

Suspended

By Grace McDonald

As Alex looked around at her friends, all she could think was, *How did we end up here?*

"Take a chill pill, Mark!" squealed a teenage girl wearing high-waisted jeans. A pink scrunchie pulled back her blonde hair in a high, crimped ponytail, leaving only her stiff bangs which rose above her vibrant eye shadow like a teased tower.

Who is this retro Barbie? Alex wanted to ask, but the words could not escape her lips. Instead, her breath froze in the air when she saw they were surrounded by a snow-covered army of trees. The frozen lake behind her slept silently under a blanket of frost and a rickety wooden bridge. *Where am I?*

"Bite me, Deb," a voice hissed. Alex tentatively looked upward to face a menacing figure in a letterman jacket. "Where's the package, dweeb?"

"Package?" Alex gulped. She was startled by the unfamiliar deepness of her voice. The looming man-child's mullet sneered at her like an animal ready to pounce.

"Don't play dumb. The cigs. Where are they?" he demanded, drilling his glare into her. Intimidated, Alex averted her eyes until she faced the glassy lake. Her heart stopped.

The reflection belonged to a stranger. Replacing her usual copper-colored hair and round, freckled face, a pubescent boy with sunken cheeks fixed his green-eyed stare on her from the warped mirror below. Even under his disheveled mop of dark hair, Alex detected the distressed lines on his brow. *Who am I?*

"Hey, Landon, I'm talkin' to you!" Mark gripped the collar of her polo with his sausage fists. Alex recoiled from the stench of his tobacco-soaked halitosis.

"Drop dead & leave my big brother alone!" piped up a small voice.

"Hush, Lissy," begged Deb, pulling the child back.

A seven or eight-year-old girl with curly, black locks marched up to the bully in her Strawberry Shortcake moonboots.

Mark snickered. "What's your damage, small-fry?"

"Landon has no more cigarettes. Daddy quit smoking," the young girl argued, pummeling the back of his jacket with her small fists. "So why don't you ditch, dog breath?"

In a burst of rage, Mark dropped Landon, A.K.A Alex, and snatched up the little dark-haired girl, her earmuffs sliding off. "No!" protested Alex, swinging a closed fist only to be shoved back to the ground.

With Lissy, the younger sister, kicking and clawing, Mark heaved her over to the top of the bridge and dangled her over the edge. Tears streamed down her rosy cheeks as she clung to his trunk of an arm for dear life above the lake's surface. "If this pipsqueak can hang onto the edge for five minutes, I'll let you all off easy."

"Are you mental?" Deb cried desperately, her leg warmers a blur as she rushed to Lissy. She was no match for Mark's brute force as he knocked her back.

Mark cackled, "I think your Betty is flirting with me, chicken."

"As if!"

Alex's chest tightened as she shouted, "She'll never last!" She glanced one more time at the sullen boy's face, framed with shaggy hair. "I'll do it."

The next thing Alex knew, her bony fingers clutched onto the bridge's railing so she could save the friends she didn't even know. Despite being imprisoned within his body, she yearned to help.

“You’re at three minutes, Landon!” cheered Deb, trying to shield her worry with hope. “You’re doing awesome, hon! We, for sure, believe in you.” Lissy choked back frightened sobs as she buried her runny nose into Deb’s sweater.

The arms Alex was controlling, pulsated with aches. The stinging cold made her slippery fingers fat and useless while they cramped in anguish. Alex gritted Landon’s teeth and clenched Landon’s eyes, shutting out the icy death that would await if she succumbed. “I g-gotta do this,” Alex grunted, shivers racking her ribcage. “For them.”

Meanwhile, Mark sneered at his victim’s success. His beady eyes surveyed Landon who twisted in the air like a mouse before a cat. Sniggering, Mark thrust his large body into the side of the bridge. The rails wobbled like teeth knocked loose from the bridge’s wicked grin.

Suddenly, Alex found herself, slipping, then plummeting, then crashing, then gasping, then... nothing.

Alex jolted awake, her chest heaving. Her limbs were entangled in a mass of sweat-soaked sheets. She brushed her fingers along the back of her cranium where a sharp pain lingered.

