

The image is a vertical, inverted collage. The top half shows a city street at night, viewed from above, with cars and buildings. A large, glowing white crescent moon is superimposed over the street. The bottom half shows a lush green landscape with a banner that reads "FREE AS ANIMALS". The banner is held by two white birds in flight. The entire scene is framed by a vertical strip of a textured, grey surface on the left and right sides.

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FREE AS ANIMALS

# Two Funerals

By Stacey Gordon

My father-in-law Henry's two cousins, who according to the inscrutable taxonomies of family trees also ranked as my husband Brian's cousins of some degree removed, died within twelve hours of each other.

Neither passing felt untimely or even surprising. Linda and Bonnie had been in their seventies and suffered from chronic health issues. Still, the coincidence presented a conundrum for Henry, who'd cared for the women like sisters.

My husband texted me from work to share the news about the proximate deaths. *Wait until I tell you what Dad has in mind.*

He arrived home just before dinnertime and scooted into the breakfast nook next to our daughter Sophie, who was busy drawing a white-bellied sea eagle. He shot me meaningful looks, but I was dashing around the kitchen—flipping the burning fish sticks, feeding our underfoot dog, answering Sophie's interminable questions about eagle wingspan—and declined to engage.

At dinner, he blurted out his gossip. "Dad's planning a combined funeral for Linda and Bonnie."

"That seems weird," I replied without thinking. I was propelling a bite of peas toward my four-year-old's closed mouth. "You *have* to eat at least two bites, Sophie. You like peas!"

"Eagles don't eat peas," Sophie protested.

She'd glommed onto eagles after we'd spotted one on a hike. I knew from experience she would obsess about them until the next fascination gripped her.

"It's classic Satterwhite family," Brian said. "God forbid we abide any excess. Too much grief and ceremony at once is impractical!"

I ignored his sarcasm. For years Brian and his father had clashed over their opposing natures—my husband's carefree and artistic, Henry's frugal and pragmatic. I hoped Brian wouldn't make this sad occasion part of their age-old conflict.

"Linda and Bonnie weren't even blood-related, were they?" I asked.

"No! Linda is Dad's first cousin on his mother's side. Bonnie's and Dad's paternal grandfathers were brothers, so she was Dad's second cousin. But you know our family. The Seattle clan of the Satterwhites has clung together since after the Second World War. The cousins all grew up together. They treat each other more like siblings."

"Poor Henry. He must be so sad. Sophie, *one bite.*"

"Dad thinks he's making everything easier, but it comes across as miserly." Brian watched me coercing our preschooler. "She's old enough to feed herself, Becca."

"I need her to eat *something.*" I put down the spork. Sophie beamed, victorious.

"She'll eat if she's hungry."

Brian genuinely believed this. He would already have shut himself in the basement with his instruments and soundboard when Sophie—bathed, pajamaed, and listening to a story about a clueless

bear or a petulant frog—would announce her ravenous hunger and refuse to fall asleep.

“I’d definitely want my own funeral.” I picked up my fork to eat my own lukewarm pasta.

My husband chuckled. “Like any of us will actually have a choice in the matter.”



The phone rang at eight-thirty. “Hi, Henry,” I answered, not bothering to check the caller ID. He was the only one who ever called the landline anymore.

“Good evening, Becca.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss. How are you doing?”

“I’m fine. A little sad.”

My father-in-law rarely expressed emotion beyond satisfaction at a well-cooked steak or appreciation of a sunny day. I was glad to hear him admit his feelings.

“It’s a big loss for you,” I said.

“Yes. Still, they lived good long lives.”

It occurred to me that the cousins’ death must be reminding Henry that, at age eighty-two, he was untangling and smoothing out the threads of his own long life. This made me feel even more sympathy for him.

“Is Brian around?” he asked.

“Oh, he’s in his music studio. In do-not-disturb mode. It might be late before he’s done.”

Henry sighed. He’d always struggled to understand his son’s preoccupation with music, Brian’s failure to take his career in finance seriously, his distance from his family. Though I’d also been feeling abandoned by Brian’s growing emotional absence lately, my loyalties wouldn’t allow me to commiserate with my father-in-law and deepen the rift between them.

“Is there anything I can help with?” I asked.

“Well, I hate to ask. But is there any chance you’re free tomorrow?”

