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## Tidings

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# Tidings

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**Author Bio**

Libby Conroy is a sophomore from Ridgefield, Connecticut with a double major in English with a Writing Concentration and Management. As the current fiction editor for The Mercury, she eventually hopes to pursue a career in creative writing or editing. She is also a sister of Chi Omega sorority.

# *Libby Conroy*

## *Tidings*

"There you go, Doris, there you are." Anna wheels the elderly woman into room 208-B, and secures her in front of the television set. It is Doris's routine to catch up on the global news prior to her weekly checkup. Suffering from the early stages of Alzheimer's disease, Doris hopes to keep up with current events as long as she can. She actively follows the current American-Iraqi war, as her son constantly reminds her that the outcome of this war will determine the world's fate.

The thought of her son, James, saddens Doris. Fighting in Iraq, his life is in constant danger. Doris only hears from him once a week, at best, and resorts to praying nightly for his safety and for God to spare his life. Her son's bravery always overwhelmed Doris; from the time he was a small boy James was determined to conquer the world. Doris chuckles at the memories of her eight-year-old boy racing to ride the largest rollercoaster, swallowing a cockroach on a dare at age thirteen, and at seventeen punching his future father-in-law in his girlfriend's honor. That night, specifically, was unforgettable.

Doris was alone in the kitchen, washing dishes from last night's dinner that she never got to, and heard her son's car rattle up to the driveway. She looked up, alarmed at his early return, to see her son's strapping figure stomping away from Taylor, his fiery girlfriend. She was screaming, tears flowing freely from both eyes, and rushed towards James.

"WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, JAMES? I KNOW HE'S UNREASONABLE BUT HE'S MY FATHER, FOR GOD'S SAKE!" Taylor broke into a run to keep up with James, who was clearly determined to make it to the front door without his girlfriend. He spun around to face Taylor, his face the identical color of his girlfriend's flaming red hair.

"The last thing I want to do right now...is talk about this with you. You're welcome to stay, but please. I am not discussing this."

Doris was frightened at the powerful control her son's voice possessed. She never heard him speak with such jurisdiction. The front door opened, and James trudged straight to the staircase leading to his bedroom. Taylor came inside shortly after, and sat forcefully in a kitchen chair. Her whole body was rigid with anger.

Nervously, Doris asked, "Taylor, dear, it might be none of my business, but—"

"HE PUNCHED MY FATHER, Mrs. Theilker! Completely leveled him to the ground!

"My mother is taking him to the hospital now. She thinks his nose is broken!" Taylor's voice shook with rage.

"Taylor, you know James as I do, he's not an aggressive person. What on earth possessed him to do such a thing?"

"Well, I think he would like to tell you himself." At these words, Taylor's voice cracked and she lost control. Her body was no longer shaking with anger, but instead she was shuddering from wracking sobs. Doris sped over to the girl, and attempted to calm her.

"There, there. Just tell me what happened, I promise it'll make you feel better. James will be punished, either way, but I need to know the full—"

"We're getting married, Mrs. Theilker! My dad called me a whore and told James that he would rather die than see his daughter marry a commoner!"

Doris felt faint. She clutched the edges of the table to steady herself, and slowly stood up, making her way upstairs. The talk with her son was a fit of hysterics, but in the end, he left home to marry his high school sweetheart.

That day began the divide of their relationship. Raising James singlehandedly, he was very much her best friend and her reason for living. Yet losing James to Taylor at such an early age strained that bond—especially since Doris was not overly fond of James's wife. To this day, Taylor has yet to help Doris with her hospital visits or doctor's bills. Which is why, deep down, Doris resents her son for leaving her to suffer. She can't help but feel abandoned. The doctors aren't sure of how long her memory will last, and Doris almost wishes that it already disappeared. At least then she will no longer anticipate her inevitable mental collapse.

"Okay?" Doris watches the young blonde leave the room, and frowns at her own unavoidable loneliness. At Anna's departure, Doris glances around the room at the familiar faded floral wallpaper and the setting sun behind the dingy blinds. Ruled shadows are casted on the opposite wall, littered with framed embroidery sewn by local volunteers. Doris closes her eyes, attempting to permanently set this image in her mind. It was completely possible that by next week, she will be looking at this room as if she never saw it before. Doris shakes her gray haired head, changing the subject of her thoughts.

