BLINK AND YOU'LL MISS IT

It had been happening as far back as she could remember. At first, she didn't even notice, it was always so insignificant. A changed font on her report card, a different shade of yellow in her scrambled eggs, one fewer leaf on the rose bush. Maybe a design missed a spot, or the sweater's pattern was a little bit more green than usual. Simple stuff, things no one would remember if asked about. Things only started to get more serious on her twelfth birthday.

Frannie was sitting on the couch in her favorite blue dress, kicking her legs back and forth. The party hat's elastic was cutting into her chin, but she was too focused on the front door to care. Ally was twenty minutes late. Ally was never late. Her eyes flicked to the clock on the wall for a second before returning do the door. She stopped, slowly looking back at the clock that hung over the kitchen door. It read 12:25. She blinked once, twice. Hadn't it just read noon?

Before she could even begin to answer the questions racing through her mind, the doorbell rang, chiming clearly for all the house to hear. Frannie's mother came bounding down the stairs, finishing putting in her earrings as she wiggled her eyebrows at Frannie. Pulling the door open, she smiled.

"Hey Mary, hey Jeremy, good to see you again. Come on in. Frannie's on the couch, Ally."

Ally rounded the door, her black braids swinging behind her. She plopped onto the couch next to Frannie, grinning as she set down a brightly colored, wrapped box.

"You're late." Frannie said, crossing her arms and pouting.

Ally's smile dropped, morphing into puzzled humor.

"What are you talking about? The invitation said that the party starts at one. I'm early."

Frannie scrunched up her eyebrows, chewing on her lower lip.

"Fine, it doesn't matter. Let's just go outside."

She pushed off the couch, stopping at the doorway to straighten her dress and wait for Ally. Ally jumped up, racing her out of the living room and out the back door. They thundered down the porch stairs, jumping into the grassy backyard.

"Let's play hide and seek!" Ally said, covering her eyes with her hands. "I'll start."

Frannie scrambled away, scanning her eyes over the tulip beds and the tool shed. She squeezed herself behind the shed, pressing her dress against the fence as she did. She could faintly hear Ally counting somewhere in the yard.

"Nine, Ten! Ready or not, here I come!"

Frannie smiled and bit her lip so as not to laugh. She blinked, fidgeting behind the shed, struggling to hear Ally looking. There was no sound. A minute passed. Two. Why hadn't she found her yet? She stuck her head out from behind the shed. The yard was empty.

Where is she? Frannie thought to herself, stepping out from behind the shed. *I didn't hear her parents calling her inside. Why'd she stop looking?*

Frannie slowly went up the porch stairs and went inside the house. She heard talking in the kitchen, so she went through the open door. Her mom and her dad were talking to Ally's parents, laughing and talking. Her mom saw her first.

"Frannie, what happened to your dress?"

She looked down and saw that it was torn at the bottom and had some sap spots.

"I was playing hide and seek with Ally."

Her mom looked confused.

"Who?"

"Ally. We were playing outside, but now I can't find her. Do you know where she went?"

Her mom exchanged a look with her dad.

"Frannie, who is Ally?"

Frannie crossed her arms.

"This isn't funny mom. Ally, my best friend. We've known each other since pre-school."

Ally's parents looked amused.

"She's your daughter, tell them about her."

Ally's mom, Mary, laughed nervously.

"Frannie, we don't know anyone named Ally. We don't have kids."

Her heart stopped.

"What are you talking about?"

Frannie's mom smiled at her, but the concern shined through.

"Are you feeling okay honey?"

"No!" She cried. "None of you remember Ally! She came inside ten minutes ago and put a present down on the couch. Look and see!"

Frannie's dad looked skeptical, but he went into the living room. He soon returned with a bright red, wrapped box.

"See! That's the present Ally brought."

He looked at the tag and shook his head.

"No, this is the present Jeremy and Mary got you."

Frannie's heartbeat slowed as she took the box in her shaking hands. The tag read: *To Frannie, From Jeremy and Mary*. Frannie thought she could feel her heart shattering. Ally was gone and there was no proof that she ever existed.

