for pretend.

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He likes to take the girls to baseball games, their father. He drives them all the way from the mountains of New Hampshire to the skyscrapers of New York. The Bronx. They're Yankees at heart. The drive is always so exciting, so new.

It's an adventure and they take turns changing the stations of the radio. Their father loves sports and smooth jazz. The girls like their Princess and the Pauper soundtrack and nothing else. The ride lasts five hours, but by hour 3 the trio is passed out, heads on the shoulder of the next, mouths agape and lids fluttering with dreams. It's finally quiet, peaceful. And they're in the Big Apple before they even realized they'd fallen asleep.

The games are always cold. They're wrapped in their father's old sweatshirts and their mothers knit hats. They look like munchkins and they love it, eating popcorn and watching the tiny people running across grass that's greener than they'd ever seen.

Their father provides his own commentary, and the sisters laugh like he's the funniest man in the world. And to them, he is. He hugs them and buys them cotton candy and carries them back to the car when they fall asleep amidst the throng of screaming fans. He kisses their foreheads and pulls on their hair and their mother always smacks him for it. The girls will pout and sniffle but then he opens his mouth and the smiles that they try to hold back break across their faces and father and daughter are friends again.

Their father is the greatest man in all the world. All fathers are. They're there to wipe away the tears and make faces behind the backs of mothers when they're yelling about spilt juice and broken animal crackers. And their father is no different, only he

makes the faces when they're mother *is* looking, and it makes Madison laugh even harder, feeling like she's in on a little secret only she and her father are a part of.

That's how it started out. Little secrets. Smirks and giggles and an extra piece of cake after dinner. But she wasn't ready for the secret that would break her heart.

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She's a girl like any other girl, fiery tangles flying in the harsh autumn breeze. Her bright, plastic covered pink backpack bounces against her back with every step she takes—her stride very much the frenzied dance of every middle school girl on their walk home from school. The sleeves of her chunky grey sweater, too long and too scratchy against her skin, keep away the burning chill from her hands as her sneakers smack against the leaf covered ground beneath her feet. A few twigs snap under the weight of her gait, but she can't hear them over the wind tunnel that turn her ears a bright pink, shaking the last remaining leaves from their homes high up in the trees.

It's a day like any other, the sun still shines—warm rays losing all warmth as they cascade through the atmosphere and down to this quiet little town in the middle of New Hampshire. Right smack in the middle, the only thing for miles being trees and bears and the occasional lumberjack. Children walk home, smiles and giggles and the occasional scream. The air is crisp, biting if out in it too long. But mothers wait inside houses, heat cranked up and mugs of hot chocolate waiting for the kids finally free of the school week.

Madison is one of those smiling children, anxious to throw off her bag and throw herself under the covers of her comforter. *It's a good day to watch Mary Kate and Ashley movies*, she thinks, and she rushes the rest of the way through the thin forest and into her backyard.

There's an eerie quiet piercing the air, a silence that chills and eats and consumes. But Madison is just a girl, a girl like any other, and her mind entertains only the thoughts of mystery solving twins and rice krispie treats.

The Olsen twins may have taught her many things, but the approaching events were pieces of one mystery that Madison would soon regret solving.

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There's broken glass and cracked plaster and empty rooms. The garage door hangs open limply, windowpanes cracked and wood splintered. The driver side window of her father's car is gone, the only hint of what once was being the sparkling remnants strewn about the garage floor.

Inside the house is no better, there are holes punched in walls and broken plates and a heaviness that hangs in the air like stale cigarettes and betrayal. Her mouth opens, her lungs heave, there is no sound. Her house doesn't feel like her home. Her

skin crawls and freezes and she searches for answers to questions she has yet to conceive.

Rings that litter the carpeted landing sparkle in the sun that trickles in through the foyer window. Beams of light reflect off the crystals hanging from the ornate chandelier. Dust flies in the mid afternoon sun. Everything is normal and nothing is normal at the very same moment. Because this jewelry does not belong on the floor, scattered about the hallway like it's trash.

