

imaginary things

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CHAPTER ONE



There was something about driving an ancient Dodge Caravan packed with all of my worldly possessions, including my four year-old son and my cat, that reeked of failure and desperation. The back of the minivan was crammed with duffel bags of clothing and cardboard boxes filled with pirate action figures, perfume bottles, matchbox cars and race track pieces, sketchbooks, a remote-controlled dinosaur, mascara wands and eyeliner pencils, markers and stubby crayons, and black garbage bags stuffed with everything else: David's rocket ship comforter, my flat iron, winter coats, story books, sandwich baggies full of earrings, and half-eaten boxes of Little Debbie's that were probably smushed by now. I'd sold my bed, couch, and kitchen table for a fraction of their worth and had given my TV to Stacy for all the times she'd watched David for free. I'd also asked her to hold on to my rocking chair, the one piece of furniture I couldn't bear to part with, until I could come back for it. I'd taken bags of clothes and toys that David had outgrown plus my old dresses, purses, and shoes to Goodwill, and still the minivan was bursting with the painfully mundane trappings of my life.

If I'd sped past myself on the highway five years ago (and undoubtedly I would have, because this Caravan wasn't exactly capable of high speeds), I would have looked at the maroon minivan missing its hubcaps, the back windows blocked by lumpy garbage bags and last-minute additions to the trunk like Candy Land, a bag of kitty litter, a dustbuster, and then at the driver—a pretty,

twenty-two-year-old girl with dirty blond hair and a perfect nose, sporting glamorous sunglasses, a bleach-stained T-shirt, and frown lines, and thought—*where the hell did she go wrong?* And then I would've zipped past, changed lanes, secure in my own bright future, and forgotten her.

Ha. What a sucker I'd been. What a sucker I still was.

I raised my eyes to the rearview mirror and caught a glimpse of David rocking back and forth in his booster seat, singing quietly to himself, "*The tie-ran-a-suss rex had big big teeth, big big teeth, big big teeth. The tie-ran-a-suss rex had big big teeth when dino-suss roamed the earth.*" In her pink crate on the seat next to him, Vivien Leigh was mewling her dissatisfaction, as she had been since we'd left Milwaukee an hour ago.

"How you doing back there, buckaroo?" I called over my shoulder.

He lifted his blond head and squinted thoughtfully. "Me and kitty are singing," he said.

"I can hear that. Do you need to go potty?"

He squinted again and cocked his head. "No."

Which meant yes. I popped a stick of watermelon gum into my mouth. "We'll stop at a gas station in a few minutes and you can go."

The AC had been wheezing and puffing out only a tepid breeze, so as soon as I pulled off at the next exit, I cracked the windows and the pungent, familiar smell of manure blew in. Yep, definitely not far from our new home now. Strands of my hair whipped across my face, and I wished I could remember where I had packed my brush—probably in one of the duffel bags at the very bottom of the pile. Oh well. Who was there to impress at this Podunk gas station anyway? There were only four pumps, and a homemade sign advertising BAIT! BRATS! HOTDOGS! God, I hoped there were indoor bathrooms.

"Can kitty come out, Mommy?" David asked as I unstrapped him from his booster seat. Sensing freedom was near, Vivien Leigh was yowling for all she was worth.

"No, she's fine," I said and held out my arms for him to jump down. "We won't be long."

David curled his pointer finger around one of the metal bars of her crate sympathetically. “Do you want food, kitty? Do you want to play? Do you need to go potty?”

I glanced inside her crate. She shot me a haughty look and then, seeming to think better of it, let out a pitiful meow. “Oh, don’t be such a diva.” I manually propped the side windows open an inch.

David looked unconvinced, but he slid into my arms anyway.

Inside, a country music radio station played over the speakers, and the tiled floors looked like they hadn’t been mopped or swept in twenty years. Crystals of salt leftover from winters long ago stuck in the soles of my sandals. David galloped straight for the candy aisle.

“No candy,” I said in my best *I’m-not-in-the-mood-so-you-better-not-start* voice. The man at the register craned his neck to get a good look at us, but I ducked behind a rack of trucker hats as I steered David’s little body to the restroom. Suspicious of what state the bathroom would be in, I flung the door open and flicked the light on with my elbow. It was pretty much in keeping with the rest of the gas station: sad gray tiles, scrunched-up paper towels on the floor, drippy faucet, toilet seat flipped up to reveal what I hoped was a ring of mildew.

“Don’t touch anything,” I instructed David and guided him inside.

He stood in front of the toilet for a second and then faced me. “Go outside, Mommy.”

“Just go potty, David.”

He frowned. “Go outside. I’m a big boy.” It was his rebuttal to everything lately.