***

After that day, it only got progressively worse. Now Frannie sat in the mall food court, bouncing her leg as she glanced around. School had let out only an hour ago, but the cafe was already crowded with other seniors. The barista at the counter had long pink hair and smiled at her from where she stood. Frannie flashed a nervous smile in response before returning her eyes to the crowd, hopelessly scanning the people for any sign of familiarity. A girl with hair extensions set her yellow backpack down at a booth nearby. A bearded man sat down next to her, laughing at a joke the girl told.

Sighing, she opened the book that had lay in her lap, the wrinkled cover of Barry Potter and the Prisoner of Alakazam staring up at her. Propping the book up on her table, Frannie began to read, focusing in on the wizarding world in front of her. Barry's black hair, his green eyes, and his two best friends. She blinked. Barry's blonde hair, his green eyes, and his two best friends. She furrowed her eyebrows and blinked again. Barry's blonde hair, his grey eyes, and his two best friends.

Someone tapped on her shoulder, and she turned, closing the book hard as she did. The barista jumped back, wincing at the sound. She held out a cup. Frannie blinked at her.

"Your coffee, miss."

Frannie looked at her, eyes immediately going to the baristas short, pink hair as she took the cup.

"Oh. Thank you. Sorry."

The barista turned and walked back to the counter, unaware of Frannie's sad eyes watching her go. Frannie turned back, cupping the paper cup in her hand. The girl with hair extensions rummaged in her bag while the bearded man teased her. Steam rose from the cup, into her eyes, and Frannie blinked. The girl's violet bag tipped over, spilling notebooks and colored pencils onto the floor.

Frannie took a sip of her coffee before sighing and pulling a crumpled piece of paper out of her back pocket. Unfolding it revealed a list, titled Changes. Under *gum flavor* and *taco shell shape*, she wrote *coffee*. She had ordered a caramel latte, but when she checked her receipt and what she had written on her hand, it matched her drink. She stood up, tugging her bag onto her shoulder as she slipped a twenty into the tip jar and left.

It took several minutes of maneuvering through the crowd before she could get to the center courtyard. A fountain stood tall in the middle, the wide lip acting as a circular bench that she sat down upon. Her eyes finally found the billboard that listed out the date and time and she began to blink. As fast as she blinked, things started to change. The font, the billboard height, the placement of the date, the color of the background, the type of material. She stopped, keeping her eyes open as she stared. With all of her blinking, the only thing that didn't change was the date.

Smiling and with shaking hands, she pulled a small piece of paper out of her other pocket. She slowly unfolded it and straightened it on her knee. It was mostly empty, except for the title, Safe, and the two words under it. Under *Names* and *Age*, she wrote *Date*.

***

When she got off the bus in her neighborhood, it was pouring down rain. Her short hair was plastered to her face, water streaming down her back as she trudged through the ankle-deep puddles. As she turned the corner, a big black dog came rushing at the fence, barking loudly as she walked past.

"Hey Duchess," Frannie said, sticking her hand through the fence to be licked. "I'll come by to walk you tomorrow. It's too wet right now."

Duchess ran back inside, and Frannie continued down the sidewalk, kicking water as she walked through her yard. Fumbling with her key and shaking off the water, she managed to open the door without too much hassle, closing it behind her as she stepped inside. It was dark, so she flipped on the light, pulling off her wet boots and socks.

The tv was on in the living room and someone's socked feet were hanging off the arm of the couch. An empty mug sat next to several others on the coffee table, a neon backpack with a rabbit design sticking out beneath it. The socked feet were emerging from a slouched blanket burrito, and when she squinted, she could see a pale little face sticking out of it, green eyes glued to the television screen.

"Hey Audrey. How was school today?"

The burrito shrugged, not looking up from the screen. Frannie crouched down at the end of the couch, eyes just level with her sister's feet. She walked her fingers up slowly, tapping them loudly as they crawled up. She was still for a moment, before she grabbed her foot and pretended to bite down. Audrey squealed, writhing across the couch in her blanket.

"Stop it! That tickles!"

Frannie stood up and swung Audrey's legs towards the coffee table, still holding her feet in the air. She plopped down next to the burrito and tossed her arm across the blanket, smiling down at the freckled face beside her.

"How was school?"

Audrey shrugged again, wiggling her feet.

