

My Guardian Angel

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My first day here, 21-hour lockdown. They say its minimum security but I doubt that. I'm in scrubs, but not like the light blue ones I'd wear to work. These are green, my favorite color, with SCCF stamped across the back of the shirt and on the front of the pants.

All I'm given is a laundry bag with two sheets, which are as thin as paper towels, a towel (about the size of a washcloth), a green blanket, which reminds me of the blankets you'd get on an airplane, a cup with a lid, a spoon, another clear cup, a toothbrush and toothpaste, plus the green scrubs I'm already wearing.

They tell me to grab a mattress, which is similar to four yoga mats put together, which would be great if I were about to do some yoga, but certainly not to sleep on. I look at what's inside the bag again and my first thought is they forgot to give me a fork and knife, surely I thought there would be plastic matching along with the spoon, but that's all I see. I would soon realize I would have no purpose for those extra utensils. Not only is the food pretty disgusting, but almost everything is made with a soup consistency, perfect to eat with only a spoon on hand.

The officers call out my name. I am wondering what for.

The gate opens up and I walk out. I feel like a dog with its tail between its legs as I am walking, too afraid, not knowing where to go or why.

I am called to nursing, they say. I guess it's procedure, so I start heading out. As I am walking, I am guided very strictly as to where to go. I follow a red line until I get to a sign that says "Nursing." I see a doctor. She wants to know about my health history. Dr. asks me what meds I am on.

"Zoloft for my depression, Seroquel for sleeping, Xanax for my anxiety, and Ventolin for my asthma."

She asks, "Are you suicidal?"

I answer, "No."

She also asks if I am embarrassed or ashamed to be here. I cock my head to the side and start crying.

"Of course, I am," I say.

She gives me my sleeping pill right there but she can't give anything else, she says. It's around 6:30 p.m., certainly not time for sleeping, but I ask no questions and she dismisses me.

I head back to 5 East South, go through two metal detectors, and check back in with the officer that called my name. I hear the sound of the gates again—they are so loud and just make me anxious and depressed. I go into #24, that's where I'll be spending the next couple of days, that's my cell number.

I make my way in and the gated bars slam closed startling me. I'm so miserable and afraid. All I can think about is what got me here, the shame I feel. All I can do is think, and cry and cry, and think.

I curl up holding my knees to my chest as I lay on that two-inch mattress. It's so cold. It feels like the windows are open and it's mid-January. I am so restless and anxious, so I get up and decide to throw those thin sheets I was given on the mattress and lay the blanket down. I take my shoes off, which are a cheap version knock-off of Converse, which are my favorite, but not these. These have three Velcro tabs instead of laces (I am assuming laces don't meet jail standards).

8 x10. That's the size of my cell. I measured with my own feet. This 8 x10 area includes a metal bunk for my thin mattress and a metal toilet with a sink attached above it. I pace around, back and forth, with only a few steps. I am so cold, all I can think about is how much I miss my own bed, my flannel sheets, my heavy blanket, the several pillows, the weight of my dog laying by my feet and the warmth of Mike lying next to me. Oh, I miss him. I miss my dog. I miss my home.

I can think back to the holiday times. Mike and I spent the weekend decorating the house with Christmas lights and ornaments. It was freezing out, but we didn't care. We were having too much fun testing all the lights and drinking hot chocolate. Our Christmas tree was beautiful, "perfect" actually. Each branch was evenly distributed, it was the perfect height and it smelled so pretty, like a Yankee candle, you'd always catch a whiff off it when first walking in the house.

We went to sleep and left all the Christmas lights on. I could catch a small glimpse of the lights reflecting on the wall from our tree when I lay in bed that night.

I love Christmas time and I love keeping the tree up for as long as I can. I start feeling bad once I see trees being thrown out on the side of the road waiting for the garbage pick-up the day after Christmas. I usually get made fun of because I like to keep my tree up until it starts drying up. Luckily, Mike goes along with the little quirkiness, because last year our "perfect" tree made it to Valentine's Day. Now, it's January 17th, and since I am not around, he'll be getting rid of the tree any day now.

