

## **Light at the end of a Tunnel**

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“I should have protected her. It was my fault.”

I sat rocking back and forth in my psychiatrist’s couch; I had said nothing more than that repeatedly, over and over, and over for the past two hours I spent with Dr. Stephenson. This was what our sessions were like every week. I’d come in with the confidence of a model, strutting, determined that this time around I’d tell my story; finally say something besides, “I should have protected her. It was my fault,” but I couldn’t. As soon as I sat in the vastly spacious couch covered in soft suede, I’d look around and feel the walls closing in on me, the bright three o’clock sun would turn into that of a dreary new moon, my expensive clothes would turn into skinny jeans and a short pink top with childish rhinestones, and my long freshly colored brunette hair would be swept into a messy pony tail. My lungs would tighten, choking on the smell of freshly spurred blood. The rusty smell would bring me to tears and memories of past pain and hatred for myself; it would ring and rape my soul, throwing daggers at my heart allowing me to crawl into fetal position like a child yearning for the comfort and soft touch of a mother.

I lived in the sunny state of California since I was little; I was born in Saint Rose Hospital, January 21, 1985 and two years later I gained a sister, Jessica Pearl

Thomas. Twelve years after her birth, something bad would happen, something that would scar me for the rest of my life.

“How was therapy, Honey?” My husband Michael asked softly, kissing my cheek. “The same as always. What’s supposed to change?” I said with a smile. He never knew about that day and he never will till later on in our marriage. Along with my husband, I, Elena Rose Sinclair, lived amongst the most prestigious and rich people in New York City. I worked in a large hospital and earned way more than your average doctor would. My husband Michael Sinclair worked at a wealthy law firm. We had no children only a rather huge apartment in upper Manhattan.

“So remind me... why do you go to therapy anyway? I married one of the most beautiful, perfect, smartest women in the world.”

“Yea, and this perfect wife of yours is hungry, are you finished cooking yet?” I’d say; trying to change the subject without him knowing.

“No, but seriously, I don’t see the point of you going every weekend and coming back with the same bleak answer ‘it was fine, or it was good’, what could you possibly need it for?” His eyes seemed to widen and a start of anger and sternness boiled at the end of his sentence.

“It’s work, Love, the constant feeling of pressure and, and the deaths around me, it has a toll on me and by the weekend, I don’t know, I just need to vent.” This is

how I started to cover for myself – by lying to the person I loved the most. I slowly made my way behind the tall granite counters to where he stood and wrapped my arms around his waist and kissed his neck, I watched as he skillfully flipped and tossed the meat and varied arrangements of peppers in the frying pan while I waited for him to reply. He was a live artist and the stove was his canvas, while the pots, spices, and spatula were his weapons of skill. I loved when he cooked.

“Why didn’t you tell me you felt this way about work? I know you love it but is it really worth the pain?” he turned to me and his once stern voice and widened eyes resided to his natural look of love and affection. This look made me feel whole, made me almost forget about everything and everyone. I loved him and he loved me. He embraced me and in his chest I muttered,

“Yes, I love my job, I love my patients, I love helping. It’s worth every long session with Dr. Stephenson.” I didn’t lie there, I do love my job it was the one place besides with Mike that I felt needed, loved, and important. It made living each day easier for me, because home and life was the least of my worries working in a busy ER.

“Every princess has her secrets.”

The air was thick and I was running, screaming for my life. My hands were stained and my hair was damp. I could feel the water from my hair run down my back and tickle the soft skin on my legs. I looked at my hands again and I had smaller hands in mine, the hands

of a baby, it was Jessica. I was four Jessica was two. We ran in circles from our mother giggling. She loved putting us in soft little pink dresses and ribbons in our hair. We loved when she gave us baths – so much that we would mess ourselves up on purpose so she would have to repeat the process all over again. Those summers at our grandmother’s lake house were the best. It was when Dad, Mom, Jessica, Grandma, Grandpa, and I would spent endless hours playing games and having fun, but things changed after grandpa had a stroke and died months after. Mom was distressed and grandma never allowed us back at her grand lake house. Eventually, Mom would get over it, but she wasn’t exactly the same.

The day of therapy came. I sat in my 24’ BMW at every red light and thought of every excuse in the book not to go “My dog died and my husband is very upset can we reschedule?” That was never going to work-- he’d call Mike and send his “condolences” like we even had a dog. Mike was allergic, and I was never good at keeping pets. I turned onto 52nd and Lexington into the vast parking lot of Dr. Stephenson and Dr. Barns Psychiatric Offices. I hated the name of his building. I slowly walked into the door and braced myself. My palms got clammy and my throat started to itch, but I was persistent in telling my story.

