

Half God, Half Devil

Martin E Ericson Jr



Dedicated to my little boy, Johnny
Without whom none of this matters

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“I’m sorry.” The old woman’s eyes are incredibly tired, but friendly. “Do I know you?” She smiles absentmindedly. “My mind’s a whirl of thoughts right now. You know... with the excitement of the wedding and everything.”

The young man grins and slowly raises his head triumphantly. “Yes...” He pauses, considering.

The old woman returns his smile. “I thought so. I’m so sorry. The wedding party is huge, and I feel like I keep meeting someone new. And then I realize I’ve met them earlier, but just can’t remember their name.”

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“... and no.” He raises his eyebrows and shakes his head slowly. “You know me... unfortunately. But we’ve never actually met.” His grin gets wilder. “Because this is our first time.”

The old woman looks confused.

“I’m Sam.”

“Martha.” She reaches to shake his hand, but Sam quickly moves his hand away, placing it to his side.

“Oh.” Martha doesn’t know what to do with her outstretched hand, hiding her discomfort with a nervous smile. She unconsciously flexes her fingers back and forth as if she were just working out a cramp, and then slowly pulls her hand back to her body.

Sam’s eyes twinkle as he watches her awkwardness for a brief moment. He glances out to the surrounding tables, smiling and watching the festivities around them. Enjoying what could have been.

“Are you a friend of Annabelle’s?” Martha looks over to the beautiful bride. She’s sitting with her new husband at the main table in the middle of the large ballroom, surrounded by their family and close friends.

“Your daughter?” Sam’s smile fades away as his face instantly goes sad. “No. I’m sorry. We’ve met briefly, I suppose. But I haven’t had the privilege of... befriending her.” He glances sideways at the old woman. “But my little brother tells me wonderful things about the young lady.”

“Oh.” Martha frowns in thought. “But you’re not one of Henry’s brothers. I’ve met both of them.” Noticing how handsome he is, she

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widens her eyes and smiles. “And they’re nowhere near as charming and handsome as you.” She giggles nervously, and then clears her throat awkwardly.

Horrified, Sam fakes a small smile.

“Is your brother a friend of my Annabelle’s then… or one of Henry’s friends?” She looks over to the bride and groom, her smile appearing forced and unnatural.

“My brother… he’s friends with just about everyone.” Sam looks away, his smile growing wide again. “It’s just who he is.”

“Well.” Martha takes a deep breath and works to visibly recover her smile. She nervously looks back to her daughter, laughing affectionately with her new husband. “Your brother. He sounds….” She looks confused for a second, furrowing her eyebrows, thinking. “… he sounds amazing”

Sam nods his head. “Yeah. I suppose he can be.” His grin returns. “He’s my youngest brother. The others… they’re more… irritating than amazing. Not that he isn’t irritating at times too.” He glances over to the happy bride and groom. “My brother and your daughter go back a long way.” His smile wanes. “Well. A long way for you. Not so long for us, of course.”

Confusion spreads across the old woman’s face. “Really?” She’s completely unsure what he means.

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“They met when she was just seven, not long after my first encounter with her.” Sam scrunches his eyebrows. “Well... actually, I encountered both of you. But still, we never actually met. You know... met met.

Martha nods slowly, just to humor him.

“Does she still have the little monkey?” Sam completely drops his smile as his face becomes grim. “Do you remember that far back... when she was seven?”

She gives him an irritated look, but then her face lights up. “Oh yes. A mother remembers everything. Every year is more special than the last.” The old woman thinks back to her daughter’s childhood, trying to remember some of her daughter’s little friends at that age. She had so many. Martha can’t remember any of them. Not one.

“No, you haven’t.” Sam answers her question before it’s asked.

Deep in thought, his words just pass her by. “Have I met him? Your brother.”

Martha takes a quick look at Sam, noting his features. Long brown hair, big, blue eyes, a truly beautiful face framed with stubble, like a movie star or better yet, a rock star. A beautiful rock star.

“No.” Sam smiles. “You haven’t. And yeah... I get that a lot.”

The old woman looks out to the room, looking for someone that could be his younger brother. “Are you certain? It was always just me and Annabelle. Just the two of us. I knew all of her little friends.”

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“Oh. No. No. No.” Sam shakes his head, an incredible smile reaching all the way to his eyes. “You definitely... definitely... have not met him.” He makes a show of looking around the entire room, settling his gaze on the bride. “Not in person.”

The old woman takes a quick look to her left and right, deciding this conversation has gotten even stranger and more confusing than it started. She looks for an out, someone else she can make an excuse to go chat with. She’d only approached the young man because she felt something tugging at the back of her mind for her to come over and say hello. Now she regrets her decision.

Martha risks a sideways glance and catches Sam’s eyes, noticing how blue and almost sparkly they are.

Sam grins as warmly as he can muster. It’s her first time, and he wanted to get acquainted. But he knows that it’s time to speed things up.

The old woman quickly looks away to her daughter. “Why is she sweating so much?” The words tumble from her mouth, becoming high-pitched with her sudden concern.

“What’s that?” Sam’s voice is soft and light.

“Annabelle.” Martha immediately appears panicky as she turns to Sam. Her voice cracks. “Her face and hair.” She lets out an uneasy laugh. “She’s nervous, I suppose.”

Sam glances past the old woman, looking over to the bride. “Yes. Well. Why don’t you go over and check on her? Make sure she’s okay.”

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The old woman squirms in her seat. Again, she tries a rigid smile, nervously changing the subject. “So... which one... which one is your brother?” She grabs Sam’s wrist, holding it hard in her sweaty grip.

Sam looks down at her hand on his wrist. Whatever smile he had, drops away to nothing. “None of them, I’m afraid.” He gently removes the old woman’s hand from his wrist, and wipes his fingers thoroughly on his pants.

Martha looks down at Sam’s arm and then up into his eyes. “Oh. I’m... I’m sorry. I’m just... I’m...”

“My brother... he doesn’t usually come to my...” Sam shakes his head, closing his eyes and smiling to himself. “... to these types of events.”

They both glance over to the main table as someone taps a wine glass several times with a fork. They listen as the best man teases the groom and compliments the bride. The bride’s dress and hair are completely soaked now, and her eyes are glazed over white. But she still laughs and smiles lovingly, holding the arm of her new husband and kissing him gently on the cheek.

Confused and unsure, the old woman turns back to Sam, a look of complete shock and fear on her face. “What’s happening here? This isn’t right.” Her voice is squeaky and nervous.

“What’s that, Martha?” Sam’s face is cold and blank.

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“Can’t you see?” Her voice is high pitched, like a quiet scream. She looks around anxiously, her head spinning from one person to another, as if expecting someone to jump out and scare her. “She’s soaked. What’s happening? Why is this happening?” The words tumble from her mouth as she takes several quick breaths, working to control calm herself.

“Martha. Why don’t you go over and check on her. Make sure everything’s okay. She’s your daughter.” He looks down at the old woman, seeing the tears build in her eyes. “Maybe for just a few seconds... on this special day... she needs her mother.”

Sam and the old woman sit in silence for several minutes. Sam glances over to the wedding party and briefly locks eyes with a middle-aged woman with a bright, red bow in her hair. She smiles politely and looks away.

“I can’t.” Martha’s voice is a raw whisper. “We...” The old woman’s voice lets out a tremendous crack. “... we don’t speak.” She has tears streaming down her face as she looks up at Sam. Her voice goes from a squeak to a whisper. “We haven’t talked in years. Many, many years.”

Sam’s face remains blank. “You’re not supposed to be here.” It’s not a question.

The old woman shakes her head sadly.

An animated grin appears on Sam’s face. “You’re a wedding crasher.” He chuckles.

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The old woman just stares ahead.

“So. What happened then?” Sam lets his tiny bit of joy fade as his face goes serious. “Why don’t the two of you talk? Why has it been many, many years?”

The tears streaming down her face leave long, white trails where it erases her makeup. “I... I’m not sure anymore.”

“How can you...”

“I don’t remember!” She whispers, violently. Her voice is harsh and wild. She closes her eyes for a few seconds. “It’s been a long time. I just... don’t remember.” Her voice creaks and croaks as she holds back her tears.

Sam sighs impatiently. There’s a lot of places he’d rather be right now. He intends on meeting his friends at the coffee shop in town once he wraps this up.

The old woman opens her eyes and a startled screech escapes her throat as she looks down at her hands. They’re soaking wet all the way up to her elbows. “What’s happening?” She begins to cry lightly. “What’s going on with me?”

Sam takes a quick look around the nearby tables. Seeing a busboy placing some empty plates on a small cart, he puts up a hand to get his attention. “Excuse me.” He clears his throat. “Ahem. Excuse me.”

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The busboy looks over, noticing Sam for the first time. He sets down some dirty dishes and walks over. “Is there something I can do for you, sir?”

Sam smiles broadly. “Yes. Thank you. My acquaintance here...” He motions with his eyes to Martha, sitting just to his left. “... she’s...” Unsure what to say, he gestures to her wet hands and arms. “Could we get some extra napkins or maybe a kitchen towel or something?”

The busboy looks at the old woman, seeing her soaking wet arms. “Oh. Wow. Yeah. That’s quite a spill. I’ll be right back.”

“Thank you.” Sam turns and looks over at the old woman who is holding her arms out in front of her as they drip on the table and into her lap. She’s gone pale. The lines on her face have gotten deeper, and the pillows under her eyes have gotten fuller and darker.

As if in slow motion, she turns her head to Sam, her eyes puffy and red from tears. “Help me.” She whispers painfully.

The busboy returns, handing several small towels to Sam. “Do you need anything else, sir?” He considers walking around them, and helping to wipe up the mess on the table. But something stops him.

“No. We’re good.” Sam smiles his thank you and turns to the old woman. He begins patting the towels on her arms and then he dries each of her hands the best he can. “You can put your arms down now, Martha.” He puts an uneasy smile back on his face.

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The old woman takes one of the unused towels from Sam and uses it to dab at her eyes. “Thank you. You’re very kind.”

“I try.” Sam’s face is again a blank slate. “So then. Where were we?” He furrows his eyebrows, pretending to remember. “Ah, yes. You haven’t spoken to your daughter in ages.”

Martha finishes blotting the tears from her eyes. “Ages. Did I say ages?”

“No. You didn’t.” Sam glances over to the bride. “You haven’t spoken to your daughter since she was seven. The night before her eighth birthday actually.”

The old woman jerks her head quickly, looking up, directly into Sam’s eyes. Whereas earlier, they appeared warm and genuine, charming, they now have a coldness to them. “Seven?”

“So. What happened then? Between the two of you.” Sam raises his eyebrows. “You really don’t remember?”

“I... I don’t... I don’t think so.” She notices that her hands and arms have gotten wetter again. She blots at them with a wet towel.

Sam reaches over and gently takes the towel from her hands, replacing it with a dry one.

“She was such a headstrong child. Difficult.” The old woman shakes her head, closes her eyes, doing her best to remember. “So difficult. It was just me and Annabelle, you know. Right from the beginning. Her

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father took off. Never looked back. It was just me and her.” The lies come fast as her voice gets softer and tears begin to collect in her eyes.

“So, it was just the two of you?”

Martha doesn’t answer, just patting the towel on her hands and arms to no effect.

Sam looks over at the bride and groom, as they enjoy a toast by the bride’s father. Something witty and quick. Everyone laughs, raising their glasses. As her father sits down to her right, the bride leans over and gives him a long hug, and a loving kiss on the cheek.

The old woman hears the cheers. She opens her eyes and looks over at the happy couple. “Ahhh!” A small, garbled scream escapes her throat before she can cover her mouth with the wet towel in her hand.

Her daughter and new son-in-law are cutting the wedding cake, their hands joined as one as they press the knife through the layers. The bride is soaking wet from head to toe. Completely drenched as if she’d been caught in the rain. Each time she laughs, water pours from her mouth and runs down the front of her wedding dress, splashing on the table in front of her, on the cake, on her friends and new husband. The water runs down from her neckline and over her big belly.

Annabelle’s pregnant.

All their friends cheer as the bride plates the first piece of cake, as soaking wet as she is. She hands it down the table, vomited water spilling from the small plate.

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“Martha. Look.” Sam leans closer and points to her daughter. “You’re going to be a grandmother.” He tries smiling, his voice feigning happiness for the grandmother to be.

The old woman is visibly shaking and crying. She watches her daughter, wondering why no one seems to notice or care that she’s practically drowning as she cuts the second and then third piece of cake.

Then, with several turbulent convulsions, the bride vomits up another huge mouthful of water. She leans over, letting it splash all over the table in front of her, pushing empty glasses to the side and splattering all over the beautiful wedding cake.

The entire wedding party lets out a loud cheer of happiness, clapping and whistling as if she’d just done something incredibly wonderful.

“Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God.” Martha looks up at Sam, her face a contortion of sadness and pain. “What’s wrong with these people?” Her breathing gets shallow and raspy. “What the hell’s going on here?” Her hands shake violently, sending sprinkles of water in all directions.

“Martha.” Sam’s voice is soft. Gentle. “Martha, you need to calm down. Get hold of yourself. This is only the first time. It won’t get easier.”

The old woman is uncontrollably weeping to herself, not even able to wipe the tears from her eyes because of how wet her hands and arms have gotten.

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“Martha. I told you about my little brother...”

She somehow finds the ability to nod.

Sam turns his chair slightly to face the old woman better. “... the one that knows Annabelle... has known her all her life. But he got to know her even better on the night before she turned eight. Do you remember that night?”

The old woman takes a couple deep breaths, trying her hardest to regain her composure. She shakes her head, afraid to speak.

Sam’s eyes have gone dull as he stares at her.

“I’ve never met him.” The old woman’s voice is low and flat, like she’s just repeating something she’s heard.

“Well... I have several other siblings too.” Sam is speaking slow and deliberate, like he’s talking to a child.

The old woman’s voice is just a whisper. “You have brothers. They irritate you.”

“Yes. That’s right. Three brothers in total. And I have an older sister.” Sam pauses, giving her the chance to remember. “And you’ve definitely met her.” Sam pushes for her to remember, but slowly, not too much at once. He doesn’t want her to completely break. Not yet. “Do you remember my sister?”

Sam catches her eye and motions towards the middle of the room as the new bride and groom walk out to the dance floor to share their first dance as husband and wife.

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“Oh God.” She tries to close her eyes, but can’t. As she watches, her daughter leaves wet footprints and small puddles everywhere she dances. The old woman makes a series of squeaks as she wants to look away, but just doesn’t have the ability. She’s frozen with pain and confusion.

“Martha. You met my sister twice.” Sam exhales slowly. “She spent quite a long time with you that first night. Deciding what she should do. If she should... take action. Do anything.” Sam takes several deep, calming breaths. “But she didn’t.”

“I... I don’t remember. What did you say her name was?”

“I didn’t... but it’s Rae.” Sam takes another deep breath, releasing it slowly. “Her name is Rae. R. A. E.”

The old woman shakes her head, still watching as the bride sloshes around the dance floor with her new husband, leaving more and more water wherever they go.

“My sister... she’s gone through some rough times lately. Life-changing times. For all of us.” Sam grinds his teeth, and exhales again, this time more rapidly. “And you were no help. None. No help to her at all.”

“I said I don’t remember.” Martha’s voice becomes sharp and squeaky, on the verge of anger.

“She was there the whole time. Unable to make the difference she wanted to. Maybe you didn’t see her. Maybe she wouldn’t let you see her that night. But I assure you... she was there. She always is.”

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The old woman, breathing hard and shallow, quickly looks up to Sam. “You’re angry with me about something.”

“No. I’m not. Well... not really.” Sam purses his lips, breathing out long and slow. “It’s not who I am. I’m not angry. I don’t judge.” He grins slyly. “It’s just a job. Just something to keep me busy, I suppose. We all have our roles.”

The bride stops dancing, shoving her husband back as she vomits water everywhere, not once, but three times. Everyone cheers and yells in appreciation. And then, as if nothing happened, the happy couple continues their dance as all their guests clap and laugh, enjoying every minute of their perfect day.

Martha looks on in horror. She tries to stand, to run away, but she can’t move her legs. They feel like stiff rubber, cemented to the floor in front of her.

“And the second time... the last time you met my sister... she sat with you while you were on your death bed. Many, many years later.”

The old woman’s body visibly jumps, a series of hoarse whimpers coming from deep within her throat.

“She held your hand and comforted you. She sat with you for a very long time. Months.” Sam smiles at the memory of his sister being who she is. “Do you remember? My sister’s not someone easily forgotten.”

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Martha turns back to Sam, confused and unsure. She looks to her daughter, lying face down on the dance floor, drowning in her own vomited water, while everyone else continues to dance.

The old woman begins to shake violently, water pours from her hands and the sleeves of her dress. She gags several times, and then throws up warm water on herself.

Sam gives her a moment to collect herself.

“Martha. What happened on the first night you met my sister? What happened that changed both your lives?”

The old woman’s breathing is barely audible. She’s in shock. She’s dizzy and uncertain where she is and what’s happening. She scrunches her eyebrows, trying to remember. “I... I think I remember her. Your sister.”

There it is.

Sam relaxes, sitting back, making himself comfortable for the first time this evening.

“Pretty. Young. All dark and light.” Remembering seems to calm her. She takes a deep breath and actually tries a weak smile, forgetting about the dance floor for just a few moments. “Skinny little thing.”

Sam chuckles. “Yeah. Dark hair and eyes. Milky skin. That’s my sister.”

Martha closes her eyes for a second, calmed, starting to feel better. When she opens her eyes, she finds herself sitting in a small park in the autumn, leaves of all colors strewn about on the grass and sidewalk in

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front of her. Sam sits off to her right. They share an old, wooden park bench.

The old woman isn't the least bit fazed by the change in her surroundings. She glances over at her daughter, sitting on another park bench all wrapped up in a heavy coat, with a matching knitted cap and scarf. She's holding her own baby daughter, bouncing her on her knee as she quietly sings to her.

"She was very beautiful." Martha looks down into her lap. She's no longer wearing a fancy dress covered in water. She's wearing a long black coat and heavy gloves. The change in scenery seems to have calmed her. Not being direct witness to her daughter lying in her own vomited water has temporarily brought her back to what she believes is reality.

Sam glances over to the young woman playing with her baby daughter. "Yes. She was."

Martha looks up at Sam, again admiring his nice face and big, blue eyes. "I meant... your sister." She catches his eye, seeing the sadness in his face being masked by the small smile he gives her. "It must run in the family." She giggles and girlishly places a friendly hand on Sam's arm. "If I were only forty years younger."

Sam grins wide. "And alive." He pats her hand twice and gently removes it from his arm, as if it were something he'd rather not touch. Again, he wipes his fingers on his pants.

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The old woman jumps, immediately thrown back out of her imagined reality. Her panicky breathing and pounding heartbeat return. Water begins to trickle from her arms down to her hands.

She glances back to her daughter, now soaking wet, her knitted hat laying in the grass next to her, and her soaked scarf pressed heavily against her wet coat. Her eyes are a glazed-over white.

The baby is gone.

Sam's voice remains calm. "Tell me more about that night." He watches as the sadness in the old woman's eyes multiplies. "That first time with Rae."

Martha's hands begin to shake, causing her gloves to rhythmically drip water. She looks down at her hands, her breathing has become even quicker and shallower. She pulls the gloves from her hands, letting them drop with a wet slap to the ground below. "She was very beautiful."

"Yes. You mentioned that." Sam's voice becomes monotone, bored. He imagines that his friends will be sipping their drinks, wondering what's taking him so long.

"Her smile... her smile was beautiful. Warm. Comforting." The old woman begins to cry again. "Sad." A cool breeze blows across the park. She's shaking so badly that her jaw begins to rattle open and closed, causing her teeth to chatter noisily against one another.

"Was she alone?"

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The old woman's crying instantly grows loud and fitful. She howls and screams painfully. She remembers. "No!" She can barely speak, her voice going from loud and angry to soft and barely audible. "No. No. No. No. No." She shakes her head violently back and forth.

"Martha." Sam's voice is soft, but abrupt. "Was she alone?"

The old woman continues to shake her head side to side violently. "She's holding... she's... Annabelle." She lets out a long, violent scream that carries across the entire park. "She's holding my Annabelle. She's holding my baby." Her crying has become a mumble of sounds. "She's... sitting with her. Holding her."

Sam exhales slowly.

"I was just a baby myself. I was young. I was alone. I didn't know what to do." The old woman's words pour from her mouth. "Please. It wasn't my fault."

"She was seven." Sam closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. "And you drowned her in the bathtub." Sam's voice is matter of fact. "Surrounded by her toys and everything she loved. She was laughing and having fun. And you shoved her head under the water and held it there as she fought and struggled to stay alive."

The old woman cries out, raising both her hands and slapping the sides of her head brutally.

"And then she stopped struggling. And that last bubble of air from her lungs broke the surface of the water." Sam pauses to take another long

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breath. “And she was dead. The night before her eighth birthday. She was dead.”

The old woman stops hitting herself and starts pulling at her hair, ripping handfuls from the sides of her head. Sam reaches over and takes her by both wrists and slowly moves her hands away from her head and face. He firmly pushes them down to her lap. He’s not gentle.

“I was all alone.” Martha whimpers, her voice becoming just a croak. “She was difficult. I didn’t know what...”

Everything slows to a pause and fades to black as the large room full of people reappears.

“I’m sorry.” The old woman’s eyes are incredibly tired, but friendly. “Do I know you?” She smiles absentmindedly. “My mind’s a whirl of thoughts right now. You know... with the excitement of the wedding and everything.”

The young man grins and slowly raises his head triumphantly. “Yes...”

2

Sam sits quietly in a small coffee shop just down the street from his dad's house. For a man who despises coffee, he spends a lot of time here with his close friends. But he never drinks the coffees or teas. He prefers the sugary-sweet, cold drinks, like the iced-chocolate with extra whip cream he's enjoying today. Sam has always enjoyed the sweets.

“No. This is all wrong.” He shakes his head, mumbling to himself, flicking his tongue out to grab some of the whip cream off the top of his drink. Sam looks to be about thirty, but treats life like he's just entered his

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teens. He appreciates life immensely, but often ignores the trappings that come along with adulthood. It's like he never grew up.

It runs in his family.

Today, when he arrived, the first thing he saw was that the small shop rearranged all the tables and chairs. They removed his favorite couch, which faced the front window, and in its place, they put two small wooden tables with hard-back chairs and a place to plug in laptops. They turned it from a comfy spot to watch life pass by, into a practical area where you could lose track of life as it passes you by.

To compensate, in the center of the room, they added four, overstuffed, leathery chairs, facing each other in a square. Each chair is turned inwardly in an effort to get you to converse with one another. In the center, is a heavy, round, wooden table, set low, making it difficult to use without leaning forward. This was the new spot for a group of friends to enjoy each other's company, to laugh and tell their stories.

Sam makes a tutting noise. He doesn't like this new setup at all. He's always been resistant to change, but interestingly enough, was the first member of his family that pushed for change.

He mumbles something under his breath about the seating arrangement, and plops down in one of the big chairs. It's more comfortable than the old couch was, but he intends to resist that comfort in favor of missed familiarity.

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“Hey little bro.” Sam’s sister, Rae, glides between the chairs and sits down to his right in one seamless, graceful move. She gives her brother a big grin and then takes a long sip of her drink, making a loud slurping sound.

“You can just leave right now if you intend on making that obnoxious noise with every sip.” Sam presents her with a brotherly smile, his lips firmly closed and upturned at the corners.

“This is not what I ordered.” She makes a sour face and shakes her head quickly. “Anyway… they say it helps to cool the liquid, so it doesn’t burn your lips.” She takes another loud, slurping sip. “This is definitely not hot chocolate. This is disgusting.”

“First, you’re doing it wrong. You’re slurping for the sake of slurping… instead of pulling in air to make it bubble and cool the liquid.” Sam shakes his head slowly. “Second, if you don’t like it… put it down… and stop slurping it.” He breathes out heavily. “You’re worse than Tegan.”

With perfect timing, Tegan and her twin sister, Nyssa, step between Sam and Rae and slide into the two empty chairs opposite them. They each set a coffee on the table.

“Well… speak of the Devil.” Rae giggles, glancing over to her brother.

Sam gives his sister an unamused look, and then smiles warmly at his two friends.

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“Hello girls.” Rae’s voice is girlish and playful. At the moment she appears to be in her early twenties with long, perfectly straight, almost black hair, pulled back behind both ears. She’s stunningly beautiful, with milky-white skin, small pink lips, and a bright, white smile. As always, she’s wearing a long black dress that nearly matches her hair, and no shoes. She never wears shoes, preferring to let her bare feet discover the world alongside her.

Tegan looks a little uneasy. Rae kind of freaks her out. And with good reason. In a fit of rage, just two weeks ago, Rae killed her and her twin. And worse yet, she hasn’t even apologized for it. They’re back now of course, thanks to Sam.

Nyssa give’s Rae a strained smile, and pulls a book out of the front pocket of her black hoodie and opens it to a bookmarked page. She fakes reading until Rae stops looking in her direction, then she tries to escape into her story.

Suddenly she moves the book down to her lap. “Are vampires real?” She looks to Sam.

“Of course not.” Sam clicks his tongue.

“Of course they are.” Rae gives her a disappointed look.

“Rae.” Sam’s voice is soft. “Please. Not today. This new seating arrangement has already made the morning tough to deal with.” He takes another small sip from his chocolate drink. The look on his face goes from pleading concern to pure, sugary joy in a split second. If only they’d had

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the frosted, lemon cake he loves so much. But they were all out. Lately, they seem to always be out. He often wonders why they don't just make more if it sells out so quickly.

“What?” Rae pushes out her bottom lip in a fake pout. “I’m just answering the question.” She loses the pout, replacing it with a smile. “I thought we could all start fresh. You know… now that I’m feeling a little better…”

Tegan snorts.

“… and they’re both alive and breathing.” Rae purposely grins.

“She’s just teasing…” Sam gives both his friends an understanding look. “… just being difficult.”

“Hmmm.” Nyssa has returned to her book.

“See.” Rae tilts her head to the side and looks over to her brother. “I think Nyssa gets it. A fresh start.”

Sam just shakes his head. He’ll wait for this to escalate before stepping in again. Rae is a sweet and friendly soul. She’s kind and generous. She has to be, considering that her life’s role depends on it. And he knows she’s just teasing the girls because she’s accepted that they’re family. And because his sister enjoys being difficult. Especially to family.

Growing up, for the longest time, it was just the old man, Rae, and Sam. The two siblings were the best of buddies, and still are. But once the other boys in the family came along, things got more complicated. And although it was always Rae and Sam against their younger siblings in games

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and life, as they grew older, they grew somewhat apart as people do. But even considering Rae's recent breakdown, and her near destruction of everything that is, was, and will be, they're all just family. And that includes Nyssa and Tegan, whether they want to be part of this oddball family or not.

Rae moves her eyes back and forth between the two sisters, a cocky grin on her face. She'd never admit it, but she actually likes the twins. She likes that they take good care of her brother. She likes that they can be strong and fierce. She absolutely loves that they opposed her brother Michael when he and Sam had their little tiff. And she's happy with all of that, so long as their strength and ferocity aren't pointed, in any way, in her direction. And that's why she bullies them. All of them, her brothers included. She feels a need to make them entirely aware that she's the eldest, and not to be taken lightly.

"Look at us. We all look so... normal." Sam chuckles, glancing at his goth-Victorian-looking sister and then across to the twins, appearing as if they probably just parked their motorcycles out back and stopped in for a quick cup of coffee. Black, no cream, no sugar.

He smiles broadly at Nyssa and Tegan. They look a lot alike, with just enough variation to look different. Nyssa's face is longer, and thinner, with high cheekbones. Tegan's is roundish with a defiant chin poking out. Like Rae, they're both petite, appear to be in their early twenties, and are short and slender. But unlike Rae, who has an appearance of young

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innocence, the twins carry themselves in a manner that makes them appear bigger and heavier. And it's not just the thick-soled, black boots they wear. It's more of an unconscious illusion by the two girls to appear more intimidating, and at the ready for anything that comes their way.

Both twins wear black jeans and black hoodies, with Tegan having a well-worn, leather jacket over hers. Their dark hair is cut short and with a modern, punk flair. It's shorter in some places and longer in others, seemingly done at random, as if they got their hair cut in the dark by a five-year old with safety scissors.

“You guys do realize we’ve caught the interest of some young hoodlums directly across the room.” Rae takes another slurp of her tea, making a face of disgust.

“Hoodlums? Really?” Sam is polishing one of his rings on the front of his shirt. “How exciting.” He looks up with just his eyes, trying to see who finds their little group so interesting. “And if you don’t like it, stop drinking it.”

“Hoodlums.” Tegan smirks without actually looking up at Rae. “You sound like an old lady.”

Rae tilts her head to the side, thinking. “I am an old lady.” She sighs.

Sam does his best old-woman voice. “You hoodlums... get off my lawn.” He comically shakes a fist in the air.

Nyssa laughs, her eyes never leaving her book.

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Rae flicks at her tea with her tongue. “This really doesn’t taste good at all.” She makes a bitter face and sets her drink back down on the table, pushing it as far away, towards Tegan, as she can reach. “How can you drink this stuff?”

“Just go up to the counter and tell them you got the wrong drink.” Sam gives her an odd look.

“Yeah… I suppose I should.” She grins. “But I don’t want to be a bother.”

Sam raises an eyebrow, feigning surprise. “Really? You… don’t want to be a bother?”

Tegan lets out a small snort, while her sister struggles to hide her grin behind her book.

Sam puts his ring back on his finger. “So… hoodlums.” And deciding that being direct might be for the best, he leans slightly to the side, looking past the twins, finding the young people so obviously watching them. It’s a young man and woman, probably in their late teens, maybe early twenties. Sam gives them a playful, little wave and a big, candid smile. The young couple immediately look to each other and start chatting, pretending not to notice him.

“Excuse me.” Rae puts up a hand to get the attention of a young woman in a green apron, wiping down a nearby table. “Do you have anything less… hmm, let’s see… disgusting?” Rae cocks her head to the side and presents an innocent smile. She’s not trying to be rude. She just

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doesn't always understand some of the complexities of not appearing rude.

The young woman looks up, pulling an earbud from her ear. “What? Oh. I’m sorry. It’s not good?” She walks over and takes the drink from the table.

“No. I’m sure it’s perfectly delicious. Perfectly.” Rae grins like a child, showing a mouthful of bright, white teeth. “It’s just not perfectly delicious... to me.”

Nyssa and Tegan give each other a sideways glance. Tegan rolls her eyes.

“We have other coffees, or teas.” The young woman shows a friendly smile. “Other flavors if you’d like to try something different.”

Rae makes a sour face, scrunching up her nose. “Hmmm. I don’t like coffee. It’s so...” She searches for the appropriate phrase. “... dirty tasting.”

Sam chuckles and nods. “It’s like someone put a handful of gardening soil in a cup and added some water.” He adds helpfully. “We try to cover it up with sugar and milk... but...”

“Gross.” Rae finishes.

The young woman laughs loudly. “You guys are funny.”

“Thank you.” Rae looks at her brother. “We’ve had forever to work on our act.” She grins.

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“We have bottled water if you’re just thirsty.” The young woman wants to be helpful. “Or chocolate drinks. Vanilla drinks.”

“Do you have Coke?” Rae’s childlike grin grows wider. “I would die for a Coke.” She winks at Tegan, playfully.

“I’m sorry. We don’t have sodas here.” The young woman raises her eyebrows in apology.

Rae pushes out her bottom lip in a pout. “Oh well. Thanks anyway. You’ve been super friendly, and I appreciate that.”

“No problem.” The young woman turns back to the table she was wiping, but then quickly spins back towards Rae with a big smile on her face. “Hang on. Let me check in back. My mum may have packed a Coke with my lunch.” The young woman grins enthusiastically.

“Oh. No. No. No.” Rae puts up a hand to stop her, and raises her eyebrows in alarm. “I couldn’t take it even if you did have one. Please. A bottle of water would be fantastic.”

“You sure?” The young woman’s eyes widen. “It’s really no big deal.” She looks like she’s about to run off and get it anyway.

Rae puts up a hand, gesturing for the young woman to stay right where she is. “Positive.” And she tilts her head to the side, giving her the sweetest of smiles.

Again, Tegan rolls her eyes.

The young woman slouches in defeat, and shrugs. “Okay then. I’ll be right back with a bottle of water.” She turns back to the table she’d

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been wiping and quickly finishes up. And then with a hop in her step, nearly dances over to the counter area to get a water for Rae.

Nyssa can't help but let out a short giggle from behind her book.

"So. By the way. The hoodlums are still watching us. They're trying not to, but they are." Rae looks first to Nyssa and then to Tegan. "Isn't this the part when one of you two usually hops up and plays bodyguard to my dear, defenseless brother?"

Nyssa glances up from her book for just a second, catching Sam's unconcerned eye, and goes right back to her story. It's a Victorian mystery with an ancient vampire, and she's positive Sam's father will want to read it when she's done.

Tegan exhales loudly, and looks over her shoulder to see the young man and woman, so obviously trying not to look in their direction while talking in hushed voices.

"Sam, this isn't another couple of thugs interested in your hottie sister, is it?" Tegan blurts without thinking. "Cuz I'm not going to hold back this time." She moves to stand up.

"Tegan." Sam scrunches his eyebrows together and shakes his head rapidly. "Please. Sit down. Enjoy your cup of dirt water." He grins and looks to his sister.

"Go on Tegan. Show 'em what you got. Put the lanky one up against the wall by his throat." Rae pulls her legs back a little farther underneath herself, sitting a little higher to see better. "Nyssa, you too. Just

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get in real close and stare down the girl until she cries like a child.” She looks to her brother, returning his grin. “Dirt water.” She giggles.

Tegan gives Rae a dead stare.

Nyssa looks up from her book. “And Rae. You go all dark and scary. Kill them on the spot without even giving it a thought. Who knows... they might simply be interested in where Sam bought his fancy, leather jacket.” She stares at Rae, a small grin on her angular face.

Sam, still grinning wildly, looks to Nyssa, and then quickly turns back to his sister to see her reaction. “She thinks my jacket’s fancy.”

Rae laughs. “Well. I guess I could pop over there and give them a little bit of the old...” She lets her eyes go pitch black for a moment.

“No. Please.” Sam puts up a hand, wanting to laugh. He’s glad to see the twins standing up to his sister. And he’s happy that Rae’s having fun with it. “They’ll come ask me about my jacket when they’re ready.”

“I’ll bet.” Nyssa mumbles.

“Oh, pish. I don’t care what you say. I find it rude, and I’m going to go have a little chat with our young friends.”

But before Rae can hop to her feet, a hand holding an ice-cold can of Coke is thrust directly in front of her face. “Sorry I took so long. Someone spilled. And I’m on mop duty.” The young woman in the green apron is back, smiling happily.

“Oh.” Rae sits back, a little startled.

“Ha.” Tegan laughs.

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“It’s okay. I can grab another one from the gas station across the street on my break. Or maybe I’ll just have an apple juice with my lunch. Healthier anyway. Oh. I forgot to say… we also have apple juice.” She pushes the can down towards Rae’s hand.

Rae sits back a little farther, looking first to the Coke and then to the young woman holding it. “Are you sure? Really? Cuzzzz… I’m fine with water.”

Sam watches as his sister squirms a little. He grins happily.

“Positive. Really. Take it. Enjoy.” The young woman seems thrilled to donate her Coke to Rae.

Rae politely takes the Coke from her hand. “Well. I don’t know what to say.” She gently touches the young woman’s wrist with her fingers, causing the young woman to blush. “Let me pay you at least.”

“You’re welcome. And no.” Still blushing, the young woman practically skips off to clear another table.

“I do believe someone has a not-so-secret, secret admirer.” Nyssa holds back a grin, not bothering to look up as she flips a page in her book.

“Ha.” Again, Tegan can’t help herself, enjoying Rae’s moment of awkwardness.

Rae sits back comfortably, pops open the can, and takes a long sip of the delicious Coke. “Yeah. I get that a lot. No biggie.”

“Hmph.” Tegan instantly loses her joy.

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“Don’t act so surprised, Tegan. I’ve told you in the past. People like me. Most love me... in the end.”

Tegan looks away.

“You seem to be one of the few exceptions.” Rae takes another sip of her Coke. “You’ll eventually come around.”

For just a few seconds everything slows to a near pause, the world dimming like a light bulb ready to die out. It flickers wildly several times, like an old-fashioned film about to break. And then, just as suddenly, it’s all back to normal.

“Hmmm.” Sam’s eyes light up a little as he looks around the room. Everyone continues with their conversation, sipping at their drinks. He even sees someone take a bite of his favorite lemon cake. “Where’d she get that?” He mumbles.

“What’s hmmm?” Rae smiles thoughtfully at her little brother. “I didn’t mean anything bad. I just... well it was super sweet of that young woman to gift me her Coke.”

“Did you feel that?” Sam lets his eyes go back to their natural blue, but sits up a little straighter, glancing around the small coffee shop. He keeps looking back to the older woman eating the lemon cake. “Why are they always out when I want some?”

“Feel what?” Rae takes another sip of her Coke, and then leans forward, setting it on the small table in front of her. “That is sooooo good.”

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“Oh.” Sam smiles weakly and pats his sister’s hand. “I’m sure it’s nothing.” He wants to tell her. He remembers his nightmares when they were kids and how she’d rush to his room to comfort him. But he finds it odd that she didn’t feel it.

Just then, the young couple stands up, leaving their empty coffees and used napkins scattered on the table. As they start their walk through the coffee shop, meandering around all the small tables and chairs, towards the door, it becomes obvious to Sam that they’re not a couple.

“They’re brother and sister.” He leans his head closer to his own sister, but keeps his eyes on the hoodlums.

Both have the same long faces, oversized noses, and large, almond-shaped eyes. They even walk in a similar way, kind of slouched over with a laziness in each step that comes with lack of purpose. The big difference is that the boy is tall and lanky, and the girl is short and painfully skinny. That, and the boy’s hair is bleached about as white as possible, while hers is relatively short, very dark, with big, looping curls. They each have a similar unhealthiness about them.

They do their best to steer clear of Sam and his little group, but there is no easy path towards the front door without going directly past the four chairs in the center of the room. The boy walks in front, and as he passes Sam, he quickens his pace and looks away nervously, feigning interest in the nearby display of cakes and cookies. His sister, most likely a little older than her brother, isn’t so easily intimidated, and she looks both

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Sam and Rae directly in their eyes as she goes to pass. She's daring, compared to her brother. She stares hard, especially at Sam, as if she's trying to memorize the look in his eyes.

"Excuse me." Sam's voice is soft and friendly as he leans to the side out of his chair, making sure not to block her way. That would be rude and unpleasant.

She stops abruptly and takes a quick step back.

"We couldn't help but notice you looking our way. Well... looking at me, really." He grins. "Earlier. And... well... right now, actually." He bulges his eyes, flexing his eyebrows, and gives her a childlike grin.

The young woman stoically looks at Sam, unflinchingly, and then to Rae. She says nothing.

Rae tilts her head to the side. "Hello." Her voice is fun and friendly. "H&M. He got his fancy jacket at H&M." Rae's grin matches her brother's.

The girl stands casually, just off to the side of Sam. She doesn't react from being called out by this stranger. Her facial expression, a constant frown, hasn't changed. She seems relaxed and in control. She opens her mouth slowly, giving herself time to think. She looks back to Sam. "Not you. Your friend." She motions towards Rae with her head, without actually looking at Rae. "My brother thinks she's... pretty. He's just... kind of shy." The words come out awkwardly, as if she's making

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them up as she goes. She is making them up as she goes. Then she fakes a small smile that comes across as forced and unpleasant.

Sam grins broadly and looks to Rae.

“Tell your brother he’s very sweet.” Rae gives the young woman a girlish smile.

Sam looks back to the young girl. “No. Not buying it. You both have an obvious interest in me. Not my sister.” He flashes his big, blue eyes at the young woman.

Rae gives her brother a playful push on his shoulder. “You’re ruining my moment.”

Sam briefly turns to his sister. “You had your moment with the young lady gifting you her Coke. Now she has a lunch but no Coke.” He turns back to the young woman standing to his side. “Sorry. Where were we?

The young woman’s eyes reveal her nervousness for a split second. She looks to Rae and then back to Sam. She’s unused to confrontation. She’s used to people backing down to her usual brand of bored confidence.

“Am I right?” Sam presses, leaning back in his chair. Again, his eyes flash.

Suddenly feeling cornered and nervous, the young woman’s voice drops to a whisper and she awkwardly looks away. “Uh... I... I know what

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you are.” The last few words come out rushed, as if she hadn’t planned them.

Sam’s smile doesn’t change.

With a nervous hop, the girl moves past Sam, quickly walking away to the front door and out onto the sidewalk. She turns and practically jogs past the bus stop, around the corner, and down the street, without ever looking back.

And that’s when she runs directly into Rae, standing in the middle of the sidewalk.

“What the fuck!” The girl puts her hands up in shock and takes a quick step back. “How...”

“Hello again.” Rae tilts her head to the side and smiles mischievously.

“Jesus Christ. You scared the hell out of me.” The girl puts a hand up over her heart and gives Rae her best pissed off look. She’s suddenly much bolder when it’s one on one.

Rae’s pleased with herself. “Yeah. I get that a lot.” She takes a small step forward, towards the girl.

The girl takes another quick step back, putting both hands straight in front of her as if to protect herself. “Look. Just leave me the fuck alone. You’re starting to freak me out.”

“Yeah. That seems to be a thing too.” Rae’s smile drops, her face going serious.

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The girl spins around, jogging to the crosswalk, and then quickly across the street, cutting through the oncoming traffic.

“Hey...” Rae’s soft whisper somehow reaches the young woman’s ears as if she’s standing just over shoulder.

As she reaches the curb across the street, she stops, looking back over her shoulder without turning her body. She sees Rae still standing in the same place.

“... tell your brother...” Rae flashes a big smile. “... tell him I’ll be seeing the two of you around.”

3

“Oh. I’m sorry.” The old woman nearly sits down in Sam’s lap. “I didn’t see you there.” She catches herself and moves farther down the park bench to his left. She glances at him, looking a little embarrassed. She really didn’t see him there just a second ago.

“No worries.” Sam smiles weakly, never looking at the old woman, choosing instead to stare out at all the kids full of energetic fun, running around the playground.

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“Which one is yours?” The old woman leans in towards Sam, smiling and pointing with a stubby, wagging finger out to the children loudly chasing each other in a noisy game of tag.

Sam leans slightly away from the old woman, and points out to the group of little boys as they yell and run with big smiles on their faces. He makes no effort to point at any one of them in particular. “My little brother.” Sam scoots his entire body a few inches down the bench, away from the old woman.

“Oh, so not actually yours then.” Noting the difference in age between him and his little brother, the old woman tries grinning playfully, but comes across as creepy and strained. “Watching your parents’ little mistake then.” She giggles roughly, flowing seamlessly into a series of short, barking coughs. A long stream of drool runs from the corner of her mouth.

“That’s hurtful.” Sam turns his head slightly, giving her a moment of privacy. “Don’t let him hear you say that.”

She pulls a crumpled tissue from her purse, turning her head away from Sam to wipe her mouth. “Oh, no. Of course not. Just a little joke.” She chuckles. “So. Which one is he then?” She looks out to the group of boys running around at the edge of the playground, near the small area set aside for family picnics.

Sam scans the crowd, randomly picking one that works for him. He sees one with longish, blond hair sticking out from under a beanie hat,

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and what looks like big, blue eyes. He squints to get a better look. “Blue hat.” Sam says flatly.

The old woman moves her head around, trying to keep track of all the boys running and laughing. “I don’t see him.” Then she sees the blue hat race from the crowd, being chased by another boy in their game of tag.

“There he is.” She turns to Sam and raises her eyebrows. “He’s a fast one.”

“So it seems.” Sam chuckles, amazed at how quickly the boy zigs zags away from the bigger boy.

The old woman looks to Sam, then to the boy, and then back to Sam. “He looks a lot like you.”

“Does he?” Sam raises an eyebrow, looking out at the boy again, trying to get a better look.

The bigger boy gives up on catching blue hat and starts chasing another, even smaller boy.

Sam sighs as quietly as he can. He could sit here alone and watch these kids run around enjoying themselves all day. But he’s not here for that. “And which one is yours?” He glances sideways at the old woman, watching as she struggles to find her thoughts.

“Oh. It’s my granddaughter.” She laughs. “I’m much too old to have any kids at the playground.” She lets out a nervous giggle, expecting the young man to flatter her.

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Lost in thought, watching blue hat run like the wind after another boy, Sam doesn't give his answer much thought. "Of course you are."

The old woman slouches, giving Sam a scowl, her feelings hurt. Briefly, she thinks about moving to another bench to leave this rude young man to think long and hard about what he just said. But as quickly as she thinks about it, the thought is gone from her head.

"So, which one's your granddaughter then?" Sam's voice is flat as he turns his head and smiles softly at the old woman.

"Hmph. Over there." She roughly points to a beautiful young woman pushing a small girl on a swing.

"And I suppose that's your daughter with her?"

"Hmmm? Oh yes. That's my Annabelle and her little girl." The old woman smiles proudly.

"And what's your granddaughter's name?" Sam's voice goes from flat to charming and interested. "She looks about seven... maybe eight? Am I right?"

The old woman sits there blankly for a few seconds. She looks over to Sam, her mouth opening. But she says nothing. Her eyes shift around in thought, as if she's forgotten something, and it's sitting just on the tip of her tongue.

"They're both quite beautiful." Sam glances over to the old woman.

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“Quite.” The old woman smiles up at Sam, forgiving his rude comments.

“She looks nothing like you. Did you and your husband adopt?” Sam finds it difficult to hide his dislike for this one. He sighs, finding it tedious to be intentionally rude. He can’t imagine how Rae does it so effortlessly.

The old woman scrunches her eyebrows together in irritation. “Of course not.” She looks over at the other bench that was empty a few minutes ago. A bunch of little girls are now sitting at it playing make believe with their dolls. “Why would you even say something like that?” Her old face reddens with an approaching anger.

Sam’s face goes soft as he blinks his big, blue eyes several times. “Oh. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you. Did you say your daughter’s name was Annabelle?”

The old woman, with a scowl on her face, nods mechanically.

“So why aren’t you over there enjoying them? It’s a beautiful day.” He looks up to the clear, blue sky and the warm sun shining down at them.

The old woman follows Sam’s eyes, shading the sun from her own eyes with a hand. Then she looks over to her daughter and granddaughter. Her scowl lessens, and without the clarity of her anger, she suddenly looks even older and more confused.

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“Martha?” Sam clears his throat as gently as he can. “Is everything okay?”

She turns to Sam, her eyes getting moist. “Do we know each other?” She pulls the crumpled tissue from her pocket and blots at both her eyes. “You called me Martha.”

“I did.” Sam smiles gently. “So why aren’t you over there pushing your granddaughter on the swings. Mom looks like she’s getting kind of tired. You should go over there and give her a break. Every moment with a loved one is precious.”

Martha tries returning Sam’s smile, but can’t find her own. She feels dizzy and queasy. She looks over to her daughter who appears to be sweating under the warm sun, with her hair beginning to stick to her forehead. The old woman blinks and instantly her daughter’s shirt looks like it’s getting wet from the neck down.

Martha looks even more confused. She turns quickly to Sam, her eyes beginning to tear up. “Wh...” Her voice cracks and she’s unable to speak. Her heart is beating hard and heavy.

Sam is looking out at the boys still playing their game of tag. Blue hat is standing next to a middle-aged woman with a red, bow in her hair who’s kneeling in front of him, helping him take his sweatshirt off. His hat comes off and falls to the grass. He leans over and grabs it, pulling it roughly back onto his head. And then he runs off to join the other boys in their game.

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Martha looks back to her daughter. Her shirt is hanging heavy on her body. With every push of the swing, huge water droplets fly in every direction. Tears build in the old woman's eyes and begin to run down her cheeks. She sniffles loudly and wipes the tears with her sleeve.

“Martha...” Sam turns to the old woman, with a glimmer in his eye. “... do you remember my sister?”

The old woman isn't listening. She's watching as her daughter pushes her granddaughter on the swing. Water is running down her daughter's body, soaking her jeans.

“What... what's happening?” The old woman's voice is weak and cracks. “Why does this keep happening to me?”

“Ahhh, so you do remember my sister.” He pauses to consider. “Hmmm. Or maybe just me. Or maybe...” He uses his hands to gesture wildly around them. “... your situation.”

Martha turns back to Sam with long tears running down her face. Her eyes are red and blurry. “I don't understand what's happening.” Her breathing gets quick and shallow. “Help me.” Her voice is a coarse whisper.

“My sister. Her name is Rae. You may remember her. She sits with people.” Sam smiles. “She comforts them when they have great need.”

Sam looks away from the old woman and to Annabelle. Her eyes have now glazed over white, but she continues to push the swing as her

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little girl laughs and calls out for grandma to come play. She looks over her shoulder and waves at her grandmother as she swings back and forth.

The old woman visibly slouches, the need to keep her composure becomes lost in her confusion.

“Go on grandma. Go push the swing for her.” Sam’s voice tries for excitement. “Why aren’t you over there enjoying every minute? They grow up so fast, you know. Go on.” He’d give her this much, if she’d just make the effort.

“Grandma. Grandma.” The girl’s small voice calls out, happily, from the swings.

“I... I can’t.” The old woman rubs her hands together in her lap nervously, noticing the streaks of wetness left behind on her pants. She lets out a small whimper.

“Sure you can. I’ll save your spot on the bench.” Sam pats the bench next to him, and leans in closer. “Go on... grandma.” He watches, hoping. It’ll be a first step.

“Stop it!” Martha’s voice is harsh and angry. “I can’t.” She looks down at her wet hands, now soaked all the way up to her elbows. “Please?” Her voice drops to a raw whisper as she begins to rock back and forth.

Sam sits back, just a little disappointed. “My sister sat with Annabelle in that bathroom, while you sat in the corner rocking back and forth trying to comfort yourself.” He takes a deep breath and releases it slowly. “Do you remember that?”

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“No.” She croaks. “I don’t remember.” She forces the words out quickly.

“You do. You just won’t let yourself say it.” Sam uses his fingers to wave at the little girl as she keeps looking back to her grandmother.

Martha lets out a series of sobs and whimpers.

“Your daughter. Annabelle.” Sam’s voice becomes flat and dull, like he’s telling an old story that he’s told a thousand times before. “You drowned her in a bathtub when she was seven.” There is no emotion in his voice. “She was playing. She was surrounded by her toys. She was having fun. It was the night before her birthday. She would’ve been eight.”

The old woman goes cold as water runs down her arms, dripping from her fingers into her lap. “No.”

“My sister sat there. Deciding” Sam takes a deep, calming breath. “Deciding whether or not to shove your head under that water so you could better see the face of your seven-year-old daughter as she fought to stay alive.” His voice stays calm, but the old woman can feel a fire behind his words.

Martha’s head drops, and she starts crying, at first quietly to herself, but then it gets louder and louder as the anguish pours out like the water running down her arms.

“You were the first.” Sam reaches over and picks up a big, red ball that rolled over and stopped right in front of him. He looks over and sees blue hat holding up a hand for him to toss it back. The game of tag

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complete, they've moved on to kickball. With a short grunt, Sam heaves the ball high so that all the kids can run and have a chance at it.

The old woman's crying becomes howls of pain as she watches the water now streaming down her arms and pouring from her hands, dropping to the grass in front of her.

"My sister went through a thing recently. And it all started with you. Well... not started, exactly... but built to a breaking point... with you." Sam's voice hardens considerably. "You."

Sam thinks of his brother, Michael, and how quickly his anger can surface. This sad, old woman should consider herself lucky that she's not sitting here with Michael, that this is not Michael's place.

"My sister wanted to save the kids. She wanted to save herself. She tired of monsters like you doing things only monsters like you do. She screamed and cried for help." Sam pauses, remembering.

The old woman just sits there sobbing and crying, sniffling loudly, and wiping her eyes on her wet sleeves.

"I tried. I tried to listen. I tried to help." He swallows hard. "But I didn't know how. I didn't understand what she was going through. I thought I did... but I didn't."

Martha looks up, trying to wipe the tears from her eyes with wet hands. In the distance, she sees her daughter dropped down to her knees, her head hung low against her chest, water pouring from her wide-open

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mouth and running down her body. The empty swing next to her continues to move back and forth, as if still being pushed.

The old woman's heart is beating so heavy that she feels like she may pass out.

“No.” Sam calms her a bit. “You won’t.”

“She was so difficult.” The old woman finds her voice and spits the words with sudden anger. “She was so fucking... difficult! She took all our time.”

“Our time?”

“My time. All my time.” Martha’s voice drops low as it cracks and croaks out the words. “I was all alone.”

And suddenly they’re in a small bathroom, the floor soaked with water that had recently splashed from the bathtub. The water in the tub is still sloshing back and forth from the violent act that took place just seconds ago.

The old woman sits in the corner behind the door, rocking back and forth, screaming and crying. Her anguish now out of control, her body convulses as small seizures ripple through it. Her mind races to come to grips with what she just did. She was in a fever. She was overcome by her own selfish mindlessness.

She raises her head somewhat, but then seeing the bathtub in front of her, she cries out and drops her head low, closing her eyes as tightly as possible. She rocks back and forth even more violently as the water

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continues to run down her arms and pour from her hands. “I wasn’t ready.” The words are guttural, not making it beyond the depths of her throat.

Sam sits on the closed toilet lid, next to the bathtub, just listening. He’s heard this all before. But he needs to hear it again. He needs it to take root. He needs it to push aside his complacency. He needs it for Martha. He needs it for himself.

“I was too young.” The old woman’s words are just weak groans and squeaks.

Sam pulls a Minnie Mouse toy from the bathtub and sets it on the side of the tub. “I don’t want to hear the lies and excuses anymore. She was difficult. You were too young. You were all alone.” Sam’s voice is soft, but you can feel his words grab hold in the stale moist of the small bathroom. “No more.”

The entire room lights up with the power of a billion suns and burns away like a match lighting tissue.

“Oh. I’m sorry.” The old woman nearly sits down in Sam’s lap. “I didn’t see you there.” She catches herself and moves farther down the park bench to his left. She glances at him.

The look on Sam’s face terrifies her.

4

“Hey! Wait up.”

His hand still on the open front door, Sam looks over his shoulder into the living room to see his youngest brother jogging through the room towards him. Normally he’d jump at the chance to hang out with one of his siblings, especially Chris. But not today. Today he intends to get started on a new project that’s about to rear its ugly head.

Sam sighs hard, and stops in the middle of the foyer. “Chris, I don’t think I’d be very good company today.” He holds open the door to let his brother slide past, and then follows, closing the door behind them.