I am here all alone in #24. There are a few other girls here, but I just feel alone. My neighbor in #25 keeps trying to make small talk with me but I am not in the mood. She's been here for 10 months so I can see why she keeps making conversation but I'm too depressed to talk and in deep thoughts. I toss and turn, nothing feels comfortable, but the sleeping pill finally takes effect and eventually I fall asleep.

It's 6:00 a.m. I am woken up by another inmate sliding a breakfast tray through the 2 x 4 horizontal opening in my cell. I am told she is "Tier Rep." I am assuming that's a good title because she gets extra time out of her cell. She has to hand out the trays for all the girls in our

unit. So far, there are 15 of us. She hands them out one by one, and by the time she hands out the last tray, she starts collecting the first one she gave out.

I look down. It's cereal, Rice Krispies, two packages of peanut butter, one package of jelly, two pieces of whole wheat bread, and a little container of low-fat milk. I eat the cereal and decide to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, but I save it not knowing when will be the next time I eat. I am still very sleepy and so cold, so I toss and turn a couple of times and fall asleep.

I jump out of my sleep when I hear an officer yell out my name.

"That's me, Sir," I say.

"Roll up," he yells.

I am not sure what that means, but I asked #25 and she says, "You are getting out of here, so grab everything and dump it in the bag you were given."

I think it's better news, considering I'm supposed to go into DWI facility. I've heard some inmates talk about the DWI pod saying if you have to be locked-up, the best place to go is there.

I grab my stuff. The gates open with that loud horrible sound and I head out. But there's another set of gates I have to go through again and then a heavy door with bars which officers have a giant ring full of keys to use for.

I'm waiting in the tiny hallway and I realize I'm in the middle of the unit and there seems to be another set of cells parallel to where I just came from. Officer tells me to put my bag down on the floor and follow him. He hands me a green bulk folded up. It appears to be a blanket, but not like the one I had. This one is a different material and has a stitched pattern on it. I've seen a few inmates, guys and girls walking around with the patterned blanket folded into their bodies making a gown and they are handcuffed. I've seen them walking around on my way to nursing. I remember thinking if those inmates were in trouble. No shoes, no pants, and this sleeveless gown in this cold place?

I follow officer to first door made of bars. It's about a 15 x 15 area with a shower covered by a small plastic curtain and a sink right beside it. On the opposite side of the bars stands a girl with her bag in her hand, she looks at me with a slightly confused, or frightened, look on her face. I'm thinking, *maybe we're switching sides? Maybe she was too rowdy with the other inmates? Maybe this is the better side?* I had done nothing wrong so they could only be switching us for another reason.

She stares at the green bulk I'm holding and she says to me, "You are on suicide watch."

I quickly answer in disbelief, "No. How can that be?"

"You are holding the gown for suicide watch."

In panic, I start shaking the green bulk open. Thank God, it opens up to a blanket and not a gown, so I am a little relieved.

They open the gates from the 15 x 15 area to let her in and let me in further. The gates close and now we are on opposite sides of the bars.

I ask officer very respectfully, "Why am I here? Is this DWI section?"

He says, "No, you are on suicide watch."

"There must be some kind of mistake," I say.

He nods me off, tells me to walk into cell #12 and that if there's a mistake, it'll get straightened out.

"I bet you hear this all the time but, this is different. I am not suicidal, I swear," I say as I start walking looking for #12.

As I continue to walk by a couple of cells I get hit with such a smell of urine. It's so strong it smells as if I were standing next to a urinal that hasn't been cleaned in years. The smell burns my nostrils. How did I end up here?

