

The Death Experience

Martin E Ericson Jr



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

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“Welcome to Apple Valley, California.” A young boy coasts up on his banana-seat bike and rings the old-fashioned, metal bell on the handlebars twice. Ring ring. Ring ring.

A petite, young woman with beautifully pale skin, and long, almost-black hair turns and flashes him a smile. “Hi.” She sits just outside the old, faded barn, far to the left, a hundred or so feet from the barn door. There had once been a huge apple tree here, but all that is left now is a big stump for her to sit on. “So... are you the local welcome wagon then?”

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The boy shows a bright smile, his big blue eyes nearly hidden by his blond, surfer-cut hair. “I’m lots of things.” He moves the hair from his eyes. “But yeah, that’s me, I guess. I welcome people.”

“Just to Apple Valley... or to the whole Bay Area?” The young woman looks at the boy, putting a skeptical look on her face.

“Well... everything this side of Oakland.” The boy grins happily.

The young woman pulls her legs up onto the large stump, sitting with her legs crossed, her long, black dress blowing slightly in the summer breeze. “So how do you know I need to be welcomed?” She flashes him a wild grin. “That I’m not from Apple Valley?”

The boy lays his bike in the grass and sits next to it. “Well...” He pauses and matches her smile. “Oh, I don’t know. Just guessing I suppose.”

The woman grins even broader, pulling her long hair behind both ears. “Hmmm. Because you haven’t seen me around?”

The boy shrugs.

“Maybe I don’t get out much.” She watches the boy’s face remain unchanged. “Maybe I was born and raised here, just at the end of the road, where it stops at the ocean.”

The boy’s smile gets even wider, again matching hers. “Maybe.”

“Maybe.” She repeats what he says, imitating the way he says it. “That’s it. Just maybe.”

He nods slowly, looking to the ground in front of him. “Maybe...” He pulls some grass free and tosses it to the wind, watching as it carries

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down to the barn door. “... maybe I haven’t seen you in a long time and you’ve changed or something.”

She tilts her head to the side, studying her new friend. “Yeah, or something.” She teases.

He stares at some grass in the palm of his hand. He’s completely unaffected by her teasing.

“Maybe you’re right.” She grins at her new friend.

“Yep.” His eyes shift up away from the grass to meet the girl’s. “Probably. I know pretty much everything.”

“You do?” She fakes her astonishment. “Wow. That must be a lot to handle.”

He pauses to think for a second. “No. Not really. The trick is to not think of it all at once. Just pull what you need, when you need it.”

He looks so serious, causing the young woman to giggle.

“You know... everything not directly in your view doesn’t actually exist at that particular moment.” He allows himself a slight grin.

“Well, I guess you got me there.” She slumps in mock defeat. “I’m Rae.” The young woman leans forward on the stump and extends her hand for the boy to shake.

“Yep, you sure are.” The boy leans forward and shakes Rae’s hand gently, just like his dad taught him.

Rae turns her head to the side, waiting for the boy to respond with his name.

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He doesn't.

She sits back. "Oh, but that's right. You probably already knew my name."

The boy raises his eyebrows a little. "So... Rae. Why are you just sitting out here by the Miller's barn?"

Rae's smile fades in an instant. She suddenly looks incredibly sad. Her eyes go glassy, and a sudden gust of wind blows her long, dark hair across her pale face. "You don't know?" She winks, forcing an imitation of a smile back on her face.

Again, the boy shrugs his shoulders. He pulls more grass free and tosses it to the wind. As the wind dies back down, they both hear a man's voice in the distance.

Rae looks a bit up the hill to the old, white farmhouse. A man walks out on the back porch holding a cup of coffee.

"Come on boys. We got a few things to do before breakfast." The man calls into the screen door, just off the kitchen of the farmhouse.

"That's Mr. Miller." The boy looks over to Rae, pushing the hair from his eyes. "He's Paul and Mark's dad."

She nods her head. Her face is blank. Her smile has gone.

"Are you okay?" The boy's voice is soft and caring. He stares up at her, his clear blue eyes reaching out to her.

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Rae glances at the boy, giving him a half-hearted smile, but keeps her attention on the farmhouse. “Yeah, I’m fine. How do you know the Miller family?”

The boy shrugs again. “I dunno. I just do. I know everyone.”

“... this side of Oakland.” She finishes, teasingly.

The boy climbs to his feet, pulling himself up onto the large stump that Rae is sitting on. It’s quite big, and there’s plenty of room for the both of them. “You know...” He gestures to the big faded barn just a hundred feet away. “This is their barn.”

Rae nods again, still lost in thought, watching the man in the distance.

The boy feels her sadness and gives her a few minutes before speaking again. “Does Mr. Miller know you’re down here? Are you a friend or something?”

Rae shakes her head, but says nothing.

“You’re not here to visit then?”

“Kind of.” Rae mumbles. “Not really.”

The boy scrunches his face, turning his head slightly in confusion. “Sooo... which is it?”

“I’m not really sure.” Rae looks over to the boy and gives him a weak smile. “Maybe there’s something wrong with me.” She pauses, still deep in thought. “I’m confused, I suppose.”

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The boy sighs. “I could tell.” He lays back on the large stump, staring up at the sun. “So are you lost then? You need directions?”

“Yeah. I guess so.” For a second her face lights up just a little, like she just discovered something new. “That’s actually a good way of putting it.”

“You guess?” The boy’s face shows obvious confusion. “You’re not even sure if you’re lost? Have you asked anyone for help?” He sits partially up, still leaning back, resting his elbows on the stump. “My dad says that when you’re lost, the easiest thing is to ask someone for help.” His shirt catches on a sliver of old bark. “Oh man. My favorite shirt.”

Rae reaches down and carefully releases the elbow of his shirt from the bark. She smoothes her hand over the blue fabric, pushing the loose threads back in place the best she can.

“Thanks.” The boy pulls his elbow close to his face, inspecting his shirt.

“No problem. I have little brothers.” Rae looks back to the man on the farmhouse porch. “But I’m not lost like that. It’s not that kind of lost.”

They sit for several minutes, letting the sun warm them and the wind cool them back off. Rae continues to watch the man up by the farmhouse.

The boy places a friendly hand gently on her shoulder. “David.”

Rae tilts her head to the side and scrunches her eyebrows at the boy.

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“Mr. Miller. Paul and Mark’s dad.” The boy gestures up towards the house. “His name is David.”

Rae smiles sweetly, reaching down and patting the boy’s knee.

They hear the screen door on the back of the house slam shut, and see a young boy, his hair a mess, slump out and plop down on the porch swing next to his father.

“One of his sons.” Rae says quietly.

“That’s Mark. He’s my age.” The boy takes his hand from Rae’s shoulder, continuing his narration of the Miller family morning. “We’re both eleven, but I’m actually a bit older.” He sits up a little straighter, as if to show Rae his full height.

“You’re pretty grown up for eleven.” Rae says softly, still watching the farmhouse activity.

This makes her new friend laugh. “My dad says I’d be pretty grown up for forty.”

Rae turns her attention away from the farmhouse for just a second to give her friend a wide grin.

“Mark’s older brother is Paul.” The boy scrunches his face in thought. “He’s thirteen or fourteen. He’s in middle school already. He’s really nice to me. Taught me some cool skateboard tricks.”

Right on cue, Paul walks out of the house, letting the screen door slam behind him. Their father just shakes his head and takes a careful sip of his coffee.

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Paul yawns and stretches his arms into the air. “What are we even doing this for anyway?” Being the true teenager, Paul speaks more freely than his younger brother. “It’s a farm.” He gestures all around. “I’m sure whoever ends up buying it will just let it get all crappy again anyway. We’re just wasting our time. And why before breakfast?”

The boy on the stump nudges his shoulder against Rae’s. “Oh yeah. They live in town. This is their grandpa’s house.” The boy’s face saddens in an instant. “He passed away a couple weeks ago.” He looks down to his hands, flicking a small beetle away from his wrist. “Heart attack.”

The wind blows hard again for a few seconds, causing Rae’s hair to completely cover her face. She reaches up and pulls it back behind her ears.

“It was really sad. He was a really nice old guy.”

“I know.” Rae’s face becomes complete sadness.

“Ohhh.” The boy’s voice goes from instant realization to quiet sadness. “Now I get it.”

Rae glances over at the boy, meeting his big blue eyes with her watery brown eyes.

“I’m so sorry.” The boy carefully places his hand back on her shoulder. “I shouldn’t have brought it up. That’s why you’re sitting out here alone. That’s why you’re so sad.” He pauses. “You’re not lost. You’re lost.” He emphasizes the difference.

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Rae puts her hand over the boy's. "You really are a smart kid." She smiles sadly. "For an eleven-year old..." She adds, pushing a friendly shoulder up against his side. "... going on forty."

They watch as David grabs his work gloves from a small table and starts down the porch steps, towards the old barn. He calls back over his shoulder. "And hey..." He stops for a second. "Could you guys please start closing that door gently and not let it slam? Every. Single. Time." He shakes his head. "Please?"

"Doesn't answer my question." Paul gives his brother a gentle shove and rolls his eyes at their father.

Mark smiles as they follow after their father. Paul jogs down the steps while Mark, suddenly full of a boy's energy, jumps from the side of the porch where the rail is missing, and runs up alongside his dad. "Yeah, farming sucks." He tries to sound more grown-up like his older brother.

His father gives him a look.

"Well, it does." Mark mumbles.

The three of them walk down to the barn together. The father and his sons are nearing the barn, but don't see Rae and her friend off to the side, sitting on the stump.

"This isn't farming, knucklehead." It's David's turn to playfully lower his shoulder and shove his youngest son to the side, nearly knocking him to the grass. "We're just cleaning up grandpa's old barn to make it more... presentable."

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“For what?” Paul asks. “Just to sell the damn place.”

David stops walking, letting his son catch up. “Paul. Language please.” He scolds. “If your mother hears you talk like that, it’ll be me who catches trouble.” He reaches over and musses his son’s hair and raises his eyebrows.

Mark struggles to push the big door to the side and the three of them walk into the dank barn, lit only by the morning sunlight coming through the huge holes in the roof. “Dad, it stinks in here.” He pinches his nose with his fingers, making his voice nasally.