Wheeling herself forward, Doris finds the remote tucked next to the dusty aged television. Doris's shaky sun spotted hands aim the remote, and click on channel 40, World News with Ian Casidy.

Doris adores Ian, for he possesses the rare ability to deliver the news wittily and for the fairly. She smiles once he appears on the screen with perfectly combed bronze hair and brilliantly blue eyes. He is the epitome of a classical handsome man.

*Good day. I am Ian Casidy with the top stories in world news. Tonight, June 4, 2008, we will be covering several stories including the ever-present energy crisis update, Japan's newest advancement in robotics, and the highlights of the Presidential Address last night. However, I would like to turn it over to Marie for coverage of today's breaking news story. Marie?*

*Thanks, Ian. I'm standing here in the outskirts of the Iraqi city, Mosul, which, as you can see, have just experienced extremely devastating suicide bombings as little as fifteen minutes ago. It is speculated that several members of the radical Muslim group, Ansar al-Islam, are responsible for destroying a major portion of the city, killing eleven American soldiers and leveling three tenement buildings. The causality of Iraqi citizens is currently 164, but more bodies are continually being discovered. It is unclear as to who specifically is accountable for today's horrific events...*

Farrah doesn't completely understand English, but she knows precisely what the woman is reporting. She can see the terrified expression beneath her professional mask; the reporter is clearly nervous to be in this city. In her city. Farrah creeps further back into the shadows and smoke as the camera crew files past her, zooming closer to capture the city square's inconceivable damage. Hundreds of wounded Iraqis are frantically scurrying throughout the city, bleeding or even partially aflame. Several buildings completely fell to the ground, causing soot to blind Farrah from nearly everything. To these foreign camera men, this is just another opportunity to capture human race at its finest. But to Farrah, these are her people. She hugs the laundry, still wet from washing, closer to her fragile body. This laundry is the only reason Farrah isn't partially dead. Retrieving the wash from Miss Aban saved the girl's life.

"And all our wishes go to the Iraqi people and the American soldiers that died. Back to you Ian." Farrah watches the light-haired woman's expression collapse as soon as the cameras turn off. She is no longer collected, but instead Farrah witnesses the anguish in the woman's eyes. Death's overwhelming intimacy seeped into her skin. One of the crewmembers tucks the frail woman under his arm, and escorts her back into the news van, leaving Farrah alone in the alley. After an ash filled deep breath, Farrah collects herself and stepped back into her living hell. She can only hide for so long.



In that moment, all Farrah's senses fail her. Unbearable heat slap Farrah in the face; she is blinded from the hot and dusty air. Her chocolate eyes begin stinging and watering in protest at every attempt to see. Children and adults' desperate screams fill Farrah's ears, ringing and pulsing with each tumultuous echo. She continues in a zombie-like daze, stepping over her neighbors' dead bodies and passing through pieces of friends' homes. Nothing is real, nothing is real. Through the dense smoke, Farrah recognizes the street corner where her apartment building once stood. Instead lies rubble and fire. She recognizes her classmate, Leyla, being extracted from the rock by the Americans, soaking with blood and blisters. Farrah's family is nowhere to be found.

"UMMI!" Farrah coughs as she swallows ash, but continues to scream for her mother. "UMMI?" She begins to blindly run around the perimeter of the ruins, searching for her family she left only thirty minutes ago. "ABBI!?" Her pace quickens as she frantically shrieks for her parents. The dozens of deceased and dying blur together; Farrah is uncontrollably sprinting away from the sight, screaming and crying hysterically.

"Whoa, come here, sweetheart." Farrah collides with one of the Americans, knocking herself flat on her back. She instantly recoils at the sight of him, scraping back against the rough ground. The man is taller than any she saw before, and his machinegun threateningly jets out from underneath the bulk of his arm. He, like Farrah, is covered in a thick coat of dirt and blood. The mere size of the man is intimidating, and Farrah continues to squirm against the gravel. She feels skin scrape and begins to bleed through her clothes, cutting her elbows and hands. The unfamiliar man scoops Farrah off the ground, regardless of her protests. He brushes the soot off her petit frame, and tries to explain to Farrah that he means her no harm. However, Farrah is unable to see past the soldier's daunting gun. Noticing Farrah's obvious discomfort, James removes his gun, and put it to the ground. It is only then that Farrah notices the man's eyes. Against the filthy skin, his eyes seem to shine out of his face. She recognizes his expression: exhaustion and gentleness. Perhaps, Farrah thinks, this man knows where my family is.