I glanced at my phone—it was three o’clock already, and I’d told Duffy we’d be there around one—and blew out a sigh of resignation. “Fine. But don’t touch *anything*, and wash your hands when you’re done. I’ll be right outside if you need anything.”

When the door closed with another click, the cashier’s head darted up again. Unluckily, we had a direct view of each other as I waited outside the bathroom. He was middle-aged with a thick brown beard and a green plaid shirt. I supposed he was a nice enough guy—somebody’s uncle who sent birthday cards with a twenty inside, the best

bowler on his team, maybe—but all I felt right then were his eyes crawling all over me, undoubtedly trying to determine the color of my bra and the cut of my underwear. Yuck.

I narrowed my eyes at him and then feigned interest in the odd assortment of items shelved nearby—windshield wiper fluid and ice scrapers right alongside boxes of tampons and bags of Funyuns. My gum was starting to lose its flavor, and I hadn't heard the toilet flush or the water run yet. I pressed my ear against the door.

“Everything okay in there, buckaroo? Need any help?”

David didn't respond, but I thought I could hear him singing softly: “*When dino-suss roamed the earth...*”

I pressed on the door handle, but it wouldn't budge. “David!” I called. Was the door stuck or had he locked it? “Let Mommy in, okay?” I was acutely aware that the bearded cashier was watching the whole scene with interest.

“It's time to go, David. Let me in so we can wash up and then go to Grandma and Grandpa's house.” I jiggled the handle again, but no luck. I squatted down to be at his level and spoke into the crack. “Did you lock yourself in? You need to turn the knob or the little dial thingy, okay?”

“I know how to lock and unlock the door,” David said. It sounded like he was crouching, his mouth hovering near the door jamb.

“Great. Then unlock it so I can come in.” I stood up and swung my purse back over my arm.

“Need any help there, honey?” the cashier called.

I didn't even bother to look up. “No, thanks. We're fine.”

“Alrighty then,” he said, heavy on the skepticism. “Let me know if you change your mind.” Like he was worried my son was going to wreak havoc in his precious, pristine gas station bathroom. Right.

“David, unlock the door right now,” I hissed.

“If I unlock the door, can I have candy?”

“No deal. Unlock the door this instant, David.” My tone was stern, but I wasn't fooling anyone. My four-year-old clearly had the upper hand here. The cashier knew it, I knew it; even David knew it.

There was a long pause, then the sound of water rushing. I could only imagine what he was doing inside. Unscrewing pipes? Playing in the toilet? Licking the floor?

“It’s time to go, David. Please unlock the door for Mommy.” I was so tired. I’d been up until three the night before, packing the minivan and attempting to cover up the holes in the walls and scrub out the carpet stains for our apartment inspection. Not that I’d gotten my deposit back anyway.

The water stopped. “If I unlock the door, can I have animal crackers?”

Fine. Given the circumstances, it seemed a small concession to make. I was starting to worry Vivien Leigh was dehydrating into cat jerky in the minivan. “Yes, if you unlock the door you can have a snack.”

“Animal crackers?”

“Sure. Whatever. Just open the door.”

A few seconds passed and then the door clicked, and I scrambled to open it. David looked up at me with his wide brown eyes.

I gripped his shoulder a little too tightly and peered in the toilet. The water was grungy, but not yellowish at all. “Did you go potty?”

“No, Mommy. I told you I don’t need to go potty.”

“David,” I said, and then stopped, too angry to continue. *Count to ten, twenty, a hundred, whatever it takes*, Stacy was fond of saying. *You can’t take back your words*. I bit my lip. “Don’t ever do that again. Now let’s get your snack and get back on the road before Grandma Duffy starts to think we changed our minds.”

Of course there were no animal crackers, so we settled on a dusty package of mini chocolate muffins, which I was pretty sure had been sitting on the shelf a few years past their absent sell-by date, but David wouldn’t be dissuaded. The cashier enjoyed a good close-up of my cleavage in my V-neck as we checked out but then sent me a disapproving look as I handed the muffins over to David. Great, even he thought I was a totally incompetent mother.

I buckled David into his booster seat somewhat gruffly, but enamored with his mini muffins, he didn’t seem to notice. The standoff in

the gas station was just another one of the footholds I lost with him every day. Sleeping in his T-ball jersey and socks? Sure, why not? As long as the cleats came off. Eating a Swiss Cake Roll for breakfast? Fine. How different was it *really* in nutritional value from a Pop-Tart or doughnut? Burying and then digging up his action figures in various holes in the backyard like a dog? Whatever. As long as it kept him occupied. I was a disaster at discipline because David knew my Achilles heel—I didn't have any energy left in me to fight.

