broken

Nor Hell a Fury, like a Woman scorn'd.

-William Congreve

Gretchen opened her eyes. Everything was still a bit blurry but in time, the world around her will come in focus. The last thing she remembers was sitting in her room, playing with her toys. Next thing, her mother entered the room, screaming about how ‘*daddy is a selfish asshole’.* Her vision isn’t the best at the moment but her ears work perfectly. She can hear her mother whistling show tunes. It was faint but she can hear the muffled sound of someone struggling to talk, almost as if they were asking for help. “Oh, you’re awake.” Her mother stops. She puts her hands to her waist and smiles at Gretchen. “Good timing. Any longer and you would have missed the show.”

Gretchen sits still. She can’t move. She can try but the rope is tied too tight around her. With each passing moment, the memory of what happened began to sink back into her brain. She remembers the toys she was playing with. She remembers her mother bursting into her room. Her mother seemed different. Much like her father, and his slurred and incoherent speech, that’s’ exactly what she was doing. Her mother was drunk; far too many sips from the wine bottle. Gretchen looks down at her arm. Even though she couldn’t make out her arm, the throbbing pain that it was generating throughout her body is enough to send her weeping. She didn’t weep. She didn’t shed a single tear. She sits quietly as her mother whistles songs from *South Pacific*.

Gretchen’s mind wanders. She finds herself back in her room. The pain in her arm was from her mother’s grasp. With her mother in an inebriated state, her judgment was slightly askew. She grabbed Gretchen by the arm and dragged her out. Gretchen was pulled, kicking and screaming away from her toys. Gretchen held tightly onto her stuffed rabbit, Fluffy but as her mother yanked her out of her safe haven, he fell out of her tiny hands when she was slammed into the door frame.

“Stop crying! Don’t be such a little bitch!” Her mother pulled Gretchen down the hallway, leading her way towards the winding staircase. “You’ll understand, Gretchen. You want to know what real pain is!? Do you really want to know what being hurt feels like?” Gretchen’s right arm flailed about. She cried for her mother to stop. But the cries were in vain. No matter how much she cried, no matter how loud it became, her mother would shush her with a quick and violent yank. Her mother was standing at the top of the stairs. She took a deep breath then wiped her brow. She grabbed onto Gretchen’s free arm and started to descend the staircase. She took a step.

*Thump.* Gretchen’s buttocks hit the wooden steps hard. Her mother took three, quick steps.

*Thump…thump…thump…*

Gretchen bawled. She asked for her mother to stop. She begged, pleading to her mother, “I love you, mommy! I love you!” Her mother scoffed. A slight, smirk crossed her face. “You’re a liar. You’re just like your father. You just spit crap out of mouth to shut me up.” She stopped. She looked behind her at the remaining steps. She counted them. She’s lived in the house for nearly eight years but never once counted the steps. “…*seven, eight, nine...twelve.”*

She looked at Gretchen. Her daughter’s eyes said it all. “Okay, princess. I’ll stop.” She let go of Gretchen’s arms and walked passed her, heading back upstairs. She stopped. She sat down next to Gretchen and held her. Even though her mother was hurting her, she still needed that comfort. She clutched her mother tightly, wrapping herself around her. “Why did you hurt me, mommy? Don’t you love me anymore?”

She smiled at her daughter. Wiping the tears away from eyes, she pulled Gretchen away to look her in the eyes. “Mommy still loves you. Mommy just feels sick.” She stood up and looked down at Gretchen. Gretchen was still whimpering. “I want Fluffy.” She put her thumb in her mouth and curled her upper lip.

Her mother rolled her eyes. “Oh, please. Don’t act like a fucking baby.” With that, she put her foot against Gretchen’s face, covering it completing. A single pushed and Gretchen was sent tumbling backwards, twisting and turning in all positions, till she landed hard on the floor. Her mother’s face held no expression. It was a blank stare. She stood on the steps, looking down at her daughter’s, unconscious body.

Gretchen’s mind slips back to the present. She is still tied to a chair. Her mother is across the room, her back towards Gretchen. Gretchen spoke softly, “Mommy, what’s going on?” She squints once and then a second time, only tighter.

“It’s nothing for you to worry about.” Her mother fiddles with various objects sprawled out on wooden work bench. She picks up one looks at it with a questionable grimace on her face. “This will do.” Turning around, she holds a large kitchen knife tightly in her grasp. “A woman’s work is never done.” She walks towards her husband. Like Gretchen, he is tied to a chair. The muffling noises Gretchen heard earlier were those of her dads. He glances at his wife. His eyes widen with horror when he spots the knife in his wife hand. He screams. But nothing is audible. The dirty rag shoved in his mouth has taken care of any screams that could possibly raise alarm in the quiet, suburban neighborhood of theirs.

Gretchen eyes start to focus. She sees her mom. She is standing to the side of her dad. “Daddy!” Gretchen screams out. “Leave daddy alone!” Her mother whisks around and stares down Gretchen, the knife pointed at her. She clicks her tongue, making a ‘*tisk, tisk’* sound. Gretchen cries. She looks at her dad and he does the same. They both have fear in their eyes. Gretchen might not be ready to accept what her mother was planning on doing but her dad did. He knows exactly what was going to happen. He knows he won’t be leaving this room alive. Probably won’t even make it out in one piece.