Just out of sight, Rae untucks her legs and steps down from the big stump, letting her toes wiggle in the long grass.

“You’re not wearing shoes.” Her new friend pulls the hair from his eyes. “Of course you’re not wearing shoes.”

“You just now noticed?” Rae giggles. She looks down at her bare feet. “I don’t like shoes much. They keep your feet all hidden away where they can’t experience stuff.” She stands in front of the boy. “See.” She uses her toes to grab at the bright green grass, letting it go between her toes.

The boy smiles and scrunches his eyebrows, clearly thinking she’s lost it. He looks up at her over his eyebrows, blowing upward to move the hair from his eyes.

Rae fakes a pout, forgetting her sadness for a few seconds. “Why don’t you get a proper haircut so you don’t have to keep pushing the hair out of your face?” She laughs.

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“I like my hair the way it is.” He runs both hands through his little surfer cut, pushing the hair back and pulling it behind his ears. “It makes me... me.” He smiles proudly, sitting up even straighter. “Well... this me.”

Rae looks him over, for the first time noticing what a handsome little boy he is. “Could it be because all the girls probably think it makes you look super cute too?” Rae teases.

He shrugs, really not sure. He decides to quickly change the subject. “You know, this used to be the biggest apple tree in Apple Valley.” He knocks twice on the tree stump and hops off. “My dad says it got poisoned somehow and started giving off bad fruit.” He runs a hand across the top of the stump. “People were getting sick, so they cut it down.”

“That’s a shame.” Rae mumbles, only half listening, walking a few steps towards the front of the barn.

“Yeah. One day someone brought out the chainsaw and took it down.” He looks over to Rae. “That’s what he says at least. But he likes to tell stories, and I’m never sure if he’s just messing with me.” He walks a couple steps towards Rae.

From their new spot in the yard, the pair can now see into the barn, through the open door. It’s a complete mess, full of makeshift tables with oily, rusty junk everywhere. It’s as if everything is either filthy black with a thick crust of oil and grease, or dry, dusty, and rusty.

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“They’ve been doing this since their grandpa died.” The boy’s voice goes soft. “Well not the first weekend, since they had the funeral and grieving and stuff.” He pauses, remembering. “Mark says they’re cleaning the place up so they can sell it.”

Rae suddenly turns to her new friend, an expert quickness in her movement. “You should probably get going now.” She smiles sadly. “I’ve got stuff I need to do.”

The boy looks at her blankly, unsure.

“I’m sorry... but I need to do it alone.” She tries giving him a better smile.

“You sure?” The boy is happy to just hang out. “I’ve got nothing better to do. We could do whatever you have to do together.” His voice is tempting. “Doing stuff together can sometimes be better than doing it alone.”

“I’m sure.” She walks over to the boy’s bike and picks it up from the grass, and walks it back to him. “Really. I just need to be alone now. I’m sure you understand.” She holds the bike out to him.

He takes the bike and throws a leg over the banana seat and sits down on it. “I get it. I like to be alone sometimes too. Just to think about stuff.” He turns the bike to face the side of the barn, towards the old road behind it.

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Rae turns to him, a friendly sparkle in her eye. “Oh yeah? And what kinds of things does a smart eleven-year-old, who apparently has no name, but who knows everything, think about?”

The boy stops his bike and considers. “Just life and stuff, I guess.”

“Of course.” She giggles.

He pedals his bike forward, struggling through the soft grass. He stops for a second to catch his breath. “Chris. My name’s Chris.” He turns and smiles one last time at his new friend. “Maybe I’ll see you around.”

“Maybe.” Rae gives him a small wave goodbye. “It was nice meeting you, Chris.”

As he rides off he rings the old-fashioned metal bell on the handlebars twice. Ring ring. Ring ring.

Rae turns back to the barn, letting her smile slowly fade. Inside the barn, she can hear the Miller’s working away.

“Dad, we’ve been doing this every day for almost two weeks.” Paul puts his gloves on. “I don’t wanna be a farmer like grandpa. I don’t like any of this.”

“Yeah dad. This sucks.” Mark adds, looking over to his big brother, trying to impress him.

“It’s only been one week. You’ll survive. We’re almost finished anyway.” David shakes his head and drags some trash bins closer to a huge wooden table where grandpa had oily car parts seemingly thrown

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randomly in piles. “We’ll be done in a few days.” He explains for the tenth time. “And you guys are getting paid for your time. So stop complaining.”

“About that...” Paul looks at his little brother for support. “We were talking last night before bed, and we don’t think this is worth it. I mean, we’re not getting paid that much, and you and mom get all the money from the sale.”

“Yeah.” Mark mumbles, playing with the pieces of an old tractor engine, trying to figure out how they go together.

“Then do it for grandpa. He would’ve appreciated it.” David impatiently motions with his arms for his sons to finish cleaning the area under the old straw loft.

The boys’ father hasn’t asked them to clean the loft itself, because the steps leading up to it are rotted and broken. He’ll leave the loft for the new owners to deal with.

Finishing up with the few items left on the table from yesterday, David walks over to his sons to help motivate them. “Look. Don’t tell your mom, but once we’re finished, and the place is sold, I’m giving you guys a little extra.” He smiles as he watches their faces light up. “Consider it a gift from grandpa.”

“Thanks grandpa!” Mark excitedly looks to the sky through a hole in the broken roof.

“How much extra?” Paul asks, wanting to weigh the amount against the effort.

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“Extra.” David points at some things for them to grab and bring to the table. “Just extra. That’s all you need to know. Be thankful for whatever you get.”

Both boys look to each other and get an instant spark of energy, suddenly moving just a little bit faster.

“How about this one dad?” Paul holds up a small, electric motor covered in a thick greasy goo.

David examines it with his eyes for a second, not actually sure what it is. “Put it on the table with the others.”

“And this one?” Mark holds up an old rusty toolbox.

“Anything in it?” David glances over and sees it’s empty. “Toss it.”

Just then there’s a thunderous bang and long, loud creak of old wood. One of the wooden beams holding up the loft cracks loudly, and the entire loft comes crashing down full of old, musty straw and tons of unrecognizable junk.

At the sound of the crack, David lunges forward and pushes his eldest son as hard as he can out into the open. Paul violently flies forward towards the big table, the motor dropping from his hands as he tumbles forward not even realizing what just happened.

David falls forward, the broken loft beam hitting him square in the back and spinning him to the dirt floor, back first, pinning his legs. He jerks his head back, looking through all the dust in the air to the spot

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where his youngest son was just standing. It's now covered in a massive pile of dry, old wood and straw from the loft.

“Mark!” David tries yelling, but only a loud croak escapes. A thick stream of blood pours from his mouth, splattering onto the dirt floor. He groans, his eyes bulging wide at the sight of all the blood.

Paul jumps to his feet, seeing the blood coming from this dad's mouth. “Dad?” He says softly, scared and unsure what he should do.

David spits another mouthful of blood to the dirt next to him. “Where's your brother? Check for your brother!” David yells through the pain.

Paul runs to where his brother is laying under the loft debris. “I don't know dad! I don't know! I can't see him.” His voice is raw and he's on the verge of tears.

David turns his body as far as he can, checking out the beam that has clearly busted some of his ribs, and maybe even his back. He takes a deep breath and tries pushing it off himself. “Then get over here! Help get this damn thing off me!”

David knows he's scaring his son even more by yelling, by not remaining calm. But he's so worried and scared that he doesn't know how to compose himself. David reaches forward to his legs and tries moving the huge chunk of barn wood.

Paul leans over to help, tears dripping from his cheeks.

“Wait! Stop!” David puts up a hand to quiet his son.

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“What?” Paul stops to listen.

They can both hear it. Mark. Crying softly.

“Mark!” Paul lets go of the beam and runs towards his hidden brother. “Mark!” He can hear his little brother lightly crying from underneath the pile of wood and straw.

David increases his efforts on the beam, now crushing his legs even worse than before. But the pain is no longer there, replaced by a father’s adrenaline. “Do you see him?” David yells, still pinned to the ground. Then with an unexpected burst of strength, he shoves the beam off his legs, and half crawls, half drags himself to where Paul is digging with his hands at the straw and wood.

David grabs Paul’s hand to stop him. He pulls him closer to get eye contact. “Listen. Get help. Run to the house. Call 911.”

Paul looks down at his father’s hand gripping his arm, making it turn white.

David lets go, startled by how hard he’s gripping his son’s arm. “As fast as you can. You understand?”

Paul nods his head, but doesn’t move. He’s scared and unsure. His body feels cold and weak. He stares at his dad’s bloody mouth, and looks to where his brother is buried.

“Now!” His dad lets out guttural scream, spitting blood, an angry look on his face. He instantly regrets his anger and tries calming his voice. “Please.” He reaches out and gently touches his eldest son’s arm. “Get

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help. Fast. Call 911 and then run down the road to the Henderson's and get the old man and his sons.”

Paul starts crying, turns, stumbles on some debris, and takes off running out the barn door for help.

Rae absent-mindedly twirls her hair with a finger, as a dirty, teenage boy runs out the barn door, half stumbling, directly towards the old farmhouse up the hill. Her sadness grows stronger, as she watches the scared boy fall up the steps from sheer exhaustion and make it into the house. Rae knows he'll find the cell phone his dad left on the counter. He'll call 911, and breathlessly fight to get the words out that his brother and father need help. He'll then run down the road and get Mr. Henderson and his three teenage sons. She also knows, it'll all be for nothing. They'll be too late. That's why she's here.

Rae turns back to the open barn door, hearing the soft crying coming from within. She hears the cries of the child, and the grunts and groans of his father as he does his best to dig his son out of the fallen loft.

In the barn, David is half laying, half sitting, pulling debris from where his son is softly crying. He huffs and wheezes trying to catch his breath. Spitting more blood to clear his mouth and ease his breathing, David moves aside a large piece of plywood. His breath catches in his throat and his eyes instantly tear up as he sees his son's extended arm, dirty, cut, and bleeding. He rips the heavy work glove from his hand and gently pulls the glove from his son's hand. He grasps the small hand

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warmly into his own and squeezes gently. “Mark? Hey little guy.” He tries for calm, but can only achieve scared and nervous, his voice shaking and squeaking.