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When she’d first married, Bonnie had moved into a mid-century ranch house with her new husband. She’d lost him young, in an accident no one had ever explained to me, but she’d stayed in the house for close to sixty years.

Henry let us in the front door with his own key. I’d visited this house several times with Brian, for family dinners, holidays, and visits with the new baby. The living room was still dustless and tidy with newer furniture and a shelf lined with family photos. One of them showed an adolescent Brian and his kid sister Angela posing with a younger Bonnie, in pleated khakis and classy heeled sandals.

This moved me. Though he’d acted flippant yesterday, I knew how much Bonnie and Linda had meant to him.

On the table next to an armchair lay evidence of Bonnie’s age and medical afflictions: a blood pressure cuff, a magnifying glass, an army of rigidly aligned pill bottles. She’d woken up with chest pain a few nights before, called the paramedics, and sat on the porch waiting for them to arrive. The ER doctor who’d called Henry informed him she’d died within an hour after arriving at the hospital.

My father-in-law promptly located the papers he sought in a desk drawer in the kitchen. While he

flipped through them, I emptied the refrigerator of perishables, carried out garbage, and watered plants on the windowsill. It felt like we were housesitting while Bonnie was away on a trip.

After we locked up, Henry drove to Linda's shabby house, with its overgrown lawn and broken concrete front stoop, on a dead-end street on the south side. The day was chilly and drizzly, and the inside of the house felt even colder and more damp when Henry opened the door.

The disarray of the living room gave an impression of a house abandoned in despair. Laundry, mail, and magazines bloomed over every surface. Like Bonnie, Linda kept her prescription bottles on a table next to her armchair, but hers were jumbled, some overturned, with white and red capsules trailing out of them.

Linda had rented her second bedroom to a woman who worked the night shift. Her roommate had come home at dawn to find Linda cold and stiff in her recliner, a ghost-hunting show still blaring on the TV.

Henry's expression grew taut, his movements edgy and rushed. He sat down in Linda's recliner and picked up a disheveled stack of papers from a basket on the floor.

"Are you alright, Henry?" I asked. It wasn't like him to act so tense.

"Linda never got around to making me power of attorney," he told me. "She wanted me to take care of everything for her, but I can't get into any of her accounts."

"I can help look for statements," I said.

"Maybe check her bedroom."

At the end of the hallway, the bedroom I assumed to be Linda's contained an unmade twin bed surrounded by white garbage bags bulging with clothes. Stacks of books and papers inundated a desk in the corner.

Somehow I put my hands on her will right away, lying on top of a desk tray. The top notarized page was labeled as the Last Will and Testament of Linda Satterwhite Jones. Trying to not seem nosy, I picked it up by its edges and carried it to Henry.

His face lit up. "Great, great. I paid for the attorney so she could have this done. Thank goodness she followed through with it."

I read over Henry's shoulder. Linda had itemized her few bequests. To Brian, some antiques and her twenty-year-old Mazda. To Angela, her costume jewelry and the Beanie Babies she'd bought in the nineties as a retirement investment.

"That was very thoughtful of her," I said diplomatically. Brian would at least appreciate the car. He'd probably sell it to buy another guitar.

Henry flipped through the will, wearing an expression of fond exasperation. Linda had been a character, the family member everyone told outrageous stories about. I'd heard many of them. The time she'd thrown jars of dill pickles at a rude store clerk. Her atheist screeds at Easter dinners. The beloved pet rabbit named Piggy Sue she'd owned as a teenager. The jobs she'd quit stormily; the husbands she'd divorced. In spite of her colorful character—maybe even *because* of it—Henry had cared for her devotedly.

I recalled then what was missing. "She didn't leave anything to her children?"

"She's been estranged from Karen and Joe for years. They never talked to each other."

"That's so sad. Do they even know she died?"

“I wouldn’t know where to find them, Becca.”

The last two pages of the packet outlined a detailed plan for Linda’s funeral: the music she wanted (Stevie Nicks), the flowers (white lilies), and her arrangement preferences (cremation).

“What a relief,” I said. “This makes things easier for you, Henry.”

Henry flipped to the last sheet of the packet. His mouth fell open. A long column of names designated Linda’s guest list for the funeral. I started to laugh, then stopped when I spotted the second, shorter column titled Do Not Invite.

