

## FOLIE A DEUX

"Dad says we have to talk to other people too."

I refused to look at my sister, focusing instead on the fat neighborhood cat that had wandered up to me in the yard. He purred and rubbed his orange head against my hand. I smiled, but it was a fleeting one. Leah sighed and took my hand, forcing my attention away from the cat and onto her face.

"Ji-lalo," she said softly after making sure Dad was nowhere to be seen.

"Jo-lali." I wasn't afraid if he heard us.

"We should try."

"Why?" I was being purposely ignorant, and Leah knew it.

"You know why he took us away from the compound. We are human, Lalo. We are meant to be around the others."

"All I need is you." I said it in our secret words. "And you, me."

"We'll always have each other. In the whole universe, there is nothing that could change that. But-"

"But what? Mama always said we were born with everything we need."

"Mama wasn't right in her head, Lalo. She kept us separate from everyone and everything."

"I miss the woods," I said, ignoring what Leah said about Mama. Mama loved us more than anything. "Don't you wish we could go home, Lali?"

Leah opened her mouth to answer but a shadow fell over the doorstep where I was sitting. I cried out, a wordless sound from neither language, but it was only Dad. He had his arms crossed, and that meant he was angry. Leah immediately ducked her head, but I held mine high. There was nothing he could do to make us give up our secret words.

"We *are* home," he said, and I realized he hadn't even noticed our special names for each other. "Listen to me, Rebekah. Leah." He sat down beside me on the step. The orange cat wound around Dad's ankles as Leah sat on my other side. I reached over and her hand was already there, ready for me to take it.

"Your mother," he began, and I groaned inwardly. Here came the same story he'd been telling us for weeks now. "Your mother had problems. A lot of them. She had a disease in her head that made her take us all away and hide in the forest. You girls remember our church?"

Of course I remembered. It was always so scary going to church for the week. There were strangers there, strangers who didn't understand Leah and me. "Mama protected us," I said. I would not hear of her sickness. She didn't seem sick to me. She was perfect. "She kept the others away from us. She let us be with each other. You don't." My hands were in balls, angry little fists that I had no memory of forming. "If you really loved us, you wouldn't make us change!"

Leah gasped, and I expected a scolding, but instead, tears began to fall from my father's eyes. "Rebekah... I love you more than anything on this planet. You girls are my heart and soul. I took you away from that place *because* I love you. Someday, I hope you can see that."

"You took us away from everything!" I yelled, and a man on the other side of the street looked our way. His gaze was too prying, too curious. I stood up and ran inside the new house, back to our room. Without Leah there though, it felt empty.

I sat on the floor and wrapped my arms around my chest. Footsteps came from the hallway, and I scooted around so Dad couldn't see me cry. "I can't do this anymore," Dad said. "I thought you were getting better, but you're not. I'm getting you two some help."

That was when the meetings started. Twice a week, they made us separate into different rooms while a lady talked to us. Her name was Doctor Saltmarsh, and she asked us weird questions about mom, the compound, the woods. Each other.

I knew Leah wouldn't share our secrets, and so I refused too. This woman was a stranger. She didn't know us. She didn't deserve to know us. But every week without fail, she was at the new house waiting for us.

It took a long time, but one day, I felt something change. Leah changed. "Jo-lali," I said when she came out of the living room. Doctor Saltmarsh walked out behind her, and I shut my mouth. She didn't deserve to hear our language, our secret words.

"Hello, Rebekah," she said. "Are you ready for our session?"

I looked at Leah. She had tears on her face. Doctor Saltmarsh had made my sister cry. I said nothing, but took Leah's hands. She held them for a brief moment, but then she pulled away, and I was left alone with Doctor Saltmarsh as Leah walked to our room.

Doctor Saltmarsh placed a hand on my shoulder and led me into the living room where Dad was already waiting. He had a pinched, nervous look on his face. I stood in the center of the room, my arms around myself. "Please sit, Rebekah."

I wouldn't dignify that with a response. They would get nothing from me until I got what I wanted: Mama and Leah.

Dad sighed and forced me down into a squishy armchair. I hated it. We never had anything like this in the compound. I couldn't sit up straight in this chair. "Listen to the Doctor, Rebekah. She's going to tell you something very important."