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“Why don’t you go find some other teens to hang out with... or maybe dad’s out back. I’m sure he’d love to spend some time with you.”

“I’m not a teen.” The boy pushes his surfer-cut blond hair out of his eyes with one hand. “I’m eleven...” He smiles up at his brother, showing a bright-white smile and big, blue eyes. “... and a half.”

The two brothers walk side by side across their father’s lawn and onto the front sidewalk.

“Of course you are. My mistake.” Sam breathes out heavily. “Though, I’m surprised it hasn’t gotten to the point where it’s time for an upgrade? Especially due to recent events. Maybe fourteen. Or what about that girl with all the rings? What was she... like seventeen... eighteen? She seemed fun.”

“Can we slow it up a bit?” Chris takes a few swift steps to catch up with his brother. “We’re not all that tall, you know.”

“Ha.” Sam looks down at his brother. “Yeah, well why aren’t you... that tall?” He sounds tired. “Sixteen... seventeen would probably get you there.”

“I don’t know. It just doesn’t matter, I guess.” He shrugs. “There’s always something out of reach, no matter how tall you are.”

Sam glances from the corner of his eye. “That’s pretty deep for an eleven-year-old.”

“And a half.” Chris grins. “So why would I change? What would be the point?”

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“What’s the point of anything? I mean, come on. What’s the point of this?” Sam motions to his brother, from head to toe.

“Wow. You’re a real bummer today.” Chris frowns, and glances down at himself, holding out his arms in front of him to see better. “This is what I usually go with.” His smile returns. “Unless I’m messing around.”

“Then mess with me... and grow up already.” Sam realizes how annoyed he sounds, and tries to soften his voice while still making his point. “We all had to. Why not you? What makes you so special?”

Chris glances up at his brother, his big grin encouraging him to vent some more if needed.

Sam shakes his head. “And that stupid t-shirt? You know I hate that shirt?” He tries a smile, but it comes across as weak and tired.

Chris looks down at his shirt. It’s a black t-shirt with a cartoon red Devil on it with his butt pointed out to the front, and an embarrassed look on his face.

“Hey. Be nice.” Chris playfully punches his brother in the arm. “I made this myself.”

Sam looks down at the shirt. “Big deal. Like that was an effort.”

“It was.” Chris grins broadly. “I did it the old-fashioned way.”

“Yeah. I’ll bet.”

“I did. Dad got me a new laptop and I made him a ‘#1 Dad’ shirt. You’ve seen it. He wears it around the house sometimes.” Chris smiles up at his brother. “I can make you something if you’d like.”

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“Hmmm.” Sam stares straight ahead. “I’ll think about it.”

The two brothers silently walk side by side for a few minutes, with Chris struggling to keep up. He keeps falling a few steps behind and has to take a couple quick steps to catch up.

Suddenly Chris cruises smoothly past his big brother on a long skateboard.

“What the hell, dude.” Sam exhales loudly, and reaches out, pulling his brother off the board by the arm, letting the board come to a stop when it hits the grass. “Where’d that come from?”

“It was a birthday gift.” Chris runs over to the edge of the neighbor’s lawn and grabs the board. “Last year. From Gabriel.”

Sam gives him an odd look.

“I brought it.”

“No, you didn’t.” Sam raises an eyebrow. “That’s kind of what I’m talking about. Why do you do those things? What’s the point?”

“What? I don’t see what the problem is.” Chris tucks the board under his arm and joins his brother back on the sidewalk “Where are we going anyway?”

Sam looks at his brother, giving him a blank stare. “Lose the board.” Then, in an effort to lighten up his mood, he gives his little brother a friendly smile and slight shove off the sidewalk, onto someone’s lawn. “I’ll wait.”

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“Consider it lost.” Chris hops back to the sidewalk, the skateboard nowhere to be seen.

Sam shakes his head. “You could’ve just run it home. We’re like a half block away. You could’ve tossed it into the yard. I would’ve waited.”

“No. You wouldn’t have.”

“I would have slowed down. You could’ve caught up.”

“Ha.” Chris jogs ahead and then turns on the sidewalk, walking backwards in front of Sam. “Anyway. Why so moody?”

“I just don’t understand why you do it.”

“So you’re still stuck on my appearance.” Chris has to walk backwards quickly to stay in front of Sam.

“And the skateboard.”

“Right. I guess I don’t understand what the big deal is. I like to play around. It keeps me entertained. Cut me some slack. I’m just a kid.”

“Whatever. It doesn’t matter.” Sam throws his hands out and open, giving up. “And you’re not a kid.”

“Sure I am.” Chris grins, holding out his arms for his brother to look at him.

Sam shakes his head and walks in silence watching as his brother, still facing him, jogs slowly backwards down the sidewalk. Now Sam is the one having trouble keeping up with his energetic little brother. “Slow down a little. You’re going to fall and get hurt. And I’m the one the old man is going to get mad at.”

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Chris gives his brother a broad grin, but slows down, and turns around to walk alongside his brother again.

“You know… I’m just going to the coffee shop to meet up with the girls. Nothing special. You don’t need to tag along. You’re just going to get bored.”

“Yeah, I know. Although you’re not yet aware that Nyssa won’t be there today. She’s got other plans.” Chris scrunches his eyebrows together, giving his brother an amused face. “And I can entertain myself if I get too bored.”

“Yeah. That’s obvious.”

They walk for another block and then turn the corner.

“And what’s with you suddenly hanging out at home all the time?” Now Sam is just picking on him out of sheer frustration.

“I just told you. I’m bored.”

“Cuz you’re bored?” Sam shakes his head. “You wander off and no one can find you for like… forever. Even when Rae’s about to explode the universe…”

“She wasn’t about to explode the universe.” Chris smiles broadly. “That’s not who she is.”

“You know what I mean.” Sam looks frustrated. His family can be so irritating at times. He’s used to this with Michael and Rae, but Chris can be even more difficult when he wants to be.

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“Anyway. Not true. I was right there when she asked. I was right there when you asked. I was right there when you asked again. And I was there when she really needed me.” Chris states the facts quickly, so that his brother can’t interrupt. “And I believe it was me that fixed everything.”

“Hmmm.” Sam gives him a disapproving look.

“You know. You speak a lot differently to me when you need something.”

Sam gives his brother a sideways glance. “I never... need... anything. Sometimes I ask because... I don’t know... it’s just easier.”

“Oh. My bad.” Chris chuckles. “Next time Rae’s about to explode the universe, I’ll just let you handle it then.”

“She wasn’t about to explode the universe.” Sam finds himself holding back a smile. “Apparently... that’s not who she is.”

They wait silently at the corner for the light to change. Then they look both ways and begin to cross.

“And I don’t speak to you differently when I need something.”

Chris cruises past his brother, swerving back and forth on his skateboard again.

Sam mumbles something to himself.

“Sure do.” Chris lowers his knees a little and tries a small jump onto the curb with his board. But he misjudges it, causing the board to crash against the curb. He stumbles forward, taking a few awkward steps, but manages to stay on his feet.

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Sam sighs, walking right past his little brother, stopping at the front door to the coffee shop. Smiling gently and nodding his head, he holds the door open for an older couple to enter.

“Are you coming?” He turns to see what’s keeping his brother, but he’s no longer behind him.

“Who are you waiting for?” Chris is standing inside the door, holding his skateboard in one hand. He does his best imitation of Rae and tilts his head to the side, and grins annoyingly. Like a child.

“Oh God.” Sam walks in, reaching out and giving Chris a brotherly push to the side. He looks over to the four chairs facing one another in the center of the room, but they’re all taken. “Ha. That’s a first.”

“Is that your spot?” Chris follows behind, getting up on his toes, trying to see past his brother. “Let’s just sit somewhere else.” He points to a small table up against the wall.

“I know. I know. It’s just habit.”

“You’ve only sat their once. How much of a habit can it be?”

Sam just stares at his brother, wanting to make his eyes go dark like Rae does when she wants to show her irritation.

“What?” Chris shrugs. “Sorry. I know things.”

“I’m expecting visitors. Not just the twins.” Sam looks off to the far end of the little shop. “And I needed the extra space.”

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Chris nudges his brother with his shoulder. “Yeah. I know.” He gives his brother a funny look. “I told you. I know things. Do you want me to tell you how the conversation ends?”

Sam ignores his annoying brother, and looks at the empty table against the wall, and then back to the four chairs in the center of the room.

“Eh.” Chris shrugs. “I’m sure they won’t stay long. And we can move over there once they leave, if you want.”

Sam looks down at his brother. “You’re sure?” He can’t believe he’s contributing to his brother’s antics.

“Pretty sure.” Chris grins wide. “You want anything? I’m going to get myself a bottle of water. Walking makes me thirsty.”

“Hmmm.” Sam looks over to the counter to see if they have any lemon cake. But there’s nothing but a plate full of crumbs under the glass display. He sighs, letting his voice show his disappointment. “Just something cold and chocolatey. Use your imagination. You need some cash?”

Chris shakes his head and walks to the counter.

Just as Sam glances over to the table his brother had pointed out, two young women sit down with their coffees. He looks around and sees another small table with two hard chairs against the wall. He walks over and sits down, and immediately finds the experience uncomfortable. He looks around the big room, suddenly missing his favorite, old couch.

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“Hmmm. Maybe I’ll just have Chris... no, best not go there.” He mumbles to himself.

A few minutes later, Sam hears the barista call out his brother’s name and then Chris approaches carrying a bottle of water, a large iced-chocolate drink, and to his complete delight, a plate with the lemon cake he loves so much.

A huge smile appears on Sam’s face. “They were out.” He motions with his eyes to the cake.

“Yes. They were.” Chris grins, his big, blue eyes seeming to get even bluer. “See. My messing around can have some unexpected benefits. I’m hoping it’ll help with your mood.”

Sam nods happily, and reaches over, taking the plate and his drink and sets it front of him on the table.

Chris just stands there.

“What’s up?” Sam gives him a confused look. “Sit down.”

Chris turns and looks over to the group of four chairs in the center of the room. He glances over his shoulder at Sam with a cocky grin on his face. “Three. Two. One.”

In complete unison, the group of four gets up out of their chairs. They smile, shake hands, and hug. They quickly clean up their mess, pack their stuff, and leave to begin the next part of their day.

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Sam grabs his cake and drink and casually strolls over to the chairs. He sits down comfortably exactly where he sat yesterday, and Chris sits in the chair to his right, leaning his skateboard against the side of the chair.

“Now you can call this habit.” Chris opens his bottle of water and takes a sip. “Still a bit of a stretch though.”

Sam sets his plate of lemon cake in his lap, smiling down at it happily. “Oh. I should’ve grabbed some...” He looks up and sees Chris’ hand holding out some napkins. All he can do is chuckle. He loves his annoying, little brother.

Chris looks around the room with a smile on his face. He’s happy to give his brother a half hour of joy before things get ugly. That’s the main reason he decided to tag along this morning.

Sam sets his drink on the table in front of him and adjusts the plate in his lap. “Okay. I get it. You get bored.” He pulls a small piece of cake free, heavy with dried glaze, and pops it in his mouth. “You must get bored a lot.”

“Yeah... you’d think. But I usually find something to do.” He continues watching the various people in the small shop.

Sam offers his brother some cake, but Chris politely shakes his head.

“I’ll bet.” Sam hears the barista call out the name ‘Tegan’. He turns in his chair, looking over his shoulder and sees Tegan scowling as she

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collects her coffee. The barista looks thoroughly intimidated and scurries away, finding anything else she could be doing.

Sam shakes his head, feeling sorry for the young lady making the coffees.

“She’s only that way because of you, you know.” Chris takes another drink of his water. Replacing the cap, he sets the bottle on the table in front of them.

Sam rolls his eyes, not wanting a lecture from his kid brother. “Oh, yeah. And how’s that?”

“She’s what you made her.” Chris looks off to the side, towards the far wall of small tables. “So if it bothers you... all you need to do is ask her to be something different. That’s what I’d do.”

“First off... I don’t need advice from an eleven-year-old.” He gives his brother a smart-ass look. “Second. I didn’t... make... her anything”

Chris changes his mind and reaches over, taking a small corner of cake covered in glaze. “She feels like she failed you. You know... the whole Michael thing.” He smiles awkwardly, popping the bite of cake in his mouth. “So she takes her frustration out on herself... and others.”

“Hmmm.” Sam gives his brother a mocking look. “Thank you, oh wise one. I’ll take it under advisement.”

Tegan walks up. Because of the height of the back of the chairs, and the lack of height of Chris, she doesn’t see him at first.

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“I know... I’m late.” She scoots around the chair to Sam’s right, intending to sit down. But she sees a boy is sitting there. She gives him her best stare. “Beat it pipsqueak. Your mom’s looking for you.”

Chris glances to Sam, an amused look on his face as he starts to get up, reaching for his skateboard.

Sam shows a half grin. “Tegan, this is my little brother...” He pauses for effect.

Tegan loses the stare.

“... you remember... Chris.” Sam finishes, enjoying the look on her face.

“Oh.” She smiles awkwardly. “Sorry about that... pipsqueak.”

“Hey, Tegan.” Chris looks up with an innocent look on his face. Deciding to stay, he lets his skateboard drop back to the side of the chair, and pushes his long bangs out of his eyes. “You’re not going to drag me out back and toss me in the ocean or anything, are you?”

Tegan notices the boy’s t-shirt and quickly glances to Sam, a look of confusion on her face.

“Ha.” Sam laughs. “That’s right. You’ve met... at the beach, behind the house. But you never realized it was him.” Grinning wildly, he looks to his brother. “How fun.”

Chris nods quickly, smiling. “See.”

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Sam looks back to Tegan. “He doesn’t always do the eleven-year-old thing. Or even the boy thing. He likes to switch things up...” He glances to Chris. “... because he gets bored.”

Chris looks over to Tegan, a look of childlike innocence on his face. “I get bored.”

Tegan thinks back. The beach. The young, blonde woman. She said her name was Chris. “Oh crap.” She goes pale.

“It’s a game to him.” An amused Sam glances back and forth between his friend and his brother. “He lets you see what he wants you to see.”

Chris leans forward. “You threatened to beat me up and toss me in the water.” Chris tilts his head to the side, mimicking his sister’s signature stare, but then gives Tegan his biggest smile.

“I...”

“It’s okay.” I’m sure lots of people have wanted to toss me in the ocean once or twice over the years.” He motions with his head to Sam.

Sam takes a sip of his chocolate drink, and nods vigorously.

“I never said I was going to beat you up...” Tegan smiles weakly.
“... but yeah, toss you in the ocean.” She shrugs.

Chris reaches down to the table and grabs his half-empty bottle of water. “Rae threatened to throw me from the roof of a hospital, not long after that. And I was a full-grown man then.” He looks to his brother.
“Tall. Very tall.”

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Sam raises his eyebrows and nods.

“So, don’t worry about it, you’re in good company.” Chris takes another sip of water. “She had no idea it was me either.”

Tegan smiles brightly, imagining the look on Rae’s face when she found out. This makes her happy.

Chris hops up from the chair, pulling his hair back behind his ears, and downs the rest of his water. “Be right back.” He holds up his empty water bottle, shaking it back and forth.

“Walking does make you thirsty.” Sam chuckles.

“Anybody need anything?” He looks to Tegan who shakes her head, then to Sam. “More cake?”

“No, I’m good.”

Chris moves to walk away, but stops. “Oh. Sam.” He taps the empty water bottle on his brother’s shoulder. “I’m sure you’ve already realized... your visitors... Sebastian and Winnifred... they’re here.” He motions with his head towards the opposite wall, frowns, and walks off towards the counter.

Sam looks up as the lights seems to dim and flicker several times, causing the room to jump in and out of darkness. As he looks around, he notices that it’s not just the lights. Everything and everyone, besides himself and his brother, are flickering in and out of existence.

5

When reality stops flickering, Sam looks towards the counter, watching as his brother grabs a bottled water, and gets in line. He'll ask his brother about the flickering later, when nobody else is around.

Tegan steps around the table and sits down in the chair directly across from Sam. "So..."

"He's only messing around. He can be a lot like Rae at times." Sam chuckles. "But without all the dark and scary." Sam glances over his shoulder as his brother gets to the front of the line. "He doesn't have any money, you know?"

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Tegan glances over to the counter, looking confused.

“He’ll still come back with a bottle of water though.” Sam shakes his head. “Sometimes I’m not sure why he bothers to go through the motions.”

“So he’s not upset with me or anything?” Tegan gives Sam a frown. “You know… because of the beach. I was pretty…”

“No. Of course not.” Sam looks past Tegan, to the young man and woman sitting against the far wall. “Tegan. Do me a favor. Move over here to make room.” He points to the floor between his and Chris’ chair. “Or better yet, take his chair if you want. It would serve him right.” Sam motions with his head to Chris’ empty chair.

Tegan grabs her coffee and moves to the plush rug surrounding the table and chairs. She pulls a rolled-up magazine out of the front pocket of her hoodie and places it on the table in front of her. She looks over her shoulder at Sam. “You know… a gentleman would give up his seat. Your brother was about to.”

Sam smiles down at his friend. “It’s just for a few minutes… while I chat with our new….” His voice trails off as he can’t find the word he’s looking for. He’s not sure there is one. “… acquaintances.”

As Sam looks up, the young man from across the room plops down heavily in the chair across from Sam. “I know who you are.” His voice is high pitched and nervous. He’s trying to smile, but doesn’t seem to

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know how. “Yeah. That’s right. I know who you are.” He repeats, this time with a bit more confidence.

Tegan tenses. “What the fuck?” She remembers what Rae told her to do yesterday.

Sam puts up a hand. “Language, Tegan.”

The lanky, young man glances nervously at her and then back to Sam.

“You do? That’s wonderful.” Sam grins, deciding to learn from his brother’s example, and have some fun. “I find that these days, so few people are actually willing to really get to know someone.” His grin becomes wild.

Just as Tegan returns to her magazine, Chris gingerly steps over her and stops just before sitting down. “Tegan… you lost your seat. You can sit here if you’d like? We can trade places.” He moves to the side, giving her access to his chair. “I’ll sit on my board.”

“No thanks. I’m good. But I appreciate the offer.” She looks over to Sam. “See. A gentleman.”

Chris sits down, opens his bottle of water, and takes a long drink. He smiles broadly at the newcomer, his eyes going even bluer.

The odd, young man looks at the boy, then to Sam, and finally around the room. “So, where’s your spooky friend?”

“Spooky friend?” Sam looks over to Chris.

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“The hottie.” The young man smiles oddly. “My sister said she was one spooky bitch.”

Sam gives him a confused look.

“He means Rae.” Tegan says flatly.

“Rae?” Sam grins wildly. “She’s not a friend. She’s my sister.” Sam chuckles, looking over at Chris. “Well she’s a friend, but also my sister.” He looks back to the young man. “Well... she’s not always friendly. It really depends on who you are. And her mood, of course. She’s quite moody.”

Sam looks to his brother, and they both nod in sync.

The young man looks confused.

“She’s at work.” Chris opens his water. “She’s always at work. Even when she’s not at work... she’s actually also at work.”

The young man stares at Chris, looking him up and down. “Who’s the smart-ass kid?” He sneers showing a row of yellow teeth and a lot of gums.

“The kid? Oh, the kid.” Sam glances over to his brother. “This is my brother, Chris.” He takes a sip of his chocolate drink, reaching for the last bite of lemon cake, picking it up between his fingers, and placing it in his mouth. He closes his eyes, chewing, enjoying the moment.

“What’s with the hair?” Chris stares intensely at the newcomer. He’s decided to fill in for Rae, and make this guy uncomfortable. It’ll be fun.

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“So.” Sam looks back and forth between his brother and the odd, young man with the shock of bleached hair. “You’ve met Chris, and this is Tegan. She... is... actually a friend.”

Tegan doesn’t look up as she continues flipping through her magazine. She’s actually finished it, but has started over. It’s more about looking busy than actually enjoying the magazine.

“She’s kind of moody too.” Sam grins.

The young man looks away from Chris just long enough to leer at Tegan, looking her up and down.

“And I’m Sam.” He pauses, setting his empty plate off to the side. “And your name is...”

“They call me Satan.”

“Ha!” Sam laughs loudly, causing several people in the shop to stop what they’re doing and look over at him. He gives everyone a wide smile.

“What?” The young man looks offended.

Sam glances at Chris.

“That explains the bad haircut.” Chris chuckles, looking back at his brother.

Sam instantly stops laughing as he gives his little brother a blank stare. “Not cool.”

The young man looks over at Chris, giving him a menacing glare.

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“I’m sorry. Am I correct in assuming you’re not... the... Satan?”
Sam’s having a little fun before his project becomes actual work.

“What?” The young man looks back and forth between Sam and Chris. “Of course not. It’s just a nickname, you fuckin’ weirdo.” He raises his chin a little. “It’s because I’m a badass.”

Sam grins at his brother, raising his eyebrows. “Satan’s a badass.”

Chris takes another sip of his water, and pulls his blond hair back behind his ears. “Yeah. If I ever saw a badass...” He looks the young man up and down. “... it’s definitely this guy... and that hair color.”

The young man starts shaking his head quickly, getting flustered, his face turning red. “I’m warning you, you little fucker.” He looks from Chris to Tegan, wildly throwing his hands up in frustration.

Tegan is smiling. Maybe Chris is the brother she should’ve been hanging out with all these years. Now she feels like she’s missed out on a lot of fun.

The young man looks back to Sam. “Tell him to knock it off.” He waves his hand in the air towards Chris as if to dismiss him. “Or I’ll show him how badass I really am. People like us...” He motions with his head to Sam. “We don’t fuck around, do we? Go ahead... tell him.”

“Please. I don’t think my brother wants to see how badass you are.” Sam smiles weakly at the young man.

“Sure I would.” Chris’ face remains blank. “Impress me.”

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Sam looks down to Tegan. “See. I told you he can be a lot like Rae.”

The young man ignores the exchange, and just stares at Sam, his mouth hanging open. “Damn straight, he wouldn’t want to see.”

“Okay, so first off… I have no intention of calling you Satan. So, what’s your real name?” Sam raises his eyebrows, his voice losing some of the fun. “The one your mother gave you.”

Chris turns to his brother. “I already told you his name. You don’t listen.”

Sam ignores his brother. “Your name.” He nods his head once, staring the young man in the eye.

The young man throws himself back in his chair aggressively, like a child on the verge of a tantrum. He glances over his shoulder at his sister, still sitting at the table against the wall, and then with a disgusted look on his face, turns back to Sam. “Sebastian.” He says softly. “My name… is Sebastian.”

Tegan snorts, and flips a page in her magazine.

“So. Sebastian.” Sam claps his hands together and rubs them energetically. “Will your sister be joining us?” He motions with his eyes to the empty chair across from Chris.

“What? No. Why should she?” Sebastian slouches forward again, and then glances over his shoulder at his sister.

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“No reason. I just thought it’d be nice. Maybe save us some time.” Sam sighs. “Fine. What can I do for you... Sebastian?”

“So tell us what you mean by ‘people like us’? You were implying that you and Sam are somehow alike.” Chris’ young voice goes hard, reminding Tegan of Rae when she’s about to show you something you’d wish you never saw. “I have a feeling it’s something insulting. Something false and horrible.”

“I...” Sebastian exhales nervously. “Look, the mouthy kid’s freakin’ me out. I can’t have this conversation with him just staring at me like that. I don’t think he’s fuckin’ blinked once.”

Tegan looks up at Chris. His eyes are even bluer than Sam’s as he stares at Sebastian.

Suddenly Chris hops to his feet, causing Sebastian to flinch, which makes Tegan smile. He grabs his skateboard from the side of the chair. “I gotta run anyway.” And with a quick glance to his brother, and nod to Tegan, he’s off, around the chair, and towards the front door.

Tegan climbs up into the vacated chair, and returns to her magazine.

“Better.” Sebastian seems to relax, letting his gangly body slump back a little in his chair. “That was one freaky kid.”

“You were saying... ‘people like us’?” Sam glances over to the door just as his brother walks out.

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Sebastian leans forward, lowering his voice. “Can she be trusted?” He motions to Tegan, flipping through her magazine. “Does she know?”

Sam chuckles. “What?”

“Can. She.” He bulges his eyes, motioning to Tegan. “Be trusted. I don’t know how much she knows... how much you told her.”

“Tegan?” Sam exchanges smiles with his friend and leans forward, towards the odd young man. “Of course she can.” He leans back. “She’s been to hell and back with me.” He winks playfully to his friend.

Sebastian gives Sam an irritated look. “Don’t fuck with me old man.”

“Ha.” Tegan quickly raises her magazine in front of her face to hide her beaming smile from Sam.

“Old?” Sam looks hurt.

Sebastian leans far forward, getting even closer to Sam, whispering “You’re a killer. Like me.” He lowers his voice even more. “I’m a killer too.”

Trying to make the best of a conversation quickly going to a bad place, Sam pulls back, moving deeper into his chair. “Whoaaaa.” He brings a hand up, rubbing his eyes with his finger and thumb. “I’m sorry, dude. Your breath... is soooo bad.”

Sebastian closes his mouth, pursing his lips. His eyes showing how close he is to bursting with anger and going on a rampage. Barely in

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control, he looks wildly over his shoulder at his sister, widening his eyes and shaking his head in frustration. She pretends not to notice.

“Okay. So then. You were saying?” Sam’s face gets serious. “I’m a what now?”

Sebastian looks around, leaning forward as far as he can without toppling over. “Killer.” He mumbles through clenched teeth, now aware of his breath, and not wanting to be made fun of again. “Murderer.”

Sam sits stunned for a minute. He looks over at Tegan as she lays her magazine in her lap. Both their smiles have disappeared, the fun having been pulled from them. He’s truly hurt. His voice softens. “I assure you, Sebastian. I am... not... a killer.”

It’s Sebastian’s turn to grin, happy that he’s finally gotten a reaction from this nutcase.

“Are you sure Winnifred won’t join us?” Sam glances past Sebastian to the young woman sitting against the wall trying so hard to look inconspicuous.

“What?” The young man looks over his shoulder nervously. “No.”

Sebastian makes a disgusted look, all gums and yellow teeth. He furrows his eyebrows and quickly scratches under his nose, causing some dead skin to flake off into the air. He’s unsure about this guy. Something seems off about him. But his sister was so sure that this was the guy that could help them. And his sister is usually a pretty good judge of things.

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Sam sighs theatrically, hoping to push this little adventure further along, towards the bigger undertaking closing in on him. There's no avoiding it, so he may as well go willingly.

Sebastian licks his lips, and motions with his head over his shoulder towards his sister. "We saw you that day. We both saw you." Again, Sebastian nervously looks over his shoulder.

"Oh, for Christ's sake, invite her over already." Sam leans to the side and roughly motions with his hand for Winnifred to join them.

She stares down, pretending not to see him.

"Hey. Hey. Stop it." Sebastian's voice is low and angry as he leans to the side, trying to block Sam and keep his attention. "At Brad's house. His garage. He was with my buddy Karl." Sebastian grins. "They were my friends. They told me what they were going to do that day... at the school. They told me everything. They even showed me the guns." He sneers. "They warned me not to go to school that day."

And there it is. "How old are you, Sebastian?" Sam reaches for his drink, and takes a long sip.

"What does that matter?"

Sam says nothing, and just takes another sip of his drink, smiling happily, looking past the young man and to his sister.

"Nineteen."

"And your sister?"

"Seriously. What does it matter?"

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“And your sister?”

“Twenty-three.” Sebastian glances back at his sister again, causing Sam to look at Tegan and roll his eyes.

“Nineteen?” Sam’s voice is flat. “And you’re still in high school?”

Sebastian sits back a little, straightening up, a confrontational look on his thin face. “I was held back. What’s it to you?”

“Of course you were.” Sam says matter of fact. “So... back to me. If your friends were the ones going to shoot up a school... how am I... a killer... like you?”

Sebastian squirms a little, fighting his instinct to get up and leave. He’s not enjoying this conversation as much as he thought he would. Never meet your heroes.

He takes a deep breath. “My sister and I were parked down the street... waiting for them to come rolling out in Karl’s Mustang. But they didn’t.” He leans forward, lowering his voice again. “We saw the garage doors burn. Then we heard an explosion. And when we started the car and drove slowly past Brad’s house, we saw you walk out of the garage. Right out of the fire.” His sneering, yellow grin is back. “And later we found out Karl and Brad were dead.”

“I walked out of the fire?” Sam remembers it perfectly.

Two teens were about to go to their school and shoot the place up because they felt slighted by the masses, because they made every effort to not fit in. Rae was supposed to be there, but after her recent breakdown,

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Sam was asked to take her place. The two idiots had a grenade that fell to the ground and exploded, killing both boys almost instantly, and saving forty-three lives and a lot of pain and a lifetime of trauma for eighty-seven others.

“Yeah. Well not out of the fire, obviously. Though... at first it looked like you were on fire. And we thought... at least we’d get to watch someone burn to death in the driveway.” He scratches his chin roughly and laughs picturing it.

Sam turns just his eyes to Tegan, and then back to Sebastian.

“But then you weren’t. Optical illusion, I guess. And you walked down the driveway and turned and walked down the sidewalk like nothing happened. You never even looked back.” Sebastian nods and smiles wickedly. “That was the badass part. Maybe we should call you Satan.” He snorts and laughs.

Sam remembers their car driving slowly down the street, trying to keep far enough back for him not to notice. He’s there right now, glancing over his shoulder knowing what’s to come.

“We followed you for a while. But all you did was walk home. At least we think it was home. Big place on the beach.” Sebastian wipes his mouth on the back of his hand. “You must be rich.”

Sam exhales slowly. There was nothing enjoyable about that day, and he finds it tiring to be reminded of it. “Ah. So I’m a killer because two

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idiots blew themselves up... and I happened to be there to witness the blessed miracle.”

He sees his flaming wings push out, tossing the Mustang to the side of the garage, knocking a grenade from a shelf. The pin is jarred loose. The grenade goes off killing the two would-be murderers. A happy accident. But they were meant to die that day whether or not Sam showed up.

Sebastian completely ignores the meaning of Sam’s words. “Yeah. You’re like a vigilante or something.” His face goes blank and serious.

Sam says nothing. Deep in thought, he taps his fingers rhythmically on the middle of his chest, watching as the overhead lights reflect off his rings.

“A killer...” Sam stops his tapping and leans forward. “... like you.”

Sebastian nods his head vigorously, a big smile on his face. “Yeah. Like me and my sister. Winnifred.”

“And now that we’ve gotten together...” Sam looks over at Tegan. “... two killers... oh, I’m sorry...” He motions towards Sebastian’s sister. “... three killers... wouldn’t want to leave anyone out...” He tries smiling. It comes across as forced and dangerous. “... what happens now?”

Sam wishes Chris had stayed.

Sebastian looks around nervously. This nutcase is starting to scare him. “Well... I’d... we’d like to invite you over to our place.” He continues

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to smile, looking happy through the nervousness. “We... I... need your help with something. Something I can’t do alone.”

“I imagine there’s a lot of things you can’t do alone.” Sam’s voice now matches his fake smile. Dangerous.

Sebastian isn’t listening. He’s mouthing something to his sister still at the table by the wall. He’s trying to get her attention, but she’s having none of it.

Sam glances over to Tegan. “And how should I dress for this this little get together?” He sits back in his chair, taking his chocolatey drink and bringing it up to his mouth. It tastes bitter, and he has a hard time swallowing it.

The world slows and dims, coming to a near pause. There is no sound, except for Sam’s simulated breathing and heartbeat. A great darkness blots out the sun, the sky, and then everything.

For a few seconds, Sam sits alone in the big, overstuffed chair, in complete darkness. Then the darkness slowly lifts revealing the coffee shop and all its patrons.

“Rae?” Sam glances around, watching as everyone is still moving, going through the motions of their conversations, but at a hundredth of their natural speed. “What’s this all about?”

Then there’s a series of bright bursts of light accompanied by thundering sounds as the darkness switches to light and everything instantly speeds back up to normal.

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Sebastian squirms and scrunches up his nose, giving Sam an odd look. “What? I don’t give a shit. Wear whatever the fuck you want.” His sneering smile slowly returns. His voice lowers to a whisper. “Or maybe you should wear something old. You know, in case things get messy.” He grins over his shoulder to his sister, still staring down at the table in front of her as if she weren’t the biggest part of this.

6

Sam walks up the sidewalk to his dad's house. It's early afternoon and the sun is shining bright. He stops just a few feet from the front door, admiring all the bright flowers.

For as long as he can remember, the old man has loved his flower gardens. He has patches of flowers, trees, and colorful bushes scattered throughout the front, back, and side yards. When he built the house, the very first thing he ever did, was put in a garden. When Sam was just a kid, it was one of his favorite hangouts to get away from the others. He would

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bring his toy trucks and dinosaurs out and play in the garden, pretending it was a jungle far away from his siblings.

Now, as an adult, he no longer needs the toys to enjoy the flower gardens. He understands his father's affinity for the rich colors, the warm smells, and the peace of mind they awaken.

“I must be getting old.” Sam takes a deep breath, smelling the various combinations of flowers. They remind him of his youngest brother. He smiles, feeling more relaxed than he did just seconds ago, which also reminds him of his youngest brother. Except when he’s being annoying. He hears a quiet snap coming from behind him, like someone stepping on a fallen branch in the yard. “Chris?” Sam turns his head to both sides. He needs to ask him about the darkness, the flashing lights, the thundering sound.

Nothing.

He breathes in deeply, enjoying the flowers one more time before entering the house. “Just the flowers then.” Sam chuckles and opens the front door.

Behind Sam, like a long, hard sigh, the wind picks up, blowing strong. Screaming alongside the house and through the flower gardens, the wind pulls at their pedals, tossing them in all directions, breaking some of them free from their roots and dragging them across the yard.

Sam closes the door behind him, and walks into the foyer. He just stands there, looking into the living room. He wasn’t there, but he can still

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feel what happened. Rae had her breakdown and killed the world, past, present, and future. Then she came back here, and in a blind rage, accidentally murdered their youngest brother. “Well... kind of.”

But of course, that last part wouldn’t be possible.

Chris let her believe it happened, to snap her back to reality, and put the insanity back in its box. Then he gave her two options. He could undue all her mistakes that led up to that moment, or he could let her continue down her path of destruction. It was her choice. She asked for the former. And here we are.

“All part of the journey, right?” Sam shakes his head sadly, but with a small smile on his face. “Anyone home?”

“In here.” A man’s voice, not his father’s, calls back from the kitchen.

Sam knows that voice and sighs heavily, pausing to put the smile back on his face. Collecting himself for the inevitable, he walks into the kitchen and stops just behind his brother who is eating at the kitchen table with his back to him.

Michael, still chewing a mouthful of food, looks over his shoulder. “Hey Lucky. Long time no see.” He grins broadly.

Sam returns his brother’s smile warmly. “Mikey.”

Michael stands up, wiping his face roughly with a paper napkin, and walks over to his big brother, giving him an immense hug.

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Sam hugs back, truly happy to see his younger brother. They find each other annoying as hell, but they're always happy to see one another. That's kind of a thing with their family.

After a few seconds, Sam lets go and steps back from his younger brother, looking him up and down. Although they've seen one another a few times recently, it's been a while since they had a chance to say more than hello.

Michael puts both arms out with his palms turned up, and tilts his head to the side. He's taller and broader than Sam. Six foot four. Big, solid, and strong. He has a head of unruly, curly, dark hair and bushy eyebrows. His eyes are brown like Rae's, but somehow brighter, which makes sense when you really think about it. His grin is big and cocky, to match his personality. Whereas Sam looks like a beautiful rock star, Michael looks like the rock star's handsome bodyguard, ready to toss anyone who gets too close.

“So. Last thing I heard... you were about to take down crazy ole Rae. And dad needed me and Gabe to guard the home gate.” He chuckles. “Heaven forbid she get in there and tear up the place because she’s having a bad day. Right?” Michael swings a leg back over his chair and sits back down at the table to continue his lunch. “So how’d that go? Everything’s still here, so I’m assuming it went alright.”

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Sam sits down across from his brother, watching him messily devour a huge sub sandwich. “Where’d you get that?” Sam’s just now feeling a little hungry. The lemon cake was delicious, but not filling.

“Delivery. You want a piece?” Michael talks around a mouthful of food, holding out what remains of the ragged sandwich.

Sam puts up a hand. “No. I’m good.”

“Rae?” Michael glances up from his meal.

“Chris.” Sam glances around the room, noticing his father’s jacket laying on the chair by the door. “And then he put everything back together all neat and tidy.”

Michael stops chewing for a second, still hunched over his sandwich. He turns his eyes up to Sam. “Of course he did.” He smiles broadly. “I haven’t seen him in a while. How’s he been?”

“Chris is Chris.” Sam gives a half shrug. “He’s still eleven if that says anything.”

Michael nods knowingly and returns to his sandwich as Sam watches, amused. His brother bites at his sandwich as intensely as he does everything else. Sam almost feels sorry for the poor sandwich.

Within a minute, Michael finishes his meal, and downs an entire bottle of root beer in several large gulps.

“So.” Michael sits back, placing the napkin and empty bottle on his now-empty plate. “You needed Chris to handle Rae.” Michael grins wildly at his big brother. “You needed a scrawny, pre-teen boy to handle our five

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foot nothing, ninety-five pound sister who looks like she's still in the eighth grade."

This is their relationship. The two eldest brothers. Constant rivalry from the younger of the two. Growing up, it was always the same. The minute the old man brought Michael home, the competition with his older brother began. Michael feels like he was meant to be the oldest, the strongest, and the one in charge of all the others. But he simply wasn't. And he's always done his best to let everyone around him know how he feels about that.

Sam smiles and stares down into his lap, just shaking his head. Some things don't change. "Looks can be..."

"I'm just messing around." Michael laughs loudly. "Rae... going full Death. Any one of us would've ran to get Chris." He laughs even harder. "Though, I bet he was already there just waiting for things to get interesting enough for him to want to be involved."

Sam nods, closing his eyes for a second. "Is the old man around?"

"Out back. He's been trying to get me to play some oddball card game he got in the grocery store checkout line this morning. Lots of reds, blues, yellows... squares and circles. Looks pretty silly to me. I'm sure he's reading the rules right now. You know dad... he's gotta know all the rules before playing the game."

Sam nods absentmindedly while glancing around the kitchen. "And what brings you by the house?"

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“Eh.” Michael shrugs his shoulders. “Just checking up on the old guy. I try to do it whenever I’m in the neighborhood. He’s not getting any younger. You see the wheelchair he’s been zipping around on?”

Again, Sam nods without giving it much thought. “Dizzy spells.”

“Yeah. He said Rae killed him a few times. That’ll do it.” Michael picks up his plate, setting it on the counter near the sink. “What brings you by the house?”

“Same, I guess.” Sam leans his chair back on two legs. “Ever since the whole Rae thing, I’ve stayed pretty close... to keep an eye on things.”

Michael says nothing, completely understanding. “She’s okay now though, right?”

“Yeah. Like I said... Chris.” Sam rocks his chair back even farther, putting one foot up against the table edge to balance himself.

“Don’t let dad catch you doing that.” Michael uses his eyes to point at Sam’s chair.

“Chairs have four legs for a reason, young man.” The old man comes scooting in, pushing his wheelchair to the middle of the kitchen. He has a pretend scowl on his face, trying to hide the smile in his eyes.

Sam instantly lets the chair drop back down to all four legs.
“Oops.”

“Ha.” Michael laughs loudly.

The old man’s scowl slowly turns into a big grin. “My two oldest boys.” He stands up from the chair, pausing to stretch his back.

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Sam stands and gives his father a brief hug, while Michael leans back against the counter behind them. “Still accessorizing with that completely unnecessary set of wheels, I see.”

“Dizzy spells.” Michael chuckles.

When they part, the old man sits back down in his wheelchair and rolls it up to the table, pushing a chair to the side. “Sit. Sit.” He looks over his shoulder to both his boys. “Well... I paid good money for it and intend to get some use out of it. I’ll probably donate it at some point.”

Sam sits back down at the table.

“I actually have to go, dad.” Michael’s voice is just a little softer in his father’s presence.

“Mikey, sit down.” The old man pats the kitchen chair to his left, and gives Sam a wink.

Michael exhales loudly. “Fine. But I can only stay...” His voice trails off as his father gives him a withering stare. He sits down, leaning back and looking away, like a teenager forced to sit with the family when he really wants to go hang out with his buddies.

“We don’t all get together much these days.” The old man grins at both his sons. “I like this. Family. It’s nice. We should get all the others and have a barbecue or something.”

Sam and Michael give each other an amused glance.

“You’re getting old and corny, dad.” Michael laughs, looking to his brother for support. For about the millionth time in his life, he can’t help

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but see a lot of their father in Sam. Same blue eyes, easy smile, squared chin. And he remembers when they were little, and dad's hair was the same sandy brown. He was always a little envious that Sam was so much like their dad.

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” The old man backs away from the table and wheels himself over to the fridge. He opens the door, looking inside. Then pulling back a little, he searches the door. “Hey. Who drank my last root beer?” He turns, looking directly at Michael.

Michael, a guilty smirk on his face, looks down to his lap. “My bad.”

His father shakes his head slowly and scrunches his eyebrows together.

“It wasn’t that great. Kinda flat tasting. You don’t buy the good stuff like I do.” Michael grins wide and laughs a little too loudly. He looks over to his brother. “He gets store brand. Plastic bottles.”

Sam smile broadly.

“It was on sale.” The old man turns to Sam. “So, what are you up to? Your sister’s not at it again, is she?” He looks over his shoulder. “She’s not going to appear out of nowhere and smash me over the head with the toaster or something?”

Sam cringes, remembering, and shakes his head. “I’m just picking up a change of clothes. Maybe a shower.”

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“So. You’re both just checking up on me then?” The old man glances from Sam to Michael. “You know, your brother is somewhere around.”

Michael looks up from his lap. “Gabe?”

“Other brother.”

“Chris.” Sam nods. “Yeah, I was here earlier and saw him. He followed me all the way to the coffee shop. He’s being all young and irritating at the moment.”

“Ha.” Michael laughs loudly. “He’s been eleven for too long now. We should have a family intervention.”

That brings a big smile to Sam’s face.

“Hey...” The old man’s face lights up. “... so who’s up for...”

“A game of cards.” Michael and Sam finish in sync.

All three men laugh.

“Another time, dad. I promise.” Michael stands, slowly stretching to show that he’s about to go. “And I’ll bring some of that good root beer in the glass bottles.”

The old man reaches up and grasps his son’s arm gently. “Alright. Next time.” He smiles sweetly. “And when you run into Gabe, tell him to stop by for a visit. He’s the last on my list.”

Michael salutes his father with two fingers. “Will do.” He walks towards the foyer and flashes his big brother a peace sign, backs up a few steps, turns, and walks out into the foyer.

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The old man waits for the front door to open and close. “So...” His face immediately goes serious. “A change of clothes, huh? Big plans this evening?”

Sam nods. “Yeah, I guess. Two hoodlums invited me to their place.”

“Hoodlums?” The old man frowns. “Who still uses that? Is that still a thing?”

“Rae.” Sam smiles.

“Ahhh.” The old man chuckles. “Of course.”

“Two young idiots about to do something stupid.”

The old man pulls his new deck of cards from his robe pocket and sets it on the table. “Something stupid? How stupid?” He remembers.

“They want me kill someone.” Sam looks over to the old man to gauge his reaction.

The old man opens the deck of cards and starts setting up the game on the kitchen table. “Hmmm. Sebastian and Winnifred.”

“Yeah.” Sam isn’t surprised. “They’re just bad news. Especially the sister. I expect to part with the brother fairly quickly. But the sister will be a project.”

Sam can feel a sudden sadness envelope the room.

“Why bother? They’ll get to you eventually. You don’t need to participate.” The old man sets the remaining cards in a pile off to the side. “Don’t let your sister’s recent actions influence you.”

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“Yeah.” Sam sighs heavily. His voice is soft, unsure. “I guess I’m just trying to figure a few things out.”

“Like what?” The old man picks a card and places it face up in front of him. “You know... your sister came to me with this same problem just days ago.” He looks up at Sam, a serious look in his eyes. “And we all know how that went.”

A few quiet minutes pass as the old man returns to his card game, making slight humming noises as he turns over card after card before finding one that gives him a slight smile.

“Yeah...” At first Sam hesitates, but then he continues. “... this whole thing with Rae...”

“Is settled.” The old man’s voice goes hard as he moves his chair a little closer to the table and flips another card.

“You don’t need the chair, you know.” Sam doesn’t want to argue, but he has a lot on his mind and maybe the old man has some answers. Or at least some pointers. “There are no dizzy spells.”

The old man glances up at his son, an irritated look on his face. “Of course not. It’s just a reminder. We all have our...” Then his face softens, and he turns his chair to look more clearly at his son. “This isn’t about your sister. Rae is allowed her choices. Just like you made your choices in the past. Everybody gets theirs. And your time will come again. But I don’t think it’s your turn again. Or is it? It can’t be.” He reaches up, scratching his head. “I’m pretty sure Michael’s up next. And you don’t get

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to jump the queue just because your sister showed you something she shouldn't have." He shakes his head, frowning. "This happens every damn time."

Sam considers what his father actually means, not what his father is actually saying. And that confuses him. "Mikey going all Rae. Now that's... interesting." Lost in thought, the comment comes out weak and disinterested.

The old man sighs. He remembers this conversation all to well.

"I met a woman who drowned her seven-year-old daughter." Sam's voice is weak and breaks. "In the God damn bathtub."

It's rare for Sam to curse. So the old man knows something bigger than Sebastian and Winnifred is on his son's mind.

The two men sit in silence for a few seconds, giving Sam's words about the little girl their due weight.

"And..." The old man sighs hard. He understands. And he knows his son just needs to talk about it. Work things out. "... and this was something new to you?" His voice is dull and flat as he turns back to his game and flips another card without even looking at it. Then he pushes the whole deck aside, no longer interested. He rolls his chair back from the table and turns towards his son.

"No." Sam's voice is low and soft. "Of course not."

"And the mother... she's with you?"

"Yeah."

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“So there you go.” The old man’s voice is a whisper as he clears his throat awkwardly, not wanting to say what he’s about to say. “They live their lives. Their choices. Not ours.” The old man closes his eyes tightly. He just wants to go up to his room, and not do this again.

“Okay. I get that. I really do.” Sam’s voice is calm. “So the mother made a choice. But the kid... the little girl didn’t.” His voice saddens and breaks to a whisper. “She was only seven.”

The old man breathes in and out heavily several times. “Yeah. That’s...” He doesn’t know how to finish. He remembers what it feels like.

“Yeah.” Sam’s voice is barely audible.

“Well...” The old man cringes inwardly, knowing very well where his words will ultimately take them. “... the little girl...”

“Annabelle.” Sam mumbles.

“Yes. Belle.” She’s in a better place.” The old man feels his stomach turn as he says the words. “I’ll check on her for you next time I’m home.”

“Better place.” Sam shakes his head. “That’s a shitty system, dad.”

7

A small, middle-aged man slouches at the dining room table staring at a wooden box with a gold lock attached. Sitting just off to his left is a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels and an empty shot glass. He pours another shot, and downs it, making a face to match the strong taste of the liquor.

The box is mahogany with scripture burnt into it by a local craftsman. It's about the same size as a toaster laying on its side and is made from beautifully dark wood and has an ornate gold lock attached to

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the front. It was a gift from his business partner on the tenth anniversary of their partnership.

He pours another shot, downs it, and makes another face of disgust.

Joseph used to consider himself one of the good guys, a lawyer that worked for the little guy. But he's been shortchanging his clients by skimming off the top of their settlements without anyone knowing. He's been working through bouts of feeling like he's shamed his family. Tonight, it's finally come to a head.

His hands tremble as he puts the small key in the lock, preparing to open the box. He pours another shot, but this time sips at it slowly, afraid that if he downs it in one gulp, it'll come right back up. Joseph's been sitting here with his bottle since his family went to bed, over two hours ago. He's drunk. And although he wants to stay drunk, he doesn't want to pass out before he does what needs to be done.

Joseph sits back, breathing slow and heavy. The alcohol has taken its toll. He can barely sit up and his mind is spinning as much as the room he sits in. He takes a moment to look around, admiring his home for one last time. He's not a rich man, but he does well enough to provide his family with all the things they need, and most of the things they want. Through the haze of the alcohol, Joseph reaches up to the wall above the kitchen table, and takes down a picture of his two teenage boys. Tears run down his face as he whimpers, trying to hold back the crying.

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A deep sigh of boredom comes from across the table. “So those are your two sons?”

Joseph looks up and sees a young man with long, brown hair sitting across the table from him. “Shit!” He scoots his chair back, startled, making it screech loudly on the hardwood floor. The picture of his sons falls to the floor, cracking the glass that holds it in the frame. His adrenaline spikes as it tries to overcome the alcohol. “I wish you wouldn’t do that.” He slurs. “Every. Single. Time.” Now he seems more annoyed than scared.

“Sorry. Just part of the experience, I suppose.” The young man reaches forward, turning the bottle of Jack Daniels so that he can read the label. “Like my sister asked you that first night... why would you drink something that obviously tastes so awful?”

“I know. I know. I won’t even ask this time. We’ve met. You’re real and we’ve met.” Joseph catches his breath, recovering his composure. “But your name...”

“Sam.”

“That’s it.” Joseph tries to think, using the palm of his hand to slap the side of his head a couple times. “I keep wanting to think that you’re just the whiskey talking. Making me see things. That you’re not real.” Joseph pours another shot and downs it, gagging slightly into the back of his hand. “But you are of course.” He scrunches his eyebrows together, thinking. “Real, I mean. You’re real.”

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Sam puts out his arm, looking at it closely. “I don’t know. I think I’m real. Would I even know if I wasn’t?” Sam waves his hand in the air to dismiss the question.

Joseph stares at Sam, drunk and confused.

Sam shakes his head slowly. “Please. Can we skip all the usual, boring stuff?” Sam grins wildly at Joseph. “You’re dead. I’m not. You suffer through this same horrible night over and over. I show up and lead you to the point where you do all the bad stuff. And then it all starts over again.”

Joseph tries to take it all in, his head swirling from the alcohol. He kind of remembers a young woman. Beautiful, but dark and terrifying. He never made it to the top of the stairs that first night. She stopped him. And he’s been doing this ever since. “She killed me.”

“No.” Sam breathes out heavily. “She startled you. You fell. And a bullet through your throat killed you. And that... saved your entire family.” He scrunches his eyebrows. “So I guess she saved your family.”

“But...” Joseph tries to remember.

“This time I’d like to just chat a bit. It’ll only take a few minutes. And then you can get on with the rest of your night.” Sam attempts a smile. “I have a question I think you can help me with. I need some... insight.”

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Joseph looks around the room nervously, a vacant look in his eyes, and then picks up the picture he dropped on the floor when he first spotted Sam.

“So.” Sam leans forward out of habit, forgetting. And like always, he gets a whiff of the alcohol and decides to lean back again. “You’d think I would learn my lesson by now.” He puts a finger under his nose and breaths in and out to clear the smell from his nostrils. “So... why?” He uses his head to point to the picture in Joseph’s hand.

Having forgotten he was holding it, Joseph looks down to his hand and sees the picture. A tear drops from his cheek. “Why?” He coughs once to clear the slur from his voice. “Oh.” He wipes a tear from his eye with the back of his hand. “I’ve already told you. So they won’t have to deal with the looks from everyone. The shame of dealing with my shame.” He shrugs. “You know, after I’m gone.”

Sam can hear the drunken irritation in Joseph’s voice. “Hmmm. So this was all to... protect... them?”

Joseph wants to nod, but his head just bobs around on his neck.

Sam glances around the room, trying to understand. “So, why didn’t you just deal with the shame yourself?” He tries an encouraging smile. “Step up and make things right. Admit what you did, and do what you could to fix it. Leave them out of it.” He pauses, again furrowing his brow. “Well... as much as you can, I suppose.”

Joseph giggles drunkenly. “Ha. If only it were that simple.”

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Sam just stares. “They’re good kids. Your wife is a good, loving, caring person.” He takes a deep breath, looking down and uses his thumb to slowly spin one of his rings around a finger. “Trust me... I would know if they weren’t.”

Joseph nods. “They are. They all are.” He reaches for his glass of whiskey, but decides against it. “JJ’s on the varsity football team. Cornerback. He’s a good student and works at the grocery store just down the street.” Joseph looks up at Sam. “Not the big one. That little mom and pop place that just says ‘Market’ above it.”

Sam nods, letting his boredom show again. “I know all this, Joseph.” His voice hardens a little. “But I don’t understand. Why would you want to end their lives because of something they had no part in? And don’t give me the usual crap.”

Joseph tries to answer, but his voice makes a squeaking, whimpering sound. He decides that another sip of whiskey is needed. “My other boy’s a freshman, still finding his place. He can be a bit of a troublemaker, like I was when I was a kid. Nothing big.”

“I know all this.” Sam’s voice shows his boredom. “He got caught smoking earlier this year. And he was suspended for three days for mouthing off to a teacher just last week. But he’s a good kid. He’s just being a teenager. Blah. Blah. Blah.”

Joseph smiles, not really hearing what Sam is saying. “But he’s a good kid. He’s just being a teenager. He’ll find his way.”

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Sam huffs loudly, letting his voice go hard. “Yes. He will. But not if you had killed him.” He leans forward in his chair. “Joseph!” It bursts from his mouth like a loud growl.

Joseph flinches, closing his eyes.

And then, in an instant, Sam’s voice goes back to flat. “I want to know why you harm one another.”

Joseph keeps his eyes closed tightly, not knowing how far his visitor will take this. He has a vague memory of flames coming with the anger. Terrifying, burning flames. “Why?”

“Yes.” Sam sighs. “Why do you so easily end one another?” He makes Joseph’s eyes open. “Humans, I mean. Why do you harm one another?”

Joseph takes a few seconds to clear his head, pouring another shot and sipping from it. “Family is important. At least it’s important to me. It’s the only thing that matters, really.” He uses the back of his hand to clumsily wipe the growing tears from his eyes. “Surrounding yourself with love. Creating a sense of belonging. Helping others grow and develop. Family.”

Sam nods.

“I’m gonna get caught eventually. You know... for the embezzling...”

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“Stealing.” Sam’s voice remains flat. “Embezzling makes it somehow sound less hands on... fancy. You’re a thief. You stole the money of poor people who needed every cent.”

Joseph waits to make sure Sam is finished. “And...” He glances over at Sam, and then quickly away. “... when I do get caught, they’ll be hounded by everyone. Ridiculed... ostracized by their friends. It’ll affect them. It’ll tear them apart inside.”

“Yes. It will. It is. But they’re working through it. They’ll move on with their lives and people will let go.” Sam’s voice goes softer. “We forgive... and we slowly forget... all but the truly heinous.”

