

Charitie

It is a crisp and sun-filled morning as she settles in her newest, favorite, and almost-finished place. The cabin was move-in-ready last summer, except for the landscaping, so her family waited another year to better enjoy their dream home by the lake, bordered by snow-capped mountains, and a comfortable thirty miles outside the city. Belinda and her husband worked hard the last five years to make this day a reality.

She stares out the open window at a perfect day—seventy degrees and sunny. Puffy white clouds amble across a beautiful blue sky. A breeze sweeps down the snow-covered mountains and brushes glints of gold across the lake while gathering a clear mist to mix with oils from the evergreens before wafting through the kitchen window. Belinda takes a deep breath of the freshly scented air and has never felt so alive.

The sun's rays flicker through the branches of a tree positioned, per their instructions, just off the flagstone patio. Belinda raises a hand to her brow to block the flickering sunlight to watch her three-year-old daughter, Charitie. A tree branch overhanging the patio seems to bounce up and down a bit more than the breeze would dictate. She brushes it off and focuses her attention back to what's important.

A “woof, woof,” is followed by childlike laughter. The rhythm and rhyme of the scene outside the window makes this an even more perfect morning. Her daughter's beautiful chestnut-brown hair bounces in the breeze, and her gorgeous green eyes sparkle in the sunlight. She tosses a red rubber ball to Buddy, their three-year-old Chihuahua–Shih Tzu mix and her best friend in the whole wide world. He hops up and down, barking joyfully with a tinge of frustration as he attempts to clamp his jaw around the bouncing ball. It hits his nose and rolls under one of the deck chairs. Belinda

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laughs, almost in sync, along with her daughter as Buddy scampers to retrieve the prize and return it to his best friend.

“Charitie, baby, do you need more water?” Belinda asks her daughter through the window, knowing the importance of staying hydrated at this elevation.

“No, I okay, mommy.”

“Alright, Sweetie.”

Belinda takes her time drying the dishes from this morning’s breakfast so she can watch the joy in her baby girl for a few more minutes. Her husband had to make a trip into the city to meet with his agent. He finished the edits to his new thriller last week and wanted to go over the revisions. He said he should be back mid-afternoon. In the meantime, she’ll pretend the day will never end as she soaks in all of what she and her husband have accomplished.

They had cleared enough of the pines around their getaway house to give them a full view of the lake and the mountains, providing the perfect balance of light and shade and leaving plenty of places for birds to roost and nest. Charitie loves hearing their musical chirps and searching them out among the branches. They graded the land into a level area beyond the patio and into a gentle slope down to the lake where they built a wooden dock. They surrounded the backyard with a small three-foot chain-link fence to give Charitie and Buddy plenty of room to run and play, which at the moment is not happening. Buddy is no longer interested in retrieving the rubber ball and has curled up, taking a nap. Charitie continues to throw it in his direction but gets no response, even

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when the ball bounces off his head. “Buddy. Buddy! Get ball,” Charitie says as she giggles and duck-legs it over to retrieve it for another toss.

Good luck with that, Belinda thinks to herself as she smiles at the sight.

“Here, Buddy, get ball.” Charitie holds out the ball to her best friend, who is content lying on the warm flagstone with his eyes closed.

The phone rings just as Charitie bounces the ball off Buddy’s head. Belinda puts down the plate she has dried multiple times, throws the towel over her shoulder, and walks to the kitchen island to answer the phone. “Hello?”

“Hello, Dear.”

“Hi, Mom, what’s up?”

Dark shadows rub their hands in glee while their eyes dart between Charitie and the gate that was not properly closed and latched. A week before by the crew doing repair work on the back patio. They watch the light in the tree branches flicker faster and faster, trying desperately to get Buddy’s attention.