“Ah Ms. Sinclair, please sit down I’d like to introduce you to one of New York’s finest hypnotists Dr.

Rachel Barns. A strange eeriness came over me I wanted to bolt to the exit. But I stayed.

“Hello, I’m Elena Sinclair. Dr. Stephenson, I thought we had a scheduled appointment today?”

“We do, but I wanted to add a twist and this is where Dr. Barns comes in I wanted with your consent to hypnotize you in order to help you explain what you are here for, do we have the okay?” I was never into the whole hypnosis crap; I always thought it was an easy scam for vulnerable weak people, but I was one of those people. I passed back and forth thinking this could be it I can finally tell my story without actually freezing. But was I ready?

“Fine let’s do this, but hurry before I change my mind.” Dr. Barns laid me down on one of the reclining chairs and placed an old fashioned pocket watch from about 1880 into my face. I had seen one of these things in one of the many vintage stores plastered in the city – I knew she was a fake.

“Now Elena, I want you to follow this watch with only your eyes and count to ten.” I couldn’t believe this I was seriously going through with this.

“ 1, 2,3,4,5,6...,7...,8.....,9.....,10.”

“Now close your eyes and only listen to my voice.” Dr. Barns said slowly sounding like a lullaby. At the sound of her voice without hesitation closed my eyes I couldn’t even tell if I was seriously being hypnotized or if the soft hum of her voice was putting me to sleep.

“Elena, you are twelve years old, on the night of October 1997. Your parents are away on vacation and your sister and you are left behind at home with your nanny Maria. Can you see Pearl?”

“Yes... I see her. She is sitting on the floor in her room playing with my dolls. I hated when she touched my things without asking.”

“Tell me what happened that night Elena? Why is Pearl dead?”

Mommy was sitting in the small chair in front of her vanity mirror putting on makeup. I was so sad that she was going to leave me and Pearl behind. I hated the nanny. She smelled and never played any games with us. I ran into her room and climbed onto her lap, she lifted me and held me tight, embracing my face and staring into the mirror. I loved her so much, she was so pretty. She had long wavy brunette hair just like mine, but hers had an extra curliness, the type of curls that even in the hottest wheatear couldn't come out. I stuck my finger in it and pulled and released her hair and it always sprung back into place. I enjoyed that feeling so much. Her eyes were a soft emerald green and her lips always had a new color on them. Tonight they were a rich red. She reached for her lipstick and slowly drew it onto my face while I stared into her eyes I never liked the lipstick but I loved the way she put it on me.

“Mommy, do you and Daddy have to leave me and Pearl home. We hate Maria she's mean.” I pouted my lips and batted my eyelashes but I was getting

nowhere with that. It only worked on my Dad when I wanted a new toy or dress.

“Oh darling its only for a few days, and when we come back daddy and I will take you and Pearl out for the best ice cream and shopping.” She didn’t really mean the ice cream part she only said it so I would leave her alone. I loved ice cream with a burning passion but we weren’t allowed to eat it unless we went out.

“Fine but I’m not going to be happy here, all alone with only Pearl to play with.” I placed my hand on my forehead and pretended to faint on her bed. I was such a drama queen, and my mother never bought it. She got up and took off her robe to reveal a long tight fitting silky black dress, with a love cut top. It looked so great on her; I wanted to hug her but my Dad hurried her. She gave me a quick kiss on my cheek and ran to say goodbye to Pearl. And they were gone.

“Pearl where are you? Pearl?” I opened my room door to find her sprawled on the floor with all my dolls on the floor. Their hair was all messed up and she mixed matched all of their clothes. “What are you doing?” “Get out my room I hate you get out!”

“I was only trying to fix them, Elena, honest!” she gave me those stupid baby eyes but I didn’t care I pushed her out my room and slammed the door in her face. I could hear her loud obnoxious cry from the other side of my door.

“Let me in Elenaaaaa! I’m sorry please let me in I didn’t mean to!”

“I don’t care go away and leave me alone.” I spent the rest of the lonely night fixing my dolls hair and clothes back, I felt much better after I wasn’t mad any more. After all she was my little sister. It was about twelve o’clock when I climbed out of bed and run down the hallway into Pearls room. I slammed the door behind me and with the noise she suddenly rose out of her bed.

