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Alpha Male

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ALPHA MALE

Sarah's father was the scariest man I didn't know.

He worked at an atomic power lab, and sometimes when he came home it felt like he brought the nukes home in his leather jacket... like the whole place might go up in an ash cloud if anyone breathed too loudly.

4... 3... 2... 1...

Silence.

Two percent of the population has Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

Two percent, but the target didn't seem so small when it landed on my best friend's father's psyche.

OCD costs six percent of the total U.S. mental health bill of 148 billion dollars.

Medicinal options are endless - Fluoxetine, Sertraline, Fluvoxamine, Paroxetine, or Citalopram. He could have tried them all.

8.4 billion dollars. Mountains of money and his thoughts still raced through his head like a confused pack of sled-dogs.

"Marche! Marche!"

He could yell as loud as he wanted, but they had no master.

Sarah was the smallest girl I ever knew.

Her brother Ben was in my grade in school, and so she'd been around ever since I could imagine, lingering on the edges of my memories.

We once found a picture of my kindergarten graduation picnic, long after we became best friends. In it I was wearing a dress far too pink, and a bow far too large and there she was, three year old Sarah, watching from behind a picnic table she could barely see over.

She was always there for me, even when I didn't know it.

I don't remember when we fell in love with wolves.

We used to check books out of the library about them. We borrowed Zooland magazines from our teachers to learn more about them. I'm not sure if we even read the words; we just loved to see the pictures.

Sometimes I still find little wolf trinkets littered around my room

– the wolf keepsake box that shines like a nautilus but still smells like the pine trees that surrounded the camp I bought it at, or the wolf magnet I got in Boston that I can't bear to peel off my radiator.

I probably still have pages of the “novels” we wrote about wolves.

I think as eight and ten year olds Sarah and I cared more about the way wolves were in our minds than how they actually were in reality. We just loved to see the pictures.

He didn't like when I was in their house. Kids aren't stupid. They can tell when someone doesn't want them around - when they've been picked last for the team.

He didn't pick me last.

He didn't pick me at all.

I flinched at the way he would avoid looking at me or talking to me. Hanging below his receding hairline were muddy brown eyes that never cleared, and a salt and pepper beard just large enough to hide his non-existent smile.

By all admissions he was brilliant, but he had one of the smallest heads I'd ever seen, like it was slowly receding into his chest, the raging thoughts disappearing with it, so they'd never race off track again. I tried to rationalize it, the way he was acting. He's just distracted. He's just sad. But I know now that it isn't something you can rationalize.

OCD isn't rational.

I don't know when I learned it but we knew we were supposed to stay downstairs and be really quiet when Sarah's father got home.

“Dad just needs time to cool down,” she explained.

I remember holding my breath.

My dad never needed to cool down.

One day while we were waiting in that chilly basement, I remember Sarah staring up at me like a fox snared in a trap. She told me that her mom had told her she had mild OCD.

“What if I end up like him?” Her whisper was just loud enough to hear, like the statement was too terrifying to translate into a full voice.

That's the only time she ever voiced it, the fact that her father's identity was something she would be scared to inherit.

Sarah moved to Elizabeth, Pennsylvania when I was 12 years old. Elizabeth, PA. No combination of words slammed a brick into my chest the way they did. Nothing made me happier than getting her letters, and nothing made me sadder than seeing that return address. Those words

would never mean home to her.

8 hours and 20 minutes.

451 miles.

It didn't matter how I phrased it. My best friend was gone.

"Mom said Dad will be better there."

That's how she explained it, and you can't argue with that. We all wanted him to get better.

We have the same birthday, July 16th. She was turning 11 and I was turning 13, and our mothers drove us to Boston to meet there and celebrate. My mom had found out that there was a wolf conservation there called Wolf Hollow.

There was a huge caged preserve and I sat there watching the wolves as they ran around. I should have been excited to be so close to them but it made me sad to see them all caged up, still running but with nowhere to go.

There was this one massive black wolf that I couldn't tear my eyes off of and yet didn't dare to make eye contact with. I sneaked a look at him. He had the most blistering orange eyes.

The instructor pointed to the wolf and told us "This is the alpha male. He's in charge around here."

It occurred to me when she said it that this wolf might have the title, but he wasn't in charge.

Somebody else was running the show. He had no control over his day. His gigantic paws ran only as far as the fence would allow.

Over a decade later Sarah's father is still a man I don't know.

A couple years ago I found out that the police had to come to Sarah's house because he was getting out of control. They told him that either he had to get therapy for his OCD or he wasn't allowed to be near his family anymore.

He refused treatment.

I haven't seen him since Sarah moved away, but I still wonder about him sometimes. When I was younger I hated him for making Sarah upset. I hated him for cancelling her birthday party at the very last minute. I hated him for making her move away from me. I hated him for making her scared of who she would be.

Objectively I know better now. I know he has a disease. I know he can't help it. I know that I don't understand what he's going through. I know a lot of things.

I know I still hate him sometimes.

I know I shouldn't.