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## Prologue: Bread

Dakoda McCallum  
*College of DuPage*

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*Prologue: Bread*

DAKODA MCCALLUM

Bethany sipped gently on her tea. It was supposed to heal stomach aches but with every taste on her tongue, it only made her anxious stomach flip. Kyla's skirt swished around her calves as she went back and forth between her kitchen counters. The afternoon sun shone in through the dusting flour rising in the air. She kneaded the bread and formed it into balls. There were several gluten spheres all around the kitchen. Bethany pushed away her tea.

She took up her book and fingered the edge of the page she had already read over three times. She began to read it for the fourth time.

"Was that tea any help?" Kyla asked as she brought over a cloth-covered bowl.

Bethany swallowed and shook her head softly. *No.*

Kyla set the bowl near the window where a warm breeze swept in now and again. She reached over and held Bethany's hand and rubbed the soft pad of her thumb over Bethany's farm-calloused hands. She sat there in the quiet. Neither looked each other in the eye, their hands met in the middle. Bethany couldn't. She thought she might throw up.

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Bethany waited in the hallway. The hospital had rooms with glass walls. Standing with the glass between her and her dying mother still felt like too little distance. She felt the tightening urge to flee. She kept seeing her mother rising, ready to charge at her with fire in her eyes and words poised to spring from her forked tongue.

The doctors were all giving their apologies. Bethany had to keep a straight face. She could have laughed, cried, and then spat in the doctor's face. Then she started imagining that they were apologizing for not speeding it along. That they were uncovering this grand mystery of who her mother was. That, suddenly, whatever this thing was that was eating her alive was of the will and mercy of God.

Somehow the nurses knew. Nurses always know. They see the looks you throw to your loved one as they lay in bed. The nurses didn't say much to Bethany. They gave a lot of hugs though. Great, good hugs. They *had* to know what the woman tangled up in IVs and monitors was capable of.

The mask they had put on her face gave Bethany comfort. *Maybe she'd never speak again. No more yelling.*

"She's making the turn," the doctor said one afternoon, "She'll be gone by the morning. I'm sorry, Ms. Barrett."

Bethany tried staying awake. She read. A nurse brought her coffee. They nodded to each other. Bethany muttered a "thank you." They both knew the coffee was a lie. Her mother's last mercy of life: that her daughter would pretend to stay awake as much as she could through the night to cherish the last moments with her mother.

She didn't know what time it was when she woke. But it was sunny, golden. Bethany stared into the pixels of the heart rate monitor. A nurse walked in. She was checking vitals. Maybe for the last time.

Bethany sat there. Staring. And the heart monitor went flat. It made that alarm sound. She wished it made a prettier sound than that. Her heart leapt a little. It made her anxious. Hospital staff rushed in, looking like they were going to try bringing her back. Bethany reached out to a nurse with a limp hand.

“Please don’t,” she whimpered.

The nurse swallowed. “We’re just calling time of death.”

Bethany nodded. She was so dizzy. *Nightmares always die in the morning.*

They had put on her gravestone: *Jessica Barrett. Beloved daughter and mother.* The greatest lies are recorded on tombstones.

*She didn’t deserve to be called mother.*

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It was cold in the night. The stars shone so brightly. Bethany wished that they would send some of their astronomical heat down to earth. Her bare feet hung over the branch. The cottage glowed orange from the inside out. Kyla had set both ovens in the cottage ablaze to bake the bread which had spent the day rising up toward the warm sun at the windows. Kyla had dough on her window sills where many would put house plants and failed herb-growing attempts.

Anywhere would have been warmer than up in this tree. But it was the first time all day that Bethany did not feel nauseous. She wasn’t willing to break the spell quite yet. Besides, it was sobering to be reminded how powerful the sun was, only to leave her in the dark chill when it was called to the other half of the world.

All of the bunnies had gone away. The sheep remained, but they were set away in the stables to keep warm among one another. All of the crocus-eating-bunnies had gone away. *They would never survive in the cold of night.* Well, they would survive. But no one likes being especially cold if they don’t have to be.

She wrapped the knitted shawl around her torso, covering the places that had been exposed to the small bite of cold. She gathered her knees up and pressed the pads of her feet into the rough bark of the tree. She tucked her skirt around her toes. It wasn’t the barefoot summer anymore.

Bethany looked up at the stars once more. Many said how slowly they moved across the sky at night, but they seemed to race past. City folk would confuse the stars with their damned street lights. All those scientists. All of them. City slickers. She looked at the windows to the cottage. Kyla’s shadow blocked the blazing fires from blinding Bethany. Kyla always called her bread-making a science. She tried so hard at perfecting it. It was magic to Bethany. And like any good magic, there was no right way to make bread so long as Kyla was in charge of it. To eat homemade butter with Kyla’s bread was both a cardinal sin and the greatest pleasure to the human tongue. The only difference was Kyla’s directive.

*This pairs well with the herb goat cheese.*

*I’ll kill you if you forsake this recipe with margarine.*

*Golden butter will do just fine with this loaf.*

*Plain. Eat it plain. Or God have mercy on you.*

Kyla had a way.

The moon had traveled far across the sky and Bethany had yawned more than

her share for the night. She slid down the trunk while her hands found their way past the branches.

Even the ground held onto the warmth of the sun.

She crunched the dying grass beneath her feet and snuck back inside to the baking ovens resembling hell and heaven's sun.

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"I'd never felt as alive as I did this past year," Bethany said, "Now I feel as though I am dying all over again."

Kyla was spreading blackberry jam over sourdough slices. They had been crying. Bread was due. Especially with blackberry jam. She was nodding her head. Her beautiful head – crowned with branchy, brown hair. Her beautiful head with swollen eyes and nose, puffy red.

"I thought that I could erase my mom and start all over again. I thought that her wasting disease would clear my mind and heart. That maybe it would empty out all the anger I had. Because if she was dead, I can't be angry at a dead woman. Dead women lie dead in the ground. They don't speak. They don't rise and face the day. They don't laugh. They don't smile." Bethany continued, "But somehow I hate her more now than I did when she stood across from me, lying. I'm more angry at her after all her last-minute apologies. It's just like her to leave everything behind and assume it will work itself out post-mortem. I can hear her louder now than when she yelled at me, cornered in my room."

The crying started and stopped. Her body had to re-bottle tears before it could pour them down Bethany's cheeks. Her chest had to accumulate enough pressure to crush her lungs before she took a gasping breath. Her heart would pump harder and then the tears could start up again.

Bethany's head throbbed endlessly and she wanted to go lie down. The sunlight stung her weepy eyes. She wanted to go lie down. But she wanted to eat bread until she was too full to move. She wanted to talk and scream until her stomach emptied again so she could chew more sour bread with sour blackberry jam. Make her sour; sour, sour. Kyla was too beautiful to be crying with her.

Her sweet friend wrapped her slender fingers around Bethany's head and held it to her chest, stabilizing her thumping brain. Bethany crushed her rib cage and pulled Kyla down as she sank to the floor. Kyla gracefully folded herself and held Bethany.

Kyla stroked Bethany's braids back and rubbed her back.

"I wish I could unbury her from your mind and strangle her," Kyla said.

Bethany would have laughed. But she couldn't. She just cried. Kyla cried too. Oh, how little bread can fill a person when they're bored with holes so deep and left bleeding. There is a hunger that cannot be touched except by one's mother.