I lie down on the mattress and wrap myself in the blanket covering my face, trying to block the smell. Now I'm even colder because I don't have those useless thin sheets. I see another officer. She grabs a chair and slides it over to a small desk. She parks it right in front of #12. I think she is texting someone but she keeps looking up at me. She says, "#12, I need your socks!"

Great! The only part of my body that isn't cold right now are my feet, but without questioning her, I take them off and she walks around past two sets of gated bars where I hand them to her. I'm so cold. All I can do is curl up into a small ball so I keep myself warmer as I lay back down. I just start crying inside the blanket. I can taste the saltiness in my tears as they hit my lips.

I close my eyes real tight and start daydreaming about having dinner with my family... my mom's chicken cutlets and empanadas... playing with my niece and nephew... Amalia is going to be there in March and I won't be around to see her on her special day. She is talking so much and becoming such a character. I miss her smile and I'd give anything to hear her sweet little voice right now. Her baby brother, Wyatt, just turned one in November. He is so delicious. He is walking and running all over the place, his laugh is super contagious and his smile melts my heart.

I miss my sister as well. She is older than me. I've always looked up to her she would try to give me the best advice she could. I feel she might be disappointed in me now, but she's still always there for me. She's been my shoulder to cry on, the one to make me smile when I needed it the most. She is my best friend.

I miss my parents very much. My mom and I are very close. I can picture her running her fingers through my hair and saying to me to be strong and stay positive. I also imagine my dad hugging me and saying, "This, too, shall pass," and to learn from this tragedy.

I don't want to think anymore. I just want to close my eyes and not feel any more pain. I've noticed how with all this thinking, I've actually become numb to the smell of piss coming from cell #15.

Once again, I'm woken up by the loud sound of my gate. I am not sure how long I'm allowed to be out of this 8 x 10 cage, but I come out and I see lunch coming around. Whatever it is, it smells terrible, but at least for a few minutes, it drowns the smell coming from #15.

I ask permission to use the phone—a pay phone, they still exist here in jail. I call Mike collect. I can't hold back the tears. It's worse, I am actually sobbing like a child and getting choked up as he tries to calm me down. He tells me he and my mom are on their way to visit me, but I can't keep it together. I just cry to him and try to explain to him about my transfer to suicide watch. He has trouble understanding what I say between all the sobbing I'm doing, and it's hard for me to make sense because I keep getting choked up with all the crying, so that just gets me frustrated because everyone is telling me not to cry and all I can do is cry.

My five minutes are up and we say our "I love you" and hang up. My gate stays open and a girl let me know it's my rec time.

"What the hell is that?" I ask.

She tells me, "It's the three-hour break you get out of your cell. Once your three hours are up, you have to lock back in until tomorrow."

Twenty-hour lock down; now I get it. I sit next to her on the bench right outside our cells. We are still enclosed in a narrow hallway surrounded by bars. There's one T.V. hanging on the wall behind the bars. Erin Brockovich, starring Julia Roberts, is on so I try to watch it through the bars but I get so distracted by urine girl #15.

She seems to be preaching about something. She is very loud and is standing in her cell with her blanket wrapped around her body, holding a bible open with both hands pretending to read from it. I can tell she is not actually reading it because about an hour goes by and she never turns a page. Now, she is chanting "Show me the money! Show me the money!" and I realize that's definitely not in the bible. I think that's from a Tom Cruise movie.

The officer tells her to quiet down, to take a shower and clean her cell, but she refuses. They don't get mad but they keep insisting. He tells her to at least clean her cell.

"Stop peeing on yourself!" he yells.

I see her dunk one foot in the toilet and dunk it again to rinse it off. That's how she cleans herself, I'm told. She washes her hair in the tiny sink, dries it off and tells the officer she is clean now and continues with her bible.

I can't take this. Am I in a psych ward? My anxiety is killing me and they won't give me my meds. My breathing gets heavier, but I have to control it, I don't have my inhaler.