Lauren turns and steps in front of her husband. He looks up at her. He doesn’t have to speak. She knows what he is thinking. She knows what he wants to say. It won’t matter. No words, no flowers, or boxes of chocolates will make her change her mind. To her, he messed up. She can’t take it anymore. She is not going to be the victim anymore. It’s time for the tables to turn and put him in his place. It’s time for him to know that the shady business he’s been hiding from her is going to end. She squatted down, and positions herself to meet face to face. She puts the blade to his face. It’s cold. Brad shuts his eyes and turns his away. Angrily, she grabs his chins with her free hand and pulls his head back. “Don’t move! I want to see your face. I want to see the pain in your eyes.” With a quick stroke, Lauren slices a gash into his cheek. For the first time in her life, Lauren felt in control. It was her time to make the rules. Lauren ran the blade on Brad's other cheek. He shut his eyes. A muffled whimper escapes from him. Lauren ignores his cries. She presses the blade sharply against his face. Like earlier, she made a quick swipe. She pulls the knife back and with another stroke, she slices once more, tearing away at his cheek.

*Slash!*

She slices again and again. With the repetitive motions, his cheek is disappearing under a cloak of blood. She continues. "You stupid, son of a bitch! Why are you making me do this!?"

Gretchen calls out to her mom, begging for her to stop the madness. Lauren jerks her head, pointing the knife at her. The blood is still dripping off the tip, dropping to the floor. With all the chaos in the basement, Gretchen can still hear the sound of the blood hitting the wooden floor. "Don't sass me, missy. Your daddy deserves everything coming to him."

Gretchen looks at her with sad, puppy dog eyes. "But why, mommy? What did daddy do?"

Lauren laughs. She blows the hair away from her eyes and stands up. "You really want to know? Do you really want to know what your daddy did? Okay, fine. I'll tell you how daddy hurt mommy."

Lauren walks over to Gretchen. She takes a seat in an empty chair near her. She spins Gretchen around, making eye contact with her daughter. "Where do I start? Gosh, I don't know where to. There's so much to tell.” Lauren thinks back to the day she noticed things began to unravel. The day she saw her husband with his arms around another woman was the day her heart broke. It was also the day she knew that things were not going to ever be the same. The only way for her to fix it was to take out the problem, no matter how extreme it might be.

*3 weeks ago…*

Lauren was running late. She is never late. She is and has always been a very punctual person. She likes being early. Even being on time is too late for her. She likes having a cushion. It was an idea that was instilled in her at her very first job. Her job was all about time. A simple chink in the chain could send the whole day into complete chaos. Ever since that idea was implanted, she based everything she did on time. She feared that if she was ever late, things would fall apart. It all started when her alarm clock didn’t go off. It might have gone off. It probably did. She just slept through it. Even with the clock being set twenty minutes fast, those twenty minutes were lost. If she never overslept that morning, things would have turned out differently.

Lauren rolls over and looks at the clock. Panic sets in. She throws the covers off her and grabs her phone. It is a quarter after nine. She curses. Lauren runs to the bathroom. Being a master of multitasking, she dresses herself, while brushing her teeth. A few strokes from a hairbrush and she is ready to go. She runs to her car. Pulling the keys from her purse, she drops them. Another slip of the tongue, she curses to herself. Nothing is going right for her this morning. Everything is just putting her farther behind. If this is to keep up, she is never going to forgive herself.

Lauren looks in the rearview mirror. *Calm down, Lauren. You need to stop stressing yourself out. Breathe. Just, breathe.* Lauren gives herself a pep talk and takes a few deep breaths, holding each one in a little longer than before. With her seatbelt securely fastened, she puts her car in drive. The radio turns on, jumping right into a news report.

Scotty, the local traffic reporter, warns commuters about the large accident on the freeway. It is the route she takes. It isn’t the only way there but it is the quickest. Lauren wants to give up hope. But, she sticks it through. She isn’t late. She is just running behind. If anything, she is going to make right on time. Not exactly her cup of tea but anything will be better than the awkward feeling of walking into a room and having dozens of eyes gaze on you. *The look of utter failure* is what Lauren calls it. She presses forward. The morning is taking its toll on her. As of now, it means nothing. But as the day progresses, everything little thing, every bump in the road, each little hiccup, is going to lead in to what will be a life changing event. It would have been much simpler if she just didn’t oversleep. There are two sides to every story. If she hadn’t overslept then she would never see her husband with that other woman. She would never tailspin out of control and take matters to a violent act. Had she woken up in time, her husband would still be alive.

Lauren presses on the breaks. The light is yellow. She could press on the gas and make a nascar-style attempt at beating the light but even with her wanting to make it on time, she can’t take that slight chance that maybe, just maybe, she could cause an accident and then she would be more than just tardy. She breaks and stops her car at the intersection. She looks to her left. A gentleman is busy talking on his cellphone, tapping his fingers angrily on the steering wheel. To the left of her is a strip mall. She glances at it. She looks away and focuses her attention back in the road, hoping that the light will turn green soon. *I can’t be late. Come on, turn green.* Lauren stops. A look of confusion fills her face. *Was that Brad?* She swore she saw her husband. Glancing back, she checks out the man exiting the shop with a woman in tow. It is him. Questions raced about her had. Thoughts of uncertainty boggled her mind. It was hard for her to pay much attention to the road ahead of her when all she can think of is her husband fornicating with another woman. Her mind did that. Her imagination always got the best of her. No matter how hard she tried, sickening images ran amuck in her brain.

*Focus, Lauren. You need to focus.*

She took a deep breath. Her hands tightened around the steering wheel. If she is to grab any tighter, she will break the wheel in half. It was at that very moment she saw her husband under a different light. He is no longer the ma she fell in love with. He isn’t the knight in shining armor he made himself out to be. He was a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Lauren wasn’t going to let this charade go on for any longer. At that very moment, a light bulb went off. Maybe it isn’t the wisest thing to do, nor is it even legal. Even being the religious woman she is, she knows what she was going to do is wrong. She smiles to herself. As her husband and the other woman disappear from view, she whistles a happy tune. Everything was going to be okay. She jus needed time. More importantly, she needs more proof. She doesn’t want to be wrong. Needless to say, no matter how much more proof or what little proof she already has, her plan was already set in motion. Maybe not in reality but in her mind, she is standing over his dead, rotting body.