As if now under their dark spell, Charitie leans over the edge of the patio to pick up the ball, stumbles forward, and catches the ball on the toe of her shoe, catapulting it toward the gate. She picks up the pace, laughing as she moves to catch up with the ball, but instead of leaning over to pick it up, she gives the ball a swift kick. She laughs again as the ball shoots through the gate then bounces and caroms off small rocks, gains speed as it rolls down the hill. Charitie runs, arms stretched out to her sides like a glider riding

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the wind. The dark shadows can't contain their laughter as they scramble to stay on her heels.

Hands free and leaning on the counter, Belinda stares at the phone, which sits face up and in speaker mode. In one hand is a pen, ready to make corrections on a note pad sitting next to the card plucked from her recipe box fifteen minutes before when she called her mother and left a message to call back.

“I don't know what I'm doing wrong.”

“Probably nothing, dear.”

“Something's missing. I want to go over the ingredients again.”

“Ok, dear, we can do that.”

“Thanks, mom.”

The laminated card contains instructions handed down from her great-great grandmother. The same laminated card her mother used when she inherited the family recipe. Belinda has made three failed attempts to follow the steps since becoming the newest member to guard the secret and sacred ingredients of the family's famous oatmeal cookies.

“And you're using butter, not margarine?” her mother asks.

“Yes, of course, butter.”

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Even though the taste is off, the smell is not, and it takes her back to the lazy Sunday afternoons in their small kitchen watching her mother watch her and her brother to make sure their hands didn't snatch an early treat.

“And it's the brand noted in the recipe?”

“Yes.”

“It may be the amount of salt. I sometimes put a pinch more in if I'm making a medium-to-large batch.”

Belinda jots down this new nugget of information on the pink sticky pad. “Ok. Noted. But I've made them according to what the recipe calls for. I haven't over made the batch.”

“Ok, dear, let's keep going then,” her mother says.

If Belinda were on the usual video call, she would see her mother's loving smile, but out in the wilderness, bandwidth is limited. In a brief pause of silence, she hears the faint cackle of an animal that may be in pain. A chilly breeze blows through the kitchen window and rolls down her back, making her shiver.

“When are you bringing my beautiful baby to see her grandma?” her mother asks.

“We're up here for the month. You and daddy are more than welcome to come out for a weekend?” Belinda uses the pen like a wand and scans each line on the laminated card searching for the clue that will deliver the perfect batch of cookies. “You could take her down to the lake. Daddy could teach her how to fish.”

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“Yeah, great fun for your father, not for me.”

“How about Jerry taking you and Charitie for a ride in the canoe? That would be something fun you could do.”

“No, not fun. My hair would get all messed up, or I may tip over and fall into the lake. I’m sure my granddaughter would get a kick out of that.”

Belinda laughs. “You’re not going to fall into the lake, and no one is going to care what your hair looks like, not up here.”

“I would when I look in the mirror.”

Belinda shakes her head and taps the pen on the marble counter as her mother’s voice recedes behind her thoughts of making the perfect batch of cookies.

The shadows swarm down to the shore as the angel bounces the branch up and down at a more urgent pace. Sparkles of sunlight flash through the branches as a light snore rises from the patio. The angel jumps up and down, up and down, to catch the right beat of shadow and light to stir Charitie’s best friend.

Buddy’s snoring stops. The angel stops bouncing. Buddy blinks but doesn’t budge. The angel bounces, bounces, looks toward the lake and then looks back down at Buddy. It bounces harder, fearing time is running short.

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Buddy opens his eyes, looks up, blinks into the light, and hops to his feet. His head twists back and forth as he searches the yard. His eyes widen, and his neck straightens as he sniffs the wind. The angel smiles and leaps from the branch.

The age of innocence is a mythical and magical thing. Charitie's childhood is no exception. The world is a wonderland, and all things are possible. Joy and laughter are the order of the day as she searches for a new adventure. Her little brain absorbs all the day's colors and sights and sounds. Today is the day she discovers the wonderful blue waters of a lake. Her childlike eyes see the red ball bobbing up and down, just like her yellow duckies, but in something so much bigger than her bathtub. The wood boards rattle out a melody as she steps toward the big blue bathwater. She stops at the edge of the dock, watching the red ball pop up and down as her little brain tries to figure out how to get it back. She leans down and stretches out her arm, but the dark shadows bouncing on the waves keep the ball just out of her reach.