My rec time is up and there goes the sound of the loud gates again. I sit back down and warp myself in the blanket and start taking deep breaths. How am I going to get through this? How can I be strong? I hide my face inside my blanket and start crying silently.

Change of shift. Another officer yells out my name. I'm wanted in "Classification." Not sure what this could mean but I'm guided out.

“Follow the red line,” he yells.

I get picked up by another officer half way who takes me to an elevator. He is carrying my mugshot with my information. Years ago I would be concerned about looking my best in a “selfie” and now here I am, dressed in greens, following an officer who carries my mugshot in his hands. I couldn’t even remember what floor I was on but everything says five something so I just assume I must be on the fifth floor heading down to main level where “Classification” is.

I get out of the elevator when directed and I’m told by another officer to stand next to the “X” that’s marked on the floor. I walk in when instructed. It’s an office with a few desks, several officers and a big counter. An officer tells me to approach the counter. He can tell I’ve been crying. I can’t see what I look like but I can feel my eyes filling up with tears and I’m sure they are bloodshot red from all the crying I’ve been doing.

“You are on suicide watch,” he says.

I am not sure if it’s a question or not but I answer, “Yes, sir.”

“Are you suicidal?” he asks.

“No, sir.”

“You’ve been crying. You can’t be doing that, you are in jail. Nobody wants to be here, but you can’t be doing that. That’s why you were transferred to suicide watch. Your lawyer called, your family called. So you are not thinking of hurting yourself, right?” he asks again to re-assure himself.

I answer again, “No, sir.”

He tells me mental health cleared me also, so I should head back upstairs and everything will be straightened up.

Now I am back upstairs and suddenly that strong smell of urine starts burning my nostrils again. This is awful. Hopefully, it’s not long before things get straightened out now that I’ve been cleared by both mental health and classification. I just have to wait this out. What other choice do I have?

I just sit in my tiny cage and stare at the officer who dragged her desk and chair and parked it in front of my cell. Maybe she’ll come to her senses since I was just cleared and at least give me my socks back.

I have to use the restroom and this, too, brings me more shame. As if using a toilet that’s facing the bars where officers come and go, wasn’t enough, now I have to use a restroom with an officer right in front of my cell who is purposely sitting there because she was told to keep her eyes on me. At least it’s another female. Not sure if I’d have the nerve to use the toilet facing a male officer.

It must’ve been just a couple of hours that went by, but it felt like an eternity. They call me out of my cell. At this point, all I have is what I’m wearing and I’m sockless, since everything was

taken. They show me back to where I came from and place me in cell #23. I'm upset I'm not where I'm going to be permanently, but at least, I'm back to the original side I came from and it doesn't smell like urine. That is something to be content about for now.

I get called down to "Visiting." I get a little anxious and excited at the thought of my mom and Mike finally arriving here to see me. I can't wait to see them. I can't wait to walk out of this tiny cage, even if it's only for a little while.

I make it down to visiting entrance. Everything has a sign on the wall letting inmates know where to go as you follow the red line. I'm waiting for officers to make eye contact with me as I wait against the wall.

I'm surrounded by a line of males that only keeps getting longer. Finally, officer greets me in before all the men. I have to go through a metal detector and, unexpectedly, they throw a yellow jumpsuit at me.

"Stand to your left and put on the jumpsuit," they say.

I join the other girls putting on the jumpsuits and we give each other a hand with the zipper that's on the back, carefully not to get the green scrubs or any hair caught in it.

I walk into this huge room after giving another officer my last name. She tells me to go to number 44. I didn't know what to expect when I walked in, but this was not the image I had in mind. It's worse.

There were about ten to fifteen male inmates to one girl inmate. Apparently, it's mostly males that get visitors. There are several rows of counters and metal stools bolted to the floor and a thick glass dividing the counter top. On the opposite side of the counter, there are metal benches bolted to the ground.