As I pulled out of the gas station, I did a double take. Leaning against one of the pumps was a blond man wearing a leather jacket, despite the heat. He was much too tall and heavysset to be Patrick, but my pulse accelerated anyway. No matter how much time passed, Patrick would always be my own personal boogeyman, lurking behind every corner.

"Tell me a story," David said around a peaty mouthful of chocolate muffin.

My head felt like a wasp's nest—brittle and buzzing. "Not now, buckaroo. Maybe later if you're good. I need to focus on the road now."



It would've been easier to think of our stay with my grandparents as a fresh start if their home in Salsburg hadn't been the place I'd been shipped to whenever I needed to recover from my other failures in life. My mom had first sent me to stay with them the summers I was seven and eight, after serious "behavior problems," as she called them. Then after some spectacular mischief my sophomore year of high school, I was exiled to Salsburg again for the entire duration of the school year. Most recently, when I was eighteen, they took me in for part of my pregnancy.

So the symbolic significance of the fact that I was going there now, after I'd lost my job as a receptionist at Lakeview Dermatology, was not lost on me. Or them, I was sure. But they had always been good about taking me in, dusting me off, and attempting to set me back

to rights again. Winston and Duffy Jennings were not stern, preachy types, nor were they permissive, indulgent pushovers. Since my mom had made them grandparents before they were even forty, much too young to be dubbed Granny and Pops, Duffy had insisted I call them by their first names instead. She owned a small beauty salon and over the years had learned to talk auctioneer-fast, pausing rarely to catch her breath, lest someone interrupt her. She called it like she saw it; sometimes she called me a dumb-ass and sometimes she called me a snickerdoodle, and whichever it was, usually rightfully so. Winston was a semi-retired farm equipment mechanic who had adapted to his wife's loquaciousness by speaking up only when necessary; his silence was occasionally restful but most of the time kind of unnerving.

My grandparents rarely left their one square mile of southeastern Wisconsin, their beloved population-of-one-thousand town, and they acted as if driving all the way to the "big city" of Milwaukee was as treacherous and cumbersome as hitching up a team of horses to a covered wagon and setting out for the great unknown. Driving alone both ways with a baby was unappealing to me, and I was an appallingly lazy correspondent; I patted myself on the back if I remembered to send them a Christmas card with a recent photo of David in it. So the pathetic fact was that the last time we'd come to Salsburg for a visit was for David's second birthday, and if I was nakedly honest with myself about it, I'd admit it was because I had been flat broke (though nowhere near as destitute as I was now), and I had known I could count on them to buy cake and presents.

Still, when I had called Duffy two weeks ago to explain my financial woes and plead my case, I had barely squeaked out that I'd lost my job, when she'd interjected, "Why don't you two come and stay with us for a spell? You know, Anna, that we've got those two spare bedrooms just collecting dust and storing Winston's old Revolutionary War junk, and it would be so nice to spend some time with you and Davey. Why, I haven't seen the little guy since he was still in diapers! It would be good for him to get out of that big city and get some fresh air and experience a taste of small town living."

And that had been that. What I'd hoped for, of course, as I had dialed their number, and though the length of a "spell" had not been agreed upon, something about this stay seemed much more permanent and serious than all the others before it. I had no home to return to this time. I was leaving no one behind who really gave a damn. This was not merely a respite from my life. This *was* my life.



"We're almost there," I sang out to David, as we passed the ostentatious wooden sign welcoming us to THE VILLAGE OF SALSBURG; POPULATION: 1,140; THIRD LARGEST GROWER OF SNAP BEANS IN WISCONSIN; HOME OF THE FAMOUS SALSBURG FIREMEN'S PICNIC; PROUD SISTER VILLAGE OF BORKENDORF, GERMANY. It was the kind of town you could completely miss if you were focused on changing the radio station or lighting a cigarette. One church, one cemetery, one volunteer fire department, one restaurant, one gas station, one bank, one drugstore, one post office, one beauty parlor, and five bars. No stoplights. No sidewalks.

Of course by this time, David was dozing in his booster seat. I rattled down Main Street and hung a right on Steepleview—so named for its vantage of St. Monica's white steeple reaching heavenward. Duffy and Winston's house was a large brown and white split-level adrift on a sea of rolling green lawn. Not that you could see much from the street except for a long blacktop driveway and a wishing well; towering Douglas-firs hid the rest. A shiny blue SUV was parked at the top of the driveway, and I was careful not to block it with the Caravan.

I rolled the minivan door back as slowly and gently as possible, which was about as quiet as a freight train squealing its rusty brakes. David blinked up at me with stormy eyes and a furrowed brow—a sure indication of an impending cranky mood. That made two of us.

"Guess what, buckaroo? We're finally here! Grandma and Grandpa's house!"

He looked unimpressed. I unbuckled and lifted him into my arms. When I tried to set him down, he clung to me and pressed his hot little cheek against my neck.