Joseph looks at the wooden box in front of him, moving it a little closer. He opens it slowly and reaches in carefully, moving aside the red, silk covering, and gently lifts out a small, black handgun.

“Guns.” Sam’s voice shows his distaste as he slowly shakes his head.

“This...” Joseph holds the gun up a little, drunkenly pointing it directly at Sam.

“Please.” Sam reaches out and gently pushes Joseph’s arm to the side so that the gun is no longer pointed directly at his face.

“I’ve owned this for almost ten years. It was a gift from my business partner.” Joseph sets the gun carefully on the table and reaches back into the box for the small carton of bullets.

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Sam closes his eyes, and reaches up with both hands, massaging his temples. He can feel a headache coming on. “Your office was robbed while you were working late. You got shot. You were terrified. You nearly died. I’ve heard all this many, many times.”

Joseph sips at his whiskey and just listens. He smiles drunkenly. “The gun was a gift. To protect myself. To protect my family.” He sees the irony in what he’s just said, and awkwardly downs another shot of whiskey, spilling half of it down his chin and onto his shirt.

A noise comes from the living room. It sounds to Joseph like a squeak coming from the leather sofa in the middle of the room.

“Did you hear that?” He whispers and looks to Sam, a crazed look on his face.

“Yes, I did.” Sam’s voice remains dull. “So what’s inside you that allows you to take someone’s life as if it’s yours to do with what you want? Don’t you care about the consequences... for them...” He motions to the gun. “... for you.” He uses both his hands to point back at himself.

Clumsily, Joseph covers the gun and bullets on the table with the silk cloth. He holds his breath, listening, but hears nothing. He gets up from the table and walks to the doorway entering the living room. Looking around in the dark, he doesn’t see anything unusual. His family is asleep. Even his teen boys, who were known to stay up a little too late on school nights. They were asleep. He was sure of it.

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Joseph returns to the kitchen table and opens the box of bullets. He was hoping that this time Sam would be gone when he got back. But he never is. He's sitting at the other side of the table, staring down at his hands, absentmindedly playing with the rings on his fingers.

Sitting back down, intending to ignore Sam, Joseph goes to work loading the handgun. He fumbles nervously with the bullets, dropping several on the table and into his lap.

He hears a loud sigh come from the living room. A cold sweat envelopes him. This time he stretches his neck and looks over into the dark room, only lit by the porch lights spraying through the front window.

“It was nothing.” He tells himself, trying to calm his nerves.

Sam’s patience is coming to an end. He wants to take something with him to think about. Something thoughtful. Useful. “Are you sure? I heard it quite clearly.” Sam smiles menacingly, showing a mouthful of bright, white teeth. “Maybe it’s the Devil. Waiting. Watching. Excited to catch you when you fall.” His smile drops.

Joseph drunkenly stares at his uninvited guest, his head slowly bobbing back and forth. Sam stares back, his eyes glowing brightly in the darkened kitchen.

Everyone is asleep in their rooms. He’s sure of it. Joseph’s heart is beating hard and he’s sweating. “Fuck.” He whispers, jerking his head forward, some drool dropping to the table in front of him. “Why do we have to keep doing this?”

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Sam just continues to stare, his eyes getting brighter.

Joseph groans, breathing out heavily. “I don’t know. It just happens sometimes. People do things they shouldn’t be capable of. People make up some crazy reasons to do stupid shit... because they fool themselves into believing they need doing. Maybe something just breaks in our brains. Something short circuits... and we lose control of our thoughts, but not our actions.” He licks his lips nervously. “People can break, you know. It’s called a breakdown. I’m broken. That’s all I know. We break.”

Sam’s face remains blank, and his eyes light up even more, making the whole kitchen come to life with crawling shadows. “Hmmm. Maybe you’re right? You stop thinking... and just act. You go numb and forget how to be human. Maybe being human takes effort. Maybe none of you are human to begin with. It’s all a show.” He brings a flaming hand up in front of his own face, staring at it. “I know I forget to breathe sometimes... and there’s been times where I forgot to make my heart beat.” He looks over to Joseph. “Most times I don’t sweat or blink. And if assaulted or enraged, I lose the body altogether.” He instantly removes the flames from his hand, showing beautifully manicured nails.

Joseph looks up from his gun and into Sam’s eyes. Taking a deep breath, he closes his eyes and rubs them awkwardly. “Well... is that all? Are we done then?”

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“Yeah... maybe it takes effort to remain human. For all of us... all of you.” Sam smiles as his eyes go back to their natural blue. “Thank you, Joseph. You’ve been very helpful.”

Joseph picks up the bullets from his lap, stands up and walks to the living room. He goes to the bottom of the stairs, listening, only hearing the sounds of his own heartbeat pounding and his sloppy, ragged breathing. He holds his breath and listens. Nothing.

He goes back to the kitchen and sits down at the table, wiping the sweat from his forehead on the sleeve of his shirt. He wipes the tips of his fingers quickly on his cotton shorts, and begins to load the gun just as he saw on a YouTube video earlier in the day.

“You don’t have to be here anymore.” He looks up in Sam’s direction, but he’s not there. The chair is neatly pushed in.

Joseph thinks for a second, confused by his own drunken imagination. He slaps himself violently in the side of the head several times. He pours one last shot and downs it in an instant, not even bothering to make a sour face. He waits a few minutes, just staring at the gun in his hand. Then he closes his eyes and says a silent prayer that his family will be taken care of wherever they’re going. He knows where he’s going, where he is, and he can’t be with them.

Opening his eyes, the room spins a couple times while Joseph clears his vision, blinking it out. He double checks that he’s got everything right. He makes sure the safety is off. He puts the remaining bullets back

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in their box and then back into the wooden box, and covers them with the silk handkerchief. He locks the box with the small key and places both the box and the key on a bookshelf as he enters the living room. His heart is now beating out of his chest and drops of sweat are running down his back under his shirt. He walks past a leather sofa, to the bottom of the stairs. He stops and listens to make sure everyone is still asleep.

Sam sits casually on the sofa, one leg crossed over the other, watching as the little man approaches the stairs. He lays his head back, causing the leather on the couch to squeak. He breathes out heavily.

Joseph's shoulders slouch as the weight of his world begins to crush him. The lines on his face deepen. The bags under his tired eyes balloon from his face. He sighs louder than intended, and again holds his breath, listening up the stairs to make sure no one heard.

Joseph thinks back to what Sam said. He made Joseph out to be a thief. But he doesn't think it's because of the money he took. He thinks it's because he's about to steal three lives. Four if you count his own. "Fuck you." He stares at the ceiling, talking louder than he thinks he is.

His legs feel like lead as he lifts them one after the other on his plodding journey up the stairs to the bedrooms on the second floor. He drunkenly mumbles something only he understands. He looks up to the ceiling again, dizzy, talking to no one in particular.

Joseph nears the top of the stairs. This is where the girl scared him. He tries to remember her name, but can't. He'd spun around and the

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gun went off, opening up his jugular, saving his family from his brokenness.

She sat with him on the stairs while he died, not because she wanted to, but because it was her job. And then she pushed him to Sam. And he fell for what felt like a lifetime, maybe several. Maybe a hundred for all he knows.

Joseph smiles, taking some small satisfaction in knowing that he's doing the right thing. He'd hang himself in the garage and leave his family be if he could. He's thought of that a hundred times, but dismissed it, because that would leave his family alone to bear his shame. Everything will come out eventually and it will ruin their lives. Their friends will know. His wife's coworkers will find out. His boys will lose out on so much because of him. He can't leave everyone he loves behind to deal with his failures. It needs to be a clean slate for all of them. His last act can be one of generosity, compassion. He'll send his family to a better place.

Joseph's done his research. The internet is a horribly wonderful thing. Three bullets. Though he's loaded ten. Make it fast. His boys first, then his wife. Pillows used as a silencer, like they do in the movies. Supposedly, that kind of works. And then, finally, he can hang himself in the garage. It'll be easier at that point anyway, with the guilt and shock of what he just did. He's not sure he'd have the courage otherwise. It occurs to him for a split-second, that he may only be doing this to make things easier for himself.

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On the last step, Joseph overcomes his nerves. He steps up on the landing, turns and walks towards his eldest son's room. It's farther from the other bedrooms, the bathroom being in between, so the others shouldn't hear the first shot. He turns the handle slowly and pushes the door open, trying not to make the creaking noise he knows it will make. He enters, pushing the door closed, but not all the way, just enough to hopefully keep the sound of his actions from escaping.

Letting his eyes adjust to the dark, Joseph slowly walks through the room towards his son's bed. He drunkenly stumbles at one point on some dumbbells sitting in the middle of the room. He has to put his hand over his mouth to keep from crying out as he stubs a bare toe against the heavy iron.

When he gets to the bed, he sees Joseph Junior laying on his stomach, his head turned to the side, sound asleep. Joseph carefully reaches over his son and grabs one of the two unused pillows next to his head.

He watches for a couple minutes as his boy sleeps, remembering how he did the same thing nearly eighteen years ago while his son slept in his crib. He remembers how he'd get up several times each night to check on him, to make sure he was still breathing. For the first few months, he had a fear that something would happen during the night while he slept. They seem so fragile at that age. And he was a first-time father, with all of the self doubt, and over-worrying that comes with that.

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All of this makes Joseph feel dizzy. He needs to sit down as his legs begin to shake and get weak. He looks around, and the only thing he can do is gently sit on the side of the bed. Again, he checks the gun, making sure that the safety is off. Once he puts the pillow over his son's head, he'll only have a second to fire. He doesn't want to scare him. He doesn't want to wake him. He wants it to be peaceful. He wants it to be done with love. Compassion.

Joseph takes a long, rough breath and exhales slowly as his heart begins to beat faster. Up until now, the alcohol has kept his mind and body sedated enough not to show his anxiety. But as his adrenaline builds, the alcohol is being overcome, and Joseph's body starts to shake. Feeling weak and nervous, Joseph stands up, steadyng himself against the side of the bed with one hand.

And he immediately throws up.

“... huh... dad?”

Startled, with everything he's planned completely lost, Joseph drunkenly brings the gun up as quickly as he can, and without even bothering with the pillow, shoots his eldest son straight in the face.

But his aim is off, and the bullet passes through his son's jaw, completely obliterating his mouth and the lower left side of his face. Blood and bone splatter up into Joseph's eyes, partially blinding him. His son screams in pain as Joseph takes a step back and pulls the gun back up and shoots. But he misses completely. Then he fires again, hitting his son

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in the shoulder, causing him to scream out even more. His son pulls his body away from where his father is standing. The look on what remains of his face is absolute terror. His eyes are wide and bulging. They're bloodshot red. He crawls backwards towards the opposite side of the bed like an abused animal, not understanding what they did that's causing you to hurt them.

Joseph's hands are shaking so badly, he can barely hold the gun up in front of him, as he fires again. This time, by sheer chance, his aim is true, and the bullet passes through his son's eye, splattering brain and hair all over the wall behind him. His son instantly drops, with a gurgle of choking blood coming from his throat.

Joseph falls to his knees, screaming and crying, all his stealth thrown aside. Then he hears a sound in the hallway. With a crazed look in his bulging eyes, he takes a sharp breath and holds it, turning his head up high, listening.

The door opens slowly. A pair of eyes peak around the corner, it's his younger son. And then immediately, his wife pushes past the boy, shoving her son behind her body to protect him. She stops in the middle of the doorway, staring at her husband down on his knees at the side of their eldest son's bed. Joseph begins to cry and sob uncontrollably. His wife looks over and sees her son's bloody face, his eyes open wide and lifeless, staring off into nothing.

And she screams.

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As his blood pressure drops from shock, Joseph passes out, collapsing backward onto his son's floor, hitting his head on the metal dumbbell sitting just behind him.

And he falls.

Joseph's still aware of everything that's happening as his mind continues to fall beyond the bounds of his body. He lets out an endless scream that follows just behind him as he descends into the never-ending, cold, darkness below.

He will fall for what feels like several lifetimes, perhaps a hundred, until the Devil himself finally decides to catch him again, and return him to his kitchen table, ornate, wooden box, cold gun, and bullets. If he could think beyond the pain of what he believes he's just done, he'd wonder how many lifetimes he'll be falling this time.

A small, middle-aged man slouches at the dining room table staring at a wooden box with a gold lock attached. Sitting just off to his left is a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels and an empty shot glass. He pours another shot, and downs it, making a face to match the strong taste of the liquor.

8

“Hey wait up.” Chris calls out from the living room.

Sam stops in the foyer, closing his eyes and sighing to himself, his hand grasping the door handle. “Not this time, buddy.”

“Awe. Come on. Really?” Chris walks out of the living room and into the foyer, his skateboard under his arm. He pushes his long bangs out of his eyes, giving his brother a big smile. He knows very well where his brother is going, and wants to tag along and bring him a bit of joy before he sees what Rae’s done. Or more precisely, will do, as she hasn’t done it just yet.

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“Yeah. Sorry. I’m just going out for a walk.” Sam gives his brother a sad smile. “Some alone time.”

Chris cocks his head to the side, studying his brother’s eyes, seeing the sadness in his face. “You sure? We could just walk... and not talk? I promise I won’t be annoying.”

“I’m sure.” Sam nods quickly. “But hey... the old man wants to have a family picnic this weekend. Saturday. You should run out and see if you can find Gabe. He hasn’t been around for a while, and the old man’s complaining.”

“Sure.” Chris grins. “I’ll give it a shot... see if I can find him.”

“Yeah... see if you can.” Sam chuckles.

Chris reaches past his brother, opening the front door. “What’s with the disco jacket?”

Sam looks down at his jacket. It’s a shiny, black windbreaker with thin, red piping around the waist, collar, and breast pocket. “You don’t like it?”

“Doesn’t work with the jeans and boots.” Chris shakes his head and scrunches his nose. “You need to go full leather on the jacket.”

“Hmmm.” Sam inspects the jacket’s arms. “It’s for... an event. I didn’t want my good jacket to get ruined.”

Chris stops directly in front of his brother. “Hey. I’ll be around if... you know... you change your mind about hanging out.”

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Sam takes a deep breath. “Could you... not... be around just this once.” He tries making his smile a little brighter. “Just for today.” Sam looks away into the front yard. “I got a lot on my mind... a lot to think about.”

Chris stops just outside the door. His eyes go a little bluer as he nods his head. “Will do.”

“You sure?” Sam tilts his head down, looking into his brother’s eyes.

“Absolutely.” In one swift movement, Chris throws down his board and skates off down the front sidewalk. He does a trick at the end of the sidewalk, just before the road, flashes a big smile, and skates along the side of the road away from the downtown.

Sam follows, carefully closing the door behind him, but when he gets to the sidewalk alongside the street, he heads in the opposite direction. At the end of the street, at the corner, he stops for a few seconds to make his decision. He looks to his left, in the direction of his favorite, little coffee shop. He told Nyssa and Tegan to wait there for him, that he’d see them a little later than usual. He didn’t want them tagging along for this.

For a few seconds, he considers taking his father’s advice, abandoning his plans, and just hanging with his friends for the evening. He could simply not get involved. His father would appreciate that. But then

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he turns and heads off towards the river, down by the high school. His conversation with Joseph has stoked the fires.

As he walks, Sam thinks about Chris and smiles. He thinks of the recent mess that happened with Rae. She wanted help finding herself. She felt so lost and empty. So she asked Sam to help her save the world, or at least save the ones that needed saving. He tried, but it just isn't who he is. For a while, Sam actually thought they were doing it. It felt amazing to make that big of a difference in someone's life.

But it was all Chris.

And then Rae's path turned out to be full of destruction, and she ended up nearly destroying everyone, including herself.

So Chris took care of that too.

Sam knows he should be happy with the outcome, but all it did was show him how small his world really is. As selfish as it sounds, he enjoyed playing the hero for once. But he'll have to leave that role to others.

Sam gets to the edge of the small cemetery, just off the to the side of the high school. It's really only a few graves that date back to when Apple Valley was first founded. He walks through the cemetery, careful to walk around the graves, not over them, making sure not to disturb anyone, or even get too close and frighten some of them. The town's founders weren't always the best of people. Unfortunately, he knows a few of them quite well.

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He walks up and over a small ridge, and finds himself standing on the sand that makes up the edge of the river. This is the place where he finally realized it wasn't him that was saving the world. He smiles sadly as he remembers him and Rae, kneeling in the wet sand, attempting to save a boy who had just drowned. Rae was on the edge of the void, her void, frantically demanding that Sam reach in and pull the young man back. She was sitting with the boy, doing what she does, holding his hand and being the comfort he needed.

But when Sam looked in, the boy wasn't there. From his perspective, Rae sat there alone. They did this twice, with the same result. They even attended the boy's wake afterward. But then once Rae's breakdown had raged towards a frightening end, Chris stepped in.

Literally.

And that was the third time.

As Sam sat near the water, everything began to dissolve away, including Rae, and then Sam. Reality opened up, and a small boy stepped out. And as Sam faded to nothing, his little brother did what Sam was never really capable of doing. He saved the boy. He showed Sam what a miracle really looked like. He was the hero.

Sam feels warm and content for a minute. Even as he realized it wasn't him pulling the people back, he was happy to know that the one person who could do it, was doing it. He feels pride for his brother. But he also wonders why he doesn't do it more often. He told the twins that his

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brother wasn't much of a doer, that he tended to stay out of things, but that when he did get involved, he usually went big.

He saved the boy.

He saved Rae.

He saved everyone. Every where. Every when.

He went big.

“Hey there, killer.” The voice is weak and nasally.

Sam turns his head, looking over his shoulder. He watches as Sebastian comes plodding over the hill and onto the sand.

“Fancy seeing you here, old man. I wasn't expecting that.”

Sebastian casually looks around, trying to look confident and at ease.

“Seriously. Weird running into you out here.”

“Old man?” Sam frowns, but decides to put his sadness aside for the time being. He knows how today will end, but he'll try to enjoy a few moments here and there, until he ultimately can't.

“Ha. Yeah, sorry.” Sebastian grins. “I come down here when I need to get away... think.” He watches Sam closely. “So how about you?”

“I came to see you.” Sam's smile fades as he continues to stare out to the water.

Sebastian's face goes blank, his mouth hanging open as he stares at the side of Sam's face, unsure if he's serious. “You were looking for me?”

Sam turns his entire body to face the young man. “Sure. Why not?”

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Sam looks down at the young man. He's several inches taller than Sebastian, but half of that is due to the younger man's terrible posture. He seems to lack just as much confidence as he tries to portray.

"Well... alright." Sebastian tries to hide his discomfort at being stalked by a crazy person. "So now what... killer?"

"First." Sam drops his smile completely. "Don't call me that. Don't ever call me that."

The intensity on Sam's face causes Sebastian to take a step back. His foot catches in the damp sand, and he stumbles, nearly falling backward. "Alright. Sorry. No problem." He licks his lips nervously. "What was your name again?"

"Sam." His face remains stoic as he looks back out to the river.

"Okay. Sam." Sebastian swallows and coughs to clear his throat. "So... what's up then?" He kicks at the sand and glances out to the river. The sunlight sparkles off of the water as the sun begins to set. "You know... since you're the one looking for me." He attempts to regain some of his false confidence.

"You wanted help with something. Because you think we're alike." Sam turns his head to look at the short dock jutting out into the water. "We're not. But I'm here anyway." He can clearly see the the young boy sitting on the dock with Rae just before he drowned. He catches his sister's eye for just a split-second, before they both look away.

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“Oh, yeah... that’s cool.” Sebastian grins happily, showing his yellow teeth and pale gums. “I wasn’t sure if you were interested. You were so...” He trails off, not wanting to say ‘weird’.

Sam chuckles.

“So yeah. My sister and I. We... I thought you could come by... maybe hang out... maybe you could help us with something she needs.”

Sam lifts an eyebrow and looks over at Sebastian.

Sebastian exhales loudly. “We...” He glances around nervously and lowers his voice. “... I wanna be like you. But... it’s not so easy. I’m not there yet.” He looks down at his feet, a little embarrassed. “So I need your help.”

“Like me?” Sam’s voice is soft and monotone as he looks back to the dock. He watches as the young boy hops up and runs down the dock towards a big tree, intent on showing off for the pretty girl he’d met just that morning. Rae tells him to take it easy, he doesn’t need to impress anyone.

“Yeah.” Sebastian licks his lips. “I got something to do. But I can’t do it alone. I don’t know how. I... tried... and couldn’t do it. Just scared him is all I did.” He looks down to his feet, as if embarrassed. “So that’s where you come in.”

Sam nods, staring out at the ripples in the river caused by the young boy jumping in from the roof of the old high school. This is where

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he drowns. As Rae sits on the dock, she looks over to Sam with an incredible sadness on her face.

“And your sister? Winnifred?” Sam closes his eyes briefly and then opens them, making it all go away.

“Ha. I’m not sure she really knows what she wants.” He lies. Though it’s true that she’s uncertain. “And it doesn’t matter. She just wants... help... I guess. She’s having a hard time. Life’s kinda kicked her in the ass.”

“And how can I help?”

“I wanna be like you. I need to be like you. For my sister. It’s important.” Sebastian looks away. “And if I can’t... then I just need you to do it.”

“For your sister.” Sam looks across the river, watching the wind blow in the trees, wondering if Chris did as he said he would, and stayed away.

Sebastian steps closer. “I’m a killer.” His voice drops low. “Like you. But not like you.” He nervously smiles. “Yet.”

“You’re a killer?” Sam sounds bored. He knows everything there is to know about this young man and his sister.

“Animals.” Sebastian looks around, almost comically. “For practice. And for fun, I guess.” His eyes bulge with excitement as his heart begins beating faster. This is the first time he’s shared his secret with anyone other than Winnifred. “It was my sister’s idea. Work our way up. Baby steps.”

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Sam says nothing, just staring into Sebastian's eyes, watching the thoughts drift through his tiny brain.

"You know... mice, rabbits, some cats... stray dogs. A squirrel." He grins proudly. "We even stole a small dog from someone's backyard once. A fucking chihuahua." Sebastian chuckles oddly. "That dog wanted to kill me as much as I wanted to kill it."

"That's disgusting." Sam turns away from the younger man, understanding his sister's anger towards people like this. He imagines her exploding the young man and happily walking away.

Sam already knows all these things about Sebastian and Winnifred, but hearing it talked about so plainly, makes him feel dirty. He keeps clenching and then unclenching his fists. It's bad enough when they're in his place, but out here in the open, makes the reality of it feel that much more repulsive.

He'll ask Chris if he can do something about the chihuahua later. As a favor.

"Fuck you. We do it for a reason." Sebastian sounds angry. "It's not like I'm just some nut killing animals because I can." He walks to the front of Sam, but keeps his distance. "Jesus Christ. You killed two teenagers. They were still kids. But you murdered them." His anger pushes. "And you don't hear me calling you disgusting."

Sam's eyes seem to light up a little. "I told you. I've never killed or harmed anyone. It's not who I am."

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“But...” Sebastian’s anger-fueled courage fails.

“But nothing.” Sam’s voice gets darker.

Sebastian unconsciously takes a step back.

“Those two idiots had a grenade. They intended to shoot up a high school.” Sam turns and uses his head to motion to the school just off to the side. “This high school, right here.”

Sebastian looks over at the school and then back to Sam.

“I paid them a visit to save my sister the trouble. The grenade accidentally fell to the ground from the shelf they kept it on. It exploded. I walked out of the garage. They died. I went home. I had a sandwich, listened to Chopin’s Spring Waltz several times, and went to bed.” Sam’s words tumble from him as he works to control his anger. He hums a few bars of Spring Waltz to himself, remembering.

The two men stand in silence for a couple minutes. Sebastian goes over what he’s just been told, dismisses it completely, knowing that this guy just doesn’t want to admit to anything.

Sebastian slowly grins, feeling giddy by the thought of his friends getting blown up in their own garage. “Fine. If it makes you feel better, we can pretend you had nothing to do with it.”

Sam would roll his eyes if there were anyone to share it with. Instead he turns to Sebastian. “Would you like me to arrange a little chat between you and your deceased friends? They can tell you their part of the story. You may find it interesting. You might run. I’m betting on run.”

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“Man. That would be awesome.” But Sebastian shakes his head quickly. “Could you imagine? Would they be all blown up and burned and shit? Or would they just look like they always did?” He laughs. “Like a couple of dumbasses.” He snorts loudly.

“We could arrange either... or both.” Sam wishes he had his sister’s natural ability to intimidate and scare the hell out of people. He can do it easily out of anger. Or even in his place. But not here. He usually finds it overbearing and unnecessary.

“Ha.” Sebastian is actually starting to feel at ease. “You’re crazy, killer.”

Sam just stares coldly at him.

“Whoa.” Sebastian puts up a hand, pretending to hold Sam back. “Sorry. Slip of the tongue.”

“So what do you get out of killing defenseless animals? Small dogs. People’s pets.” Sam takes a half step closer to the young man. “Besides practice.”

“Nothing. It keeps my sister happy, I guess. She’s a weird chick. She’s got problems. Lots of problems.” Sebastian takes a step back, trying to make it look natural. “Why did you... you know... Karl and Brad?”

Sam immediately turns and steps over the small ridge, walking back towards the cemetery.

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“Hey.” Sebastian follows. “I didn’t mean anything. Really.” He catches up to Sam as they walk down the other side and into the cemetery. “I’m just interested.”

As Sebastian is about to walk right across one of the graves, Sam puts his arm out to stop him. “That way.” He points to a dirt trail that goes the long way around the graves.

“That’s cool.” Sebastian takes the lead as they both walk on the trail that leads around the small cemetery and to the sidewalk passing the high school. “Look. I just want your help.” He takes a risk, and grabs Sam’s arm to stop him, just as they pass to the other end of the high school.

Sam looks down at Sebastian’s hand, a definite intensity in his bright, blue eyes.

Sebastian immediately removes his hand. “Sorry.” His voice goes weak. “So are you gonna help or not?”

Sam stops for a second, looking at Sebastian with a blank, bored look on his face. “You’re an idiot.”

Sebastian decides to let the insult pass. “Fine. I’m an idiot. I’ve been told that my whole life. My sister tells me that several times a day.”

Sam continues walking past the school, towards the nearby park. He’s decided he wants to feed the ducks. It sounds like a welcome distraction from this.

“So what do you think?” Sebastian stays at his side.

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“I think you’re broken.”

Sebastian takes a deep breath, again letting the insult go. He needs this guy’s help, and pissing him off isn’t going to help. He’s just smart enough to realize that.

“Tell me. Why didn’t you join your friends in the garage? Go shoot up a bunch of innocent people at a high school. That sounds about your speed.”

Sebastian considers. It never actually occurred to him. “Because that was their thing, not mine. Plus... I’d be dead right now.” He smiles and pushes out at Sam with his hand. “Right?”

Sam gives him a blank look.

“And anyway, that’s not what I need.” Sebastian frowns, pushing out his lips. “That’s not what my sister needs. I’m doing this all for her, you know.” His face changes, going vacant. “I didn’t really want to at first. I mean... fuck her, she’s just my stupid sister. But she’s a bossy bitch. Older sister... thinks she knows it all.”

Sam knows exactly what he means. He turns away, steps off the sidewalk, and begins walking across the lawn, near the playground, towards the small pond in the park. He’ll sit on the bench and feed the ducks. “You intend to kill someone. Not an animal. But a someone. Correct?”

Sebastian just glances around nervously, making sure no one’s in ear shot.

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“So who is it you need... gone?” Sam feels sickened just thinking about it. “And how would that help your sister... who sounds like a wonderful human being by the way?”

Sebastian doesn’t say anything at first, giving it some thought, deciding what this lunatic needs to know. Trying to figure out if it would scare him away, or maybe even get him excited for another easy kill. He knows he doesn’t do it for money. He didn’t rob Brad’s place. Apparently he didn’t take anything. And he hasn’t asked Sebastian for anything. Winnifred seems to think he’s a bit of a do-gooder, saving the people at the school, maybe even saving her if given the opportunity. Or that he was simply in the right place at the right time.

Sebastian thinks that even if he was simply in the right place at the right time, this nut may now consider himself a bit of a vigilante. Maybe even a hero. Which still works for them. Or so he hopes. “Doesn’t matter. Just someone getting in the way.” He looks away not wanting to say any more than he has to.

As they approach the pond, Sam looks up the small slope of grass and sees his brother, Michael, sitting on a swing, looking incredibly out of his element. “You really want to go there? To that place? My place?” He looks over to Sebastian. “There’s no going back.”

Sebastian scrunches his eyebrows, and scratches his head. “Jesus Christ. Yes. Yes. Yes. I wouldn’t be wasting all this... fucking time... with

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you if I didn't. Jesus!" He stands there shaking his head, gritting his teeth, looking upset. "So? Are you fucking gonna help or not?"

Sam stops, still looking directly at his brother on the swing, gently pushing himself back and forth. Then he turns, in an instant, to Sebastian, with a sparkle in his eye and a huge grin on his face. "Yes. Of course I will."

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“Awesome!” Sebastian pumps a fist in the air. “I can’t wait to tell Winni. She’s gonna be so stoked.”

Barely listening, Sam walks away towards the swings where his brother is sitting. Sebastian follows close behind, a stupid grin on his long face, and a slight skip in his lanky walk.

“So then... what’s the plan?” Sam continues towards the swings. He sounds more upbeat since seeing his brother looking down the hill at them. He knows why he’s here, and what he wants to talk about, but Sam

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is just pleased to not be alone with Sebastian for a few minutes. He thinks of it as a temporary reprieve from an afternoon filled with chores.

“My house. In an hour or so. We pretty much already have things ready. You just need to... you know...”

Sam stops, looking over at Sebastian. “Your house?” He scrunches up his eyebrows, dreading the thought.

“Yeah, my mom’s staying the night at her loser boyfriend’s. So we’ll have the place to ourselves.”

“Your mom’s house.” Sam tries a smile. “In an hour.”

“What’s the problem. Yeah.” Sebastian grins bizarrely, looking more like a yellow-toothed dog, than a young man.

Sam turns and continues walking. “And you already have your... person.”

“Yep.” Sebastian tries smiling, but it comes out more sad than happy. “Like I said... we’re ready.”

“It’s not going to be me, is it?” Sam would love for that to be true. It would make things much more interesting. “I’m not being lured to my own demise?”

Sebastian gives Sam an odd look. “Of course not. What would that accomplish?”

As they approach the swings, Michael hops off and walks up to his brother, tapping him on the chest with the back of his hand. “Nice jacket.

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You got a date tonight?” He chuckles, completely ignoring his brother’s little friend. “You got a bit of a Bee Gees vibe going on.”

“I didn’t take you as the swing type.” Sam motions with his eyes towards the swing, still bobbing back and forth. “Even when we were kids you were more of a monkey bars type.”

Michael shrugs and looks around. “Modern times. No monkey bars over cement anymore.” He shakes his head. “Too dangerous.”

“Now sitting in the sandbox... I could picture that for sure.” Sam jokes.

“Ha.” Michael laughs and pushes his brother hard, straight in the chest.

Sebastian isn’t amused by this silly conversation. He looks at Sam, with a confident grin on his face, still excited that Sam is going to help them. He nudges Sam, his new best friend. “So, who the fuck’s this guy?” And he gives Michael a sneering look.

Michael takes a half step closer to Sebastian, showing his full six foot four. “I’m the guy that’s gonna kick your skinny ass if you don’t watch out.”

A cold chill goes through Sebastian, and he takes a step away from both brothers.

“This is Michael. My brother.” Sam looks back and forth between the two men, enjoying the awkwardness. “Mikey. This is... Satan.”

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Michael's face remains hard, but his eyes move to his brother, and the smallest of smiles shows on his face.

“Sebastian.” The young man gives Sam an irritated look. “Satan’s a nickname.”

Michael laughs.

“Yeah... well... I don’t need this shit.” Flustered and embarrassed, Sebastian takes a couple quick steps off to the side, his eyes still on Michael, and then he attempts to strut away like nothing happened.

“Hey.” Sam calls out. “Where should I meet you? What’s your address?”

Sebastian turns but continues walking backwards. “Big red house on the corner of Whitehurst and Elm. One thirteen Whitehurst. One hour.” He looks at his watch. “Around seven thirty.” He spins and walks away. “Don’t be late.”

Michael give his brother another playful push in the chest. “So, what’s that all about?” He chuckles. “You know that guy probably needs a good ass kicking.”

Sam smiles. “Yeah... I got that handled.” He glances at Sebastian as he walks away.

Both brothers start walking past the swings, towards a couple benches sitting off to the side.

“So. Twice in one day.” Sam gives his brother a sideways glance. “What’s up?”

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“Like I said… just checking on dad. And you, to be honest.”

Michael clears his throat. “I’m a little concerned.”

“About?”

Michael extends his arms and raises both palms. “Everything.”

Then he points to his brother. “And you, of course.”

Sam stops near the first bench. He wipes a few leaves from it with his hand and sits down. “Hmmm.” He’s disappointed that all the ducks remain down by the pond. Sometimes they’ll come up this far if it looks like they’re going to get a handout.

Michael sits down next to him, leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Something’s goin on. I can feel it. Gabe too. But we don’t know what it is.” He frowns. “And you have to admit… that’s pretty unusual.”

“And what does it have to do with me?”

“It’s all around you. That much I can tell.”

Sam thinks of the odd occurrences that’s he’s felt and that no one else seems to notice. Not even Rae. “And you have no idea what it is?”

“No.” Michael looks down to the pond at the bottom of the hill. He makes some vague noises trying to lure some ducks up towards them. He knows his brother loves the ducks.

“Rae?” Sam glances over to his brother. Then he immediately shakes his head. “Chris. He’s doing something.”

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“Chris.” Michael gives it a few seconds thought. “Yeah, maybe. Remember some of the weird shit he’d do when we were kids?” He frowns, remembering.

Sam nods, wondering if his brother has been having the same experiences that he’s been having. “Have you actually seen it... or felt it? Experienced it?”

Michael shakes his head. “Not exactly. I can just tell that something isn’t right. And it centers on you. Something that affects everything.” Now he feels like his brother probably knows more than he’s saying. He won’t press things at the moment. He’ll let Sam come to him when he’s ready.

“Did you ask the old man?”

“Kinda.” Michael looks to his brother. “This morning before you came by. He just shrugged it off, and didn’t really want to talk about it. He knows something... he’s just not talking.” He considers calling Sam out too, but decides not to. Their relationship has always been difficult, and he’d rather not go there today.

“So that’s what brought you by the house? Check on dad? Check on me?”

“Well... at first, I came to check up on Rae. You know... make sure she’s in a good place.” Michael glances sideways at his brother. “I thought maybe she was... still acting up.”

“And?”

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Michael half shrugs. “This doesn’t feel like her. I know she recently killed everybody... but this is different. Bigger I’d say, if that’s possible.” He glances over at his brother, his face serious. “And Chris’ been around a lot. So I assumed everything must be okay with her.”

“So ask him. Ask her.” Sam gives his brother a knowing look. “Since when don’t you just corner someone and get what you need?”

“Ha.” Michael laughs. “Yeah, right. No way I’m cornering Rae to ask her if she’s gone back to stomping on reality. I don’t need that battle right now.”

“She’s five foot nothing and ninety-five pounds.” Sam grins. “Looks like she’s still in the eighth grade.”

“Ha. Ha.” Michael looks down to the pond and makes some more duck noises. “I haven’t cornered you either, you know.”

“Hmmm. And I appreciate that.” Sam chuckles. “Between you and me... Rae still has her moments. She hides it. But she’s been doing the occasional stomp when she thinks no one’s looking.”

“Yeah. But whatever this is... it’s more than the occasional stomp.” He stops, considering. “And Chris...” He trails off, not sure what to even think or say.

“Yeah... and Chris.” Sam gets it. “One. Odd. Super complicated. Annoyingly annoying. What you see... is what he wants you to see. Duck.”

Both brothers laugh.

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Michael shakes his head, a big grin on his face. “So yeah... that’s not happening.”

They laugh some more, catching up on recent events, and eventually breaking out some of the funnier family stories. They spend time just hanging out, being brothers. They were never that close, but they were always brothers. And they always had each other’s backs.

After many stories, mainly concerning Rae or the old man, and a lot of laughter, Sam reaches over and slaps his brother’s thigh with the back of his hand. “So.” He smiles as Michael grimaces and rubs his leg through his jeans.

“So nothing.” Michael stands up and stretches. He was right to come to Sam. He can see the sadness in his brother’s eyes, even through the laughter. He knows something’s going on with his brother. “Look. If you need something... if something gets...”

“I know. And thank you.” Sam smiles up at his brother.

“Hey. That’s what big brothers are for.” Michael starts walking away towards the sunlight shining through a small group of trees behind them.

“I’m the big brother.” Sam stands up, watching as Michael disappears into the light.

“Tall brother. I meant... that’s what tall brothers are for.” Michael calls out from nowhere. “So, if you can’t reach something... you know, on

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the top shelf... you just let me know.” He laughs wildly, letting the sound of his voice melt away into the shining sunlight. “This was fun.”

Sam shakes his head, smiling. He had a good time just hanging out. He makes a mental note to do this with Gabe sometime in the near future. To check that one off his bucket list.

Sam breathes in long and deep. It’s gotten dark. He didn’t realize he and Michael had been reminiscing for so long. He walks across the playground, and down the sidewalk. Apple Valley is a small town. And it’s only a few blocks to Whitehurst and Elm, but he decides to take the long way in an effort to avoid the inevitable. He sighs deeply to himself, letting his smile drop as he walks and thinks.

After a twenty-minute walk, Sam arrives at Sebastian’s house. It’s an older house with three stories. The siding was probably once bright red, but has faded considerably. It’s a little rundown, but nice. At the side of the house there’s a gap leading to the backyard, and a detached garage on the other side of the gap.

“Hmmm.” Sam takes a deep breath, breathing out heavily as he works to put a passable smile on his face.

He doesn’t see any lights on in the house. But when he looks to the garage, he notices a dim, flickering light coming through the side window, facing the house. He walks over to the small door on the side of the garage and knocks in a playful, musical pattern. He chuckles. It’s Gabriel’s signature knock.

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Not waiting for anyone to answer, Sam opens the door and steps in, pulling the door closed behind him. He sees a few lit candles sitting on a dusty, old workbench near the window. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Sebastian's sister hastily slip out another door in the back of the garage, like she's escaping from something.

Sitting on an old, beat-up, faux-leather couch against the far wall is Sebastian. He has his head leaning back, his eyes closed. He looks completely worn out, like he's resting after a long day.

“So...” Sam looks the young man up and down, and then glances around the room, and to the wall behind him. “... what the hell is this all about...what happened to you?”

Sebastian says nothing. He doesn't move.

Sam purses his lips and shakes his head, looking to the shadows remaining ever so still in the corners of the garage. He looks to the middle of the couch, and blinks away what he sees, not wanting to see it. “So. This is the place where we take our first steps into the land of the broken.” Sam's voice is mocking.

“I have no idea what that means.” Sebastian moves his head forward, opening his eyes. “Where've you been... you fucking nutcase?” He doesn't care anymore. He's tired of playing nice with Sam. Plus, he's just plain tired.

“Language, Sebastian. Language.” Sam walks over to the couch and sits down on the opposite end, where the shadows begin. “I was

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having a family moment with my brother. You met him. Big guy. Curly hair. An in-your-face attitude.” He chuckles. “It was nice. Warm. Friendly. We tend to have an… adversarial … relationship.”

“It’s been three hours, you fuck.” Something has given Sebastian some courage, as if he has nothing further to lose.

“Don’t push your luck, Sebastian.” Sam’s voice goes hard. “I’m not enjoying the attitude.”

Sebastian moves his mouth to respond in the most brutal way possible, but thinks twice, and decides against it.

“So. What’s the plan… killer.” Sam’s voice remains mocking. “And where’s your sister off to in such a hurry?” He glances over to the door in the back of the garage. “She looked a mess.” He’s tempted to peek out back, but now would be too soon. “This changes everything.”

Sebastian ignores the sarcasm. “Fuck her. I don’t know what her deal is.” He reaches down to the side of the couch, retrieving a half-empty bottle of vodka. He unscrews the cap. “So now it’s just you and me.” The bottle is where the courage came from.

“We won’t be needing that.” Sam uses a twirling finger to motion for him to screw the cap back on and put the bottle down.

With the bottle almost to his lips, Sebastian pulls it back down, staring at Sam, deciding what to do. “Whatever.” He screws the cap back on and sets the bottle down on the cement floor next to the couch.

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“What’s with you little psychos and your garages?” Sam looks around and sees a pillow and some neatly folded white sheets sitting on the bench, near the candles. “The last time I was in someone’s garage...” He makes an explosive motion with both hands. “Kaboom.”

Sebastian ignores him, saying nothing, just sitting there, staring straight ahead, making it a point to show off his bad mood.

“Sorry.” Sam smiles politely, letting his voice regain its natural tone. “So what’s the plan now?” He wonders if he should continue as he had planned, or go with things as they are.

Sebastian blinks several times, wildly, like he’s trying to clear his eyes, his mind. He brings his hands up to the side of his head and holds it tightly, his knuckles massaging his temples. He has an excruciating headache. It feels like his head is going to explode. And then he quickly drops his hands and shudders, letting out a short whine.

Sam just watches.

“We...” Sebastian’s voice cracks. He looks confused. “... we... just do it.”

“Ah.” Sam’s face remains blank. “I see.”

Sebastian looks over at the workbench. He licks his lips nervously. The facade of confidence he had shown when Sam first walked in has been completely lost. The alcohol has been overcome. The only thing carrying him onward at this time is the adrenaline that came with the excitement of Sam finally arriving.

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“And where is our...” Sam’s voice becomes even more serious. “... person?”

“In... in the house.” Sebastian squirms in his seat, looking away from Sam and to his feet. He suddenly looks even more nervous than usual. That, and the confusion, makes him look weak and defeated. He flexes his fingers on both hands trying to get his blood flowing.

“Just hanging out, I suppose. Maybe enjoying a rerun of their favorite show? A short nap?” Sam’s voice goes stone cold. “Their last meal?”

Sebastian ignores Sam’s ramblings. He’s too busy going over things in his head to deal with this loony bastard. If Sebastian didn’t need him to do this, he’d slit his throat and be done with his nonsense. At least, that’s what he tells himself.

“And when will your sister be joining us?” Sam looks to the back door.

“I’m in charge. We’re not waiting for her.” Sebastian’s voice shows some anger. “She’s scared. Maybe she changed her mind. I don’t know.” His eyes shift around the room, nervously. “I’m... I’m not sure.”

“Or maybe she’s the smart one.” Sam says flatly. “Actually, chances are... she’s the smart one.”

“No! She’s just being weak right now.” Sebastian snarls as he leans forward on the couch, working up some last-minute courage.

Sam sighs. “Okay. It’s just you and me, then.”

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Sebastian shakes his head, mumbling. “She abandoned me. She led me down this path... and then she just fucking abandoned me.”

“Hmmm.” Sam thinks he should check in on Rae after this. “Just out of curiosity, Sebastian...” Sam loses the phony grin, and condescending voice. “... what will all this get you?” He motions towards the workbench, sheets, and pillow. “Harming this person. What will it get you... not Winnifred... you?”

Sebastian turns his body on the couch so that he can look right into Sam’s face. “It’s for my sister. She needs this. She’s going insane. She is insane.” He pauses, thinking. “I don’t hate her... I don’t like her... but I don’t hate her.”

Sam’s face remains blank.

“I do this... and it’s done. She leaves me be. Leaves me alone.” He licks his dry lips and makes a nasty, smiling face. “Then I’m not a loser. She thinks I’m a loser... that I was a mistake... that I have no purpose.” Again, he thinks. “But this’ll prove that she’s full of shit. She gets what she wants... what she needs... and... and I did something. I win. I’m not a loser. I’m a winner.”

Sam still says nothing.

“And hey... I’ll be someone.” He grins ugly. “Maybe I’ll get to meet my god... my devil. He’ll appreciate what I’ve done. I’m not a loser. I’m a winner.” A string of drool drops from the corner of his mouth.

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Sam glances over at the pillow and the clean, white sheets. “Those are for our person?”

Sebastian nods vigorously, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“That’s very kind of you to give them a pillow and clean sheets before you murder them.” Sam’s voice goes back to mocking.

Sebastian doesn’t even notice the sarcasm. He uses the back of his hand to wipe the sweat from his forehead. Then he wipes his hand on his pants. “So... you ready? Or do you need some of this?” He picks up the bottle of vodka and holds it out to Sam.

“No thank you.” Sam puts up a hand. “Again... out of curiosity... what will you do when you meet your... devil?”

Sebastian scrunches up his whole face. “It was just a fuckin’ goof.” He squints his eyes at Sam. “Pay attention and stop being such a smart ass about everything.”

“Well then... consider your devil met.” Sam’s voice becomes even deeper and hollow sounding, bouncing around the garage. He’s reminded of Rae. “Nice to meet you, Sebastian. We have a long road ahead of us.”

Sebastian jumps a little, confused. A series of cold shivers goes through his body, leaving it weak and rubbery. Then his anger surfaces, his face getting red. “You’re a fucking lunatic.”

“But you’re wrong...” Sam’s eyes get brighter, lighting up the shadows around him. “... I don’t appreciate what you’ve done.”

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Sebastian hops up from the couch, his heart beating heavy. An icy coldness goes through his body as he begins to sweat heavily. “Get the fuck outa here!” His voice is angry, but scared. It cracks and squeaks. “I said... get the fuck outa here!” He screams at the top of his lungs. “Now!”

Sam remains seated on the couch. He slowly crosses one leg comfortably over the other, letting Sebastian know that he isn’t leaving.

Sebastian stands there, his arm shaking as he continues pointing towards the side door of the garage, where Sam had come in. He has an angry, out-of-control look on his face. His breathing has become hard and labored. Drops of sweat roll down from his temples, dropping to his shirt.

“You said... you’d be a winner. No longer the loser your sister thinks you are.” Sam’s eyes light up even more, causing all the darkness in the room to retreat and hide within itself. “The loser you believe yourself to be.” His entire body instantly lights up with flames as great, fiery wings spring from his back with a loud whoosh, burning away the couch beneath him as he slowly stands up. “The loser you are.” His voice is so deep it booms and echoes. The entire garage shakes and the candles burn out with a short hiss.

Sebastian loses control and wets himself. He’s not even aware that it’s happening. He just stands there as his pants get wetter and wetter. Then his legs get weak and he drops to his knees, trembling and scared. He lowers his head and throws up several times. His body convulses and massive tears drip from his eyes into the vomit in front of him.

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The inner walls and upper rafters of the garage catch fire and begin to fill the area with thick, dark smoke.

Sebastian is crying and screaming, making obscene noises of pain and fear. His body is weak and trembling. He's coughing and choking from the smoke.

“You’re wrong, you know. I’m not a killer. Even now, I’m not a killer. I don’t relish in anyone’s pain. I don’t bring these things to you.” He pulls his wings in, and immediately lets his body cool.

His point has been made. The show is over.

The burning garage stops burning. The smoke pulls itself into the darkness as if it were never there. The couch is back. “People like you... broken, sad people... you bring these things upon yourself.”

Sebastian’s crying grows more out of control. He starts sobbing and finds it difficult to catch his breath. Whatever strength remaining in his legs fails. He falls face first into his own vomit, just lying there, staring off into nothing.

“And my sister thinks she’s the scary one.” Sam sighs, not sure how he actually feels about that. And mimicking her, he tilts his head to the side, looking to the far wall, by the side door. “And I’m fairly certain she still is.”

Sebastian makes a whimpering sound and throws up a little more, letting it pool on the floor directly in front of his mouth.

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Sam pulls his long, brown hair back behind his ears, smoothing it down with his hands. He straightens the jacket he wore especially for his night out. He didn't want to sully his comfortable, leather one. He didn't want it to reek of this encounter. "Go out and find yourself, Sebastian. Wander... and look." He glances down at the trembling mass laying at his feet. "You are listening... right?"

Sebastian's crying grows loud and raw. Sliding his cheek in his own vomit, he looks up at Sam. He doesn't see the great, flaming god. He only sees the same man from the coffee shop. The same man from down by the river. The same playful smile and bright, blue eyes.

"I'll take that as a yes." Sam flicks some ashes from the cuff of his jacket as he turns away and walks to the back door of the garage, stopping just before the door. "Find yourself, Sebastian. The real you..." He opens the door and steps out. "... not this creature you've become."

10

Sam carefully closes the small door in the back of the garage and walks out into Sebastian's backyard. It's a big yard with an old, rusty shed sitting off to the side. The lawn is made from patches of pale greens and bare brown spots. Towards the back, in the corner, is a big oak tree with a home-made wooden swing hanging from thick ropes.

Sebastian's sister is sitting on the swing, using her feet to push it gently back and forth, just a lazy foot in both directions. Her head is held low as she cries softly.

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Sam straightens his jacket and wipes a few more ashes from his sleeves. Then something catches his eye just off to the corner of the garage, towards the house. He turns his head to his left, following something as it passes. It's a memory of something that both has and hasn't yet happened. Sam turns away as the sadness in his eyes painfully moves across his entire face. He takes a deep breath, exhaling slowly, preparing for what comes next.

He walks farther back in the yard, towards the young woman crying on the swing. He purposely clears his throat when he's about halfway there, to give her warning that she's no longer alone with her sadness.

He stops for a brief couple of seconds, choking back the utter contempt he's feeling. Then he remembers to restart his heart, to start his breathing, and he continues his short walk to the swing.

The young woman looks up, and quickly uses the sleeves of her hoodie to wipe the tears from her eyes. She gives Sam a frightened look, and then glances back to the garage. "Oh God. Did you..." The tears well in her eyes as they bulge with pain. She looks ready to drop to the ground, unable to hold herself up any longer.

Sam's contempt doubles, causing his heart to stutter a few times before returning to normal. He tries a smile, but fails.

"Hello. And no." Sam's face goes grim. "I..." He searches for the right words. "... convinced... your brother to take another path. That you

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had the right idea... you know... to abandon..." He bounces his head side to side, searching. "... your plans." It proves to be a very difficult sentence for Sam to craft without giving it all away before the time is right.

She stares at him blankly, wiping more tears on her sleeves. "So." She's unsure what to say. "Nothing happened then. Nothing... bad?" Her voice is weak and raw.

"Hmmm. I don't think so." He considers. "Just thought provoking, I would think." Sam grins, this time successfully. He can almost see her thought process as she looks to the garage, then to the ground at her feet, and finally back at Sam. She does this several times as she tries working out her next move. "It's a matter of perspective, I suppose."

The young woman takes a deep breath, rough from all the crying. And deciding that the worst hasn't happened just yet, she attempts a sad smile.

"Let's start again." Sam steps in closer, but not too close. He doesn't want to spook her. "Hi, I'm Sam. We met at the coffee shop. You told me the most fascinating thing." He grins wildly. "That you know what I am." His eyes go big as his smile slowly grows wider.

She feels a dizziness go through her whole body. Confusion. A cold sweat go through her body from head to toe. "Hi." Her voice is soft, uncertain. She appears to have lost the confidence she showed in their initial meeting. That, or she's pretending.

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“So. You okay?” Sam pulls a red, silk handkerchief from his breast pocket, and after staring at it for a few seconds, contemplating, holds it out to the young woman. “Winnifred, right?”

She takes a sharp breath and holds it for a split second. “I’m surprised he told you.”

“He didn’t.” Sam looks back to the garage.

“Oh. Yeah. Of course.” The young woman hesitates for a few seconds, trying to regain her smile, and then leans forward, extending her hand. “My friends call me Fred.” The sadness in her eyes is forced across her face. Her hand trembles slightly. She’s unsure whether she wants to actually touch him, but is willing to do so to further her needs.

“Fred?” Sam takes a quick glance at her hand, and turns, walking in a small circle, looking up into the big tree, directly above them. “My family used to have a tree kind of like this. But it would’ve made this one look small.”

Fred awkwardly pulls back her hand and nods silently. “I hate Winnifred. So I go by Fred.” She chuckles hoarsely. “My mom thinks interesting names give people character. But I hate it.”

“One day the tree got sick and threatened to harm all the other trees around it. So my old man took a chainsaw to it.” Sam raises his eyebrows. “Or maybe it was an axe.” He shrugs. “His stories change with each telling. Same story. Small differences.”

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Fred looks up, directly above her head, into the green leaves of the tree, trying to figure out what he's babbling about. Deciding how much she should pretend to care.

Sam looks back to the garage. "Is it just the three of you then? You. Sebastian. And mom?" He turns back to Fred.

Fred purses her lips, considering. "Yeah. Just us. Me and Bash." She motions towards the garage with her eyes. "Sebastian. It's really just the two of us." She looks away for a second, thinking. "Mom's never around. She always has some new boyfriend that comes before us. It's always been that way."

Sam nods.

"How about you?"

"One father. One sister. Older. Three younger brothers."

"No mother?"

Sam looks away, searching for something to sit down on.

Fred smiles weakly, realizing that he has no answer for her question. "I met your sister, but..." A shiver goes down her spine. "... for some reason, I thought you'd be an only child."

"A one of a kind." Sam bulges his eyes, grinning, deciding to make the best of a nasty situation. He can learn a lot from Chris. He makes a note to take more walks with his youngest brother. "Nope. There's five of us. Plus the old man."

She nods. "Is your name really Sam?"

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“Of course. Samael actually.” Sam scrunches his eyebrows together. “Don’t I look like a Sam?”

“You look like a John.” Fred smiles.

“And what does a John look like that a Sam doesn’t?”

“I don’t know.” She looks away, blushing. “Tall, dark, and handsome.” Out of the corner of her eye, she looks closely at his face. “Or in your case, tall, fair, and handsome. Always taking control of everything around him. That’s a John.”

Sam walks a few feet towards a short, wire fence and grabs a beat-up, old lawn chair. He pulls the chair closer to the tree swing. “May I?” He puts a hand out, and motions with his eyes to the handkerchief he’d given her earlier.

She hands the handkerchief back to Sam. “I’d always thought only old men carried handkerchiefs.”

“I’m older than I look.” He uses it to wipe the chair off and then sits down, before shaking out the handkerchief and neatly tucking it back into his breast pocket. “I just have a good skin care routine.” He begins to fiddle with the handkerchief, trying to get it to sit in his pocket just right.

She fakes a smile.

“And you’re describing my brother, Michael.” He gives her a broad smile. “Not me. I prefer to stand off in the back and watch things. Quietly figuring things out. Letting them play out until I’m called upon.”

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“Yeah, that sounds more like a Sam.” Fred smirks, starting to feel a little more herself. She’s almost happy that he hasn’t harmed anyone yet, and she doesn’t think that he’s here to hurt her either. “Well then, I probably have the wrong brother.”