*2 weeks ago…*

Lauren arrives home. She shuts the front door, calling out to her husband and daughter about her arrival. “I’m home!” She spots Brad on the telephone. He waves his hand in the air, waving to her with a smile. He points to the phone before she could get another word in. Laruen glares at him. She doesn’t like his attitude already. She isn’t a person you hush. Even with what she is suspecting. It isn’t wise to hush a broken woman.

Brad cups his hand to the receiver. Muffled, he speaks softly into the phone, “She’s home. We’ll talk later.” He pause and looks at his wife, “I know. Me too. Bye.” Brad hangs up the phone. He sets the phone down on a shelf and walks over to Lauren. His arms are open, readying himself for a loving hug. “I missed you, dear. How was work?”

She stands and accepts his hug. While he embraces her, she cringes. It wasn’t the same. Each hug she’s received since he saw him with the other woman, nothing has been the same. It’s all been different. The marriage is falling apart. To Brad, it is all well. Nothing is different. While he goes on with his life, holding back a dark secret, she is dying a little inside each day. The bond they swore to uphold is nothing but a thing of the past. Brad steps back. He looks at Lauren. He sees in her eyes a twinkle of concern. “Everything okay, dear? You seem upset.”

“It’s nothing.” She replies.

Not to be silenced. He questions her again, “You can tell me. What’s wrong?” He stares at her. He wasn’t going to budge till he says what’s on her mind. “Lauren…please. What’s wrong?”

She brushes the hair from her eyes. She lowers her head and smirks. “Just forget about it. I need to get dinner ready. Go tell Gretchen to wash up. Dinner will be ready in an hour.” She looks at Brad. He looks back at her and doesn’t say a word. He nods to his wife and like a trained puppy, he follows her command. “Okay, honey. Cheer up. You’re getting worked up over nothing. I promise.” He leaves the room. As he heads upstairs, he grabs the phone. Lauren could hear him dialing a number as he ascends the stairs.

She walks out of the room, watching him. She grabs the phone from the wall. Slowly and with great ease, she picks up the phone, listening in to the conversation.

“Everything okay?” the voice on the other line says.

“Not really. I think she knows.” Brad tells the woman on the other line.

“Oh, God. You didn’t tell her anything?”

Brad raises his voice, “Hell no! I don’t want her to find out.” Brad sighs deeply. He chuckles a bit, “I’m surprised she hasn’t found out already.”

The woman on the other line laughs. “Is everything ready?”

“Yeah. Six o’clock, right?” He asks, reassuring himself.

“Yes, Brad. Don’t be late. I want this to be perfect.”

Gretchen walks into her parents’ room. Brad is sitting in the bed. He smiles at her and mouths, ‘hello’. “Look, I have to go. Can we meet up tomorrow?”

“Sure, Brad. Meet me at Robin’s at four. I’ll be at the bar.” The exchange good-byes and hang up the phone. Downstairs, Lauren is crying. It was all the proof she needed. It was clear to her that her husband didn’t love her anymore.

Lauren stands over the stove, tears run down her face while she stirs the pasta. She argued with herself, trying her best to figure out what she did to deserve this. She did everything for him. She treated him like a king. Why would he deceit her? Why is he running around with another woman? Maybe she wasn’t attractive anymore. Maybe the sex was getting boring. As she thought long and hard, she failed to realize the water was boiling over, slowly ruining the pasta inside.

“Shit!” She grabs the handle. The pot is too hot for her. She lets go and lets the pot drop to the floor. Lauren steps out of the way, letting the scolding water run across the floor, seeping quickly under her shoes. Brad walks in the kitchen. He sees Lauren bent over, mopping up the spill with some paper towels.

“I guess were doing take out?” Brad smiles and bends down to assist Lauren. For everything she was going through, his joke wasn’t the wisest thing to say. Lauren stood up fast, tossing the soaked, paper towels at Brad. She says nothing and storms out of the house. “Lauren?” He follows her outside but to no avail, she was already pulling out of the driveway. She looks at Brad and yells, “You can add cooking to the list!” She puts the car in drive, and within seconds, the car fades out of view. Brad stands there, dumbfounded. He brushes his shirt down, almost like he is trying to dry himself off.

Lauren drives. She doesn’t know where but she just had to drive. She had to get away from the lies. The car ride gives her time to think, to debate whether or not to actually go through with her plan. Each time she leaned towards passing it over, she thought about the voice of the woman. It was that voice in particular that pushed her over the edge. It brought her closer to closing the book and dropping the gavel. She pulls into a parking lot of a nearby department store. She sits for bit, motionless and quiet. The silence is gone. Now the car is filled with her crying, cursing loudly towards her husband. *No turning back now.* She wipes the tears away. She adjusts the mirror, looking at herself in it. She pulls a make up kit from her purse and cleans herself up. She left the car and made her way to the doors of the store. An old man, nodded at her and smiles. “Evening, miss. Have a pleasant shopping experience.” She smiles back, and continues forward. She’s been in the stores dozens of time but it was very visit, she couldn’t find anything she needed. Maybe it’s the adrenaline running through her that is fogging up her memory. Lauren looks up at the signs hanging from the ceiling. She follows the signs; cutting left and twisting and turns down aisle after aisle, till she reaches the one she was clamming for. *Hmm…* Lauren presses her finger to her lips. There are many to pick from. Some were small and some were large. Small or large, both sizes will get the job done. Feeling rushed, she grabs the nearest one. Just holding the large knife in her hand, she feels a sense of liberation. She turns the knife about, looking at it inquisitively. A heavy woman walks by her. She stops and stares at Lauren. “You okay, dear?” She pulls at her dress, wedging it out from her ass crack. The woman stands still. She waits for Lauren to reply but she never did. Lauren is too captivated by the glistening shimmer of the knife’s blade under the florescent blubs in aisle twelve.