David winces, crying out slightly from the pain in his broken ribs. His breathing becomes even shallower from a punctured lung. He’s running on pure adrenaline at this point. If it wasn’t for his little boy, he’d already be dead. He doesn’t even realize that his back is broken in several places, and he shouldn’t be able to move at all.

Mark responds by crying a little harder, mainly from relief that he isn’t alone. He’s scared and has no idea what happened. It had happened so fast. He just knows that he’s trapped under a bunch of heavy stuff and he can’t move. And it hurts. He squeezes his dad’s hand back weakly.

David smiles through the blood. It drips from his mouth and runs down his chin. “Your brother’s getting help. Everything’s going to be okay, little buddy. Just stay calm and we’ll get you out in just a minute.”

Mark’s crying gets quiet and then stops altogether.

“Buddy, you okay?” David holds his breath, listening.

Mark doesn’t reply.

David, tears streaming down his face to meet the blood, goes into frantic mode. The adrenaline surge goes to work. Refusing to let go of his son’s hand, he uses his free hand to tear wood and straw away from him, first seeing Mark’s shoulder and part of his back, and then the bottom corner of his face, splattered with blood.

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David pauses and goes still. All he hears is Mark's quick, shallow breathing. He breathes in as deeply as his injuries allow, and holds it. He grips his son's small hand for what seems like forever, until he realizes that he can't hear him breathing anymore.

“Mark?” He whispers softly. Listening intently. He uses both hands to grasp his son's now limp hand. Gently rubbing it while he sobs. “Mark!” He screams his son's name and cries uncontrollably. “Mark!”

Just outside the barn door, Rae can hear a father cry, scream in pain, and then sob uncontrollably. She says a silent word or two, hoping for a last-minute rescue. She knows it's possible. Anything is possible.

David's crying then gives way to a father's painful scream. Without letting go of his son, he frantically pulls pieces of wood away from where his son lay. His nails tear and break, bloodied by splinters of old barn wood. He forgets to breath, and begins choking on his own blood, vomiting onto his arm and shoulder. He screams and cries through the blood as he starts tugging at his son's limp arm, at first gently, and then harder and harder with increasing desperation. With a last spasm of intense pain, knowing that he's failed his boy, David collapses forward, blood pouring from his lips. His sobbing goes quiet as his breathing stops.

Rae walks slowly towards the open barn door. She can smell the oil and grease, the dank musty straw and wood. The crying has stopped. The breathing has stopped. She pauses just inside the barn door. She sees the mess the collapsed loft has created. She sees the bloodied father slumped

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forward, still holding his son's hand. Rae steps forward to where the father and son lay. She moves some splintered wood to the side and solemnly sits down next to them. With great care, she takes David's hand from his son, and holds it in her own. Then she takes Mark's small hand in her other hand. She sits for a while, confused and conflicted, holding them both tightly in her own hands for as long it takes. She does her best to help them, to guide them. This is who she is.

Then she looks up to the light pouring in through the holes in the barn roof, and lets the sadness take over.

2

There's a rapid knock on the driver-side window of Thomas' truck. Startled, he jumps, and then seeing the smiling face of a young woman, he takes a deep breath and rolls down the window. "You scared the heck out of me, young lady." He chuckles, patting his chest and exhaling dramatically.

Thomas, a middle-aged man, has been sitting patiently in his truck, off to the side of the road, in the dense fog for quite some time. He and his baby daughter were on their way to visit his parents when a sudden fog

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drifted in, covering the old, two-lane highway and making it so you couldn't see more than a couple car lengths in front of you.

“Hi.” The young woman smiles widely, and gives Thomas a friendly wave. She looks past Thomas to the baby in the car seat next to him. “Hey little one.” She does a baby-sized wave.

Thomas, his hand still on his chest, glances over to his baby daughter sitting securely in her car seat. She smiles up at him, cooing, squeezing a little teddy bear. Nine months old with big blue eyes and the prettiest smile ever.

“She’s adorable.” The young woman leans her head into the window and makes a series of goofy faces.

The baby coos loudly and laughs in several short, loud bursts.

“I speak baby.” The young woman smiles brightly at both father and daughter.

Thomas, confused and still a little startled, takes a quick look at the young woman, seeing that she doesn’t have a jacket. She’s just wearing a long, black dress to match her hair, and both are blowing wildly in the cool, night air. “Are you okay? Do you need something?”

The traffic had been slowed for the last half hour by the fog, and it’s now at a complete standstill. Nothing has moved in over ten minutes. Dozens of cars and trucks find themselves stuck on a two-lane highway out in the middle of nowhere, after dark, with only the stars struggling to light the way.

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“Rae.” She smiles, moving a step back from the window and extending her hand through it for Thomas to shake. “With an E. And I’m fine.”

“What?” He’s still confused by the young woman’s sudden appearance at his window.

“My name.” Her hand is still extended through the window. “I’m Rae.” She laughs softly. “And I’m fine. Thank you for asking. You’re very kind. That’s a nice quality.”

Thomas leans away from the window slightly, reaches up and shakes the woman’s hand awkwardly. “Aren’t you cold, dressed like that? Without a coat?” He glances over the open window, noticing that she’s also barefoot. She stands on her toes to stretch her small frame enough to just see into the window of the big truck. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Rae looks down to see what Thomas is looking at. “Oh my feet. No, seriously... I’m fine.” She giggles. “I’m just not much of a shoe person.” She gives him a wide smile. “I find them... limiting.”

Thomas finds himself grinning at how peculiar she is. “Where’d you come from?” He feels the cold seeping into the truck and leans over to tuck his daughter’s blanket around her tightly. “Are you from one of the cars behind us... or in front?”

Rae turns and looks around at the line of cars in front and back of Thomas. Dozens of cars and trucks going nowhere because of the dense fog. The traffic had slowed more and more until finally people started

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pulling over into the gravel area where the wheat field begins. They'd have to wait it out as safely as possible until the fog dissipated some, and they could see where they were going.

Every now and then a car slowly passes by on the road, carefully moving at a snail's pace. But eventually you'd see their brake lights bring them to a complete stop, and they'd be forced to wait off to the side of the road with everyone else.

Rae's smile disappears as she imagines what would happen if someone driving even a little too fast comes down the road and straight into the line of the cars still sitting partially on the road. "Death." She mumbles.

"Rae?" Thomas tries to get the young woman's attention. "Rae, are you okay?"

She blinks several times, clearing her thoughts and smiles weakly at Thomas.

"Now that's not a happy smile you got there." Thomas is beginning to worry about her standing out in the cold, wearing nothing more than a light dress. "Let me see, I may have an old jacket or sweatshirt behind the seat." He struggles to reach behind his seat, using his hand to fumble for something to keep the cold off her.

"No. It's okay. I shouldn't have come over." Rae's smile fades completely, and she scrunches her eyebrows. "I just wanted to say hi. And

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to meet your little one.” She gives another small wave to the baby. “I rarely get to say hello beforehand.”

Thomas smiles over at his daughter as she plays with her little stuffed bear’s nose. Babbling, giggling, and drooling, she opens her mouth wide shakes her head side to side in excitement as she fits the bear’s nose in her mouth. Her eyes go wide in concentration as she happily chews the nose.

“Her name’s Agnes.” Thomas gives up on looking for that old jacket he thought was behind the seat. He looks again at the wind blowing Rae’s hair wildly. “Look. Would you like to hop in on the other side and warm up a little while we wait?”

“You’re very kind.” Rae gives him a weak smile. “Really, I’m okay.” She hears voices in the near distance and looks a few cars ahead, seeing a crowd gathering. “I’m so sorry about everything.” She suddenly looks really sad. “I really shouldn’t have bothered you. You try to have the best night you can.” She starts walking away into the wind, towards the other side of the highway.

“Hey.” Thomas calls out sharply.

Rae stops and looks over her shoulder, her pale face looking much darker and older through the night fog.

“Are you sure you’re okay? I can give you a ride home if you live nearby... or if you need a few bucks...”

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Rae's face brightens, her big brown eyes piercing the fog. "You really are a good man Thomas Castillo. You take care of Agnes on the next leg of your journey. Don't be afraid, just keep her close. I'll see the both of you soon." With that, she turns and walks across the foggy highway to the other side.

Thomas is unsure what to do. He feels like Rae needs help, but he can't force it on her. He rolls up the truck window to keep the cold out and watches as she finishes her short walk to the other side of the road, and stops just before the fog swallows her. She turns and just stands there watching a small crowd gather near an eighteen wheeler two cars in front of Thomas. She sees him watching and gives him the saddest look.

Now he's getting warm with anxiety. He was fine until Rae startled him. He rolls the window down a couple of inches, letting the cool fog drift in just a little. Running his fingers through his thinning hair, he smiles at his daughter lovingly. "We'll be fine Agnes. No problem. We'll just be a little late." He reaches over and gently strokes the back of her chubby little hand with the tips of his fingers.

He thinks about calling the house to let his mother know that they'll be a little later than expected, but he doesn't want to worry her any more than she probably already is. He takes his hat off and sets it on the seat between him and Agnes, and gives her a reassuring smile.

She smiles back and makes a gurgling sound with her mouth, blowing mini bubbles on her tiny lips.

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Fidgeting and wondering if he should just make that phone call, Thomas reaches over and tightens the lap belt that keeps Agnes safe in her car seat. He doesn't usually take her in the truck. He doesn't feel like it's safe. But his wife has the car. She's been helping out the last few weeks with the grandparents after his dad's stroke. She'll be waiting there with his parents once the fog clears and they arrive. Thomas works from home, so it only made sense for him and Agnes to stay behind and let his wife help his mother take care of dad. She'd offered to take Agnes with her, giving him more time for work, but taking care of both granddad and Agnes would've been a strain. Plus, his dad needed rest, not a baby keeping him up at all times of the night. He knew his dad would want to play and spend time with Agnes, and the stroke was fairly severe. It would only frustrate him and lead to more problems because he could no longer keep up.

Agnes coos loudly. "Gah! Gah!" And she giggles, pulling the bear's nose back to her mouth.

Thomas and Agnes are both excited to get up there and see mum. Well, at least Thomas is. Agnes is still pretty oblivious at this age. But he's absolutely sure mum is dying inside not being able to hold her baby girl each night before bed. He's sure Agnes misses the extra loving too. As much as Thomas tries to make up for mum being away, he knows that there are some things he just doesn't do, or do right, or even know about, that Agnes misses.