It's not.

Her mother's jewelry box lies cracked and empty in the middle of the hallway, she can see it from the landing through the holes in the wooden railing. Necklaces and bracelets and watches she has never seen cover the floor. Some are broken; some are not. But none are where they should be and her legs stop moving.

Only she can't stop. She keeps moving forward and she can't feel her feet anymore. She's drawn to her parent's room, where the door is cracked just slightly and she can hear noises no matter how faint.

And then she's in the room, and there are tears and cries and so much darkness. Time slows. Or speeds by. Or maybe it stops completely. Because her father is on the ground and her mother's clothes are lying in shambles and her head is pounding with scenarios all of which end without fairies or princesses or happily ever afters.

She rushes to his side and cries along with him. She doesn't know why but she knows she should. She hugs him and holds him even though he should be the one holding her. Comforting her. Chasing away the monsters and the demons that are invading her mind like the ones that would hide under her bed. But he doesn't. He can't. He's lost. And she's lost too. Lost in a land she never read about in stories or watched on T.V. She's watching her father break, watching him shatter and fall apart in a way that she never thought she'd see him fall. And she's still not even sure why.

It's not until later, faces stained with salty rivulets and eyes red like gloveless hands in winter that she realizes in helping her father find peace, she lost a part of herself in the process.

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Later, she watches from the porch swing as her sisters run across the yard. They laugh and play with kids across the street, basketballs bouncing into the middle of the always-quiet road. She sits and watches when she should be out there playing, should because she always does. But she doesn't want to. Not today.

Through the cracked front door she can hear her father on the phone. He's talking to someone. No, he's yelling at someone. Screaming. There's rage now—no more tears, no more emptiness. There's an edge to his voice that burns at the corners of

her eyes and digs her fingernails into the skin of her hands. She's never heard him yell like that, not even at her mother. But maybe that's her on the phone.

She hopes it is.

She hasn't come home, not yet. And the girls, her sisters, keep running up to her to see if she's arrived. She fakes a smile and replies with a single no. And they're satisfied as they run across the street and into their fabricated world of zombies and superheroes.

Madison doesn't want to go inside, but she does. She just wants a peek. The house has been cleaned; it was pristine before her sisters ever made it home. She helped her father fix everything up. After he made her promise to keep a secret that eats away at all the good times she tries to hold onto.

She listens intently, her father pacing back and forth in the kitchen as she hides in the foyer. She can hear the person on the other end. It's a man. It's *him*. The sound makes her sick to her stomach and she doesn't listen any more. The autumn air washes over her like the wave that almost washed her away that one summer in Myrtle Beach as she retreats back to her spot on the porch swing.

Her mind wanders and she no longer sees her sisters playing across the street. She can't see anything but her mother and her elementary school and the teacher that was once her best friend, her uncle, her big brother in a world where her family was falling apart.

As it turns out, he's the one that broke it in the first place.

She remembers crying on her last day as a fifth grader. She remembers how badly she would miss the man, that second grade teacher, who became her best friend. She remembers telling her mother she didn't want to grow up; she didn't want to leave. She remembers lunches when they'd play Go Fish and create inside jokes. Madison didn't have many friends. Madison didn't have anybody.

And she doesn't know what hurts more, because everything hurts and nothing is okay. She's only 13 and she doesn't even understand the idea of sex, not fully. What does cheating even mean? She knows it's bad. She knows her mother is awful for doing it. She knows it's wrong and it's wrong because it made her dad cry. It made him break. Her mother broke her father and she thinks seeing him cry hurt her more than the secret ever could.

She almost doesn't hear her mother's car enter the driveway. She almost doesn't hear the screaming and the fighting and her mother packing up a suitcase. She almost doesn't hear the engine of her mother's car rush back to life just as it had quieted down for a good night's rest.

She almost doesn't hear it, but she does.

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Madison can't remember a time when things were normal.