Lauren drops the knife into the shopping cart. She pushes the cart by the large woman. They exchange glances. Lauren moves forward. She glances left and then takes a glance right. A man walks up to her. He’s dressed in a red apron. Putting on a fake smile, he greets her. “Need some help, ma’am? Can I help you find anything?”

“I’m looking for your cleaning supplies. More specifically, I need a large bucket.”

The man nods. He steps out of the aisle and points left. “You wanna head towards our cleaning supplies. It’s aisle twenty. Buckets will be on the bottom shelf.” Lauren thanks him and turns her cart around. “Anything else you need?”

“No, thank you.” She heads off, ignoring the man’s pleasant ‘thank you for shopping here’ spiel. Lauren picks up the bucket. *Just a few more things.* She walks towards the hardware section and picks up a hammer. Lauren feels a vibration in her pocket. She grabs the phone from her pocket and looks at it. It was Brad calling. She doesn’t silence it. She lets the phone ring. A ‘missed call’ message covers the screen. She hopes he just leaves her be but she knows better. She knows he is going to leave a message and he’ll call again, checking to see if she received the message. It’s just how Brad is. He has very poor telephone skills. Sure enough, the phone dinged. A voicemail was left. She hovers her finger over the ‘listen’ button. She wants to know what he has to say but if she heard his voice again tonight, there is not telling how angry she would get. Lauren looks up. The large woman was in the same aisle as her. *Is she following me?* Lauren wants to run over to the woman and give her a piece of her mind but doesn’t. She imagines it though. She imagines screaming and hollering at the lady. She imagined the woman fighting back verbally. Lauren then picks up the hammer, and with a few, swift sings, she bludgeons the woman to death. Lauren comes to. She is standing, staring off in to space. The woman looks at Lauren then rolls her eyes at Lauren. She passes her by, once again, pulling her dress out of her ass crack.

“Bitch.”. Lauren says under her breath as the lady passes by. Lauren’s adds a few non essentials items to her cart and wheels the cart up to the front to check out. Lauren wonders if maybe someone will question the items in her cart. Will they wonder why she was buying a hammer, nails, and a knife? Is this normal? Do normal people buy these things this late at night? She is worrying too much. The cashier didn’t even look at what she was scanning. She grabs items and drags them across the laser. Her face just read, ‘I hate my job’. Lauren pays the woman and leaves the store. The older gentleman tips an imaginary hat to Lauren. “Have a good night, miss. Thanks for shopping with us.” She waves gently. Leaving the store, she feels a heavy burden lift off her shoulder. She feels like she got away with the crime of the century. While she hasn’t committed any crime as of yet, she hasn’t yet thought too far ahead of what will happen to her if she is caught red handed. Even if she is caught, she won’t care. Just to be free from the lies of her husband is good enough. To rid the Earth of another unfaithful man is a duty she should receive a medal for.

Lauren opens the trunk of her car and tosses the purchased items inside. She takes a seat, buckles herself in, and gazes at herself in the mirror. While looking at herself with a sense of pride, she catches the obese woman out of the corner of her eye, waddling her way to her car. Laruen continues to watch the woman. She wishes she could run the woman over. It was as if the lady was stalking her. She just wanted to get home, get to bed and sleep. Even with acts of violence running about in her head, she knows that she is going to sleep easy. Once she completes the act, she’ll sleep even better. No more worries. No more wondering about her husband. It is going to get easy. *Next week. I need more time to prepare.*  Lauren wants to be sure everything goes right. There is no room for error. Lauren pulls out of the parking spot and makes her way back home.

*1 week ago…*

Lauren sits at the dining table. Gretchen sits across from her. She is enjoying a bowl of cereal. After each spoonful, she fills her spoon with milk and takes a loud and agonizing slurp. She looks at her mom and giggles. Lauren gives her a stern look and shakes her finger at her. Gretchen doesn’t take the warning seriously. She fills her spoon once again with milk and slurps it again. She laughs, snorting in the process. “Stop that, Gretchen. What about the manners I taught you?”

Brad lowers the newspaper from his face. He takes a sip of coffee and looks to Lauren. She bites her lower lip. She motions with her head, getting him to notice Gretchen and her lack of table manners. “Do something.” She mouths to him.

Brad puts the paper down and turns around in his chair to discipline Gretchen. “Gretchen. Is that how a big girl eats her food?” She looks at her dad and smiles. She holds the spoon in her hand. Almost as if she was testing him, she drops the spoon down into the lake of milk. “I’m warning you, sweetie.”

Without any sense of repercussions, she takes another slurp. Instantly, she breaks into a squeal of laugher. A few snorts followed, ending with a snort. Lauren rises swiftly from her seat and storms over to Gretchen. “For heavens sake. Brad, sometimes you’re a pushover. You know that?” Lauren grabs Gretchen by the arm, startling her. “I will not have a child act like this at the table. You were raised better.” She pulls at her daughter’s arm, dragging her away to the bathroom to face the penalty. Knowing that she is going to get a belt across her backside, Gretchen pleads with her mom to give her another chance. Lauren isn’t one to back away from a beating. She had her fair share when she was growing up. If it wasn’t for her father’s abuse, she wouldn’t be planning what she is. Tough love is what her dad called it. It was the only Lauren could learn from her disobedience. Now that she is older and with a child of her own, the belt is in the other hand. It is her time to dish out the punishment and show her daughter that acting up and disobeying your parent will never be taken lightly.