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And Thomas doesn't speak baby.

Thomas reaches over and nervously checks the straps on the car seat for the millionth time. That's what first-time dads do.

Then he glances over to check on Rae. She's still standing on the other side of the road, her hair and dress blowing even more wildly in the wind than it did just a few minutes ago. She looks incredibly sad, no longer able to hide it beneath a pretend smile.

Thomas leans over towards Agnes and uses a hand to rummage behind her seat, hoping to find that old jacket, so he can call Rae over and give it to her. He feels bad for the young woman. If she's from one of the cars, she should go sit in her car. He assumes she's with family. He's not sure how young she is, but even if she's in her early twenties, at the latest, she doesn't seem like the type to be alone, without family nearby watching over her. She was so peculiar and innocent.

He looks to Agnes. "Well... I did my best. I told her she was welcome to jump in the truck."

Agnes makes a gurgling sound and continues her drooling assault on the bear's nose.

Thomas again gives up his search. His wife must have taken the jacket in the house. He looks over at Rae. "Maybe she's okay like she said. She doesn't look cold. Not at all, really." He mumbles, trying to make himself feel better.

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His phone buzzes. He pulls it from his pocket, and hits a button to see what it is. It's a text from his wife. She heard about the dense fog on the news and wants him to drive extra careful. He texts back. He tells her that they're waiting off to the side of the road for the fog to thin. She sends him a little red heart and Agnes a bright pink kiss. She suggests they turn back and come tomorrow when it clears up. Or just stop at a hotel for the night. As if he could find one in this fog. Thomas assures her that everything is fine and they'll be safely at his parent's tonight. Just later than expected. And they'll both be hungry. She sends him a pizza emoji and says to let her know when they're twenty minutes away. She'll order food when they get close.

He sends his love and a quick picture of Agnes gnawing at her bear. His wife sends another little red heart.

Thomas puts the phone down on the seat next to him. He feels better having talked to his wife, but now he feels impatient. He opens his window all the way and peaks his head out to get a better view. He sees a small group of people that have congregated in the road just ahead.

Just then, another car drives past at a crawl, and the crowd has to move out of the way. A few of them make a show of it, as if they are being inconvenienced by the car trying to pass.

“Not very smart.” Thomas mumbles, smiling weakly down at his baby. “This is getting dangerous.”

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He thinks he should step out and encourage the group to at least move off the road where it's a little safer. The car that passed was going at walking speed through the thick fog, but you never knew when some idiot would come cruising down the road too fast and hurt someone.

Now Thomas is seriously concerned. He glances over at Rae still standing on the opposite side of the highway. "That's not exactly safe either." He mumbles. He flashes his headlights twice, hoping to get someone's attention so that they come to him, and he can tell them to move off to the side, instead of standing right there in the road.

An old man looks back at him with an irritated look on his face, but then turns back to the small group and continues with whatever they were talking about.

Thomas wants to step out, but he can't just leave Agnes alone. You don't leave a baby in the car and just walk away, even if it's only a couple dozen yards. He finds himself nervously tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. Faster and faster. He's becoming agitated. And hot. Though it would be nice to cool off a little. And it's only a few yards away. Even in this fog, he thinks he'd be able to see Agnes the whole time.

He realizes that something has been tugging at the back of his mind. "What did she mean 'she'll see us soon'?" Thomas makes a tutting noise. "What's she gonna do? Join us for pizza?" He chuckles.

He looks over to Rae again. She's still looking at the crowd. But then, as if feeling that someone was watching her, she turns her head

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slightly and gives Thomas that same weak smile. The wind is now blowing harder. Using both hands, he watches as Rae pulls her long hair behind her ears and then uses one hand to hold it behind her head to keep the wind from blowing it right back in her face. She looks back to the small crowd.

Thomas tries to get her attention. He opens the window and yells out. “Rae! Hey, Rae!” But the howling wind keeps drowning him out. He closes the window, frustrated.

“What the hell is she doing just standing out their in the cold anyway?” Thomas looks down at Agnes. “Sorry about the language darling. But daddy’s worried about our new friend, Rae.” Thomas takes a deep breath, looking to the small crowd, and makes up his mind. “Well little one... I can’t just sit here doing nothing.” He leans over towards his daughter and gives her a small kiss on the forehead. “You stay right here for a minute. Daddy’s going to have a quick word with those people up ahead.” He points at them for her to see.

Agnes looks up at her dad and coos, playfully grabbing his thumb with wet fingers.

He smiles back lovingly, wiping his fingers off on his jeans. “I’ll be right back.” His voice is playful and goofy. “And I’ll be keeping an eye on you the whole time.” He touches the tip of her nose with his finger. “Beep.” He smiles even bigger, more to reassure himself than her.

Thomas shuts the truck off, takes the keys, and steps out into the fog. The truck will be warm enough for the few minutes he’s away. Closing

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the door gently, so as not to scare Agnes, he slowly walks through the cold, dense air to the front of the truck. It's even colder than he realized, and super windy. He feels the chill through the light jacket he's wearing. For a second he considers walking over to Rae and making her take his jacket to keep warm. It's what a gentleman should do. But that would take him too far from Agnes, so he puts the thought out of his head. He turns slightly and looks at her bare feet in the distance. "She has to be freezing." He mumbles to himself, shaking his head.

Thomas turns back to the truck, extending his arm towards it, and clicks the button on his keychain. The truck's locks drop heavily into place, its horn beeps twice, and the headlights flash to let him know everything is good. Agnes is still happily oblivious, playing with her teddy bear. He looks ahead and sees that several more people have gotten out of their cars and have joined the small group just ahead. Thomas shakes his head and sighs.

He begins to walk away from the truck, but hesitates and walks back, trying the door to make sure it's really locked. Feeling better, he decides to make this quick. He'll nicely tell them they should all move to the side where it's safer and then he'll come right back. For a second, he thinks to ask Rae if she could sit with his daughter for a few minutes. It would be a good excuse to get her to warm herself in the truck. He could even give her his jacket. But again, he decides against it.

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Rae, watches as Thomas joins the group of stranded travelers. She watches as he smiles and shakes the hands of a couple of people. She watches as he keeps nervously glancing back towards his truck. Rae looks over and sees Agnes sitting alone playing with her bear.

Suddenly the wind cries out with a howling vengeance, screaming painfully for what's about to happen. The crowd of people congregated near the truck up ahead hear a long, low growl almost buried by the cries of the wind. Startled, they turn in unison to see what's causing the great noise.

Thomas goes cold. Time seems to slow and all sound goes to a buzzing silence as cold shivers run down his back. His entire body goes numb and heavy, and the only thing he can hear is his own pounding heartbeat and the lowering of the blood pressure in his head. The cold overcomes him from within, and he's instantly nauseated. He yells his daughter's name, never hearing the sound come from his mouth, and takes off in a horrified sprint towards his baby.

Out of the fog, an 18-wheeled monster comes scorching, screeching, and growling sideways down the highway, throwing cars left and right through the air, obliterating everything in its path. Within seconds, everything is destroyed. The line of cars. Agnes. Thomas. The group of onlookers. Everything.

Rae stands off to the side, her hair and dress dancing wildly in the wind. She has her eyes firmly closed, refusing to witness the carnage

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directly in front of her. Rae's head is pushed down, tilted towards the ground, tears streaming down her cheeks, dropping heavily into the cold, night air.

3

“So.” Rae clears her throat. “Are you out there? Are you listening?” She sits cross legged on a porch swing in someone’s backyard. “It’s me, Rae.” She puts her head back, closing her eyes. “A smart little boy recently told me that when you’re lost, the easiest thing is to ask someone for help. So I’m asking.”

She sits quietly for a few minutes, letting the setting sun warm her face.

“I feel ugly.” She exhales deeply, letting the words leave her body. She blurts it with the same bluntness she feels inside. “I don’t know what

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I'm doing anymore." She tries remembering. "I'm not sure I ever did. And dad just doesn't get it. But you... I think..." Her voice goes silent.

Rae rocks her body forward and then back, causing the wooden swing to slowly move back and forth. She hears voices from within the house behind her, and her sadness deepens.

"There's two little girls in this house that are going to die in 31 minutes, 55 seconds." She takes several shallow breaths, composing herself. "They're going to burn to death in a house fire. They'll find their bodies right there." She points to a spot nearby.

Rae pauses, using the sleeves of her black dress to wipe the wetness from her eyes. She looks around the yard, wondering if her words are all for nothing.

"Am I evil?" She wonders and sighs loudly.

The wind blows gently through the trees at the far end of the yard.

"I mean... for doing nothing to help... you know... before they die?" She tilts her head upward, staring at the stars just appearing in the twilight sky. "I just watched a child die. An infant. I didn't warn them. I didn't whisk them away. I didn't stop it from happening." She pauses to think for a second. "I approached her and her father and said hi. That's it... I said hi."

The wind blows again, grabbing a pile of leaves on the ground, pulling them up into a small whirlwind, carrying them up into the air to disperse and fall back to the ground slowly.

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Rae sits silently, remembering everything. Every second. Every look. Every feeling. She remembers the accident and holding all their hands. Separately, and some together. She waits several minutes, choking back a need to scream and cry.

“I’m not actually sure I could’ve stopped it or changed it...” Her eyes glisten in the fading sunlight. “... or whatever.” She pulls her long hair behind her ears. “It’s not really who I am, is it? It’s not what I do.”

The warmth fades away as the sun sets beneath the trees in front of Rae. She rocks forward and then backward again, to get the swing moving. She listens as the two sisters inside the house squabble about something for just a second, and then it’s quiet again. Rae cocks her head to the side, using a finger to absentmindedly twirl her long hair into a big, long curl. She remembers her brothers, all the bickering and teasing, and fun they had growing up.

She wipes another tear from her eye. “I know what I do. But I don’t know why. I’m not even sure I’m doing it right anymore.” She pauses, taking a deep breath and then exhales slowly. “Maybe I’ve always been doing it wrong...” She chuckles. “... and no one bothered to let me know.”

Rae looks around sadly, needing a gentle hand on her shoulder, some encouraging words. The birds chirp, the wind blows, and a car pulls into the garage off to the side of the house.

