



Marissa Gladstone was asleep when the patrol car eased into the driveway. Like most teenagers, she slept half of the summer away and spent the rest of her time flirting with the boy across the street. It made sense that Marissa would lock her dreams around the much older, Irish baseball star with eyes like a field of green.

Sean was the local hero in Chatham, New Jersey, rumored to play minor league ball next spring. But that was about to change. He was there that morning; mowing the Gladstone lawn like he always did on Mondays. Summer was just beginning and the promise of young love filled the air.

Three years her senior, Sean had offered to drive Marissa to school that fall. She was over the moon when her parents agreed. Charming and responsible, Sean had ended his party days and set his sights on Marissa and he knew she set hers on him. Though his

friends warned him repeatedly not to get involved with the 'would be' freshman; there was something about her petite frame and innocent smile that held his interest.

Marissa was nothing like the plastic queens Sean had dated. She was a sporty, vivacious girl. Her honey colored hair and flat waist had always tantalized him. Lately it seemed like everywhere he went, even when he tried not to look, Marissa Gladstone was there.

Unable to wait any longer, Sean jerked the cord to the lawnmower just before ten am. With his eyes set on Marissa's bedroom window he managed to glide over the ankle high grass keeping the lines tight. Had the boy been concentrating on the lawn perhaps he would have noticed the patrol car as it turned up the driveway. When the lip of the tires eased toward the Gladstone home Sean turned the mower back to the road. The car pulled close to the house and parked just outside the flowerbed walkway that led to the front door.

Sean wondered why the police would be there so early. He tipped the roaring beast around the maple tree and kept his eyes on the cruiser. Wiping his sweat on the rim of his worn Adidas shirt he stepped over the side of the mower. When the officers stepped out, a rock lodged itself in Sean's throat. He stalled the machine and watched as the men stared at each other across the hood of the car.

The way they meandered up the walkway made him worry. When the men breached the landing they stood at ease and removed their hats. That's when the terror sank in.

Mrs. Gladstone appeared with a diaper bag in hand and the twin girls beside her in their stroller. She propped the door open with her foot and stood in the threshold. A second later she staggered back.

Sean was half an acre from the front door when his heart tripled its pace. He sailed across the uncut lawn as his breathing heightened. He leapt up the steps pushing past the two police men. "What is it, what's wrong?"

Mrs. Gladstone sank to the floor. "There was an accident."

The officer dropped his gaze. "Best as we can tell Mr. Gladstone's rig broke down, when he tried to exit the truck another vehicle came by. A trucker called it in this morning just after 6:30 am."

"He's all right though? I mean he..."

The older officer stepped in. "I'm sorry son, he didn't make it."

He looked at the tattered woman, her stains of mascara dripping down her cheeks. At first his ears seemed clogged but one look at her and the news it carved into his heart like a dull blade. Sean had a mother and father but Mr. Gladstone was his biggest supporter. He spent three summers pitching to him in the front yard. He bought him a Pro-series glove for his twelfth birthday. Sean felt like part of the family.

He had no sooner stood up then Mrs. Gladstone reached for his clammy hands. The woman pulled him closer until she looked him in the eye. "I need you to go wake Marissa."

Sean couldn't be the one to tell her. He didn't want to see the look on her face, to break her heart. "Please Sean. Go get my daughter."

He looked down at the twins, both were turning a shade of crimson. The officers crouched down and offered to help her up but the woman was too grief stricken to move. He nodded and Mrs. Gladstone released his hand. Her muffled cries echoed up the stairway as he struggled to pull himself up.

He fumbled about trying to delay the inevitable. He better get to Marissa before she woke up and walked in on this scene. She didn't need to see her mother falling apart and the twins on the verge of terror. He tried to think of something to say— anything that would break the news. But nothing filled his head.

Sean wiped his sweating palms on his shorts. He turned to the left, the hallway stretched out before him. He braced his steps along the wall as the film in his eyes clouded his perception. Everything seemed surreal.

His legs felt like cement trees. He wiped his face with the back of his jittering hand. What was happening?