As I start making my way through, looking for my assigned seat, I pass so many inmates, all dressed in yellow jumpsuits that read "Visiting" across the front. So many yellow jumpsuits sitting around waiting for their loved ones to arrive, like a bunch of yellow dandelions in a big field. Finally, they open the gates and I see a glimpse of my mom's platinum blonde hair and Mike.

Oh, God! I don't want them to see me like this. I don't want to see myself like this. I can feel my eyes filling up with tears. Should I lie and pretend that I'm okay? Should I try to be strong? I can't imagine what this must feel like for my parents, for my mom, for all my loved ones. I'm sure my parents must wonder how they've gone wrong and question each other with what they did or didn't do, or what they said or didn't say. But it's not their fault. It's my fault and mine only.

I was raised in a loving home. My parents always taught me to be respectful, caring and kind to others. It's my terrible and irresponsible actions that got me here, sitting, behind this thick glass, in this yellow jumpsuit.

This must be so hard for my parents and other loved ones, having to go on a half-hour drive to see me just to spend a little time with me. Not for coffee or for lunch, but to see me through a thick piece of glass only two hours a week. They are going to jail to visit me, their daughter, sister, girlfriend, godmother, friend and co-worker. We are allowed to hug or kiss our visitors hello but not for long before someone gets yelled at to sit.

“Time’s up, say goodbye,” officers yell.

It’s already been an hour? I cry so much. I wanted to tell them that I was okay, but I knew I wasn’t. I didn’t want them to worry about me, I didn’t want them to be ashamed or disappointed in me. I just wanted to say how sorry I was and how I hated myself for everything I’ve done, for everyone I’ve hurt, for everyone that thinks I’m a monster. I feel like one. I am sorry! I love you!

“I am going to be okay,” I say, even though I don’t believe that as I say it.

Men walk out first. I am not sure why because there’s roughly around thirty to forty men and just five of us girls. I assumed, and have also read, about officers doing a search on the inmates after every outside visit, but never in my life had I imagined a real life “strip search” performed on me.

“Step into booth,” they yell, and I walk over.

“Take off yellow jumpsuit, throw it on the floor, shoes off, clap them together and hand them to me,” she says.

“Take your socks off, inside out, don’t shake them. Shirt off, hand it to me...” she says adding, “...pants off, bra off.”

The only fabric left touching my bare skin is this ridiculous granny cotton white underwear, Victoria Secret’s finest. Every female inmate is not proud of owning these. She tells me to turn around, pull them down, squat, cough. I feel so violated. I thought peeing in the open as male or female officers walk by back and forth all day was bad enough, but this? This was such a horrible experience, and there’s nothing more I can say about it.

That’s what happens when you come to jail. This is what it’s like being locked up. Everyone here is guilty of something. That’s why you are here, that’s why I am here. You lose all your rights, all your privacy, all your freedom and any authority. This is hell.

You are trapped in a tiny cage, like you are some kind of animal that’s been bad and needs to be punished, can’t run free, can’t see sunrise or sunset or rainbow that forms on a sunny, rainy day. No such thing as the smell of fresh cut grass, because there isn’t any around. Can’t smell the rain coming before the storm, or feel the snowflakes on your nose during the first snow fall. This is jail.

You are told what to eat, when to eat it, when to wake up, when to go to sleep, when you can go outside, which is only for an hour and is basketball court, all fenced up and surrounded by barbed wire, sharp razors on the top of the fence to make sure no one thinks about escaping.

I am the animal and this is my punishment. I deserve to be here. This is my hell.

Sitting back inside this blanket, behind these heavy bars, I brush my hair off my face and catch my mom's scent on me, on my hands. Her perfume from when we hugged during visiting. It smells so sweet, I close my eyes to picture her next to me, holding my hand, padding my hair, which she still does when I don't feel well or I'm sad and crying about something, to calm me down.