"Fine."

Frannie frowned.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just tired."

Frannie threw her head back dramatically.

"Well, I'm pretty bummed."

Audrey wiggled in her blanket, turning to look at Frannie.

"Really?"

"Yup," she said, nodding and flailing her arms. "But do you know what would make me feel better?"

Audrey shook her head.

"Some ice cream!"

Her eyes lit up and she threw back her blankets.

"Let's go!"

She grabbed Frannie's hand and tugged at her arm, pulling her off the couch and into the kitchen. Audrey reached to grab the bowls, leaving Frannie to grab the ice cream from the freezer. As she went to open it, she spotted the calendar that hung on the fridge door. There was a

big red circle with the words "18th Birthday" written under it. Was it only three days away? She shook her head, trying to shake off the feeling of dread.

She blinked and picked up a carton of ice cream.

"Bad news, Audrey. We only have chocolate and rocky road." She said, pulling out the chocolate.

Audrey set down the bowl next to the carton and turned to grab spoons.

"That's okay!"

Frannie blinked, pulled open the lid and just stared down at the contents. Audrey popped up behind her, looking around her shoulder at the ice cream.

"That's not chocolate! You tricked me!"

"Yep," she said, still staring down at the creamy green ice cream. "Sorry, I must have had chocolate on the brain. I guess we do have mint chocolate chip after all."

"Yay!"

She slowly scooped heaping portions into their bowls, and she set them on the table, sliding into her seat as she did. Audrey immediately dug in, scarfing down her ice cream as Frannie just watched her. She pulled the folded piece of paper out of her pocket and unfolded it, smoothing it on the table before jotting something down.

"What are you writing?" Audrey asked, taking a break because of brain freeze.

"Nothing," she said, setting her pencil down.

Under the word *Safe* was one more word. *Audrey.*

"Let's eat."

***

When she set out the next morning, the rain was almost completely gone. All that was left were some puddles and an overcast sky. Frannie pulled her coat more tightly around her as she stepped out of her yard, slowly making her way towards the city bus stop. The trees were still dripping wet, but something felt off.

As she began to walk past one of the yards, she stopped. Where was Duchess? She always came out to meet her in the yard, but she was nowhere to be seen. None of her toys were in the yard either. Frannie doubled back, jogging up the front door to ring the doorbell. She blinked and the now red door opened, revealing a short woman with greying hair and a nightgown.

"Hi Mrs. Castellano."

"Frannie? What are you doing here?" She asked, unfolding her glasses, and putting them on her face.

"I was wondering if you wanted me to walk Duchess when I get home from school today?"

Mrs. Castellano squinted at her, rubbing her eyes with one hand.

"What are you talking about?"

Frannie could feel her smile dropping but she fought it.

"I didn't see her outside, so I was wondering if you would need me later."

"Who are you talking about?"

Her blood ran cold.

"Duchess? Your dog."

Mrs. Castellano shook her head, reaching for the door.

"I don't know what you're trying to pull Frannie, but this ends now. You know I don't have a dog; I never have."

"But-"

"Goodbye Frannie."

The door was shut in her face, leaving Frannie standing stupidly on the doorstep. She reached into her back pocket, fingers trembling as she uncrumpled the list entitled *Changes.* As tears began to slip down her cheeks, she wrote down the name *Duchess.*

***

Mr. James was standing in the doorway as she approached the classroom. He nodded and she mumbled a greeting as she slid past him. Her eyes were red and puffy, but she had done her best to cover it up with makeup on the bus. She slid her bag off her shoulder and slumped into her seat, looking out with glassy eyes, seeing very little. The brown-haired boy who sat next to her turned, obviously about to tell a joke when he saw her face. His smile disappeared as he sat up straighter.

"Yo, Frannie? Are you okay?"

She nodded, blinking slowly before looking at him.

"Yeah, Donovan, I'm fine. Just tired." She lied, rubbing her eyes with one hand.

"You sure?"

She managed to fake a smile.

"Yep."

He turned back to face the front of the room, drumming on his desk as he did so. Frannie followed his gaze and saw that their teacher was not at the front. She looked to the doorway, but he wasn't there either

"Where did Mr. James go?"

Donovan looked at her as if she was crazy.