Through a muffled Arabic-English mix, Farrah learns the man's name is James, and she roughly explains that she lost her family, who lives in one of the leveled buildings. James shakes his head, and points to a temporary shelter barely visible through the dusty air. The Iraqi girl and the American soldier walk side by side, making their way to the shelter.

Inside the tent-like room, dozens of children—newly orphaned—are gathered together crying, others are still from shock and disbelief.

Several adults are being treated for minor injuries at a small medical station. Farrah glances around the room but doesn't recognize a single face. In the corner stands an old television set, showing the devastating replay of her home and several others crash to the ground. Farrah's hand slips from James's as she joins the handful of people brave enough to watch. Maybe, in the replay, she will see her parents or where they sought refuge. However, the only face she identifies is James's. Farrah sees the same kind eyes and the obscenely strong figure on the other side of the television screen. She reads the news story's Arabic subtitles explaining what the American news anchor is recounting:

*Today we witnessed that even in life's most horrific and dehumanizing moments, heroes are revealed. The Mosul suicide bombings have left the city in utter ruin—casualties have reached 230, and twenty American soldiers have been killed. However, the numbers would have been much higher if not for American soldier James Theilker who bravely saved 37 Iraqis from the flame and rock, and three of his fellow soldiers. He risked his own life entering the burning buildings, yet managed to extract twelve different families before the building collapsed. James will be receiving an honorary award by the mayor of Collinsville, Connecticut, tomorrow evening, to be accepted by his wife, Taylor, and his newborn son. We send the soldiers our hope and prayers on this terrifying and dangerous day. Mark?*

Taylor turns her eyes away from the television, and focuses on James's empty leather armchair. Two years from yesterday he has been gone, stationed first in Iran and later moved to Iraq. "Maintaining the peace," James tells Taylor in his letters and the rare times they would speak on the phone, he is simply based in the Middle East to "maintain the peace." Taylor doesn't buy it; she knows James is in danger 100% of the time. Night and day, she worries for her husband's safety. It is unbearable. She watches him rush into burning buildings covered in ash, his weapon strapped loyally to his side. Sure, he is a hero, but Taylor doesn't care if he rescues three thousand people. He has yet to rescue her. Or Peter.

It is as if he heard his mother's thoughts. Two doors over, Taylor hears the hunger cries of her newborn son. The son James was home long enough to conceive, but not long enough to care for. He couldn't even get a leave of absence for the birth. Taylor's cascading red hair brushes over her shoulders as she reached in the crib for her son. Peter coos at the familiar sight of his mother, and instantly begins sucking the air, searching for food. Taylor takes her son into her bedroom, so she can lie down as she nurses.

"Hey, babe. I was going to get Peter, but you seemed to have gotten to him first." Chris instantly recognizes the expression on his childhood friend's face. "What's wrong?"

"I just saw James on the news. You didn't tell me there was an honorary ceremony tomorrow. And I'm accepting the award?" Taylor's blue eyes lock on Chris's anxious expression.

"Ah, yes. I was wondering when I should break that news to you. Well, you can understand why I was hesitant to—"

"You know I don't want to accept his award, Chris, let alone on television. Especially not from you! People have already begun to talk. Do you know how awful it would look if people found out? And let's be honest here, it's only a matter of time." Peter begins to wail at his mother's yells. Taylor calms the child, and he blissfully begins nursing again.

"You know I agree with you, Tay, I just wish I knew what to do to make this easier for you." Chris covers his face in his hands, unable to look at the angry expression on Taylor's face.

"God, I'm sorry Chris. You know how much I've appreciated you this past year. I wouldn't have been able to raise Peter alone, nor would I have remained sane. As guilty as I feel, I can't help but to be thankful for you being here." At these words, Taylor leans into Chris's open arms, completely surrendering herself to his embrace.

She realizes she is the stereotypical cheating soldier's wife: lonely, afraid, desperate, Taylor even has the impossibly needy newborn. She used to judge the woman she knew who carry on affairs while their husbands are fighting overseas; she believed them to be weak and selfish. Yet now, she can't imagine life without Chris's consistent support.