Sam chuckles. “No. I’m sorry. You got the right brother.” He gives up on the handkerchief, and looks up innocently.

Fred holds back her excitement, and lets out a long, steady breath. “Yeah... I kinda thought so.”

“Because you know what I am.” Sam winks, pushing her farther down the path she’s chosen.

At first, Fred’s face goes pale, afraid that Sam’s about to take this conversation directly to the point. She’s not ready for that. She wants to feel him out first. If he would have walked straight back here and murdered her, that would have been okay. But if he intends to sit here discussing the very nature of what he is, and attempt to figure out how he’s supposed to help, she’s not sure she’s willing to have that conversation just yet. That frightens her. She’s still working to overcome the stress of what nearly happened in the garage before he arrived. She’s still trying to figure out what she really wants.

Sam grins and shrugs, raising his eyebrows.

Fred laughs loud and hollow, not a real laugh, but one constructed to make her seem likable and friendly. She’s used that laugh many times to put people at ease, and get what she wants from them.

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“Look. I don’t want to cause you any distress, since we’re just getting to know one another... but I need to ask...” Sam’s face goes serious.

And here it is. Fred wants to panic. Her heart starts beating heavy in her chest. She feels beads of sweat start to build. She wants to get angry and yell at him that it’s too soon, not yet. She takes a deep breath, exhaling slowly. She looks ready to burst into tears. She doesn’t really want to talk about it. Not right now. Not with someone she barely knows.

Sam shakes his head. “No. No. No.” He smiles gently, putting a hand up in front of him, hoping to put her at ease. “Please. I only want to ask why... you... wanted me to come here tonight? Not your brother... you. I’ve already heard his nonsense.”

Fred is silent for a couple minutes as she fights to stay in control. She’s on edge. She feels like she could break down at any second. She buys time by casually pushing herself back and forth on the swing, thinking.

Sam can see constructed tears building in the corners of her eyes. His contempt silently returns. He knows they are both acting out their scenes. He almost finds that interesting.

Fred knows why her brother asked the stranger here. He asked so that Sam could help them do something truly horrible. But Fred’s intentions changed, to some degree, when she realized what he was. It was at that coffee shop, when she looked into his eyes and saw what was

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hiding inside. She either saw it. Or he showed her. She feels like, either way she wins.

“Sebastian said he wanted my help. That he couldn’t do something without me. But you wanted me to come for a different reason.” Again, Sam bounces his head back and forth, shoulder to shoulder, considering. “But also the same reason. Right?” He smiles gently. “Because you think you know what I am.” He purposely keeps saying this because he can feel the anxiety it causes. “So you have two outs... and you’re not sure which to take.”

Fred nods, afraid to speak. She has to work up the nerve, swallowing several times, and clearing her throat. “Bash lacks courage. That’s the only reason he dragged me into this, really. And he dragged you in too, I suppose. He doesn’t know how to do anything. He doesn’t have the ability to do anything by himself. I didn’t want any part of this.”

Sam keeps his face friendly. “He... dragged you... into it.” He says it slowly, to let her see better what she’s actually telling him.

She nods, considering where to go with this. She’s not used to playing the part of the innocent who is asking for help. She usually manipulates from behind the scenes, letting her idiot brother do all the work. She learned that from her mother. “Bash’s stupid friends... Karl and Brad...”

“We met.”

Fred nods quickly. “We saw you come out of the garage...”

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Sam puts up a hand to stop her. “You knew they were going to murder people... but you...” He sees the beginnings of panic show on her face, and stops. “I’m sorry. Please. Go on.”

But before she can, the world instantly goes black and pauses. There are three thundering booms that echo throughout reality. Sam glances around the yard, back towards the garage, and then at Fred. She’s leaning forward, with a tear halfway down her cheek and her mouth half open.

Sam sits for several seconds in the darkness, thinking. The stars have dimmed to near black. The moon is low and flickering wildly like a movie fighting to get out of a two-frame loop.

Then the world suddenly lights up in a series of bright, white flashes as if the sun is exploding over and over again. Sam has to shield his face, the brightness temporarily blinding him. Then, everything returns to normal so quickly, that it actually startles him, and he finds himself holding his breath and without a heartbeat.

Fred sniffs loudly as the tear drips from her face. “There was nothing I could do. I only found out when we were sitting there on the side of the street in Bash’s piece-of-shit car.” She pretends to show some remorse with a well-practiced lie.

Sam just stares at her as he finds his heartbeat again. He has to blink his eyes several times to adjust to the sudden absence of the

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unnaturally bright light. The light was so bright, it hurt. It actually hurt. It's the first time he's actually felt physical pain. He doesn't like it.

Fred takes Sam's silence as judgement and lets out a series of contrived whimpers. She needs him to be on her side. She takes a rough breath, fighting back the tears as they begin to build for real. She wonders what abilities he has, and if all this work is for nothing.

Sam works to recover. "Okay. So. Where were we?" He glances back towards the garage. "Sebastian said you saw me come out of the garage that day. Out of the fire."

She nods her head vigorously, pleased that she hasn't lost him. "For a second it looked..."

"The garage was on fire behind me. Probably looked like I was on fire too." Sam chuckles. He looks to the sky to make sure the moon is still there, and he does a quick count of the stars noticing that quite a few are missing. Hundreds of thousands.

"Yeah. Kind of." Fred wipes more tears on her sleeves. Her face has gotten red and puffy. She looks down, unsure what more to say. She really needs some space, some time to think this out better, to prepare.

"Then you guys find me at the coffee shop. Sebastian approaches. Recruits me. And here I am."

Fred looks up at Sam, staring into his big, blue eyes. "Yeah. That sounds about right." The uncertainty in her voice is obvious.

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“I know what he wanted? But what did you want?” Sam smiles gently. “Your brother doesn’t see me the same way you do. Am I right?” He laughs softly. “I’m actually pretty sure of that. But then again...”

“You know what Bash wanted from you? He told you?” She suddenly looks incredibly nervous, like she’s about to jump from the swing and run. She momentarily fears that he’s just toying with her, and that he really is out here to murder her.

“No. That’s not why I’m here. Not really my thing.”

Only half listening, her mind racing to find the answer, Fred exhales loudly, not realizing that she’d been holding her breath. She looks over to the garage. “I... I wanted your help.” She pushes the words out, finding them difficult to say.

“As did your brother.” Sam’s voice is flat.

Fred nods. “Yeah. But when I saw you come out of the garage... I saw something else. And I had to be sure.” She wracks her brain for something that will win him over. “I... I... I saw someone who might’ve stopped the evil before it could do it’s damage. And then... you looked so confident... so pleased with yourself. You were smiling. You looked so happy.” She puts a hand up to her mouth, pretending to cough a couple times. Thinking. Stalling for time.

“And?”

“I wanted you to stop him. Bash.” Her voice drops to a whisper. “I changed my mind. I found a better way.”

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Sam exhales slowly. In a conversation riddled with lies, and at best half-truths, that last part came from the heart. She's not lying. Yet she's far from innocent.

“I see.” Sam puts on an easy smile. “Well then. Mission accomplished.” He stands up and loudly claps his hands together once for effect, briskly rubbing them together. Then he reaches for the lawn chair, folds it, and walks it back over to the fence.

When he turns back to Fred, she is staring at the garage, with a blank look on her face. She looks lost and weakened, overwhelmed by the events of this evening. Confused and scared. And this time, it's not an act.

“Winnifred.”

She blinks several times, slowly turning her head towards Sam. Looking dazed, she puts on a cautious smile.

“Would you like me to make sure the... the person in the house gets... home... or wherever they should be... safely?” He motions with his head to the house. “Then again... perhaps they're already home by now.”

“Yes. What? No.” Fred look to where Sam's motioning, and is instantly overcome by a cold sweat.” Oh.” She scrambles to figure out how much her idiot brother told him. “No. I can do that.” She fights through her confusion at what he's talking about, knowing in her heart that Sebastian would not have told him everything. At least not until the very last minute. And only if completely necessary to finish the job.

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“Are you sure?”

She nods quickly, her smile broadening but still looking wrong, pained.

“Hmmm.” Sam walks away into the yard towards the path between the house and garage.

“Hey!” Fred finds some remaining confidence and calls out.

Sam stops and turns, putting a labored smile back on his face. He’s gone through all the right motions, considering the unexpected circumstances of the night. He dislikes outside interference. And, at first, he found it somewhat difficult to adjust his methods.

“When will I see you again?” Fred’s face looks desperate, like she’s about to burst waiting for his answer. “I still need your help. Maybe not the help Bash wanted. But I still need your help.”

Sam turns to walk away. Then he stops and turns again. “Today’s Friday, right?” He has to think about it. Every day seems like a Tuesday to him. Always has. “So tomorrow’s Saturday?”

Fred nods, feeling tired and numb. She’s worn out from what almost happened tonight, and even more so from having to fight her way through this conversation. She’s relieved, but at the same time, she knows there’s a lot more to do before this whole thing is finished.

“My family’s having a barbecue tomorrow. You should come by. Not for the barbecue though. That would be awkward.” He imagines the look on Rae’s face. “But you and I... we can talk more. You can unload.

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Tell me all your stories. Tell me the truth. I've been told I'm a good listener." Sam grins proudly, like a child pleased with himself.

Fred smiles awkwardly. "The truth." She wonders.

"End of the road, heading to the beach. Great big house with lots of flowers. You can't miss it. Around noon." He turns and walks away between the garage and house, purposely looking away to the right, trying to avoid getting a glimpse of a memory that hasn't happened yet.

And then the bright light overwhelms him again, this time coming from the memory. He puts up a hand to block the light from his face and eyes, and risks a glance in that direction.

Sam sees an extremely bright column of light reaching from the ground to the stars. It's not as bright as before, not painfully bright, but still brighter than the sun itself. Standing at both sides of the light are two small children with great smiles on their faces as they appear to hold hands with the light itself.

And off to the side, sitting cross legged on the ground, is his sister, Rae, holding the hand of a body laying still in the grass. She has a big, beautiful smile on her face, while she cries and sobs uncontrollably.

11

“Knock. Knock.” Sam walks into the small bathroom, takes a neatly folded child’s towel off the closed toilet lid, and sits down. “Sorry, I’m late. I’ve been busy.”

“Ahhh.” The old woman cries out, her voice rough and gravelly as she starts sobbing and crying hard, like she’d been holding it in for a while.

“Hey.” Sam’s voice is soft. “Martha. I said I’m sorry. Really. I am. But this whole thing is kind of on you to begin with.”

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The old woman is sitting behind the open door, rocking back and forth violently. She's been cold, wet, and alone for what feels like a lifetime.

The water in the bathtub is still sloshing back and forth violently.

“Can we just talk this time? I have questions.” Sam is still talking softly. “Just a quick chat. More my stuff and less your stuff, this time. If that’s okay? I realize it’s a little selfish.”

The old woman is sobbing and crying so hard that Sam is having difficulty hearing himself. She’s convulsing with emotion, rocking back and forth in an effort to comfort herself.

“Martha? Please. I think it’ll help us both in the long run.”

She continues rocking and sobbing. She screams out a long guttural sound, trying to express her frustration and pain.

Sam looks down into the sloshing water of the bathtub. The pain on his face is obvious. He looks to the splatters of water running down the walls and saturating the floor in front of him. “This isn’t going to work is it? For either of us.” He sighs loudly. “Okay. We can start with you then.”

Instantly, they are sitting on a bench at a children’s playground, towards the top of a sloping hill. Kids are running around playing on the slides and swings, climbing on the monkey bars. Not the kind Michael seems to miss, but new ones, built over a cushioned surface that looks like stone.

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Just down the hill is a small pond with a family of ducks swimming in a row. This appears to be the playground where Sam and Michael had their recent trip down memory lane. It was empty then, but today it's full of families trying to make up for lost time. With a little luck some of the ducks may come up a little closer, so Sam can feed them. But it's probably best if they stay close to the pond.

“So. Martha. You were saying?” Sam turns and smiles gently at the old woman sitting on the bench just a couple feet to his right. He’s still feeling a little worn out from his experiences with Sebastian and Winnifred.

Martha looks at him, looking confused and a little lost. “Excuse me?” She takes a quick glance around at the park. “Sorry. My mind was elsewhere. Was I saying something?”

Sam grins. “You were telling me about your daughter. It’s her birthday today. She turned eight.”

The old woman tries to smile, making an awkward grimace. She looks out to the children playing. “Oh. Yeah.” She points at a young girl sitting on a teeter totter with a little boy, both bouncing up and down, back and forth.

Sam’s face gets sad as he watches the little girl laughing and having fun with her friend. “She looks just like you.”

Again, the old woman tries to smile.

“What’s her name?”

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She gives the young man sitting with her a sideways glance. She knows him. But from where? She's too embarrassed to ask. "Annabelle." She feels so old.

"Beautiful name. Old school. I like it."

This makes the old woman more comfortable. She nods proudly. "But she likes to be called Belle."

"Of course she does." Sam flashes his blue eyes at the old woman, hoping to comfort her further. He really does want to have a talk, work through some things.

"That Disney movie." The old woman playfully rolls her eyes. "We must've watched it a hundred times. Once she realized there was a Princess Belle..."

"She had to be called Belle." Sam laughs. "Kids are funny." He shakes his head.

She nods. "For a while, she wouldn't even respond to Annabelle. She was stubborn about it. I knew she could hear me, but until I said Belle..."

"When my younger brother, Michael, was a kid, he went through a stage on insisting we call him 'the Michael'. Not just Michael, but 'the Michael'." He grins. "As if he were the only one." Sam chuckles, and then instantly scrunches his face, thinking. "You know... I think he actually was. I'm just now realizing that."

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“He probably thought he was.” She laughs, making a series of grunting noises. “How old was he?”

“Old enough.” Sam gives her an amused look. “He wasn’t playing. He was serious. ‘The Michael’. It was important to him.”

The old woman laughs, but her throat feels dry and raw, and she starts coughing.

“He was the third child, but he told us that he was our father’s chosen one. That me and my sister Rae... we were the oldest... we were the old man’s mistakes, and that’s why he had to bring a third child home.”

The old woman chuckles roughly, clearing her throat.

“He was our replacement. ‘The Michael’.” Sam laughs to himself, remembering how serious Michael was.

“How long did that last?” The old woman pulls some wadded tissue from her pocket and wipes her mouth.

“Not long. In your time... a couple months, maybe.”

The old woman grimaces, confusion clouding her thoughts. Her head hurts, like a headache is coming on.

“Less than a year later, another brother came along. Gabriel. And it kind of broke ‘the Michael’s’ theory.”

“Awww.” The old woman, scrunches her eyebrows together, still fighting through the confusion, but showing sadness for the boy. “Poor dear.”

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“Nahhh. He deserved it. He was pretty upset, though. My old man had to sit him down and have a talk... help him work through his disappointment.”

“Well, he would’ve grown out of it eventually, anyway.” The old woman smiles.

“I’m not sure he has.”

The two of them sit quietly on the bench for a few minutes, watching Annabelle run from the teeter totter to the slide, then to the swing, spending just seconds on each. She’s having the time of her life.

“Do you have any children?” The old woman is trying to figure Sam out, trying to remember him, find out why he’s here. She motions out to the kids running all around them.

“No. It’s not really my thing.” Sam shows a sad smile. “Not really who I am.” He suddenly perks up. “I love children though.” He motions towards some boys running around playing tag. “I brought my little brother.” He allows himself the minor lie. This is his place.

“Oh. Gabriel, right?” She puts a hand up to her eyes to block the sun, so she can see the boys better.

“No. Not Gabe. Another one eventually came along, completely obliterating Mikey’s theory.” He grins at the thought. “My youngest brother.” Sam points out to the group of boys. “Blue hat.” He isn’t here. He’s not part of this group.

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The old woman spots him. “Well. Isn’t he a little cutie.” She looks up at Sam. “Kinda looks like his big brother.” She gives Sam an uncomfortable smile.

Sam has to look again, but blue hat isn’t here. Martha is just working through the changes to her script.

“My older sister… Rae…” He turns his eyes to the old woman. “… you’ve met her… she briefly called the youngest ‘the one.’” He looks away and chuckles. “Her theory was that dad had only one daughter… her… because he got it right the first time. Then it took four boys to get ‘the one.’”

“Siblings tease one another. It’s been like that forever.” Martha watches her daughter running around having so much fun.

Sam’s face goes blank. “So. Martha. I have a question.”

The old woman, still smiling brightly, nods her head. “So what’s his name?”

“Who?” Sam looks out to where she’s staring. “Oh. Chris.”

“Chris.” She nods. “That’s a nice, simple name. Is it short for Christopher?”

“Martha. My turn. My question.” Sam’s voice shows a little more focus.

She turns to Sam, smiling oddly, blinking her eyes several times as if trying to focus.

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“Why do people harm one another?” Sam asks the question so plainly, as if he were asking something as simple as what time is it. Then he looks out to the children, giving the old woman some space to think.

“I’m sorry. What do you mean?” Her smile disappears. She begins to show her nerves, placing her hands in her lap, letting her fingers fidget with one another.

Sam turns and faces the old woman. “Martha. Last night. The night before her eighth birthday... you drowned your daughter in the bathtub in your home.” His face remains blank, waiting.

The old woman visibly flinches, like she was slapped. “I... I don’t...” Her eyes instantly redden, getting watery.

Sam puts up a hand. “You do remember. And please. I just want an answer. Nothing special. Just the truth.”

Tears flow from the old woman’s eyes, running quickly down her face. She wants to walk away. To think. But she can’t. She feels dizzy and confused. Her body goes cold, and she feels like she may pass out.

“Martha. Please.” Sam tries a weak smile. “I don’t want to bring you back yet. It’s kind of nice just sitting out here watching all the kids.”

“I... I’m not sure what you mean.” A cold shiver goes through her already-cold body. “What did you say... about... Annabelle?” She blinks back tears, fighting the feeling that she’s about to lose consciousness.

Sam gives her a few seconds to recover, but then motions to a man standing with a small boy near the slides. He has a fatherly hand on the

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boy's shoulder and is having what appears to be a rather serious talk with him. His face is stern, but caring. "See that little boy... and his dad?"

Martha looks up from her lap at Sam, and then finds it difficult to look away as she studies the side of his face, the softness of his skin, the sadness in his eyes. She breaths out roughly, battling the urge to burst into tears, and shifts her eyes over, seeing the boy and his dad.

She nods silently.

"The boy hasn't been listening to his father. He'd told him several times not to run so close to the people on the swings. That he'll get hurt." Sam glances at Martha. "When they get home, he'll get a spanking. It'll escalate the more the boy cries. Finally, in a rage, his dad will end up punching him in the back several times. Hard. While telling him to shut up over and over again."

"H... how... how can you say that?" The old woman looked appalled, shocked. She forgets about her own discomfort and feels for the young boy. "Why are you telling me that?"

"If you could see his back right now... you'd see it was covered in bruises. All in various stages of healing. It's not a one-time thing." Sam's voice gets cold and distant. "He'll eventually end up killing his son by strangling him in a complete loss of control... because the boy was playing with a new toy his dad bought him, when he should've been in bed. He should've been sleeping. He had warned him several times... but

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the child was so excited about the new toy. He kept getting out of bed to play with it. It made motorcycle sounds when he twisted it.”

The old woman’s face has gone pale. Her mouth hangs open, wanting to ask something, but she doesn’t.

“Martha. What makes you hurt the one’s you love.” Sam waits patiently for an answer. “Or supposedly love.” He watches as the little boy stands with his head down, listening to his father’s lecture.

The old woman goes numb. She feels dizzy and sick. Her heart is pounding, slowly, but hard against her chest.

“Martha. I need an answer. Something to take with me.” He turns to face her and shows her a half smile. “Please. It’s important.”

The old woman scans the kids in the crowded playground, looking for Annabelle. She wants to call her over. She feels the need to hug her and give her a kiss on the forehead. But she doesn’t see her anywhere. She sits up straighter, stretching her neck to look through all the kids running and playing.

“She dead, Martha. She’s not here. She never was. This is the day she would’ve been eight. It’s her birthday.” Sam’s voice becomes a whisper as he leans in a little closer to the old woman. “She didn’t make it to eight.”

The old woman fidgets noticeably, shaking her head to clear her mind. She can feel the wetness crawling across the skin of her arms and down her hands. Her fingers start dripping, causing little splashes of water on the sidewalk beneath them.

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Sam's voice gets colder. "You pushed her head under the water and held it there until she stopped struggling. She put up a good fight. But so did you."

Martha shakes her head violently. But her voice comes out a whisper. "No."

"And just to be sure... you continued to hold her under the water for several minutes while you slowly counted out loud. One. Two. Three. All the way to a hundred."

The old woman instantly shows a look of pure shock on her face. Her entire body gets rigid. She wants to melt down in tears, but she can't. Something won't allow it.

Sam motions to a young boy, standing in the middle of a large sandbox while a woman kneels in front of him, taking off his jacket. "See that woman... with the little boy?"

Martha's eyes follow.

"Tonight..." Sam pauses. His breathing stops. "Tonight, his mother will be making dinner. And the boy will keep making excuses to play at the counter, near her expensive new phone. Wanting to play with it. He'll keep touching it to turn the screen on. She'll ask him to leave it alone and go play somewhere else. But he'll keep coming back. He'll keep touching it. She'll yell at him loudly. He'll jump. Scared. Afraid of what's about to come. Because at that point, he remembers what his mother's

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anger can bring.” Sam purses his lips tightly, tensing his jaw. “He’ll accidentally knock it off the counter, shattering the screen.”

Martha doesn’t want to hear any more. She wants to put her hands over her ears, but doesn’t. She can’t. He won’t allow it.

“She’ll lose control and grab him by the neck, slamming his face into the broken phone on the floor. Yelling over and over at him that she told him not to play with it. Glass will stick in his face making him scream in pain. She’ll put a hand over his mouth to quiet him. Afraid the neighbors will hear. He’ll scream and struggle. She’ll put her other hand over his entire face and pull him in close to her chest. To quiet him. He won’t be able to breathe. He’ll struggle and yell into her hands. He’ll suffocate in his mother’s arms. Because of a phone.”

Martha is shaking and crying to herself. She begins to rock back and forth in an effort to make it all go away, to make this horrible man just go away.

Sam uses a hand to motion out to all the kids and their parents milling about, playing, having fun. “All of them. They all murdered their children.” He makes a painful face and closes his eyes tight for a few seconds. “They’re all dead. Every single one of them. None of them made it to their eighth birthday. All of the parents are with me.”

Sam sits quietly, listening to the soft crying of the old woman turn into painful sobs. “Martha. Please. Give me an answer and we can be done here.” He sighs. “For now.”

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He waits patiently. He wants her to find the words all by herself. He could force them from her. He could've done the same to Joseph. And the answer would be just as honest. But somehow, it wouldn't give Sam what he needs. He's always been interested. He's asked these same questions before. They've always been important to the process. But lately, since Rae's breakdown, they've gained additional value to Sam.

“She was...” Martha takes a deep breath and works to control her sobbing. “She was...”

“Difficult.” Sam sighs heavily. He feels like the lie was about to sneak out.

“Yes.” She struggles, trying to find the truth she has so deeply hidden. Her face contorts, finding the truth. “No. No. Not really. She was just... in the way.”

The old woman lets out a small scream of agony, and cries uncontrollably for a few minutes.

“She took so much from me. I wasn’t ready.” She sobs violently.

Sam sits, waiting calmly. The playground has cleared. It’s completely empty except for Sam and Martha.

“Before... before she came along... her father and I... we did things... we... we had fun.” She sobs loudly. “Movies. Dinners. Parties. We had each other. All we had was each other. We were still so young.” The old woman instantly stops crying. “But kids...”

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“They take up your time. A lot of your time. Resources.” Sam sits back, unhappy with this answer. “You didn’t consider help... a family member... a nanny... or babysitter perhaps? Maybe a psychologist.”

“George would have none of that.” Martha squeaks, her voice cracking. “He... was protective. Overprotective. He didn’t trust anyone with his baby.” She begins to cry softly. “I just wanted us to be... us again. But we could never go back.”

As she quickly blinks her eyes several times to flush out the tears, the two of them are back in the small bathroom.

“Ahhh!” The old woman lets out a guttural scream and starts sobbing and crying loudly, not holding back.

The water in the tub is still sloshing back and forth. Droplets run down the walls. The floor is covered in small puddles. The old woman’s arms are wet past her elbows. The front of her shirt and pants are soaked with water long gone cold.

“Please.” She moans between sobs. Her voice is low and hoarse. “I just wanted more time with my husband. We were in love before she came along. I just wanted more time. I just wanted him to only love me again.”

“So...” Sam stands up as the walls begin to melt away, flames slashing and burning through them from the outside.

The old woman reaches up, without looking, touching Sam on the back of his hand.

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Sam snatches his hand away, letting her fingers drop heavily back down to her body.

She lets out a long whimper that turns into a painful scream.

“So... how’d that work out for you?” And he walks out the door as the room burns away, leaving the old woman rocking back and forth, while the body of her seven-year old daughter lays face down in the cold bathwater.

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“Hey boys.” Making an entrance, Rae, surrounded by darkness, comes walking up from the water towards the back of her dad’s house on the beach. She glances over at Nyssa and Tegan, sitting at the big, glass table in the sand. “And girls.” She winks playfully. She’s in an excellent mood.

Tegan looks away, rolling her eyes. Nyssa half smiles as a show of acknowledgement. But the darkness reminds her of being dead, and a cold shiver rolls through her body.

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The old man places cut peppers and squash on the grill, just off to the opposite side of where Nyssa and Tegan are sitting. He looks up and sees his daughter trekking up the beach, followed by deep shadows as they slowly fall away from her the closer she gets.

“Hello, Sunshine.”

Just as she reaches the family, Chris appears out of the last shadow, appearing as a beautiful, young woman, most likely still in her late teens, and just a hair taller than Rae. “Hey.” Her voice is quiet as she leans her head back a little and pulls her long, blonde hair away from her face. Her big, blue eyes shine mischievously.

Rae glances over her shoulder, back at Chris. “Hmph.” She wonders how long she’d been there.

The old man looks back up from his grill. “Hey buddy. I almost didn’t see you there for a second.” He furrows his brow. “You need a haircut. Remind me later and I’ll give you a twenty so you can get a trim in town.”

Nyssa turns to her sister, giving her a confused look.

Tegan leans in closer. “Yeah, apparently he...” She pauses. “...she... doesn’t always do the little boy thing.”

“That’s quite an entrance, dear sister.” Gabriel calls out as he and Michael come walking down the stone path, carrying the sofa from the living room. “Rae... I meant Rae.” He gives Chris a grin.

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“Well, both of them, actually.” Michael makes his eyes go wide and laughs. “I mean... I don’t know about anyone else, but I was caught a little off guard.”

Rae walks up the path and hops on the sofa, right in the center, making her brothers carry her down to the edge of the stonework, just before the sand. Right before they set it down, the two brothers give each other a look, and quickly turn the sofa down, dumping their sister in the beach sand.

“Ha.” Michael and Gabriel share a laugh as they set the sofa down on the patio.

“Now that’s an entrance.” Michael laughs.

Rae grins and shrugs, turning in the sand and sitting up, brushing the sand from her dress. Her long, dark hair dances in the wind as she stares down her brothers. “I’d expect this from Mikey... but Gabe... I’m disappointed.” She gets up and walks over, giving the younger of the two a peck on the cheek. “Long time, no see.”

Rae walks over to Michael and gives him a quick shove in the chest, causing him to fall with a soft thud into a sitting position at the end of the sofa.

The old man looks over from his grill and grins, shaking his head. “Mikey. Stop messing with your sister.” He squints, looking over at Chris. “Your older sister. Stop messing with Rae.”

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“Me?” Michael puts a hand to his chest, faking innocence. “I think she killed my shirt.” He grins wildly, looking over to the twins. “Anyway, she’s the one causing most of the trouble lately.”

Chris walks past her father and hops up onto the stonework, sitting down between her two older brothers on the sofa, pulling her legs up and putting her bare feet underneath herself. Then she smoothes out her long, floral dress, just as she’s seen Rae do a million times with her own.

Then, in a single, simultaneous blink of everyone’s eyes, he’s his eleven-year-old self, pushing his blond bangs from his face and rolling the sleeves of his shirt up to his elbows.

He grins wildly.

Rae finds herself face to face with him. “Yeah... well... sorry about that.” She’s staring right into Chris’ eyes. “That breakfast sure was good though. Wasn’t it?” This is her way of making sure they’re still good. She’s recently strayed from the path again, just a little. And of course, she now realizes, there’s no way of hiding that from her youngest sibling.

Chris’ smile grows, showing his bright, white teeth as he nods enthusiastically. “Like I said... perfectly toasted toast. And orange juice.” He sounds excited. “We should do it again... soon.”

“Nyssa, Tegan... you know everyone right?” The old man turns and looks to the twins. “I don’t remember if you’ve met my youngest daughter...” He points towards the sofa and frowns. “... son... Chris.”

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Tegan gives Chris a half smile, and small nod. “Pipsqueak.”

“Yeah, Tegan and I’ve met.” Chris gives her a big smile. “She threatened to beat me up and toss me in the ocean.”

“I didn’t say I was going to beat you up.”

Chris shrugs. “I think it was implied. I’ve heard stories.” Chris grins up at Michael.

“Ha.” The old man, still tending to his vegetables, laughs.

“Pipsqueak.”

“Yeah, we all know how much Mikey likes telling stories.” It’s Gabe’s turn to laugh.

“And you, Nyssa… have you met my youngest?” The old man glances over his shoulder. “He may have looked… different.”

Nyssa nods. “Kind of. But not in person.” She looks over to Chris, who gives her a small wave. “Just a voice… and a whole lotta nothin’ else.”

“Yeah, you’ll have to forgive him. Unfortunately, he’s a lot like his sister.” The old man chuckles. “But not on purpose.”

“Hey.” Rae sticks out her lower lip.

Sam comes trotting down the stairs from the second-floor balcony. As he gets to the stone path, he starts clapping his hands slow and deliberate. “Look at this. The whole bunch of misfits, all in one place, at the same time. Nice.” He makes an exaggerated point of looking around in the sky all around them. “I’m shocked that time and space hasn’t

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ruptured from all this crazy in one place.” He does notice all the stars that are still missing, but puts it off for another time.

“Lucky. Finally.” Rae prances around her other brothers and gives him a small hug. “You’re on my team. Everybody’s picking on me.”

He pulls back, sharing her grin. “I’m pretty sure you can handle these three.” He glances to his brothers on the sofa, settling on Chris. “Well... maybe not this one. He’s too much like you.” He chuckles.

“Hey.” Rae pushes out her bottom lip into a pout.

The old man turns away from his grilled vegetables. “Okay. That’s enough.” He gives all of them a fatherly look. “No more picking on your sister.” He shakes his head, looking over to the twins. “Kids.”

Sam looks to Gabriel, so happy to see him. “Glad you could make it.”

The old man moves his veggies from the grill to a warm, aluminum platter and carefully covers it with foil. He pulls out a big tray of pre-made hamburger patties. “So how many burgers? I put A1 in the mix.” He looks over to all his loved ones, gathered as a family for the first time in ages. “We got cheese. And there’s chips and pickles. Good sour ones.” He looks over to Nyssa and smiles gently. “And Nyssa made the tastiest potato salad I’ve ever had in all my years.”

“And that’s a lot of years.” Sam grins.

Tegan gives her sister an odd look, raising an eyebrow, having had no idea.

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“Yeah... I have hobbies that don’t include you.” Nyssa smiles slyly at her twin.

“I’ll have one, dad. No cheese for me, please.” Chris calls out, getting off the sofa and walking out into the sand to sit down with the sun to his back. “I think I’m becoming lactose intolerant.”

His brothers and sister all look to one another, amused. Michael opens his mouth to say something.

“Mikey... please. No. Let him be.” The old man is still looking to Nyssa. “Kids.” Again, he shakes his head.

Nyssa clears her throat. “I’ll just have some of the grilled veggies, please.”

“One. With cheese, please.” Tegan is still looking at her sister with an intrigued look on her face. “I’m saving room for that delicious potato salad that I’ve never had and didn’t even know existed.”

“One with cheese.” Sam is watching the twins have their moment. He’s already enjoying this little get together. They don’t happen often, but they’ve created a lot of memories over the years.

“Two with cheese.” Gabriel smiles over at Nyssa. “I’m also really looking forward to that potato salad.”

“Two. Double cheese. And a triple scoop of that potato salad.”

Everyone looks over at Michael.

“What? I’m hungry.” He fidgets on the end of the sofa, pretending to be uneasy with everyone’s eyes on him at the same time.

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“Sunshine?” The old man looks over to his daughter, a loving smile on his face.

“I’ll just have some of those yummy veggies I smell. And a pickle.” Rae turns to Nyssa. “And a big helping of potato salad, of course.”

“You got all that, old man… or do you need some help?” Sam walks over and puts a hand on his father’s shoulder.

“I’m good. I’m good.” He looks out at his family, pointing his finger and counting. “Okay. Six with cheese. One without. And my one, without.” He places the eight patties he’d brought out from the house on the grill, setting the empty platter aside. “He pats his belly and smiles at Sam. “I don’t need the extra calories.”

Rae walks over to the glass table and sits down in one of the chairs across from the twins. “So. Nyssa. Tegan. I’ve been told that I owe you an apology.” She glances to Chris, catching his eye.

The old man, tending to the patties, looks over his shoulder. “Oh?” He looks surprised, but he’s not.

Rae glances over her shoulder, towards her father. “I killed them because I got angry.”

“Oh. Well, that’s not good.” The old man turns back to his grill. “That’s not good at all.” He feels the top of his head, remembering.

“This should be good.” Michael nods his head, sitting up a little straighter, excited to see how this goes.

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“Absolutely.” Gabriel laughs. “Remember that tall tree in the side yard when we were kids?” Gabriel looks over at Rae. “I fell from one of the topmost branches once. And as luck would have it... dad had just sent Rae out to call me in for dinner. She was right there, at just the right time. Staring down at me.”

Rae grins. “I remember that.”

“She convinced me she was there because I’d died in the fall, and it was her duty to comfort me and take me home.”

Rae grins wider, glancing over to Nyssa and Tegan. “It’s kinda my thing.”

“Then she yanked me into the void and pushed me off the edge.”

“Ha!” Michael has heard this story before, many times, but finds it funny every time.

“I mean, Sam immediately brought me back up, and everything was good... but still...”

Nyssa suppresses a smile, as Sam and Chris chuckle.

The old man looks over at his daughter, shaking his head and giving her a disappointed look. “And I made her apologize for that.” The old man starts flipping the burgers one by one.

Rae smiles brightly, and turns to Tegan. “Tegan. I’m sorry for killing you.” Rae’s voice is sing song. “It was wrong of me. I suppose.” She turns to Nyssa. “You too, of course. I’m sorry. I’ll try to do better.”

“Ha.” Michael laughs. “I knew this would be good.”

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The old man looks over at his daughter, shaking his head, giving her another look of disappointment.

Sam turns, staring at the house for a few seconds, and then starts walking back up the stone path towards the French doors connecting the patio to the living room.

“Hey. Where do you think you’re going?” The old man holds the package of buns. “Food’s about done. I was going to have you plate the burgers.”

“I’ll be right back. Start without me.” Sam steps through the French doors going into the living room.

“I got it.” Chris hops up, brushing his hands off on his pants, and walks over to her father. Tossing a small pickle in his mouth, he grabs the buns and starts laying them out on the paper plates.

Sam walks through the living room, into the foyer, and to the front door. He pauses for a second. Forcing a smile on his face, he opens the door. “Hello, Winnifred.”

But there’s nothing there. Not Fred. Not the front yard. Not the street, the sky, or the world itself. It’s just empty blackness.

Sam takes a half step back, tilting his head to the side, his eyebrows scrunched together in thought. His mind instantly goes to the nothingness that Chris uses when he wants to be alone. But he can feel that this is different. He almost wishes Michael were here to experience this.

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Sam tries to reach past the door, into the darkness, but can't. Something stops his hand just before the darkness. It's not that his hand bumps into something. It's not something he can't see. But when he reaches forward, he can't physically move his hand far enough to touch the darkness. It's like two opposite-polarity magnets being forced up against one another.

Sam closes the door, still deep in thought, still thinking back to Chris and his nothingness. But he's been in the nothingness. He's walked in the nothingness, moving easily and freely. This is something else.

He reaches for the door again, and hesitates, letting his hand rest on the knob. And then he opens the door.

Fred is standing there, facing him. "You didn't even give me a chance to ring the bell." She tries smiling, but looks nervous and confused. It's not an act. It's the real thing.

Sam glances around the front yard. "Well. That was... different." He gives Fred a reluctant smile. "You've been standing out here, deciding whether to ring the bell." Sam steps aside, inviting her in. "I thought I'd help you make up your mind."

She cautiously walks in and stops in the middle of the foyer.

Sam motions for her to go to the right, into the living room. He takes one last look out into the yard before closing the door.

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Fred walks in and Sam follows, sitting down in the old man's wheelchair, near the fireplace. "Have a seat. Please." He points to the big chair just off to the side of where the sofa usually sits.

"I hope it's okay... that I came by." She looks nervous, staring at her feet like she's afraid to look Sam in the eye. She's worked through this scene a hundred times in her head and decided that playing it contrite and pathetic might work best to get what she needs.

"I wouldn't have asked you over, if it wasn't."

She glances up and looks around the big room. "Nice house. Big. But comfy." She sees all the family photos on the walls and huge shelf against the far wall.

"It's my dad's place. I grew up here." He pushes out his lips, thinking. "Kind of."

"So... you're like old school Apple Valley. My family moved here from LA when I was nine." She notices where the sofa left impressions in the carpeting. "Someone steal your couch?"

"Are you feeling any better?" Sam's voice is soft.

Fred shakes her head. "Not really."

Sam nods. "And you made sure that your... friend... in the house got home okay?"

A tingle goes down her spine as she looks away. "Yeah. They're fine. They had no idea about anything." She finds herself fighting to keep the emotion from her voice.

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Sam spins the wheelchair in a circle and pops a wheelie, and then does it all over again, all with a fun smile on his face.

Fred just stares at him. Watching this crazy person enjoy himself, seemingly in his own world. She works to keep her voice steady and clears her throat. Today, she's ready to get right down to it. She's prepared. She takes a deep breath. "I need your help."

"So you've said." Sam stops playing and wheels closer. "What kind of help? Good help or bad help? Or worse yet... Sebastian help?"

"I haven't seen my brother since yesterday." She shrugs. "I dunno. Just help. That's all."

"Hmmm." A few seconds pass as Sam continues to play around with the wheelchair.

Fred just sits there, looking at everything in the living room, except for Sam. She's afraid to look him in the eyes. She's not sure what he'll show her.

Sam brings the wheelchair to a stop and sighs quietly. "Okay. How can I help?" He glances over towards the French doors. He can smell the barbecue and it's making him hungry.

"I don't know. Probably nothing. Maybe I do have the wrong brother." She wants to just blurt it out, to tell him everything, tell him what she knows, and why she's positive that he's the only one that can help. But she's given it a lot of thought since yesterday. And she thinks

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that the more lost she comes across, the more likely he is to offer his help. She's just hoping that someone like him can be fooled.

“All my brothers are just out back, if you’d like me go get tall, dark, and handsome.” He looks very serious. “But Michael will definitely want to get right to the point.”

She shakes her head, again looking down at her feet for effect. “I’ve done things. Bad things. And I’m afraid I’m gonna do it again. Even worse things. Much worse.” Her words pour out in one long mumble. She decides that it may be best to be somewhat honest. Just in case he already knows. Give him her reasoning. And then tell him how he can help. She feels like that’ll give him the fuel to do what she needs him to do. She’s given this a lot of thought since last night.

“I know. Sebastian filled me in.” Sam sighs heavily. “The chihuahua’s name was Bobby, by the way. My brother put him back.”

Ignoring him, Fred glances up, giving her words time to weigh on him before she continues.

“Sam.” Rae stands in the open French doors. “Your burger’s getting cold. And the potato salad is actually... believe it or not... really, really good.”

Startled, Fred quickly stands up, looking scared and nervous. She looks at Rae and a series of cold chills go through her body. She looks away quickly, refusing to look back. She realizes that for some reason this girl absolutely terrifies her. Maybe it’s the fact that Rae somehow got out

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on that sidewalk ahead of her, when there was no possible way she could have, unless she's the same as Sam. And that kind of scares her too. Maybe all these people he calls family, are the same as him.

“What’s she doing here?” Rae takes a step into the living room, tilting her head to the side, letting her eyes go darker. “You shouldn’t be here.” Her voice drops lower. “You really, really... shouldn’t be here.”

Fred instantly goes ice cold from head to toe.

Sam puts up a hand, never looking away from Fred, who looks like she’s seconds away from bolting out the front door. “I’ll be out in five minutes.”

“Sam. She shouldn’t be here.” Rae continues to stare directly at Fred. “This isn’t right. This is our home.”

Sam gives Rae a sideways glance. “Azrael. Please. I’ve got my reasons.”

There’s a few moments of tense silence as Rae decides what to do.

“Fine.” Rae’s eyes remain dark as she turns and walks out the doorway onto the stone patio. “Five minutes.”

Fred remains standing in front of the big chair. She’s staring at the floor again, nervous and incredibly scared. And this time it’s not an act. Normally, she would never have backed down to anyone. But these people aren’t normal. And she has a feeling that the scary girl may be the least normal of all of them.

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“No. Believe it or not... not even close.” Sam takes a deep breath and puts on his softest voice, trying to compensate for Rae. “Please. Continue. This is quickly becoming tedious.”

“I...” Fred’s voice quivers with real fear and sadness. She’s terrified that the scary girl will come back.

“Tell me a story.”

Fred looks up, slowly taking her eyes off the floor.

“I’ve met a lot of bad people in my time. Trust me. Nothing you could say would shock me. It may be unappealing. It may be outright disgusting. It may be gut-wrenchingly evil.” Sam breathes out long and steady. “But it won’t be shocking.” He wants to just move this along so he can get back to the barbecue.

Her mind races. She needs to give him something. “A story.” And suddenly she finds the words. “When I was thirteen... and my brother was nine... we took my uncle’s pellet gun down to the beach and started shooting at birds. Just for fun. Seagulls or pigeons. I don’t know the difference.” She talks fast. “I wasn’t even really trying to hit them. I didn’t think I could, actually. We were pretty far away and just kids. And the gun... it felt awful.” She lies. “It was awful” She lies again.

Sam nods.

She forces herself to stare right into Sam’s eyes. For some reason, she wants to know the things he knows. She wants to see the things he’s seen. Maybe everything she’s done isn’t as bad as she thinks. Maybe she’ll

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actually be okay. Maybe what she has planned really isn't that bad compared to the things he's seen.

"No. You really don't want to know" Sam sighs heavily. "And yes, it is."

She blinks several times, feeling lost for a few seconds. She's sweating, but cold. She can't remember the last time she was legitimately this nervous. Then her mind drifts to Rae, and she goes even colder.

"Sorry. Go on." Sam attempts a pleasant smile.

Fred swallows hard. "Well... my brother got lucky. Or unlucky, I guess. He hit one of the birds in the wing. It screeched and fell to the sand as it tried to fly off." She licks her dry lips. Her lips have been so dry. "It made these sounds. All it could do was squawk painfully." She closes her eyes, remembering perfectly. It makes her feel at peace. She enjoyed it.

Sam sits for a few seconds, thinking, listening to Fred's trembling, deep breaths. "You're broken." He suddenly wonders why he's doing this. He almost wishes Rae would come back in and do what she wants.

"It gets worse." A tear rolls down her face. "When we got up close, we kicked sand at it. We spit at it. It hobbled in the sand trying to get away from us, but we just followed it... tormented it. Then, my brother handed me the gun and told me it was my turn."

Sam looks over to the French doors willing his sister to return and send this horrible creature straight to hell. Maybe he should just do it

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himself and move on. But he's still searching for answers. Fred isn't his big project. This is merely a side quest.

Fred's eyes fill with manufactured tears as the words tumble from her mouth. "I shot it in the face. It screeched and tried running off down the beach. We followed. I got up close and shot it in the eye. It lay there bleeding. I could see its little chest moving up and down so fast. I shot it in the other eye." She makes a whimpering sound. "And we just sat there for maybe a half hour... laughing and giggling... until it finally stopped moving."

Her story over, Fred glances up at Sam, wondering what he's thinking. She's quite pleased with herself. She's happy with her story.

Suddenly done with this, and with one final glance to the French doors, Sam hops to his feet from the wheelchair. "Okay then. Yes. That is quite awful. Disturbing actually. I'll probably have nightmares." He puts a hand out, motioning towards the front door. "Well. I have a barbecue to get back to. And I really don't think you'd fit in."

He starts walking towards the foyer and the front door.

Fred follows, stunned. She can't even get angry, because she has no idea what just happened. She goes over her story in her head quickly, trying to see where she went wrong. He should have been pleased, energized, motivated. One way or another.

Real tears begin rolling down her face, and she doesn't know what to say. She came here to get help. She thought Sam was the key. She could

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see it in his eyes. He knew things. He understood. She was sure of it. And their conversation, yesterday, in her backyard, only made her that much more certain.

Sam opens the door, smiling broadly at Fred, encouraging her to exit with a gesture and a glance.

And now that she bared herself to him, told him who she was, what she thought he wanted to hear, he was escorting her out. Now that he found out who she was, how horrible she truly was, he was done with her. This isn't the way it was supposed to be. She thought this silly little story would grab hold of what he truly is, and that he would then have no option but to help her on her way.

She goes numb as she walks past her savior, and out the door without even looking back. She finds her natural anger boiling back to the surface. She wants to turn on him and unleash her fury on this hypocrite, murdering, son-of-a-bitch.

Sam closes the door behind her, walks through the living room, and heads out to the back to join in on the family fun. He has a lot to think about. But not right now. Right now, Sam just wants to eat cheeseburgers and enjoy the inevitable back and forth between Rae and Michael.

13

There are three solid knocks on the door, followed by two quick, lighter knocks. Fred huffs loudly like a dog growling. She just laid down on the couch with her phone. She sighs, pulling herself off the couch and mopes over to the door.

There's another knock on the door before she can get to it.

“Hang on.” She sounds tired and unhappy. She unlocks the deadbolt and pulls the door open a few inches, looking out.

“Hey, Fred.” Sam greets her with a big smile, his voice soft and friendly. He'd been practicing on the walk over.

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She's surprised, especially after yesterday. "What the fuck do you want?" She knows he can still help her, but she's too tired and depressed to even try to win him over.

"I'm here to take you to lunch." Sam leans forward a bit, glancing through the barely open door, checking out the living room behind Fred.

He's like a child, she thinks, as she throws the door open all the way. Standing just off to his side, is one of the young women that was with him at the coffee shop the other day.

Sam follows Fred's eyes, looking over his shoulder to his friend. "This is Nyssa." His voice is upbeat and pleasant. Again, he's been practicing. "Nyssa. This is Winnifred. But she likes to be called Fred... by friends."

"Winnifred." Nyssa smiles politely, trying to hide how incredibly odd she finds this encounter. This is a first, even for Sam.

Fred gives Nyssa a blank stare and then looks back to Sam. "You treat me like shit yesterday... and then you show up with your buddy to take me to lunch."

"Yeah. Lunch." Sam nods. "And I don't think I treated you that poorly. But I apologize if I did." He turns to Nyssa and smiles brightly. "I had a lot on my mind. Your story was... disturbing."

Fred takes a deep breath, wondering how far to push this. "You invited me over to your house. You asked me to tell you a story. I told you something personal. And you asked me to leave because I wouldn't fit in."

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The words come quickly. Her voice is dull and flat. “That’s the story of my life. And that’s pretty shitty to me.”

Leaving the door wide open, Fred turns and walks into the house, plopping down on the couch, laying back, and pulling out her phone. After about thirty seconds, she glances over her pillow to see her visitors still standing outside the open door. She makes a huffing sound.

Sam motions with his hand, as if asking if they can come in.

“What are you a God damn vampire?” Fred snorts.

Sam looks confused, but stays outside the door.

She rolls her eyes. “You know... vampires can’t come in until invited.” She chuckles at her own joke. And then remembering that she’s still angry, she immediately puts a scowl back on her face.

“Nope. Not a vampire.” Sam steps in, followed by Nyssa, who closes the door. “But that sounds like it would be pretty cool. They dress so well.” He looks over his shoulder to Nyssa. “Could you imagine Rae as a vampire?”

“Easily.” Nyssa smiles slyly.

Sam walks into the small living room and gestures to a well-worn, stuffed chair across a small table from Fred. “May I?”

Fred rolls her eyes again, and Sam takes that as a yes. He kind of appreciates the honesty in everything she’s done today. It’s a welcome change from yesterday, and the day before.

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Nyssa follows, choosing to sit on the other end of the couch from Fred. She tries to get comfortable, but this isn't really her thing, especially considering the circumstances, so she looks kind of stiff and unnatural just sitting there.

“So.” Fred looks over at Nyssa. “I take it the other one’s your sister?”

“The intense one, yes. The intense, scary one, no.” Nyssa smiles at her own clever comment. “Twins.”

Fred nods. “Yeah, you guys look a lot alike.” She looks Nyssa over, admiring her all-black, casual look. “I like your boots.”

Sam clears his throat quietly. “Well... you hungry?” He grins broadly. “Lunch?”

“I’m babysitting. So, no.” Fred looks over to Sam, and stares right into his eyes, doing her best to show him how unhappy she is. He really let her down yesterday.

A young boy, probably about eight or nine, quietly wanders into the room.

Momentarily startled, Nyssa scrunches her eyebrows together and looks over to Sam, but his full attention is on the boy. “Sam...”

He thrusts up a hand, and subtly shakes his head.

The small boy walks right past the three adults, without giving them any notice, and over to a small table, grabbing a toy car. Picking it up,

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he brings it close to his eyes and starts spinning one of the wheels, studying its movement. He makes a low humming noise.

Without warning, reality skips a few beats, jerking forward, as if trying to accelerate, but with the brake fully on. Sam glances to Nyssa, watching her jerk through time along with everything else. He sees that Fred is not affected and doesn't seem to notice the effect. And the boy continues to play with his toy car, but at the same time looks all around the room, as if, like Sam, he's seeing everything skip forward erratically.

And then, as quickly as it began, it's over.

“Babysitting. See.” Fred using her entire hand to point over to the boy without really looking at him. She doesn't seem happy about it. “I'm always babysitting. It's what I do.”

Still glancing around the room, Sam leans forward in his chair. “Hey little buddy. What's your name?” He looks to Nyssa, but she seems completely unaware of what just happened. He really needs to talk to Chris.

“He doesn't talk.” Fred's voice is flat.

Sam looks over at her. “Not at all?”

She shakes her head and looks over at the boy for the first time.

“What's his name?” Nyssa sits forward. She's nearest the boy, and tries to get his attention.

“Maxwell.” Fred gets up from the couch, picking up a few scattered Lego bricks laying on the carpet. “Max.”

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“Hey Max.” Sam waves his fingers to the boy, his voice playful and childlike.

Fred sits back down, placing the toys on a side table. “I told you... he doesn’t talk.”

“Hmmm.” Sam hops up and carefully walks over to the table full of cars and trucks, next to Max. He doesn’t want to startle him. He sits down on the floor, next to the boy, and picks up a car. “This one’s pretty cool.” He holds it out, directly in Max’s eye line, so he’ll notice it.

Max stops playing with the wheels on the car in his hand, sets it down, and takes the one Sam is holding. He looks Sam in the eyes for a brief moment and takes a step closer to him. He puts out a hand in front of Sam and moves it around slowly, like he’s stirring the air.

“You like it?” Sam smiles brightly at the young boy, and looks up at Nyssa. “I’m sparkly.”

Nyssa nods, and rolls her eyes, looking much like her sister. “I know.”

Sam gives her an odd look. He wonders if that’s how she sees him. They’ve never really discussed it. Michael glows intensely. Gabriel flickers like a candle. He doesn’t see either that way unless he chooses to. He’s excited to ask the girls about it later.

Fred sits up a little straighter, looking more closely at Sam. But she doesn’t see anything out of the ordinary. Still, she gets excited,

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remembering what she saw in his eyes at the coffee shop. It's almost enough to get her out of her funk.

Sam moves the little car up directly in front of Max's eyes. "It's a Maserati. Zoom. Zoom." Sam makes car noises as Max sets the car down on the table and moves it back and forth. "I'll bet Nyssa would love one of those."

Nyssa moves to get the boy's attention, nodding enthusiastically, her angular face smiling broadly.

"Although, she doesn't know how to drive." Sam chuckles.

Nyssa sticks out her tongue playfully.

Max looks up at Nyssa and smiles, making a series of humming noises while showing her his toy car.

"Nice eyes, Max." Nyssa grins and bulges her eyes, being goofy. "You're a very handsome little boy."

"Are you hungry?" Sam leans into view and makes a motion with his hand and mouth as if he's feeding himself. "He doesn't talk at all?" Sam glances over to Fred.

"He tries. He imitates sometimes. But I don't think he really understands." Fred is looking away, unconsciously playing with the toys on the table next to her. "He can sign a few things though."

"Awesome." Sam looks over to Nyssa. "Ask him if he's hungry."

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Nyssa moves down, closer to the table, making sure Max can see her. “My name’s Nyssa.” She signs each letter of her name. “Hungry?” She signs to him.

He continues to play with his toy car, paying her little attention.

She cautiously touches his shoulder to get his attention. “Hungry?” She signs again.

“He doesn’t know that one.” Fred stares at her phone, uninterested. Her voice is flat and uncaring.

“Does he go to school?” Sam picks up a small truck from the table, handing it to Max and taking the Maserati for himself. “I wish Gabe had come along… this is totally his thing.”

“If he went to school, I wouldn’t have to babysit every single minute.” Fred’s voice is bitter. She’s still not paying much attention to them. “He has someone come to the house three times a week to work with him on things.” She looks over to Max, and forgetting her current mood for a second, half smiles. “He’s doing really well with that.”

“His house or yours?” Sam glances over to Fred.

“Mine.” She gives Sam a blank stare as if he’s an idiot.

“Can you leave the house with him?”

“Of course.” She gives Sam an odd look. “This isn’t a prison.”

Sam ignores her attitude. She’s still angry, and he understands that.

“Then let’s all go for lunch. My treat.” Sam sets the toy car down and hops to his feet, looking over at Fred enthusiastically.

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She's staring at him, looking completely indifferent. She needs to play this just right. He wouldn't be here if he wasn't interested. "I don't get it. You practically kick me out of your house yesterday... and now you show up here, and wanna take me to lunch." She squints her eyes. "What's your deal?"

Max has moved closer to Sam and is just staring at him, looking from head to toe, reaching out to touch the sparkles.

