

## The Fight Within

“Daddy, please! Don’t go!” He turns around with a look of pain and indecision in his eyes. I beg him again, “Stay. Please stay.” He shakes his head with tears in his eyes, “I can’t stay baby. I’m sorry but I just can’t. I have to go.” My mother stands at the door of what was once a place of happiness and love. She has no tears in her eyes, doesn’t say a word. Just stands and stares. Frankie looks confused and sad, as if she understands but doesn’t understand. Dad gets in his car and pulls away. Frankie and Mom turn and look at me with anger and hate in their eyes. “It’s your fault!” Mom screams, “He left because of you!” I gasp as Frankie points a gun at me, and I scream when I look down to see blood oozing out of my chest.

I sit up in bed. My heart is pounding and I am soaked in sweat. Another nightmare. They are all the same. Truth mixed with something horrible. I know it’s just my mind going through all the possible reasons why James left. Yes, James. I refuse to call him my Dad. He lost that title when he left 8 years ago with no explanation. I shake off the feelings that the nightmare has left me with and I look at my clock. 5:12 AM. I don’t need to get up until 6:15, but I know I won’t be able to go back to sleep. I roll out of bed and begin my day. Two hours later, I have drunk two

cups of coffee and cooked breakfast for myself, Mom, and Frankie. Frankie is my sister that just graduated from nursing school. She's 22 and I'm 18. When we were younger, the four-year age gap seemed so wide. I could never relate to her and we just fought all the time. But this past year, she's the first person I go to if I wanna talk about something. Since she's started working at the hospital she's been pretty busy, but I still get most evenings with her.

I eat a quick breakfast, get ready for work, and head out the door. This is my second summer working at Sunnybrook, which is a daycare about 15 minutes from my house. I love my job, but I am still glad that tomorrow is Saturday. I work the 7:30-3:30 shift in the three year olds' classroom, which is my favorite age. I love being able to get a glimpse of the world through a three year old's eyes everyday. After I finish my shift, I do what I do almost everyday. I go home and text Jason, my boyfriend of 2 years. I ask him about his day and we talk for about 20 minutes and then I read or study until it's time to get dinner started. Frankie is always telling me that I should branch out and be more social. Go to some parties with her, drink some beer, relax a little. But that's not me. I want to learn and get ready for school. This Fall, I start my first semester at college to study behavioral psychology. I want to be able to understand why people do the things that they do. Maybe someday I'll understand why James left. I shake myself out of my thoughts and start dinner as Frankie gets home. After we eat dinner, we sit in the kitchen and I read while Frankie texts her many friends. Around 8pm, Mom gets home and heats up her dinner while asking Frankie and I about our day. I look at our kitchen as Frankie talks about her latest boyfriend. It has always been my favorite room in the house. The wood floor is stained a rich cherry maple and the walls are painted dark red. The wood cabinets are also cherry maple and the appliances are black. I helped James pick out the colors and flooring when I was 9.

After I talk with Mom and Frankie, I retreat to my room for the night. The light purple walls and dark lavender drapes relax me. I take a deep breath of chamomile incense and sink into bed. My phone softly plays an old country song as I close my eyes. I am almost asleep when my phone starts ringing. It's Jason. He never calls after 10. I answer the phone and immediately know what's coming. He stutters and gives me a speech about how I am an amazing girl and he knows that I'll find someone that deserves me, but that someone just isn't him. He doesn't feel like we are right for each other. He is sorry. He continues to stutter around as I go numb. I don't try to get him to stay with me. I tell him I understand and wish him luck in college, then I hang up. I don't even cry. I just feel numb. Somehow, I'm not surprised that he broke up with me, but I don't know what's so wrong with me that no one will stay. First James, now Jason. I lay back down and start going through the reasons why I know he left. In the last several months, we had only had a handful of actual dates. I never went to parties with him because it isn't my thing. We are different people than when we first started dating, or at least he is. After two hours of thinking, but not feeling, I drift into a light sleep.

I wake up in the middle of the night and sit up. I am wide awake and I feel so energetic. I look at my clock. 2:05 AM. Why am I awake? My mind is racing. Racing in an uncontrollable way. Random snippets of music flash into my head and then back out just as fast. I hear voices and lines from movies. I can't control what I'm thinking! What is happening? I sit on the edge of the bed and put my hands over my ears as the racing thoughts finally stop and the quietness of my room envelopes me like a dark blanket. I look up at my clock and it reads 2:37. That lasted half an hour? It felt like an eternity but at the same time, it felt like it was only five minutes. I go down the hall and into Frankie's room even though I know she probably won't be in there. Nope, she's gone again. Frankie goes out almost every Friday night. She waits until Mom is asleep and

then goes out with her friends. I know that Mom suspects that Frankie does this, but she doesn't have enough energy to fight about it. Mom works 10 hour shifts, 6-7 days a week at the nursing home. She is always so tired and sad. I walk back to my room and sit on the edge of the bed. I wish I knew where Frankie was so I could join her. Where did that thought come from? I don't party, that's not me. Yet I feel so energetic. I want to go out. I get my phone and text Frankie, "Where are you? I wanna join you." Within two minutes Frankie replies, "There's no way you are serious! Are you?" I reply, "Dead serious, why? Can't I have a little fun too?" Frankie immediately responds with an address. I go to my closet and pull a sparkly red sleeveless top out from behind my other clothes. I haven't ever worn this top because I always thought it showed too much skin, but tonight it feels perfect. I pair it with jeans and strappy sandals, and I tiptoe out of the house.