I stared straight ahead. My eyes were for my sister alone. They were the same as hers. Dead grass green.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Doctor Saltmarsh shoot Dad a look before turning back to me. "Rebekah," she said again. My name sounded foreign and harsh on her tongue. She wasn't saying it right. Leah said it right. So did Mama. "We've decided we need to take some more drastic steps in your recovery. Your progress isn't where we would like it. We have decided, and Leah agrees: you will be sleeping in separate bedrooms from now on."

It took me a moment to process what she said. When it finally clicked, I laughed. Leah and I would never sleep apart. Most nights, we even shared the same bed. It was so comforting being close. When we slept, our breath would rise and fall in time with each other. Mama always said that we were one in her womb, and should do whatever we could to be one in life.

Dad looked surprised at my reaction. "This is for real, Rebekah. It's happening. Leah is upstairs moving her favorite things into her new room."

Leah would never do this. Not without being in complete agreement. But even as I thought it, I knew something wasn't right. Leah had been crying. What if they had forced her? I uncurled my arms from around my chest and walked away towards our room.

Leah wasn't there. My heart racing, I rushed to the empty room beside ours. But it was empty no longer. There was a bed, a table, and a desk that hadn't been there before. Leah sat on the edge of the bed, her eyes red and puffy. "Jo-Lali," I said, shaking my head. "They can't make us do it. We are meant to be together. We were born that way."

Leah sniffled and looked at me. It was like looking in the mirror, especially since I had begun to tear up too. "Rebekah," she said, and I frowned. She never used that name for me. I was always Ji-lalo or just Lalo. "We have to try. I... I think Dad is right. I think we're sick, Rebekah."

"Don't call me that!" I cried. That was what *they* called me. "I am Ji-lalo! Ji-lalo!" Footsteps came from the hall and Doctor Saltmarsh and Dad entered the room. "What have you done?" I hurled myself at Doctor Saltmarsh. "You broke her, you did something!" My fists beat upon her stomach and chest, and she dropped her clipboard. I kicked it away, ready to attack again, but Dad pulled me away. He wrapped his arms around me, pinning mine to my side.

"Rebekah, please, Rebekah!" I twisted and writhed, but I couldn't get out of his grip. Leah was still sitting on the new bed, not looking at me. They ruined her. They made her believe their lies. A fear so overpowering came over me, I stopped struggling for a moment, and Dad was able to pull me back into the hallway. What if I couldn't bring her back? What if now, I was alone? I had never been alone. Not for longer than it took to take a shower, and even then, sometimes we would talk through the door to each other when the loneliness got to be too strong.

"We want you to have your own personality, Rebekah," said Doctor Saltmarsh. "We need you to thrive and flourish on your own as a little girl, not as a part of a whole. We want to hear your voice."

They wanted my voice? Well, I would give it to them. Summoning all of the willpower I had, I screamed. I screamed and screamed until Leah began to scream too, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Leave them be," I heard Dad say over my piercing wails. "When they get like this, only they can calm each other."

Doctor Saltmarsh shook her head. "No," she said. "We must separate them. They are feeding off each other. Take Rebekah to her room please. I'd like to speak with Leah."

Dad nodded, and lifted me off my feet. I refused to stop screaming, no matter how much he begged after he set me down on the bed in mine and Leah's bedroom. Eventually, he left, shutting the door behind him. I screamed until my throat felt raw and my voice started to fade. Once I was quiet, I could hear voices in the hall, and I slipped off the bed and pressed my ear to the door. A pang of deep sadness and loss shot through me. Leah should be beside me. She always was. Until now.

"...working for Leah, the progress has been incredible, but Doctor, what about Rebekah?" It was Dad, his low gruff voice carrying through the silent house. "The medication isn't working. She clings to her sister. You saw what just happened, surely there must be something we can do."

There was a pause, and I had to listen with all my might to hear what Doctor Saltmarsh said next. "You may not think they're ready, but I think it's time, Jeff." Another long pause, and Doctor Saltmarsh spoke again. "Good. I'll take care of all the paperwork. They'll have some of the best care in the state, Dunmore has a wonderful school system."

