

Lulu

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by Andrea Alghalith

Brooke stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Mom in *The Luna’s* express elevator. She ran her fingers through the ends of her dyed blue hair.

Mom hit the button for the sixty-third floor. She pursed her lips in disapproval. “Your beautiful hair.”

“I love it.” Brooke scowled. “It’s my treat for getting my spring break ruined.”

She was supposed to have had ten days of freedom from school and band, spent with best friends Phoebe and Rena. They had planned one big slumber party, rotating houses so nobody’s parents got too sick of them. Rena had just gotten her driver’s license, and Phoebe, that sly girl, had snagged a bottle of vodka from her parents’ liquor cabinet.

But Mom had to fly down to Tampa to shuttle Grandma into assisted living, and in a stroke of bad luck, the trip coincided with Dad’s annual business trip to New York.

“It’ll only be four days,” Mom said. “Then you can spend the rest of the break back home with your friends.”

“Aunt Jen’s weird,” Brooke said.

Mom glared at her.

“Well she is. Why couldn’t I have just stayed home?”

“You know why.”

“We weren’t drunk.”

Mom turned to face her. “You’re fifteen. It doesn’t matter. You were caught drinking on school grounds. The

last thing I need is our house becoming party central while I'm a thousand miles away.”

“Could I at least have my phone back?”

“Your phone will be waiting for you at home.”

The elevator dinged when it reached the sixty-third floor.

“Just remember,” Mom whispered as they stepped into the corridor. “Your aunt’s been through a terrible tragedy. Try to muster some compassion.”

“Please can’t I come with you to Florida?”

“Sweetie, it’s not going to be a beach vacation. Grandma isn’t going to want to move, and it’s going to get ugly.”

Brooke would rather listen to Grandma fling obscenities (and possibly Precious Moments figurines) at them than be left alone with Aunt Jen for four days.

Once upon a time, Jen had been the cool aunt. She bought her Gold Coast condo at a significant bargain, and she and her five-year-old daughter, Sophie, embraced big city life. But everything changed when Sophie died in a freak accident. Since then, Jen had become a ghost at the top of the world. She never left her condo. Her friends avoided her, having run out of words of comfort where no comfort was to be had. Nobody wanted to get too close, just in case such tragedy was contagious.

Mom knocked on the door at the end of the corridor, and it opened immediately. Jen looked older than Brooke remembered. Gray streaks dulled her blond hair. Her once sparkling blue eyes reflected shadow.

“Hi, sweet girl,” Jen said to Brooke. “I like it. Your blue hair.” She offered a faint smile. “Come in.”

Jen clasped Brooke’s arm with icy fingers. Brooke swallowed an urge to shake her aunt’s hand off.

She turned to say goodbye to her mom, but her mom had disappeared.

Oh, that's nice, didn't even say bye.

The condo was a corner unit, and three wall-to-ceiling windows gave the illusion of total exposure at the top of the world. A white sectional sofa centered the room. A vase of purple orchids rested atop a glass coffee table. On the one wall that was not a window hung a piece of modern art – white canvas splattered with red paint.

Like blood.

Brooke shuddered. But when she turned her attention to the view out the glass walls, her dread turned to awe. Other high-rise condominiums surrounded *The Luna* in a mishmash of architectural styles and heights. Beyond the skyline, Lake Michigan curved into turquoise infinity.

Morbid fascination quickened her heartbeat when she saw the balcony. Little Sophie had spent the last moments of her short life there. The wrought-iron railing looked flimsy, a piddly barrier against a terrifying drop into the void. Wind rattled the plastic sheet that covered a stack of outdoor chairs.

The sliding glass door shimmered golden and warm. A cloud floated by the window. Brooke blinked. They were on the sixty-third floor, which was high, yes, but *The Luna* seemed to have risen high into the sky, above the clouds, leaving the other high-rises so far below that they looked like children's toys. Brooke stared into the blue, her mouth dry with wonder. No building could really be this high, could it?

They had to be hundreds of stories up, tens of thousands of feet above the earth.

Brooke’s heart swelled with a giddy desire to stroll out to the balcony and climb atop the railing. She could bathe in the blue of the sky. She could spread her arms like eagle’s wings. She imagined diving into the cotton embrace of the clouds.