Unfortunately, I didn't get to see my dad. My mom said he had to stop at work for a bit, but the way I saw my dad sobbing at court when they handcuffed me and brought me here, tells me that he just wasn't ready to see his little girl in that yellow jumpsuit. In my thirty years, I can count with just one hand how many times I've seen my father cry. But that Tuesday in court, hearing my father's painful cry, makes up for all the times he kept his crying hidden. It hurt, and hurts, so much.

My sister couldn't make it either. It was tough sitting in court for everyone, seeing all the pain from both sides of the room. And I knew she'd have to make up for all the missed days of work, for being there on that Tuesday, January 17th. She works long hours at the hospital. She's a P.A. but I knew I'd see her soon. I can't wait to see Molly and Wyatt. She promised she'd bring them the first weekend I'm allowed visits. They are too young to know any better.

It's so hard to fall asleep, hearing all the gates opening and closing, inmates passing by, dragging their two-inch mattress across the floor. More girls arrested, spending their night here, in jail with me.

I hear a couple of cells down from a girl getting sick. She keeps vomiting, going through withdrawal. Another girl on the opposite end keeps yelling that she can't fall asleep because the lights are too bright and, "This place is so cold!"

I have no sleeping meds, so I am scared to even fall asleep now, but I can't stand being awake. I'm afraid that without my meds, the nightmares will start again. All the flashbacks from that night, that terrible night, when I decided to drive home from that restaurant-bar.

I close my eyes and I hear and see shattered glass everywhere. I smell something burning, like the smell of burnt rubber. I hear sirens and see flashing colored lights and a female approaches my car. I can tell she is talking to me but I can't hear her, I can't make out what she is saying, she sounds muffled, like she's under water. I try to open my door, but it won't open. I try to talk to her but nothing is coming out, kind of like when you are having a nightmare and you try to scream and nothing comes out. I can feel my head throbbing and my temples beating. Did I black out?

I left the restaurant to head home. My phone was my GPS, as it always was—I am that stereotypical kind of girl that can't even find her way around her own backyard. I was going around the bend when my GPS fell. I reached down to grab it for what I thought was only a second, but, unfortunately, a second was too long. Now I just see flashing lights seeping through shattered pieces of glass.

They take me in an ambulance to the nearest hospital. I know something bad has happened, something terrible, but I'm not talking about me, I don't care about me. I care about the car I

crashed into and the man who was in that car. I should not have had that extra glass of wine. I should not have had any. I wish I wouldn't have had an empty stomach, I wish I would've eaten something, anything more than a Nature's Valley granola bar the entire day. I wish I never got behind the wheel that night. I wish that innocent man had taken a different path home that night. But all of my wishing is too late.

I am at the hospital. They tell me I have a few broken bones in my back, a shattered ankle, some bruising and a few scratches. I am in so much pain but I don't care. I asked the nurse if she knows how the driver of the car I struck is doing, but she doesn't know. I ask several times but the most I get is that he was taken to a different hospital. They don't seem to want to tell me much.

I never liked my wrists being naked but I never imagined what would happen next, that I would be wearing these heavy brass bracelets tightened around my wrists, keeping my hands together in place, that I'd be in these metal handcuffs and walked to a police car to be transferred to the 1st Precinct. I start walking following the officer, passing a few cells on the way to my destination. Men start screaming and whistling at me like they've never seen a female before. I'm so scared, this is just a terrible dream and I can't wake up.

They throw me in a holding cell with three other women. I try not to judge, but clearly these women must be regulars at the 1st Precinct. They seem to know each other and the people they socialize with. This seems like some sort of a get-together for them as they all seem to be catching up. I think, this isn't a social gathering, it's not really a place to be catching up, or to be happy to have run into one another. I'm scared, I'm cold, and my body aches.

I'm not very religious, but I close my eyes and try to concentrate and start praying. I'm praying for a man I've never met. I'm praying that he is alright. I'm praying that not a single bone in his body is scratched. I keep crying because the thought of me hurting someone kills me, and... these three bitches won't leave me alone, they want to know why I'm here and why I am crying, where and what time was I arrested and where I'm from...