He could feel the pulse of his heart in his throat as he reached for her door. Three more steps and he'd be there.

His lips began to quiver. Sean stood, releasing a sigh and puffed out his chest. His fingers trembled as he reached for the knob. *He couldn't do it.* How could he tell his childhood sweetheart her father was dead?

His tongue swelling in dryness. He squeezed his eyes shut. Another shallow breath and he decided to just open her door. The house seemed quiet. He heard nothing of the screaming children and sobs of Mrs. Gladstone. It all disappeared.

Sean opened the door, hoping the gravel in his mouth would dissolve. His sweaty palm released the doorknob and he walked in. The fan oscillated as her sheets fluttered over her body. Sean studied her form lying so peacefully. But her sweet perfume and pink lips did not draw the boy. He stepped closer hoping to wake her.

“Marissa.”

The girl rolled over, stretching as though enjoying a dream. Marissa clutched her designer sheets and drifted off again. Sean spoke a third time and this time her eyes flickered. She caught the sound of her name as a strange form stood in her doorway. The cries from the stairway pulled her from the blissful state.

Sean croaked. “Rissa.”

Her eyes flashed open. The handsome 5’10’ Sean Moffit struggled to smile. He gripped her white bureau and looked around her room. “Riss, you need to get up.”

What was he doing in her bedroom? She jolted up and cued in on the noise from the hall. “What are you doing in here?”

Sean inched closer and played with the spindle on the foot of her bed. His eyes roamed the walls.

“Sean what’s going on? Where’s my mom?”

When he wouldn’t answer her heart plummeted and she started to cry. “What is it? What’s happening?” Marissa shook her head as if she already knew. “The girls are okay, please tell me they are okay?”

Her eyes searched his for something, a thread— anything that would tell her it was all right. “It’s not the girls Riss.”

Sean’s lips began to quiver.

Marissa tilted her head as though she tried to understand. Her mother's sob echoed up the hallway. Marissa yelled. "Mom?"

She ripped the covers off her bed and charged toward the door. Sean swept back and barricaded it with his thick body. He clothes-lined her around the waist and forced her back toward the bed.

The sorrow bit at her as if the bottom of the earth had opened up and swallowed her. She pushed against him though his hold never loosened. He locked his hold around her as her body started to tremble. Her eyes darted about.

Sean's eyes closed as he blocked her face from his. She wrestled inside his arms like a wild stallion. His voice cracked as he held her tighter. "Rissa, no!"

Marissa reached for the doorframe as her mother's scream shriek up the hall. She began to heave as her eyes poured a spool of tears to the wood floor. "Let me go. Please let me go!"

Sean's throat closed as he tried to inhale. She hung over his arm and flailed about trying to break free. "What's happening? Somebody tell me what's happening."

Sean pulled her tighter, hoping he could take away the pain. He wrapped his other arm around her neck and clasped her shoulder. "Sshhh."

Her jaw started to shake as he carefully moved his hands to the front of her shoulders. "There was an accident this morning." He whispered into her loose locks, and the vibration of his words melted down her head. "The police are here now."

He held her closer, studying the pools of tears that soaked her face. Her maple eyes held his, begging for some sort of resolve. He

swallowed again, hoping for more strength. But God was not there to help him.

He pressed his forehead against hers and began to cry. Sean squeezed every ounce of strength within him and moved his arms around her in a consuming hug. He cradled her head and patted her hair. "It's your father."

Her eyes closed as her body blended into his. His words spun in her mind and she gasped. "No!" Marissa jolted off the bed. Her bare feet pummeled up the hall she called to her mother.

Tumbling down the wooden stairs Mrs. Gladstone did not speak. Marissa pulled back the curtain of hair covering her mother's face. "Mom. Mom where is he? What happened?" She curled up beside her. "Dad's coming home today. You said so yourself. You talked to him last night. He was on his way. Right? He's coming home. We're having a cookout and I can't go because he's..."