"You lied to me yesterday." Sam drops his smile and stares back at her, matching her intensity. "I asked you to tell me something... a story... and you lied to me."

Fred shifts on the couch, looking uncomfortable. She sits up and puts her feet on the floor in front of her. "No. No, I didn't." So maybe this has all been in vain. Maybe someone like him can't be fooled. That would make total sense, actually.

Sam gives her a knowing look. "Let's go to lunch. We can talk more about it." He grins. "What kinds of food does Max like?"

Fred shrugs, not happy about being called a liar. But she thinks Sam may still be the only one that can help her. "He'll eat just about anything I give him. He's good about things like that."

Sam walks towards the front door, glancing back at Nyssa. "Have him grab a couple of his cars to bring with... to keep him entertained."

Nyssa takes a flashy, yellow car and places it in Max's hand, gently wrapping his fingers around it. In the other, he has a truck. She stands and

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holds out her hand to him. He reaches up, and she takes his wrist in her hand. He makes an abrupt giggling noise.

Fred hops up from the couch and marches over to Max, taking his truck and setting it aside, and taking his hand in hers, pulling him from Nyssa. “I got him. He’s my responsibility.”

Sam opens the door, and he and Nyssa step outside. He abruptly stops and turns towards Fred. “Should we invite your brother?” He feels mischievous.

“He hasn’t been around.” Fred, still holding Max’s hand, follows Sam and Nyssa out the front door. “Probably at one of his loser friends houses. Hiding out cuz he pissed me off.”

Sam grins, and turns, taking Nyssa’s hand and starts walking down the driveway towards the front sidewalk.

Fred and Max follow. Max keeps stopping to tap the cement with his fingers, and Fred, getting more and more impatient, keeps pulling him to his feet to continue down the driveway.

“So, you watch Max often?” Sam tries making small talk as they walk towards the corner, opposite Fred’s house.

“Too often.” The tone of her voice shows how uninterested she is. She’s still upset. And she’s considering her next move. “Where are we going?”

“There’s a yummy place around the corner. Just before Main. It has the best meatball subs. I discovered it a few weeks ago.” Sam looks

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over his shoulder at Max, just walking along with a happy smile on his face. “Max. Do you like meatballs?”

“I told you...” Fred starts.

“He doesn’t talk.” Nyssa finishes, tiring of the attitude. She turns, walking backward and signs hungry and spells out meatballs, and rubs her stomach in a circular motion, making an eating motion to her mouth.

“He’s not that advanced with that stuff.” Fred gives Nyssa an irritated glare.

“Well if I keep showing him... he’ll become more advanced with that stuff.” Nyssa returns Fred’s glare. She makes a mental note to ask Sam what the hell they’re doing. It feels wrong to her.

As they walk around the corner, Fred stops, pulling Max to a sudden halt. “This place wasn’t here.” She looks confused. She looks at Sam, wondering if this is his doing, if this is something he can do. She gets a little dizzy just thinking about what he may be able to do. But at the same time, it brightens her mood just a bit.

Sam walks up the two steps leading to a patio with lots of small tables and chairs. “Sure it was. I told you... I discovered it a couple of weeks ago.” He sits down and Nyssa sits to his left.

“No. It wasn’t.” She realizes that she may be underestimating him and how much he knows about her.

Max tries pulling Fred up the stairs, but she remains standing on the sidewalk. He starts whining and making a long crying sound, so Fred

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allows herself to be pulled up the steps and to the table. She lifts Max and sets him in the chair directly across from Sam, pushing it closer to the table, before sitting down in the remaining chair.

Within seconds the waitress comes over and takes their order and soon after, brings them their lunch. The four of them don't say much while eating, but every now and then Sam tries to connect with Max by pointing something out or asking if his apple juice is good. He's considering getting one himself but fears it may be sour or bitter.

Max doesn't touch his food, so Fred has to keep breaking pieces off and hand feeding him. She barely touches the small sandwich and chips she ordered for herself.

After they're finished, Sam gathers all the plates and used napkins, and places everything on a tray at the corner of the table for the waitress to pick up. "Nyssa. Do you think Max would like some ice cream?"

Nyssa leans down and catches Max's eyes. She makes an eating motion and then points to the ice cream shop right next door. He looks where she's pointing, but the happy grin on his little face doesn't show if he's interested or not. He's humming and playing with the wheels on his car again, watching them spin.

Nyssa stands up and gives Fred a look to make sure it's okay.

"Just stay where I can see him." She gives Nyssa a hard, bored stare. She wonders what this young woman is, and moreover, what she is to someone like Sam.

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Nyssa pulls the boy's chair out and takes his hand, leading him around the table. He stops for a second, looking back at Fred and making a whining noise.

"It's okay. I'm right here if you need me." She doesn't bother to smile or to look interested in the least. "You'll be able to see me the whole time."

Nyssa leads Max by the hand to the ice cream shop just twenty yards away. As they walk away, she gives him a big, toothy smile.

Sam watches. This is why he brought Nyssa and not Tegan. Tegan could do it, but Nyssa is better with people. He turns to Fred. "She'd make a good mother, wouldn't she?"

Fred stares blankly at Sam. "I would think it takes more than ice cream and sign language to make a good mother. But then again... what do I know?"

"Okay." Sam claps his hands together loudly, startling Fred, causing her to jump slightly, which angers her even more. "Now, where did we leave off?"

"You were rude and I'm not happy with you." Fred turns, putting her feet up on Max's empty chair, doing everything she can to appear relaxed and in control. She's tried soft and pathetic, and that didn't work out so well. "That's... where we were." She sneers, looking like her brother. "Thanks for lunch. I'm broke. So... that worked out." She looks

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away nervously, holding her breath, waiting to see how Sam will react to this new approach.

“You’re very welcome. But let’s see...” Sam smiles politely as the waitress takes the tray from their table and walks away. Once she’s out of earshot, he continues. “Yesterday, I asked you to tell me a story. To see where things stand. To see if there’s anything I can do to help.”

Fred stares away towards the street.

“And you lied to me.” Sam pauses. He expects her to get upset and deny it.

She doesn’t. “A story’s a story. It doesn’t have to be completely true to be a story.”

“Touché.” Sam continues. “I asked you to leave. I returned to the barbecue. One of my three brothers, and my lone sister, did their best to one-up each other. My youngest brother... won the family game... by cheating, I suspect. Nyssa and I picked you up for lunch. I had a delicious meatball sub. And I got to meet Max... a little boy you babysit, who seems absolutely wonderful.”

Fred turns her head to look Sam in the eye. She’s still trying the direct, assertive approach.

“I really like him.” Sam shows a broad smile. “He’s fantastic. I love his fascination with the wheels. Maybe he can be an engineer when he grows up.”

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Fred snorts, and just stares at Sam, trying to be anything but nervous and unsure. Just like the first time they met, this stranger always manages to push his way through her phony exterior, and make her the one that feels uncomfortable. Plus, he's just so weird, and she has to admit, annoyingly charming.

“It’s one of my gifts. It comes in handy in my line of work.” Sam grins wildly. “Did I forget anything?”

Fred thinks for a second, and then asks. “What makes you think I lied to you?”

Sam’s smile disappears as he sighs loudly. “It was a cat, not a bird. It was in a pharmacy parking lot, not the beach. Sebastian wasn’t with you. You were alone. You were nineteen, not thirteen. So, four years ago. You weren’t a child anymore. And as it was laying there in pain, most likely dying... you stomped on its head until it was crushed and dead.” He shakes his head. “Oh. And you enjoyed every second of it. And it still makes you smile when you think about it.”

Fred goes cold, pulling her feet from the chair and sitting up in her seat. She looks around anxiously, and then over to Max, seeing Nyssa hand him his ice cream cone. “Who are you?” The worry is obvious in her voice. “Why are you here?”

“I thought you knew who... or what... I am?”

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Fred nods slowly, mechanically. She's covered in a cold sweat. She wants to grab Max and just go home. She needs to think. Or maybe she should just go, and leave Max with them.

“The two of you... you and your brother... approached me because your brother thought I murdered two boys in their garage?” Sam lifts his eyebrows to show that it's a question.

Again, she nods slowly.

“But you... you don't think I killed them. Or do you?” He knows the answer, but wants to hear it from her. “And now you want my help.”

“Yeah.” She looks around, giving it a couple second's thought, letting everything sink in. Then she shakes her head. “No. I think you killed them, but I didn't want what Sebastian wanted. I just needed your help.”

“You wanted a possible murderer to come to your house that night?” Sam turns his head, and gives Nyssa and Max a little wave. “And you weren't afraid.”

Fred nods quickly. “Yeah.”

“To stop you and Sebastian from doing what you intended to do.”

“Yes.” She takes a deep breath, feeling a buildup of raw emotion wanting to erupt. “Well... to stop my brother. I had no intention of going through with his stupid plan. I couldn't. I told him so just before you got there. We argued. I walked out. You saw me.”

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“But you killed animals. Bobby the chihuahua. And you enjoyed it.” Sam looks disgusted. “The cat wasn’t the first and it wasn’t the last.”

“Y... Yeah, as stupid as it sounds... it made me feel good. Powerful... in control.” She licks her lips nervously. They’re so dry and rough. “When I feel lost...” Fred’s mouth hangs open to say something more, but stops. She finds the truth difficult.

“Sebastian wanted to meet his god... his devil. As a winner.” Sam looks away towards, Nyssa and Max. “He tired of being a loser.”

This is the first she’d heard of that. Her brother can be so dramatic and corny. “Maybe. I don’t know.” Fred scrunches her eyebrows together, thinking, “He’s a fucking idiot is what he is.”

“And what do you want?” Sam raises an eyebrow. “You seem to always avoid that one.”

Fred leans forward, her voice getting anxious and excited. “I wanted you to stop my brother... stop me if necessary.”

Sam breathes out heavily. The playful charm is gone, overwhelmed by his sadness. He looks over to Nyssa and Max sitting on a bench enjoying their ice cream. He wants some ice cream. And then he wants to go feed the ducks.

Fred swallows hard and her voice gets softer. “I don’t wanna hurt anyone.” Her eyes fill with real tears.

“Have you?”

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She doesn't say anything, afraid to push him away again, when she feels she's so close.

"And how did you intend for me to stop you?" Sam's voice has gotten low and dark.

Fred's heart starts beating heavy and fast. "I didn't really care. I just wanted us stopped. If you killed Sebastian... that was fine." She shrugs, hoping that Sam actually did kill her brother. She hasn't seen him since that night. "If you killed me... even better."

Sam watches as Fred glances around nervously and uses the back of her hand to wipe the sweat from her forehead, and the beginnings of tears from her eyes. He knows she's telling the truth.

"I didn't kill your brother." Sam leans back in his chair. "I would have liked to... I suppose." He pauses, considering. "Well. Maybe not liked it. But he would've deserved it." He breathes out heavily. "But it's not who I am."

Several heavy tears tumble down Fred's face. "I saw you come out of that garage. Those two idiots died... and you were there. I saw the fire... the flames..." She pauses, deciding if it's time. "I saw wings." The last few words come out as a slight whisper. "I saw flaming wings."

Sam has no reaction. He just sits there for a minute watching Fred stare right at him, her breathing short and rapid. She feels like she's about to lose control, to panic and run. She's dizzy and weak, her whole body numb. Her mouth has gone completely dry as she nervously licks her lips

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for about the hundredth time, causing even her tongue to feel dry and rough.

“So you think you know... what... I am.” He smiles weakly. He’s known what she saw and what she didn’t see from the moment her and Sebastian started following him in their car. It’s a gift his entire family shares.

“Where’s my brother? Where’s Sebastian?” Fred’s heart begins to pound heavier, blurring her vision, causing her to blink rapidly several times. “You killed him. He hasn’t been around... because you killed him.”

“Winnifred.” Sam sighs. “This is getting tiring. Just tell me what you want from me?” He wants her to say it.

Fred looks over to Max and Nyssa, who’ve finished their cones and are approaching, hand in hand. “Yeah... maybe she would make a good mother.” She purses her lips. “I want you to stop me. I want you to kill me.” She suddenly grins awkwardly, proud of herself to have finally said it out loud.

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“Sam?” The voice sounds painful and raspy. “Is that you? You can come in, you know. You’ll just frighten someone standing out there, pacing like that. They’ll think I’ve finally gone and died.”

Sam walks into the room, his hands in his pockets, like a child reluctantly entering the principal’s office. Without looking at her, he walks past the woman lying in the hospital bed and sits in a fabric-covered, wooden chair near the window.

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“Since when do you just h...” The woman coughs several times. “... hover outside the door without coming in. That’s not the Sam I know.”

Sam looks over at the woman lying in the bed in front of him. She’s in an oxygen tent with two pillows propping up her head. Bandages cover nearly every inch of her body, including her eyes. Her eyelids were burned away, and her retinas damaged, causing instant blindness. Off to both sides of the bed are the machines, blinking and beeping, reminding her that she may still be alive. But sometimes, she’s not so sure.

Her breathing is rough and labored, and her voice sounds like someone who’s inhaled too much smoke too many times. If you could see through the severe burns and bandages, the missing hair, fingers and toes, you’d see a forty-four-year-old woman, heavily medicated, but still in great pain, her mind coming and going as she tries to keep it all together. She has no choice.

“So...” She coughs roughly. “Am I getting the silent treatment today? Cuz I’m okay with that. I can just lie her and listen to your breathing if you don’t want to talk. At least I’m not alone.”

Sam makes a small laughing sound. “You’re not alone, Mikaela. You’re never alone.”

“Ahhh, there he is.” She chuckles. “So, did you bring your deck of cards?” Her voice cracks, sounding painful. “We can either play some blackjack...” She chokes on her own saliva. “... or you can read my

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future.” This makes her laugh all the way through a rather harsh coughing attack. She can taste the blood washing down her throat.

Sam chuckles, patting the breast pocket of his jacket. “I got a deck right here. But I was thinking... maybe we could do something a little different today. Maybe just chat for a bit.”

“Sam. You’ve visited me every day for the past two months, and we’ve always played cards.” Mikaela coughs. “You changing things up like this... it makes me think this is the last time you’ll be visiting.”

The first night they met was three days after the fire that brought her here. She was in a coma for the first two days, probably her body’s way of saying you can’t handle this right now. But then on the third day, there was Sam and his deck of cards. He’d hang out. They’d chat a little, and play blackjack for hours, sometimes until she fell asleep. Then he’d disappear until the next night when he’d show up and do it all over again.

When Sam is around, the pain always seems blurred, like it was there, but not really there. That was the number one benefit of him visiting. She likes him. But she likes the pain going away even more.

“The truth Sam.” Mikaela croaks. “You said you would never lie to me.”

“This is my last night, Mikaela.” Sam turns his chair a little, so he can look out the window into the hospital parking lot. It’s raining and everything glistens as passing headlights catch the raindrops and small puddles.

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“Your last night. So not mine then? Hmm?” She chuckles hanging onto some hope, waiting for an answer that doesn’t come. “Let’s talk then... while I still have my voice.”

Sam smiles weakly, still looking out the window. “We can get to know each other a bit more before... before I have to go.”

“And before your sister gets here.” She reminds him.

“Yeah. That too.”

“She still comes every night, just after you go.” Mikaela coughs roughly several times, choking. “Maybe she’ll keep coming... even if you don’t.”

“Maybe.” Sam hops up and walks closer. He pours her a small cup of water from a bottle and lifts the oxygen tent a little. “I have some water for you.”

She nods and gets her mouth ready. She can feel him next to her. She hears the crinkle of the plastic as he reaches under and puts the cup to her lips. She takes a drink. It hurts to swallow.

He never touches her. Sometimes she wishes he’d accidentally brush his fingers against her cheek or somewhere there’s no bandages. It would make her feel better somehow, like she’s still human, and not some mummy wrapped up in her death bed.

Sam puts the cup on the table and goes back to his chair by the window. “If you need more, just let me know.”

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“Why do you smell like flowers?” She tries smiling, her broken lips painfully grimacing. She notices it every time he reaches under the tent and gives her water. “I’ve wanted to ask to you that for weeks now. It’s not a perfume smell. It’s real flowers.” She croaks out a short giggle.

Sam takes a long sniff of the air around him. “I don’t.”

“You do.” Sometimes she coughs a little harder just so he’ll come over to give her water, and she can smell something other than her own burnt flesh and bandages.

“My little brother smells like flowers. Always. It’s kind of crazy actually.” Sam thinks of Chris. “Spring flowers. It’s... soothing.”

“To me you smell like a fresh bouquet of daisies.” She wants to try a smile, but decides against it.

“Well... thank you, I guess. No one’s ever told me that.”

“Maybe no one’s got a sniffer like mine. Well... like mine used to be.” She chuckles painfully. “When I burned, all I could smell was meat. Like someone was cooking a fatty steak in a cast-iron frying pan.”

Sam stares out the window. She’s mentioned this before. It’s always difficult.

“I’ll never eat steak again, Sam. Never.”

Sam clears his throat uncomfortably.

“When it happened, I immediately felt the heat... the pain.” She pauses, struggling to remember. “But then you go cold. It’s like you’re still

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on fire. You can see the flames, feel the warmth, but something goes ice cold in you. So cold that it hurts.”

“Your core temperature is lowering, I suppose. Maybe trying to compensate. Like when you have a sunburn and get the chills.” He’s pretty sure that’s only partially correct, but it sounds nice.

“Hmmm.” She half nods, trying not to move too much. “It’s hard to remember, really. I guess the mind doesn’t want to remember. It’s doing its best to keep you safe. Maybe so you don’t break.”

“Break.” Sam mumbles. “That makes sense.”

“You know… when we first met, I tried to figure out if you were a young doctor or maybe a medic or a fireman.” Her voice sounds dry again. “I can tell you’re young because of your voice. Old men have old voices.”

Sam gets up and gives her another cup of water. “You’d be surprised, Mikaela.”

“Thank you.” She carefully licks her broken lips, feeling their permanent roughness with her tongue. “You didn’t seem like a doctor though. You kept your distance.” She chuckles. “I couldn’t ask that first night… I hadn’t found my voice yet.”

“I remember.” Sam stares out the window. “And you haven’t asked me since.”

“No… I haven’t.” She pauses, feeling a spasm of pain where her toes used to be. “I’m not really sure why, either. Maybe deep down inside, I know what you are… and I’m afraid.”

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“I’m not a doctor, or a medic, or anything that helpful unfortunately.”

“I know.”

There’s a full minute of silence.

“Will I die tonight?” The words tumble from Mikaela’s mouth out of fear. She feels a coldness rolling through her damaged body from her feet, to the top of her head, settling heavily in her brain. The cold’s been getting worse each day, and it seems to be at an unbearable peak right now.

“No.” Sam’s answer comes after a few seconds thought.

“You’re not telling the whole truth.”

Sam smiles to himself. “Mikaela… you’re not going to die tonight. I promise.” He looks away, out the window, sadness spreading from his eyes to his weak smile. He’s not lying, but he isn’t telling the whole truth.

“You sure?” Mikaela risks the pain, laughing hoarsely. “You already told me you’re not a doctor.”

“I’m positive.”

A young nurse walks in the room. “It’s just me Mikaela. It’s time for your meds.” She checks one of the machines, injecting a clear liquid into an IV hanging just outside the oxygen tent. “Can I get you anything?”

Mikaela stays silent, not wanting anything, and not wanting to keep the nurse from her rounds. She’s sure that her time is better spent with the living.

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The nurse writes something on a clipboard hanging on the wall, and then walks out the door.

“Why do you and your sister visit me every night?” Mikaela breathes in heavily, feeling the tears trying to build in her eyes, under the bandages. “She shows up just after you leave, whether I’m awake or asleep. I wake and there she is. She pulls the chair over to my side and sits with me. I think she holds my hand, but I can’t feel it.”

“I can’t really speak for my sister... but I come because...”

“Had we met before that night?” Her voice sounds weaker, sadder. “Before the fire?”

“No.” Sam looks back out the window. “I arrived as soon as you got to the hospital. My sister was with you the whole time though.”

“Rae.” Mikaela smiles, fighting through the pain.

“The first two days... she never left your side.”

“I knew her though... didn’t I?”

Sam doesn’t respond. He stares out the window, watching as the wind blows heavy droplets against the glass.

“Sam.”

“You’d met her a long time ago. But you wouldn’t remember.”

“The mind doing its thing again.” Mikaela doesn’t really mean it as a question.

“Possibly.”

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“I thought so. Even without seeing her, there’s something about her that seems familiar.” Mikaela tries moving her head to get more comfortable.

“So, what has she been reading to you lately?” Sam looks over, smiling, interested.

“Nothing. She hasn’t been reading anymore. She hasn’t for a few days now. We just talk now. Kinda like were doing now. Maybe she ran out of books.”

“What do you talk about?”

“Girl stuff.” Mikaela laughs. “Boys.”

“Boys?” Sam furrows his eyebrows.

Mikaela laughs. “She tells me stories about her childhood. About you and your brothers. Boys. Let’s see… their names…”

“Michael.”

“Yeah. And the other one…”

“Gabe.”

“Yeah, Michael and Gabriel. Lots of stories about you boys growing up. And all the things you got into.” Mikaela’s voice is getting weaker and hoarse. “And there’s one more…”

“Chris.”

“Yep. Him too. She doesn’t talk as much about him, but Michael… oh boy.” Mikaela’s getting tired. She hopes she has it in her to stay awake

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until Rae gets here. Maybe this will be her last visit too, and she doesn't want to miss any of it.

Mikaela makes a painful, whining sound as she feels a long spasm pass through her left foot.

"Would you like me to get a nurse?" Sam doesn't move, knowing what her answer will be.

She shakes her head back and forth almost imperceptibly. "What does she look like?"

"The nurse?"

"Rae."

Sam grins. "She's petite, very pretty... with a twinkle in her eyes that tells you she's full of mischief."

Mikaela laughs. "Sounds about right. I imagined her. You know how you do that when someone tells you about someone, but you don't know what they look like. Your imagination puts a face to the name."

"Yeah."

"Her voice. She's young, but you can tell she's seen a lot." Mikaela's voice cracks, causing her to cough several times. "She's lived a lifetime."

Sam just stares out the window.

"Petite. Long dark hair. Big blue eyes..."

"Brown." Sam mumbles.

"Big brown eyes. Oh, that sounds nice." She chuckles roughly. "And you're tall. I can tell. Tall and handsome with big... brown eyes."

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“Blue.”

“Blue.” She coughs loudly, like a dog’s bark. “I can’t get the eyes right.”

Sam is quiet.

“How do you picture me Sam. I mean... without all the burns and bandages and mess you see lying here.”

“Very pretty. Short, dark hair. Curly. Big brown eyes, but more of a hazel color. Dark skin. Mocha. And you always have your nails painted a tasteful red. Hands and feet.”

“Y... you...” Mikaela wants to cry. “You’ve seen pictures.”

“Magic.” Sam chuckles. “Maybe I’ll use the cards to read your fortune.”

Mikaela laughs. “That would be a quick read.”

“Can I ask you something personal? Since it’s our last night.” Sam clears his throat gently. “Something to take with me when I go.”

Mikaela nods. She coughs several times, some blood splattering up from her throat to her lips and tongue.

“What’s it like to lose a child.” He looks over to her. “I’m working through something right now, and I’d like to know.”

“Oh, Sam.” Mikaela sighs long and slow. “Please. No. Let’s not talk about that.”

“I’m sorry. I know... I’m being selfish.” Sam sounds a little ashamed.

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Mikaela doesn't say anything for a while. Sam can hear her breathing as it gets rougher with grief. "Sam..."

"I know you had a daughter. But you don't talk about her. All these weeks of chatting... playing cards and chatting... I've enjoyed every second... but I feel like the only things I know about you are that you're an accountant, grew up in Boston, and were working late one night in your apartment when there was an electrical fire."

Mikaela opens and closes her mouth several times, afraid to speak. She can feel the emotion tearing at her inside, just like the fire did to her outside.

"It's okay. I'm sorry I asked. It was rude. Selfish."

"Yes. I had a daughter." Mikaela's voice is low and soft. "When I was young. Willow."

"What happened?" Sam turns away from the window, sitting up straight, giving Mikaela his full attention.

"She died. She would've been..." She thinks. "... twelve now. It was my fault."

Sam sighs heavily. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you."

"How old was she when she passed?"

"Three." The word comes out as just a squeak. "Just a month away from her fourth birthday. June second. It was a Monday. It was raining just

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like today.” The tears try to build in her eyes, but they’re far too damaged for that. But Mikaela can feel them, nonetheless.

“May I ask how?”

“Oh Sam.”

“I’m sorry.” He knows how horrible he is for asking. But it’s important.

“Who is Rae? Who is she really?” Mikaela tries licking her lips, but her tongue just won’t reach. “We’d met before, you said.”

“Rae knew Willow. They were friends.” He considers. “They are friends.”

And that’s when Mikaela remembers. “Azrael.” She lets the name roll from her tongue.” She feels the cold from when she burned return and run through her body, numbing it completely. “Oh God.” Her voice is a whisper.

“They spent a lifetime together.” Sam says softly. “After Willow passed... Rae sat with her, showing her everything that would’ve been.”

Mikaela lets out a sharp croak. “Rae... she’s...”

“Yes.”

Mikaela takes a sharp breath and holds it. Her lungs burn and hurt. “Oh my God.”

“She sat with her. With Willow.” Sam smiles, picturing his sister doing what she does. “Then she took her home. And she sat with you while you grieved.”

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“She was there for days. Weeks.” Mikaela finds the tears she was looking for and starts crying softly.

“Years.” Sam turns again, looking out the window. “It’s unusual for her to do that. It’s really Gabriel’s thing... but sometimes she takes his place. She does it herself.” He purses his lips. “I think it helps her... as much as you.”

“She helped me grieve.” Mikaela croaks.

Sam grins. “Yeah. It’s not something anyone in my family could ever really understand... a child passing. But it makes us hurt.”

“That’s why you’re here? Isn’t it?” Mikaela suddenly feels a comfortable warmth go through her cold body. Unlike the cold, it doesn’t just travel through. It stays, as her pain diminishes. “You’re here for me.” Her voice breaks.

Sam looks over to his friend. “No. I’m here for me.”

“All this time... I figured something happened to someone you knew or loved... maybe that’s why you were at the hospital all the time... and then you found me... and you decided to visit.” She chuckles, still feeling the incredible warmth building inside her. “You felt bad for me.”

Mikaela lets out a long, empty breath, but doesn’t breathe back in. “You’re here to take me.” Her voice is barely a whisper.

The machine next to the bed starts beeping loudly as its display drops to a flat line.

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Sam stands up, looking over at Mikaela for the last time. “I’m sorry we don’t have more time to talk about Willow. But maybe sometime in the future I can visit and we can talk some more. I’d love to meet her.”

“Sam.” There’s worry in her voice. Her breathing has stopped. Her heartbeat has gone from fighting loud, to absolute nothing. She’s not even sure how she can still be talking. “You said I wasn’t going to die tonight.”

“Your daughter. Willow.” Sam looks down at Mikaela’s pregnant belly, hidden beneath a clean white sheet. “How did she pass?”

“You never lie. Rae said none of you ever lie.” Mikaela’s voice gets soft. “Please, Sam.”

“We don’t. I promise.”

Mikaela can feel the warmth in her fingers and toes now. She can feel the vision returning to her eyes as they flutter beneath the bandages.

“Mikaela...”

“Cancer. It was all my fault. Cancer. A brain tumor. It runs in my family. I knew. I should never have had children. It wasn’t fair. I put her through nearly a year of pain. It was all my fault.” The words pour from her as she feels the tears build beneath her bandages. “I put her through that. I should’ve known better.” Her voice cracks and breaks down to nothing.

Sam isn’t sure what to say. He’ll leave that up to his sister. She’s much better with those things.

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“Sam. If your sister is Azrael... Death... what are you?” Mikaela remembers one of her talks with Rae. “She called you...” And then she realizes. “Oh God. Oh God. Oh God. No. Please.” Her voice breaks as she begins softly crying. “Samael.”

“Shhh. It’s okay. I’m not here for that Mikaela. It wasn’t your fault. That’s not how it works.” Sam steps over to the side of the hospital bed, doing his best to provide some warmth.

Her whimpering and crying slow.

“Please. Before I go... what’s it like to lose a child?”

Mikaela finds the remaining strength in her voice. “It burns. It burns a hole right through you. Every thought... every memory... contains a piece of them. You never forget. You remember every smile. Every time they reached for your hand. Every breath they ever took.” Her voice cracks and drops to a whisper. “When you lose a child... you lose yourself. You become a dark, empty void that just goes on because you have to. You don’t want to... but you do.”

Suddenly, two nurses and a young doctor hurry into the room, followed by two orderlies with a gurney. They’re talking fast, tearing the plastic aside and getting ready to move Mikaela over to the gurney. They decide that there’s no time, and that they need to take the baby now, before it’s too late.

Rae appears from the shadows. She walks right past Sam, the nurses and doctor, around the gurney and orderlies, and to Mikaela’s side.

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She takes her hand in her own and smiles gently. “I’m right here Mikaela... for our last chat. It’ll be a long one, I promise. A lifetime.” Rae’s smile grows. “And this time... Willow would like to sit with us if that’s okay.”

Sam can feel the emotion wash over him. “Mikaela. You died two months ago. In that fire. I’m sorry. You didn’t survive.”

He reaches over one last time, hovering his hand several inches above the sheet covering her.

“But Death refused to take you just then.” He can feel the child’s heartbeat. “Mikaela. He’ll grow up strong. He’ll live an amazing life.” He slowly pulls his hand back, letting it drop to his side, turns, and walks out of the room. “I promise.”

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Sam walks in the house and tosses his keys on the table in the foyer. He'd been down by the river again, just sitting on the short dock behind the high school, thinking. And now he just wants to go up to his room and lay in his bed, and listen to some music. Chopin. He wants to listen to Chopin. It relaxes him.

As he walks into the living room, he's greeted by his brother's big voice.

"Hey, Lucky." Michael's sitting on the sofa, looking over his shoulder. "So what's going on? Tegan says she's worried about you."

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“Hey!” Tegan reaches over from her spot on the couch and slaps Michael in the chest. “I told you not to say anything.”

Michael rubs his chest, smiling wide. “Everyone keeps hitting me.”

It makes sense that Tegan would get along with Michael and feel so comfortable with him. They’re a lot alike. Putting the past behind them took time, but now that his conflict with Sam is over, they’ve become friends.

Sam walks farther into the living room, towards the sofa. He looks over to the stairs, leading up to his bedroom, and sighs theatrically, realizing that his plans have been put on temporary hold. It would be rude not to say hello to his family.

“Oh man.” Gabriel gets up from the other end of the couch. “I don’t need to be here for this.” He walks towards the French doors heading out to the patio, flashing a peace sign and uneasy smile towards Sam. “I’m going to go find pops and Nyssa... and see what they’re up to.”

“Books.” Tegan blurts. “They’ll be walking down the beach talking about books.”

“That sounds nice.” Gabriel continues down the path to the beach.

Sam takes note of how unusually upbeat Tegan seems today. There must have been a lot of good-natured teasing between her and his two brothers.

“Nerds.” Rae sits up, and Sam sees her for the first time, somewhat hidden by the back of the old man’s favorite chair. “Hey Sam.” She hops

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up and walks over, giving him a short hug. He doesn't hug back. "I know. Rough day." She pulls back, making an overly serious face.

As Rae sits back down, Sam pulls the old man's wheelchair closer, plops down in it, and rolls into the space directly in front of the others. He looks tired. "So... Tegan?" He pushes his eyebrows up, giving her an expectant look.

"Don't blame me. I was just sitting here... by myself... enjoying some pudding... and your brothers wandered in and took over, having some loud conversation about something incredibly stupid." Tegan gives Michael an amused look.

"It wasn't stupid." Michael looks hurt. "We were talking about the different kinds of pickles."

Tegan gives him a blank look. "Then your sister pops in... and of course made everyone uncomfortable."

"I didn't... pop... in." Rae grins wildly. "I glided."

"And Tegan... you were the only one she made uncomfortable." Michael winks to his sister.

"I came down the stairs and saw these guys all chatting like they were up to something." Rae tilts her head to the side. "I thought they were talking about me."

"Not everything's about you, Sunshine." Michael squints his eyes at his sister.

"It is in the end." Rae smiles wide like a child.

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Even Tegan smiles.

“Pudding?” Sam scrunches his eyebrows together, looking at Tegan.

“Vanilla pudding with little bits of cooked rice in it.” Tegan widens her eyes. “Very yummy.”

He’s still amazed at how good of a mood she’s in. She needs to hang out with Michael more often.

“Rice pudding.” Rae laughs. “It’s called rice pudding.”

“Yeah. My favorite.” Tegan nods. “Your dad keeps a bunch of pudding cups in the fridge. In that drawer in the bottom.”

“That’s always been the pudding and apple sauce drawer.” Michael laughs. “The rice ones are good. I really like the chocolate vanilla swirl. You get some chocolate. You get some vanilla. Best of both worlds.”

“Those are Chris’ puddings.” Sam stands up.

“He won’t miss one.” Tegan gives Rae a quick glance, and then looks to Sam.

“So you threaten to beat him up.” Michael chuckles. “And then you steal his pudding. You’re a bully.”

“I threatened to throw him in the ocean... not beat him up.” She huffs. “Why is that so hard for everyone to get right?”

“Ha.” Michael likes Tegan. She makes him laugh.

Tegan takes a deep breath, exhaling slowly, and pulls herself off the couch. “Look. This isn’t about me. This isn’t about pudding. This is

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about him.” She points to Sam, and looks up at him. “You’re being all secretive and weird.”

“He’s always been the weird one.” Michael is mocking, not taking this as seriously as he should. He’s not sure if he wants to bring up what he spoke to Sam about. Not in front of Rae.

“Chris is the weird one.” Sam breathes out. “I’m...”

“It is pretty strange what you’re doing.” Rae chimes in. “Hanging out with that... thing... chatting... being friendly. It’s weird. So yeah... you’re the weird one right now.” She stares challengingly at Sam. “You know what she is.”

“Hmmm.” Michael nods, looking first to his sister and then back to his brother. “I met her brother. Just leave ‘em to their fate and be done with it.”

“And what’s their fate... smart guy?” Sam’s getting slightly irritated by all this. They’re all ganging up on him, and he doesn’t like it.

“I’ve met the both of them.” Rae laughs, remembering. “And their fate seems pretty obvious to me.”

Nobody says anything at first.

Finally, Tegan sighs, and grabs her empty pudding container and spoon. She looks directly at Michael. “I’ll be in the kitchen. Alone. Thank you very much.” She glances to Sam and Rae. “Possibly eating another of pipsqueak’s puddings.” She marches off.

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“Alright. So that just leaves the big dogs.” Michael glances to Sam and then Rae. “And the chihuahua.”

“The creature.” Rae’s face hardens. “Winnifred. Why so much interest? She’s a lost cause as far as I’m concerned.”

“You know her?” Michael looks over to Rae, getting a feeling that his sister may actually be involved in his little mystery. And that worries him.

“Of course, you idiot. I just said I met her. Pay attention.” Rae shakes her head. “Rude little thing that deserves everything she got and everything she has coming.”

“Ha. The chihuahua has spoken.” Michael doesn’t get involved with Rae’s dealings. And he certainly doesn’t bother with Sam’s. But something is going on here. “Sam? Our little chat?”

“Honestly... I wouldn’t...”

“She’s lost.” Rae interrupts. “And she deserves to be lost.” Rae flashes her eyes, black and empty. She holds her stare for a full ten seconds, while Michael looks on, smiling. Then she cocks her head to the side and giggles, letting her eyes go big and brown again. She gives her brother a big, goofy smile.

Michael rolls his eyes. “Well. The rude little thing is on her way up to the door, as we speak.” He uses his head to motion towards the front window, where they can see Fred crossing the lawn.

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Rae hops up and glides around the big chair in one graceful move. “My turn.” She makes a show of dancing to the foyer. Turning before going out of the living room, she curtsies to her brothers, spins elegantly, and casually walks out into the foyer.

Sam closes his eyes tightly, wishing he were up in his room with Chopin.

Michael laughs. “This should be fun.”

Rae flings the door open with a flourish, and for a split second, she allows her eyes to show the darkness within.

Fred, her hand still in the air, about to ring the doorbell, takes a quick step backwards, nearly falling into the bushes. She puts a hand to her chest. “What the...”

“Remember me?” Rae’s voice is girly and playful, but with her usual hint of attitude.

“You.” Fred’s voice is squeaky. A wave of pure terror goes through her body. She goes ice cold.

“Yeah, me.” Rae is playing. She just stands there for a few seconds holding the door open, the crazy look in her eyes daring the girl to step into her world.

Sam calls out from the living room. His voice is tired. “Rae. Invite her in. Please. I think she’s a vampire... you need to invite her in.”

Michael gives his brother an odd look.

“Kidding.” Sam chuckles through his weariness.

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Fred glances past Rae, trying to see into the foyer.

“Yep. He’s home.” Rae motions with her eyes for Fred to come in.

“You got lucky.” She grins wickedly. “You and me alone. Oh... so dangerous. Remember?”

Fred, her body now covered in a cold sweat, walks in, carefully avoiding Sam’s scary sister.

Rae closes the door and prances past Fred, and into the living room ahead of her.

Michael looks over his shoulder at the young woman that just walked in. “So this is the rude little thing that’s lost? I’m a little disappointed.”

“Mikey!” Sam’s voice is a harsh whisper and his eyes light up briefly.

“What?” Michael casually shrugs. “I was expecting... more.”

Fred hesitantly walks slowly towards the middle of the room. She’s scared. Very scared.

“This is my brother Michael. Mister tall, dark, and handsome.” Sam shows a weary smile. “And I know you’ve met my sister.”

Rae smiles like an overly happy child.

“I... I can come back another time.” Fred’s words come out small and fast.

“No. Please.” Sam makes a motion for her to come sit down. “They were just leaving.” He gives his siblings a look.

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Fred looks over to the big chair she sat in the other day, when the sofa was missing.

“Not the chair.” Rae says blandly as she passes and drops sideways into the chair, with her legs over one of the arms. “This is my father’s chair.”

Fred looks uncertain. She just wants to go. She glances to the foyer which seems so far away at this point. But she also wants to finish up her talk with Sam before she loses her hold on him.

Sam gestures for her to take a seat at the opposite end of the sofa from Michael.

“Nyssa said she had a bad attitude. Bold.” Michael turns to his brother. “She looks pretty timid to me.”

“Dude.” Rae laughs. “She’s standing right there.”

“Please. Excuse my brother...” Sam begins.

Fred digs deep and momentarily finds herself, and forgets who she thinks these people are. “Look asshole. If you want bold, I can go bold.” She looks directly at Michael, her arms and legs trembling, but trying to sound convincing. “I don’t like being bullied, and that’s the only thing that’s happened since I got here.” She looks over at Rae. “And that goes for you too.” She struggle for second, as the fear threatens to overwhelm her. “You scary... fucking... bitch.” The last word comes out much weaker than she intended.

“Ha.” Rae laughs. “Maybe I should make you aware that...”

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“No.” Michael puts up a hand, quickly glancing to his brother.

“No. It’s okay. Rae and I were just leaving.”

“No. We weren’t.” Rae puts on a fake pout. She tilts her head to the side and looks up at Fred. “I wanna see where she’s going with this. Plus, I don’t like being called names.” She drops the pout, giving Fred an intense stare. “We either find out now... or I find out later. You and me. Your choice.” She turns just her eyes to Sam, showing how serious she really is. “Now... or later?”

“Rae. Please.” Sam motions for her to take Michael and go. “I’ll owe you both.”

Fred wants to turn and go, walk out in a huff, just to make a point. But she can’t get up the nerve to turn her back on Rae. She’s back to being terrified. Sam’s sister is like a tiny, beautiful package that you know contains some kind of scary jack-in-the-box, ready to explode in your face.

Michael stands up and extends a hand towards his sister.

Rae pulls herself out of the chair and walks past Fred, just staring at her with a sweet look on her face. She walks right past Michael, ignoring his outstretched hand, and towards the French doors in the back of the room.

Michael shakes his head, rolls his eyes, and follows.

Sam looks over at Fred. She’s just standing there looking scared and angry.

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“What’d you tell them?” Her voice is weak, as she tries to regain her moment of strength.

“Nothing. They’re just concerned.”

“Fuck them.”

Sam motions for Fred to sit.

“No thank you. I can say what I need to say from right here.” Michael and Rae pissed her off. She quickly glances to the open back doors going out to the patio.

“It’s just you and me.” Sam smiles wearily.

Fred lets out a long breath. She half sits, half leans on the back of the sofa. Her attitude completely shifts as her voice gets soft. “Did you think about what I asked you?”

Sam drops whatever smile he has left, just watching her as she begins to fidget with her hands. He looks down to his own hands. He’s been twisting his rings the entire time he was conversing with Michael and Rae. It used to be a habit he intentionally created, because it seemed so human. But over the many years, it’s become a real habit when he’s legitimately agitated.

“Why do you want to die?” He doesn’t look up.

Fred’s body slumps. She looks ready to cry. Within seconds, her face has gone from defiant and angry back to sad and lost. “I told you. I’m not a good person. I don’t wanna hurt the people around me. I don’t wanna hurt anyone... and I know I will. I’ve already tried.”

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Sam's face remains serious as he considers. There's a lot she doesn't know, and he debates just telling her now. It would be a quick end to all this, but it would leave so much unanswered for him. He's beginning to realize that he's still on his sister's path, just without her company this time. His project.

"I still haven't found Bash." Fred mumbles.

"You will." Sam begins taking his rings off, one by one. He has seven of them. All silver.

They were gifts from his father. When he was just a kid, the old man took a ring off his left pinkie and put it on Sam's thumb. He said it would always link them together. Father and eldest son. He never gave any to the other boys, just Sam. He continued giving them to Sam one by one at various moments in their lives.

"Right." Fred half smiles. "With a little luck... I suppose I will."

She firmly believes that Sam killed her brother that night. She can feel that he's dead. And she remembers what she saw when Sam came walking out of Brad's burning garage. His smile of satisfaction. The otherworldly, crazy, happy smile. She's sure of it. This is what he does. This is who he is. This is why she came to him.

Tiring of these habits that he's accumulated over the years, Sam leans back and tucks all his rings into his front pocket. He takes them off to stop himself from nervously playing with them. He only leaves the original one that his father gave him. It now fits his pinky as it did his

father when he first gave it to him. He wants to keep that link between father and son.

“I’m afraid of who I’ll hurt.” Her voice goes soft as she loses the remainder of her confidence. “I can’t do it myself. I can’t... kill myself. I’m... weak. I’m afraid.” At this moment she’s very unlike her natural self, and more like a lost child trying to find her way.

“Of?”

“I guess... I don’t wanna meet Sebastian’s god... his... devil.” Deep down inside, she knows that sounds ludicrous, but it’s the truth. They never had religion in their family, but they were given a clear understanding of what happened to bad little boys and girls. Their grandmother pushed that upon them when they were young.

Sam and Fred sit in silence for several minutes. Fred keeps moving her eyes from the floor to Sam and then back to the floor in front of her. She feels stupid admitting such a lame thing. But she’s serious. After meeting Sam, she doesn’t want to take any chances with whatever else is out there.

“Look. I’m not going to try to bullshit you.” She pauses. “Well... not anymore.” She considers her words, where she should take this, and how far is too far. “I’m trying to save myself just as much as I’m trying to save the people around me.” She’s telling the truth.

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“We’re talking about the little boy. We’re talking about Max.” Sam lets out a long, steady breath. Another habit he intends to rid himself of soon. “He was waiting in the house... for me and Sebastian that night?”

Fred immediately looks up from the spot on the floor she’s been staring at. Again, she’s instantly covered in a cold sweat, her heart ready to burst. A flood of tears stream down her face. Real tears. “I...” She immediately pushes herself away from the back of the sofa, and quickly walks across the room, into the foyer, and out the front door.

As the door closes, it’s like a switch being flipped, and everything is gone. All that’s left is darkness. Sam falls backward into the black nothingness, as the chair he was sitting on is no longer there. He tumbles over and over into the darkness, trying to get hold of himself and stop himself from falling.

“Chris!” He yells out, unsure what’s happening and how to stop it. He’s a little freaked out.

The darkness flashes to intense light and then back to the black void over and over, speeding up into a wild flicker of light and dark. With each flicker comes a booming, crunching noise like planets smashing together, their cores slamming and grinding, rock against rock. Sam has to close his eyes and put his hands over his ears to keep the pain out.

He’s still falling, tumbling.

And then he’s back.

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He's sitting breathlessly in his father's chair. He's breathing hard and fast, his hands both gripped onto the side of the chair, crushing the armrests down to nothing.

“What... the fuck... was that all about.”

16

Sebastian opens the side door to the garage and steps in. Fred is sitting on the old couch against the opposite wall.

“Where’ve you been? Is he coming?” His sister looks unhappy. Her voice is soft and weak, bland. There’s no trace of her usual bravado.

“Yeah.” Sebastian nods, and looks to his left, seeing that she’s lit a few of the candles to help brighten the dark garage. Sitting nearby is a thick blanket, pillow, and stack of clean, white sheets. “What’s with all that?”

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She gives him a look like he's an idiot. "It's dirty out here. And uncomfortable."

"Yeah... I guess." He looks down, trying not to think about it.

She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly.

Sebastian licks his lips, and clears his throat quietly. "You know... you're just going to have to throw them out after. Or burn them in the fireplace. Or bury them..." His voice trails off.

Fred says nothing, but looks away to all the old, storage boxes sitting in front of the main garage door. The boxes have been there forever, and contain her and Sebastian's baby clothes and old toys from when they were kids. Her mother just won't get rid of them. Memories, she says.

Fred takes another deep breath, but this time, it pushes out rough and raspy.

"You okay?" Sebastian grabs the blanket, pulling it out from underneath the pile of sheets, and lays it neatly over an old wooden table sitting in the middle of the garage.

"I'm sad. What do you fuckin' think?" She looks up, to see what he's doing, and then looks away to the boxes again. "You found him?"

Sebastian nods. "He's on his way. You should be excited..." He hesitates. "... kind of." While laying out the blanket, he glances over his shoulder at his sister, a stupid, gummy smile on his face. "He should be here in maybe forty-five minutes."

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“Yeah.” She looks up, appearing bored. “So why didn’t he just come with you?”

Sebastian grabs the pillow and sets it on the table on top of the heavy blanket. “We won’t need the sheets.”

“They’re for after, dumbass.” Her voice cracks, and she looks away.

Sebastian shrugs. “I don’t know. He’s on his way though. He ran into some asshole. His brother or something. And I didn’t feel like waiting.”

“Was he at that lame coffee shop again?”

Sebastian shakes his head. “No. Down by the river. Behind the high school.”

“That’s where you found him?” Fred scrunches her eyebrows together, pulling the hood back she’s been using to hide her face, and runs her fingers through her curly hair. “How’d you know that’s where he’d be?”

“I didn’t. It was just dumb luck.” Sebastian looks over at his sister and grins. “Or maybe fate.” He walks over and plops down heavily on the other end of the couch, causing it to make a loud cracking noise.

She turns and looks at her brother blankly. “But you’re sure he’s on his way?”

“Yeah.” Sebastian’s smile gets even wider, showing a mouthful of gums and yellow teeth. “We talked some more. Like I told you... he’s kinda strange. A little scary actually. In a weird way... not like he’s trying.”

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“Whatever.” She remembers the look in his eyes when he introduced himself. “What did you tell him?”

“Everything.” Sebastian sits up straight, looking proud of himself.

Fred raises an eyebrow. “Everything?” She sounds uncertain. That wasn’t the plan, just yet.

Sebastian nods enthusiastically. “Almost everything. I mean… I didn’t want to scare him off or anything.”

“Did you say anything about…?” Her voice trails off, not wanting to say it.

“No. Like I said… I didn’t want to scare him off.”

She pictures Sam as he walked out of that burning garage. She knows what she saw. She wasn’t sure at the time. But once she saw his eyes at the coffee shop, she knew. And that’s when everything changed for her. She hasn’t said anything to her brother, but she has a different idea of how Sam can help. And if he kills Sebastian before getting to her, that’s totally fine.

“Just so you know.” Sebastian, drops his crazy smile and looks off to the side, thinking. “Number one… he doesn’t like to be called killer. So don’t do that… like I said, he’s kinda freaky.”

Fred shakes herself from her thoughts and nods.

“Number two… he’s playing it cool like he didn’t kill Karl and Brad… like he’s feeling things out to see where we’re going with this.”

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“Or...” Fred’s laughs with absolutely no trace of humor. “... maybe he’s gonna show up and kill you just because he can. Maybe he’s got a thing for killing idiots in garages.”

“Don’t call me an idiot.” Sebastian’s snarls. “I don’t like it.” He glares at his sister with an angry look on his long face.

Fred just stares at her brother, wanting to push things and call him idiot just to show him she can. But she wants him here tonight. She doesn’t want him running off to sulk like the big baby he is.

“Trust me. Mister tall, dark, and crazy’s all in.” Sebastian’s face lights up with excitement again.

“Hmmm.” Fred doesn’t seem as sure.

“Seriously. I told you... he fucked up Karl and Brad. He’s gonna fuckin’ do this. He’s gonna help one way or another.” He quickly looks away before he can catch his sister’s eyes again. His voice drops low. “He can do it. And then he can take the blame.”

Fred glances over to the workbench and table.

Sebastian’s eyes go wild. “Or I can fuckin’ stab him and we’ll claim self defense. We saw him kill our friends and he came after us.” He makes a snorting sound. “I’ll be a God damn hero.”

“Don’t believe your own bullshit.” Fred snarls, hoarsely, a crazy, angry look in her eyes.

Sebastian looks away. “Well... doesn’t matter. He believes my bullshit. He’s like me. I can feel it.”

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“If you mean, bat-shit crazy... yeah, probably.” She turns her anger into a sneering smile. “Idiot.”

“Fuck you!” Sebastian jumps up and walks over to the boxes, looking for something. “Lose your fuckin’ attitude or I’m out. You think you can do this on your own?”

“You need this. You don’t wanna be a loser anymore. You fucking need this.” She’s been telling him this for weeks now. Pushing him forward like a good sister does.

“No... you fuckin’ need this.” He looks over his shoulder, returning her sneering smile, feeling in charge for once. He pulls out a long, butcher knife from one of the boxes, holding it high in the air. “Ahhh. Come to daddy.” He kisses the blade like the idiot his sister thinks he is.

Fred looks away, swallowing hard, her throat feeling like it’s closing up. Her heart starts beating heavy. She feels a warm sickness overcoming her, blurring her vision. “I don’t think I can be here for this.” She mumbles. “When he gets here...”

“What?” Knife in hand, letting it drop to his waist, Sebastian trudges closer. “What are you fucking talking about?” Spit flies from his snarling mouth.

She doesn’t want to say anything more. She feels like she might start crying, and she isn’t doing that in front of her idiot brother.

“Winni!” Sebastian’s voice is sharp. “I’m talking to you.”

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She turns quickly, noting the knife in his hand, and for a second wondering what he's going to do. How angry can she get him? He's right that she needs this. But maybe this is her way out. Maybe he'll just end her nightmare right now and she won't have to do a damn thing. "I told you... idiot. I can't be here for this." She pushes, one last time. She breathes in and out quickly, trying to find her control.

"Fuck you! He's on his way. We're fuckin' doin' this. You're part of this." Sebastian holds up the knife, pointing it at her. "You're the whole reason we're fucking doing this. I didn't want this. You did. I like the kid."

He looks on the verge of being out of control. She's seen him like this before. Many times. And he usually does something incredibly stupid.

"This is all for my looney sister who can't handle what life dealt her." He looks crazed, a long stream of drool falling from his mouth. "We're doing this. We're fucking doing this!"

Fred's heart starts pounding. She's scared. Anybody would be. But at the same time, she's excited. She closes her eyes for a second, hoping and praying that this will be enough.

Moving the knife to his other hand, Sebastian grabs his sister by the wrist, and yanks her from the couch, pulling her towards the wooden table. This wakes her from the warm feeling that had started to creep through her mind and body. She instantly falls back on what she knows, on who she is. Sometimes no matter what you really want, self-preservation kicks in and takes over.

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Fred pulls away. “Knock it off, Bash!” She takes several steps backward, towards the couch, wary of the knife in his hand, and very aware of his temper. She may be older, but he’s bigger and stronger.

Sebastian turns to face his sister, his face gone red and sweaty with anger.

And instantly, he explodes into a fine red mist splattering on the wall behind him, the work bench, the table, the clean white sheets and the pillow. Everything is red, shiny, wet.

In between heartbeats, Fred’s world slows as she watches the red mist settle across the room, putting one of the three candles out, and causing the others to hiss violently.

She screams, and falls backward onto the couch against the wall.

“Hello.” The voice is calm and pleasant, familiar. Scary without trying to be scary.

Fred jumps, and turns her body to the young woman sitting on the other end of the couch.

Rae waves her fingers at her like a child, and smiles. “I told you I’d be seeing you guys around.” She tilts her head and giggles. “Coffee shop. Remember?”

Fred is so scared and confused, her vision begins to cloud, and she feels herself about to pass out.

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“No.” Rae pulls her bare feet up and places them underneath her long, black dress on the couch. “I don’t have time for any of that nonsense.”

Fred feels her mind clear as she begins to relax. “Wha... wha...” She can feel her body wanting to vomit, but it doesn’t.

Rae turns her body on the couch, still smiling pleasantly. She points to her own cheek with a finger. “You have a little bit of your brother... right about here.”

Feeling unnaturally relaxed, but still stunned and unsure what is happening, Fred unconsciously reaches up with her own finger and wipes some blood from her cheek. She gags several times, but can’t find it in herself to actually throw up.

“There you go.” Rae’s voice is girly and fun as she smiles even brighter. “Let’s see. I’m several days ahead of you in this whole thing... so give me a second.” She takes a few minutes, while Fred looks around and tries to grasp what has just happened.

“My brother.”

“Dead.” Rae giggles girlishly.

Fred looks over at the blood on the walls and table. “How?”

Rae laughs. “What you do mean... how?” She gestures with her hand at everything in front of them. “As you can clearly see... he exploded.” She tilts her head to the side, letting her smile drop. “Trust me... you don’t come back from something like that. It changes a person.”

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That's when the tears start coming. Fred goes cold and starts whimpering and crying lightly. Her brother is dead. And she's terrified that the same thing is about to happen to her. Her crying gets a little louder.

“No. We don't need any of that either.”

Fred immediately stops crying, sniffles several times, and wipes her eyes on the back of her hands. She wants to cry more. But she can't.

