

## **Montana**

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### **Short Story #1**

The attic was a mess. Sunlight strained against the arched windows, battling a film of dust and grime that Mia dreaded having to clean later. She tried to recall if her mother had ever had the windows washed when she and Scott were children, but she couldn't remember. It didn't matter now. She was dead.

Despite the window's best efforts, the sunlight still felt like the most positive thing in the dim, stuffy room. The air stank like rotting flowers— thick and stifling. It sent tingles racing up Mia's spine, though the summer day was hot and humid and Mia could already feel the beads of perspiration collecting on her forehead. It was as if when Death had come for her mother, it never left. As if it was still trapped in this attic, among all the other cluttered old things that lived up here— frozen in time. As if it slumbered here— stirring silently in the shadowed corners, simmering in the saccharine scent of heady old lady perfume, slipping deeper into the maze of old memories that lingered in the room like ghosts.

Mia shivered slightly and glared at her surroundings, as if daring the room to confirm her theory. Receiving no response, she huffed at her own ridiculousness and turned her attention back to the ancient wingback armchair she had been appraising. It, like most of the things in the attic, hadn't seen the light of day for a long time. Mia's mother had been a sentimental woman, and now that she had passed away, her many mementos were proving to be quite the project for her two children.

Mia had reluctantly taken time off work— a rarity for her as a Hollywood producer— to get her mother’s affairs in order. Her brother, Scott, had also flown in to help— all the way from Montana, where he lived alone on a farm in the middle of nowhere. Mia hadn’t seen him since two Christmases ago. Or maybe three. She couldn’t recall.

A euphoric cry rang out from the corner of the musty attic, and Mia glanced up, swatting stray hair out of her face irritably.

Scott was wading towards her through a sea of dusty boxes. “Look what I found!” he cried, shaking a small drawstring bag he held clenched in his fist.

“What is it?” Mia asked. “Not another baby photo of us in the bath, I hope.”

Her brother shook his shaggy head with a giddy grin and flopped down into the armchair. A puff of dust escaped the fading green upholstery, like the breath of someone that’s just been socked in the stomach. Scott waved it away with a lazy hand.

Mia felt a scowl beginning to form on her face. “You know, you could be a little more careful. Some of this stuff is really old.”

Scott shrugged dismissively and opened the bag, roughly shaking out its contents into his calloused palm. He looked up at Mia, his wide eyes scanning her face expectantly, as if awaiting a specific reaction. A smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

Resting in Scott’s hand were tiny, toy rubber animals. They were obviously for children, but Mia couldn’t think of why their mother would have kept the little things. Most of their childhood toys had been sold when they moved out, leaving behind only a few precious items they couldn’t bear to say goodbye to, like Mia’s favorite doll or Scott’s model plane. As far as Mia knew, the rubber toys didn’t hold the same sentimental importance.

“What are these?” Mia asked, plucking one from her brother’s hand. It was a round blue whale. She squished it slightly between her fingers, amused.

“You don’t remember?” Scott asked, clearly appalled.

“What exactly am I supposed to be remembering?”

“They’re rubber buddies! You and I used to collect them together. How can you not remember?” Scott’s eyebrows cinched together, like the drawstring bag that still dangled, forgotten, from his fingers.

Mia frowned. She vaguely remembered it now.

Scott pressed on. “We used to save up all our quarters and ride our bikes down to Blockbuster every weekend to buy one, remember?”

Mia thought he seemed oddly desperate, as if she had forgotten her name instead of a bag of stupid rubber children’s toys.

“So this is what we used to waste our allowance on?” she snorted.

Scott stood, his face crumbling like a sandcastle at high tide. He snatched the blue whale from Mia’s fingers and scooped the rubber toys back into their bag. “Never mind, forget I said anything,” he said, tossing the bag on the chair behind him and slumping back to his corner of the attic. His smile had vanished, replaced by a blank mask.

“Fine,” Mia shrugged, trying to keep her voice indifferent. She turned to a stack of boxes and began to rummage through the top one.

They worked in fragile silence. Mia tried not to think of the way Scott’s excited face had collapsed, but the sight had burned itself into her mind— taunting her. It took a while before she realized why it bothered her so much. It reminded her of the last conversation she had with her mother.

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Mia had been especially busy that day. Something had gone wrong with a shoot location, and it was up to Mia to pull some producer-magic and whip a solution out of nowhere. She was in the middle of trying to rearrange the shooting schedule— which was looking more impossible by the minute— when the phone rang. Recognizing her mother’s caller ID, Mia couldn’t help but groan. Now was *not* a good time.