Bonnie’s name appeared at the top.



Henry invited us to his house for pizza that evening for a family huddle. I suspected he didn’t want to be alone. On the drive over, I told Brian about Linda’s funeral arrangements.

“I don’t know why anyone’s surprised,” he said when I finished. “Linda was a battle-ax. She would pick a fight with anyone.”

“But with Bonnie? I thought all the cousins were close.”

“She probably had a grudge about something that happened fifty years ago. Still, Dad has to respect her wishes.”

When we arrived, Brian’s sister Angela was already sitting on the back patio with a glass of red wine. The evening had turned mild, revealing a final spray of sunlight.

“How much do you think I can get for those Beanie Babies on eBay?” she asked when I stepped outside to greet her. I’d worked as a website designer before having Sophie, and Brian’s family still thought of me as an internet expert.

“Not much, anymore.”

“You want them for Sophie?”

“Absolutely not.” I couldn’t imagine my precocious four-year-old, with her fervent fixations on dinosaur skeletons and cloud classifications, expressing an interest in the floppy, grimy toys.

Brian slid open the door. “Hey Ang!” His sister stood up to hug him. I slipped back inside to give them private time. They rarely saw each other.

Henry was opening the pizza boxes and filling up wine glasses. He looked tired.

“You alright?” I felt sorry for him. The cousins’ deaths were the first in the family since Henry had lost his wife, Brian’s mother, six years before.

“Yes, yes.” He waved his hand and passed me a glass of wine. “Thank you for going with me today. It really helped.”

“I’m glad.” I laid a hand on his shoulder. “It’s a lot, Henry. I don’t want you to have to handle all of this alone.”

The patio door banged open. My husband and his sister barged inside.

“Dad!” Angela said. “Brian just told me your plans. A combined funeral? You can’t do that!”

Henry claimed a glass of wine and plopped onto a stool. “Why not?”

“First, Bonnie and Linda weren’t even technically related. It’s not like they were married, or even inseparable. They were *distinctive people*.”

“And it looks cheap,” Brian added. “Like you’re trying to get the buy-one-get-one-free funeral deal. It’s in poor taste.”

“And now that we know the stipulations of Linda’s will, it’s even more outlandish.”

“Linda would haunt you forever!” Brian said.

“She might haunt all of us anyway,” Angela cracked. “Knowing Linda.”

“Besides, all of us agree we’d want our own funerals,” Brian continued. “When I told Becca your plan, she immediately called it weird”

Henry looked at me. I blushed. Brian and Angela ganging up on their father felt unfair, and I was ashamed at my role in it. “I’m going to go check on Sophie,” I said.

My daughter was watching a video about eagles on my iPad in the guest bedroom. “Mommy!” she exclaimed when I poked my head around the corner. “Did you know eagles sometimes die together in a death spiral? They fly high in the air and lock their talons so tightly they can’t let go, and then they fall to the ground together. Sometimes they do it because they love each other so much. And sometimes it’s because they’re fighting over territory.”

She turned back to the screen, wide-eyed.

I crossed the room and lifted the tablet from her hands.

“Let’s go eat some pizza, Sophie.”



Henry stood his ground through dinner that night, in spite of Brian and Angela’s badgering. “A lot of people need to travel in to pay their respects,” he reasoned. “It’s easier and less confusing logistically to have one event.” Still, as we left, I noticed how frail he appeared.

“You should give your dad a break,” I told Brian in the car on the way home. “He’s going through a lot.”

Brian didn’t answer, only rolled his eyes. When we got home, he marched down to the basement and shut the door, leaving me to put Sophie to bed.

I’d offered before we left Henry’s house to go with him to the funeral home the next morning. Sophie’s preschool was closed on Wednesdays, so we had to take her with us. When Henry arrived to pick us up, she clambered into the booster seat he kept in the car for her.

“Hi Grandpa!” she sang. “Did you know bald eagles can see fish from more than a mile away?”

“That’s really far! Do you think they can see for two miles when they put on their glasses?”

Sophie giggled. “Eagles don’t wear *glasses*, Grandpa.”

“Right, right. Because they don’t have ears to hook the frames over.”

As he drove I observed my father-in-law out of the corner of my eye. He and Brian physically resembled each other so much, both bony with long jaws and clear blue eyes. Anyone seeing them together instantly knew they were father and son. No one ever guessed how much they differed in personality.