The cab driver drops me off at the address that Frankie sent me. The house is so huge. It has two stories that would each be a big house on their own. I walk up to the door and reach for the door handle. For a moment I feel cautious and timid, but the feeling leaves just as quick as it came and I open the door. As I step inside the crowded house, the smell of weed and alcohol overwhelms my senses. I look around for Frankie and see her talking to some guy. She sees me across the room and walks over with a smile. "Sage! I didn't think there was anyway you were actually coming, but I'm glad you did." I smile confidently and shrug my shoulders, "Sure I came. Wanted to see what I've been missing out on." Frankie cocks her head. For a moment she looks as if she wants to tell me to go home, but she shrugs her shoulders and says, "Oh you've been missing out on lots! Wait 'till you get a couple drinks in your system. You'll loosen right up. You're gonna have a blast. That is, if you want. I know you're really cautious about-" "Frankie," I interrupt, "don't mind me, okay? I'm fine on my own, I promise" Frankie looks so

surprised, and I understand why. This isn't like me at all. I know that, but I don't care. I smile at Frankie to show her that I am fine, and point her back to the guy she'd been talking to. I look around and spot a girl with a tray of drinks. I've never had alcohol at all, have never wanted to try it. Until now. I walk over and grab a drink from the tray and raise it to my lips. It burns down my throat and makes my stomach feel warm. The taste is nasty but the feeling is great. I finish my first and go get a second as I begin to lose any part of boring Sage that I have left.

I talk to the cab driver all the way back to my house. It's almost 7:00 AM when he drops me off. Hopefully Mom isn't up yet. I tiptoe into the silent house and sigh in relief when I see that she's nowhere in sight. I know that I should feel tired, but I don't. I still feel so energetic. I feel as if I could stay awake for days. My racing thoughts keep coming and going, but I have already learned to just accept them. I walk down the hall and peek into Frankie's room. She is asleep in bed. I guess she left before I did. I go into my room and shut the door behind me. I look in the mirror. My brown hair is about midway down my back. It's too long and I realize I want to shave it all off. An hour later, I have showered and changed clothes. I get in my car and drive to the salon, which is about 10 minutes away. I tell the hairdresser that I want it just long enough for her to make an aztec design in it. By that evening, I have a tattoo on my shoulder blade, a nose piercing, a haircut, and I have traded my car in for a Harley. It's dark by now, but I don't go home. I head to another party that some guy told me about last night.

Once I am bored of this party, I head home. I pull up to my house around 5 AM and park my motorcycle outside. As I step inside, Mom and Frankie are there in the front room waiting for me. They gasp when they see my hair and piercing. "Oh my gosh, Sage. What have you done?" Frankie says. Mom grabs me by the shoulders, "Where have you been? You smell like alcohol. Did you drive yourself home?" I roll my eyes, "I only had a couple drinks, Mom. I'm barely

even buzzed. I was fine to drive.” Mom looks into my eyes as she tears up. “Sage, this is not like you. I’m really worried. I feel like now is the time to tell you about your Dad.” I straighten my spine. “What about James?” I ask. Frankie sits down and Mom tells me to sit down too. “Frankie already knows because she overheard us talking the day before he left. Now I’m glad she knows, because otherwise she wouldn’t have known to look out for the symptoms.” I look at Mom and Frankie as the racing thoughts make it hard for me to think and figure out what Mom is talking about. I wait for them to go away like they usually do, but they don’t. They keep racing on and on. Pieces of conversations between me and my Dad. Him telling me he loves me and wouldn’t leave if he had a choice. I put my head in my hands and try to tell Mom that I can’t hear her and to hold on. Finally, they quiet down enough for me to think again and hear Mom asking if my head hurts, or if it feels like my thoughts are out of control. I look up at her, “How did you know that?” Mom shakes her head, “Because that is one of the symptoms of bipolar disorder. I know what it looks like because that’s why your Dad left. He had bipolar disorder, Sage. The symptoms started getting really bad. The manic phases, then the depression. The racing thoughts. Then he got a call from a research facility that specializes in bad cases of bipolar disorder. They said that they wanted to test a new medicine out on him, but that they would need him to live near their hospital. He already felt like a burden to us, so he decided to go. He hoped to come back in a couple of years, but the medicine didn’t work. I got a call from him about a year after he left. He said his symptoms were worse than ever, and he couldn’t come home like he was. Then about 6 years ago, I got a call from the police department down there. Your father got killed in a car wreck because he was speeding and driving recklessly one night. They said he had alcohol in his system, along with cocaine. His illness got the best of him. Sage, I can’t let you go through what he went through. In the last two years, they have come out with new medication

that is fully approved. It is supposedly really effective in getting rid of the symptoms. I know this is a lot for you to take in, but it's gonna be okay." Mom and Frankie grab me in a long hug as tears stream down our faces.

My Dad had left us because he thought that was best for us, not because he didn't want to be with us anymore. All of this new information is relieving, scary, and sad to me. I can't believe I didn't recognize the symptoms. I already know that there are new treatments for bipolar disorder because of all of my psychology reading. The treatments that they have now are supposedly very effective. I feel free of the bitterness that has held me captive for so long. I am ready to start my treatments. I have no intentions of letting this sickness rule my life or keep me from pursuing college and a career. If anything, I am more motivated than ever to become a psychologist.