She had just decided to ignore it when a strange feeling fluttered in her stomach. Pausing, Mia glanced again at the phone vibrating on her desk. Almost unconsciously, Mia felt herself drop her pencil, pick up the device, and accept the call.

“Hello?” she said.

“Mia, baby, is that you?” Her mother’s voice sounded surprised.

“Of course, mom,” Mia replied, confused.

“Oh, okay,” her mother said. “I’m sorry. I just didn’t expect you to answer.”

There it was again. Mia’s stomach twisted and she shifted in her leather backed chair.

“Well, I did,” she said. “Was there something you needed?”

Mia could almost feel the apprehension from the other side of the phone. The silence stretched for so long that, for a second, Mia wondered if her mother had hung up.

“Mom?” she prompted.

Her mother inhaled. “I was just wondering if you had talked to your brother lately,” she asked.

“No.”

The word burst out so quick that Mia didn’t have time to mask her displeasure. She reeled it in. “I’m sure he’s fine though,” she said.

She imagined her younger brother traipsing around his farm in his muddy boots and grass-stained jeans. The displeasure began to leak out again. “Probably milking a cow with a huge smile on his face,” she added, rolling her eyes.

“Mia,” her mother warned, “be nice.”

Mia had always wondered how her mother did that. She would say her name in that disappointed tone and suddenly Mia was a little girl again, caught poking her brother or sneaking cookies. Even when her father was alive, his disappointment never hit as hard as her mother’s.

Mia sighed, rubbing her eyes. “I just don’t get it. Why leave California to be a farmer in Montana?”

“I don’t know, Mia, but Scott has always been different. Montana makes him happy, so it makes me happy,” her mother replied.

Mia had to stop herself from scoffing. That sounded straight out of a parenting handbook.

“Come on. Aren’t you the slightest bit upset that he moved so far away? He had tons of opportunity in San Diego and then suddenly, without a word to anyone, he decided to move to Montana?” Mia talked like the idea was incomprehensible.

“Well... ” Her mother trailed off.

“What is it?” Mia snapped.

“He didn’t leave without a word,” she admitted. “I knew about him wanting to move to Montana before he made the decision.”

“What?” Mia gasped, “And you were just fine with it? He left us!”

“Come on, Mia. That’s not true. I see him as much as I see you, and you only live two hours away.”

Mia’s stomach felt like a sack of squirming snakes. She swallowed hard.

“Yes, well... I’ve been really busy,” she muttered.

“I know, sweetheart,” her mother soothed. “I’m not mad at you. I’m happy you’re doing so well.”

Mia cleared her throat. “Thanks, mom.”

The line went silent again for a moment, then Mia’s mother spoke up hesitantly. “You know, he said you’d be welcome at the farm,” she said. “He told me he’d love it if you’d visit.”

Mia ground her teeth. That was just like her brother. He knew just what to say to get their mother off his back and onto her’s. She knew he’d be as happy to have her on his farm as she would be actually having to go.

“I’m sure he did,” Mia snarked back, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Her mother sighed heavily. She sounded tired. Suddenly Mia felt bad.

“I’m sorry, Mom. I’ll call him. I promise,” she said. There was a long pause before her mother spoke again.

“I’m glad to hear that, baby,” she said finally. “I love you both.”

“We love you, too,” Mia mumbled.

Her mother sighed again. “Well,” she announced, “I’m sure you must be busy, so I’ll let you go. Talk to you soon, okay?”

Mia nodded, lost in thought. Then she remembered her mother couldn’t see her. “Oh, yeah. Of course. Talk to you soon.”

She hung up the phone and got back to work, ignoring the uncomfortable feeling in her stomach.

They never did talk again. And Mia never called her brother.

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They had been working for hours now. The sun was beginning to dip in the sky, casting a feeble glow over the contents of the attic and lengthening the shadows on the walls. A combination of the muted atmosphere and plain exhaustion made Mia want to curl up on the dusty threadbare rug below her feet and sleep for a thousand years.

Smothering a yawn with the back of her hand, Mia turned back to the green armchair that had caught her interest before.

Gently brushing a bit of dust off its arm, she backed up a few paces and let her sharp eyes rove over the piece of furniture. Biting the inside of her cheek in thought, her face adopted a calculating look— as if she were a courtroom judge on the verge of deciding someone’s fate.