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“Nothing?” She sighs and rocks forward and then backward, making the swing move again. “Really?”

“Girls, I’m home.” Their mom calls out as she enters the kitchen through the door leading to the garage. “Come help with the groceries.”

Both girls are sitting on the couch in the living room. The older girl, Alicia, is texting on her phone and listening to music through her headphones. The younger, Allison, is flipping through a coloring book looking for something to create.

Allison tosses the book to the floor, jumps up, and runs to the kitchen, excited to see mom and see what she got at the grocery store. “Hey mom.” She immediately grabs the gallon of milk from her mom’s full hands.

After Allison puts it in the fridge, her mom leans over and gives her a kiss on the cheek. “Where’s your sister?” On her way back out through the garage door, she yells to her eldest daughter. “Alicia, come help with the groceries.” She pauses, listening. “Now, please.”

Alicia sits on the couch texting a friend, listening to her music. She heard her mother both times, but doesn’t really feel like doing anything right now. At fourteen, she’s at that age where you’re slowly distancing yourself from your parents. You’re starting to do your own thing and don’t want to be told what to do. She assumes mom will sigh, give up, and put everything away without her.

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Allison, on the other hand, is only ten. She's still firmly in mom's and dad's embrace. She enjoys their attention. She likes helping out. As mom brings in the last few bags of groceries, Allison puts everything away that's low enough for her to reach. Her mom's smile of thanks is pure joy for Allison.

“Ally, go get your sister, she’s going to at least help with dinner... whether she likes it or not.”

Allison runs off to the living room. “Licia, mom says you have to help with dinner.”

Alicia, hears her, but completely ignores her. Allison walks over and pulls her headphones from her ears with a quick tug.

“Hey!” Alicia gives her sister an angry face and takes a swing at her with an open hand.

“Alicia Marie Andrews!” Mom is watching from the edge of the living room.

“What?” Alicia is startled by the appearance of her mother, but acts the victim. “She’s being a brat.” Alicia sets her phone on the small table in front of the couch and slowly gets to her feet, a stubborn pout on her face.

“I don’t care. You hit her, you hit anybody, and you lose that phone for a while. We’ll see how you like that.” Mom stares at her eldest daughter, her hands on her hips, before turning and walking back into the

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kitchen. “Now come help me with dinner. Your father’s working late and it’s just the three of us.”

“So what’s new. He’s always working late.” Alicia mumbles as she follows her mother and sister into the kitchen.

“Yeah, and that’s why you have that fancy phone that you’re so close to losing.” Mom answers back.

Alicia grunts and sits down at the kitchen table where her sister is already looking through yet another coloring book. Making sure her mother isn’t paying attention, Alicia shoves the coloring book from her little sister’s hands.

“Hey!” Allison gives her sister a look of annoyance, and pulls the coloring book back in place. “I’m working here.”

Their mother looks back at them, knowing very well what probably happened, but she says nothing. “Alicia, can you get a large pot out, and the cast-iron, frying pan please?”

Alicia knows not to push things too far and gets up to help her mom. She actually enjoys helping with dinner anyway. She just doesn’t want to show that she enjoys helping with dinner.

“So what’s for dinner then?” Alicia asks as she grabs the pot and the heavy frying pan.

“Spaghetti night.” Mom smiles knowing how much of a hit spaghetti night is.

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“Yay! Spaghetti.” Allison finds what she’s looking for in the coloring book and grabs a couple of the colored pencils she intends to use.

Alicia fills the pot with water for the noodles and places it on the stove along with the pan for the sauce. She turns the burner on to heat the water for the pasta. Then she turns on the burner under the heavy frying pan to preheat it for the meat and sauce.

“Allison, I assume you’re finished with your homework?” Mom finishes putting the groceries in the upper cupboards.

“Yep. Did it on the bus.” Allison is proud of herself. She looks at her sister smugly.

“Of course you did.” Alicia chimes in sarcastically. Ignoring the look her mom gives her, she goes to the cupboard where the various sauces and things are kept. Bending down she shuffles through things looking for a jar of spaghetti sauce. “Mom, did you get sauce today?”

“Shit!”

Alicia giggles.

“Mom!” Allison scolds her mother.

“Oh God, I’m sorry girls. It’s been a stressful day.”

“So... no spaghetti night.” Alicia says disappointedly. Not that she really cares, but on spaghetti night she gets to do most of the cooking.

“No, we’ll have to figure something else out.” Mom opens the fridge, looking at what they have, thinking.

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Allison, sets her pencil down. “Mo-om.” She whines. “Spaghetti sounds soooo good.”

Their mom closes the fridge, still thinking. “Okay. Let’s see. We have everything else?” She looks to Alicia.

Alicia nods her head yes, showing her the pasta noodles she had just grabbed from the cupboard. “And I know we have garlic knots in the freezer.” She points.

Mom checks the freezer. “Yep.” Still thinking. “Okay, I’ll call dad and let him know that dinner will be late and see if he can make it. This could work out even better.” She grabs her car keys and purse from the counter. “I’ll run out and quickly grab some spaghetti sauce from the market on the corner.”

“The market.” Allison snickers.

“Grocery store.” Mom smiles and shakes her head.

“Mom’s old.” Allison snickers again, making Alicia laugh.

“Okay. Ten minutes and I’ll be back.” Mom opens the door to the garage.

“Twenty.” Allison and Alicia both say in unison.

“I know. I know. Twenty then. I’ll be right back. I have my phone if you need me.” Mom closes the door. Then it reopens and mom pops her head back in. “Be good.” The door closes. Then it opens again. “And Alicia... turn the burners off until I get back.” The door closes and the girls hear the car start, the garage door open, and the car leave.

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Alicia puts the box of pasta on the counter and walks over to her little sister who is busy coloring a pony. She waits for just the right moment and purposely bumps her hand, making her go out of the lines.

“Hey!” Allison shoves her sister’s arm out of the way. “Stop it.”

Alicia gives her sister a sneering face and walks to the living room. She grabs her phone off the table and yells back to her sister. “I’ll be in my room. Tell me when mom’s back.” Half way up the stairs she stops. “Ally. Turn off the burners. I forgot.”

Allison isn’t listening. She’s deep in thought about how mean her sister can be, and how she can get back at her later.

Upstairs, Alicia plops down on her bed, moving aside some frilly pillows and a large, stuffed unicorn. She sends a quick text to her mom to get a dessert if she sees one. Maybe brownies or something. She’ll make them. She puts her headphones on and closes her eyes.

Allison continues coloring. She’s chosen a unicorn surrounded by bushes and flowers. After a while she gets bored and lonely. She puts her colored pencil down, flexing her fingers, and decides to go bug her sister. She skips through the living room and up the stairs.

Allison quietly approaches her sister’s room. She gets down low and peeks in the doorway, barely letting her head through the entrance. Alicia has her eyes closed and her head is gently bouncing up and down to the music. Allison stands up and slowly walks into the room, past the ‘No

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Entry' sign hanging on her sister's door. A sign meant specifically for her. She smirks at her own trespass.

“So whatcha doing?” Allison asks, feigning innocence.

“Get out.” Alicia doesn’t even bother to open her eyes or remove her headphones.

“I just wanted to hang out.” Allison sits on the end of her sister’s bed. “I’m lonely. And it’s kind of spooky downstairs alone. It’s getting dark.”

“Get out.” Alicia repeats, this time opening her eyes. “Turn on some lights and you’ll be fine.”

Allison hops off the bed and shuffles slowly toward the door.

Alicia smiles and closes her eyes. Her head starts bouncing to the music again.

Allison reaches her sister’s door and quietly closes it from the inside. She puts her back to the door and sits down. A couple of minutes pass while she just sits there pouting.

“I can hear you breathing.” Alicia says casually.

“How can you? You have your music blaring.” Allison asks.

“It’s not blaring. It’s on low, because I know you’re still in here.” Alicia snorts. “Now get out.”

Allison gets up and walks towards her sister again. “Why don’t we play anymore? We used to play a lot more than we do now.” She stops at the foot of the bed.

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“Because I don’t play. I’m a grown up and you’re a kid.” Alicia opens her eyes. “Now get out before I throw you out.”

“I’ll tell mom and dad.”

“Tell them. It’s my room. Get out.”

Allison turns and walks quickly to the door. She flings the door open, letting it swing and hit the wall.

“Hey!” Alicia yells, sitting up on her elbows, giving her sister an angry look.

Allison leaves quickly down the hall. Seconds later she runs back in. “Something’s wrong.” She’s scared, but doesn’t come all the way into the room for fear of upsetting her sister further.

“What now?” Alicia asks, but then sits right up, smelling smoke.

“The whole downstairs is full of smoke.” Allison whines quickly, on the verge of crying.

Alicia jumps up from the bed, knocking her phone to the floor. “Oh God. Oh God. Oh God.” She’s goes cold as a shiver runs down her spine. “The house is on fire!”

Allison begins crying.

Alicia runs to her sister and pulls her close, trying to console her. “We need to leave.”

Still holding her little sister tight, they start down the hallway as the smoke begins to creep to the upstairs area.

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“Wait.” Allison wipes her tears on the back of her hand. “In school we learned that you need to crawl so the smoke doesn’t get in your lungs as much.”

“What?” Alicia is frantic and tries pulling her sister forward by the wrist.

“We need to stay low. Crawl.” Allison drops to her knees and starts crawling under the smoke down the hall.

“Wait. Wait. Wait.” Alicia drops to her knees and catches up with her sister. “I’ll lead. Stay right next to me.”

Alicia is crying but does her best to hide it from her little sister.

Shoulder to shoulder the two sisters move down the hallway and then start backing down the stairs on all fours. They’re coughing more now, and they can barely see through the smoke and tears.

Flames are leaping from the kitchen into the living room, starting small fires everywhere. The wall separating the two rooms has burnt completely through in places and started the front door of the house on fire.

Rae has moved from the back porch swing to the couch in the middle of the living room. She can feel the intense heat on her face, chest, arms and legs. She looks over to where the girls have now reached the bottom of the stairs, and watches as they crawl, cry, and cough while they struggle to find a path around the small fires.