“It doesn't really matter anyway. He was an awful human being. And I didn't need him for this particular conversation. It's you that I find interesting. I warned you.” She tilts her head to the side, giving it some thought. “I mean... I will warn you. In three days. So now we do it my way.” Rae grins madly. “Now or later, I said. Now or later. A bit confusing when you think about it.”

A small whimper comes from Fred's throat.

“Anyway. Now your brother gets to meet...” There's a glimmer in her dark eyes. “... hmm...” She pretends to think. “Oh yeah. He gets to meet his devil.” She laughs. “As if he gets one all to himself. Conceited bastard.”

Fred takes a deep breath and holds it. She wants to run. She glances to the door in the back of the garage, leading out into the backyard. But she can't find it in herself to move.

Rae reaches over and roughly pats Fred's leg. “You just let me know when you're ready to meet yours.”

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Fred takes several deep breaths, searching for any remaining courage.

Rae tilts her head innocently. “I suggest you listen to me closely and respond appropriately.” Letting her big, brown eyes, go completely black and empty, she stares directly at Fred.

Fred nods very slowly, unable to look away out of pure terror.

“My brother. Sam. He has an unusual interest in you.” She grins wildly. “Why? What have you got, that he wants?”

Fred says nothing, a blank look on her face, not understanding.

Rae raises her eyebrows.

“I... I don’t know. We just met.” Fred swallows hard, feeling like her throat has completely closed. “My brother... Sebastian... said he’d help us.” She looks over to the bloody mist forming red streaks down the garage walls.

Rae glances over to the blood. “I think some things are beyond help... even my brother’s. What do you think, Sebastian?”

Fred turns her head back to Rae. She sees Sebastian sitting between them, on the couch, holding Rae’s hand, looking just as he normally does, but better. He’s smiling comfortably.

The candles go out, and the garage instantly goes pitch black, unnaturally black. There’s only the couch with the three of them sitting on it. Rae lets go of Sebastian’s hand, and casually pushes him forward. He falls face first from the couch into the darkness below.

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Fred lets out a squeak. She can hear him screaming as he falls and falls and falls. It seems like the screaming will never stop. She closes her eyes firmly and puts her hands over her ears to block it out.

“That’s enough.” Rae says plainly, and the screaming stops.

Fred listens cautiously for a few seconds, letting the tears roll down her face and drop to her lap. Then she slowly pulls her hands from her ears.

“My brother isn’t helping you. At least, not the way you think he’s helping you. You have no idea who my brother is.” She scrunches her eyebrows. “Or rather... you have some idea, but you’re wrong”

“Wh... where...” Fred breathes in and out slowly. “... where are we?”

Rae makes a show of looking around. “This is the void. This is me. You’re still in your blood-soaked little garage. But this is me.”

Fred makes a whining noise, and begins to whimper, her lip quivering as she looks around. “What are...”

“I’m the most terrifying thing you’ll ever experience. Well... until you get to know my brother a little better. In his place.” Rae’s laugh echoes into the darkness. “And even then... that’s debatable. You’ll have to let me know.”

Fred’s tears turn into outright crying. She puts both hands to her face, covering her eyes and mouth, and sobs uncontrollably into them.

And this time, Rae allows it to happen.

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“My brother’s interest in you started with me.” Rae sighs, and lets any human pretenses drop. She darkens, beginning to meld into the blackness around her. “I went down a path that showed him the possibilities of what we could accomplish if we really wanted to.”

Rae pauses, a sudden idea creeping up on her like an old memory slowly pulling itself from the shadows.

Fred, her hands still covering her face, feels like she’s about to burst, and all she can picture is her brother exploding onto the walls.

“Maybe I don’t need you after all. I think I know what you are to my brother.” Rae’s voice deepens. “Sam and I are a lot alike. We both have to deal with... things like you. Fortunately, I only have to deal with them every now and then. But Sam’s whole world is filled with monsters. He used to have nightmares, you know.” She smiles sadly. “When he was a child.”

Rae lets the darkness slowly fade, again revealing the blood-splattered garage.

“But like any good, big sister... I inevitably, although unknowingly, showed him the path he should take. To rid himself... and others... of things like you.” She laughs to herself. “Good for me. It was the right thing to do.”

There’s several minutes of silence where all Fred can hear is her own heartbeat and labored breathing. She keeps her hands over her eyes, trying to wake from this nightmare. She finds her voice. “H... hello?”

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For a brief second, she thinks she's alone.

Then. "But you. You're causing a God damn problem. I can see that now." Rae pushes air out of the darkness as if she's actually breathing. "I risk losing my little brother because of... what you are." She sighs long and deep, like a low growl. "Bad for me."

Fred pulls the hands from her face, and takes a sharp breath. The darkness is gone, replaced by the blood-splattered walls of her garage. And sitting where the pretty, young woman just was, is a black, swirling mass of darkness.

And she sees the face of Death, staring out at her. It's something her brain can't process. Fred tries to scream, but can't.

The blackness grows and pulls itself above and around Fred, reaching out for her with long, black tentacles of emptiness.

Fred screams and panics, jumping back, falling off the edge of the couch and onto the hard, garage floor. She screams and wakes, bolting into a sitting position on the couch in her living room. She's sweating, and her heart is pounding in her chest so loud that she can actually hear it. Feeling something wet running down the side of her face, she uses the back of her hand to wipe some blood from her cheek.

Max stops playing with his toy trucks in the middle of the room. He looks up at her for a second, a funny smile on his face, but then goes back to playing, making engine sounds as he pushes his toys around on the living room carpet.

17

Sam sits alone at the kitchen table eating from a big bowl of cereal. He'd added extra sugar over the top, like he always does. It could never be too sweet. He's been watching Duck and Squirrel all morning on the TV mounted in the corner. When he and his siblings were kids, it was a Saturday morning favorite.

“Hey spaceman.” A quiet, somewhat nervous, voice calls from the doorway leading out to the foyer.

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Sam slowly turns, not sure who it is at first. “Noel.” He’s confused. “What are you doing here? How’d you get here?” He quickly glances around, making sure everything is as it should be. “You shouldn’t be here.”

Noel tentatively steps into the kitchen. “Your sister brought me.” She glances around the room. “She said you could use a friend today.”

“Hmmm. My sister.” Sam pulls out the chair at the end of the table, and gestures for her to sit down. “Please. Sit.”

Noel smiles shyly and sits down in the chair, but keeps it pulled out, facing the room. “Thanks. Yeah, she came by the house and hung out a while with me and my mom.” Her voice is quiet and nervous. This is only the third time she’s seen Sam since he saved her. They’re still getting to know one another.

Noel is fourteen going on forty. Until just a few weeks ago, she was homeless, on her own for several years, and abused by a very bad man. Her and her mother had lived alone on the streets since Noel was eleven. And then one day her mom had gone out to beg for money, and got attacked and killed in an alley. She never came back, and Noel had no idea what had actually happened. She thought she had been abandoned. That’s how Noel ended up on her own and with her abuser.

Eventually Sam came alone, gained her trust, and saved her from the streets and her abuser. All in a matter of hours. He took Noel home, reuniting her with her dead mother. And of course, Rae violently

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murdered the girl's abuser in a tent he called home, down by the river. He deserved it.

"I'm sorry. I'm just a little surprised." Sam pushes his cereal bowl to the side, and using the remote, mutes the TV. "So... my sister..."

"She's so..." Noel suddenly smiles wide. "... she's so... pretty."

Sam grins, and nods. He carefully gets up, so as not to startle the young woman, and takes his half-empty bowl of cereal and sets it in the sink. "Yes. I suppose she is."

"She's got eyes you could lose yourself in." Noel giggles, looking down to her lap, a little embarrassed. "Does she have a... boyfriend?"

Sam rinses his spoon and bowl under a stream of water. "She most definitely does not." He's amused. It's nice seeing Noel like this. It's cute.

"How old is she?" Noel glances up at the TV. "Sixteen? Seventeen?"

"Hmmm. Definitely too old." Sam grins, placing the spoon in a drawer and the bowl in the cabinet. "So... tell me everything." He sits back down at the table, making sure she sees him coming. "How are you and your mom doing? Are you all settled in? Everything good?"

"I won't even be fifteen for another 2 months." She giggles, watching Duck zip himself into a fancy-dress, chicken suit.

Sam shakes his head knowingly.

Noel grins as her cheeks flush.

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“So.” Sam mumbles. Then his voice brightens. “Your mom knows you’re here, right?”

“Of course. Your sister asked her if it was okay to bring me by for a short visit. To say hello... and goodbye.”

“Goodbye?” Sam purses his lips, thinking.

“And... like I said... your sister said you needed a friend today.” She looks down from the TV, directly at Sam for the first time. “She said you were struggling with something.”

“Hmmm. I suppose I am.” He smiles warmly. “But it’s just nice to see you. I’m glad you and your mom are doing good.”

Noel thinks for a second. “I’m pretty sure my mom knows your sister. Already knew her. She was really happy to see her.” She half smiles. “And that’s... totally... not my mother.”

“Yeah. My sister can have that affect on people...” Sam chuckles. “... when she wants to.”

“Probably the eyes.” Noel’s cheeks flush again. “We all had lunch and my mom knew what she liked and everything. I’ve never seen my mom so happy... and comfortable.” She looks over to the foyer.

“And where is my oh-so-comforting sister with the dreamy eyes right now?” He glances to the back hallway.

Noel shrugs. “We got here and she pointed for me to go to the kitchen... and said she was going out back to look for your father.” Again,

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she looks down to her lap. “She held my hand the whole walk over here. I was so nervous. My hand got so sweaty.”

“Now that’s definitely my sister... making people nervous.” Sam grins. “And yes... your mom knows my sister well. They’ve known each for a long time.” He furrows his brow. “Through bad and good. But lots of good.”

Noel nods, and gives the kitchen another look over. “This is all so... normal. Not what I would have expected from a spaceman.” When they first met, Sam was so different from all the other men that approached a young, pretty, homeless girl, that she took to calling him spaceman. He was the only one that wanted nothing from her. He just wanted to help. Plus, he sparkles.

Sam glances around the kitchen. It hasn’t changed much since he was a child. Different table, chairs, TV. Updated appliances. But otherwise pretty much the same.

“It’s weird, even though my mom doesn’t seem to remember, I kind of do sometimes. Like right now, when I’m sitting with you.” Noel glances up at the TV as Sam uses the remote to turn it off. “I remember you and our talk... and we ate...” She pulls her eyebrows together, trying to remember the details.

“A meatball sub and a Coke.” Sam licks his lips. “It was so good.”

“And then you walked me home... I think. And you kept your distance. I mean, it’s a totally different place. Super nice. I’m not even sure

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where it is, really. It's not here, though." She narrows her eyebrows. "You know what I mean... here, here. This is still hell to me." She laughs, blinking her eyes several times, feeling a little confused just talking about it. "No offense."

"You'll forget too." Sam smiles gently. "It's for the better."

"Ahhh. We've got company." A voice calls from the dark hallway at the back of the kitchen.

Noel turns and sees an old man approaching from the dark hallway leading to the back of the house. She assumes it's Sam's father.

"Noel Marie Blanchard. What brings you by on this beautiful day?" The old man steps into the kitchen, but stops, keeping his distance, a great big smile on his face. He doesn't want to startle her. She doesn't know they've already met.

"It's been forever. A whole other lifetime." He seems just as surprised and happy to see her as Sam. He glances to his son, giving him an odd look. Then he remembers.

Noel returns his smile and looks over to Sam. She doesn't even wonder how he knows her name, much less her middle name. And it doesn't bother her that someone she's never met seems to be so pleased to see her. Things like this seem perfectly normal when she's around Sam. That's part of how he earned her trust in the first place.

"Noel. This is my dad."

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“Well...” She feels confused again, a fog rolling across her memory. “It’s nice to meet you.” She stares at the old man for a couple seconds. “Are you a spaceman too? Or is Sam just the family’s odd duck?” She can see the family resemblance. He’s obviously much older, with thinning, longish, grey hair, but you can see the same blue eyes peeking out from underneath a lifetime of lines.

The old man grins. “Ohhh... I think he’s just an odd duck.” He chuckles.

Noel giggles. She’s instantly comfortable with him.

“So how’s Beatrice?” Sam’s dad walks over to the counter and opens a drawer.

“You know my mom?”

Deep down, she realizes she shouldn’t be surprised. She’s always known that there was definitely something different about Sam, so why shouldn’t that extend to the rest of his family. It’s just hard for her to wrap her head around. Sam sparkles, but that doesn’t completely freak her out. It should, but it doesn’t. Then she notices that his dad kind of sparkles too. But not as brightly. Faded. Older.

Even Sam’s sister has this oddness that seems to wrap itself around her as she talks and walks, like a foreigner trying to blend in and not quite getting it right. It’s as if they have an accent that not only applies to the way they speak, but to everything about them. The way they walk,

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talk, move, gesture. Even their smiles are different. Not odd, or unusual. Different.

“My old man knows everyone.” Sam gives Noel a playful wink.
“Honestly. Everyone.”

Noel laughs, unsure how seriously she should take her spaceman. But she’s fairly certain he’s not exaggerating in the least.

The old man moves a few things around in the big drawer to the side of the sink, makes a tutting sound, closes the drawer, and opens another. “I’ve known your mom for a long time. I’d like to think we’re friends.” He closes the second drawer and turns to Sam, a puzzled look on his face.

“What are you looking for?” Sam stands up, going over to the sink to grab the dish towel, wiping some spilled milk from the counter before his father notices.

“My box of checkers. Your sister is out back, and I’m going to rope her into a quick rematch while you two are catching up.” He glances at Noel, and smiles broadly.

From where she sits, Noel looks around, trying to help. She stretches her neck looking on all the counters and the small shelf against the far wall.

“It’s in the first drawer you opened. The big one, under all those notebooks you refuse to toss out.” Sam hangs the towel over the edge of the sink.

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“Ohhh.” The old man’s eyes light up. “Yes. Of course.” He opens the drawer again, and moving the notebooks aside, finds a well-worn box of checkers. “It might be time to get some glasses.” He looks over to Noel, raising his eyebrows and giving her a sweet smile.

She chuckles. “I’m thinking you two are probably a lot alike.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” The old man beams proudly at his eldest son.

“Yeah... well...” Sam chuckles. “... I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

“Kids.” The old man shakes his head. “Well, young lady. You say hello to your mother for me. She’ll remember me.” He heads off to the back hallway, checkers in hand.

“Good luck with your game.” Noel calls out as the old man reaches the end of the short hallway.

He stops, turning his whole body slightly. “Luck. Ha. She’s going to cheat and win just like last time.”

“Seriously?” Sam is surprised. That doesn’t sound like Rae at all. Like Michael, she thinks cheating is for the weak.

Noel giggles. “How do you know she cheats?”

“Oh, I know.” His eyes seem to briefly light up. “She knows I know, but it doesn’t stop her.” The old man chuckles. “I think that’s the part of the game she enjoys the most... seeing when she can make her move... and if I’ll let her get away with it.”

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“Hmmm. I’ll bet neither one of you really cares.” Noel understands. “It’s just about hanging out and enjoying each other.”

Sam raises an eyebrow and looks over to his friend. “You’re very wise for a fourteen-year-old.”

Noel giggles. “When we first met, you said I was intuitive. But I’ll take wise. It makes me sound smarter than I actually am.”

The old man smiles and nods. “You are wise. Intuitive. Smart. My daughter brought you here for a reason. Oh...” He pretends to whisper. “... and on her eleventh move, she’ll distract me by pointing out a colorful bird just on the edge of the sand. A bluebird. Almost purple. Probably not even a real bird.”

Noel shows a childlike smile. They’re a fun group.

“When I turn my head, she’ll nudge a piece out of place, and then make a triple jump. It’ll earn her a king, and I’ll never recover.” The old man chuckles, shaking his head as he shuffles off to the back of the house.

Sam looks over to Noel to get her reaction.

“What?” She sees him staring at her out of the corner of his eye.

He shrugs, motioning to the hallway with his head. “Can you believe that?”

She considers for a brief second. “Hmmm. Maybe.” She raises her eyebrows. “Actually... I wouldn’t be surprised if it happened exactly as he said.”

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Sam laughs and sits back down at the table. The two of them sit for a few seconds, letting the room go calm again.

“So... my sister doesn’t just bring people around for casual visits. It’s not part of what she does. Not at all. I’m actually a little surprised and kind of proud.”

“Really?” Noel thinks back to those eyes. “It doesn’t surprise me at all... she’s soooo sweet.”

“And it’s a little outside the overall rule book.” Sam gives that a quick thought. “And you said you also wanted to say goodbye... which sounds really permanent.”

She thinks for a second, studying Sam’s face. “Look... I really barely know you...” She looks away, towards the dark hallway, a little confused. “... and this probably seems just as silly to you as it does to me... but your sister thought maybe I could help.” She gives him a quick look. “She said you were on some kind of path... and somehow I could give you some worldly advice.” She pushes out her lips, shaking her head. “From a fourteen-year-old... about to turn fifteen.”

Sam stares at her for a few seconds, a blank look on his face. “First. There’s nothing silly about her thinking you could help.” He grins, lowering his head to look into her eyes. “Like I said... intuitive... smart.”

Noel shows a weak smile.

“Second...” He suddenly frowns. “... and I’m sorry to say this... but you probably have more... worldly... advice... than my entire family

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combined. So I totally get why she brought you here.” And his smile is back. “Plus. You’re a friend. And you make me happy.”

Noel beams. “Okay. So she says you’re on a path... and you’re helping someone?” She feels a little jealousy creep up on her. She’s always assumed that Sam was there specifically for her, and not because he does that type of thing on a regular basis. Her guardian angel. But she’s not surprised.

“Fred.”

“Fred.” Noel nods. “And that helping him... or not helping him... or even just dealing with him at all... will take you some place you need to go.” She looks back down to her lap. “Anyway... supposedly I’ll say something that will somehow help.” She looks up, grinning. “I wouldn’t bet on it though.”

“Her.” Sam smiles.

“Her?” Noel scrunches up her whole face, confused at first. “Fred? Fred’s a her?”

“Fred’s an insanely disturbed, twenty-three-year-old horror show.” Sam’s smile drops away. “But yeah... Fred’s a her.”

“What’s with the name?” Noel’s never liked her own name, but now she feels kind of lucky.

“Her name is Winnifred. But she likes to be called Fred.” Sam grins.

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“Well... yeah... no wonder. Though I’m not sure it’s much of an improvement.” She laughs. “So... is she like me... you know... does she need help like I did? Is that the trouble that your sister says you’re having?”

“No.” Sam shakes his head, closing his eyes briefly. “First. She’s nothing like you.” Sam’s frown returns. “Second. The help she needs... what she’s asking for... isn’t something I’m capable of giving her.”

“So that’s the problem then.” Noel pushes her lips together in thought. “She needs something you can’t do.” She leans forward looking up at him. “Which I absolutely refuse to believe.”

Noel’s seen too much from Sam to believe that there’s anything he couldn’t do. Her mother was dead. But now the two of them are back together. She knows that she should have a million questions about that, but the more thought she gives it, the cloudier her mind gets, until she just accepts it for what it is. They’re back together and they’re happy. She has no idea how that works, and doesn’t even care.

“What she thinks she needs... she doesn’t really need.” He purses his lips and pushes them out. “And anyway... it’s much too late for that.”

Noel does her best to understand. “Does she deserve your help? Is that the problem? She doesn’t deserve it?”

Sam nods quietly, breathing in and out deeply, and then shakes his head. “No, she doesn’t deserve my help. She doesn’t deserve anyone’s help.” He exhales, long and hard.

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“But other’s around her do.” Noel instantly sits up straight. She said it, but has no idea where it came from. “She’s... she’s showing you something ugly that you need to look past. She’s just an example... one of many. You’ve spent your entire existence sitting with horrible, ugly things... and you’re missing out on the beautiful things just behind them. And now it’s their time.” There’s a somewhat startled look on her face. “It’s the beautiful things that now need your attention... your help. It’s your time. No matter what the rule book says.”

Chris pokes her head into the kitchen, from the foyer. “Ready?” She pulls her long, blonde hair back in a makeshift ponytail, putting it in a red scrunchie. “We should probably get going.” She uses a hand to smooth down the side of her dress.

Noel nervously looks over, her face blushing a little.

“Ahhh. So... that... sister.” Sam grins, looking first to Noel and then to Chris. “That makes much more sense. What was I even thinking?” He shakes his head. “So why didn’t you just sit down and tell me this yourself?”

Chris takes a couple steps into the kitchen, gently taking Noel by the hand, leading her towards the foyer. “Because you don’t listen to me. You rarely take my advice.”

For a few seconds, Noel stands there looking incredibly shy. She glances over to Sam with a small smile on her face. “It’s the eyes.” Then, as she’s lead into the foyer she mouths without speaking, ‘soooooo pretty’.

18

Gabriel walks from the living room into the foyer, and opens the front door.

A young woman stands there looking agitated. “Do you people ever wait for someone to actually ring the fucking doorbell?” She’s in a mood and no longer interested in playing meek, mild, and innocent.

Gabriel grins wide. He considers pushing his warmth to calm her, but decides not to interfere. “You must be Winnifred. I’m Sam’s brother, Gabriel.” He looks down at the young woman standing in front of him, her hand still in the air, a finger pointed towards the doorbell.

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“Of course you are.”

“And hello... you must be Maxwell.” Gabriel squats down and signs hello to the young boy at Fred’s side.

Max looks up at Gabriel, his eyes wide. He makes a sound while breathing in deeply. He’s holding a toy car in one hand and a toy truck in the other. Carefully transferring both toys into one hand, he holds his free hand up, palm out as if gently touching something extending out in front of Gabriel.

He sees and feels the heat coming from Gabriel.

“He doesn’t talk.” Fred announces angrily. Her face is pink and blotchy, like she’s been crying. She looks down at Max and then back to the tall man standing in the doorway. “Don’t tell me you’re sparkly too.” The words come out with annoyance.

“The doorbell... it’s broken.” Gabriel turns to the side, giving them room to walk past. “And no. I’m not sparkly.”

Fred sighs, completely done with Sam and his oddball family. “Well... I’m sure you got something going on.” And tired of being afraid, she stops directly in front of Gabriel and stares up into his face. “Are you the last... or are there more?”

“One more.” He grins, taking a half step back, seeing her for exactly what she is, and not wanting to be so close. He’s a little surprised by Sam. “The youngest.”

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“Great. I had hoped that I met all of you by now, but there’s another.” She rolls her eyes, looking irritated. “Fantastic.”

“No worries. You won’t be meeting him.”

Fred looks down and sees that Max has made his way into the living room on his own. “Max. How many times have I...” She steps into the living room and sees him standing directly in front of an old man in a wheelchair. He doesn’t usually approach others unless she’s right next to him, holding his hand.

“Hello Max.” The old man leans his head down, trying to get the boy’s attention. “You probably don’t remember me. I’m a bit older.”

Max is looking the old man up and down, a happy smile on his face.

The old man shows mild surprise. “Or maybe you do.”

Then Max sits down on the floor, looking at one of the wheels on the old man’s chair. He tentatively touches the large wheel, and then the spokes.

“You like my chair. It’s like a little car in the house.” He chuckles.

Fred takes a deep, huffing breath, and walks farther into the room. “Max. Max! I’m talking to you.” She walks closer to the old man, trying not to look at him. She’s not sure who he is or what he is. And she’s not taking any chances.

“Hello Fred.” The old man looks up, a big smile on his face. “Long time no see.”

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A shiver goes through the young woman's body.

"He's just interested in the wheels." The old man looks at the toy cars in the boy's hands. "Those are some pretty nice cars you have there, young man." He gives Max a smile and looks back to Fred.

"I'm here to see Sam." Fred walks over to Max and roughly pulls him to his feet by his elbow, pulling him away from the wheelchair.

The old man smiles wide, reminding her of Sam with that silly, charming smile. He leans forward a little, whispering. "How about you... do you remember me?" He chuckles.

She ignores the question. "I'm here to see Sam." She repeats, letting her voice go monotone. She has no interest in meeting another member of Sam's weird family or whatever they really are.

The old man looks over to Gabriel. "He stepped out for a bit. Isn't that right, Gabe?"

"Yeah. Down the beach, I think."

"Then I'm wasting my time." She quickly turns, pulling Max roughly towards the foyer.

"But he should be back any minute." The old man rolls to the middle of the room.

Fred stops, without looking back at him.

"I'm actually fairly certain." He looks down at Max, and winks playfully. "Do you like games, Max?"

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“No. He doesn’t. And neither do I.” She decides to show them that she’s not here to socialize, and she’s no longer afraid of whatever they are. She doesn’t want to let them into her head again, like Sam’s other brother and that spooky sister of his. “He’s got thirty seconds. If he’s not back in thirty seconds...”

“If who’s not back in thirty seconds?” Sam walks in through the French doors in the rear of the big living room.

Fred looks over, and just stares at him with an irritated look on her face. She knows she should be nicer, especially since she still needs him, and this may be her final chance to win him over, but she just can’t manage it right now. The time for playing nice has passed.

“Dad this is Fred... the young woman I told you about.” Sam walks closer. “The young lady I met at the coffee shop.”

“Yes. Yes. I know.” The old man looks up at his son. “Sebastian and Winnifred.”

Fred’s irritation turns to a look of anger. Her already blotchy face reddens as she wonders what Sam told the old man about her. She hates being talked about behind her back.

Sam gestures towards Gabe. “This is my...”

“We met. He’s a charmer. We need to talk. I’m not here to meet your entire clan.” She gives him a snide smile which makes her look a lot like her brother. “We’re not heading off to prom.”

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Gabriel chuckles, which causes Fred to slowly turn her head in his direction.

She's not sure exactly what she's dealing with here, but she has no intention of letting someone laugh at her. "Or did you really wanna have this conversation in front of laughing boy and your dad?"

The old man makes several clicking sounds with his tongue, shaking his head slowly. "I think we all got off to a rough start. I apologize. Totally my fault." He smiles politely. "You obviously have business with my son, and we've rudely taken up too much of your time." He glances at Gabriel. "Come. Let's go out back to the patio and give them some space."

"A pleasure." Gabriel nods once to Fred, and follows his father towards the back of the room.

Max pulls free from Fred, and runs after the wheelchair, making engine sounds as he watches the spokes in the wheels spin.

"God damn it Max!" Fred exhales loudly and starts walking towards him. "Get back here."

"Leave him. He'll be fine out on the patio. They'll look after him." Sam's voice is hard and flat. He's not happy. He turns and gets his brother's attention. "Gabe."

Gabriel looks over his shoulder.

"Can you do me a favor and keep an eye on Max for a few minutes?"

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Gabriel nods and follows his father and Max as they move out onto the patio.

Sam turns to Fred, his eyes seeming to light up, which no longer surprises her. “You were rude. You have no right to walk into my house... my father’s house, and be so discourteous and ill mannered.”

“Well they...”

“No!” Sam’s voice gets loud, coming from everywhere all at once. “You. Have. No. Right. Do you understand me?” His face shows an intensity Fred has never seen before, in anyone. “Do you understand?” He stares her in the eye.

This is the first time she’s seen Sam angry. “Yes. I’m... I’m sorry.” The immediacy of it takes Fred by complete surprise. Her face goes blank, as a cold shiver goes down her spine. She doesn’t know what else to say.

“So.” And in the blink of an eye, it’s gone. Sam smiles softly and sits down in the old man’s favorite, overstuffed chair. He motions with his eyes for her to sit down on the sofa across from him. “Babysitting again, I see.”

“Your sister killed me.” Fred blurts, remembering her dream. She goes cold as she pictures the black void that Rae had become.

Sam smiles wide. “Well. That gets me off the hook then.” He leans forward, making a show of looking more closely at her. “For a dead girl, you look absolutely flushed.”

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Fred finds a little of her attitude again. “Fuck you.” She hesitates, scared that he’s going to get angry again. She lets her voice go softer. “In a dream. Your spooky-ass sister, or whoever she really is, killed me in a dream.”

“Whoever she really is.” Sam’s voice is questioning as he sits back. “And?”

“And I’m thinking it means something. Dreams mean things. It’s like your subconscious speaking to you.” She glances nervously towards the patio area. She can see the old man, leaning down in his chair and laughing as Gabriel and Max play with the toy cars.

“What it means is that you’re contemplating your own death, maybe fearing it, and it just so happens that my sister freaks you out.” Sam looks out onto the patio. “Don’t feel bad, she freaks a lot of people out. She does it on purpose.”

Gabriel is sitting on the stone floor next to the small boy, playing with one of the boy’s cars. You can hear Max laughing as Gabriel makes screeching noises and then crashes the car into the wheelchair, while the old man pretends to be jostled by the accident.

“If you’re that disturbed by a dream, maybe it’s your subconscious telling you that you don’t want to die after all.” He looks to Fred, observing as she watches the boy play with the two men on the patio. She looks as if she’s never thought to do that herself.

She fidgets, looking nervous.

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“He’ll be fine. Well... as fine as he can be... considering.” His contempt resurfaces. “My old man raised five kids. Alone. And Gabe’s a total sweetheart... unless you piss him off. And it takes a lot to piss him off.”

“What?” Fred looks back to Sam. She’d been lost in her own thoughts.

“I said... your son will be fine. My family loves children.” And that finally said, Sam waits.

Fred goes completely pale, but doesn’t say anything. She looks out to the patio, still watching as the three of them play together so naturally.

“Fred?”

“How... how long...”

“I’ve always known. You were fourteen. One of your mom’s... boyfriends.” Sam stares straight into her watery eyes. “I also know about the severe bruising on his back and shoulders. Max has less to fear out there with a couple of strangers than he would sitting on the couch next to his own mother.”

Fred immediately loses her composure, bursting into tears, sobbing and crying. She hates this. This isn’t her. She’s strong. “I... I...”

“What do you want, Fred?” Sam leans forward. Putting his elbows on his knees, he starts twisting the one ring that remains on his finger. The one the old man gave him when Sam was just a boy. “What do you... really... want?”

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“I need... I need you to save...” She pauses, struggling to find the words. “... my son. To save Max.” She looks down to her lap, unsure how she feels about unloading on someone she met just days ago.

“From?”

“From me.” Her voice is a raw whisper.

Sam slowly breathes in and out several times, considering. He watches as Fred begins to silently cry to herself, reaching up every few seconds to wipe the tears from her eyes with the cuff of her hoodie. This is the first time she’s been completely, one-hundred-percent, honest with him.

“Fred. You don’t need me for that. Go down to the police station. Tell them what you did. Show them the fresh bruises. Show them the ones in various stages of healing. They’ll make sure Max is saved from you.” Sam leans back again. “Tell a social worker. Tell a neighbor. You don’t need me for anything.”

“I wanna die.” She whines, still looking to her lap.

“I’m not so sure. There’s a million ways to die in this world. It’s easy. If you really wanna die, step in front of a train.” Sam sighs. “If you’re concerned about Max... leave him with me. And just go.” He gestures towards the foyer. “Trust me. He’ll be taken care of.” He glances to the patio. “He already is being taken care of.”

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“It’s more than just Max.” She pauses, finding the words. “I want you to save me too.” She pauses, waiting to see if he’ll say anything. “I need you to save both of us.”

“Save you from what?” Sam’s monotone hasn’t changed. He’s not surprised. “Yourself? I’m too late for that.”

“I’ve done bad things. Really bad things.”

“I’m aware.”

“No. It goes beyond the animals. It goes beyond... the bruises.”

“I’m aware.”

She hasn’t looked up from her lap once, but now she raises her eyes. What he’s saying makes sense to her. Of course, he’s aware. He’s hinting. He’s asking her to come right out and say it. Then he’ll save her. He’ll save them both, her and Max. “The first time we met...”

“The coffee shop.”

She nods, her head still down. “I told you... I said... I know what you are.” Fred finally pulls her head up high, letting the tears stream down her cheeks. “You’re an angel. The angel of...”

Sam immediately laughs.

“You are. I know you are.” She looks at him in awe. “My grandmother used to tell us stories. I didn’t think they were true but...”

“I’m not.” He still has a huge grin on his face. “But we should get Gabe and Rae in here. Mikey too. They’d love it. I’d never hear the end of it.”

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“I watched you come out of Brad’s garage.”

“On fire apparently.” Sam chuckles. “Which doesn’t sound very angel like.”

Fred gives him a blank stare. “No. Not on fire. You were walking out of the fire. Unharmed. I told you. I saw wings.” She hesitates, licking her lips. “You had wings.”

“Great flaming wings.” Sam lets out a long, tired breath.

“Yes! Yes!” Fred’s excited. “I knew it. I told you. You’re an angel. You saved all those kids from Karl and Brad. That whole school full teachers and kids.” The words begin to pour from her. “Bash was wrong. You’re not a killer. You’re an angel. Some kind of avenging angel or something. You saved all those people by...” She scrunches up her eyebrows, thinking. “You’re the angel of death.”

Sam sighs. They’ve finally gotten to this point. He breathes in and out heavily. He feels like this should make him happy. But it doesn’t. He feels nearly finished with Winnifred. His last side project before he moves on. He’s decided to move on. He’s just not sure how.

Fred nods excitedly, a wild look on her face.

“I’m not an angel. I didn’t save anyone. It was never me. And I’m okay with that.” He needs to talk to Chris. “And I certainly didn’t kill anyone. Those two idiots had a grenade. It got knocked to the ground. It exploded.” He cocks his head to the side. “I mean sure... I kind of accidentally caused it. But let’s call that fate.”

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“You are. I know it. I saw it. That’s why you’re so... odd.” She glances out to the patio. “Are they really your family? Do they know? Or is that why they’re all so strange too.”

Sam can’t help but smile. “And how do explain Rae?” Since he’s known her, Fred has been angry, difficult, morbid, and sad. But right now, she’s done a complete one eighty. She’s giddy with excitement and wonder. For the moment, she’s completely changed. She’s hopeful.

“She’s... I don’t know...” Fred stares off towards the staircase. “She’s fuckin’ spooky, that’s what she is.” She gives it a quick thought. “She’s probably the God damn Devil.”

Sam lets out a snort of laughter. He looks forward to telling his sister and brothers.

Fred is smiling insanely, having suddenly figured it all out. She can see it in his eyes. She’s right.

“And you want the angel of death to kill you?” Sam pushes for the final piece of Fred’s puzzle.

She nods enthusiastically. “I’m not a good person. I’ve done things. I’ve hurt people. You know all this already. I... I...”

“You hurt your son because you don’t understand him. You don’t mean to do it. You love him. More than you can ever show.” He pauses, letting that sink in. “It just happens because you lose your temper. Your mind clouds over as your body reacts. Violently.”

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“Yes.” Her voice weakens. “Yes. He was never meant to be. I was too young. He’s... different. I was raped.” Her voice goes quiet. Her face saddens. “But I figure, if an angel kills me... it’s gotta be like a free pass or something. Or if you’re the angel of death... it’s just... just what you do. It’s your job. To...” She points upwards. “Plus, then you can save him. Save Max. Take him to a better place than this... hell... where he can’t even speak.” She looks over to Sam, her eyes filling with tears. “Right?”

Sam just stares at her. “You’re broken, Winnifred. You were always broken. And I’m sorry bad things happened to you... and broke you more. I really am.”

“I don’t wanna meet Bash’s devil. But I don’t wanna be alive anymore. I want... to die... and get on with whatever comes next. This can’t be all we get. Cuz... cuz it’s all... so shitty.” Her head drops. “And it’s not fair... to me... to Max. He didn’t do anything to deserve any of this.”

Sam watches as her excitement falls off, becoming some sort of lost sadness. It reminds him of Rae when she reached out to him for his help, when she got so sad her mind clouded over, and nearly destroyed everything. Violently.

Maybe even Death can break. Maybe even the Devil.

“Max is a beautiful little boy. Absolutely delightful. Perfect just the way he is. We just need to evolve to fit his needs.” Sam’s voice is soft and caring. “Just because he’s not like you or me... doesn’t change that in the slightest.”

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Fred nods quietly. “I believe you.”

“A free pass.” Sam closes his eyes, shaking his head.

Fred fights between the happiness she feels from finally confronting him, and the sadness she feels for all she’s done. “You were sent to help me... so please... help me.” Her voice is barely a whisper.

“Everything good?” The old man wheels in with Max sitting on his lap.

The boy waves to Fred, the palm of his hand faced towards his own face. “Ba ba.” He giggles. “Ba ba.” He proud. Happy.

Fred slowly stands, a look of shock on her face.

Gabriel walks just behind his father. “He’s saying mama, but can’t do the mmm sound. So I showed him the buh sound. He can manage that one pretty easily.”

The old man grins up at Fred. “You’re ba ba.” He looks delighted. “It’s a start. A little late, I realize... considering everything that’s happened. But it’s a start.”

Fred looks down at Max, sitting so happily in the old man’s lap. As the old man moves the chair, Max makes engine sounds like he’s driving a car. She doesn’t know what to say or do. She wants to run over and hug her son, but she doesn’t know how. It’s too late for that. It would be so foreign. He wouldn’t understand.

“Nice job little buddy.” Sam reaches over and gives the boy’s shoulder a gentle squeeze.

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Taking a couple lurching steps forward, Fred grabs for her son. “Max!” She roughly pulls him from the wheelchair. “We have to go.” She drags him through the living room, letting his toy cars fall to the floor as he starts crying. She looks back, over her shoulder at the old man and Sam’s brother. “You had no right.” Her face looks more pained than angry. “No right.” And she walks out the door, slamming it behind her.

19

Cassie grabs the purse from where it landed in the grass next to her. She pulls it in tight to her body like a prize. “I hope you die in your sleep.” Then she looks to the house with the small crowd gathered around the inside of the front window. “And fuck ya’all too!”

Bill clumsily climbs to his feet. He exhales loudly, glancing over at their audience and then back to Cassie. “Come on. Please. Just come inside and I’ll get you a ride home. I promise.” At this point, he really doesn’t care, but is trying to save face in front of their friends.

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Cassie climbs to her feet, brushing some dirt and grass from her skirt and torn leggings. She stumbles to her car, opening the door, and practically falls in. Fumbling with the keys for a few seconds, she finally manages to start the engine.

She opens her window to the half-way point. “I’m gonna get a cop and tell him you tried raping me. That’ll teach you to fuck with me.” She puts the car in reverse and tears out into the street hitting a car parked across the way, causing the car horn to start honking loudly in alarm.

Bill throws his hands up in exasperation. “Good luck with that!” He turns to his friends inside the house, shaking his head. “Crazy fucking shit.”

“You should really leave a note, Cassandra.” Sam checks that his seat is buckled tight. Cassandra seems worse than usual. But he’s probably just more tired than usual.

“Shit! Fuck!” Her words are slurred as she glances over at Sam. “Just go away. Leave me the fuck alone.”

“You just hit that car.” He gestures over his shoulder. “Again.”

Cassie puts her car in drive and speeds off down the dark street. She turns the corner, going past a few houses until she hits the old highway.

“Cassandra. Slow down a little.” Sam grips the dashboard in front of him, bracing himself as they approach the stop sign at full speed. “Please.”

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Cassie runs right through a stop sign and nearly loses control as she momentarily looks at her face in the mirror. Then she speeds up, passing farmhouse after farmhouse in the dark night. Driving angry, drunk, and way too fast, she nearly runs off the road into the ditch several times. To make things even worse, the alcohol is making her tired and she can barely focus on the dark road in front of her.

“What do you want from me?” She spits her words, looking over at Sam for way too long, ignoring the road in front of her. “What do you fucking want?”

Sam tries to get comfortable. Still holding his arm out in front of him, with his hand against the dashboard, he turns slightly to better face her. “Nothing. I have no expectations... unfortunately. I’m just here to check in on things.” He half shrugs, almost letting a grin cross his lips. “It’s part of the job, really.”

She gives him an irritated look, her foot still heavy on the gas pedal.

“You could slow down though. Or better yet, pull over. Let me drive you the rest of the way home.” Sam smiles broadly, like he’s talking to a small child. He says all these things knowing very well that she won’t leave a note, or slow down, or let him drive. That’s not the way this happens. Not yet. She hasn’t learned anything yet. But maybe if she did, they could eventually be done with some of the particulars.

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He goes through the motions, always knowing the inevitable outcome. Nothing changes unless she wants it changed, and he allows it to change. Both must be ready for the change. Sometimes he puts these ideas out there just to see what she'll do. The old man always tells him to let them live their lives. But this isn't their lives anymore. They traded that in for whatever brought them here. This is Sam's place to do whatever Sam wants. And occasionally he switches things up just to keep it interesting. But today, he's just not in the mood to care how things go one way or another. They always go bad in the end. Until they don't. That's why they're here. And that's why he keeps bringing them back.

“Fuck you.” Cassie seems to be speeding up even more. Maybe just to spite him, to push back a little.

Sam sighs. It's not like he ever enjoys these things. It's just a small piece of who he is and what he does. Part of the role he took on for the old man. But this time his mind isn't even here. He can feel that something has recently changed inside himself. And it's all because of Rae. He's turned a corner. He realizes that this is probably how she felt. Maybe he needs to apologize to her for not actually understanding when she actually needed him to understand. Maybe he shouldn't have called for Chris. Maybe he should've just let her do her thing to see where it took them.

Through blurred vision, Cassie sees something moving in the distance. She can just make out headlights coming her way.

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She looks over at Sam. Her face has suddenly gone from drunk, to angry, and then settling on terrified. “Please.” Her voice is soft, pleading. As each mile passes, she remembers more of where she’s heading. And it horrifies her. Cassie’s not going home to a warm bed to sleep off the party she left behind.

She’s going to crash and burn. Literally.

Through blurred vision, Cassie sees something moving in the distance. She can just make out headlights coming her way. She’s been purposely driving down the center of the road to make things easy on herself. She feels like that’s the careful thing to do considering how much she had to drink at the party.

She turns the wheel slightly to move back to her side of the road. But she misjudges how much to move over, and nearly runs off the right side of the road. Then she overcompensates, turning the wheel too far to the left and nearly loses control, crossing the middle line and screeching into the oncoming lane. Again she tries correcting her mistake by turning back towards the middle of the road, but the car coming from the other direction is right there, laying on the horn as Cassie crosses the center line, sideswiping the other car and barely making it back to her lane.

Holding on tight, Sam glances over at Cassie, seeing the tears streaming down her face. He watches as her mind and body fight to overcome the effects of the alcohol. He watches as she resists going to the her final destination.

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He turns away, looking out the side window, pulling his arm away from the dash, no longer interested in putting on this weak show of mortality. He reminds himself to speak to the old man again. And Rae. And maybe even Chris. Just to feel them out. Maybe get some advice. To see where they think he's going. He has no intention of crashing and burning on his path. Not this time.

The oncoming SUV is forced to the side of the road, where its tires catch in the gravel just before the ditch. The driver cranks the steering wheel to keep the car on the road, but the tires just slide through the loose gravel. Catching on some bigger stones, the car flips on its side and then bounces once, landing completely upside down. Its forward momentum causes it to skate down the road upside down, throwing sparks into the night, until it finally comes to an ugly stop.

After striking the oncoming car, Cassie's car spins in a complete circle, the tires screaming as they grab at the pavement. As she punches the brake to the floor, her car comes to a shuddering stop, sitting in the middle of the road, facing the opposite direction, towards the car she hit. She puts her car in park because her legs are shaking so badly she can't hold the brake down. She feels weak, with a cold fever overcoming her from head to toe like a slow tide.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” Cassie sits for a minute, collecting herself, breathing heavy, the smell of alcohol filling the car. She feels like she may

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get sick, so she opens her window wide, letting a burst of cold air in. She thinks it will help fight the effects of the alcohol.

“So now what?” Sam’s voice is uninterested, going through the motions. He’s looking out the side window, wondering if he’ll find the time for one more trip to the coffee shop with Nyssa and Tegan. He’d like that. One more people-watching adventure. One last hangout with his friends.

Cassie is crying silently, and has to work to find her voice. “Please. Let’s go back. Please. Start over.” She sobs several times and tries to catch her breath. “I want a do over.” She whines. “Not here... but a real life do over.” She makes a garbled crying noise. “Please, Sam. Please.”

“Almost everyone does.” Without even looking, Sam uses his head to motion out into the darkness in front of them.

Cassie has no choice but to look. “I won’t get in the car next time.” She violently wipes the tears from her eyes with the backs of her hands, leaving big smudges of black makeup.

About a hundred yards in front of her lays the car she hit, upside down, on its back like a stuck turtle. As she watches, the car’s engine catches fire with a whoosh that she can hear from the distance, sending growing flames out into the darkness. Through blurry eyes, Cassie sees something move halfway between her and the overturned car. She carefully puts her car back in drive and slowly pulls forward, her foot shaking violently as it sits on the brake. One of her headlights is out, so

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she turns the car slightly to point the working headlight on the road in front of her.

Shocked by what she sees, she jams down on the brake hard, causing the car to rock back and forth several times as it stops violently. “Oh shit.” She slurs as she sees the broken, bloodied body of a young man lying in the road. “Please be alive.” She whispers, her breathing getting short and rapid. She gets dizzy and nearly passes out, but shakes her head, blinking her eyes several times to stay awake.

“His name is Mateo... and he’s still alive...” Sam breathes in heavily, and out loud and steady.

“Oh thank you, thank you, thank you.” Cassie’s breathing is heavy but shallow, making her even more lightheaded.

“... but not for long”

Cassie watches nervously as the man tries to pull himself to a sitting position, but his right arm is obviously broken in several places. He resorts to using his other arm, and all the strength he can muster, in an attempt to pull himself towards his burning car.

“What should I do? Think Cassie. Think.” Her words tumble out rapidly as she bangs her hand on the side of her head to keep herself alert. “Sam, please.” She’s afraid to turn and look at him. “Please. Please. Please. I’ll do anything.”

Her heart pounds heavily in her chest as her body tries to overcome the alcohol with a wave of pure adrenaline. She looks down the

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road to the car, now half overcome by flames. She sees a young child, upside down, hanging from a car seat in the back of the car.

“Oh fuck.” She exhales loudly. Overcome with another round of dizziness, her breathing gets quicker and shallower with every heartbeat.

She pulls her car forward slowly, unsure what she should do in her drunken state. The fire hasn’t reached the child yet, but she can see flailing arms lit by encroaching flames.

“His young daughter.” Sam’s voice gets deeper, seeming to echo throughout the car. “She’s just a baby.”

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” Cassie panics and quickly turns the car in the road, causing the wheels to squeal loudly. She jams the gas pedal to the floor and takes off in the opposite direction. “I don’t need this shit. I don’t need this. God please. Please.”

“Oh, Cassandra. This is your choice. I’m giving you the choice. Right now... I’m giving you the choice.”

Cassie looks slowly over to Sam, knowing very well what she’ll see. His eyes are lit up, fire pouring out of them and moving across the sides of his face. He’s become angry.

“She’s alive for the moment.” His voice drops, becoming unearthly. “Not that it matters to you. I’d would’ve let you save her... if you’d gone back. I would’ve let you save her. But you never go back.”

Cassie wakes in the backseat of a small SUV. She’s sitting behind the driver. She’s been feeling so tired, and she fell asleep for a while.

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“So, Sam. Where is it you two are heading?” Mateo’s face is bright and happy as he glances over at his passenger sitting to his right. “I mean... where’s your final destination.”

“Oh. Nowhere you’re going. Trust me.” Sam grins. “But we appreciate you picking us up and getting us a little closer. You can drop us off just before you get to Old Greenville Road.” He glances over his shoulder, seeing that Cassie has woken. “I’m afraid we’ll have to make the rest of the trip on our own.”

“You’re the boss.” Mateo smile warmly at Sam. “But if it isn’t too far... we can go a little out of our way to get you home safely.”

“Thank you, Mateo. I appreciate your kindness.” Sam smiles warmly. “But it’s far, far away.”

Cassie’s eyes are blurry, this time not from the alcohol, but from confusion. The alcohol is gone, left behind in the crash that hasn’t yet happened.

“Well. Good morning, Sunshine.” Sam shows a friendly smile, finding it ironic to use Rae’s nickname. Especially after what his sister did to Cassie that night. When he first met Cassie to start her on this journey, he had to find what was left of her on the side of the road in the dark. It was pretty gruesome to see what Rae and her insanity had done to this drunken murderer. Even the Devil had to look away.

“W... where... are we?” Cassie’s still fighting through the confusion.

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“After the accident, our new friend Mateo...” Sam motions with his eyes to the driver. “... picked us up and has been kind enough to give us a ride.”

Cassie rubs her eyes, trying to focus.

“You remember Mateo. We left him in the middle of the road with a broken leg, broken arm, seven shattered ribs, a dislocated vertebra, torn spleen, punctured lung, and a multitude of other injuries I can’t even begin to diagnose. As I told Mikaela, I’m not a doctor.”

“Hello.” Mateo, completely oblivious to what Sam is saying, looks in the rear-view mirror, catching Cassie’s eyes.

She stares blankly, seeing Mateo’s eyes in the mirror as he motions to her right.

“And that’s the light of my life... Isabella.” He raises his head slightly, showing a bright, white smile in the mirror.

Cassie blinks several times, trying to clear her head. Then she lets her head flop to her right, laying it on her shoulder, as if her neck were broken. Sitting next to her is a baby girl, probably not even a year old, dressed in a frilly pink dress, and matching booties, with a small, black, velvet bow in her dark hair.

Cassie blinks several times as her eyes begin to water. “Sam.” Her voice is hushed, as if she’s trying to not disturb the baby.

Isabella coos and looks up at her with big brown eyes.

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“Cassandra.” Sam doesn’t look back, but continues to look out the front window, enjoying the car ride. He doesn’t get to ride in cars much. It just doesn’t come up except in these situations. And he’s certainly never thought to drive one. He’s not sure he’d even know how. It’s always looked complicated to him, all that shifting, those gauges, signals, and pedals. He’s been on a horse. He’s even pulled a coach with a horse. But he’s never driven a car.

“Can we go now?” Her voice is still soft, but with a falter to it, as if she might burst into tears at any moment.

Mateo glances up into his mirror again, seeing her sad eyes. He’s pretty sure that if he were real, he’d feel bad for her. But not if he knew what she did.

Sam doesn’t answer, just shaking his head side to side as he stares out the front window.

With tears running down her face, Cassie glances at the little girl sitting next to her. Isabella reaches out towards Cassie with a chubby, wet, little hand. She coos and makes a gurgling sound with her drool-covered, pink lips.

“Sam. Please.” Cassie’s voice is just a whimper.

“We’re not there yet.” Sam’s voice is dull and lifeless. “Just hang on. We’re just now getting to the interesting part.”

Tears drop from Cassie’s face into her lap. She looks out the window at the road going by so fast. She would consider opening the door

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and jumping, but she knows that won't work. She recalls trying it numerous times. The door never opens. The window won't go down. And she's tried breaking it dozens of times. Always unsuccessful.

"So, Mateo." Sam turns and grins wildly at his new friend.

"Where've you been today? Anything fun?"

"We had a long day... me and Isabella. Church in the morning and then her cousin had a birthday party. Turned five. My wife stayed behind to help clean up." He glances in the mirror back at his daughter cooing and looking around in the dark car. "The day seems to have worn me out more than her."

Sam chuckles. "Get used to it. She'll be wearing you out for the next decade and a half." He glances over his shoulder at Cassie. "Or at least she would have, if you'd been allowed to live."

Mateo nods, letting his head slump, pretending to be more tired than he really is. Then he looks up, grinning. "Do you have kids, Sam?"

Sam shakes his head. "No."

"How about you, Cassandra?" Mateo looks in the mirror, smiling.

Cassie looks away from the window where she's been staring out at the road going by so fast. She shakes her head quickly, sending tears flying to both shoulders.

"What the..." Mateo looks back to the road, seeing a car's swerving headlights coming right at them. He moves closer to the side of the road to give them room. "Hang on everybody."

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“Sam!” Cassie screams.

The oncoming car forces them to the far side of the road, where Mateo’s tires catch in the gravel just before the ditch. He cranks the steering wheel to keep the car on the road, but the tires just slide through the loose gravel. He risks a quick glance in the mirror at Isabella, and then spins his head, looking over his shoulder, to make sure she’s okay. Finally, the car catches on some bigger stones and the SUV flips on its side and then bounces once, landing completely upside down. Its forward momentum causes it to skate down the road upside down, throwing sparks into the night, until it finally comes to an ugly stop.

“Sammm!” Cassie hangs upside down from her seatbelt.

But he’s not there. His seat is empty. Mateo’s seat is empty too, his side window busted out and covered in blood. His seatbelt frayed and torn, hanging from the seat. She looks over and sees Isabella hanging upside down, still secure in her little car seat. She’s violently crying. She’s scared, and she too young to even know what happened.

“No. Please.” Cassie whines and starts crying harder. Her head starts hurting as the blood pools in her brain. She looks away from the little girl, closing her eyes tight, and making a loud humming noise, trying to drown out the baby’s cries.

Then she hears a whoosh, and can feel the heat coming from the flames as the car starts on fire. Cassie’s crying becomes sobs and moaning

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noises as she fumbles with her seatbelt, knowing very well that it won't come free. It never does.

The flames get closer and the heat gets hotter and hotter. Cassie can feel the flames begin to lick her arms and neck as they grow larger. Through her crying and screaming, and the baby's crying, Cassie can somehow hear footsteps approach the car.

And suddenly the flames go out, and the heat pulls back into the cool, night air.

A young woman with short, dark hair kneels down and peeks in the car. She has a sad, distant look on her face as she reaches in through the broken side window and unbuckles the little girl, pulling Isabella to her chest tightly. The little girl immediately stops crying, and sleeps.

Taking the child with her, the young woman walks away, stopping once to look back over her shoulder and lock eyes with Cassie. She purses her lips, shaking her head as she turns, and walks towards the darkness off to the side of the road. She hands the little girl to Mateo. And the three of them head off into the night, talking about all the wonderful things his wife and daughter brought into his life. And all the amazing things they would do in the future.

The car instantly bursts into flames again, creeping and crawling towards Cassie as she screams and cries, still frantically trying to loosen the jammed seatbelt. She hangs from her seatbelt in the back of Mateo's car for a lifetime. Crying, screaming, and burning.

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“Do you remember when we were all kids?” Sam sits at the kitchen table with the old man. They’re each setting up their side of an old, plastic chess set.

They just shared a frozen pizza, and the old man pulled out the chess set. Normally, Sam would make some excuse to run off, but today a quiet game sounds nice. He has had a lot on his mind lately, and thinks that maybe his father will provide a few answers, just in casual conversation.

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Sam hops up from the table, puts his dish in the sink and walks over to the fridge to get a bottle of water. “You want anything?” He stands there with the door held open.

The old man, still setting up his pieces on the chess board, doesn’t look back, but shakes his head. “No. I’m good. Thank you.” The board set, he pushes his empty plate aside. “And of course, I remember. I think about it every day. No matter how old you get, you’ll always be kids to me.” He smiles brightly as Sam sits back down. “You’ll understand that yourself someday.”