"They can live a normal life?"

"We will start them a grade below where they should be. That will help them acclimate. This is an important step. The girls need to socialize with children their own age. They need to

learn proper social cues and how to interact with adults. I recommend separate classes. They depend on each other too much.”

“Of course,” said Dad. “Whatever you think is best, you’re the expert.”

“I must admit, Leah and Rebekah’s case fascinates me. I am wondering when you feel it appropriate to talk with the girls about their mother?”

“Not yet.” Dad’s voice was firm. “Let them have their innocence a few years longer. Please.”

Doctor Saltmarsh hesitated. “Do the girls know that their mother is dead? Do they know what you saved them from? They had the poison in their hands when you arrived, isn’t that right?”

Dad’s voice was heavy with something I didn’t understand. “Yes. I saved them... but I couldn’t save Carol. She had already...” He cleared his throat. “You know, maybe I’m not ready yet either.”

“That’s alright. Trauma like this can take a long time to process, let alone heal.”

The conversation continued, but I wasn’t listening anymore. I stood rooted in place. Mama was dead?

That couldn’t be true. If it was true, I would have known somehow. I would have felt it. No, Mama was still out there somewhere, waiting for us to come back to her. I rushed to the window and threw it open, half-expecting to see her standing there with her arms outstretched, but there was nothing but some freshly-cut grass and a chain fence.

The smell of the grass made me think of summer at the compound. Mama would let us swim in the pond when no one else was around. The grass there was always cut short for us to play in. When Mama had long meetings in the church building, Leah and I would roll down the hills or play pretend in the woods. We played that we were warriors defending our forest kingdom, or that we were animals who could talk.

Even now, I longed to run outside and scale the lonely tree in the back of the house. It was as close as I could get to Mama. But I wouldn’t go without Leah. I opened my door to find Dad and Doctor Saltmarsh were gone, and hurried to the other room. The emptiness I felt without Leah was all-consuming, but when I pushed open the door, I saw that the room too was void of my sister. “Lali?” I called, but there was no answer.

I went downstairs, and to my displeasure, Doctor Saltmarsh was still here, talking to Dad in the hall. I hid behind a corner, listening.

“I know it must be an adjustment having the girls full-time, but really, you are coping so well. I can tell you truly want the best for your children.”

“Of course I do. They are my life. You can’t imagine what I went through when I thought they were gone too.”

“I know. Here, I’m recommending you to speak to a therapist. He’s a friend of mine. I’ll personally make the call if you want me to.”

Dad nodded. “I think that would be best.”

They walked towards me, but I crouched down behind a long table, and neither of them noticed. “I will see you in three days,” Doctor Saltmarsh said, and exited the house. Once I was certain Dad was alone, I leapt out from behind the table. “What happened to Mama?” I demanded.

Dad’s face turned white. “How long were you-”

“What happened to Mama?” I shouted. “Where is she?” I started to cry again. I couldn’t help it. Fat tears splashed onto the scratched wooden floorboards.

Dad gathered me in a hug, and for just a second, it felt like Mama was there too. But then Dad spoke. “She’s gone, Rebekah. I’m so sorry. I didn’t know how to tell you. I didn’t want you to find out like this. I-”

The sound that came out of me was like nothing I had ever done before. I fell onto the floor, unable to stand any longer. So it was true. Or maybe they were lying to me, trying to get between me and Leah. They were forcing us apart in ways I never thought possible.

Leah came rushing in to the hall when she heard my howl of grief. “He killed her!” I screamed. “She’s dead, he killed her! She’s gone! Mama’s gone!”

Leah was dumbstruck, unable to speak as the truth of what I was saying washed over her. She fell too and we held each other for what felt like hours. Dad didn’t dare try and tear us apart this time. After a while of him standing over us awkwardly, he went to the kitchen. We heard him talking on the phone, but he shut the door so we couldn’t listen.

When he returned, I couldn’t look at him. He had done this. I don’t know how or why, but he was there the last time we saw Mama. There had been so many people at the compound that day, and this time we weren’t allowed to go off and play in the grass like we usually did. Mama gave us each a cup of soda. We never got to have soda. It was a special treat, she had said, but we were not to drink it until she said so.