Brad sits in the other room. He sips his coffee, reading away at the stocks of numerous fortune 500 companies. He tunes out the cries from his daughter. Even the snapping of the leather belt had no effect. He just sat there, cutting off the commotion from the other room. A savage beating but to Lauren, it is well deserved. She just wishes that it was Brad getting the fifteen lashes and not her sweet, *sweet* daughter.

Gretchen limps slowly back to the dining room. She sits down, gasping and clenching her teeth – anything to not show her mother she is in pain. Lauren follows behind Gretchen, taking her seat once again. She eyes Brad. He doesn’t notice the icy stare. He is too involved with the paper in front of him. The moment Lauren looks away to enjoy her now, cold meal, Brad senses her anger. He looks at his wife. “What?” He says with a stupid look on his face.

“Nothing. Just read your damn paper.” Lauren takes a final bite from her meal. Another meal she missed out on. Lauren picks up her plate. She reaches over to Gretchen, pulling her cereal away. She wasn’t finished. Since she came back from her beating, she stirred the cheerios around, swirling them around, making a milk-like whirlpool in the middle of the bowl. Lauren looks at her watch. It was that time to hurry her daughter off to school. It was also the time for her husband to leave for work. She questions that now. She wonders if he is really going to work to bang numbers around or just skipping out to bang a number of women.

Lauren walks her daughter to the bus stop. “I’m sorry for what I did. But you need to learn, Gretchen. You just can’t act like that. You’re a big girl now.”

Gretchen looks up to her mother. She wipes her nose. “I mean it, Gretchen.” Lauren bends down to talk to Gretchen eye to eye. On one knee, she pulls her daughter in close for a motherly hug. “I love you. You know that, right?”

“I know, mommy. I love you too.” The bus pulls up and stops. The doors swing open. A group of kids scramble on to the bus. Gretchen hugs her mom for a few seconds but to her, it feels like an infinite. “Better get going.” Lauren kisses her hand and places it on Gretchen’s forehead. Getting back to her feet, she watches Gretchen walk on to the bus. She limps a little but nothing to raise a red flag at the school. Gretchen takes her seat and stares out the window. They wave to each other, continuing all the way till they no longer see each other. Lauren turns away from the bus stop and makes her way back home. Enjoying the time alone to think, she visualizes a life without her cheating husband. At home, Gretchen makes her way to the basement. This is her workshop. This is where she is going to follow through with her plan. This is where her husband is going to die. If she has to, it will also be the last thing her daughter lays her eyes on. While her daughter has nothing to do with her husband and his unfaithful ways, she can’t imagine her daughter growing up with a father. She rather have her daughter die than live life knowing her daughter cared more about a stranger than his own family. No child should be burdened with something like that. If she is going to take two lives, she’ll have to get more supplies. She only has enough for one. Like a good, boy scout, it is best to be prepared.

*Present Day…*

Lauren stands over her husband. He is covered in blood. She drags the blade across his chest. It slices his shirt, revealing his bare chest. With each stroke she makes, another button flies off, landing on to the floor. The eerie silence in the room is enough to make the ever so faint noise echo in all their ears. Still gagged and unable to scream, Brad gazes into his wife’s eyes for any sign of the woman he loves. But nothing is there. There is only darkness and pain. There is only a bitter woman with a broken heart. If Brad could speak, he would do all he can to mend the heart he broke.

Lauren walks back to the work bench. It is a moment of relief for him. It is a time for him to not feel pain or have a sharp object dangle, sinisterly in front of his line of sight. Brad might not be able to see anything but his ears are working overtime. The sound of metal objects scrapping together, were enough to give his brain a work out. He can see his wife rubbing blades together. He can hear her smile and sigh with delight as she chose her new weapon. There is nothing he could do. He knows that before the night is over, he is going to die for a reason that escapes him.

Lauren turns back and walks to her husband. He looks at her. The fear is stronger now. Lauren presses a saw to his arm. She drags it slowly across his arm. She is careful enough to not cut deep but just enough to break the skin. Brad closes his eyes and weeps. His crying only made Lauren angrier. She felt nothing for him while he cries. She has been crying for weeks. A simple tear isn’t going to make her drop the saw and tell him all will be okay. His weeping sent her in a frenzy. She presses the saw harder onto his arm. Then, Brad lets go. He lowers his head, ashamed of himself. Lauren looks down at his legs. Like a scared child, Brad wets himself. The stream of urine travels down his pants, dripping from his pants and forming a puddle of warm, urine below his feet. Lauren can’t help herself. She laughs at her husband. All the manliness he had is gone. He is nothing more than a whimpering child. He is the scared little boy he was back from his youth. But being a grown man, he doesn’t have his mother to comfort him. He has no one to hold him and tell him everything is going to be okay. Even if he did, nothing is going to be okay. He is going to die and he knows it.

Gretchen stills sits across the room. She watches her mother torture her father. There is nothing she can do. All she can do is beg for her mother to stop. Her vision is back. She can see everything. She can see her father sitting there is pain, taking everything Lauren dishes out. She yells to her mom, “Stop, mommy! Leave daddy alone! Don’t hurt him!” To no avail, it doesn’t work. Lauren just shrugs it off. She looks at Gretchen. She doesn’t say anything but just the look in her eyes was all she needed. She is well aware her mother is going to hurt her next.