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Alicia climbs to her feet, still squatting as low as possible. She frantically surveys the room. The front of the house and kitchen are completely engulfed in flames. The back area, although covered in small raging fires is the only place to go.

Rae stands up, looking around for a route that wouldn't take them to their impending death on the back porch. She walks through the smoke towards the kitchen entrance, causing the fire to pull back from her and move off to the sides. "Girls! This way!" Rae calls out to them through the smoke and the dull roar and sharp crackles of the fire.

Alicia can't see through the smoke, but hears someone calling out. "Mom? Mom?" She moves forward but her sister has become dead weight on the end of her hand. Then, for just a second, she can just see a young woman standing in the smoke and fire.

She looks down at her sister.

"Ally?" Alicia begins crying harder. She feels her little sister's chest. She's still breathing. But she's passed out from all the smoke. She starts dragging her with all her strength towards the back of the house, through dad's den. She sees the back door going out to the rear deck near the porch swing, and starts pulling her little sister towards it.

Rae sighs hard and releases her hold, letting the flames completely engulf her in the kitchen entrance, drying her tears.

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The girls' mom has finished her shopping and turns down the road, heading for home. Twenty minutes exactly. "Ha." She smiles to herself. It'll be spaghetti with brownies for dessert, and dad's on the way.

The sun has set completely, and as she drives down the dark road, she sees lots of lights ahead. Bright lights, blue lights, red lights, flashing lights. She begins to panic.

"No. Please God, no." She mumbles. Scared. Thinking the worst. "Please." She speeds up.

Turning the bend in the road, she sees flames coming from her house. Firefighters have just arrived and are running around positioning themselves to put out the fire.

The girls' mother panics. Going into a cold shock, she speeds up and then slams on the brakes, pulling the big SUV to a lurching stop just behind one of the firetrucks, nearly hitting two of her neighbors. She stumbles out of the car in full tears, screaming her daughters' names, and runs towards the house. One of the firemen, realizing that she lives there, grabs her in full run, spinning her into his arms. She fights his embrace, struggling to free herself and save her girls.

"My girls are in there!" She screams and fights to get free. "Let me go! My babies!"

"How many?" The fireman is calm but concerned. "Where would they be?"

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“Two. Alicia. Allison.” She struggles harder. Panicking and going into a numb shock. “I don’t know. Kitchen. Living room. Maybe upstairs.”

As her struggles fall to complete exhaustion, a neighbor takes her from the fireman and hugs her close. Regaining some strength, she struggles to get loose again, but he holds her tight and walks her over to the back of the fire engine for her own safety. She’s lost. Not knowing what to do. “The girls.” She mumbles. And then she screams right in his face with everything she has. “My girls!”

As the neighbor releases his grip and steps back startled, she jumps free and runs around him towards the burning house and her children. Another fireman sees her from the corner of his eye, drops the hose he was helping with, and catches her with both arms, holding her tight as she swings at him, hitting him in the face and head.

“My girls!” She cries. “My girls are in there.”

“Ma’am, it’s too hot. Let us do our job, please. I’ll send someone in to get them.” He jogs her to the back of the ambulance, and forcefully sits her down. “I promise, we’ll get them.”

A paramedic, recognizing that she’s in shock, throws a blanket over her shoulders to keep her warm in the cold, night air.

The fireman turns to a neighbor. “Get over here and make sure she stays.” He runs off at full speed, grabbing some gear and heading for the burning house.

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“No. You don’t understand. Alicia and Allison are home. They’re fourteen and ten.” She mumbles, becoming dazed and weak. “I left them alone to get spaghetti sauce and brownies.” Her voice gets even weaker. “It’s spaghetti night and we didn’t have any sauce.”

“Ma’am. I promise you. They’re looking.” The paramedic struggles to keep her from jumping up.

The neighbor comes back over and sits next to her, putting an arm around her firmly, holding her as tight as possible, making sure to keep her arms low so she doesn’t start hitting again.

Sitting on the edge of the rear of the ambulance, she’s crying and starts screaming out weakly for her girls. Her face is a mess, bloated and red. Long lines of tears run down from her eyes to her cheeks. She’s insane with grief. She’s completely unaware of anything happening around her. She can’t even feel the neighbors hold. She’s numb inside and out.

Rae stands far off to the side, near another fire truck. “Please...” She’s crying. “I can’t do this anymore.”

After many minutes of waiting, of watching the firemen get the fire under control and then systematically search through the house, working their way through and out the back, Rae walks to the back of the house, near the deck, which is now a pile of smoldering wood. The porch swing she had been sitting on earlier is gone. Just two chains hang from the scorched deck roof. Just outside the charred back door, she reaches

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down and moves some of the rubble aside, uncovering a large piece of blackened plywood that had once been part of the deck roof.

Rae's hair and dress dance violently as a sudden gust of wind attacks the back yard, screaming out and crying into the night. She turns and walks towards the trees into the darkness.

Two firemen come walking around the corner, searching everywhere, moving things, listening, looking. They have hope in their eyes. They stop and survey the area, noticing the exposed piece of plywood, barely touched by the fire. They each grab an end and flip it up and over. The two girls lay together underneath, the older holding the younger in a tight embrace. They're both burned beyond recognition.

4

The old man dreams of her again. She's bashing his skull in with a rock, her beautiful face smiling sadly as the rock crashes down on the back of his head over and over until he's dead.

He wakes in a sweat, his thinning grey hair sticking to his forehead. The room is dark and the old man is confused for a split second as he looks around. He laughs loudly, then coughs several times, clearing his throat. "Azrael." He chuckles and shakes his head. And then his smile immediately disappears. "Is it that time again?"

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Martin E Ericson Jr

The old man swings himself to the side of the bed, reaching out with a foot, tapping around with his toes to find the fuzzy slippers one of the boys got him last Christmas. He stands and stretches his arms to both sides, feeling a pleasant crack as his back loosens up. The room is just beginning to let the sunrise in as the old man slowly shuffles to the back wall. With blurry eyes, he feels for his small desk in the dark, and then leaning towards the French doors to the side of the desk, swings them open to greet the fresh morning air.

For several minutes he just stands on the back patio in his slippers and pajamas, the darkness of the early morning teasing him as the light flickers several times, getting brighter and brighter, until finally it's daylight.

“Ha.” Puffing out his old chest, he runs his fingers through the thinning, grey hairs in the center, pleased with himself.

His old eyes ache for a few seconds as he violently rubs them with his knuckles to clear his head. As his vision adjusts to the morning, he's surrounded by a bright light filling his world, forcing out the darkness that slept alongside him.

The old man yawns and stretches, taking in the fresh air drifting from down the beach and right up to his bedroom door. He walks back inside his room, now pleasantly lit by the sun coming through the open doors. He walks through his room and down the hall to the bathroom, where he does all the typical morning things people do to prepare for their day.

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Opening the bathroom door and coming back into the long hallway, he considers heading downstairs to get some water and maybe search out a little breakfast, but he decides there's no time to waste, this being such a beautiful day. His breakfast will have to wait.

The old man walks back into his bedroom, grabbing a half-empty bottle of water sitting on the small table at the side of his bed. He feels the bottle with both hands. "Hmmm... good enough." He grins and mumbles to himself as he walks to the desk and grabs a well-worn book with a big, red bookmark stuck about halfway through.

He walks out the French doors onto the patio, down a stone staircase, and out onto a trail of steps that ends where the beach begins. There's a large glass table just on the edge of his quiet little section of the beach. He sits in one of the chairs, setting his water and book down on the table. Reaching to the center of the table, the old man cranks open the large umbrella to block out the heat of the sun.

"Very nice." He sighs, leaning back in his chair, scratching his balding head and stroking his short, grey beard.

He's an old man going through the rituals of the morning wake up. He sits for a while enjoying the sounds of the beach and the warm breeze gently kissing his face. He finds the splash of the ocean tide and the sounds of the birds hypnotic. And as old men with nothing left to accomplish sometimes do, he's soon napping in his chair under his big umbrella.

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Hours pass, and before long, the sun is high in the sky and a sudden gust of wind causes the scattered sand to tickle his toes. A quick shiver runs through his body, and he wakes with a startle, snorting and clearing his throat. Wiping some sand from his face, he takes a quick look up and down the beach, having that feeling like he's being watched, that he's not alone. He smiles to himself and closes his eyes for a few minutes, lost in thought. He had been dreaming of his boys this time, the green field, and the good times they all shared as a family.

Suddenly, with an energy belying his age, the old man hops to his feet, leaving his untouched water and book on the glass table surrounded by bits of sand. He trots up the path and climbs the stone stairs, reentering his bedroom, stopping only to slip off his robe, and put on some pants and an old, faded t-shirt that says '#1 Dad', and heads down the stairs to the living room. He walks to the kitchen and makes himself some lunch, taking it over to the couch in the living room, and spends the rest of the afternoon flipping through channels on the TV.

Finally, after hours of boredom, the old man slowly gets up from the couch, stretching his legs, and after a quick stop in the bathroom, walks through the living room, and out through another set of French doors leading to the beach. He walks down the same stone path and back to his glass table, picking up his book and settling down for a good read. He takes a deep breath of beach air and closes his eyes for just a second, letting them burn the dryness away.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

In the blink of an eye, everything dims. Day becomes night. The night blackens further. The stars seem to flicker and dim. The air cools. The water goes cold. The sand becomes like ice.

Two hands, small and delicate, reach down from behind. Perfect, pale and soft, they hover at his neck, barely above his skin, trying to announce her presence without giving it away.

The fine hairs on the old man's arms electrify and stand. His eldest. His daughter. Azrael.

“Sorry I’m late.” Her soft voice is an immediate comfort. She walks around to the chair sitting to her father’s right. And as if all her energy has completely drained, she plops down, letting her bare feet dig into the cool night sand. “Have you eaten?” Her voice is girlish and fun, but thick with hidden sadness.

His eyes still closed, the old man senses her fake smile without having to look. He can hear it in her voice. Recently, this has become routine.

She takes a large brown bag from her lap and sets it on the table, unpacking several plastic containers of food and a couple of drinks with straws.

The old man opens his eyes and sits up properly. “So.” He purposely makes his voice softer. “No hug for your old dad?” He stares.

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She stares back, her big brown eyes blinking several times to keep the sand out. Her long, dark hair gently blows in the wind as the smile she arrived with is replaced by the real thing.