We listened to a man talk for a while, but Leah and I were more interested in us than him. When he was through, though, Mama told us we could have our special sodas. She even showed us how to drink it, in one big gulp. But that was when Dad showed up. He ruined our special day and knocked the soda out of our hands. After that, I don’t remember much. There were lots of blue and red lights, and strangers. So many strangers. After that day, Dad said we had to live with him now. But I wasn’t going to let him come between me and Leah.

Taking her by the hand, I led the way up to our room, and pulled her down onto the bed with me. We were wrapped in each other’s arms. It was how it was supposed to be. But soon enough, Leah disentangled herself from me and sat up. I looked up at her.

“I’m going to go to my room,” she said. “I think I want to be alone.”

“But we are alone,” I said, puzzled.

“No Rebekah, really alone. By myself. Not you.”

My eyes filled with tears when I finally realized what she meant. “Jo-lali,” I began, but she held up her hand.

“Not Jo-lali,” she said, and her voice was sharp, cutting right through my heart. “I want you to call me Leah now.” She turned and left my room, closing the door behind her.

Leah stayed away all night, even going so far as to lock her new bedroom door. I went back to our room and sobbed. I couldn’t sleep, not while this wall of wood and stone blocked me from my sister. She came back to me in the morning though, and her eyes were narrow from lack of sleep.

We held each other for long moments, until Dad showed up and made everything worse.

“You’re going to school this fall,” he said with no preamble. “I want you to be prepared to meet new kids, so today, we’re going to the park.”

I had read about parks. They were places where children played with their parents keeping a watchful eye on their comings and goings. “We aren’t going,” I said immediately.

But Leah gave me a sideways look and my mouth opened in shock. "Rebekah, please," she whispered. "I want a normal life. I want to be a normal kid."

"But we aren't normal," I said. She needed to know this, she must see it. "We are us. You and me. We are all we need. Ji-lalo and Jo-lali."

When I said our special names. Leah's eyes narrowed even more, and she looked at Dad. "I want to go," she said.

The park became a weekly ritual. I hated it. Leah went off and abandoned me to play with strangers. Strangers! Anything she said to them had to be said in everyone's language. I heard her talking and scoffed. She and I had secrets together.

Once, she was playing with two boys and their younger sister. Strangers make me nervous, but I was determined to remind her that I am all she needs. "Play with me, Lali," I said in our language.

Leah ignored me. My heart seemed to shatter into a million pieces. She had never ignored me, not once, not ever. I hid beneath a wooden structure for the rest of the time we were there, and I refused to come out, even when Dad begged. Eventually, Leah did exactly what I had hoped and crawled through the sand to get to me. "Come back with us, Rebekah." She still wouldn't call me by our special name.

"No," I said in our secret words. "I'm never coming out again."

Making a face I didn't understand, Leah spoke our words. "Come home, Lalo. Please?"

Satisfied, I nodded.

But the next time, my plan didn't work. Leah refused to crawl through the sand to bring me home, and I felt lost all over again. Dad had to huff and puff his way through the sand and drag me out. There were no more visits to the park after that. I had won. But Leah didn't see it that way. She didn't understand that I was doing this for her, for *us*!

Days went by, I'm not sure how many, because Leah withdrew from my comfort. Sometimes, she couldn't help herself and would come crawling back to me with a strange red-faced look about her. There were nights where she couldn't sleep alone, and I would find her curled up beside me. Those were the only nights I slept.

School began just as the leaves were beginning to change. It made me miss our compound and Leah and Mama even more than I already did. Dad bought us new clothes that fit strangely and made the back of my neck itch. We looked bizarre in these.

Dad drove us to school on the first day. We were starting third grade. Doctor Saltmarsh was there to see us off too. I spoke to neither of them. The stink I had put up this morning had hardly done any good at all. We were still here. At least I was with Leah. She was holding my hand. Her fear was palpable, but I wasn't scared. I had her.

Once I stepped inside, it was another matter entirely. Endless tiles led in all directions, and the lights were harsh and cold. There were metal boxes covering the walls, each with a combination lock on it. This place seemed alien and inhospitable. A loud bell rang and I screamed, which made Leah scream.