"Who?"

"Mr. James. He was just here a second ago, I just saw him when I came in." Her voice got louder and faster as she spoke

"Who are you talking about?"

Frannie could feel her heartbeat speeding and her throat began to tighten.

"Our teacher."

"Are you sure you're okay? We haven't had a homeroom teacher all year. It's pretty much been a running joke."

She stood up quickly, her breath quickening.

"What's wrong?" He asked, standing up with her.

"I need to leave."

She began pulling her bag onto her shoulder.

"What, why?"

She just shook her head, shaking as she started backing up.

"I need to get out of here."

She turned, and she ran.

Once she caught the city bus home, she stopped and took a moment to breathe, burying her fingers in her hair as she stared down at her tear-stained jeans.

Alright. This is bad. I knew something bad would happen on my 18th birthday, but not like this. Not again. What do I do?

She pulled her hair hard, her chest rising haphazardly as she tried to focus on the pain in her scalp.

What do I know? The blinks keep getting worse. What is safe from changing? Names, Age, Date, Audrey. I don't know why, but Audrey never changes. A miracle. Everything else can, though.

I just won't blink. I can keep my eyes open for five minutes, maybe ten if I can concentrate. Worst comes to worst, I can burn off my eyelids. Can't be too hard, just need to keep them open. If that doesn't work, I can just sew them shut.

She shook herself.

Don't make any rash decisions. What if Duchess isn't actually gone? Maybe if I blink, she'll come back. Maybe Mr. James just works somewhere else?

When the bus stopped, she threw herself down the steps, catching herself before she fell on her face and rocketing down the sidewalk. She was standing on Mrs. Castellano's porch before she realized she had left her bag on the bus, but it didn't matter. She knocked on the door, almost banging on it.

The door was wrench open, and Mrs. Castellano looked surprised to see an almost frantic Frannie standing there.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Castellano, but do you have a dog named Duchess?"

She sighed.

"What did you call me?"

"Please," Frannie pleaded, her voice almost shrill. "Just answer my question."

"Alright, alright. No, I don't have a dog and I never have. Happy?"

Frannie was biting back more tears as she nodded, digging her nails into her arm.

"I don't know why you kept bringing that up but calling me the wrong name is just odd. I've known you all your life and you don't remember my name."

She froze.

"What?"

Mrs. Castellano shifted her weight to her opposite hip as she crossed her arms.

"I've been your neighbor for seventeen years and you still can't remember my name."

No, no, no no no no no no no.

She swallowed.

"Your name's not Castellano?"

The woman snorted.

"Of course not. It's Amelia Groce. Honestly, Frannie, I can't believe-"

Mrs. Groce began prattling on as Franni stood up.

"Sorry for troubling you, Mrs. Groce. I need to get home." She interrupted, turning and walking away before she could answer.

She walked slowly, though her thoughts were racing.

Names can change. That means the constants can change. Nothing is safe. Are dates safe?

She began to run, fumbling with the key when she got to the front door of her house.

Come on, come on come on!

She wrenched the door open, leaving the key in the lock as she ran to the kitchen calendar. She pulled out her phone, holding the home button so it would turn on. The screen lit

up, displaying the time and date. Her heart dropped. Yesterday had been August 6th. Today was August 8th. Her birthday was tomorrow.

Names aren't safe. Dates aren't safe. It's safe to assume that age isn't safe either. Mom is 49.

Frannie flipped the calendar off the fridge and flipped to September and stared at the red circle with the words 50th underlined. She took a deep breath.

"Siri, call mom."

"Calling mom."

One ring, two rings. On the third, she picked up.

"Hey Frannie, is something wrong?"

"No mom everything is fine," she said, voice shaking. "I just wanted to ask how old you are."

"I'm turning 50 this year."

Frannie blinked, staring at the calendar the whole time. She gasped.

"How old did you say you were turning this year?"

Her mom sighed.

"I just told you. 51. Why are you asking me this? Frannie, I-"

"Thanks mom," Her voice was steely and calm. "I'll see you when you get home."

She set the phone down on the counter, her mom still talking as she took the calendar and started walking towards the stairs.

Names aren't safe. Dates aren't safe. Age isn't safe. Nothing is safe.