Her mother covered her hand and squeezed it as Sean watched from the top of the steps down to the landing. He stared at the family of women he so longed to join. Mrs. Gladstone looked at her daughter but her mouth only twitched as she tried to speak. The presence of the police gave Marissa all the confirmation she needed. Her denial broke and she floundered at the bottom steps like a loose sail in the wind. The storm of grief had hit the family with no warning. And just like that life would never be the same.

Sean shut the door when the officer's left. He gathered the twins in his arms and gave one to Marissa. Her mother had retreated to her room and he helped Marissa climb the stairs. Side by side Sean

Jessica Adriel- Sample Read

walked down the lone hallway with a baby in his arms and Marissa's hand in his. He followed her into her bedroom where they spent the afternoon in silence.



When the funeral was over, things did not return to normal. June turned into July, and Sean's friends wanted to know where he was. All he could say was Marissa needed him. Sean even convinced Mrs. Gladstone to let him spend more time with Marissa. He said he wanted to take her out and do the things she had done with her dad. What he didn't tell her was that most nights he went to bed wondering how any of them would ever get through the pain.

Marissa had started to withdraw. When her mother sent her to Connecticut for a week to stay with her aunt Sean nearly went out of his mind. He hadn't told her of his feelings and each day he helped the grieving family, his convictions grew stronger. He thought of them constantly and placed himself in the roll of caretaker.

He wrestled with the idea of dating her. How was it possible? She was too young. But the morning after her return, fate played a hand. Sean was up early, waiting to make his move. He hoped to be at the

Gladstone's before breakfast. He had written a poem for Marissa—one he hoped would ease her pain.

He had just slid the card into his pocket when the Gladstone's front door slammed shut. Marissa sped over the lawn and across the street. She dodged between the Moffit's house and the neighbors running full steam. Sean ran out the door, yelling after the frantic girl. *My God, what was wrong?*

"Marissa? Marissa wait!"

He rounded the corner of his house and fell on the wet grass. He scampered to his feet and searched the bank of the lake. He heard the constant slice of the water as a lone figure soared through the brown water. "Rissa!"

Sean trampled over the lawn chairs and weaved around the trees as he yearned for the embankment. He dove in, clothes and all and raked his arms through the water. Her muffled cries bounced off the water as he looked toward the dock in the middle of the lake. Marissa was heading for it. Her clothes were weighing her under as she starting heaving.

"Rissa! Hold on." Sean gasped for air then plunged under the surface.

She grabbed onto the ladder and tried to pull herself up but her sobs pulled her back in. Her head drooped toward the water as she clung to the side.

Sean stroked as fast as he could until he reached her exhausted body. He wrapped his arm around her and reached for the dock's ladder. Marissa floated toward him almost lifeless. "Please be okay." He kissed the back of her head.

She didn't answer.

Sean jostled her. "Marissa. Rissa."

She turned her head as her tears dripped like a morning rain.
"Hold on. It's going to be okay."

His heart ached. How could he make her see he was in love with her? She was so young, so beautiful but so broken— and he could not fix her. He wanted to know this girl, to see her more; to help her but the ways of a seventeen-year old boy could not soothe such pain. And for that a pair of tears escaped his eyes.

Sean latched his foot around the slippery pole of the dock's ladder. He patted her wet hair with his hand and he dragged her body toward the side. She leaned against him as a fountain of sobs blew off her lips. Her father was gone. And no one could bring him back.

Sean waited in the water until she settled down. "Don't leave me Marissa. I will do what I can to make you happy. Just don't give up on me." His whispers and pleas wrapped around her like a life jacket. He was giving her a reason to pull through. That reason was to be with him. With her head tipped back against his shoulder her hair gathered around his neck.

His words cut through her silence. Though she didn't answer she soon kicked her feet to hold her weight. Sean smiled and pulled her tighter against him. When the rim of her shirt floated to the surface Sean pushed it back down, in that second Marissa moved away from him. He caught her and drew her back. Her sad eyes locked in his

heavenly gaze. He inched to her, running his hand down her face. Before he knew it, he kissed her.