Her hands fumbled with her bedside lamp, seeking comfort in its soft glow before stumbling over to her mirror. The large T-shirt she wore to bed clung to the perspiration on her back.

Alex exhaled and rested clammy hands on freckled cheeks as she examined her reflection. Everything was her own. Her penny-colored hair, her brown eyes, her feminine curves, her shadow... her shadow. Chilling pinpricks washed over her body. Alex’s eyes widened as she swerved around and gasped.

The shadow on her bedroom wall was foreign. It belonged to a scrawny boy with hair sticking out at odd angles. He clung to the silhouette of her ceiling fan for dear life. His shape squirmed in adjusting his grip and kicking his bony legs.

“It can’t be,” Alex breathed. “Landon.” The shadow cocked his head in recognition of his name, which hadn’t been uttered in so long. “I-I was... you. I saw you-” One hand slipped. The shadow grasped at the air while his fingers slid slowly off of the ceiling fan’s silhouette.

Alex reached out to the wall just as the shadow plunged to the floor, leaving behind an empty, cold space where its two-dimensional form used to be.

She pressed at her eyes with her thumbs and rubbed them in disbelief. *What time is it?* The alarm clock broadcasted the blazing digits: 1983. Alex furrowed her brow and tampered with the faulty machine. But it clattered to the floor when the black mass appeared on the opposite wall, startling Alex.

Seizing the digital clock, she raised it in a defensive position. Instead of retreating, the dark presence pointed at her ‘weapon’ and threw his head back in silent laughter, his shoulders shaking. Confused, Alex gently set the clock down, with the numbers still eerily displaying 1983.

The shadow gained his bearings and waved his arms in the air. “What do you want from me?” Alex hesitantly asked, peering at the peculiar presence from the corner of her eye.

The figure rested his hand on his temple in thought before perking up like a dog at the chiming of a doorbell. The shadow lifted his hand to his ear and bent down his three middle fingers, so only the thumb and pinkie were up. “Um,” stuttered Alex, as she stumbled through this new game of charades. She mimicked the symbol with her own hand.

The shadow slapped his forehead in disappointment before he scampered across the walls to another location. Landon gestured desperately at a large phone book on Alex's desk. She had only used it as a paperweight. "Y-you want me to call someone."

The personified shape leaped off of the desk's silhouette and clapped his hands in glee. Alex couldn't help but smile at his soundless celebration. "Who, Landon?" she giggled, surprised at herself.

He halted, his posture becoming morose and motionless. He cupped his hands and formed the distinct shape of a heart above his head. Then, with his palm flat, his shadow placed it on top of his wild hair and gestured to a height just below his chest, referencing the heights repeatedly.

Alex squinted and pursed her lips in confusion, waiting for an epiphany to strike. She was taken aback when Landon's boyish form morphed into a smaller girl with curly, long hair and moonboots.

In that moment, Alex's window burst open, releasing a gust of frigid air into the bedroom. The phone book's yellow pages unfurled frantically and didn't cease until Alex latched the window shut. She glanced at the worn book, then the shadow, who had shifted back into its boyish outline.

Landon's broken profile looked as if he were Atlas bearing the crushing weight of the world. With his shoulder's drooping, the shadow lifted his head to Alex and steadily gestured towards the book with an open hand.

Alex's eyes flitted about until they settled on one specific phone number. A warm, tingling sensation struck her as her thumb brushed over the text. She drummed her fingers on her desk while the phone rang on the other end, her leg bouncing to the rhythm of her heart.

"Hello?" a woman's sleep-ridden voice echoed through. Alex froze as she choked on the gravity of the situation. "Oh God! It's three in the morning. Is somebody hurt?"

"Lissy?" squeaked Alex, the phone shaking in her hands.

"Actually, it's Melissa. No one's called me that in a long time," the woman sharply commented. Her bitter tone seeped through the phone's speaker. "Who is this?"

"Y-your brother's death," Alex started, looking towards the melancholy, dark figure. The shadow was gone. "It wasn't your fault."