“Oh... I doubt that.” Sam moves his first pawn out into the field of battle.

“Anything’s possible.” The old man pushes Sam’s piece back where it started. “White goes first.” He makes the same move his son did. “And you very well know that.”

“What I mean is... when we were actual kids, just starting out. Young and dumb.” He makes his next move, sliding one of his shiny, black pieces to meet the old man’s pawn head on.

“I remember when we were young and dumb.” Rae walks into the kitchen through the back hall. “Especially you.” She giggles.

The old man looks over his shoulder. “Sunshine. I didn’t know you were at the house.”

“I was just on my way out.” She walks over to the table and puts a hand on her father’s shoulder, and the other on Sam’s.

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“On your way to pop into someone’s dream and scare the hell out of them?” Sam raises his eyebrows, glancing up at his sister.

“Not tonight.” Rae grins. “And there was no scaring the hell out of that one. Am I right?”

Sam considers just coming right out with it and starting that conversation. They’ve all met Fred, so there’s no hiding the obvious. But he decides to let everyone keep the pretense. “It’s just easier this way.” He mumbles to himself. “For now.”

Rae tilts her head to the side and smiles sweetly. She knows when and when not to harass her brothers. And she knows all too well what Sam is feeling right now.

“Hmmm.” The old man moves his second piece without giving it any thought. He finds the beginning of a chess game to be just a series of boring moves to get your pawns out into the mix. “Rae. Please stay out of your brother’s business.”

Sam looks over at the old man, noting how fast he made his move.

“Oh, pish.” Rae spins towards the door to the foyer. “I was just looking out for my little bro.”

Sam gives her a blank stare.

She practically glides to the foyer, not wanting to continue this conversation. “Ta.”

“Rae.” The old man uses his best dad voice.

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The front door opens and closes as Rae pretends that she didn't hear him.

"Do you have a strategy, or are you just going to wing it as usual?" Sam purposely takes a few seconds before making his next move, even though he feels like the beginning of a chess game is just a series of boring moves to get your pawns out into the mix.

Like father, like son.

The old man nods. "Neither one of us is particularly good at this game. We're always just winging it." He makes another quick move, pushing another pawn out to the first pawn's side.

"We've been playing chess since... I don't know... a long time. I would think we've both gotten fairly decent by now." Sam makes another move.

The old man studies the board. "I wasn't referring to chess." He looks up, a beaming smile on his lined face. "But yeah... we've never gotten any good at it."

They share a laugh.

"Hmmm. Well maybe that's the problem. No variation. We make the same moves over and over. It's become a pattern to us."

"We're still talking about chess... right?" The old man widens his grin. "This feels like one of your sister's recent conversations. Just loaded with analogies."

"Of course." Sam returns the same beaming smile.

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The old man pretends to look around nervously. “You’re got going to bop me on the head with something when I’m not looking, are you?”

Sam half rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

“Sorry.” The old man shows a wry smile.

Sam watches the old man with interest. His thinning, grey hair falling into his face as he leans forward in the wheelchair he doesn’t really need. The lines on his face are deeper than Sam remembers. Underneath his bushy, dark grey eyebrows, his father’s blue eyes flash as the old man makes his next move.

“Who was the easiest?” Sam grins, just making small talk while they play.

“Easiest?” The old man looks up, confused.

“Kids.” Sam shakes his head. “Which of us was the easiest when we were kids?” He moves his knight out.

“Oh... I don’t know.” The old man turns and leans back in his chair. “I almost want to say Mikey because he tried growing up so fast... but I think Gabe was probably the easiest.”

“Mikey. Ha.” Sam’s surprised. “He was always getting into trouble. Challenging everything.”

The old man exhales loudly. He’s already feeling tired. It’s been a long week for him. And he remembers this conversation. His eldest son’s goodbye. His goodbye. “You’re just saying that because it was you he was always challenging.” He laughs, looking off into the foyer, remembering a

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time when Sam and Mikey were going at it, and Rae had to intervene and shut both of them down.

“Yeah... maybe. Gabe thought. I get that.” Sam glances over to where the old man is looking. He sees the same memory working itself out in front of the two of them. They were so young, and Rae, still just a young teen, seemed so mature at the time. She really did help raise all the boys.

“Gabe was easy. He had all you guys to help him along.” The old man smiles proudly. “You know who had it the hardest?”

Sam looks up and shakes his head. But he knows.

“Your sister. Rae had to do it all alone. That’s kind of why she is who she is. She had a difficult time when it was just the two of us.”

Sam can feel the sudden sadness hidden behind the old man’s tired smile.

The old man puts a hand up and rubs his chest and then his left arm. It aches. “You were all difficult in your own way. Kids are like that. With very few exceptions... kids are hard.” He runs a hand through his hair. “This used to be thick and brown before you kids turned it thin and grey.” He chuckles.

Sam smiles, remembering his dad when he was younger, before all the lines on his face, the grey beard, the wheelchair he doesn’t need. He scrunches his eyebrows together as he realizes it’s all a bit fuzzy. He can’t quite picture his dad’s face. He chalks it up to being tired.

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“Kids can take a lot out of you. You want to do your best. You try your hardest. You want to get it right. You’d do anything for your kids.”

The old man puts a hand on his son’s wrist. “And it’s worth every wrinkle. Every grey hair.”

“Seeing Rae lately...”

The old man cuts him off. “The difficult thing with Rae was that she was the first. It was just me and her. I had no idea what I was doing. None. I made a lot of mistakes. She had to figure out a lot of things on her own, because I didn’t know how to show her. How to make her understand. We both know there are a lot of great single parents out there. But I wasn’t one of them.” He smiles weakly. “At least, with your sister, I wasn’t.”

Sam casually pulls his wrist from under his dad’s hand and hovers it above the game board, searching out his next move.

“Then you came along, Sam. Everything was different. You changed Rae’s world.” He shows a glimmer in his eye. “Mine too.”

“I gave her someone to boss around. She liked that. Still does.”

“Hmmm. She called you her little light bringer. That’s how you got the nickname, you know.”

Sam nods, and moves one of his pieces, knocking off his dad’s knight. “Yeah. I’ve got like... half a dozen nicknames.”

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The old man chuckles. “Well... before that day... the spark had almost gone out in your sister. She was tired. Lonely. Unsure of her purpose. She’s restless like that.”

“Kind of like she is now.” Sam’s grins. He looks over his shoulder to the foyer, half expecting her to step in from the shadows, her eyes black and dangerous because they were talking about her.

“Ha.” The old man closes his eyes for a split second, feeling the ache in his arm throbbing, growing more uncomfortable. “But then she immediately took to you. She took you from me and held you in her arms for...” His eyes show some sparkle. “... for a lifetime. She smiled and laughed. She had tears in her eyes. That’s when I saw in her what I would eventually need her to be. You gave her purpose.”

Sam sits back, remembering. He can feel Rae’s warm arms holding him when he was just a baby. He can remember every word she spoke to him as she wrapped him in a blanket and made him safe. He can remember every lesson, as she showed him the world. Every time she got mad at him for not listening.

As if sensing where Sam’s mind has gone, the old man pats his son’s arm and grins. “The thing about kids is that they don’t always get along with one another. And that’s one of those difficult things for a parent. But I was lucky...”

Sam cuts in. “We had our differences. Still do.”

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“Of course.” The old man nods, trying to smile through his memories. “But when we all went places, she would always insist on holding your hand.” The old man rubs his arm. “She would walk you across busy streets. She’d keep you safe.”

Remembering their game, and not even sure who’s turn it is, Sam reaches out and makes a quick move.

“She didn’t do that as much with the others. With you, I let her take a lot of the responsibility. So when she’s especially hard on you...” The old man takes a deep breath, and lets it out slowly. “...I think it’s just her trying to show you something new... something you may have missed... something you’ve forgotten... or something you just need to know.” He smiles knowingly. “Even now.” He begins to remember this conversation more fondly. Not as sadly as he at first thought. It was a nice moment between father and son. Son and father.

Sam watches as his father makes a daring move, pulling his Queen out into the middle of the board. “Yeah. She’s a gifted spiritual guide.” He snorts.

The old man ignores the sarcasm. “Rae helped with all of you, really. Especially with things I couldn’t... or didn’t.”

Sam closes his eyes, and slowly opens them, remembering how nurturing Death can really be when she wants to be.

“I think that’s the reason all of you show so much respect for her. Why all of you boys take so much of her bullying without pushing back.”

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“We push back.”

“Sometimes. But usually just in fun. You never really push, push, if you know what I mean.”

Sam laughs. “That’s because she can be scary as hell.” He pulls his Queen from hiding to directly challenge the old man’s move. “When she really wants to... she can even put Mikey in his place like no one else.”

“Mikey is complex. Gabe too, in less obvious ways.” The old man realizes that this trip down memory lane has made him even more tired. He doesn’t really want to play anymore. He wants to give in and just go up to his room and rest. He makes another wild move which makes Sam wonder what he’s playing at.

“You sure you want to do that?” Sam motions with his eyes to the open path to the old man’s king. “I’ll give you a do over.”

The old man smiles weakly, shaking his head. “Not everybody wants a do over.”

Sam half shrugs, and moves his bishop clear across the board. “Check.”

The old man feigns disappointment, frowning. “You know... Mikey really looks up to you. Gabe too.” He moves another piece. “Even Chris.”

“Only because I’m older.” Sam considers for a second. “Chris? Hmm.”

The old man nods his head slowly. “Especially Chris.”

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Sam moves another of his pieces. “Check.”

“Chris would do just about anything for you. And only you. You mean a lot to him.” The old man makes one last effort to half-heartedly protect his king, but he can already feel the comfort of his bed as he lays down and flips though the channels on the TV, and eventually drifts off to sleep. “All you need to do is ask.”

Sam looks over to his father, watching him rub his shoulder for like the tenth time since they started playing. “Dad? Are you alright?”

The old man reaches for the game’s cardboard box, and sets it in his lap, open side up. “I’m just tired.”

Without actually making the final move, Sam announces the result. “Checkmate.” He says it weakly. He’s worried about his father, but at the same time, he knows he’ll get through this. He always does. Goodbyes aren’t forever.

Sam leans forward, doing his part by tossing a few pieces into the box and folding the board, sliding it under the plastic chess pieces.

“I think I’ll go up to my room now and settle down a little early for the night.” The old man wheels away from the table, opens a drawer by the sink, and sets the game box inside, closing the drawer. “Thanks for dinner. And thanks for the game.” He rubs his shoulder again, moving his hand down to his chest, realizing that it’s not his shoulder, but his heart that hurts. “It was nice just chatting and hanging out... reminiscing... just you and me.”

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“Dad...” Sam touches his own left shoulder. He can feel it too. “I’ll check in on you tomorrow. Maybe we can have another go at it.” He motions with his eyes to the drawer his father just put the chess set in.

“No. I don’t think so. Not tomorrow.” The old man lets out a long, slow breath, hiding his pain beneath a toothy smile. “You take care, Lucky. And don’t you worry about me. I’ll be fine.” He stands up from his wheelchair and starts walking towards the dark hall to the back of the kitchen. “I think I’ll go get some rest now.”

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“Hey, Lucky.” Michael peeks his head into Sam’s room, and then immediately walks in.

Sam lets out a long sigh. He’s sitting in a chair next to his childhood desk, flipping through an old photo album.

“What’s that?” Michael plops down on the end of Sam’s bed.
“Photos?”

“Yeah.” Sam closes the album and places it on the small desk.
“What’s up?”

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“Nothing. I saw your light on. Door was open. So I thought I’d pop in and visit my favorite big brother.” Michael gets up, reaching for the photo album.

“Only big brother.”

Michael grins. “Exactly.” He opens the photo album, seeing a picture of the whole family on the first page. “One of our trips to Disneyland.”

Sam smiles, a tired look on his face. “Yeah.” He remembers how tired the old man was after their game this evening, and he feels the same. He just wants to put on some music, turn out the lights, and lie down on his bed.

“Where’d you get this?” Michael flips through a few pages seeing various pictures of the whole family along with Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. “Gabe was so weirded out by that giant duck.”

“Terrified.”

Michael looks up, catching Sam’s eye. “Yeah, and that was just two years ago.”

They both burst into laughter.

“He said the duck smelled funny.” Sam shakes his head, still laughing.

“Well it was a hot day... and that duck suit doesn’t look like it has a lot of ventilation.” Michael chuckles, scrunching his face in disgust.

“So what’s up Mikey? You’ve been hanging around a lot lately.”

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“I already told you.” Michael sets the album aside on Sam’s bed and sits back down. “I came to check on dad.” He glances over to his brother to get his reaction. “And you know...”

Sam straightens a few items on his desk, but says nothing.

“Have you noticed...” Michael decides to leave it alone for now.
“... that dad seems a little off lately.”

“Yeah. I was hanging out with him earlier in the kitchen. He seemed pretty tired.” Sam leans over and grabs his slippers, putting them on. “I’m getting kind of tired too.” He fakes a yawn.

“He’s sitting out there on the beach. Just staring out into the water.” Michael chuckles. “Letting the water tickle his toes, he says.”

“Hmmm. He told me he was going to bed.”

“Eh. Maybe he couldn’t sleep.” Michael looks around the room.
“Remember when you, me, and Gabe used to build forts in here and have our little sleepovers?” He chuckles. “Or sometimes out on dad’s balcony.”

Sam stands up, walking towards the door. He doesn’t really need anything from downstairs, but this is the only way he feels he can get Michael out of his room without making a big deal out of it. “We’d get all the blankets in the house and all the chairs from the dining room and kitchen and bring them up here.”

Michael laughs. “We’d build a massive fort.”

“Yeah. And all those ghost stories we’d tell. Dad would bring us chips and sodas.”

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“And flashlights. He’d always bring each of us a flashlight to play with in the dark.” Michael actually sounds excited.

“Yeah. That was pretty cool.”

Michael nods. “And eventually, after about a dozen stories, we’d all get tired and fall asleep.”

Sam nods, a big smile on his face.

“Always in the same order.”

“First Gabe, then me, and finally you.” Sam loved those sleepovers. He liked to tell all the scary stories to his little brothers that Rae had told him when it was just the two of them. “No matter how tired you’d get, you always had to stay awake the longest.”

Michael laughs. “I’d finally drift off after talking to myself for a while, not realizing that no one else was awake. My final story would always go to waste.”

“And halfway through the night, I’d get tired of sleeping on the floor between you two clowns, and I’d climb up on my bed to get some real sleep.”

“Ha.” Michael remembers perfectly. “By morning, we’d all be up there.”

Sam nods. “Good times.”

“You know. Long after that. After... you left...” Michael gives his brother an apologetic look. “I’d help Chris make small forts in his room.

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Or sometimes in here.” He smiles at the memory. “Just so he could have some of those great childhood experiences we had.”

“Really?” Sam scrunches up his face, trying to picture Michael going out of his way like that. “That’s pretty awesome. You were probably a better big brother than I was.”

Michael shrugs. “We’d all gone our separate ways by the time he had his chance. And it was nice to do some of those things again.”

“Did you do the whole sleepover thing too? Or just help out with the fort making and go on your way?”

“We would do the sleepover… sometimes.” Michael looks away, a little embarrassed. “I was a little old for that, but he seemed to enjoy it.” He turns, smiling broadly at Sam. “Don’t tell him… but I probably enjoyed it just as much as he did. Maybe more.

“Oh. You know I’m going to tell him.” Sam laughs.

“Anyway. He wasn’t too thrilled to be sleeping alone in the dark.”

“I remember.” Sam grins.

“After I’d leave, he’d get up and turn the hallway light on and leave his door open. Dad would turn it off after he fell asleep.”

Completely forgetting about his plan to get his brother out of his room, Sam leans back against the wall, enjoying another trip down memory lane. Another goodbye. “The dark freaked me out too, when I was really young.” Something suddenly occurs to him. Something he’s

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considered in the past, but never told Michael. “You know. It was probably just Rae messing with us.”

Both brother’s laugh.

“Maybe. But I doubt it.” Michael raises his eyebrows and gives his brother a look. “She was pretty supportive when one of us got freaked out at that age.”

“Except for the stinky duck.” Sam grins. “She teased Gabe for weeks about the duck.”

Michael nods, remembering.

“Yeah.” Sam thinks back. “Do you remember when I used to have nightmares?”

“Kind of.” Michael lays back sideways on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. “You were pretty much over that by the time I came along.”

Sam nods. “I’d wake in the middle of night. Sometimes I’d yell out. Sometimes I’d just wake sweaty and out of breath.”

Michael laughs, picturing his big brother being afraid of anything. “What kind of nightmare scares the Devil?”

Sam gives him a disapproving look.

“Sorry.” Michael grins. “What were they about? The nightmares?”

“I don’t remember them. Which is really weird, right?” Sam walks over and sits down on the end of his bed.

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“Yeah. But not really. I had a short time with nightmares when I was little. More like bad dreams really. Nothing like yours. And I don’t remember any of them. Not one.”

“Hmmm. Probably dad being a good dad. Too traumatic for our little brains back then.” Sam finds himself thinking back to one particular night.

“Yeah. So... poof.” Michael makes an exploding gesture with his hands. “We don’t remember. And it’s all for the better.”

“I do remember that Rae would wake up and come running.” Sam smiles at the memory and sits down on the end of his bed. “Every time.”

“Probably heard you yelling. I heard you a couple times back in the day. When I was really, really young.”

Sam nods, staring off to the doorway. He can picture Rae running to his room. She was still just a kid herself. Maybe seven or eight.

“She’d run to my room and sit with me. Calm me. Sometimes she’d tell me stories or read one of my comic books out loud until I fell back asleep.”

“She was such a good storyteller.” Michael remembers his bad dreams. He didn’t have many, not like Sam. But Rae would come running when he did. “She’d tell me stories too, if I woke up and couldn’t get back to sleep.”

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“Yeah, I think she did that for all of us.” Sam can picture Rae sitting on the end of his bed, telling one of her stories. He remembers seeing her reading to Gabriel before bed sometimes.

Michael smiles fondly. “It’s kind of who she is... or at least who she became. Right?”

“She had this one story. I think she told it just to remember it herself. It was important to her. She said it happened when we were just little kids, at the bottom of that big grassy hill with all the flowers and butterflies.”

“Chris’ hill. His field.”

“Really?” Sam had no idea.

Michael nods. “Yeah. Well, technically it’s probably not his. But he spends a lot of time there. Sometimes that’s where I go when I’m looking for him.”

“Hmmm.” That reminds Sam that he wants to have a chat with his baby brother. Maybe he should go look for him there in the morning.

Michael smiles to himself. “But yeah. I remember that hill. Dad would take us there on weekends just to get away, so we could be ourselves. It was alone time. We could do anything we wanted. Anything.”

“There were sooo many flowers and butterflies.” Sam closes his eyes, remembering. “And as time went by, there’d be more and more families playing and picnicking and just enjoying life.”

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Michael knows the story Sam's about to tell him. Rae would occasionally tell it to him and Gabe as a bedtime story. "The stranger on the hill."

Sam laughs. "Yeah, that's what she called him."

"A friend of dad's, she says." Michael closes his eyes, remembering her telling the story. It wasn't scary or even fun. It was just interesting, especially the way she told it, so full of wonder and mystery. When she told it, you could see in her face that she was enjoying it as much as they were. She was reliving it.

"Yeah. So Rae says that when she was twelve she was out walking in the field..."

"Oh. Oh." Michael quickly adds. "She thinks she was walking with someone, but doesn't remember them."

Sam raises his eyebrows and nods. "And when she looked up the hill, she could see someone chatting with the old man. Laughing and having fun. You know... like old friends." He glances over his shoulder at his brother. "At first, she just blew it off. But you know Rae..."

"Ha. We all know Rae. She had to hike up the hill to see what's going on."

"Yep." Sam grins, shaking his head. "Even at that age." He chuckles. "She walks straight up to the two of them and says, 'so who's this guy?'"

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“Yeah. The way she tells it, she gave him a full dose of Rae.”

Michael just shakes his head imagining it.

“Attitude.” Sam chuckles. “She was twelve. So preteen Rae attitude. The worst.”

Michael sits up. He likes that about his sister. He learned that from his sister.

Sam grins. “I wonder if she showed him the darkness in her eyes that she shows everyone when she’s irritated.”

“If she didn’t... I’ll bet she wanted to.” Michael stands, walks around the bed and sits on the end next to his brother. “She did though. I guarantee you... she did.”

Sam laughs, falling back, laying on the bed, staring at the ceiling. Michael does the same. For a few seconds it feels like one of their childhood sleepovers.

“Yeah. She said she talked with both of them for quite a while.”

“The guy smiled and laughed a lot.” Michael glances at his brother. “He told her a lot of stories about dad... about when he was a young man.”

“Yeah.” Sam is enjoying this time with Michael more than he’d like to admit. Both today, and the other day at the playground, awakened some fond memories. “Supposedly, he even knew dad as a boy.”

“Hmmm. I doubt that though. She said he was much younger than dad.” Michael nods. “But it would be awesome if she could remember

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some of the stories he told.” He kind of wishes she were home to tell this story herself. They could turn out the lights and break out the flashlights for effect.

“That’s the funny thing though… isn’t it?” Sam turns his head to look his brother in the eye. “She doesn’t remember the stories… or his name… or what he even looked like…”

“But she does remember that he was a younger man.” Michael widens his eyes.

Sam nods. “She thinks. And once she walked away… she’d didn’t remember his face. Nothing.”

“She’s not even sure if she was walking with someone in the field… or if she were alone.” Michael stares at the ceiling, remembering.

“Mmmm. Hmmm. But that’s what made it such a great bedtime story. It had the spooky story equivalent to a punchline.” Sam glances over to his brother. “We don’t forget. Anything. Ever. That’s the spooky part.”

“We don’t remember the nightmares.” Michael quickly adds.

“True. But that’s different. Dad doesn’t want us to remember the nightmares.”

“You don’t know that. It’s just a guess.” Michael’s voice goes back to his usual boldness. “You know it was Chris, right?” He’s done playing sleepover. “In the field… on the hill.”

“What? Why would you think that?” Sam looks over to his brother with a surprised look on his face. “Is that what Rae told you?”

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“No. Just a guess.” Michael pauses, thinking. “It’s almost always Chris. There’s times when I’m just hanging out... sitting in the park feeding the pigeons or something... and out of nowhere someone says hi to me and smiles oddly... and I get a feeling that it’s just Chris being Chris.”

“Feeding the pigeons.” Sam gives his brother an odd look.

“Ducks. You know what I meant.”

“Chris wasn’t even around yet.” Sam laughs. “It was just the four of us at that point. But yeah, I know what you mean... he gets bored.” He pushes himself up to a sitting position.

Standing just outside the doorway, in the darkened hall, sipping at a straw, is Chris. He’s wearing yellow, Darth Vader pajamas and holding a comic book in one hand, his long surfer-cut bangs partially obscuring his eyes.

“Is that my comic book?” Sam stretches his neck, trying to see what it is.

“Nope. Dad got it at the neighbor’s garage sale today.”

Michael props himself up on his elbows. “What are you drinking?” He grins wildly, his conversation with Sam done.

“Juice.”

“A juice box?” Sam can’t help but smile.

Chris pulls his lips off the straw, holding the small box out in front of him, looking at it. “Apple juice.”

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“Yeah, but that’s a juice box.” Michael teases.

“So.” Chris puts the straw back to his mouth and takes another sip.

“So you’re not four. Why don’t you get a glass of juice like a normal person?” Michael grins, enjoying himself, having a much better evening than he had anticipated.

“I didn’t want a glass of juice. I wanted a juice box.” There’s a twinkle in Chris’ eye. “And how do you know I wasn’t four when I grabbed it?”

“Well. He’s got us there.” Sam finds himself actually interested. He’s reminded of Tegan and her rice pudding. “But let’s pretend you’re normal and you’ve been eleven all day. Why the juice box?”

“I like the straw.”

“So get a glass of juice and get a straw.” Michael chuckles.

“I didn’t want a glass of juice. I wanted a juice box.” Chris looks at them blankly, his big blue eyes shining in the dark hallway. “Anyway. We don’t have any straws.”

Sam and Michael look at each other and laugh.

“And that was a problem?” Sam gives Chris an odd look.

“Where’d you even get it?” Michael again wishes Rae were here, but this time to join in on the teasing. But she’d likely be on Chris’ side.

“The fridge, of course.” Chris takes one last sip, tilting the box and pushing the straw into the corner to get every last drop.

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Sam and Michael watch, amused by this whole scene. It's like one of their old sleepovers got crashed by their little brother, and now they get to tease him a little before sending him off to bed.

"Since when does the old man buy juice boxes." Sam shakes his head. "I never got juice boxes when I was a kid."

"I don't think they made juice boxes when you were a kid."

Michael gives Sam a funny look.

Chris just stands in the doorway, smiling at how much fun his two brothers are having together. It makes him happy. Really, really happy.

"If you want something, you just have to add it to the grocery list on the side of the fridge." Chris turns and walks away towards his room.

"Like a normal person."

22

Rae sits on a bedroom nightstand, looking down at the bed. She's moved the lamp, putting it on the floor, and tucked the alarm clock into the top drawer, then pulled herself up, crossing her legs underneath herself. It's both comfortable, because she's not sitting on the bed with a monster, and uncomfortable, because the nightstand is hard and cold.

The room is cool and dark, with the blinds pulled shut. Fred's body lays motionless on top of a snow-white comforter. She lays there with her head propped up on a pillow, a clear, plastic bag over her head,

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with a rubber band keeping it tight to her neck. She has a bluish, peaceful appearance.

“Normally, I’d try to find some joy in this. Knowing what kind of monster you are.” Rae tilts her head to the side, wondering why she’s even here. “But knowing... exactly... what you are... I get absolutely nothing from this. Not one God damn thing.”

“Do they do this a lot?” Gabriel steps out of the shadows in the corner of the room. He looks first to the body, and then to his sister.

“Gabe?” Rae looks past the body to her brother, a little surprised. “What are you doing here? I’m pretty sure this one’s beyond the both of us.”

“Yeah, I know.” Gabriel walks over to the bed and gently sits on the opposite side. “I met her at the house.” He props up two pillows against the backboard, and lays back on them, next to Fred’s body.

“That’s disrespectful.” Rae puts on a fake frown.

“I agree... normally it would be. But not for this one.” He looks over to Fred’s body. “So... you didn’t answer my question. Do they try this a lot?”

“No.” Rae tilts her head to the side, looking down at the body. “It’s usually not...” she trails off, considering.

“Hmmm. Kind of a waste of time, huh?” Gabriel pushes the pillows closer to the wall so he can sit up a little.

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“Hers or mine?” Rae’s voice shows her clear disgust for the young woman.

“Everyone’s.” Gabriel feels for his sister. He knows the history between the young woman and Rae. And he wonders why Sam is doing this so close to their sister’s recent breakdown.

“You don’t have to be here, Gabe. You shouldn’t be here.” Rae glances around the room, half expecting Sam to appear out of the shadows too.

“This won’t work, right?” He scrunches his eyebrows. “I mean... obviously not... it accomplishes nothing.”

“Of course not.” Rae looks at her brother with an odd look on her face. “That’s a silly question.”

“Then why are you here?” Gabriel gives her a gentle look.

“You first.”

Gabriel clears his throat dramatically. “I came to see why this... person...” He motions with his head towards Fred. “... is so important to Sam. Why he would allow this.” His face goes serious. “What she has to offer.”

Rae doesn’t say anything.

Gabriel slowly grins. “You know, but you don’t want to tell me.”

She still says nothing.

Gabriel looks over at Fred’s face. “So how does this work? A bag over the head. Sleeping pills?”

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Rae nods. “Yeah, she tried overdosing on sleeping pills.”

“Which rarely works, I’m told.”

Rae looks to her brother. “You’re told.” She grins.

Gabriel shrugs.

Rae glances down at the body. “That’s the reason for the bag over her head. She thinks that she’ll suffocate before her adrenaline kicks in... and she can tear the bag loose.”

“Sounds awful.” Gabriel sits up a little more, looking more closely at the neck and face. “I don’t know... looks like it worked out okay.”

“I suppose.” Rae shrugs. “Doesn’t really matter though, does it?”

“Nope.” Gabriel turns his head, stretching his neck. “So are you going to tell me or not? What is she to Sam?”

Rae takes a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “I took Sam down a path recently” She pauses, thinking. “A dangerous path.”

“Oh.” Gabriel fakes confusion and shock.

“Don’t be a smart ass...” Rae’s eyes briefly go dark. “... it’s not really your thing.”

“I thought Chris fixed everything.” The casual grin is back. “Mikey says Chris... and I quote... ‘shut you down’.”

Rae takes another deep breath. “Yeah... Chris... helped me out.”

Gabriel chuckles. “How fun.”

“But Sam got ideas. He saw firsthand, what made me so unhappy... and he’s...”

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“Oh, no.” Gabriel’s smile drops. “He’s finishing what you started.”

“Yeah. I think so. Not in the same way of course.” Rae looks away, embarrassed. A cloud of confusion envelopes her mind.

Suddenly everything blinks out of existence, followed by several thundering booms, and then reality slowly fades back in.

“Yeah. I think so. Not... in the same... way... of course.” Rae looks away, embarrassed. For a couple seconds she feels confused. And when she looks back, it’s no longer Gabriel sitting on the bed. “Michael?”

She just stares at him, unsure why this startles her. Why she feels wrong. She blinks her eyes rapidly several times.

Michael looks at her oddly. “Azrael?” He mimics her questioning tone, not understanding why she’s staring at him so oddly.

Rae says nothing, letting her mind clear, trying to remember what they were talking about.

“You’re being weird.” Michael scrunches his eyebrows. “So, he’s not running around exploding people.”

“Of course not.” Rae sounds uncertain as she regains her focus. “I brought him along because I felt alone. I wanted a traveling companion.” She considers for a second. “And I thought maybe he could do it. I already knew I couldn’t.”

“Do what?”

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“Save them. All of them.” Rae smiles at the thought of her brother doing just that. “I think that’s what he’s gonna do. But his way. Not mine.”

“God damn it, Rae.” Michael walks over to the window, peeking through the shades into the driveway and over to the garage. “You remember the last time he decided he knew better than everyone else.” He considers everything that he can feel happening. Everything centered on his brother. “You should’ve known better.”

“Mikey. Don’t take that tone with me.” Her eyes go black in an instant.

“Christ, Rae. Knock off the bullshit.” He walks around the bed, closer to where she sits. He looks down to the body on the bed. “What does this creature have to do with this?”

“She just happened to be in the right place at the wrong time.” Rae keeps her voice low. “The starting point was actually a woman who drowned her seven-year-old daughter.” She looks down at Fred. “Not this... person.”

“Are you fucking kidding me. Sam deals with that kind of shit all the time.”

“Yeah, but she was the first after...” Rae hesitates. “... walking with me.”

“And?” Michael sighs heavily.

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“Then she...” Rae gestures down at Fred. “this one... came along... she put her son in danger. A little boy named Maxwell.” Rae smiles, thinking of the boy. “He’s really sweet. You’d like him.”

“Yeah...” Michael closes his eyes thinking about his recent chats with Sam. “... I’m sure I would.”

Rae rolls her eyes. “Sam’s going to save the boy.” She smiles softly. “He just doesn’t know how yet. But he’s going to save him. And the others.” She’s happy for him. “He’s got a plan.”

“You know... he sent Nyssa and Tegan home... to stay there. Home.” Michael watches as his sister stares blankly off towards the shadows, a smile on her face. “Rae.” His voice gets softer. “I’m not sure if you’ve noticed... but something’s not right. Something... bigger than a dead girl laying on a bed.”

Rae shrugs. “That’s all I know, Mikey.”

“He doesn’t usually do stuff like this, does he?” Michael looks down at Fred. “I mean... this isn’t part of Sam’s process, is it? I’m not missing something here?” He gives Fred a look of disgust. “She was in our God damn house.”

“No. Not like this.” Rae tilts her head, thinking. “This is... unusual.”

“Yeah. That’s what I thought.” Michael lets any remaining anger drop from his voice. “I mentioned it to dad. He didn’t seem surprised. But he agreed it was unusual.”

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“So... what now?”

“I don’t know. I don’t get involved in Sam’s business.” Michael shrugs. “I need to think... maybe talk to Gabe... dad... Chris. Someone.”

The mention of Gabriel fogs over Rae’s mind for just a second, like she’s forgotten something. “Maybe we should just ask Sam?” Rae scrunches her face up, giving it some serious thought. “You and me...”

Michael shakes his head. “I already gave him several opportunities to tell me what’s going on.”

“And?”

“And... I don’t think he really knows.” Michael sighs. “Maybe he hasn’t really decided yet. Probably still trying to figure it out.” He pauses, thinking. “You started this. It’s your path. So where’s he going? How’s he going to save the boy?”

“I’m sorry, Mikey.” Rae shakes her head. “It all feels familiar, like I should now, but...”

Michael waves a dismissive hand at his sister. “So, where’s the boy... Maxwell?”

“Downstairs, playing in the living room with his cars.” Rae glances to the open doorway leading out to the hallway. “He’s really into cars, and wheels... things that spin.”

“And she didn’t give a shit that the boy might wander up here and find his mother blue faced and dead with a fucking bag over her head?”

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Michael glances at the body on the bed. “Okay. I’m going downstairs to take the boy away.” He moves towards the bedroom door. “You...”

“Why bother?” Rae gives her brother an odd look. “It’s not like he’s...”

“I realize that. And I don’t care what he is.” Michael’s eyes light up, bright white. “At this point, it’s God damn disrespectful.”

“Of course.” Rae considers for a second. “Sam will...”

“Fuck Sam. If he’s got a fucking problem with it, he knows where to find me.” Michael’s voice begins to anger. “And he can answer my God damn questions while he’s at it.”

Rae just nods.

“I assume you’re going to...” Michael gestures rudely towards Fred. “... wake it up and send it on its way?”

“That’s the plan.” Rae cocks her head to the side. “What do you think she’ll do when she wakes up and the boy isn’t here?”

“Don’t care.” Michael immediately walks out the bedroom door and towards the stairs.

Rae pulls her feet out from underneath herself, and hops to the floor next to the bed. “Okay.” She tilts her head. “I’m going to count to three, and you’re going to wake up and forget about all this...” She picks up the empty pill bottle from the side of the bed and tosses it aside. “... nonsense.”

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Rae steps back, straightening her dress and pulling her hair out of her face, tucking it behind her ears.

“And when you wake up, I’m going to need you to go find my brother. Sam. Not the lunkhead that just left.” She chuckles. “And give him what he needs. And then go on your merry way.” Her eyes get darker. “And leave my family... the fuck alone.”

She hears the front door of the house open and then close hard. Michael is taking the boy away.

Rae moves a little closer to the bed, and pulls the rest of the plastic bag away from Fred’s head. She leans in so their faces are just inches apart, and starts counting slowly. “One. Two. Three.”

Fred opens her eyes, taking a deep, panicky gasp of air. The first thing she sees is Rae’s face, eyes gone black and completely hollow, staring at her from inches away. She screams and wakes, bolting into a sitting position on the couch in her living room. She’s sweating, and her heart is pounding in her chest. Max’s toy cars lay in the middle of the room. He’s nowhere to be seen. Something pushes free from the back of her mind, and a cold shiver goes down her spine.

“Max?” She jumps to her feet. “Maxwell!”

23

Chris walks through a field of bright green, sprinkled with hundreds of colorful flowers of every hue. Suddenly there's a boy, maybe a year or two older than him, walking next to him. They walk together in silence for a long time, just tossing a baseball high up in the air, back and forth, without having to say a word. The field is buzzing with birds, butterflies, and other insects.

Seeing the boy's breathing get heavier, Chris stops and smiles brightly, giving him a rest. He reaches up, pulling his blond hair back behind his ears and looks over at his new friend.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

The boy tries smiling while catching his breath and shading the sun from his eyes. “So... hi. I’m Danny.” The boy puts out his other hand for Chris to shake.

“Hey Danny. I’m Chris.” He shakes the boy’s hand firmly, again tossing the baseball up high for Danny to catch.

Danny stretches his arms up high, takes a deep breath, and catches the ball in his left hand. It lands in his hand with a solid smack. “Owe.” He smiles, shaking the sting out of his hand.

Chris laughs. “Sorry about that. I’ll try not to throw it so high.”

“It’s okay. I think I’m just a little out of practice.” Danny is the older boy and doesn’t want to be shown up by someone younger and smaller.

“Is it okay if we keep walking? There’s something pretty cool I want to show you.” Chris looks deeper into the huge field.

Danny nods, and follows his new friend as they continue walking.

He isn’t sure what he’s doing here. He’s not even sure where here is. But he loves the smell of the grass and flowers. Everything’s so fresh. For some reason, he feels like he’s been stuck indoors for a long time and needs the fresh air to clear his head.

“Yeah. Sometimes when I feel cooped up, the fresh air clears my head too.” Chris breathes in through his nose, enjoying the fresh smell of the field and all its flowers. “It makes me feel alive.”

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Martin E Ericson Jr

“I can’t believe how many butterflies there are. They’re everywhere. Birds too.” Every once in a while, a butterfly will actually get close enough to land on Chris or Danny for a few seconds looking for nectar, and then quickly fly off to find a flower instead.

Danny tosses the ball up, and Chris catches it behind his back.

“Whoa... that was so good.”

“Just luck.” Chris shrugs, tossing the ball back to Danny.

“Still pretty cool.”

“So how old are you, Danny? You look about twelve or thirteen.” Chris grins over at the boy. “I’m eleven most of the time. It’s a good age to be.”

“Hmmm.” Danny ignores the comment, trying to think, but his mind feels like it’s elsewhere. It feels fuzzy and slow, like it’s in a dark place stumbling around looking for a light switch. “Twelve. I think.” He blinks his eyes several times and looks up into the sun. His mind clears a bit. “Yeah. Twelve... and a half. Almost thirteen really.”

“And a half.” Chris chuckles, thinking about how his brothers tease him when he does stuff like that. “So, Danny. Do you know what brought you here?” He tosses the ball over to the boy. “To my field.”

“Your field?” Danny looks confused, his mind still feeling like it’s elsewhere.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

“Sure.” Chris beams. “It was just a bunch of dead grass, mud and rock before I got here.” He glances around. “Better now, huh? That hill over there didn’t even exist.”

Danny nods, unsure what Chris means. “How long did that take?”

“Oh... just a quick second. Just before you got here, actually. I go away sometimes and everything kind of gets out of whack. And when I get back, the first thing I do is fix everything... or put it back if it’s no longer there.”

“Do you go away often?”

Chris cocks his head to the side, much like his sister does when she’s thinking. “Lately... yeah.”

Danny looks out to the huge field. It’s like a huge, green painting, with daubs of color placed perfectly throughout. “You did a good job.”

A childlike grin shows on Chris’ face. “Do you know why you’re here?” He watches a small bee buzzing around in a zigzag pattern in front of him.

Danny tosses him the ball, and he holds it out in front of him trying to get the bee to land on it. But it buzzes off to choose a flower instead. Chris tosses the ball up and tries to catch it again behind his back but misses. It bounces off his wrist and rolls a few feet into some taller grass and flowers.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

Danny stops to scratch his leg. He's barefoot and some of the longer grass keeps reaching up to tickle his ankles. "Not sure. I think I fell."

"You fell? Into my field?" Chris looks up to the sky, taking another long breath, clearly enjoying himself. "From where?" He stops to let Danny scratch his legs.

"Yeah, I guess. Well... not fell into your field. That would be crazy. I just fell. And here I am." Done scratching, the boy stands back up and runs to catch up with Chris who has started walking again. "Sorry. I hope I'm not trespassing or something... invading your space." A worried look crosses Danny's face.

Chris laughs. "No. It's all good." He says nothing further as they continue their walk. He's enjoying the beautiful flowers growing all throughout the field. Every once in a while, he leans over, reaching to the ground, and grabs a few blades of grass. And then continuing to walk, he tosses them one by one to the wind, watching them blow in random directions.

Danny stops. "Hey. I think we left the baseball back there when I was scratching my leg."

Chris keeps walking but turns, walking backwards. "It's okay. I'll grab it on the way back."

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Martin E Ericson Jr

Danny jogs a few steps to catch up again. “So where are we going?” He looks around, seeing nothing they could be walking towards, just grass, flowers, and blue sky going on forever.

“Home.” Chris grins. “Your mom has been asking me to bring you home. Well not home home. But your home. With your mother.”

“My mom?” Danny’s face lights up. “That’s awesome.”

Chris beams with happiness, tossing another few blades of grass to the wind, as they continue their walk.

“It feels like forever since I saw my mom... and...”

“And...” Chris looks over and encourages the boy to continue.

“Don’t make fun of me.” His eyes get watery. “But I really wanna give her a hug.”

“Why would I make fun of that?” Chris pushes the boy’s shoulder playfully. “My dad is the best hugger I know. My whole family are great huggers. I think it’s one of the better parts of who we are.”

Danny looks over to his new friend, to see if he’s being serious.

“Seriously.” Chris smiles broadly.

They walk some more, and Danny is starting to wonder how big this field really is, how far he is from home.

Danny stops suddenly. “Has my mom been okay?” He blocks the bright sun from his eyes as he looks ahead to Chris. “It’s been a while... right?”

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Martin E Ericson Jr

“She’s been worried. Yeah. But she’s good now. Before we left, I let her know you’d be on your way soon.” A butterfly lands on Chris’ shoulder, attracted by the smell of flowers. “She’s been asking.”

Danny smiles. “That’s good.”

“You say you fell?” Chris watches as the butterfly takes off to find more flowers.

Danny nods. “Yeah. I’m pretty sure. I fall a lot. So, it’s a pretty good guess.”

They walk a little farther. Danny finds it easier to breath, the farther they go.

“How’d you fall?”

Danny thinks for a few seconds. “My dad I think.” He looks sad. He stops walking. “I messed up again, I guess. I do that a lot too.”

“I’m sorry about that.” Chris looks back and gives his friend a sad smile, motioning his head to the side, encouraging him to continue their walk.

“So how long have we been walking?” The boy asks. “It feels like forever.” He feels himself breathing heavy again, but tries not to show it, because it looks like Chris is barely breathing at all.

“Ohhh... I don’t know about that.” Chris’ grin gets wider. “Forever is a long time. I’ve done billions of forevers. Trillions. Maybe more.”

Danny laughs and takes a deep breath.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

“How long do you really think we’ve been walking?” Chris looks down at the boy who has already stopped again, to scratch his other leg.

“Oh, I don’t know… besides forever… maybe twenty minutes Half an hour. It’s a big field.” Danny looks down at his feet. “Why am I barefoot?” Then he notices that he’s wearing pajamas, but he decides not to say anything.

He looks over at Chris and frowns. His new friend doesn’t seem to be breathing at all. And the sun looks to be moving with them, staying directly to the side of Chris’ head, making it hard to look at him without shading his eyes.

“Is this really your field?”

“Yep.” Chris tosses the baseball over to Danny, making sure that he sees it first. “We’ve been walking a lot longer than that. Months.”

Danny has to reach out quickly and stumble forward to grab the baseball. “Hey.” He looks at the ball oddly.

Chris turns, walking backwards, grinning wildly.

Danny looks up, seeing the sun shining directly down around Chris’ head, through his hair, making him glow from above. He puts a hand up to shade his eyes, and glances around, thinking.

“I’m not dead… am I?” Danny doesn’t seem concerned about it. It’s just a question that occurred to him this very moment.

Chris turns back around and continues walking, knowing that Danny will follow. “Why would you ask that?”

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Martin E Ericson Jr

“I don’t know. The field. You. My dad pushing me down the basement stairs again.” Danny struggles to think clearly. “It just got me thinking, I guess.”

Chris says nothing as he points to something about twenty yards in front of them. “See that?”

Danny looks over and sees something that wasn’t there just seconds ago. “Yeah.” It’s a long, chain-link fence, stretching out in front of them, blocking their way for as far as he can see in both directions.

“This is what I wanted to show you.” Chris nods enthusiastically and points to where the fence meets a large grove of trees that wasn’t there just a second ago.

“See the gap in the fence over there? Just where it meets the trees?” Chris raises his eyebrows, and glances over to Danny.

“Yeah.” Danny walks to it and pushes some flowered branches out of the way. “We can go through. There’s a break in the fence here. There’s plenty of room if you pull back the branches.” He glances back to Chris. “You think we should check it out?”

“You go, Danny. You’re mom’s waiting for you just on the other side.” Chris starts to turn away. “Give her a big hug. She’s missed you these last six months.” Then without saying another word, he walks away and doesn’t look back.

Danny watches his new friend walk away. “You sure you don’t wanna come with?”

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Martin E Ericson Jr

“No. I’m good, Danny. You go. Have fun. Have a good life.” Chris keeps walking. “I have to meet up with my brother. He’s been waiting for me.”

“Hey!” Danny calls out. “We should hang out sometime. Maybe play some baseball or something.” He looks down at the baseball in his hand, holding it up for Chris to see.

“Keep it.” Chris turns and walks backwards. “We will. Another time.” He turns and keeps walking.

Danny pulls some branches to the side and moves past the fence, to the other side, leaving the field behind.

Chris walks back towards where they first started their little journey. He takes his time, enjoying the day. On the way, he stops and picks up the baseball they’d left behind. He grins, tossing it as high as he can, and keeps walking.

As he gets closer to where Danny first joined him, he sees Sam sitting in the grass surrounded by butterflies and bright, purple flowers.

“Is he... you know. Did you bring him home?” Sam uses his hand to block the sun from his eyes as he looks up at his brother.

“No. He’s in a coma, lying in a hospital bed.” Chris smiles, reaching down to grab his brother’s hand and help pull him to his feet. “He just woke up. His mother never left his side. Six months... and she never left his side except to shower and use the restroom.” His face brightens with happiness. “And even then, she had a nurse sit with him.”

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Martin E Ericson Jr

“Was this all for me, then?” Sam looks over to his brother as he walks away. “To show me something good.” Sam smiles weakly. “After Rae... and all the other stuff recently.”

“No. It was all for him. It gave him time to heal. Gave his mom time to realize that she needed to make a major life change.” He motions for his brother to follow him off to the side, where the field slopes up into a gradual hill. “This hill wasn’t here an hour ago.” Chris grins proudly.

“His father. Lawerence.” Sam nods, understanding. He looks up the hill, half expecting to see his own father sitting up there reading a book. This is the hill he used to take them to when they were kids.

“Yeah, he still brings me once in a while.” Chris grins. “There’s a woman that gathers the kids... and she tells stories. Fantastic stories.”

“So, what’s going to happen to the boy’s father?” Sam follows, taking a few quick steps to catch up with his brother.

“Rae already had a chat with him. And then... Michael.” Again, he shows a big grin. “But I probably shouldn’t have mentioned Michael just yet. That’s a whole other story.”

Nothing else needs to be said about the father who hits his son daily, and shoved him down a flight of stairs. Sam knows he’ll meet him soon enough.

“So, you’re aware that Rae is still... you know...”

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Chris smiles lazily over to his brother, letting his head tilt in a perfect portrayal of their sister. “So long as it isn’t taking her too far off the path.” He shrugs. “What can I do? Rae’s… Rae.”

“Probably for the best.” Sam smiles.

“It gets her through the day.” He shrugs. “It’s not the way I would handle things.”

“So. Anyway. Thanks for bringing Noel by the other day.” Sam glances over to his brother. “It was really nice to see her again. And yeah… she helped.”

“I thought she might.” Chris gives his brother a somewhat serious look. “Hearing it from me wouldn’t have had the same affect.”

Sam stops walking as the ground starts shaking. He can feel the entire universe shake violently and then abruptly come to a stop. The air swirls, getting thicker and darker, becoming pure blackness. Then the shaking becomes pounding. It feels like something is pounding against the planet, like the footsteps of a giant toddler stumbling forward awkwardly.

Sam looks up to see the sun barely shining through the darkness. It shakes each time the pounding hits, flickering, the light going on and off. Sam has to steady himself, reaching over to his brother and putting a hand on his shoulder. Then, in the blink of an eye, everything’s completely back to normal.

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“What the hell was that?” Sam looks around at their surroundings. He turns and looks at Chris. “Please tell me you felt that.” He shakes his head quickly, and sighs, stroking the stubble on his chin.

“Sure did.” Chris stands there staring at his brother, his eyes even bluer than normal.

Sam laughs awkwardly. “Of course you did. Just you and me.”

Chris motions that they should continue their trek up the slope.

Sam follows, still confused by it all. “What is it?”

Chris lets out a sharp sigh. “End of the world. But don’t worry about it. It’ll take a while. There’s still time.”

Sam catches up to his brother, grabbing his arm and pulling him to a stop. “End of the world?”

“Well... more like the end of reality. That’s a better way to put it.”

Chris reaches up, pulling his blowing hair back and out of his face.

“The end of the world.” Sam mutters, his eyes showing his confusion.

“Reality.” Chris corrects his older brother.

Sam gives his brother a mildly irritated look. “Why? What’s causing it?” His hand is still gripping Chris’ arm.

“I am.” Chris looks down at his brother’s hand. “And you’re squeezing pretty hard. It kind of hurts.”

Sam lets go. “Why?”

Chris half shrugs. “I guess you’re stronger than you look.”

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Sam's face goes blank. "Can you please take this seriously?"

Chris sighs. "It's just time. That's all. Sometimes, things have to come to an end so that a new beginning can..." He scrunches his eyebrows together. "... begin." He chuckles.

Sam frowns. "How come I can feel it and no one else can? Rae didn't notice... and Mikey feels something is off, but can't describe it... doesn't know what it is."

"It's Mikey's job to notice these things... but this one isn't for him."

"But I see and feel it... the world..." Sam quickly corrects himself. "... reality... ending."

"Probably because you're the only one truly connected to it." Chris shrugs. "That would be my guess at least. I suppose I'm letting you feel it, because you're the new beginning."

Sam stares blankly at his little brother. "Reality is ending... because... of me?"

"Kind of. But not really." Chris lets his smile fade. "Reality is ending because it's time. It's just ending. That's all. You're not the cause... you're the effect." He continues his walk up the hill. "Though... it does make me sad to see it go. I get attached." He shakes his head slowly. "That's what you're seeing and feeling. I'm letting you see it end... the flickering and all that. It's not instant. It's a process. It takes time." He grins. "It's a big place."

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Martin E Ericson Jr

“Can’t you stop it?”

“Of course I can.”

“Then do it.” Sam takes a couple long steps to catch up to his brother.

Chris stops, and shakes his head. “All things have a beginning and an end.” Chris smiles sadly. “You’re the alpha. The beginning. Just like Rae’s the omega... the end. And if you want to get really deep... she’s the end that ushers in new beginnings. You. That’s why you were brought along on her recent journey.”

Sam glances over and realizes that they’ve reached the top of the hill. He recognizes the spot. They see their sister sitting on a picnic table, just at the top of the path heading down to the river below. But this isn’t the actual place. They’ve entered Sam’s place, and he didn’t even realize it.

“Does she know?” Sam purses his lips, giving it some thought. “I mean... did she know she was bringing me along for that reason?”

“Kind of. Sort of. But no. She had no idea. She never does.”

Still staring at Rae on the picnic table, Sam sighs hard, and shakes his head. “You are so difficult sometimes.”

“But not always on purpose.” Chris chuckles.

A warm feeling goes through Sam as he turns back to Chris. “I’m sorry... what were we talking about?”

Chris grins. “It’s not important.”

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Rae turns, seeing her brothers standing off near the slope of the hill. She glances around nervously, taking a deep breath, and then smiles and waves. She really shouldn't be here.

Sam starts walking towards her, but notices that Chris isn't following. He looks back to his brother. "Are you..."

Chris is gone. He's not surprised.

"Hmph." Sam turns back to his sister, wondering what she's doing here.

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Rae sits on the old picnic table at the top of the hill, overlooking the river. She sips a Coke slowly, enjoying the beautiful, sunny weather. Her legs are swinging over the edge of the table, and after every sip, there is a look of pure delight on her face.

As Sam approaches, she continues staring down the path to the riverside.

“So... you’re here.” Sam looks down over the other side of the hill, towards the river. “And you’re... doing this again?”

“I am. And not for the first time either.” Rae smiles weakly. “I find this one... cathartic.” She briefly glances to her brother. “When I’m struggling.”

Sam looks down the hill. “Hmmm. Are you sure...”

“Oh pish. Don’t spoil it for me.” Rae’s voice is soft and sad. “I hear that you sent the girls home.”

Sam sighs. He’s not sure he wants to have this conversation.

“Nyssa. Tegan.” She smiles gently. “I spoke to Mikey.”

Sam nods, not saying anything.

At the bottom of the hill, right on the riverside, is a line of dirty, ripped tents and makeshift shelters for the homeless. A few people mill about the area, passing the time by doing nothing.

“Chris didn’t want to come over and say hi?” Rae pushes out her bottom lip. “I’m hurt.”

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Martin E Ericson Jr

“This place...” Sam makes a quick gesture to their surroundings.
“... not really his thing.”

Rae takes another sip of her Coke. “I suppose not.”

Her and Sam watch as the flap of a dirty, orange tent, directly at the bottom of the path going up the hill, flips open and a big man lumbers out. The tent is tall and large, family size. The man looks fairly clean except for his sweat-stained shirt, greasy, messy hair, and dark grey stubble on his face. He looks tired, like he just woke up. He stretches and yawns.

“And there he is. His name’s Eddy.” Rae takes another sip of her Coke.

“I know. We’ve met.”

“Already. That was quick.” Rae looks over at her brother and pats the table next to her. “Have a seat.”

“I really shouldn’t be here for this.” Sam climbs up on the table and sits down next to his sister. “This isn’t exactly how I do things.”

Rae grabs a Coke from the six-pack sitting next to her and hands it to Sam. “Who cares? It’s not like it’ll change anything.” She thinks for a second. “Unless you want it to? It’s your place. You can do this yourself if it would make you feel better.”

Sam shakes his head almost imperceptibly. “Not today.”

Rae gives her brother a sweet smile.

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The big guy stands in front of his tent enjoying the sunshine, and occasionally bullying the other locals as they pass by. Appearing behind him, tentatively stepping out of the tent is a young, teen girl.

Sam smiles sadly. "Noel." He pops open his Coke, and takes a long drink. "Yeah... I tend to skip this part of his process."

Rae pats her brother's arm. "Maybe you shouldn't be here. You're not going to like the next part." She stares down the hill. "But I find it... motivational."

Sam looks away, but can't help turning his eyes slightly to see what he already knows happens. "She just visited with me at the house. Chris brought her by..."

Rae briefly turns her eyes to look at her brother.

"... just to say hi... goodbye."