“Elena please don’t be mad at my any more. I’m sorry I was really bored, and stupid Maria wouldn’t play dress up I’m sor...”

“It’s okay I guess. Just don’t touch my things without asking again, got it” I walked slowly over to her bed trying not to trip in the bleak darkness of her room. I felt around the walls of her room I could picture her room with the lights on. Her walls were a salmon pink just like mine. Her bed was large and had a huge princess base surrounding the exterior of the mattress. In the middle of her floor was a big shabby rug that spelled her name out we both played on it. I called it my Princess castle even though it was hers, but she never minded. There were shelves crowded with dolls and stuffed animals and art supplies. It was the typical princess certified room. I bumped into her bed while quickly skimming the interior of her room climbed in. She threw her arms around me, and there is where I resided for the night. The next day Pearl and I woke up to a loud crash of thunder. Pearl’s room was still dark at nine-thirty in the morning it was because of the storm. A flash of terrifying lightning dashed across her face and

scared both of us so bad that we ducked underneath the covers. I looked at her face and started laughing so hard. I still don't know what was so funny but it was.

"What's so funny, Elena? I don't get it." An expression of confusion abducted her face, but she couldn't help but break into a laugh herself.

"Oh nothing... lets go see what dumb ol' Maria made for breakfast." We both scurried like little mice into the kitchen and sat in front of plates piled high with bacon in the shape of a smiley face, chocolate chip waffles, and leaky boiled eggs.

"Mmmm, I'm so hungry." Pearl's eyes lit up with that silly glow that you always saw in all the cartoons when the dog found a pile of fresh hot food. It was so cute.

"Oh Pearl, put your tongue back into your mouth and eat it." She slowly picked up the fork and began to pick up a piece of bacon. "Wait. What if she poisoned it." I said in a whisper trying to play with Pearl's head.

"I don't know what poison taste like, Elena!"

"Shhh. You can't make her hear us, I'm the oldest give me a piece of you bacon and I'll test it, okay." I shoved her piece of bacon in my mouth and laughed "Baby."

"Hey you lied to me, gimme my bacon back, Elena, that's not nice."

"Oh take it. I was only kidding." She was so gullible. We had finished eating and decided to watch

cartoon because it was still pouring outside. We had fallen asleep.

I woke up to a burning sensation in my lungs. I couldn't breathe, and when I tried to open my eyes it stung badly. I felt for Pearl in the bed and shook her awake.

"Pearl! Wake up, wake up! Don't breathe too quickly and only squint your eyes." Pearl shot up out of the bed and grabbed my hand. We ran out the room and found Maria asleep on the couch. We ran down the long stairs that with every step seemed to be getting longer. The curtains in the kitchen quickly sparked with flames and they roared. I ran to Maria and woke her up. We all held hands and ran to the front door. The air was thick and my eyes were still burning from all the smoke. As soon as we got out the house Maria stooped on one knee and told me to stay put and to watch my sister and don't go back inside. I nodded at her and watched her run off to the neighbor's house. I turned around and didn't find pearl holding my hand.

"Pearl! This is no time to play games where are you. You know Maria is going to put you on time ou..." The front door was open again. It shouldn't have been. I know she had run back in there. My heart raced like a thousand racecars circling a track. I looked and the quickly burning house and ran into the front door. "Pearl!" "Pearl!" There was no sign of her in what was left of the living room which was nothing but expanding flames. I continued up the stairs dogging roaring flames

and crawling on my knees to take in what was left of the clear air on the ground. I had learned that in fire safety class. I had reached my room door and saw Pearl cradled in the middle of my room with a blanket filled with my dolls.

“Pearl, leave the doll and let’s go; we’re gonna die in here.” I could hear the flames from down stair coming closer. My room was turning into a baking oven the walls were caving in and heat waves seemed to blind my vision. Coughing, I tripped over to where Pearl was throwing my dolls into a bag shaped blanket. I slapped the sheet out her hand and tried to drag her but the smoke had whipped me I couldn’t breathe anymore and neither could Pearl. Her little face was turning red and sweat bullets dropped from her face like the rain in the thunder storm. She fell. I tried so hard to pull her but my weak nimble body couldn’t take the smoke infested air any longer. I felt my lungs burst and tears dropped from my eyes Pearl wasn’t moving anymore.