Turning her attention back to Brad, she slides the saw blade across his arm with a quick jerk. A stream of blood sprays in the air. But the quick jerk wasn’t enough for her. She grabs his arm, holding it tightly. Lauren grabs the handle tightly and goes to work. Slowly, almost methodically, she begins to saw at his arm. It is easy to tear away at his flesh. It is soft and easy to cut through. Lauren works slowly at first. But when the flesh is all but broke through, she reaches the bone. That is when she reaches the hard part. The saw is dull. It isn’t strong enough to cut through bone. She tries though. She tries many times. It was like trying to cut through metal. Brad would scream but she silences him. She stops sawing away and smacks his face with the blade of the saw. She smacks twice more, ripping the flesh away from his face. Brad cries in agony. Lauren returns from the workbench with a wash cloth. She dampens the cloth with water and begins to wipe the blood from his face. It is at that moment Lauren sees what damage she brought to his face.

From her chair, Gretchen screams in horror. She stares at her dad. He looks back at Gretchen. They share a moment of love. Just looking at each other, they feel safe. They feel like they can someone challenge their mother and maybe with some strange act from above, they can break her. They can make her come to her senses and she will release them. It’s just a thing from the stories. No one can really be changed just by the power of love. Her heart won’t grow three sizes. She won’t change. She’ll just laugh off their attempt at escaping.

Gretchen looks at her mom and cries, “Mommy! What did you do!? Where is daddy’s nose?” Brad crosses his eyes and looks to his nose. Nothing was there. His nose is no more than just a twisted mess of flesh and cartilage. While Gretchen gazes on her father, her mother just shrugs it off. Gretchen’s cries of horror and disgust don’t seem to bother Lauren. She screams, getting louder and louder. The piercing decibels are pitched high enough, a few dogs in the neighborhood howl about.

Lauren drags a scalpel across Brad’s arm. She cuts him but not too deep. She wants him to feel pain, to hear him cry and beg for her to stop. “Just a few more cuts, Brad. I want you to feel the pain I felt.” She slams the scalpel deep into his arm, then with a quick, sudden yank, she pulls hard. Gretchen yells to her mom to stop. She pleads with her mom, screaming over and over, “Leave daddy alone!”

Lauren has kept her cool the whole time but with her daughter’s nagging, she seems to be losing her cool. It will only be a matter of time before she breaks. Lauren is still. She holds the scalpel in her arm, its’ blade still deep in Brad’s arm. Clutching the handle, she can’t block out her daughter’s cries and screams. Lauren turns her head slightly towards Gretchen. “Would you please, shut your FUCKING MOUTH!?”

Gretchen stops. She looks shocked. But moments later, she cries louder. Amidst all the chaos, the screaming, the crying, and the whimpering from her weak, husband, she breaks. Lauren pulls the scalpel out of Brad’s arm and lunges at Gretchen. She stands over her daughter, breathing heavily. “Cry again. I dare you. Shed another tear and I’ll give you something to cry about.” Gretchen hesitates momentarily. But just staring into her mother eyes, she sees nothing but darkness. With nothing to hope for, she lets loose. Before a single tear could pour from her eye, Lauren savagely stabs her daughter in the chest with the weapon. Gretchen screams for the attack. It only angers her mother more. She stabs her daughter again, then again, and a third time. She slashes away, flaying her arms about stabbing her daughter continuously, until Gretchen drops her head and slouches over, motionless.

Lauren taps her daughter, checking her for any sign of life.”Gretchen!?” She shakes her again, this time with more force. Still, her daughter doesn’t move. It isn’t sinking in. But her daughter is dead. With her daughter dead, it ruined what she wanted. She wanted Gretchen to watch her dad die. She wanted her to watch him suffer. But now, with the change of events, she had to react and just finish what she started. Lauren kisses her daughter’s forehead. “Did you see what you made me do!? You just ruin everything, don’t you?”

Brad holds his head down. He doesn’t look at his wife. He just watched his daughter die and knows that very shortly he is going to join his daughter. With no more conscious thoughts, she grabs the kitchen knife off the work bench and plans to finish what she started. Gretchen cuts the gag from his mouth. Brad takes a deep breath. A normal routine people take for granted but the few breaths he took in were divine. He savors the air in his lungs. “Any last words?” She says to him. She presses the tip of the blade to his neck. It pierces his skin but only breaks the skin, not really causing him much harm. But those short moments are gone in an instant. She leans in to her husband and whispers, *‘good-bye’* in his ear. Then, his world went black. With a final thrust, she drives the knife into his chin, driving it all the way through, up and through his mouth. Blood pours from his mouth. It pours and looks as if it isn’t going to stop.