“So what do you think, Scott?” she called over her shoulder, her eyes still inspecting the fine embroidered details of the chair.

“About what?” he mumbled absentmindedly, digging through yet another box full of knick knacks. He seemed to have recovered from whatever was plaguing him earlier.

Mia rolled her eyes and turned around to face her brother. “The armchair, dummy. What else?”

“Oh,” Scott glanced at the chair with mild disinterest. “I don’t know.”

“Well you’ve got two options: sell, or keep,” Mia said, as if talking to a toddler.

“I know that,” Scott huffed. “I guess sell?”

Mia frowned. “Are you sure? If you keep the house, it could look nice in the living room.”

As soon as the words left Mia’s lips, Scott stiffened. “I already told you, Mia, I’m not keeping the house.”

Tension, thick like pea soup, seeped into the sweltering attic. Scott's dark eyes flashed her a warning look, glinting like two chips of cold onyx set in stone. The attic's sickly floral aroma suddenly seemed overpowering, and Mia absently wondered if Death was awake.

"All I'm saying is that it's early to be making a decision. This house has been in our family for a long time. I don't see why you're so against keeping it," Mia argued.

Scott's jaw twitched. "Mia, if you're so intent on keeping the house, why don't you move in?"

"I already told you," Mia stressed, "that I have a perfectly good house in Los Angeles, right next to my job. The house doesn't fit my life, but—"

"But it fits mine?" Scott cut in, a sardonic smile forming on his lips.

Mia blinked. "Well... yes," she admitted. "You don't have anything to keep you from moving in here."

"Are you kidding me?" Scott asked incredulously, "My farm is finally prospering, I just finished renovating my cabin, and you're telling me I've got nothing to keep me from moving here?"

"Be serious, Scott," Mia said, shaking her head in disbelief. "It's not like you're going to be happy gallivanting through the wilderness your whole life. Eventually you'll get tired of the hard work and a diet limited to whatever you manage to grow in your backyard and you'll be glad you have this nice, respectable house to move into. You could even get a real job here."

"A real job?" Scott repeated quietly, his voice low and dangerous. Waves of white-hot anger radiated off of him, and for an instant Mia wondered if he might actually throw something. Then— so suddenly that it took Mia's breath away— all of his anger drained, and a kind of dull acceptance flooded his eyes.



“I have a real job, Mia,” Scott said, his tone defeated. “I like my life. I’m sorry that it isn’t up to your standards, but I like it.”

Mia crossed her arms, trying to ignore the fact that they were trembling.

“Whatever,” she snapped, turning away. “Let’s not talk about this now. We’ve got work to do.”

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They labored into the evening. Mia could imagine the stars that would soon emerge, like diamonds, to bejewel the night sky. They wouldn’t be visible through the filthy attic windows. Nothing seemed visible through the filthy attic windows.

“I found Mom’s journal,” Scott announced suddenly. His voice sounded thick, and the sound of it pulled Mia’s attention away from the old clothes she was sorting through.

The journal in Scott’s hands was small and worn, with a cover of warm brown leather. The pages were beginning to yellow slightly with age, bowing out in a way that suggested they had been flipped through over and over again. Scott was thumbing through the entries, stopping every once and a while to read a page.

“Can I see?” Mia asked, crossing the attic floor and reaching for the journal.

Scott nodded and handed her the book. His eyes looked brighter than usual.

As soon as Mia grasped the journal in her hands, old memories came streaming into her mind like water bursting from a dam. She remembered the many calm evenings her mother spent on their black suede couch, writing in her journal. She remembered the way she would glance up every so often, her eyes twinkling, and smile softly at her and Scott as they played on the shaggy beige carpet. She remembered the picnicking excursions they took to the park after her father passed away—just the three of them. She remembered sitting on their blue knit blanket under the lavender Jacaranda tree, munching on ham sandwiches (always turkey for her mother,

though) until Scott couldn't sit still any longer and pulled her up to go play tag. She remembered her mother relaxing in the shade, watching them chase each other as she sipped lemonade and penned a new entry into her journal.

Mia opened the cover and felt her heart tighten at the sight of her mother's familiar slanted cursive. Her vision blurred and she quickly wiped her eyes on the sleeves of her shirt. Peeking over her shoulder self-consciously, she was relieved to find that Scott had descended back into the main house, leaving her alone in the attic.