“Henry, what happened between Linda and Bonnie?” I asked. “Was there some kind of falling out?”

“I never heard about anything. It had to have been one-sided. Bonnie would have patched up anything that happened between them.”

“So they had a good relationship?”

“When they were girls, Linda idolized Bonnie and followed her everywhere. That kind of bond never goes away. If Linda felt insulted, it was all in her mind. She could be thin-skinned.”

The funeral directors were a father-and-son duo. Like my husband and his father, they resembled one another, both heavysset and bald with kind brown eyes. The son, Charlie, ushered us into a conference room decked out in shades of dusty rose. We sat at a long table while Charlie’s father slipped out and closed the double doors behind him.

“I don’t know if you remember me, Mr. Satterwhite,” Charlie began. “I worked with you for your wife’s funeral.”

Henry nodded. “Of course, of course.” He’d already started flipping through the catalog of packages, branded with names like Respectful Memories and Imperial Eternities.

Brian’s mother Theresa had died of cancer not long after I’d started dating him. I hadn’t been established enough in the family yet to participate in the arrangements. I wondered if Brian had sat at this table with Henry back then, comparing casket designs and catering tray menus.

My father-in-law explained his wishes to the funeral director. Charlie furrowed his brow. “A double funeral? Well, sure, we do those sometimes. Usually for couples who die together. Or children. Tell me, were your loved ones close?”

I noticed Sophie had grown bored with her dolls and was pacing the room. She trailed her fingertips over the velvety wallpaper and plush curtains. “Sophie,” I whispered. “Try not to touch anything.”

“I’ll have to charge you for two separate packages, though, sir,” Charlie was saying. “We can offer a slight discount.”

“Money is not the concern,” Henry said defensively.

Charlie looked at me for help.

“I know it seems—unusual,” I said. “But the family is very close. Many of the same people will be attending both services. My father-in-law wants to make things easier for everybody.”

Henry kept his eyes trained on the page in front of him, but I noticed him nod.

“I see. Well, there are many ways we could...”

“Mommy, look at the vases!” Sophie gaped at an elaborate display on a corner shelf.

“Oh, those aren’t vases, honey,” Charlie said. “They’re called urns.”

“Charlie...” I began, but the funeral director had already switched into education mode. He’d made it his life’s work to speak about death frankly, to people of all ages. I wasn’t going to deter him from his mission.

“Urn provide a comfortable and beautiful place for people to rest after they pass away,” he explained to my rapt daughter. “And they allow our loved ones to stay close to us forever.”

The wheels started turning in Sophie’s brain. Her eyes flashed. She turned her head between Charlie and me. The evening ahead would bring a thousand questions, demands for internet pictures, sleeplessness. Eagles, as suddenly as they’d swooped in, had gone out of favor.

I glanced over at Henry, who still gloomily pored over the funeral catalog.

“Thanks for your help, Charlie,” I muttered.



We arrived home from the funeral home by three, in time for a late nap for Sophie. The entire ride home she asked about urns. *How did people turn into ashes? How did a person fit inside that little vase?* “I’m not sure,” I punted repeatedly.

Brian’s car was parked in the driveway when we pulled up. “He’s home early,” Henry observed.

I nodded, not wanting to speculate. Henry thanked me and drove away without prying.

We found Brian lounging on the couch with the TV on. Sophie threw herself on top of him. He grunted theatrically, and she giggled.

“Are you not feeling well?” I asked.

He muted the television. “When I told my boss we just lost two close family members, he offered me bereavement leave. Three weeks! Can you believe it?”

“That’s terrific,” I said, relieved. “Your dad is getting saddled with everything. He’s overwhelmed, which is probably why he feels the need to keep it all simple. I know he’ll be so grateful for your help.”

I scooped Sophie up for her nap. Worn out from the afternoon, she fell asleep before I finished the first story. I left her room and found Brian in the basement. He was working out a sonic phrase on his keyboard.

“So, do you want to call your dad and tell him the good news?”

“Becca, before you say anything, just listen. A gift has landed in my lap. I’ve never had a free block of time like this. I’m so close to finishing my record. Three weeks will give me the time I need, without interruption.”

I turned and walked back upstairs.