When the big man turns as she walks out, the young girl instinctively flinches. He laughs and says something to her. She responds, looking afraid, her eyes looking everywhere except at the large man. He looks around to see if anyone is watching, and then viciously backhands her in the face. She's nearly knocked to the ground from how hard she's hit. Then he says something to her again, and slaps her face twice, quick and hard. The big guy lumbers back into the tent as the young girl does her best to hold back her tears.

Rae can feel the heat as she turns, seeing her brother fully engulfed in flames, wings gently moving in the wind. She reaches for her remaining

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Cokes and moves them to her other side “Well. Thank you for keeping the table intact, and not warming my drinks too much.”

Sam says nothing, his anger at seeing his friend slapped pushing his control to its limits. This isn’t who he is, or even who his sister is, but he can see why it’s so easy for her to cross those bounds when she feels the need. Or the want.

The girl waits for the big man to go back into the tent and then she walks slowly up the dirt path on the hill, directly towards the picnic table.

The young girl stops to catch her breath at the top of hill, directly in front of Rae and Sam. She only sees Rae, but she can feel a heat in the wind.

Sam cools his body, pulling in his wings. She may not actually be Noel, but there’s no reason to make her memory uncomfortable.

“Hi.” Rae cocks her head to the side and smiles warmly at the young girl.

She eyes Rae cautiously, but says nothing, her eyes wet with tears.

Sam wants to reveal himself, to tell her everything will be okay in an hour or so. But he resists, allowing things to play out as they did.

“I’m Rae.” Rae sets her Coke down on the table, pulls another can free from the six pack, and holds it out to the young girl. “You okay?”

Noel glances down at the Coke Rae is holding out to her. Saying nothing, she robotically turns away, and walks past the picnic table, around

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the big trees, towards town. As soon as Rae and Sam stop watching her, the memory she is fades from this place. No longer necessary.

“Nice to meet you!” Rae calls out over her shoulder. “Again.”

“She’s a nice girl.” Sam gives his sister a half smile. “She’s just been through so much. She puts up barriers.”

Rae takes another sip of her Coke and looks back down the hill at the orange tent. “I get it.” A middle-aged, heavy-set woman walks out, her long, mouse-brown hair in a ponytail, her jeans and long white t-shirt looking like they could use several good washes. She looks around to the line of tents to her left and then to her right. She walks between two of the tents and scans the riverside behind the tents, and then walks back out to the front. Finally, looking up the hill, she spots the distant figure of Rae sitting on the picnic table.

She waves tentatively.

Rae half-heartedly waves back. She turns to her brother. “Will she come to you too?”

“No.” Sam gives it some thought. “She’s a victim of circumstance. Not a truly bad person.”

“She’s done unforgivable things.” Rae sips at her Coke. “She’ll do more.”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe she’s there, but you just haven’t met with her.” Rae’s unsure about her brother’s dealings. It’s something he rarely talks about.

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“I meet everybody.” He turns to his sister, trying a smile. “It would be rude not to.”

“Hmmm. I’ll bet that’s fun for them.”

The woman trudges up the hill on the dirt trail leading to Rae. “Hi.” She’s out of breath, huffing and puffing from her struggle up the hill.

“Hello.” Rae gives her a phony smile.

“I’m Kate.” She puts up a hand in a quick, nervous hello. “Have you seen a teen girl go by? Fourteen. About your size. Long brown hair like mine.”

“Tell her she should go. She should move on before she does end up with me.” Sam’s voice is soft and dark.

Rae glances nervously to her brother, her fake smile fading. “She will. It’s okay. Let it play out.”

Kate glances around nervously, wondering if there’s something wrong with this girl. “It would’ve been just a couple minutes ago.” Kate looks around. “Her name’s Noel. She wanders.”

“She’s afraid.” Sam voice is a dark whisper. “She doesn’t wander.” He makes a tutting noise. “She escapes the abuse for a few hours here and there. She wants to run away... stay away.” His voice trails off. “But she has nowhere to go.”

Kate gets a chill down her spine.

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“She wanders?” Rae cocks her head to the side, going through the motions.

“You know. She’s a kid. She wanders off sometimes and it’s always up to me to go out and find her.” Kate looks down the hill to the orange tent nervously.

“Why?” Rae tosses her empty can in a nearby trash bin.

“Somebody has to.” Kate is still looking down the hill.

“No.” Rae’s voice is emotionless. “Why do you stay with someone who abuses you? Someone who rapes a teenager while you look away, pretending it’s not happening... just happy it’s not you.”

Sam’s eyes light up with flames rippling across his temples.

Kate feels the sudden heat, and steps back without realizing it.

“I... I...” Tears begin to run down Kate’s face. “We don’t have anywhere else to go.” She makes a painful face. “And... and there’s nothing I could do to help... even if I tried.” She whimpers. “I’ve tried.”

“She has...” Sam’s voice is a low whisper. “... it didn’t stop him. It made things worse... for the both of them.”

“Hmmm.” Rae sounds pained. “Try harder.”

“I don’t want to hear anymore.” Sam closes his eyes. “Tell her to go away.”

“Times have been a little rough for us. We...” Her voice trails off, not sure what to say.

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“You should go.” Rae’s phony smile returns. “If I see her, I’ll tell her you’re looking for her.”

The woman nods, and laughs nervously. “You don’t live around here, do you?”

Rae shakes her head. “Please. Just go.” Her eyes darken just a little.

Kate turns and quickly walks back down the trail, taking care not to fall as her feet slide in the dusty dirt.

After a few seconds of silence, Sam opens his eyes. They’re watery and blue, but Rae can see the fire within.

“Why are you doing this?” Rae reaches down to grab another Coke, but then simply pushes it aside, no longer in the mood.

“I think I’m here to say goodbye.”

Rae flinches, having no idea it had come this far. “That’s not what I meant... but okay.” Her voice hardens. “And where are you going, dear brother?”

“I don’t know. I’m trying to figure that out. But I think I need something that I can’t find here.”

“You spoke to dad about this?” Rae turns her head, looking directly into her brother’s eyes. They look so sad and glossy.

“Kind of... but not really.” His voice is soft. “I’m not sure what it even is. I just...”

“I’m sorry.” Rae blurts, feeling a sadness that she’s never felt before. A different kind of sadness than she’s used to.

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“For what?” Sam glances over to his sister.

“For taking you with me. For showing you my pain.” Rae whispers and looks away, down towards the orange tent. “I should never have come to you on the beach that night.” She breathes in deeply. “I’m supposed to hold your hand and tell you stories to get you through your nightmares. Not invite you along to mine.”

“I don’t think you had a choice.” Sam stands up, and walks a few steps from the picnic table. “I think it’s the way it’s supposed to be.”

Rae glances at her brother and then looks down the dirt trail, watching Eddy. “And what’s that supposed to mean.” Rae scrunches her eyebrows together, thinking back to her conversation with Michael.

Sam shakes his head. “Nothing. I just have a feeling. Destiny.”

Rae remembers that night on the beach, when she asked Sam for his help. This hasn’t been two different stories. This has been one story. Two people. One path.

She realizes that Chris never took her off that path. He just pulled her back from the lead, knowing that she’d already gone as far as she could. She’d done her part. Sam would have to complete the path. That was the plan all along. It wasn’t the darkness that was meant to change the world. It was the light.

“I think I can finish what we started.” Sam smiles weakly. “I just need to find a way to do it.”

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“Chris.” Rae mumbles, watching Eddy shade his eyes as he looks up the slope towards her and her brother.

She looks over to Sam, but he’s no longer there. He’s gone on to finish what she started. She wants to cry, because she has a feeling she knows how this will end.

At that moment, a middle-aged woman with a big, red bow tied in her hair appears from a small group of thick trees. She’s looking up to the sky, a hand resting on her round belly. “They said it was going to rain today.”

Rae glances over, confused. This has already happened, the first time. “Mick.” She mumbles.

“They’re wrong, of course. I knew it was going to be a bright, sunny day.” The woman stops just a few feet from where Rae sits on the picnic table.

“You shouldn’t be here.” Rae just stares. “It’s not possible. This is Sam’s place. How...”

“Oh, pish.” The woman winks mischievously. “Maybe neither one of us should be here.” She taps the side of her nose twice with her index finger.

Rae studies the woman’s face, her mocha skin, thick pink lips, full cheeks, and settles on her big, brown eyes.

“You don’t have to keep doing this, you know.” The woman grins wide and stares back at Rae, looking her directly in the eyes. “Why don’t

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you come with me and say hi to the little ones.” She walks past Rae to the gentle slope of grass leading down to the big green field.

“Little ones.” Rae remembers this from the first time.

The woman stops and turns her whole body back towards Rae. “Every Saturday I go down to the big field and just chat with all the children that I can gather. Telling stories while their parents setup their picnics and barbecues and badminton nets and other such things.” She grins. “Just a bit of practice for...”

“When it’s your time to shine.” Rae finishes, and can’t help but think of her own family playing and enjoying time together on that same field when they were all kids.

“We’d love it if you could join us?” The woman puts a hand above her eyes, blocking the sun. “I tell some pretty great stories.” She chuckles. “And I’ll bet you do too.”

Rae turns her attention back to the row of tents at the bottom of the dirt path leading down to the river. “I...”

“You have other plans.” The woman finishes, her smile disappearing. “Well, if your plans change, you know where to find me.” She turns and starts down the gentle slope of the hill. “Or maybe just catch up with me after you’re finished.”

Rae closes here eyes tightly, and then blinks several times, clearing the confusion she feels.

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“Hey you.” The voice is gruff and rude. “Well. You’re a sexy young thing, aren’t you?” Eddy leers at Rae, looking her up and down. “You know, you sit out here on a picnic table all alone and you’re just asking for trouble.” The menace in his voice is obvious.

“Eddy.” Rae’s voice fails to hide her distaste. This was supposed to be fun, but it’s turned into a chore.

“Look, bitch. I don’t want any trouble. Kate says you saw our daughter this morning, but you ain’t telling. I’m looking for her. She should’ve been home by now.” He pulls out a cigarette and lights it, trying to look tough. “So did you see her or not?” He takes a couple of plodding steps up to the picnic table and blows smoke right at Rae.

Rae scoots forward and immediately stands up, letting her eyes go jet black, the darkness pouring from them like a thick smoke. She no longer has time for this.

Eddy takes a quick step back. “Wh... what the fuck are you!” His voice is a high-pitched with overwhelming fear.

Like lightning, Rae extends her arm, grabbing him by the throat and lifting him off his feet. “I’m Death... and I’m going to watch you die.” She tries to smile for effect, but just can’t pull it off. “Again.”

25

Sam sits alone on the beach, outside his father's house. He's down by the water enjoying the night, sitting with his knees up, letting the tide come up and tickle his bare feet and then go back out. He's been repeating this over and over for several hours, moving closer to the water every time it fails to reach his toes.

He sent Nyssa and Tegan home earlier today. They'd been wanting to go home for a while now, so he feels good about that. Ever since Rae killed them, he could tell they weren't enjoying their outings as much as he

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was. They needed a break. They wanted him to stay, but he couldn't. He has a few things to take care of first.

He'll miss them. He already does. For as long as he's been on his own, working his way out of his father's shadow, they'd both been at his side. No matter what Rae thinks or says, the twins were there before, during, and after his fall. They weren't created as fodder during his disagreement with Michael. They were created as friends for Sam. And he had always regretted dragging them down with him. But of course, they had refused to leave his side, even as he struggled to keep them safe.

But tonight's different. Tonight, he feels like a drowning man who just pushed his loved ones to safety as he goes under for the last time. He's always felt bad about his past, and taking them with him. But this time he feels satisfied, knowing they are safely at home while he writes his final chapter.

When he left, Nyssa was trying to hide the tears building in her eyes. She knew. Tegan just stared at him as he walked away. She was angry. She had an idea of what he was about to do, and she wanted to be there for him. She'd always been there, and she didn't understand why he was leaving them behind this time.

“What the hell are you doing?” The voice comes from behind him. It's angry and raw.

“Hello, Winnifred.” Sam is lost in thought, and the soft boredom in his voice shows it.

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Her voice gets angrier and rougher. “What the... hell... are you doing?”

Sam can tell she’s lost and full of rage, on the edge of a complete breakdown. “It’s funny that you put it that way.” His voice is soft as he turns his head, looking over his shoulder.

Fred stands there, looking exhausted and broken. She’s been crying furiously. That’s obvious. Her eyes are sunken and bloodshot, surrounded by valleys of deep purple. Her skin is blotchy and red. She licks her pale, dry lips, trying without success to provide them with some moisture.

“I can’t find him anywhere. I can’t find Max.” Her anger drops as her voice gets soft and squeaky, and tears start to run down her face. “I searched the house, the yard, the garage... everywhere he could be... everywhere he’s able to go on his own.” She takes a ragged breath. “Please help me. He can’t be alone.”

“How’d you find me?” Sam turns back to the ocean, and breathes in deeply, enjoying the salt-water smell.

When he was a kid, he and his dad would often take a boat out to do some fishing. At least that’s what they’d tell everyone. But they never actually fished. They just took the boat out for the day to enjoy the sights and smells of the ocean. It was his father’s way of getting away from everything.

“Did you hear me? I can’t find Max.” Her voice tries for anger but falls short, getting rough and raw as she lets out a few strangled cries. “I’ve

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looked everywhere... asked everyone.” She doesn’t want him to see her like this, but she’s having a tough time fighting through the pain.

Sam gives her a second before asking again. “How’d you find me?”

“Your spooky sister. I was about to knock.” Thoughts of Rae help her find her anger for a few seconds. “Doesn’t your fuckin’ family ever wait for someone to... God... damn... knock first?” She says through clenched teeth. “What are you people?” In anger, she kicks sand at Sam’s back, but the wind takes it before it can reach him.

“Please don’t do that.” He says without looking back.

Fred drops to her knees in the sand, just a few feet behind him, facing his back. “Please. I need help. I can’t find my baby.” She cries quietly to herself.

Sam looks back over his shoulder. “Why are you looking for him?”

“He’s my fuckin’ son! You fucking maniac!” She screams through oncoming tears. She scoops up a handful of sand and throws it at him. But again, the wind grabs it, sending it down the beach.

“I asked you not to do that.”

“I need help, Sam. Please. I can’t find him.” She sobs heavily, and wipes her face on the sleeve of her hoodie.

“Did you call the police? Report him missing?” He knows what her answer will be.

She screams at his back. “Of course not, you fucking idiot! I came to you. You’re the only one that can help me.” Her voice drops to a raw

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whisper as her crying becomes loud and ragged. “I told you. You’re the only one that can help me.”

He sighs. “The help you’ve asked for... I can’t give you.” Sam wishes he was out on that boat with his father right now, away from things. “I told you. It’s not who I am.”

“I know. I know. You’re completely fucking useless!” She screams again.

“And yet... here you are.”

“Fuck you.” Her voice is just a whisper between sobs.

“Are you going to hurt him?”

“Hurt him?” She thinks. “Max?”

“Once you find him... are you going to punish him for wandering off... hurt him?”

“What a stupid fucking thing to ask.” She wants to jump up and grab Sam by his hair and shove his face to the sand and kick him over and over until he agrees to help her.

Still facing the ocean, Sam smiles weakly, taking in another deep breath of fresh air.

Fred waits for him to say something, considering what she’ll do when she does find Max. “No.” She sniffs loudly. “Probably. Yes.” The tears break loose and she starts sobbing and crying even louder. “I don’t fucking know anymore.”

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She sits and cries for a few minutes, forgetting that she's not alone, forgetting about the disguise she usually wears in public.

“Help him. Please.” Her voice is soft, but wild and out of control with emotion. “Fuck me. I don’t care what happens to me. Send me to Bash’s devil. I don’t care anymore.” Her voice suddenly goes even softer and barely audible as the tears finally run out. She sighs, breathing in and out to calm herself. “Help him. Find him. Take him away. Please, Sam. Please. I don’t want to hurt him anymore.”

Sam says nothing, just listening to the waves and the birds searching for food along the beach.

“Please.” Fred takes a deep, rough breath. “You can save him from me. I’ll go off and die somewhere... but you can find him and save him. I know you can. You’re not useless. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, Winnifred. I can’t.”

“You can’t do anything... can you?” She grabs back at her anger, and then pushes it back down just as quickly. “Please. He’s my little boy.”

Silence.

Fred sighs. “When we first met... in that stupid coffee shop. I could see it in your eyes. There was something there. Something I’d never seen before. A sparkle in your eyes. A fire in your eyes.” She takes a deep, broken breath. “I think Bash could see it too... a connection... or maybe... maybe it’s just because you’re not one of us.”

Sam turns his head slightly, listening.

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“I told you. You’re an angel… or something… I’m not even sure anymore. Maybe you’re just a useless, crazy fuck with beautiful eyes.” She takes another ragged breath. “Please, Sam. Whatever you are. Find my little boy. I don’t know where he is.” She blows out everything she has in her lungs. “Find him and take him away.”

Sam takes one final breath of the ocean air, enjoying everything about it, and then slowly releases it. “I’m sorry…” He pauses, giving himself a few seconds to think, to prepare. “… Max is dead.”

The waves go silent. The wind stops. The birds are no more. It’s just Sam and Fred sitting on the beach in a void of complete silence. She screams in anger, but no sound comes out. She screams again, but can only feel the shaking in her throat as the silence hits the cool air. She starts hitting herself in the sides of her head, wildly slapping her ears and face.

“Winnifred.” Sam’s voice cuts through the silence.

She slumps forward, and can immediately hear the sounds around her again, through the roughness of her breathing. “You killed him! You fucking lunatic! I asked you to save him. And you fucking killed him!” Her voice drops from a scream to a whisper. “He’s my little boy. I just wanted your help.”

“No, Winnifred.” Sam breathes out, long and steady. “You killed your son. You killed Max.”

A coldness sweeps through her body, and remains, keeping her ice cold from the inside out. She swallows hard, tasting thick, old blood in her

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mouth and throat. She can feel the sudden dryness of her eyes, mouth, and skin. She reaches up, touching her face. It feels hard and cold, rough against her fingertips. Her voice drops to a near-silent whisper. “I just didn’t understand. I couldn’t... I couldn’t help him. We were both so lost. And we didn’t even know each other.”

They sit in silence for a long time, just listening to the tide come and go. Sam stares out into the ocean, watching the moonlight bounce off the rippling water. Fred just stares down at the sand in front of her. She contemplates death and what it will mean for her. She knows she’ll never have a chance to see her son again. She won’t be able to hold him, hug him, and say she’s sorry. Her mind fights between self-pity and anger. She slowly raises her head, looking directly at Sam’s back. She hates him for not being what she thought he was.

After half an hour, Sam clears his throat gently. “The night your brother came to get me. I didn’t show up. I didn’t want to be there. I think I was waiting until it was all over.” He feels his eyes wanting to tear up. “I didn’t think there was anything I could do. I was wrong.”

Fred suddenly feels a last burst of anger, her voice becoming hard. “You could’ve saved him, you fucking asshole. I’m not like Bash. I wanted you to come... to save him... to stop us... to kill us before we could hurt him.”

Sam looks away. “An... acquaintance... of mine says you’re broken.”

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“You killed my Max. You didn’t come. You did nothing. So you might as well have killed him.” Fred’s voice is fast and vicious. “And that makes you a fucking killer.”

She sits in silence, wanting to breath hard. But finds that she can’t.

“I told you...” Sam’s voice drops lower. “... I’m no angel.”

“Then kill me you motherfucker. Or I’ll kill you right here and walk right out into the ocean until I drown. I’ll fucking do it. Fuck Sebastian’s God damn devil. I’ll embrace that motherfucker and learn to live with him for eternity if it means getting past all this bullshit.”

Sam stands up, brushing the sand from his feet, one foot at a time, letting the breeze dry them, before putting on his socks and boots. He turns towards Fred. “I can’t kill you, Winnifred.”

She looks up at him with pure hatred, ready to leap at him and tear his eyes out.

“You’re already dead.”

Fred slumps, letting her head drop forward to touch her chest. Her eyes close as she lets his words sink in down to the bone. She feels like she already knew, but that it took his words to remind her.

“I’m Sebastian’s Devil.” He dislikes the word, but uses it to make his point.

Feeling a sudden heat coming from directly in front of her, Fred slowly raises her head. She’d gasp if she had the ability, but her lungs are empty. Sam stands in front of her on fire, with great, eight-foot, flaming

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wings gently moving in the night. His eyes are so blindingly white, that they hurt to look at. The sand around him melts and is pushed away, causing small glass ripples on the beach.

“I’m everyone’s Devil.”

She’d scream, but doesn’t know how. She feels nothing except Sam’s heat. She’s cold inside and out. Her lungs are empty and ache. Her heart is quiet, dead, and heavy, just sagging uselessly in her broken chest.

“So...” Fred flicks her rough, dead tongue around and licks her broken lips. She feels strangely calm, finally knowing what she’d seen from the very beginning in Sam’s eyes. “... if you’re not a killer ... how did I die?”

“My sister.” His heart stops beating. “Azrael.” He exhales his last breath.

Seeing the irony, Fred wants to find her laughter, but doesn’t know how. She can feel that her throat is closed with dried blood, and that she’s been rotting from the inside out. “I’m dead.” She mumbles.

“Both you and Sebastian.” Sam adds, watching as Fred looks off into the distance.

“That scary... bitch.” Fred tries taking a breath, but it comes up empty as she remembers that she can’t. “It wasn’t a dream then.”

“No. The dead don’t dream. Not where you are.” Sam glances over to his father’s house, feeling guilty about involving him in all this. “It was

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just a warped memory of what actually happened. You were already dead by then.”

Fred looks down at the sand, scooping up a handful, realizing that she can’t feel it as it pours through her fingers.

“Rae killed you the night Max died... just before I showed up at the garage. Just before our talk in your backyard.”

“Bash killed Max.” Fred’s voice is weak. She tries bringing forth some anger, but only feels pain and emptiness.

“No. You killed Max. Sebastian never had it in him to do it. He wanted me to kill Max. But I didn’t show up. So in order for you to find your escape... you did it.”

Fred thinks for a minute. “And then your sister...”

“In anger, Rae killed the two of you as she sat with Max, holding his hand, showing him what he would’ve done with the rest of his life.”

Fred feels the pain Sam’s words bring out of her, but she can’t find the ability to cry or scream or do anything but wonder. “Who is she?”

Sam smiles sadly. “Azrael helps people when they need a hand to hold. She sits with them for their final journey.” He unconsciously cocks his head to the side, thinking of his sister. “And sometimes...”

“She’s crazy. Isn’t she?” Fred mumbles to herself.

“... sometimes... she hurts those that hurt others.”

Fred’s head slumps forward again, falling against her chest. She knows she’s crying, without actually crying. She knows she feels, without

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actually feeling. Now that she has all her answers, all she can think about is her little boy. “Save him. Please. Take me... and do whatever... but save him.”

“I can’t.”

She looks up, and Sam can see the pain in her eyes. He’s seen it before a billion, billion times. But rarely does it have any effect on him. He pulls in his wings and cuts the flames, standing there one last time as just Sam.

“Then you are useless.” Her voice is barely audible.

And the two of them are instantly sitting in Fred’s garage, on opposite ends of the old couch against the wall. Sam leans forward, trying to get comfortable. Fred sits rigid and unnatural, like a body propped up on the other end of the couch.

“My dream.” Fred mutters, glancing around the garage.

“I told you. It wasn’t a dream. It was a memory my sister used to frighten you.” Sam’s voice is back to monotone. “And no, this isn’t that same memory. This is the reality. This is the actual night.”

The garage door opens, and Sebastian and Fred push their way in, looking unhappy and tense.

“What the fuck, Bash.” Fred hits her brother in the arm several times with a balled fist. “Is that fucker coming or not?”

“I have no idea... Winni.” He stares darkly at his sister. “He said he was coming. He sounded like he was coming.”

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“Sounded. It’s been...” Fred glances up at the old clock on the garage wall. “... like three hours and that motherfucker still isn’t here. You’re a fucking idiot.”

Fred and Sam watch from the old couch against the wall. Fred wants to say something or to stand up and run out through the back door, but she can’t. She wants to sneak out to her childhood swing, hanging from the big oak tree and just sit alone, like she did when she was Max’s age.

“Max.” Fred mumbles, her eyes widening. “Please. I remember all this.” She turns to Sam, pleading. “I don’t want to be here.”

Sebastian walks over to the pile of boxes, putting some space between him and his sister. He’s rubbing his arm where she bruised him with her bony fist. “Look. We can’t do this without him.” His voice is nervous and quiet. “Not tonight.”

“Why the fuck not. Fuck him.” Rae lights the last of three candles, blows out the match, and spins towards her brother. The look on her face is pure hatred. “You said you could do this for me. I need this... and I can’t do it myself.” She wipes the spit from her chin with the sleeve of her hoodie. She stares at her brother with a crazed look in her eyes.

“Winni... I...”

“You what? You coward piece of shit.”

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“Please Sam. Please.” Fred squirms on the couch, uncomfortable watching this person she recognizes all too well. “That’s not me... not anymore... please. It’s not who I am.”

“Winni. Please.” His sister still glowering at him, Sebastian puts out both hands, palms down, motioning for her to calm down. “I just... can’t.” He looks ready to cry. “He’s...”

“He’s a lot of fucking work. You wouldn’t understand. You just wouldn’t fucking get it. He’s my son. But he’s not my son. He’s... just... not... there. I dunno.” Fred takes a step closer to her brother, throwing back her head, looking to the ceiling, trying to hold back her anger.

“But...”

“I can’t do it anymore. I can’t deal. I’m hurting him because it’s the only thing that makes me feel. It’s the only thing he understands. It’s the only thing he responds to. You’d be doing him a service.” She has tears building in her eyes. “Please. You’re my brother. You promised.”

Sebastian takes a deep breath, trying to gather his courage, to make a stand against his sister. “I’ll go get him. I’ll bring him out here. I’ll stay.” He steadied himself, waiting for a full-out attack from the monster. “But I can’t do it.”

Fred swallows, and breathes in and out to calm herself. “Fine. We’ve come this far.” She wipes her eyes on her sleeves. “Go get him. But we do it right away. No waiting. Not one second.” Her voice gets squeaky

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as tears stream down her face. “Cuz otherwise... I...” She trails off into full crying, hiding her face in her arms.

Sebastian nods his head, feeling relief that his part isn’t what it could have been. He’ll make this up to her somehow. He promises himself. He scurries out the door before his sister can change her mind.

“Sam.” Fred turns slowly on the couch. “Save him. Please.” Her voice is different. Rational. Soft and calm, with no hint of anger or indifference. “I don’t care what happens to me. I really don’t. But you met Max. He’s a sweet kid. He’s my little boy. My baby.” She finds her tears, even though her lungs and heart remain empty and still. The tears run down her face, dropping heavily into her lap. “Please. He doesn’t understand.” Her voice cracks and her head drops. “He’s my little baby. And I love him. I love him more than anything.”

The side door of the garage opens and Max walks in followed closely by his uncle. He looks straight towards the seemingly empty couch by the wall. And he smiles at his dead mother, waving with the palm of his hand pointing towards himself.

Fred, her eyes pleading and frantic, spins her head towards Sam. “Please. I’ll do anything. I don’t care. Please.” Finding what’s left of her humanity, she lets out a series of choking, crying sounds. “He’s just a baby.” She closes her eyes tight, praying for Sam to give her a miracle. “Please. Please. Please.”

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Fred walks over and takes her son's hand, gently pulling him to the make-shift bed of blankets, sheets, and pillows on the workbench.

Sebastian steps forward, carefully lifting him up onto the bench. He smiles at him like an uncle getting ready to tuck his nephew in for the night. Fred slowly pushes Max down to a sleeping position. She kisses him on the forehead, her tears dropping into his hair. She puts a hand over his eyes, and lifts Sebastian's butcher knife.

“Nooooooooo!” From the couch, Fred lets out the most horrible scream directly at Sam as he just sits there looking away, towards the back door. Her face is red and swollen as she spits and slobbers, tears running down her bloated face.

Sam now knows what it's like to be Rae, to watch something unfold and not do a damn thing to stop it. He understands why she did what she did. He applauds her for stepping outside of who she is and taking action to quiet some of those monsters. She took him along on her journey, and when she couldn't go any farther, she pushed him ahead to continue on without her. The nightmares. The stories. The pushing and prodding. Even if she didn't realize it at the time, she was preparing him to go farther than she ever could.

And now he feels like he's failed her.

Fred's head drops as her body slumps out of its rigidity. “I asked. Sam. I asked. Please. I didn't want anything for myself. It was all for him.” Her voice is soft and broken. “I was wrong. I was stupid and selfish. Save

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him. I know you still can. This is your world. Save my son. Bring him back.”

“It’s... it’s not who I am.” He glances between him and Fred, to where Rae has been sitting since the moment they arrived. “Right? I’m not? Am I?”

Rae stands up from her place on the couch. “You can be whatever you want, Sam. I’m absolutely sure of that.” She steps forward, and with a smile, turns back to her brother. “But sometimes... we need a little help.” She cocks her head to the side, looking to her right. “And you just need to ask.”

Sam stares at his sister. He remembers her dark path, and how unsure of himself he was when they tried saving that first child. They failed because he didn’t act. He just stood by and watched, doing nothing. She pulled him aside, talked him up, and pushed him to do the impossible. They jumped back, and on the next go round, somehow succeeded. And even though they later found out that it was Chris making the miracles happen, it still felt good. It was still them doing something. They had caught the attention of someone who could do the impossible.

“I’m the catalyst...” Sam considers everything. Wondering why this took so long. “... not the power.”

Rae turns and looks at Fred, sitting on the couch, not even looking at her, not even surprised that she’d been there the whole time. “Welcome

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to your journey. You got a three-day head start on me... but this is when I killed you.”

Fred can barely look up. She doesn’t really try. She doesn’t care. “Do it.” Her voice is barely audible. “And make it hurt. Make it fuckin’ hurt.”

Rae turns back to the other side of the garage, to Sebastian and Fred, watching as Sebastian covers Max’s little body with a clean, white sheet. “Hello.” Her voice is calm and pleasant. “I told you I’d be seeing you guys around.”

Sebastian spins and instantly explodes into a fine, red mist, splattering on the wall behind him, the work bench, the table, the clean white sheets and the pillow. Everything is red, shiny, wet.

Fred screams, stepping back from where she stands on the other side of the workbench. And then she explodes, joining the mess that is her brother.

Sam sighs as he gets up from the couch. Without looking back, he casually walks to the back door and leaves.

Seeing that she’s suddenly alone, watching her own violent murder, Fred jumps up from the couch and scurries to the back door. The last thing she sees is an earlier Sam open the side door and walk in, just catching her eyes before she closes the back door behind her. Unable to feel her legs, she numbly jogs to where the current Sam stands, by the tree swing, towards the back of the yard.

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She drops to the ground, not even crying. She's broken and lost. She struggles to find words in the darkness of her own mind. "Sam... save him. Please." Her voice is so weak that no one could possibly hear her. "Go back. Save him for him... not for me. Save him for him. I know you still can."

"Winnifred. Please. Get up. Sit on the swing." Sam's voice is soft and pleasant as he pulls himself from his thoughts. "In seventeen minutes, I'll be walking out of the garage to meet you on this very spot. You'll lie and try to manipulate me. You'll eventually tell me some of the bad things. You'll ask me to kill you. You'll tell me you're afraid that you'll hurt Max. You'll tell me that Sebastian killed your son. You'll lie a lot, until I show you what I just showed you. Then you'll feel for the first time... in a long time. You'll beg me to save your son."

He now knows what he wants to do.

"And for the first time, you'll want nothing for yourself." He pauses, considering. "And that gives me hope."

Sam finds a smile, broad and wide and bright. He stands there, just enjoying the night air for sixteen minutes, for the last time, keeping within the script that had already been written.

Fred softly cries the entire time.

And then Sam turns and walks away, towards the side of the garage. "I'll tell you it's not who I am. That I can't help." He suddenly

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breathes in and out, nearly gasping, and his heart starts beating again, fast and strong. “But I know someone who can.”

As Sam walks past the back door of the garage, he looks to his left to see his past self exit the back door. His eyes meet his eyes.

It's a living future, reaching out to a dying past.

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Sam walks out of the backyard, leaving Fred to her journey. The night air goes cold, so he pulls his jacket closed to keep in the warmth. As he gets to the side of the garage, he sees a tall man sitting on a bench against the outer, garage wall, near the side door. He's framed by two small children, a boy and a girl that Sam is quite familiar with.

“That bench is new, isn’t it?” Sam shows a tired smile. “It wasn’t here the last time I was here.” He gives each of the children a smile and a small wave.

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“Yep. Brand new.” The tall man smiles. “We needed a place to sit and wait.”

Sam looks the man over from head to toe. He’s tall and handsome, with longish, blond hair pulled back into a small ponytail. His piercing blue eyes light up the night. He’s dressed quite nicely, with a brown, leather jacket paired with jeans and immaculate, white running shoes.

“So is this your big boy look? I forget.” Sam remembers what Michael said about feeling like everyone that looks at him and smiles in some odd way is in fact their brother, Chris.

“Yeah, I guess.” Chris’ smile widens. “I hope you appreciate it more than Rae did.”

Sam tilts his head to the side and scrunches his eyebrows together.

“She didn’t tell you?” Chris chuckles. “The last time I wore this, she was in a mood and threatened to toss me off a hospital roof.”

“Ahhh. She didn’t recognize you.” Sam would have loved to have been there.

“She did not.” Chris shakes his head. “But I thought you’d appreciate the...” He pauses, smiling. “... big boy look...” His eyes light up even more. “... this time round.”

“Is this one the real thing?” Sam breathes out. “I lost track ages ago.”

With that, Sam is standing in a dark bedroom surrounded by toys in every corner, a set of bunk beds with the bottom converted to a fort

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with blankets hanging down on all sides, and a huge bookshelf filled with various dinosaurs made from Legos. A small boy sits on the floor, surrounded by little cutouts of people made from all colors of thick construction paper, markers, glue, and tape.

“No. I don’t think so. This seems to be my go to when I’m alone or not really thinking about it.” The small boy, maybe seven or eight years old, looks up at Sam. He has shoulder-length, medium brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. His piercing, blue eyes light up the darkness surrounding him. He smiles brightly, but with an obvious sadness on his face.

And then they’re back at the side of the garage.

“But I didn’t feel like that was appropriate given what we’re about to do.” Chris retains the same child’s smile, with the same obvious sadness.

Sam can feel his grin fade as his face goes serious.

Not wanting the mood to get too dark, Chris widens his smile yet again. “We’ve been waiting for you to finish up.” He uses his head to point towards the backyard, around the back of the garage.

Chris stands as the two children hop up from the bench and walk over to greet their friend.

Sam looks down at the two of them, Max and Annabelle, and grins happily. He kneels down in front of both children. The smile in his eyes lights up their faces. He looks to the boy. “Hello Max.” He gently lifts the boy’s chin, so that he can better see, and then signs ‘hello’.

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Max uses his empty hand to wave through the sparkles he sees where Sam kneels. Then he playfully drives his car through the sparkles, making engine noises and tire squeals as he turns the car. It's another thing he learned from Gabriel.

“I’m shiny.” Sam glances over to Chris.

“Yes you are.” Chris nods.

Max looks directly into Sam’s eyes, like he just noticed who it was. He leans over and sets his toy on the driveway in front of him. Standing back up, he signs the word ‘hello’, and proudly looks over to Chris. It’s something he learned from Chris.

Sam blinks several times as his eyes begin to water. He breathes in and out deeply to control everything that he’s feeling. He looks over to the young girl. “Hello, Annabelle.” He quickly corrects himself. “Belle.”

“Hi.” Her voice is small and soft.

“You’re even prettier than I remember.” He locks eyes with the young girl, hoping she will remember him from their brief meeting at the coffee shop.

“You’re the funny looking man.” She smiles brightly, reaching forward to touch the sparkles. “You found Mr. Nibbles for me when he wandered off.” She looks down to the stuffed animal she’s holding under her arm.

“That’s me.” Sam’s eyes light up in excitement.

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“Thank you for finding him.” She smiles. “He gets really lonely when I leave him by himself for too long.”

“I’ll bet he does.” Sam chuckles. “I’ll tell you a little secret...” His voice goes hushed. “I think we all get a little lonely when we’re left by ourselves for too long.”

She giggles.

“Hello Mr. Nibbles.” Sam reaches forward shaking the stuffed monkey’s hand. “I’m glad you could come along.”

Max picks up his toy car and reaches forward, taking Sam by the wrist, and puts the toy car in his hand.

Sam examines the toy sports car, spinning the fancy wheels and making purring sounds. And then he hands the toy back to Max. “It’s very nice. But I think you’d better hang on to it.” He leans in a little closer, catching Max’s eyes. “I don’t want to lose it.”

“It was mine when I was a kid.” Chris glances over to the toy. “It’s a Lamborghini. Dad got it for me at a swap meet in the town center when I was seven.”

Sam looks up at his brother and smiles. “I swear, none of us ever had anything brand new.”

He watches as Chris pulls a knitted blue hat from his hoodie pocket and roughly pulls it onto his head.

Sam stands up, grinning at his brother. “You little weasel.” He laughs, remembering the boy at the playground. “Blue hat.”

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“I’m told we look a lot alike.” Chris grins. “And I do appreciate you letting me tag along to the park like that.”

“Did I have a choice?”

Chris half shrugs. “Life is full of choices.”

Sam shakes his head, chuckling, and then looks down to the kids. “Will they stay together?”

“Absolutely. Even Mr. Nibbles.” Chris gives each of them a little squeeze on the neck. “By the time you get where you’re going, I’ll have placed them with a great family. It’ll be as if they were always there.”

“Get where I’m going?” Sam gives his brother a confused look, but then suddenly knows. He remembers their conversation in the field.

Chris says nothing.

Sam nods. “Hey.” He puts a hand on the children’s shoulders to get their attention. “I have to go soon, but I need you both to do something for me.” He puts his face closer to Max. “You too Max. It’s important.”

Max moves his toy to his other hand, and clamps his hand onto Sam’s wrist, holding on tightly.

“You need to take care of each other. Watch over each other.” He smiles broadly, and kneels down in front of them. “Okay? Forever and ever. Sister and brother. That’s what family does.”

Annabelle nods. “We will.”

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“When I was little... my sister watched over me.” He looks over to the other side of the driveway where Rae has been watching from the shadows, doing her best to hide her face. “She took care of me and made sure I was always okay. She made sure we were all okay.” Sam glances up to his brother, and then turns to Annabelle. “I need you to do that for Max.”

Annabelle nods and puts her little arm around Max’s shoulders, making Mr. Nibbles look like he’s hanging on the boy’s back.

“Ba ba?” Max looks past Sam, towards the back yard.

Sam gets a pained look on his face.

“He’ll be fine.” Chris gives his brother a half smile. “They’ll forget.”

And both children fade to nothing.

Sam stands up and immediately hugs his brother, pulling him in close. “It’s her birthday tomorrow. She’ll be eight.” His voice is a whisper.

“I know.”

Sam loosens his hug and steps back, both hands still on his brother’s shoulders. “Is this where I ask...” His eyes want to tear up, causing him to blink several times. “... for help?”

“Sure. Why not.” Chris smiles through his sadness. “You always do.” He pulls his brother into one last hug.

And Sam leans in and whispers in his brother’s ear. He tells him what he wants. What he needs.

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The hug is long and powerful. Stars come and go. Universes die and are reborn. Chris doesn't want to let go of his big brother. He could stop everything right here and never let things move on.

But he doesn't. He never has.

Both brothers reluctantly pull from their hug.

Sam turns, glancing over to Rae. She's crying. "She knows?"

"No. But yes. Kind of."

Sam scrunches his forehead and purses his lips. "Chris." He shakes his head. "Please."

"They all know that they won't be seeing you again... that you're going away." Chris gives his brother a serious look. "But that's all. When the time is right... they'll figure out the rest. They always do." He pauses, considering. "It wouldn't help anything to tell them now. Let's all just have our moment."

Sam nods and turns, letting out a long breath. He walks over to Rae, who's standing off to the side, near the grass. She's crying lightly through empty eyes of pure black. Every breath taken is broken and rough. Her hair is unnaturally dark as it dances erratically, completely out of sync with the wind.

Standing directly in front of her, Sam takes both her hands in his own. "You're the one who got me here. You should be happy. It's a good thing. It's a great thing. Thank you."

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Rae tries looking her brother in the eye. “At the time... I didn’t know where we were going.” She looks away. “Something in me... something I wasn’t even aware of... just felt that you needed to get here.”

Tears roll down Sam’s face and drop heavily to the cement below. “You were always my hero.” He smiles. “And sometimes... you were a real pain in the ass.”

They force one last laugh through their tears, and share a long hug.

Sam takes a deep breath. “Goodbye, Azrael.” He pauses, taking another deep breath. “I’ll miss you most.”

Sam turns back to Chris, and takes a few steps. “I already said goodbye...” He bops his head back and forth, thinking. “... in my own way... to the old man.” He pauses. “To dad.” He grins to himself. “I’m pretty sure he already knew. I mean... it’s dad, right?”

Chris smiles broadly. “He knew.”

“Can you do me a favor?”

“Anything.”

“Tell Gabe and Mikey... tell them that they were the best little brothers I could’ve ever asked for. And that I love them both. I’ve always loved them. No matter what our differences.”

Chris moves his head slightly, looking past his brother.

Sam turns and sees both his brothers standing in the grass side by side. He takes a step towards them, but stops, noting the look on their faces. Sadness and anger.

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“I asked you what was happening, Sam. And you gave me nothing. I just wanted to help.” Michael begins to light up brightly. “So fuck you, Sam. Fuck you.” Then he looks past his eldest brother to his youngest. “And fuck you too.” And he turns, and quickly walks away towards the shadows, a powerful purpose in each step. His body has gone bright white to the point of becoming just pure light. He tears open time and space, burning away the parts of the universe that dare touch him as he walks away into a bright light that opens up and swallows him.

Sam briefly glances over his shoulder at Chris, and then back to Gabriel who quickly walks over to Sam and gives him a big, strong hug, picking him off the ground. A hug so powerful that it pulls the stars a few inches closer to their embrace. “I love you, Lucky.” He sniffles loudly. “I learned a lot from you. I still am.”

Sam mumbles something personal to his brother.

Gabriel pulls back, putting his hands on his brother’s shoulders and looking him directly in the eye. “I will. I’ll take good care of them all. I promise.”

This makes Sam smile again. They even share a laugh and another long hug.

Then Gabriel suddenly pulls back, keeping his hands on his brother’s shoulders, a semi-serious look on his face. “I could stop you.” He grins.

Sam laughs through his tears. “Probably.”

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Gabriel looks over Sam's shoulder, catching eyes with Chris, seeing a sadness he's never seen before. "But probably not."

Letting his arms drop heavily from his brother's shoulders, Gabriel turns away and follows Michael's path, repairing the damage his brother left behind with each step he takes though it. First goes Chaos. Then comes Order.

And Sam is instantly no more. There's just an empty, black void between Chris and Rae where he stood. As a great suction pulls towards its center, the void slowly collapses with a final, insignificant pop.

Rae is now sitting in the grass, while Sam's empty body lays next to her, his eyes closed as if he were just sleeping. She holds his lifeless hand between both hers as she quietly cries to herself, staring down at her best friend.

"He isn't with me." She sniffles loudly. "He's not here."

"No. He's not." Chris looks up to the stars, as one by one, they begin to fade from existence.

"I'm sitting here on the edge, Chris. In the void. All alone." She tries to control her crying, sniffling several times, and breathing in and out. Then she simply stops breathing. She stops her heart from beating, finding both to be unnecessary habits. She looks down at Sam, making him a promise. She won't do that anymore. No more unnecessary habits. Never again.

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Death's darkness pours from within, overcoming and eliminating the frail shell she wears, harshly pushing the night away from her brother's empty body.

"We'll talk later, Rae. I promise. Later." Chris wants to comfort his sister, but truly doesn't know how. It's never been his role. He gave that role to her when she was just a child.

He turns and walks away.

"He's not with me, Chris." Her voice cracks with pain as she fights against her anger.

Chris, now just an infinite beacon of light, keeps walking.

The world around him stops in an instant. The night fades to pure, shocking white. The sky goes blank, causing the moon and stars to completely disappear. With each step Chris takes, reality flashes out of existence and a thundering noise echoes through the universe as it shakes. Step after step, each time his foot hits the ground, it's like the flash of a dying star, and the boom of an exploding universe.

And then, in another instant, the whiteness is gone, and the thundering sound fades to nothing.

"For there to be a beginning..." Chris reaches out to take the hands of Annabelle and Maxwell who are now walking at his sides. "... it's only fair that I get an ending."

He gives the children's small hands a gentle squeeze as the three of them fade as one from this existence.

Epilogue

“So. Are you just going to let her just lay in the water like that?”

He stands in the doorway to the small bathroom. “For Christ’s sake...
she’s your God damn daughter. Or at least... she was.”

The old woman remains silent, except for her shallow, ragged breathing.

The floor is covered in water with a bath towel laying against the side of the tub, crumpled and soaked. There are droplets of water splashed across the mirror just above the sink, and small rivers of water run down all four walls. The bath water sloshes back and forth, head to

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foot, violently. It's been doing this non-stop since the original act so very long ago.

Sitting neatly on the closed toilet lid is a folded, child's bath towel, pink and yellow with a built-in hood to help dry your hair. It's one of the Disney Princesses.

“Well?” He steps into the bathroom, carefully taking the child's towel and setting it aside on the edge of the sink. He sits down glancing first to his right, to the lifeless body of the seven-year-old child lying face down in the water, then to the mother, sitting in the corner, behind the door, rocking back and forth violently and crying uncontrollably. “Martha. I asked you a question.”

The old woman notices that his voice is much harsher than usual. He sounds angry.

“Hey!” His voice echoes hard against the bathroom, shattering some of the tiles.

Started back to reality, the old woman jumps and tries looking up, but her head is so heavy from grief, that she finds it difficult to move.

“You're not even going to look at me?” He shakes his head, gritting his teeth. He reaches down to his fingers. Empty. No rings. He remembers they're still in his pocket.

The old woman has been crying so hard that she can barely speak. “Mmmmm. Ahhhhh.” She lets out a raw, agonizing sound, coming more from deep within her throat than anywhere near her mouth.

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“Would you feel better if I pulled her from the water?” His voice becomes flat and dull. “You could hold her if you’d like? Maybe it would make you feel closer. Or at least help you come to grips with what you’ve done.”

The old woman shakes her head side to side aggressively and lets out an anguished scream. “Ahhhhh.” She lets her head drop even farther, opening and closing her eyes several times to clear the tears, letting them drop to her already soaked lap, smelling of old water and mildew.

She sees from the corner of her eye, that he’s doing something. He’s still sitting, but now leaning over the bathtub.

“Rrrrrr.” She almost growls in pain, wanting to look away. But she can’t. He won’t let her.

He leans in and picks a toy out of the cold bath water. Reaching over to the counter, he pats it dry on the child’s bath towel. “Minnie Mouse.” He holds it up, turning it around in his hand, inspecting it. “You were promising to take her, weren’t you? To see the mouse and the duck.” He chuckles roughly. “My little brother was terrified of that duck.”

“Uhhh. W... w... w...” She makes a series of barely audible noises, trying to regain her voice. She’s been crying for so long, that her throat and tongue are swollen, and she doesn’t know how to use them. They feel wrong to her.

He looks over at her, his voice is cold. “Disneyland. Annabelle would’ve loved that. Right?”

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The old woman howls in pain and starts sobbing uncontrollably. “W... w...” She tries wiping the tears, but her sleeves are hanging from her arms, soaking wet, and it just make things worse.

“Keep going... you’re almost there.”

“Wh...” She struggles, her tongue too swollen for her mouth.

“Why?” He leans over and sets the toy in the center of the room, making sure to turn it to face the old woman. “Why what? Is it my turn to answer questions? Forgive me... but I’m not sure where you left off last time.” He pulls a silver ring from his pocket, and examining it carefully, notes the carved dragon wrapping all the way around it, chasing the sun. “Oh. I like this one.” He smiles and tries putting it on several fingers until he finds one that fits. “I’m sure it has some special meaning that escapes me at the moment.”

She glances up, trying to see through blurred vision, her tears exaggerating the light entering her old eyes.

He moves his eyes from the silver of his ring to meet hers.

And she flinches. His eyes are different, cold and hard. Angry like she’s never seen them.

Closing her eyes tight, she begins mumbling aloud to distract herself. “O... One. T... Two. Th... Three. Four. Five.” The words come out thick and raw, like her tongue. She can taste the blood from her dry, broken lips.

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“No!” His voice is sharp and dangerous. “You will... not... find peace.”

The old woman’s face goes red as she finds her voice for a few seconds. “W... why... are you... d... doing this to me?” She nearly collapses forward from the effort.

They both sit in silence for several minutes, the only sounds being her ragged breathing, and the bath water sloshing back and forth violently.

The old woman tries covering her ears, while he sits, quietly toying with the ring on his finger. He pulls his hand up for a closer look, admiring how the light flashes off the silver. He can feel his anger building as he spins the ring between a finger and thumb, remembering.

“I... I’ve been... here... f... for so long.” The old woman fights to get the words out, to make them sound like she intends them to sound. “W... Why?” Then she immediately starts to rock her body back and forth again.

He laughs hollowly, looking around the room. “Really?” He makes a snorting noise, and points down to the tiny body lying face down in the sloshing water.

“S... So... long.” She whispers hoarsely.

“Thirty-eight years...”

She makes a coarse, screaming sound that comes out as a pathetic gurgle from her throat. “Ahhhhh.” The old woman’s eyes water as she tries

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looking up at him again. She opens her eyes wide and lets out a painful sound.

“... eleven months, four days.” He finishes, smiling wickedly. “This time.” He grinds his teeth, letting his eyes go pure white. “But that’s nothing. We’ll do better next time.”

She looks away, frightened. “P... Please... I can’t... d... do this anymore.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to hold her?” He stands up, taking a half step towards the bathtub.

“No.” Her voice, soft and weak, breaks. “P... Please.”

He reaches down, and with great care pulls the tiny body from the tub, cradling the young girl in his arms as water runs down to his elbows, dripping onto the wet floor. “She wanted to go to the park tomorrow. The one down by the pond. For her birthday. It wasn’t much. It wasn’t Disneyland.” His voice becomes flat and dull. “That’s all she asked for. The park.”

The old woman begins rocking back and forth more aggressively, with her eyes closed tight, her body shaking violently from the cold water.

“Mummy. Can you push me on the swings tomorrow?” The voice is Annabelle’s. It comes from every direction. “Please mummy?”

“W... Why? Why? W... Why?” The old woman tries screaming and stops rocking, her body going numb. She starts to convulse. “W... why are you doing this?” Her voice is just a choppy, broken croak.

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He sighs loudly. Taking a few seconds to compose himself, to think. He looks down at his hands, holding the small body. His ring catches some of the water running from the child, causing it to pool up on his fingers. “You took something from me.” He steps forward, carrying the young girl over to her mother. “Here. Take her.”

“N... No.” The old woman turns her head away from him and towards the wall.

“Take her!” His voice is so hard it cracks the mirror and the tiles on the wall shatter and fall into the bath water.

Shocked and terrified, the old woman, shivering from the cold, and racked with small convulsions, reaches up, taking the dead body of her daughter in her hands. Her skin doesn’t feel real. It’s been laying in the water for so long that it feels like stiff rubber. It has a hard, rough texture.

She has to adjust her grip, pulling the lifeless body into both arms and finally down to her chest. She holds her like a baby and begins to rock back and forth again, this time more gently. She begins to sing to her daughter. More stuttering mumble than song, her voice is a coarse whisper, dense and dull like her tongue.

“You... and others like you. You took something from me... from all of us.” He walks to the doorway of the bathroom. “You’re a murderer. The worst kind of murderer... if there’s such a thing.”

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The old woman coughs harshly several times, and finding her voice, starts her mumbling song again. “L... Lullaby and goodnight, with roses b... bedight. With lilies o'er spread is b... baby's wee bed...”

“You drowned your own daughter. Someone you're supposed to protect and love. Someone you're supposed to give your life for. And you have the audacity to ask why?” He stares out into the darkness of the hallway.

“Lay thee d... down now and rest, may thy sl... slumber be blessed...” Her voice cracks, and her raw throat begins to groan.

“And because of your selfishness and stupidity, we both lost something precious.” His body begins to light up brightly.

The old woman is broken, lost within herself. She's no longer listening, no longer noticing anything happening around her.

“I lost something I cared about. Someone...” His voice breaks. “... someone I cared about more than he'll ever know.”

“B... bright angels beside my d... darling abide. They will g... guard thee at rest, th... thou shalt w... wake on my breast.” She begins to cry loudly, drowning out what little voice she has left.

His body is just a blazing, white light as he walks out into the darkness of the hallway, immediately bringing the shadows to life, causing them to scatter and run, searching for a place to hide from his insatiable anger.

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He stops for a second, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a handful of silver rings of all sizes and designs. He's certain that each one has a specific memory attached, a memory not his own.

“No matter our differences... you were always my big brother.” His voice is low and soft, and thick with grief. “And I loved you. Hell... I wanted to be you.” Michael chuckles. “I wish I'd told you... you were always my hero. You were my favorite.”

Michael sniffles loud and deep, roughly wiping a flood of tears from his eyes. He breathes in deep, and exhales long and ragged. He randomly chooses another silver ring from his handful, putting it on his left thumb, and placing the others back in his pocket.

“And I'll miss you.”

Thank you
I hope you enjoyed my little story

“You’re wrong, you know. I’m not a killer. Even now, I’m not a killer. I don’t relish in anyone’s pain. I don’t bring these things to you.” He pulls his wings in, and immediately lets his body cool.

His point has been made. The show is over.

The burning garage stops burning. The smoke pulls itself into the darkness as if it were never there. The couch is back. “People like you... broken, sad people... you bring these things upon yourself.”

Sebastian’s crying grows more out of control. He starts sobbing and finds it difficult to catch his breath. Whatever strength remaining in his legs fails. He falls face first into his own vomit, just lying there, staring off into nothing.

“And my sister thinks she’s the scary one.” Sam sighs, not sure how he actually feels about that. And mimicking her, he tilts his head to the side, looking to the far wall, by the side door. “And I’m fairly certain she still is.”

Sebastian makes a whimpering sound and throws up a little more, letting it pool on the floor directly in front of his mouth.

Sam pulls his long, brown hair back behind his ears, smoothing it down with his hands. He straightens the jacket he wore especially for his night out. He didn’t want to sully his comfortable, leather one. He didn’t want it to reek of this encounter. “Go out and find yourself, Sebastian. Wander... and look.” He glances down at the trembling mass laying at his feet. “You are listening... right?”



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