The branch above the patio cracks and something catches Buddy's eye. He jumps off the patio and makes a mad dash toward the open gate, chasing something he doesn't quite understand. From the top of the hill, he spots his best friend. He barks. She doesn't respond. He hurries down the hill toward the docks and skids to a halt at the edge of the boards, unsure how to proceed. He barks and barks until his best friend turns and looks.

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“Darling, are you listening?” asks her mother.

“I’m sorry, Mom, what did you say?”

Belinda places the laminated card back in the plastic recipe box, anchors the phone between her ear and shoulder, and walks to the cabinet by the sink. She hears Buddy’s bark and is so happy they got this rescue dog for their daughter. While half listening to her mother ramble on about what she bought at the antiques store, she puts away the recipe box and looks out the window.

Buddy and Charitie are nowhere to be seen.

Her body shakes as she spots the open gate. “Mom, I have to go.”

“What’s—”

The phone drops out of her hand and bangs on the ceramic tile as she runs to the back door and almost rips the handle off to get outside. “Charitie!” Her breaths are short and shallow as her head snaps back and forth. *Where is she?* Buddy’s barking sends shivers through her body as she runs toward the gate.

The dark shadows dance beside Charitie as she teeters at the end of the dock, stretching her arm out to retrieve the bobbing red ball. They let out a laugh that is too faint to hear this side of heaven.

One of the dark spirits jumps off the dock, slides off the top of the rubber ball, and splashes into the water. A frustrated wail escapes the other spirit as the ball bobs

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closer to the dock and Charitie jumps up, claps her hands, and laughs instead of falling into the water.

Done pacing and sniffing the boards, Buddy leaps and runs toward his friend, doing his best to ignore the rattling beneath him. He barely notices the tug and pull of the angel riding his back as he is laser-focused on his best friend jumping and clapping too close to the edge. Buddy puts on the brakes, and the angel catapults onto the dock.

Belinda is numb in body and mind as she looks down the hill, praying her legs won't turn to rubber before she gets to her baby. Chills rip through her body as she watches her daughter lean over at the end of the dock. "Charitie, baby, NO!" Belinda screams as she reaches the bottom of the hill.

The dark angels float atop the waves. One turns and spots the adversary. He looks up the hill and smiles. *Too late.* The adversary dives at them as they watch in glee while Charitie's fingers tap the top of the ball. If not for the boat horn, you might hear the echo of their screechy laughs.

Her mommy's voice startles her. She steps forward as she looks back, and her shoe slides off the edge of the dock. Something scary stirs inside her as she falls

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forward. A tug on the back of her dress keeps her hanging off the dock and staring at the big blue water. Tears slip down her face.

Belinda almost falls as she tumbles off the slope and slams onto the flat wooden dock. She catches her balance and is in full-panic mode, watching her daughter flailing over the edge. Her little girl's whimpers send spikes through her heart.

Even though his teeth are hurting, Buddy holds on tight. His claws are dug into the wood of the dock, and his muscles hurt, but he refuses to let go. Flickers of darkness dart up and away, but he is not distracted. Even the tug of something on his back, gripping his fur, will not deter him from holding on.

Belinda snatches up her daughter and pulls her close to her chest. Tears of fright and joy run down their cheeks. She doesn't expect her little one to understand, so instead of words of discipline that would come out in a mangled mess, she just holds her and kisses and kisses the top of her little head.

With his best friend safe once again, Buddy pads to the end of the dock and barks. As the wind lifts the angel's wings, she smiles and waves. Buddy barks again as he watches the winged creature fly away.

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The bond between a child and her pet is strong, but even stronger is the forever bond between a mother and her child. What starts in the womb grows in the heart and the spirit. And in this bond is wisdom and intuition to keep us aware and alert on this side of heaven, where we live in a world at war.

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” Ephesians 6:12.