Mia turned back to the journal. She reverently flipped each delicate page, her eyes skimming the entries, eager for any new information she could glean about her mother. Anything that might answer the many questions Mia suddenly realized she had never asked but wanted to know. Eventually a word caught her eye, so small and faded that at first she thought she imagined it. Her hand froze, and her stomach flipped. The room got cold, like it had dropped ten degrees, and the tingles that had caressed her back with icy fingers returned with a vengeance. There was no doubt—the word was there, written plain as day, the black ink curling against the creamy paper.

*Montana.*

Mia was so overwhelmed by the word's mere presence that it took her a minute to actually read the sentence it belonged to.

*This morning Scott told me that he wants to live on a farm in Montana.*

Mia shut the journal. She didn't need to look at the date of the entry—she already knew. Scott couldn't have been older than seven. Her mother had known about Montana since Scott was *seven*.

Her mind raced. Suddenly she thought of all the hours *she* had spent with her mother, regaling her with grand dreams and plans for the future. Why had it never occurred to her that Scott might have done the same?

She thought back to her mother's words.

*Montana makes him happy, so it makes me happy.*

All the years of hating Scott for leaving them behind fell away in an instant. For the first time, Mia realized that Scott did seem happy. She thought about the way his eyes lit up every time he mentioned his farm. How his face would turn wistful as he talked about the way the sun rose over the grassy plains outside his cabin window in the morning, as if God was spreading sunlight over the Earth like butter on warm toast.

*Just a little slice of heaven,* Mia remembered him sighing.

She also remembered herself rolling her eyes—determined to dislike anything that had to do with the life he had chosen. The life that had taken him away.

Mia glanced at the drawstring bag her brother had left on the green armchair. She began to understand why her mother had kept the rubber toys. She began to understand why they meant so much to Scott.

The collection was theirs—his and hers. Mia remembered now. They had spent years building it, working together to save money—back when it was still just the two of them against the world. Back when Scott still wanted to be everything that Mia was, go everywhere Mia went.

When she had reached eighteen, moving out seemed natural to Mia. She was excited to follow her dreams and set out on her own. She never thought about leaving Scott behind. She had stupidly assumed he'd always be there, waiting, whenever she decided to visit home. That nothing would change. She let herself grow up.

She just never expected him to do the same.

When Scott moved to Montana, Mia was stunned. Suddenly he was far away, living his own life, and she wasn't a part of it. Only now— for the first time— did Mia wonder if that was how he had felt when she left him behind.

Mia thought of her mother. She thought about never seeing her again. She thought about all of the unspoken things she had let wither inside her— refusing to let them out to breathe. She thought about Death, biding its time in this room, perhaps waiting until it was her turn to depart this life. Or Scott's.

There were too many things to say, Mia realized. Too many apologies to make. Too much time squandered by her own stupidity.

She felt something eating away at her stomach, caressing its icy fingers against her spine. She was used to the sensation, but this time she knew its name. Guilt wrapped around her like a thick wool blanket, hanging heavy in the air, thriving off the room of old memories that left her feeling sick.

“Mia?”

Scott's nervous voice shocked her like a bucket of ice water over the head. Whirling around, she saw her brother crouched by the opening of the attic, his eyes fixed on her with concern.

He approached her cautiously. “Are you alright?”

Mia took one look at the expression on his face and had to swallow the strangled sob that threatened to burst from her throat. She knew that look— brows furrowed, worried eyes, a small, crooked frown. Suddenly Mia was six years old again, crying on the curb with a freshly scraped

knee while Scott sat next to her, offering the comfort of his favorite gray blanket, his little face screwed up in *that look*.

There were a million things Mia wanted to say. A million things she should say. Instead, she took a deep, rattling breath.

“After we sell the house,” she began, “is that invitation to come visit your farm still open? I’d like to see that sunrise.”

Scott’s mouth gaped open. He blinked rapidly for a moment, and then a slow smile began to stretch across his face.

“Of course it is,” he grinned, his eyes dancing, “You’ll see. There’s nothing like a Montana sunrise.”

Mia just nodded with a small smile. “Good,” she said. She looked around the attic, taking in all the work they had done that day. Scott stood next to her, and Mia could feel his presence warming the room. She couldn’t help but wish that her mother was with them.

*Look, she wanted to tell her, We’re talking. Just like I promised.*

Instead she just smiled wider. Maybe for Scott, or her mother. Maybe for Death. Or maybe just for herself.

She glanced towards the attic windows. For a moment, she thought she might just be able to see the stars.