It had taken me a long time to accept that Brian had always been like this. Getting to know his close, generous family had widened my blind spot. How could he have grown up to become so self-absorbed?

Exhausted, I fixed myself a cup of coffee. While I sipped it in the breakfast nook, I thought about our wedding. I remembered spotting Henry, my new father-in-law, clinking glasses and bantering at the bar with his beloved cousins Bonnie, Linda, Jack, and Susan. I couldn’t stop watching them, imagining what they’d been like as children: horse-playing at holidays, playing practical jokes on each other, attending school dances together.

Later, Henry had stepped in to dance with me. I could tell he’d become a little tipsy. He’d hugged me warmly and given me a cheek kiss.

“I don’t know what you’ve done to that boy,” he’d murmured in my ear. “But he’s popped his head up out of his hole for the first time in his life.” As if his son had been a groundhog, hiding blissfully underground, until I’d poked him with a stick.



Henry felt the need to personally phone every family member traveling for the funeral, to share details and arrange guest accommodations. He delegated half the call list to me.

After leaving several voice messages, I was surprised when Henry’s cousin Susan picked up right away. We chit-chatted for awhile, and I shared the funeral details.

“Did you say both funerals are being held on the same day?” she asked.



I cleared my throat. “Actually, Henry’s planning a combined service.”

Silence lingered across the line.

“Look,” Susan said. “I’m grateful to Henry for taking this all on himself. But I think he should know Bonnie and Linda weren’t close at the end.”

“It’s interesting you say that.” I told her about Linda’s funeral arrangements. “Henry says it was a misunderstanding. That Linda didn’t mean it.”

“They fought over Linda’s children,” Susan said. “Back when Karen and Joe cut ties with Linda, Bonnie was more involved than Linda knew. She might have even influenced the estrangement. No one blamed the kids—their mother was terrible to them. But when Linda found out how big of a role Bonnie had played, she went ballistic.”

“Oh no.”

“They had one of those fights where you say things that can never, ever be unsaid.”

“When did that happen?”

“Oh, it must have been nine, ten months ago.”

Had I seen Bonnie and Linda together at a family event since then? I’d been so wrapped up in motherhood the past few years—concentrating at every family occasion on keeping my infant from crying, my toddler from making a scene—that I couldn’t recall.

“How did Henry not know?”

“Henry is always playing peacemaker,” Susan said. “They might have wanted to keep him from meddling. Or, they were protecting him. He was the baby of the family, after all.”

It was sad, and a little sweet, to think that Henry believed he’d been taking care of his cousins, when in fact they’d been taking care of him.

“Susan, I’ve been searching for contact information for Linda’s children. Is there any way to notify them about Linda’s death?”

“Oh Becca, don’t worry. I called Karen as soon as I heard.”

“Will she and Joe come for the funeral?”

“They plan to send a nice bouquet.”



When I finished my calls, I found my family in our backyard. Brian sat in a lawn chair, scribbling in a notebook. Sophie was cross-legged on the lawn. She’d dug a hole and was filling a flower pot with dirt.

“Sophie! This isn’t the beach! Brian, do you see what she’s doing?” I hated to make a big deal of everything, but we’d just paid to have the grass replaced.

Brian raised his head and blinked at me, reminding himself that I existed.

“This isn’t *sand*, Mama,” Sophie called. “I’m filling up *urns*.”

“Our daughter, the future mortician,” Brian said.

I plunked into the neighboring chair. “Bonnie and Linda had a huge fight about Linda’s children, which is why Linda didn’t want Bonnie at her funeral. Did you know about any of that?”

“No, but it tracks. We all loved Linda, but she was combative her whole life. She’d battle anyone who looked at her wrong.”

“How could your father have missed all that?”

“My father is disconnected from reality. He sees things the way he wants to see them, and refuses to accept anything that goes against that.”

“Susan said he’s always tried to play the peacemaker.”

Brian snorted. “To be a peacemaker, you need to acknowledge that conflict exists.”

I glanced down at his notebook. He appeared to be writing lyrics. *Ashes, ashes*, I read upside down.

“Are you writing a song about all this?” I asked.

He blushed and closed his notebook. “This is my loss too, Becca.”

“I know that Brian.” His defensiveness saddened me.

He stood up. “By the way, Sophie asked if you’d take her to the library this afternoon to check out some books. Guess on what topic?”