Lauren picks up the blood-stained hammer on the ground. She raises it above her head and with a final, swift whack, she shatters his cranium. The pain is gone. It is gone for him and her. Lauren takes a deep breath and looks at her daughter and her husband’s body. Knowing what she did was wrong, she didn’t feel bad. She didn’t worry about the outcome of what she just did. She feels good about it. She feels better knowing that her cheating husband can’t hurt her anymore. What does worry her is the mess. The basement is covered in blood. A simple mop and bucket won’t fix it. She is going to have to bring out the bigger artillery to wash it all away. The biggest problem she will face is getting rid of the bodies. She can’t just toss them out with the trash. The idea of burying them in the yard crosses her mind but her neighbors are clueless to the idea of privacy. Someone will be curious about her midnight gardening. With the trash and the gardening ideas out the window, she went to her final idea. She plans to dismember the bodies and haul them off to the nearest dumpster. If she is going to do it, she will have to act fast. Hanging high above the workbench, out of reach from tiny hands, is an axe. It was recently bought, so the blade is still nice and sharp. *‘This will be easy’*. She stretches her arms out, even standing on her toes to pull the axe down. *‘Almost got it.’* She holds the axe in her hand. She runs her finger across the blade. It cuts her finger but she doesn’t mind. It only reassures her of the sharpness. It is going to take some time. She looks at her watch. She doesn’t have enough time for both her daughter and husband. She still has to clean up the mess and shower. She can’t be late. Her friend is expecting her. She swings. Not familiar with how to hold an axe, she misses her target. Her husbands head splits in half. It falls on the floor, rolling a bit then coming to a rest at her feet. She wipes blood off her forehead. Another swing and she cuts off the rest of his head from his neck. A boost of adrenaline runs through her body. It doesn’t feel like earlier when she murdered her husband. This time around, it feels different, almost God-like. She swings furiously, cutting away at her husband. His body grows smaller while the pile of appendages grows and collects on the floor.

Lauren drops the axe on the floor. She is out of breath and takes a moment to recollect herself. Lauren feels winded but accomplished. Her husband is no more. He is just a pile of flesh. Body parts lay about. A bloody stump, sits on the chair. “Oh, I can’t have that.” She picks up the axe. It’s heavier this time around but she feels up to it. She knows she has at least one more swing left in her. Lauren takes that final swing and with brute force, splits the final piece of her husband in two. The pieces bend and fall in opposite directions. “Done.” Lauren stands there, covered in blood and human flesh. This is the closest she has been to her husband in a long time.

Lauren pulls a trash bag from a nearby cupboard. Squatting on the floor, she begins to clean up the remains and tosses them into the bag. She starts to whistle a Disney tune, picturing herself as Snow White, cleaning up after the dwarves. While she whistles the tune, she doesn’t notice it but she starts to dance about. She twirls the bag around, knocking over her daughter’s body in the random dance number. The crashing sound startles her and she stops whistling. She stops dancing and looks at her daughter. She locks eyes with her daughter. She doesn’t want to admit it to herself but she feels some sense of remorse for killing her daughter. Lauren was angrier with herself about how things turned out. She wasn’t supposed to die first. She wanted Gretchen to suffer through what she went through. She wanted Gretchen to watch her father die. She wanted to see the look in her eyes when she watches her dad take that final breath.

Lauren’s watch beeps twice. It was her alarm to remind her of her plans for the night. She is a new woman. She is free. She can go out tonight and for the first time in weeks, she won’t have to worry if her husband is out with another woman. She knows he isn’t. She knows where he will be. He’ll be in the trash bag – the place where men like him belong. Tonight, tomorrow, and every day after, Lauren is free. She makes her way up the stairs. She takes a final look at the mess. She nods and smiles. It is a work of art to her. She is a regular Picasso. She leaves the basement and shuts off the light. The room goes dark. It would be silent except for the faint and straining gasps coming from Gretchen.

Upstairs, Lauren washes herself off in the shower. It is a little more trouble than expected. The blood is like paint. She scrubs harder and harder to rid herself from any questionable stains that can draw attention to her. She washes and runs her hands through her hair. Bone fragments drop like pebbles from her hair, being washed away down the drain – washing away more evidence of her crime.

The vigorous scrub down works nicely. She is clean and ready to dress up for tonight’s event. She stands and stares in the mirror. The dress makes her look stunning. She puts on a pair of earrings. They were a gift from Brad. She could have gone for another pair, a pair she bought herself but she likes them. She likes how the compliment her dress. They match perfectly. Even the necklace she spontaneously puts on, added a little more flair to her elegant outfit.

Lauren looks at the clock. She must have lost track of time when in the shower. She is running late. Not late, *late* but late to her not being extra early is late. She hurries, struggling to put her heels on. She slides one on and then the other. Lauren runs out of the room, grabbing her purse before shutting the door. She stops at the steps. At the bottom, she can see her daughter looking up at her. She can see Gretchen’s twisted body with her arm reaching out for her mom. “*It’s not real.*” Lauren closes her eyes and counts to five. In those short five seconds, she thinks about her daughter climbing the stairs to pull her down. But that is just silly. Her daughter is in the basement, slowly dying. It will be only a matter of time before one of those gasps is her final one.

Lauren reaches five and opens her eyes. Her daughter isn’t there. But she knew that. She knows where her daughter is. Not to find herself like her daughter, she takes each step with great caution. Finally, she reaches the bottom and feels safe. Again, she looks at her watch. *Tick Tock*. *Tick Tock.* Time is slowly ticking by. She can’t be late. She needs to hurry.

Lauren gets in her car. Her neighbor catches her. She waves to Lauren in hopes to chat a bit. Anytime Lauren chatted with this woman, it was about nothing. Normally it turned into a rant about her mother in law and how crazy the woman is. “Sorry Debbie. I can’t right now. I’m running late.”

Debbie smiles and just shoos her, “It’s okay. Tomorrow then?” Lauren agrees. “Tomorrow sounds great. We can talk over coffee.”

Lauren buckles up and starts up the car. “Sounds great, Lauren.” She waves goodbye and goes to turn away but stops, “Tell Brad I said hello. Oh, and give your little angel a hug for me.” Debbie waves again and continues waving all the way till Lauren is out of her sight.

Lauren eyes focus more on the dashboard clock than it does on the road. She doesn’t like being late. She has to be somewhere. She can’t be late.