As she started up the stairs, she spotted a family photo. Her parents, her aunts, her grandparents, Audrey, her cousin Jeannie. They were all at the beach. She blinked, wiping away

a tear. She stopped, her breath catching in her throat. Jeannie was no longer in the picture. Frannie looked at another family photo. No Jeannie. She was gone.

I'm running out of time.

She hurried up the stairs, turning into the bathroom and flipping on the light. She set the calendar down on the counter and opened the cabinet below the sink, pulling out the sewing kit and the first aid kit.

I know a simple stitch, it should hold.

She opened the sewing kit and picked up one of the needles before stopping.

If mom takes me to the hospital, they'll just remove the stitches. If I'm going to save Audrey, I need something more permanent.

She set down the needle and exited the bathroom, going back down the stairs. She picked up her phone to see an incoming call. She picked up.

"Hi mom."

"Frannie! I just called your school and they said you freaked out over something and left. Where are you? Just talk to me!"

"I'm fine mom, there's just something I need to do." She said, opening the search engine and typing something into the search bar.

"Francine Isabella Stanson, don't you dare do anything dangerous."

"It needs to be done." She said, scanning over the information she needed.

"Just talk to me! We don't need to make any rash decisions. Think about whatever you're doing. Whatever it is, it's not worth it."

"I've already thought about it, mom, and there's no other option. I need to save Audrey. Goodbye."

Frannie hung up the phone, switched it to silent, and put it down. She pulled open a drawer and removed a spoon, before walking up the stairs and into the bathroom. Frannie closed the bathroom door, locking it behind her. She replaced the first aid kit and the sewing kit in the cabinet and took out her father's pack of razor blades. Setting down her equipment next to the calendar, she closed her eyes taking several shaky breaths.

It will hurt, but it will be worth it. Audrey will be safe. Nothing will ever change again. Everyone will be safe. No one will have to disappear because of me.

She opened her eyes and studied herself. She touched her nose, her cheeks, her lips, her chin. She caressed her hair, touched the scars on her arms. She touched her ears and finally lay her fingers on the razor blade, turning it over in her fingers. A breath in, a breath in. She put a folded towel in her mouth, breathing through her nose. A breath in.

It's worth it. It's the only way.

A breath out and she stabbed the razor blade into her eye. The pain was indescribable as she screamed into the towel, tears and blood streaming down her face as she clenched her jaw. She wanted to blink, but she refused to, instead ripping the blade from her eye socket. Frannie couldn't stop looking at her now destroyed eye, the green hidden by a gaping, bleeding gash.

She set the razor blade down on the counter, shaking as she picked up the spoon to finish the job. Biting down hard on the towel, she dug it into her socket, scooping the eye out of her head. The pain nearly crippled her, and she felt the vomit rising in her throat.

Dropping the spoon, she picked up the razor blade again and, without hesitation, shoved it into her other eye. Her knees buckled as her vision went completely dark and she screamed, spitting out the towel as she vomited onto the floor, the scent of blood overpowering as she felt it

run down her face. She pulled the razor out, now laying on the floor, body convulsing as the eye came out with the razor.

I did it. It's over. She thought. *She's safe. I won.*

That's when she passed out.

***

When Frannie came to, she began to panic. She was in complete darkness, and she didn't know where she was. There was a steady beeping sound to her left and a quiet humming to her right. She tried to lift her arms, but there was an IV sticking out of one of them.

I'm in a hospital.

Her head felt heavy and numb, so she lifted her other arm to her face and felt bandages. Her head was wrapped in bandages. She dropped her hand back to the bed as she heard a door open, and footsteps rushed in.

"Frannie!"

The voice rushed over and collapsed next to the bed, gripping her hand tightly.

"Mom?"

"Yes, baby, I'm here."

"Where am I?"

"You're in the hospital. I came home after you hung up and I found you in the bathroom. Why would you do that?"

"Where's Audrey?"

"What?"

"Where's Audrey, where's my sister?" Her voice was strangled as she clutched onto her mother. "Where is she?"

Her mother hesitated.

"Frannie, you don't have a sister."

No.

She went numb.

It was all for nothing.

Then the darkness consumed her.