"I just prefer to be left alone, please," I answer.

The police officer comes to get me and they bring me to a different room. I sit on the chair and they handcuff me to a metal table that's bolted to the ground and they leave me there. A detective comes in and tells me about the man I crashed into with my vehicle. He tells me, unfortunately, the man didn't make it. *Didn't make it?!*

Everything around me freezes and the room starts to spin. His words sound in slow motion as he repeats himself. I don't understand, I thought I was okay to drive home, was maybe only 12 minutes away. To think all I wanted to do was to get home safe and I never thought I would be responsible for someone else not making it home safe that night, not making it home at all.

I am shocked. I am sad. I am angry. I am in disbelief. How could this suburban tree-hugging girl who never even stepped on a spider because she believed they have a purpose, be responsible for a human being's life? I would never hurt anyone or anything.

They leave me in there for me to process what I've just been told. Eventually they take me into a different room. They scan my hands. My fingerprints are now on record and my picture gets taken—my mug shot.

I'm brought back into a different cell with different women and, later on, taken to a court room packed with people, officers and a judge who I stand in front of. I get dismissed and brought into a tightly confined booth. They secure my hands to the counter. *This must be a nightmare... I'm not a criminal, not a violent person... I would never ever hurt anyone! I need to wake up, this is only a dream... This isn't real... I didn't hurt anyone, but... I did... My attorney tells me I did... That is why they brought me to this private booth... My family hired him... He is here to represent me...*

I am bailed out and my family takes me home. Everyone is crying and I'm slowly realizing that this isn't a terrible dream. This is real. I am awake and I am alive.

The first few nights back home are frightening, if I am awake I have terrible flashbacks and if I fall asleep I have horrible nightmares. I seek professional help because I am traumatized. I'm depressed. I have so much guilt. I have anxiety, flashbacks and insomnia. I immediately get prescribed anti-depressants, anti-anxiety pills, and sleeping pills.

Every new day seems a struggle to get out of bed. I don't want to wake up. I don't deserve to open my eyes. I don't deserve to be here. I don't deserve to be alive. I am a monster. Because of me, someone is grieving over this husband, father, son, uncle, neighbor, co-worker and friend.

Because of me, that man didn't make it home that night of March 13th. I was told he had finished his shift at work, I can only assume he was heading home. I wonder if he called his wife to let her know he was on his way. I wonder if he got to say "I love you," or if he spoke to any of his loved ones. I can't imagine his fear when he saw my car heading towards him. He must have been so afraid. *I am so sorry. It should have been me. Not you. It was all my fault.*

I sit in my room holding the bottle of sleep meds. I have plenty. I have an entire six months worth of pills in my hand. I could take them all and go to sleep, never wake up again. But I realize I am thinking crazy. I put them away and hide them in my drawer. I go to bed just taking one.

The next night I find myself holding the bottle again and thinking what would I wear so that if whoever finds me the next day doesn't have to worry about changing my outfit. *Who would find my cold body? Should I leave a letter to all my loved ones? Would it be less painful if I didn't? Should I put on shoes or first get under the covers? Should I shower first? How would my family be? Would they sell the house? I wouldn't make a mess because there would be no blood. All I have to do is take these pills. If I didn't do this who would benefit from it? It won't bring him back. How would my beautiful little niece react to find out one day, when she's old enough to understand, that her godmother gave up on life? How would my parents be? My sister? She would no longer have a younger sibling.*

And then I start to wonder about this man's widow, suffering from her loss, much worse than I am. The loss I've caused. *Why am I still alive? Why is he gone?*