*HONK! HONK! HONK!*

Startled, Lauren brings her eyes back to the road. She isn’t sure how long the light was green for but the people behind her sure did. She presses the gas and waves to the drivers behind her, giving them the universal, ‘sorry’ wave. Lauren arrives at her destination. She is meeting up with an old high school friend, Hope. They were planning on having dinner and maybe kick back a few glasses of wine. They haven’t spoke in years. She wonders if Hope still looks the same. They were quite the pair in high school. They did everything together. But after they both left for college, they lost touch. It didn’t take much convincing for them to meet up. Lauren was very excited about it.

Lauren walks to the door and knocks. She can hear Hope inside. She knocks again, listening for footsteps and to hear the sound of the door unlock. “Come in, it’s open!” Hope calls out. Lauren opens the door and steps in. The house is dark. There is an eerie silence. It is like the silence she had in the basement. “Hello?” Lauren says.

Instantly, the lights come on. The room is full of faces, familiar and unfamiliar. The group scream out, “Surprise! Happy Birthday!” Confetti and streamer fly everywhere. Lauren is taken back. She has been so caught up in her problems with Brad she forgot all about her birthday.

“Are you surprised?” Hope says to Lauren. She hugs Lauren. That moment felt like old times. All the memories came floating back. “Gosh, it’s so good to see you again.”

Lauren agrees. She looks around. She sees her sister. Her friends from work are there. Everyone she knows is there. Everything is perfect. Everything was till she spotted a woman sitting alone in a recliner, hiding from the group. “Excuse me, Hope.” Lauren pushes her way through the crowd, smiling and thanking everyone for their well wishes. She approaches the woman. From far away, she wasn’t sure. But now, standing just a stone throw away, she knows her. It is the woman that ruined her life. It was the woman who stole her husband away. It was the woman who’s been sleeping with Brad.

She can accuse her for ruining everything but it was her own hands that ended it all. The lady in front of her just started it. “I don’t want to sound rude or anything but do you know my husband, Brad?”

The woman smiles at Lauren. Just the smile alone proves it. She knows Brad. “I work with your husband. He is such a great guy.”

“Uh huh. And?” Lauren taps her foot. She crosses her arms and gives the woman a cold stare.

“We would talk all the time. He loves you, you know that? God, there were times I would have to tell him to shut up. He is crazy about you.” Sara stands up eye to eye with Lauren. “Well, he and I were talking one day. It seems you and I have a friend in common.”

Sara nods to Hope. Hope raises her punch glass and smiles at them both. “I brought up my friend Hope and one thing led to another. I had to get Hope here. He said you would be ecstatic about seeing her.”

Lauren wants to come out and yell at the woman for cheating and getting all cozy with her husband. It is just being at this party, she doesn’t want to. She doesn’t want to make a scene. But the thought of not knowing is killing her. She has to know. She grabs Sara by the arm and pulls her close. She is planning on giving her a piece of her mind. “Look, I know what you and my husband have been doing. I’m not stupid.”

“You knew!?” Sara breaks free from Lauren and sits down. “Wow. I thought we were being pretty secretive. How…how’d you find out?”

“I saw you two leaving together. I heard the phone calls you made.” She falls to her knees and cries. The party falls quiet and all eyes gaze over to the weeping, birthday girl. Lauren was kicking herself inside. She shouldn’t be crying. She should take the knife by the cake and just kill the bitch that ruin her life. But she doesn’t. She is weak at the moment and just sobs. She cries and cries, giving the party go-goers a feeling of awkwardness.

Sara kneels down and pats Lauren on the shoulder, “Look, Lauren. I’m sorry. We didn’t you to find out. It’s nothing to be upset about.” She looks around the room at everyone. They still look dumbfounded. Sara stands up, “Speaking of your husband, where is he?”

Lauren looks at her. She doesn’t and can’t say anything. She just stays mum. “You know, Lauren. Brad and I set this whole thing up. We’ve been planning this thing for weeks. It kind of sucks that you knew about it.”

“Knew about what?” Lauren feels sick. She is beginning to put the whole thing together. She wonders if she made a terrible mistake basing it all on just suspicion. “Umm…Brad.”

“Yes, Lauren! Where is your husband?” Sara pokes her head around, looking for Brad. “Believe me; he’s going to be so upset that you figured out about the surprise party.” Lauren stands up. She doesn’t say a word. She sees Hope standing by the cake table. They share a smile and a short hug. Without being seen, Lauren picks up the cake knife, concealing it from everyone’s view. “Where are you going?” Hope calls out to Lauren. Lauren reaches the top of the stairs and turns right. She walks half way down the hallway, standing at the balcony above the living room. All eyes go to her. “Oh, a speech.” Hope motions to everyone to raise their glass.

Lauren looks around the room at the familiar and unfamiliar faces. She steps closer to the railing. Everyone is gazing at her, waiting patiently for her to thank them and give some sort of heart felt speech. But she doesn’t speak. She just looks down at the crowd. Slowly, she pulls out the knife. The crowd faces fade to a look of shock. People point and scream at her to put it down. She puts the knife in front of her, pointing the blade towards her chest. People scream from below. A large man, races to the stairs, leaping almost to reach her before she did the unthinkable. The onlookers did nothing and the man’s heroic act was not fast enough. He is too slow and didn’t react with the notion of time. Before he could reach his arm out to pull the knife away, Lauren leans forward and drops from the second floor. She falls, landing on top of the cake.

Some people scream and look away. Mother’s bury their child’s faces in their bosoms to shield them from the gruesome site. Guests are covered in what may be red icing and pieces of cake. The fall killed Lauren. Still, some hope for the best. Some guests wonder if the knife missed her and the cake soften her fall. But if they glance to the floor, they can see a steady stream of blood, dripping from the cake and Lauren’s cold, dead hands.