“Awwww. I’m sorry.” She leans to her left, getting closer, and gives her father a long, loving hug.

“So how’s my little Rae of sunshine been?” The old man sticks his neck out, inspecting the food she laid out for them.

She purposely ignores the question. “It’s Italian.” She unwraps a couple of forks. “I had a craving for garlic bread for some reason.”

“Mmmmm.” He feels his stomach wake up.

I got us spaghetti and ravioli and thought we could half and half it.” She places a few big spoon fulls of each on two paper plates. “And extra garlic bread because I couldn’t resist.” Tilting her head to the side, her eyes bulge and sparkle as she genuinely smiles at her dad.

“Yum.” The old man unwraps the plastic from a fork and uses it to scoop up a ravioli and pops it in his mouth. “Oh. Oh. Oh.” He opens his mouth, sucking in the night air.

“Careful. It’s hot.” With half a smile on her face, she scrunches her nose, feeling his pain.

He takes a quick drink from the straw and nods his head quickly. “Very.” He scoops up another ravioli and gently blows on it a couple times before carefully placing it in his mouth.

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They spend the next half hour eating and making small talk, nothing deep, nothing family. They talk about the house and how he recently hired a caretaker to help out with the place. She asks about the flower garden off in the side yard. He excitedly tells her of all the flowers and the success he's had this year with his garden, especially as compared to the last few years. It's all just small talk while they enjoy their dinner.

When finished, they sit in silence for a while, enjoying the sounds of the ocean. The old man leans back in his chair, feeling the elastic in his pants pulling against his full belly. Rae finishes the last piece of garlic bread, her sixth, and wipes the crumbs from her fingers on a napkin.

“That was delicious, Sunshine. I really needed that.” He smiles at his daughter with love in his eyes. “Thank you so much for stopping by.” He pats her on the knee twice, still leaning back in his chair.

“It was good, wasn’t it? I think that took care of my craving for garlic bread for about a hundred years.” She giggles. “Seriously.” She pats her tummy again and raises her eyebrows. “Maybe two hundred years.”

“Was it good?” He raises his eyebrows to match hers. “I didn’t get any.”

Rae sits up straight, her face going blank. “Really?” She looks around the table. “I ate all four pieces? Wow.”

“Six.”

“What?” She begins clearing the table, putting all the empty containers back in the paper bag.

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“You ate all six pieces.” He chuckles. “You ordered extra.”

“Hmmm. Really?” She tries to hide a smile and shrugs. “Well. Trust me... it was yummy.”

She finishes cleaning off the table and sets the paper bag filled with trash to the side.

“Hey.” Rae jumps to her feet. “Can we go sit down by the water. I need to talk to you about something.”

“And there it is.” The old man makes a pretense of looking all around. He smiles, and clears his throat. “And talking right here just wouldn’t work.”

“Nope.” Rae laughs, leaning over to give him a daughterly kiss on the cheek. She steps back, touching her lips with her fingers. “I don’t like the beard.” She scrunches up her nose.

The old man stands, patting his full belly through his shirt. “Really though, Rae... that was delicious. Thank you so much. Your brothers almost never bring food.” He returns her kiss on the cheek, and grabs his chair by the back, dragging it through the sand, following his daughter down to the water.

“Not even Mikey?” She acts surprised.

“Well... sometimes. He almost always brings some old-fashioned root beer though. Those small glass bottles.”

“Ha. Old fashioned.”

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Martin E Ericson Jr

Her father nods his head. “You know, the kind that tastes authentic, like it was made from some secret formula in someone’s basement, not a factory.”

“Ha. Maybe Mikey makes it himself.” She snickers.

“I seriously doubt that.” The old man chuckles. “Can you imagine? He’s got a little side gig making root beer.”

When they reach the edge of the incoming tide, Rae heavily plops down in the sand like a child, her long, black dress neatly splayed out in the wet sand as if she were posing for a photo.

The old man chuckles to himself, shaking his head, and places his chair right next to her, so his feet can enjoy the tide as it comes and goes.

“Your dress is going to get awfully wet if that’s where you plan to stay.” He sounds like a father fairly sure that his daughter isn’t going to listen, so why is he even bothering.

The tide rolls in and surrounds Rae with cold water for a few seconds and then it rolls back out. “That’s okay. I like it. It’s kinda refreshing.”

As the old man rolls up his pant legs, Rae playfully splashes cool water at his skinny, old legs. Then she uses her fingers to flick the water through the air at his face, and giggles like a child.

“Just like when you guys were kids, and you would purposely splash me just to get me to play.”

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The old man leans back in his chair closing his eyes yet again. He's always so tired lately. Rae's dark eyebrows pinch together in mock seriousness, studying her father's face. His forehead. His cheeks. His chin. She looks him over, barely recognizing him. She can no longer remember him as a young man or even a middle-aged man. And she finds that incredibly disturbing. It's as if he were never young. But she knows that's not true.

Without looking, he answers the question she's trying to summon. "It's the beard. I don't think I had it when you last visited." He reaches up, stroking the hairs on his face. "And it's gone grey. It's been quite a while you know."

Rae says nothing. She continues to swirl the water around her body when the tide rolls in, and then pull her fingers through the wet sand when the tide rolls out.

"Is everything okay, Sunshine?" The old man asks, opening his eyes and looking down at his daughter sitting quietly in the sand.

She looks just as she always has. Long, almost-black hair, beautifully pale skin, and big brown eyes. It never varies, except that this time her eyes look so sad that they threaten to show their real age. But nevertheless, she always manages to look young and beautiful. It's one of her gifts. They all have their gifts.

Rae takes a deep breath of ocean air, releasing it slowly. "So, have any of the boys been around lately?" Using a wet hand, she gently brushes

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some dried, white sand from her arm, using an index finger to quickly flick the sand away like miniature kicks.

“Your brothers?” The old man chuckles to himself. “Oh, they come and go as they please. Like always. But it’s just you and me tonight.”

He watches as his daughter grins wickedly to herself, her eyes sparkling against the black of night, outshining the moon itself. For just a few seconds she is who she’s supposed to be. There’s no pretense. No confusion.

“Well...” He thinks for a second. “Mikey was just here a few days ago. Checking on me. You know how he is.”

Without even looking up, Rae answers, her words echoing over her father’s as they share the same thought. “Protective.”

They both laugh.

“Of course. That’s who he is.” She looks up at her dad. “Did he bring some...” She giggles. “... old-fashioned root beer?”

He chuckles. “No. Not this time. He came and went fairly quickly. Grabbed something from his room and was off.”

She coughs once to clear her throat of a giggle, trying to regain her seriousness. “I haven’t seen him in ages. Any of them. Next time, tell him his sister misses him and says hi.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll run into him on your own, dear.”

Dipping her hand back in the cool water, she traces a finger up and down her leg, stopping at her knee, finding a small, long-forgotten scar,

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the only flaw she was given. It happened when she was playing big sister and protecting one brother from another in one of their childhood disagreements. They were all mortified when it happened. They didn't know it was even possible.

Furrowing her brow, she caresses the area with her thumb, gently and then more deeply. Concentrating. Wanting to erase the scar with a healing touch she doesn't possess. Unsuccessful, she pats her knee twice. Holding her hand in place, covering the scar, and grinning wildly up at her father. Caught doing the impossible by someone who knows.

“So what’s on your mind, Sunshine?” The old man watches as the water carefully moves around her, tugging at her dress, making it slowly dance in the tide. When he looks at his daughter he still sees the little girl she was, and in some ways, will always be.

Rae rises to her knees, letting them sink into the cold, wet sand under her full weight. She takes minutes to answer. “Do you ever get lost in it all?” Her voice is small, nearly hidden by the sounds of the ocean.

She looks down and puts both hands to her sides, feeling for the sand, letting her fingers playfully become one with the sand. Her full attention is now captured by the fine sand, like a child with a new discovery.

Then suddenly her face lights up. Her eyes get wide and wild. “The grey beard looks good on you though.”

He smiles weakly, stroking his beard a couple times.

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Her attempt to change the subject forgotten, her expression changes and she looks away. “I mean... do you ever forget who you are, what you are?” She risks a quick glance at her dad, to see his reaction, but then looks back to the sand and continues playing. “Why you do the things you do?”

It makes him sad seeing her like this. His only daughter, the first of those he calls his children. This isn’t what any father intends as they watch their child grow up. You try to guide them, gently push them in the right direction. And heaven forbid you push them too hard or hinder their ability to find their own path. Sometimes he regrets asking her to be who she is.

There’s a long pause as they listen to the tide come and go. Rae continues to play with the water and wet sand with her hands, while her father does the same with his toes.

“No.” He tries a small smile. “I don’t forget, though I have taken a wrong turn every now and then.” The wind picks up and the air gets even colder. “As for why we do the things that we do... I don’t have a good answer for that. We do... because we do.” He brushes some sand from his pants. “How about you? Is that why you’ve come?”

Rae thinks hard for a minute. “Who I am isn’t easy to forget.” She frowns down into the water pooling around her. “But I’ve forgotten why I am who I am... what the purpose of it all is.” She looks up to her father, her big brown eyes watery. “Because this can’t be it.”

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Nothing is said for a long time. Father and daughter sit, enjoying the cooling night and the quiet splash of the tide. Her eyes are just a little sadder than he can ever remember.

“Did I thank you for bringing dinner?” The old man isn’t sure what to say, what she needs to hear. He knows it won’t matter. “It was delicious and the company was wonderful... even if you kept all the garlic bread to yourself.” He tries another smile.

Rae looks up at her dad, her eyes threatening to tear up.

The old man sighs loudly, and then lets a few more seconds pass while gathering his thoughts. “We all have our part, Sunshine. Everyone. Some parts are just harder than others. Remember? I told you that when I asked you to do this for me. I said it would be difficult. And at the time, you were the strongest.”

Rae glances up the beach, back towards the house. “I’m still the strongest.” Her small hands dig deep into the wet sand. Searching. Digging. Pulling. She quickly looks up, a slight grin on her face. “But don’t tell Mikey. He’ll just get his feelings hurt.”

“If it’s too much, maybe I can get one of your brothers to take it on for a while. Maybe Gabe.” He wants to fix everything and give her a great big hug. He nearly does, but hesitates, knowing that usually the best way is to find your own way. “But I don’t think that would help, would it?”