"Let's go meet your class," said Dad.

I shook my head, and Dad looked like he was bracing himself. I decided to let it go, just this once. Strangers had begun to fill the halls, and I was growing more and more uncomfortable.

Dad and Doctor Saltmarsh led us to a room. "This is your class, Leah," said Dad. "Your teacher's name is Mrs. Kimball. It's okay. You can go on in."

I tugged on Leah's hand, but she slipped it out of my grasp. "I'll see you later, Rebekah." She walked into the classroom without looking back.

Now that I was alone, my panic was starting to set in. "Lali!" I cried. She ignored me, talking to the teacher and receiving a handful of papers.

"This way, Rebekah," Doctor Saltmarsh said firmly. "You have Ms. Emerson. I've worked with her in the past, she is very nice."

Dad was shaking his head as we drew nearer to the classroom. "She's not ready for this."

"Sometimes dropping in full speed ahead is the only way to make progress. Nothing else seems to work, we're running out of options. It's possible she will thrive."

I refused to thrive. I wasn't sure I knew what that meant, but I wouldn't do it. I stood silent and unmoving as Dad and Doctor Saltmarsh talked to one of the strangers about me. They directed me to pick a desk, but I wouldn't budge. I won't let them manipulate us like this. Eventually, I was made to sit down right in the front of the classroom.

"We'll be available via phone if you need either of us," said Doctor Saltmarsh. "Thank you, Lois."

They left me. Dad and Doctor Saltmarsh. They walked off and left me all alone in the classroom filled with twenty strangers. But I knew where Leah was. I stood up and walked out the door. The teacher, Ms. Emerson, grabbed my arm and shut the door. "Come on, Rebekah, we're staying in our seats right now."

I sat. And remained sitting. When they all stood up to look at the American Flag, I stayed in my seat. When they started playing some inane game with a plush toy, I scoffed and stared straight ahead. When Ms. Emerson placed sheets of paper in front of me, I ignored them. The only time I was myself was lunchtime. I could see Leah then. We sat together and shared our food. It felt normal. Maybe I could learn to survive at the school. So long as Leah was with me, I could get through anything. But then, the teachers sent us outside with all the strangers. Leah left me alone then, and played a ball game with a couple other girls. I stood by and frowned at her, but she didn't seem to see me. After that, it was back inside, and I was left alone.

Dad came to pick us up when it was finally over. "How was it?" he asked Leah, carefully avoiding looking me in the eye, and for good reason. I was livid.

"I made some friends," Leah said, and her voice sounded like it used to when we played together. Happy and carefree. But how could she feel that way when I was so miserable? "Carolina and Melodie! They want me to play four-square with them tomorrow!"

"That's great!" Dad exclaimed, and hugged Leah. Then, as if he was dreading it, he asked me. "How about you, Rebekah?"

I didn't bother responding to him, though I spoke to Leah, softly in our secret language so Dad couldn't understand. "Play with me tonight, Lali," I said. "I miss you."

Leah didn't say anything.

We got home, and she went straight to her room, closing the door in my face as I made to follow her in. I understood all too well what was going on. Dad was trying to split us up. Him and Doctor Saltmarsh. It wouldn't be so bad if Leah wasn't falling prey to their tactics. But she was acting like she wanted to be apart from me. They had gone too far.

“Jo-lali!” I cried at her door. “You have to listen! They’re doing this to us! It’s like Mama always said: strangers are trying to hurt us! They all do!”

The door flew open and Leah stood there before me. I was overjoyed for a split second. Then, she shoved me to the floor. “I am *not* Jo-lali!” she cried. “It was a stupid game we played when we were little! But we’re not babies anymore, Rebekah!” I stared up at her like I had never seen her before. Not once had Leah ever laid her hands on me in a threatening way. “I want friends and classmates, like we read about! We don’t have to be alone anymore, don’t you see?”

“We were never alone,” I said from the floor. “Until now.”

One of Leah’s eyes twitched and she stared at me wordlessly for a moment before spinning around and marching back into her room, slamming the door.