Marissa braced her hands against his chest and swam away. Sean hurried behind her. *Was he her first kiss? Was she not ready?* Just as he was about to ask if she was upset, she swirled around like an otter and smiled. It was the first time he saw any signs of life in her. His heart swelled with hope.

Sean reached for her arm and gathered her on his back. She held on, listening to him breath as they shuffled across the early morning water. When his feet touched the sand he turned around to kiss her again. His smile captured her and she kissed him more fully.

“I won’t stop kissing you until you tell me to.”

Her whisper came. “Don’t stop.”

Sean stooped down in the water as Marissa eased her arms around him. When they reached the shore Marissa’s cheek was red from his stubble. Sean asked her to wade in the water while he ran to get a towel. He hurried back as her stomach knotted in worry. *Was this all there was? Was he really hers or was this some joke?* She wasn’t sure.

Sean invited Marissa to his house for breakfast. She rang out her hair and accepted the invitation. When they walked up the side of the house, he took her hand and he didn’t let go until they stepped inside. Sean closed the door and called for his mom.

Gladys. Moffit was a short woman with brown hair, fiery eyes and a soft voice. “Sean, were you two in the lake?”

She hurried down the stairs and helped Marissa up. ‘It’s only 9:30?’

Sean said he would explain later. His mother batted her eyes and kept walking. She was a kind, graceful woman who never pried or asked her boys why they were doing what they were doing. Even now she wanted to help.

Marissa followed Sean's mother down the hallway, into his bedroom. She gave her a second towel and helped pick out some spare clothes. Sean stood in the doorway unsure of what to do. Marissa stood trembling as her wet locks of hair stuck to her skin. Mrs. Moffit handed her a clean pair of shorts with a drawstring and a baseball T-shirt that belonged to Sean's younger brother Phillip.

Sean waited to see if his mother would make him explain or let the situation go.

When the door closed the situation sank in. Marissa had been drowning and Sean saved her. He actually rescued her, kissed her and said he wasn't going to stop. Her smile was outrageous as she stared at herself in the mirror.

She cupped her hands over her mouth and looked around Sean's room. *Was she dreaming?* Did that just really happen, the kiss?

Marissa stared at the headlines and baseball posters filling his room. A lot had changed since they were children. She smiled as she studied the photos of his friends lining the mirror, and the string of girls who hung on him in every photo.

Sean was no stranger to dating. She saw the cars parked outside his house every weekend. Starting his freshman year Marissa had more than her share of wake up calls when it came to her dreaming

of Sean Moffit. The boy was a serious ball player and had more admirers than any jock in Chatham's history.

Her father had noticed his daughter's affections for Sean. He warned her twice not to get her hopes up. But here she was.

Marissa eyed the giant Yankees shirt that hung below her knees. The mesh shorts were sagging to her calf and that was with the drawstring pulled tight. She looked like a child in her father's clothes. Something about that comforted her.

He told her many times that a girl should cover her body. *Don't flaunt your figure to get attention.* How this ensemble would work in her favor she'd rather not decide. With her heart escalating she stepped out of his room and followed the muffled voices down the hall. When she entered the kitchen she stared back at the Moffit's who smiled at the young girl swallowed by the Yankee's get up.

A bit wary of her position she eased her way toward the table. "Sit down."

The sight of a home cooked breakfast and glasses of apple juice and milk made the young woman smile all morning. Marissa sat down to a stack of pancakes piled up in front of her. For the next hour, her gloom of sadness departed.

She longed for a day without pain and if she couldn't have it, then an hour or a cluster of minutes would do. Perhaps Sean would fill that emptiness.

He nudged her under the table and winked. Her smile engulfed him as she whispered, "Thank you."

It wasn't often a young man found a maiden to rescue. His Nike socks slid their way to her ankles and he nuzzled her foot. As he

watched Marissa dive into her breakfast, he marveled at her lavender lips and deep brown eyes. She was alluring yet innocent, something he hadn't noticed in other girls.

His mother phoned the Gladstone house and explained what happened. Marissa stayed with the Moffit's until dinner. Mr. Moffit said it was a pleasure to have a young lady at the table that could care less about baseball. Sean was impressed with her lack of interest in his sport. Maybe he was being naïve but she was still too young to know the wiles of high school that waited her that fall.

