

## Reaching Lilly

Jillian Wanbaugh

**T**he trees were bare, twisting around themselves in a lifeless way. Some leaned, almost sagging with agony, while the rest remained erect, giving only the illusion of vigor. There were six of them; six black, dead trees forming a circle around her grave. Each wailed as the wind thrashed at their degenerate forms. Winter had eradicated autumn, mercilessly ravishing the land of all viability.

Hitting the ground with a force only a man of great stature could produce, the shovel broke through just a fraction of an inch. William knew he would have to try harder. Each strike had to serve a purpose, it had to leave a mark more devastating than the last if he wanted to unearth her bones before sunrise. He tried again, his arms tightening as the point of the shovel penetrated the glassy surface, deepening the gouge of his first attempt. Again. Knuckles white around the wooden handle. Again. He sliced away at the hardened dirt, like a butcher to fresh meat, allowing his body to move fluidly through the motions of his job. Digging, digging, digging. His muscles swelled with each cut of the soil. His heart, thumping violently, pushed blood more quickly through his veins, trying to warm his body as he fought against the frozen earth.

There was no stone marking her place. No evidence of her buried body, decaying alone under the frosted over dirt. Only the six, thin trees with winding branches, creating a canopy over the plot. And instead of one trunk, each tree consisted of several smaller ones, sprouting from the same spot, like long earthy fingers reaching from below. Underneath the soil, where, at the center, her body lied waiting for him to reach her wooden tomb that had become filled with dirt and creatures of the earth. He knew she would not like it down there, in the darkness, confined. She hated being anywhere but 'a place that is vastly open with the sun blazing down setting me on fire' as she would

say. Every where else made her heart quicken and her eyes widen. Then the scratching would start; she would tear at her own skin until her hands were bloodied and her face shinned with silently fallen tears.

Anger ignited with the thought. They didn't know her. Another slice. They never saw these things. Another. As William contemplated her demons his pace accelerated. His feet, rooted firmly to the ground as he lifted another large shovel full of condensed dirt, had been lost to the cold, his toes now feeling like small, foreign objects inside his thick but worn leather boots. He mustn't stop digging. Though his breath puffed like clouds of smoke from his mouth and his ears burned from frost, he mustn't stop.

The stars lit most of the open fields, casting a blue grey glow on everything they reached, but their light did not reach her spot. The canopy of dead branches was thick overhead, leaving William little illumination for his work. Still he toiled, purposefully, knowing with each scoop of dirt she became closer.

The wind continued with force. Each spidery tree moaned, speaking in low voices. He heard their encouragement to continue. Their words hung on his ear lobes, tickling the hairs on the back of his neck. They circled him, separating this world from the rest. This world of his and hers, blanketed by the earth.

His nose, now running profusely, left him forced to snort back mucus in between every few mouth drying gulps of air. Each breath traveled like ice down his throat. He could feel his lungs inflate with each intake, convincingly ready to crack and shatter, leaving shards amongst his organs. The skin on his fingers cracked every time he adjusted his grip. Several hours had passed since he began his excavation and his muscles ached for relief. Exhaustion had begun to cloud his mind while pain slithered around his body like a snake, biting and gnawing with each of his movements.

Thrusting the shovel point into the dirt again; it collided with an unseen object. His ears filled with the sound of rushing blood as his heart thumped more violently than ever before. His breathes drew shorter than ever before as a feeling of nausea rose from his abdomen. Throwing the shovel toward the mound that had grown beside the grave, he moved cautiously, sweeping the remaining dirt from the lid of the casket.

*This is it*, he thought to himself. *This is it*, six low voices hissed in echo.

A breeze, carrying notes of jasmine, patchouli, and grapefruit danced around him softly, as if winter had instantaneously been transfigured into spring. Her scent. He recalled it swirling around him when she walked through the air he breathed. And the way she walked, hips swinging with each hurried step.

Positioned precariously, one foot balanced on either side of the tomb, he reached down. His hands shook beyond control from expectancy and

cold. The wood was soft on his numb fingertips. With the last of his strength, William pulled the lid upward, lifting the cloak of discomfort, revealing what he had lost.

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The sun breached the horizon as dawn announced it's life giving presence. But that was not what woke Gloria Church. She woke to the sounds of shattering glass and her sons calling for her in a panic. In a bout of confusion, her body heavy from sleep, she wrapped it in a soft pink robe and hurried down the wooden stairs, each one creaking under her weight. She was never a thin woman, but since the death of her daughter, her weight grew as her depression deepened. Moving through the parlor room into the kitchen she found the source of her shattering wake up call. The door leading from the kitchen to the plowed wheat fields out back stood ajar, the glass from the window in pieces on the floor and a hole from the brass handle in the wall. Pausing only a moment, she continued through the threshold.

Gloria's ankles waded through the foggy mist that settled near the earth as she made her way closer to the elevated voices of her sons whom sounded incoherently panicked. Dead grass crunched and cracked as she hastily cleared the distance of one field, crossing through an old, unused electrical fence, entering another frosty winter tundra. She folded her arms across her chest, pulling the collar of her robe together, as a makeshift shield against the stabs of the bitter morning air. Though the deep echoes of James and Peter's voices guided her, she knew where she was going. To the very edge of their property; to where Lilly was buried.

She crossed the final stretch, lengthening her strides, carrying her more quickly to the morning scene. Among the circle of trees they had planted post funeral stood three men, all silent now, like statues, staring into the grave that should have been sealed. Her body became heavy, as if her blood turned to lead. As she approached, pressure built on each side of her head, dizzying her vision.

Her stomach turned when her eyes breeched the edge of the hole, seeing the grotesque portrait. Shock flooded her body first. There were the bones of her only daughter, disconnected, with what was once her favorite Sunday dress, now only tattered pieces of fabric hanging loosely around her remains. But she was not alone as she should have been. Lying next to her, his arms embracing what little remained of Lilly was the deceased, rigid body of William, a brutish, schizophrenic boy with a proclivity for his delusions, whom she had met during her time at the hospital.

The shock subsided only enough for confusion to set in. She looked to Peter, then her husband, then James, all wearing the same expression of horror. Before she could regain her ability to speak, James began to move,

slowly toward the grave. Gloria's husband moved to hinder him as he bent down, reaching toward the bodies, but his voice broke the silence in protest. Leaning back, he collapsed onto the earth like a weary child, revealing in his hand a small, folded piece of parchment. He opened it cautiously, ready for an ill-intentioned surprise. When nothing came, he read to himself, then a loud.

“She came to me. I had to find her.”