Ever since the day she came home to a sobbing father and a broken home, she can't help but feel like things will never be the same. Even as her parents reconciled, as much as they could for the sake of their children. Even as her sisters continued their days ignorant to the knowledge that burned into the young 13 year olds mind like marshmallows roasted for s'mores. Even as they move to a new house, get a new dog, make Christmas cookies and take a trip to a tropical paradise. There's something missing, something within Madison that no longer exists.

There have been many good days since the day that was so *so* bad. To many, it would appear that the family was whole, complete, happy. And on the surface, they were. The girls got everything they asked for on their Christmas list. Their parent's hired babysitters to watch them on nights they went on dates. They still spent days at Roby Park sledding down the giant hill that tired them out before nightfall. If Madison didn't know any better, she'd say that her family was the happiest it had ever been.

But she did know better.

Because in between the family dinners and vacations were nights that ended with Madison locked in her sisters' room, making sure they made it to sleep through their tears.

There was fighting, but there was always fighting. Fighting about the groceries or the mail or bills. But now the fights were about betrayal and lies and the word infidelity that Madison had to look up in a dictionary. And she never forgot it.

The words were different and so were the events. The yelling would stop very suddenly, and then she'd hear her mother on the verge of tears. And her sisters would be playing video games and all she could do was listen. Listen to her father come down the stairs, suitcase in hand. She'd watch as he'd ignore her mother, kiss his daughters on the forehead, and leave the house like it was nothing more than a bad memory. Their mother wouldn't speak. She couldn't.

But Madison wouldn't have listened even if she did.

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Years fly by, and things get better. Her parents fall in love, because she's pretty sure they didn't love each other in the first place. And her sisters never find out about the day that Madison can never forget, even though she tries—my god does she try. She tries with booze and she tries with drugs and when neither work she throws herself into school work because, let's face it, she's always been that kind of kid anyway. Maybe a preoccupation with imaginary numbers and the Civil War can take her mind off the event that everyone seems to have moved on from.

And she doesn't realize that the reason she can't forget is because she can't let go. That stubbornness she was born with, that stubbornness she inherited from her mother, stops her from forgiving, stops her from facing the problems of her life so instead she settles for blame.

She blames her mother for her childhood. For her pain. For her anger. For growing up too fast and for killing the memory of a person she considered her family. She blames her mother for the pain of her father when her father couldn't care to look back on that day any more than she could. Because they've both moved on and they've both forgiven and they've both come to the realization that they love each other and they love their family and nothing else matters.

Throughout the years, she had grown distant from her mother. She had stayed away and treated her with disdain. And some nights, before she goes to sleep, she regrets it. She regrets the harsh comments and the lies and nights when she told her she hated her. She wouldn't feel so bad had she not done it on purpose, had she not told her father, in the same breath, how he deserved so much better.

She can't forget the tears and the anger and watching her sisters grow up thinking they had done something wrong—they had to have—for their parents to fight like they did. And sometimes she thinks her sister knows, the middle child, the girl who lived life on the edge and never looked back. Sometimes, she thinks she knows. But she knows better than to ask, than to burden her with something so heavy and so suffocating. It's not right, it's not necessary, it's not fair.

That day—even though it wasn't just that day, or those days, or those months even—is long gone. She's not even really sure if she remembers it the right way. She probably doesn't; time can do that. And she doesn't want to hold onto it like she has, like she is, like she fears she always will. So she throws herself into her school work. She gets straight A's. She passes her drivers test and gets into college. She picks her sister up from the bus stop and goes on her very first date. And sometimes it goes away, the nagging voice that screams at her to break, to crumble, to hate. And sometimes it doesn't. But she's sure as hell never going to give up.

It's been years and everyone has forgotten, everyone has forgiven, everyone has moved on. So she sits on her bed, eyes looking out of the skylight in her bedroom ceiling to the stars twinkling in the night sky and hopes that one day—begs and pleads and prays to any god that will listen—that one day she can too.