"The ceremony is at 9:00 tomorrow, I don't expect you to be there. But what should your excuse be? Peter's sick? You're sick? Remembering him is too—"

"Just don't say anything." Taylor says resiliently.

"Tay, the news anchor just said they expect you to accept the award. I guess that's what James figured would be appropriate. There has to be a reason why you're not there."

"Fine, Jesus, just say I'm out of town." Taylor stares at the pouring rain outside her window, attempting to harness the thousands of thoughts buzzing in her head. Peter begins to coo, and his mother feels him relax as he drifts back to sleep. It is remarkable how much he already resembles his father. His eyes, nose, hair, high cheekbones—the only feature Peter shares with Taylor is his ivory complexion.

"Taylor, I know you don't want to talk about this now...but truthfully you never want to talk about this. I just want to know what you expect me to do in three months."



"I don't know." Taylor doesn't look up from her son's face.

"Well, I think it's fair if you gave me some sort of idea. I mean," Chris's voice begins to shake, "am I supposed to act like this didn't happen when he comes home? Do you really expect me to just, just disappear? Or are you going to tell him the truth and...and live with me?"

"I don't know, Chris. Not yet." A tear rolls down Taylor's face, softly splattering on her son's cheek. Chris leans over and gently wipes it away. "I'm exhausted, Chris. I'm going to put Peter down and go to bed." Taylor stands, hugging Peter close to her petite frame. Once she settles him back into his crib, Taylor returns to her bedroom, where to her approval, Chris is facing the opposite direction, pretending to be asleep. The thought of leaving her husband for Chris terrifies Taylor, and truthfully she doesn't believe herself capable of it. Her only regret will be breaking Chris's, her best friend's, heart.

The next morning comes too quickly. Taylor barely slept; every hour Peter woke up hungry or in need of a diaper change. Taylor fell back asleep once Chris had left, and woke to Peter's cries yet again, just in time to watch the memorial service on the news. She sees Chris outside of their brick city hall, professionally dressed and collected. He is holding a certificate and a badge, and presenting them to Taylor's mother-in-law, whom Taylor is surprised to see is in a wheelchair. True, Taylor doesn't hear from Doris often, yet Taylor can't imagine why her mother-in-law is now in a wheelchair. Unless she had fallen again.

Taylor falls into a daze, recollecting the first incident that required Doris's first visit to the hospital in Queens. She slipped on a patch of ice and shattered her right knee carrying groceries back to the house. When James brought her to the hospital, Doris couldn't recall where she had fallen. James insisted that they run some tests, since his grandmother had had Alzheimer's disease before she died. The tests were conclusive—and Doris has been struggling with a moderate case of Alzheimer's for the past two years. James told her recently that Doris is getting worse, and her doctor's are prescribing her with a stronger medication.

Taylor does feel guilty at the lack of relationship, however Taylor will never forgive Doris for cutting James off financially, forcing her husband to put himself through college and create a life for the two from scratch.

Taylor refocuses her attention on the television screen, seeing Chris and Doris shaking hands. Chris's chiseled face stretches into a smile as he begins the ceremony.

*I'm incredibly honored to present this Medal of Honor to Doris Theilker, Collinsville's own James Theilker's mother. James*

*has displayed an extraordinary amount of courage and selflessness in the past twenty-four hours, rescuing the lives of thirty-seven Iraqis and three soldiers during the aftermath of the Mosul suicide bombing. In order to praise his bravery, I will hereby grant this medal to Mrs. Theilker, who I'm sure is equally as proud of her son as St. Louis is. All of our prayers are with James and his family. To my left we have began a town-wide card to...*

Ryan hears his brother's voice trail off as he enters the kitchen. It is always amusing to see his brother on television, as Ryan is always thought to be the one gifted with public speaking skills. He makes a mental note to call Chris later this afternoon, and reaches in the refrigerator for the leftover lasagna.

"RYAN! YOU FORGOT TO TAKE THE TRASH OUT!"

*Shit, I'm in for it now.* Catherine storms in the kitchen with a full trash bag in her hand, fury blazing in her eyes.

"HOW MANY TIMES DID I ASK YOU TO TAKE IT OUT? WHY DO YOU NEVER LISTEN TO ME?" She raises a pointed finger in Ryan's face, and narrows her already naturally beady eyes. He reaches for the bag and snatches it out of his enraged wife's hand.