“Elena... Elena!” I heard the faint screams of Pearl but it couldn’t be she was lying in front of me. “Elena wake up fight it!” the voice only grew fainter. My eyes slowly shut and I took what I thought was my last breath. I failed that voice, I failed my sister, and I failed!

“She has some intensive third degree burns abut we’ve removed the damaged skin from her torso and legs and replaced it with some of the remainder skin from her tights.” I woke up with a horrible head ache and this annoying beeping noise wasn’t helping. My

eyes flickered open, like a new born baby waking up for the first time. I was re-born that day.

“Doctor, she’s up!” I saw my mom or a woman that looked like my mom. Her hair wasn’t combed and her perfectly done makeup was dripping from the woman face. She was crying. As the lady moved closer, I could make out the similar resemblances of my mother from this lady, my Mom. She kissed my forehead gently brushing her soft lips onto my cheek and embraced me in a too tight hug. I felt my chest tighten and that stupid beeping noise grew louder and faster.

“Ms. Thomas, you’re holding her too tight – her heart beat is climbing.” She pulled back and looked at me, and my vision went clear.

“Mommy!” I screamed like it was the first time I saw her in years.”

“Oh my darling baby, I’m here! I’m so glad you woke up I’ve been waiting”

“Woke up?” I didn’t understand all I was doing was sleeping. The last thing I remembered was falling asleep with Pearl. Mom looked at Dad and looked back at me puzzled.

“You mean you don’t remember?”

“Daddy what is Mommy talking about?” All was quiet. I only heard the distant voice of people calling doctors? I looked around and realized the hospital bed and the many tubes in me stealing my blood and replacing it with a weird clear-looking thing.

“You’ve been sleeping for four days,” I looked back at Mommy’s face she had new black circles under her eyes and her skin was pale and ghost-like.

“I don’t care where is Pearl I bet she’s dying for bacon and waffles just like me.” Again, the room went silent, but this time mommy got up and ran out the room sobbing like a baby. And that’s when I got up and walked over to Daddy. His head was in his hands and for the first time I saw him cry.

“Where is Pearl?”

“She died... in the fire.”

I didn’t process that the first time. “Died.” Then it hit me – the smoke, the screaming, and my dolls. A nasty feeling boiled up in my throat it was like I was trapped in a closet watching someone rip every organ from my body, feeling very pain and losing my sense. My head spun and my eyes swelled up tears ran down my cheeks, and that beeping went faster. I pulled hard and fast on the tubes and things in my veins sucking the life out of me. I ran. I ran fast and swift, dodging doctors and security guards. I couldn’t see too well because my tears were blocking my view. But I was outside; the cold October wind slapped me in my face and sent horrifying chills up the backless hospital dress. I didn’t care, and then there was black then pain.

“Wake up, Elena. Wake up. Ms. Sinclair, I’m going to count back from 10 and when I clap wake up.” I shot out of my seat and fell into the arms of Mike. Tears rolling down my cheek “I’m sorry Pearl I’m sorry, I

should have protected you it's all my fault." Mike cradled me in his arms and hushed me. I didn't want to open my eyes again, I was afraid to see a disappointed look on Mike's face for lying. I wished I would have burned in that house. Pearls didn't deserve to die.

"Elena, open your eyes, it's over, I'm here... Elena, please open your eyes, Love."

I opened my eyes but, instead of a look of disappointment, I saw love and a scarce trace of sorrow in his eyes.

"Ms. Sinclair, how do you feel, now?" I looked at Dr. Stephenson I shook the extra tears off my eyes.

"Like a princess whose empire should have died along with her sister's." I said this without crying. I had Mike; I couldn't cry even if I tried – his embrace was strong and comforting. I continued to talk, pouring out my feelings.

"My last choking breath"

I wore all black and tied my hair back in a messy pony tail. Mike finally met Pearl. We had taken a trip to see her. It had been the first time I went to her grave. I apologized for not saving her even though everyone told me it wasn't my fault. A small part of me still felt I let her down. But I knew Pearl had forgiven me because when I leaned on her grave and touched it, I felt her hand in mine again and a soft voice coo into my ear. That was the last time I choked on my breath. My heart was lifted of the heavy imprint that that October day had left. I was

free. A blessing had come to me. I was pregnant with a girl. I was going to name her Pearl and love her like I loved my sister. Mike grabbed my hand and we walked off into the rising sun. Freely, I lived.