Then she saw the little girl with blond hair on the balcony, clutching the iron balusters, her back to Brooke.

Sophie?

The girl looked over her shoulder and giggled.

“Color the sky with me, Brooke!”

But her plastic lips did not move. Her eyes were painted.

A doll.

“Don’t go out there.”

Brooke’s eyes flew open at the sound of Jen’s voice.

What the hell?

Her eyes had been closed, but she didn’t remember closing them. She had walked across the room to the sliding glass door in a dream. Fully awake now, heart pounding, she saw that the condo was no longer taller than the other Gold Coast high-rises surrounding them. The sliding glass door was firmly closed. No doll stood on the balcony.

Brooke’s hands trembled as she rubbed her eyes.

“Come,” Jen said in a softer voice. “I’ll show you to the guest room.”

Brooke didn’t want to go to the guest room. She wanted to go home. Nothing like that (*What had happened? Trance? Dream?*) had ever happened to her before. She had never walked in her sleep. She had never fallen asleep on

her feet. If Jen hadn't spoken, she might have sleepwalked right out onto the balcony and toppled over the railing.

Like Sophie.

Brooke followed Jen to the guest room, which thankfully had solid walls and no balcony, just a small window. No paintings hung on the white walls, no frilly trinkets. Just a double bed, a bedside table, and a closet.

Brooke's heart jolted.

The doll.

In the corner stood the same toddler-sized doll from her dream. The doll's curly blond hair was pulled back in a messy ponytail. The eyes, painted blue, were framed by honey-blond lashes. Whoever had made the doll probably intended the smile to be sweet, but to Brooke, it looked sly. Its left arm rested at its side. The right arm was angled as if it were about to do a karate chop.

“Are you all right?” Jen asked.

“That doll,” Brooke started.

“That's Lulu,” Jen said. “Sophie found it in her closet right after we moved in.” She smiled sadly. “She named it. She loved it so much.”

“Oh.” Brooke struggled to think of something to say. Mom had explained that the topic of Sophie would likely be taboo.

“You must miss her,” she managed.

Jen's gaze fixed on the doll, as if speaking to it and not to Brooke. Her voice lowered and shook, as if trying to hold back tears. “If I hadn't been so distracted...I don't even remember what I was doing or why I left the sliding glass door open. Sophie knew she wasn't supposed to be on the God-damned balcony. I remember hearing her say, *You can*

touch the sky! I ran, I screamed at her to get off the railing, but I was too late. One minute she was my whole world and the next—” She choked, holding her hand over her mouth. Then she blinked at Brooke. “Oh, honey, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to dump that on you.”

She fled the room.

Brooke sat on the edge of the bed, feeling sick. She heard muffled sobs from the bathroom. Should she go to Jen? Did Jen want to be alone? Brooke hated how sad her aunt was and that the pain would never end.

An abrupt movement at the corner of her eye jerked her attention to the doll. Its right arm had fallen to its side. Brooke stared at it with growing revulsion. She wanted to hide the doll but she didn’t want Jen to come back and notice it missing. She backed out of the room and closed the door. She wandered into the kitchen. She needed to leave. At least for the day. She could wander around downtown, find a coffeehouse, and not come home until nightfall. She fumbled through drawers until she found a pen and notepad. She sat on a bar stool so she could compose a note to let Jen in on her plan.

Her gaze was pulled back to the view outside the glass walls. Mesmerizing blue sky, Lake Michigan as far as the eye could see. Brooke found it difficult to look away. She tried to scoot off the bar stool, but her muscles would not move. She tried to write her note, but her hand holding the pen just swirled in circles, leaving doodles that looked like fluffy clouds.

Oh, well. Why go anywhere when I have such a view?

Puffs of clouds undulated just outside. The glass walls shimmered gold and melted. The clouds rolled into the

condo in a fine mist, tickling and caressing her. She fell off the stool and to the floor, dipping her hands in the clouds. Soon she would float weightless and free. She would become one with the sky.

“You can color the sky with me,” a little girl’s voice whispered.

Clouds clung to her fingers like cotton candy. She laughed, her body rolling with weightless glee toward the open sliding door.