Dad appeared and saw me on the floor. “Rebekah, what-” He looked at Leah’s closed door and sighed. “You have got to let this go. Do you understand? I just- I don’t know how to help you anymore. Go to your room. I’m going to call Doctor Saltmarsh.”

I stayed in my room all night, ignoring when Dad called us down for dinner, and when he told us to get ready for bed. It wasn’t like I would sleep anyways. I couldn’t. Not without Leah.

The next day was a Saturday, so there was no school. I stayed in my room. All I wanted was to be with Leah, but maybe if she saw how much she would miss me when I wasn’t around, she would come to me. She didn’t come all Saturday, or Sunday. She got up to go to church though, I could hear her moving around in her room. I wasn’t going. Too many strangers. At the end of the day, Dad came to yell at me again.

“You need to eat, Rebekah. Or at least have some water. Come on.” He held out a glass of water to me, but I wouldn’t take it. I wasn’t hungry.

Monday dawned and Dad drove us to school. He didn’t look like himself. His hair was messy and he had a beard. His arms were shaking too. Sometimes Mama used to shake like that.

Today, I decided I was going to *make* Leah pay attention to me. She would have to. I went to my classroom without a fuss and even stood up when Ms. Emerson made us look at the flag. But the minute her back was turned, I was gone. I burst into Leah’s classroom.

All the strangers turned to stare at me, but I didn’t care about them, despite the squirmy way they made my stomach feel. “Jo-lali,” I said. This was how much I cared, I would come to her even amidst my own fear and discomfort. “I love you, Jo-lali,” I said in our words. “I need you back. Please come back to me.”

Everyone turned to stare at Leah now, and I knew something was wrong. She had never looked at me this way before. She plunged her hand into her backpack and pulled out one of Dad’s kitchen knives.

Leah leapt at me and I put up my arms to cover my face, but the knife sliced through them like paper. Her blade found my neck and I choked on something hot and metallic.

“No!” screamed the teacher, Mrs. Kimball, who until now had been frozen in shock.

It was hard to breathe, and my arms and neck hurt so much. I started to cry. The tears stung my throat. Then the floor was rushing towards me, and everything went black.

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"They're not fit to be around people," someone said. Her voice was familiar. I opened my eyes and found myself in a white room with strangers surrounding me. Over in the corner was Doctor Saltmarsh. Beside her, Dad paced back and forth frantically.

"There must be something," he said. "I can keep them at home! Homeschool. Please!"

"I'm sorry," said Doctor Saltmarsh, and her voice seemed colder than I remembered. I tried to speak, and a horrible pain went through my throat. "But Rebekah cannot cope with the separation of her sister, and after what Leah did, I'm surprised you would even consider-"

"She was just upset!" Dad cried. "She didn't know any better."

"I think you need to look at this." Doctor Saltmarsh pulled out a recording device and pressed play.

I almost leapt for joy when I heard Leah's voice, but quickly realized that something was very wrong. Leah was laughing in a crazed, manic way. "I'd do it again! I want her gone! Dead! She's in my head you know. The only way to get her out is cut her out. Cut cut slice slice. Lalo? Lalo Lalo Lalo, come here!"

The recording stopped and Dad was staring at it in horror. "Is her mind totally gone? What happened?"

"It seems that she had a psychotic break. We will treat her to the best of our abilities, but there is the chance that she may never recover."

Dad shook his head, his eyes wide and tear-filled. "What about Rebekah?" They turned to look at me and I smiled big. Hadn't they heard the recording? Lali wants me! She wants me to come to her! I tried to tell them that everything would be okay, but no words would come out.

"I'm sorry. Her vocal cords are permanently damaged. She can't speak. Jeff, I am so sorry. But your only hope now is to admit them to our psychiatric facility. We are the foremost in New England."

"My daughters," said Dad, and he looked at me. "This is all my fault. If I had just divorced Carol when I had the chance-"

"Looking back on what could have been will help nothing," Doctor Saltmarsh said. "If you'll come with me, the admissions assistant will help you with the paperwork."

I didn't care where Dad was going or where he would try to send me next. All that mattered was that Leah wanted me. She was my sister. She was my everything. And I would see her soon, I was sure of it.