

A diamond pierced Sonia-Barton's ear. She kind of looked like a gypsy, Beck thought. Her straight black hair was cut like an awning over a pale forehead and arching eyebrows.

Beck's ears weren't pierced because Panda said she wasn't a gypsy.

"You miss your mama much?" Sonia-Barton asked.

Beck's chest clenched like it did when people talked about the drownings. She smiled wistfully, "Yes, of course I do."

"What was she doing out on the ice anyway?"

Beck leaned forward. Her voice pressed. "Getting my brother."

"You were five?"

"Let's talk about something else, shall we?"

Sonia-Barton laughed. "You act like it was your fault."

Beck's fingers spread across her face like a web. Her smile wasn't her happy grin, but the mask she wore when words or action wouldn't come.

"Mama said it gave you a condition."

The revelation of her illness caused Beck to lower her head, fingers over eyes, a rictus grin beneath them.

"That why they lock your door at night? Maybe you'll grow out of it."

Beck could finally speak at the happy thought. Her hands fell into her lap. "That'd be nice," she sighed.

"Come on, we got to get on home, get ready for school." Sonia-Barton led her up the grass embankment.

They walked down the empty dark Lakeview Drive, through the neighborhood she'd charted on her bike, her friends' houses, yards, the lake and community beach where they played. She knew who had children, pets, where the fathers worked, who had the best candy on Halloween.

Some truths are so big, so obvious you can't put them into words. Some feelings are like clouds that can't be held and shaped, but blot what is bright and hopeful in you. She tried to keep her happy face. But the memory came back like a nightmare she couldn't forget.

She'd been six, Colin eight. She'd followed where he led, on adventure, to the beach behind their house, ducks swimming in a keep clear space of ice.

The drowning *were* her fault. Her mother and brother would be alive if she'd not frozen. She could have gone for help, screamed, rescued them.

*"Look it's OK." Colin stepped off the frozen sand of their beach.*

*"Colin, no! Come back," Beck begged.*

*The more fearful, the more he teased, how brave he was. He'd slid his shoes pretending he was ice skating.*

*“Colin! Come back,” Beck pleaded, crying. “Mama is coming! Get back.”*

*“Colin!” Mama shouted from the top of the stairs, an eternity up the steep slope. “Get off that ice. It’s not safe.”*

*“It is,” he’d shouted, twenty yards from the beach.*

*A ping like something trying to escape from below and his arms threw up in the air like he was reaching out for someone when the ice broke beneath him.*

*“Colin!” Mama screamed. She ran down the stairs, stepped onto the ice beside Beck.*

*The thin surface broke into planes pointing to grey sky. Hands windmilled, head above the surface to swim to Colin. For a moment, Mama held him.*

*“Get help, Beck,” Mama pleaded.*

*Beck’s hand’s spread across her face. Her lips rose and opened, teeth exposed as her cheeks spasmed upwards.*

*“I’m cold, Mama,” her brother said.*

*“Rebecca, help.” The plea descended into a groan of defeat, “help.”*

*A hand pulled them below the caramel surface. Mother and child held each other, gone.*

*Beck’s screams were as frozen in her as the broken ice.*

Ambulances had driven the bagged bodies past press and neighbors in the circle before the house, comforting each other if not the bereaved, awed by the cruelty that took so quickly from those who had so much.

Beck had lived at her grandparents through the winter and summer until school had started. She’d learned to keep a happy face even when she’d come back to live with her father at the lake, grown accustomed to the empty house, missing her mother and brother as if the roof was gone.

A half-step ahead on Lakeview Drive, Sonia-Barton looked over her shoulder. “How could your father stay here after that?”

The grin started. Beck wiped her forehead with the back of her hand over her hair and down past her ear, thrust her chin out like her grandmother said, to straighten up and fly right. “We stayed to face our fears.”

“What?”

Beck’s jaw relaxed into an expression of confusion. She didn’t know why they’d stayed. Probably because Panda had said they should. Beck had always assumed Panda knew what was best for her. But would it have been easier to forget if they’d moved? Were you braver if you always kept your fears in front of you with constant reminders? Would she feel less guilty, less accused if she didn’t watch ice form and melt on the lake, shiver in

a winter freeze when the ping of bubbles sound like the cries of her brother? She was the one who spent the most time here. But the choice had not been hers. Nobody asked would it be better for her if they moved. Maybe she wouldn't sleepwalk if they did.

“I think we stayed to be near where they died.” Her voice trailed to a whisper.

Maybe they'd stayed to punish her, to remind her she shouldn't have let Colin go out on the ice. She should have screamed, run for help, instead of being frozen with an idiot grin. Her father wasn't cruel. He loved her. But regret would seep through into thoughts and envelop her with the question – why she was alive and her mother and brother dead?

When she wanted to say what was right for her, she could only smile like nothing could bother her.