"Okay, okay, calm down, I'm taking it out now. I got caught up watching Chris on the news."

When Ryan returns, Catherine is on the phone, an extremely severe expression on her face. She shakes her head, tears welling up in her eyes. "Okay," She says softly, "I'll tell him, of course. Goodbye." Turning to her husband, Catherine whispers, "Ryan, that was your boss. He wants you to go into the office this afternoon. You're—you're most likely going to be sent to Mosul later this week." A tear rolls down her tanned cheek.

"Yes. But you know how I worry about you when you travel. Especially in this dangerous—"

"You don't have to worry, going to foreign countries is the best part of my job, you know that. It's why I picked an international company; it's part of the job description."

Catherine sighs and sits down at the kitchen table, resting her head in her trembling hands.

"You need to promise me you'll stick to more domesticated social work when we decide to have children." Catherine mutters, barely audible.

"You know I will, I already told you that thousands of times. Who knows, Cath, this might be my last trip." With those words, Ryan kisses his wife's forehead and makes his way to the bedroom. As he changes and put his belongings together for work, he imagines the immense damage in Iraq and begins to mentally prepare himself for

what was to come. Ryan loves his job, he does, yet at times he can't help but feel overwhelmed by other's pain and suffering. He deals with it like any other does—removing emotion from the situation as best he can, and attempting to separate his work from his personal life.

At the office, Ryan is indeed told to pack his things, for the day after tomorrow he will be flying to Iraq. His boss, Mike Simmerman, is a fair man, and agrees to let him work with the Iraqi orphans at Ryan's request. Ryan favors working with the children, for he believes that in times of crisis, they are the ones who suffer the most.

Ryan returns home in high spirits, excited to know that in a couple days he will be bettering the lives of hundreds. However, his wife's mood hadn't changed. She has an extreme fear of losing Ryan—to the point that he often feels suffocated. Catherine is in bed by the time Ryan comes home, a puddle of tears collected on her pillow. Ryan smiles, shaking his head at the pathetic yet endearing image of his overdramatic wife.

"Cath—Don't worry. Even if I am sent to Mosul I will only be gone a month or so. They probably need me to sort through the newly orphaned children and help find them foster families. That's what Mike said on the phone, right?" She is a lunatic, as his buddies often remind him, but Ryan loves her immensely. He falls asleep curled up next to his wife, breathing in her scent, remembering every detail of her before he must leave. *She never understands how much I miss her while I'm gone.* Hugging Catherine, Ryan falls sound asleep.

"RYAN, wake up!" Ryan rolls over to his other side, swatting Catherine away. He feels like he had only been asleep for a couple minutes. "RYAN! Your brother is on the phone! Wake up!"

"God," Ryan mumbles, "what time is it?" He reaches for the telephone.

"One thirty." His wife responds back promptly. She leaves the bedroom, and Ryan hears her turn on the television in the living room. He turns his attention to the phone in his hand.

"Chris? What the hell is the matter?"

"Ryan, turn on the news now. This is bad."

"What?! What happened?"

"I've got to go, but seriously, Catherine should already have it on knowing her. Just go watch the news." Ryan hears the dial tone following his brother's panicking voice.

Flinging himself out of bed, Ryan rushes to the living room to see his wife in tears yet again. He sits next to her on the sofa transfixed on the screen.

*...It seems that these bombings may be linked, as the radical Muslim group, Ansar al-Islam, may have also planned the second*

attack in Queens, New York, to further insinuate terror on the United States. The president is set to address the horrific occurrence tomorrow at noon, followed by a more detailed coverage of tonight's tragedy. Kyle?

Thanks, Laura. For those of you who've just turned on the news, what you're witnessing now is the aftermath of a substantial suicide bombing in Queens. The specifics are unclear, as we continue to gather further information. Recent reports reveal that the Queens Hospital Center has been destroyed. Why exactly this building was bombed is unclear, and the exact location of the bomb has yet to be determined. Officials suspect that the bomb was prematurely detonated, as the intended location is hypothesized to be the Empire State Building. The casualties are devastating, as no survivors have been discovered in the building thus far. Police officers and fireman have been working relentlessly since midnight to put out fires, secure the scene, and uncover survivors. Our thoughts and prayers are with all of those in the Queens area.