The screen door slapped shut, and Duffy's voice rang out. "Glad to see you finally made it!" She was wearing a metallic purple apron and one latex glove; the other dangled inside out from between her pinched fingertips. Her platinum hair was teased into a cloud twice the size of her head. "I wish I could roll out the welcome wagon for you right now, but I'm in the midst of coloring Edna Franklin's hair, and it's very touchy business. Just one minute on too long, and it could turn out more Paradise Peach than Autumn Auburn."

"You're doing her hair *here*?" I asked and adjusted David on my hip.

"That's right. With the economy being what it's been, I decided to downsize and bring my business home." She took a step forward, squinting into the sun. "But my goodness, that can't be my great-grandson! He's as leggy as a grasshopper, and still towheaded just like his mommy. What a handsome little devil. Hello, David. Do you remember your great grandma Duffy?"

She reached her ungloved hand out to stroke David's hair, and the chemical smell of the hair dye wafted toward us. He jerked away, banging his head against my chin, and then started to cry loud, gasping sobs. Vivien Leigh chose this moment to join in—gazing up at me with her green, expressive eyes, scratching desperately at the bars of her crate, and crooning her most plaintive meow yet. I had named her because of those eyes, as well as her noble bearing, and not to mention that *Gone With the Wind* had been my favorite movie as a teenager. With the luxurious brown and black fur bordering her eyes on her otherwise snowy white face, my cat looked like she was perpetually wearing a feather-tufted masquerade mask.

"He's a little overtired," I said apologetically. His warm, clinging body was starting to make me feel like I was wearing a heavy fur coat. My arms were aching and my chin was smarting.

"Oh my, oh my, oh my," Duffy said soothingly. "There's no need for tears, sugar cookie. I'm sure it's been a long ride from the big

city.” She peered past us into the minivan. “Is that a cat? Anna Grace Jennings, you never mentioned anything about a cat!” She frowned and almost put her gloved hand on her hip, but thought better of it. “But I’ve been out here much too long already—Edna’s hair will be turning pink! Come inside now for a cool drink and then you can get Davey all settled in for a nap before dinner. I sent Winston out for some groceries, but he’ll be back soon, and then he can help you get all this unloaded.”

She was back inside the house before I could reply. I rubbed David’s bumped head. “Be a big boy now. I need you to walk on your own so that I can carry kitty’s crate.”

He grudgingly slid down. We made our way up the front steps together and pushed open the screen door. Late afternoon sunlight spilled through the windows, liberally coating the living room and dining room in a buttery glow. Very few alterations had been made to their house since I was seven years old. Same beige shag carpeting, same mauve-colored walls, same floral couch and matching curtains, same hutch displaying dusty wedding china and family photographs. The only concessions made to time passing were a new flat screen TV and entertainment center, which looked sorely out of place amidst all the other 90’s country-chic decor. The house was so quiet I could hear the ticking of the grandfather clock and Duffy’s constant chatter floating up from the basement. Suddenly, I felt very, very tired. Almost too tired to remain standing.

David tugged on my hand, and I switched on my auto pilot. Two glasses of water? Check. Another trip to the potty? Check. Tucking David into the twin-sized bed in one of the spare rooms despite his protest that he wasn’t sleepy and that the sheets smelled funny? Check. Sitting by his bedside and humming “On Top of Spaghetti” until he fell asleep? Check. Returning to the minivan for the litter box? Check. Closing the other bedroom door before springing Vivien Leigh from her crate? Okay, I forgot that one. She ran from the room, a blur of black, brown, and white fur, and disappeared before I could catch her.

I sat on the bed, feeling numb, feeling a little like a child who’s being punished. An old-fashioned black-and-white illustration hung

across the room from the bed. It depicted a crush of bodies, rifles, bayonets, horses, drums, contorted faces, and blood. Some battle from the Revolutionary War, I inferred. Not exactly what I wanted to look at every night before I went to sleep and every morning when I woke up.

I tried to remember what it had replaced, and the image instantly clicked into focus: a high school portrait of my mom, Kimberly. A long mass of honey curls framed her face; a poof of bangs at least two inches high crowned her head. Her face was narrower than mine, and her eyes were a hazel to my brown, but the flawlessly straight nose, high cheekbones, and Cupid's bow lips were an exact match. She had worn a high-necked royal blue sweater and a string of fake pearls.

It was a photograph that had initially served as a warning—*don't become like me, Anna*—and later as a taunt as I had lain in her childhood bed, eighteen years old, six months pregnant, and unmarried. *How could you have been so stupid, little girl? Didn't you learn anything from my mistakes?*

So maybe the gruesome Revolutionary War print was an improvement. And hopefully, I wouldn't be looking at it for that long anyway.