After a round of X-box and some other games Mrs. Moffit packed her with some leftovers and Sean walked her home. He wrestled with kissing her all day. It wasn't right. She was too young.

Three days later, Sean was unable to go another minute without seeing her. He told his friends he made other plans and clued them in on the romance he was stirring across the street. Though they repeatedly warned him not to get serious with a baby, Sean ignored their advice and picked a flower up at the store and walked across the street.

He knocked on the door just after nine to ask Marissa if she could step outside. When her mother didn't answer, he perused around the side of the house.

Sean's throat closed when he saw Marissa sitting on the patio alone. He crept up the landing, holding the railing. The sun had set and there were no lights in the back. Marissa spotted movement near the railing and clasped at her heart. "Sean?"

She stood and walked to the gate. "What are you doing here?"

The setting sun made the sky dim as he watched her approach. He peeled her fingers from the gate and took them in his. "I had to see you."

"Why, what's wrong?"

He led her to the table. "Yeah. I'm fine." He swallowed again and looked away. "I wanted to tell you that..."

Sean looked everywhere but at Marissa. His leg started to bounce up and down from nerves. She admired his tan face and golden facial hair. "I don't want you to think the other day was a normal thing. I've been thinking about you all summer. Maybe even last Spring. And I'm not just saying that."

Marissa let him move toward her but she started to giggle.

"Why are you laughing?" Sean pulled at the back of his neck.

"Cause you're so serious."

He tapped his leg louder. "You are too young for me."

Marissa turned in her chair. "And you're too old for me."

"Exactly."

Sean tried to walk away from her but his heart was like a magnet and she was the polar opposite.

He reached for her one more time to see if his feelings were true. Her hair brushed against his knuckles, and he said her name and spread his lips on top of hers. She kissed like a girl would when she'd been waiting for her lover to return. They lingered on each other's mouth the way young love does as it discovers the power of a kiss. She let his hands trace the side of her frame and gather back at her shoulders.

Mrs. Gladstone opened the door, staring at both of them. “Sean Moffit.”

“Mom!”

Sean stared down at her and back to her mother. “Mrs. Gladstone. I’m sorry.”

Marissa was irate. “Mom, what are you doing out here?”

The woman crossed her arms in the doorway. “She’s too little young for you, don’t you think?”

He held his hand out as if defending her. “I know. But I couldn’t bear it when she was away. And I worry all the time.”

Mrs. Gladstone stayed in the door, her eyes boring into each of them.

“With everything that’s happened, I just. . . I want to make her happy. I’m sorry. I feel like myself when I’m around her.”

Mrs. Gladstone put in her final say when she shut the door without refusing him. “Fine but slow it down.”

That night Marissa went to bed on cloud nine. Sean had finally asked her out. Everything was in place; it was getting better. She reopened her childhood journal and wrote: *Dad wanted me to be happy and I finally am. Sean Moffit kissed me.*

The trend of keeping Marissa happy carried over the next year and the two after that. Sean adored Marissa. His senior year was spent meeting her outside her classes, dodging his friends and immersing themselves in their own world. Though they rarely spoke about her father, the two focused on his career and college decision.

Sean turned down two full scholarships to division one schools just to stay closer to Chatham and came home every other weekend.

When Marissa got her driver's license in her sophomore year, she drove to the campus on the weekend and stayed in the frat house. Her mom would not approve if she knew what was going on, but for the most part she was too busy raising the twins to care about the whereabouts of her oldest daughter.

During his Sophomore Year whenever Sean came home, he stayed at the Gladstone's giving Marissa's mother a chance to get out and have some fun. She was thrilled to have his help with the twins and thought nothing of leaving Marissa and Sean in charge and alone. The two made plans to elope after she graduated high school.

Signed by a minor league team in New York, Sean was sure he could leave school to support his future wife. So when Sean moved up to Chicago without Marissa, no one knew what happened. No one that is, except her.

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