The balcony was gone.

Lulu stood where the balcony should have been. Her sly smile circled into a scream. Inside her mouth a black void swirled.

No!

Brooke clung to the floor with all her strength. The world tilted, and the wind filled her ears.

She woke up on the white sofa. Full darkness had fallen outside, and the room was lit only by the moon and a multitude of city lights.

Something lay cradled in her arms.

Lulu.

She flung the doll aside with a guttural cry, feeling as repulsed as if she had awakened to find herself cradling a tarantula. She stared at Lulu, heart pounding. Lulu gazed back with her painted blue eyes. There was no sign of the black void in her mouth.

Still shaking, Brooke tried to turn on the lamps, but none of the switches worked.

She trotted down the shadowy corridor to the master bedroom and rapped on the door.

“Aunt Jen?”

Nothing.

She felt her way down the corridor to the guest room. The lights did not work in there, either. She barricaded the door with the beside table. As long as the doll and the balcony were on the other side of the door, she was safe. She changed into her nightshirt and slipped into bed.

She didn't think she'd be able to sleep, but she fell right into a vivid dream.

In it, she sat on the bar stool in Jen's kitchen. Sun poured through the transparent walls, giving the white furniture a golden hue. Sophie, her blond curls held back in a ponytail just like Lulu, colored a picture of a rainbow and clouds, scribbling the background sky periwinkle blue.

“Come color the sky with me!” Sophie said.

Brooke joined her in coloring, using a midnight blue crayon. As she colored, clouds floated out of the picture and tickled her hands.

Sophie had abandoned the picture. Instead she danced around the room, singing with Lulu. The sliding door had been left ajar, and Sophie skipped onto the balcony.

“Hey, you're not supposed to go out there!”

Brooke's muscles froze. She could not move. She could only watch helplessly as Sophie did a few princess twirls on the balcony. Sophie set Lulu on one of the patio chairs. The doll's head twisted to the right, and its eyes fixed on Brooke.

Everything jolted.

Brooke was no longer on the bar stool. She had shrunk into the little girl twirling with glee on the balcony. The sun was warm, the sky blue and infinite. The wind ripped at

her dress and hair. How nice of Lulu to open the door for her!

Silver airplanes sparkled in the sky like magic wands. Mermaid hands waved from the lake. Lulu wanted a better view. Lulu wanted to touch the sky. The railing was in the way. Brooke pushed the chair against the railing and climbed onto it. Now she could see forever. She wanted to show Mommy, but Lulu said she didn't need Mommy's help. She just needed to lean over a little more. She balanced on her tummy on the railing and slid forward. She could see straight down. The people looked silly, like tiny bugs, and the cars looked like toys. Lulu whispered that she could fly right into the blue if she wanted to, if she just slid forward a little more.

The wind roared in her ears.

She was so cold.

Brooke's eyes flew open, her heart pounding. The wind still roared in her ears. This was no dream. She was on the balcony, balanced on a patio chair, cradling Lulu to her heart. Thousands of lights blinked as far as she could see. The lake shimmered under a full moon.

“Play in the dark with me,” Lulu whispered. “This time we'll paint the sky black!”

Brooke climbed onto the balcony's railing in her bare feet, her nightshirt billowing around her legs.

“We'll dance on the stars together!” Lulu giggled.

With feet as light as a fairy's, Brooke leaped into the abyss.

Five years later, a businesswoman by the name of Maureen Dorner bought a corner condo on the sixty-third floor of *The Luna* for a song. The condo had been on the

market for years, and its price kept dropping, mostly because of its history of tragic deaths. Most people wouldn't want a place haunted by so much pain, however gorgeous the view. But Maureen believed in bargains, not ghosts.

When she entered the condo, it was mostly empty. A few dusty boxes here and there, a paintbrush with dried paint on it – and a doll with long, dyed blue hair standing beside the door to the balcony.

Maureen shuddered. She hated dolls. That thing had to go.

She turned her attention to the view, which took her breath away.

“Oh, wow.”

Come paint the sky with me, a whisper beckoned.

A cloud floated past the glass walls.

Maureen smiled, eyes closed, and walked toward the balcony.