My next session with my Dr. is about my sleep medication and my darkest thoughts. She makes me tell someone or advices to call herself, but she trusts me. I tell my sister to hold onto my meds. I just tell her I don't trust myself with them but I don't really describe my detailed evil thoughts. She reminds me of how devastated they would all be and how much they love me. Now I start thinking that, that would just be the easier way out. That everyone would feel cheated. *How could this family I've destroyed be suffering from his loss but not me who caused it? I need to suffer.*

I need to feel the damage I've caused. I need to do it for him and for his loved ones. I can't give up. But I do feel life has cheated us. It should have been me. I try to think more normal. I go back to my daily activities, back to work, and my Dr. visits weekly, which seems to be helping me out with coping. I am diagnosed with P.T.S.D (post-traumatic stress disorder). I thought that only affected soldiers, but I have all the symptoms.

For almost two years I try to live as normal as I could with guilt and grief. Going to court back and forth, going over numbers, going over my future life.

On January 17th, I'm ready to start my sentence, and I see her. It's her, his widow, outside of the court room. I feel heat rising throughout my entire body and my palms become sweaty. She is holding my letter, my apology letter I wrote her. My attorney told me to sign it, so it is more official, I guess. But the pen in my hand wouldn't stay steady. My sister had to grip my hand to make it stop shaking. I signed it and handed it to the District Attorney, who is standing next to her.

I look at her and I burst into a terrible cry. I can't help myself and I'll never forget what she did next: she looks at me and opens her arms to me to embrace her and I just leap into them, we cry together. I will never forget her sweet scent and how her silky blonde hair felt against my face.

"I'm sorry!" I cry, "I'm so sorry! I never meant to hurt anyone, I never meant for any of this to happen! I am so sorry! I'm so very sorry! It should have been me."

She cries, too, and whispers into my ear that he is her Guardian Angel now and that he is watching over her, watching over us. I keep holding her tight. I don't want to let go of her and she doesn't step back or push me away. She still holds onto me as my tears start hitting her shoulders. I feel her pain and she feels my guilt. I wipe the tears away as I step inside holding my sister's hand.

I stand before the judge and accept my plea: one year in SCCF DWI program and then head off for **two years and five months upstate**. I am a felon, convicted with vehicular manslaughter. If I hadn't been driving and lost control of my car when I leaned down to pick up my GPS I may not be doing so much time locked away. Even then, I don't know that **three years and five months** is that much time for being responsible for taking someone's life, all caused by my irresponsible decisions.

"Is there anything that you would like to say?" asked the judge.

“Yes, your Honor, please...” I say, “I express my sorrow to her and to all his loved ones and to please accept my deepest apology, and that maybe one day they will forgive me. I pray for him every night. I pray for him to be in peace and for all of you to be at peace and to heal from this terrible tragedy. I’m so sorry.”

The officer comes towards me and tells me to place my hands behind my back. I can feel the cold handcuffs on my wrists and she slowly tightens them. My mind starts to race. *Have I said everything I wanted to say? Did I apologize? Did she hear me say that I am sorry? Did I say that he is in my prayers every night? That all his loved ones are in my prayers?*

I didn’t get to hug Moly or kiss Wyatt one more time. She points for me to start heading out and I start walking. I can see both sides of the room crying. Everyone looks blurry past my watery eyes but I spot her little smile and I try to smile. My eyes get caught on my dad, he stands out the most. He is weeping like a child. Something I have never seen before, how could he not cry? His little girl was going to spend the next few years behind bars.

And here I sit in #23, with my thoughts, my grief and my guilt. Here I lie on this hard mattress, in this tiny cage behind these heavy bars in this cold building. Here I lie and read the markings on the walls, “Our tears remind us that the past is real...”

My tears keep running sideways across my face as I curl up into a ball under this tiny blanket. I close my eyes and start to pray. I pray for him to be at peace, for his loved ones to be in peace as well and to heal. I pray for his forgiveness. I pray to God and I’m grateful for being alive. I’m grateful for the man who is in heaven now watching over his loved ones, watching over me, for he is my Guardian Angel and I owe him my life.