I nodded. I’d been expecting that.



In the end, Henry put on two funerals.

I was fairly sure Susan called to talk sense into him, because he changed his mind quite suddenly, not long after I spoke with her. Staying true to his principles of convenience and simplicity, however, he reserved two viewing rooms at the funeral home on the same Friday evening.

Several dozen guests drifted between the two rooms, eating cheese cubes and crudités from the long table between. They squealed at the sight of one another in the hallway and threw their arms around each other’s black-clad shoulders. The choose-your-own-adventure format of the evening seemed to distract them from their grief.

I set Sophie up in a break room with her library books (four colorful, sensitive children’s stories about death and funeral rites) and a snack plate. Some older children promised to keep an eye on her. Then I found Brian surrounded by an entourage of family and friends and hooked myself to him.

On the ride over, he’d exhibited a frantic nervousness: bouncing his knee, running his hand over his hair, tapping his fingers. I assumed he was dreading the funerals, the finality of the rites.

In the hallway, we answered the predictable questions from relatives. *What are you doing these days for work? How old is that little girl of yours now? Is she starting kindergarten soon? Everyone says she’s so smart, is that true?* I fielded the questions about Sophie, and Brian perked up when the topic veered to his music. He recited news about the album he was mixing and his hopes for a small tour in the spring. His relatives nodded politely, then glanced at me, checking the validity of his claims. I smiled supportively.

Bonnie’s service began first. A golden urn on a short pedestal took center stage. Bach’s “Air on a G String” played, and a perfume of pungent orchids hung heavily in the air. The funeral director spoke of Bonnie’s generosity of spirit, her celebrated cooking, her volunteer work. Sophie crawled into my lap, and Brian took my hand. In the row ahead of us, Henry dipped his chin onto his chest. I wondered if he was crying.

A half-hour after Bonnie’s funeral ended, Linda’s began. About half the guests stayed for the second funeral. The atmosphere felt lighter, maybe because of the music. Stevie Nicks’s “Landslide” called up liberating visions of soaring over majestic canyons. I hoped Linda was doing this very thing, leaving her

pain behind.

Suddenly Brian let go of my hand. Startled, I watched him stand up, inch his way out of the row, and walk to the front of the room. He pulled his acoustic guitar from behind the podium and perched on a stool next to Linda's rose-colored urn.

He began to sing a ballad I'd never heard before, though it was tonally similar to his other songs.

*Ashes ashes, falling down*

*When she danced, she fell around*

*Mistaken for another kind*

*Those she loved, themselves were blind*

The clumsy, sweet lyrics stirred my empathy. I'd never understood how much Brian identified with Linda, his black-sheep cousin. And so much time had passed since he'd played his music for me. I'd forgotten how much his wistful tenor filled me with longing.

I glanced at Henry. He watched his son closely, his expression studious. Certainly this mutual love for their cousin could reignite their connection, I thought. All it would take is one thing they could share.

By the end of his performance, no eye remained dry. The room hummed with awkward silence. Everyone wanted to explode into applause, but we restrained ourselves, unsure about the etiquette.

Brian took his seat again. I squeezed his hand. He stared ahead, his face frozen. He found performing difficult. I wanted to hug him and share my pride, but I'd have to do it later, when we were alone.

Visitors swarmed Brian with congratulations and thanks as soon as the service ended. He moved with the crowd toward the front of the funeral home. I reinstated Sophie in the break room, assuming the family goodbyes would take awhile, and found my husband out in the foyer. I stayed next to him as he hugged and shook the hands of every guest.

When the last family member had driven away, Henry approached Brian and put a hand on his arm. They leaned into each other and embraced, hurriedly, as if they'd waited to do this for a long time.

I ducked back inside to give them privacy.

In the break room, Sophie's library books lay on the table, but she'd disappeared. I poked my head into several rooms and nooks before discovering her sitting cross-legged at the front of Linda's viewing salon.

It took me a moment to understand what I was seeing. Sophie sat between two urns, one gold, the other rose-pink. Rushing toward her, I noticed with horror the gray dust on my little girl's hands.

"Sophie, no!" I shouted without meaning to. She flinched, then broke into tears.

"They were all alone, Mommy," she sobbed in defense. "Now our cousins will always be together."