The old man waits for an answer he knows won’t come. His heart calms and slows, searching for the rhythm of his daughter’s breathing.

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Finding the soft thump of her heart, he adjusts his own for the sake of harmony. He settles back in his chair, trying to get comfortable, and looks down the beach for a few seconds, just now realizing that they aren't alone after all.

He looks to the heavens and sighs powerfully, letting his lungs empty into the night air. The stars, like a million sets of eyes, blink out of unison in a sort of slow motion acknowledgement.

Rae glances up at the stars for a moment. "I'm tired dad. Just so tired."

"Rae. I don't know what to say." His voice is soft and sad. "You're my daughter. You can be anything. You can do anything. I've always told you that. I've told all of you that. Anything." He pauses. "I love you very much. You can make as many wrong turns as it takes. I know I did. But in the end, you'll never disappoint me. Because I have all the faith in the world in you. In all of you."

Rae continues to dig and search the sand with her small fingers. First she scoops backwards, letting the sand fall between her fingers beneath the small waves of the tide. Then she scoops forward, letting the sand wash from her outstretched palms, letting the water wash the dirt from her hands, making her feel clean again. She does this over and over. Dirty. Clean. Dirty. Clean.

After what seems like a lifetime of complete silence, the water has calmed, the wind has gone. The night is cold, silent, and dead.

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“It doesn’t make things any easier.” She whispers to herself.

Two brightly-lit, shooting stars cross the sky in an instant, disappearing far down the beach, just beyond the old man’s house. A beautiful explosion of light is instantly swallowed by the darkness of night. The moon fades. The stars dim to near black. Her brother’s friends have arrived.

“I know.” The old man leans far forward, reaching out and moves the hair from Rae’s eyes, pulling it behind an ear. “I get tired too, Sunshine. We all do.”

Their breathing stops. Their hearts shut down to a bare crawl. The old man seems older, slouching forward, his head down, unable to look his daughter in the eye.

Rae’s small hands cease their non-stop motion through the sand. She’s found what she’s been searching for. Cocking her head to the side, she pushes the sand aside before the water can silently swirl back in, covering her discovery.

“Dad...” She doesn’t finish. Suddenly her eyes gleam wildly. She smiles something false. She plays cute and playful, letting the years melt from her eyes. The sadness is now hidden by her pretense as she pulls a large rock from the sand. A rock made smooth from years of coarse sand and ever-churning water. She pulls her prize up to chest height and firmly grasps it between both hands. She smiles brightly, doing her best imitation of happiness.

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“Say hello to your brother for me.” The old man closes his eyes, his head still held low. “He shares your pain.”

Rae raises the rock far above her head and crashes it down on her father’s skull, killing him instantly. The light of the moon and stars flicker quickly, and everything goes pitch black for just a second.

5

Sam sits cross-legged on the beach near the stone path, just outside the old man's house. His long, brown hair dances like a halo around his head to the rhythm of the wind as he stares off into the night, completely lost in thought. He exhales loudly as the stars flicker and dim, and then the world goes black.

After a few minutes he clears his throat and speaks. "Hey." Sam looks to where the stars should be. "If you're out there listening... I'm going to need some help with this." Sam exhales deeply. "She's coming.

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And she's going to ask for help that I'm not sure I'm able to give. So I'm asking for yours. You know I don't like doing it... but I'm asking."

Sam sits for a minute listening to nothing.

"She's lost. And I can see where this is heading... probably because I've been there. I suppose we've all been there." He chuckles to himself. "It's not a good place, right? And I have a feeling this one's not going to end well. So if you give me a hand... or even a push in the right direction every once in a while... I'd really appreciate it."

A few seconds pass.

"And whether you're listening or not... thanks." He exhales. "But I'll bet you're listening."

And then the moon and stars fight through the darkness, again lighting the world, making it right again. Sam takes another breath, puffing out his cheeks, puckering his lips, and slowly blowing it out, watching as his warm breath fights its way through the cold air.

A minute later, a slim figure moves slowly towards him, directly from the ocean tide. Sam squints his eyes, making the world dim and become smaller, less threatening. Sometimes he wants to close his eyes completely and make it all go away. His hair blows across his face, partially hiding the intensity of his blue eyes. Out of the moonlight, he watches as she happily dances up the path from the beach, twirling and spinning on her toes, with her long, dark hair blowing wildly in the wind. As she gets

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closer, she does an awkward half cartwheel, landing hard on her butt right beside her brother.

“Ouch!” She rubs her hip. “That’s hard to do in a dress.” She laughs. “Hey Lucky. What’s new?” She flashes him a bright smile. “Dad says hi.”

Sam says nothing for a few seconds, deciding on he wants to do this.

Finally. “So what the hell...” Sam’s face remains unchanged as he points down towards the tide. “...was that all about.” His voice tries to sound hard, but only manages to sound bored.

Rae leans over and gives her brother a quick peck on the cheek. “It’s been a while, little brother.” Her voice is soft and girlish.

Sam sighs deeply as a show of annoyance. “Nice to see you too, Rae.” He plays with the rings on his right hand. Spinning them round and round.

“You’re upset with me.” Rae puts out her lower lip in a child’s pout. She lets her eyes drift around her brother’s face for a few seconds, studying him. Long brown hair, big blue eyes, full lips, and just the right amount of stubble to look like he’s not trying. “Still looking handsome as the devil.” She grins slyly.

Sam looks his sister right in the eye, still twisting his rings. “So...” He uses his head to point back towards the tide. “... how’s the old man?”

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Rae cocks her head to one side, thinking. She pulls her long, dark hair back in a makeshift ponytail, wrapping it around itself to keep it from the wind. “Dad and I are just playing.”

Sam forces another deep sigh. “You’re playing?” He gestures down to the water’s edge, from where she came. “That’s playing?”

Rae takes a quick glance towards where her father lays face down in the tide. “Yes. And I need your help.”

Sam says nothing for a few minutes, just staring ahead with a serious look on his face.

“Okayyyy.” Rae’s smile fades as she gestures towards the tide. “I’m sorry for that.” She pauses, thinking. “But it was necessary.” She looks down to the sand in front of them. “It’s part of my plan.”

Sam shakes his head slowly. “I don’t do plans.” He motions his head towards the tide. “Especially when it includes that.”

Rae’s face and voice harden. “Don’t play innocent with me, dear brother. You lost that right long ago.”

For several minutes they sit staring at each other in a stalemate of siblings that goes back to the very beginnings of their childhood.

Finally, moving some stray hairs from his face, Sam’s eyes brighten significantly as he gives her an angry look. “Still not interested.”

Rae tilts her head to the side and gives him her best sisterly smile. Then as they stare hard at one another, still firmly entrenched in that stalemate, her smile slowly drops as her eyes darken considerably.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

Sam blinks one long blink, collecting himself, not wanting to push this any further than he has to.

“This isn’t about dad. It’s about me.” Rae turns slightly away from her brother. “I… I need to do more than sit with them. I want to save them. Dad says leave them be.” She watches her brother out of the corner of her eye, hoping for a big reaction. She knows he’s had the same thoughts. Same feelings. “I’m… lost. I’m asking for your help.”

“You’re asking the wrong brother.” Sam looks over his shoulder and down the beach in the opposite direction. “Why me?”

Rae looks to where her brother is looking. “Your friends?” She tilts her head to the side. “I saw the lights. Don’t worry, I only need a few minutes.”

Sam looks back to his sister. “Ask someone else.”

Rae laughs loudly. “Yeah, I could just see that. ‘Hey Gabe, Mikey, I’m going to kill dad… and then save everyone.’” Her voice gets deeper. “Everyone. I have a plan. Wanna help?” She laughs even louder.

“So you think I’m the only one stupid enough to say ‘hey, sounds good… I’m in.’”

“Not at all.” She lightly punches his upper arm playfully. “It’s because you’re my favorite.” Rae smiles sweetly. “Just you and me… like the good old days.”

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Sam remembers when they were all kids and it was always him and Rae up against Mikey and Gabe in their sibling-versus-sibling games. Sam smiles broadly. “Yeah. Well. Still not interested.”

“Yeah right, little brother. You’re interested. Because it’s the right thing to do. And this is all crap and you know it. You’ve had this same argument with dad plenty of times.” She looks away, hanging her head low, hiding the sudden sadness in her eyes. “And together... we can get this done better than anyone.”

“Ha.” Sam makes an obvious, fake laugh. “I seriously doubt that.”

Rae’s head is still hung low as she turns and looks over to her brother and give’s him a knowing smile. “Yeah, well...”

Sam’s face goes blank. “Did you ask him?”

Her voice goes weak. “Kind of did.”

Sam grins knowingly. “And how’d that go?”

“Not face to face. I just, you know... asked.”

Sam nods, again knowingly. “And...”

“And nothing.” She remembers the young girls burning, causing her eyes to tear up. “He was a no show.”

“Hmmm.” He gives her a second. “Well... I’m not your first choice then.” His face softens and he gives his sister an ‘oh well’ smile. “And you do know it’s not who I am... or who you are.”

“Fair enough. Maybe it’s not who I am.” Rae chooses her words carefully. “But really, it is who you are... or at least, can be.” Her smile

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increases. “I got a good feeling about this. I’m not sure how I know, but I know.”

He gives her an odd look.

Rae uses her shoulder to bump his, knocking him playfully to the side. “Well? It’s who you could be if you wanted. Plus, dad said we could be anything we wanted. He just told me, right there, on the beach.” She lifts her arm to point down to the tide, but quickly changes her mind and awkwardly drops her arm to her side.

Sam looks down to the tide where their father’s body lay. He exhales forcefully, shaking his head. “The old man says a lot of things. He doesn’t always mean for us to take him so literal.”

“Trust me. I’m the oldest.” Rae grins like a child. “Did I ever steer you wrong?”

Sam can’t help but smile. “And the old man knows I’ll be part of this?”

“Of course he knows, silly.” Rae scrunches up her face at her brother. “You’ll spice things up. He’ll like that.”

“Right. And exactly how do I spice things up?”

“Just by being you.” Rae smiles wide and bulges her big brown eyes, raising her eyebrows. “You’ve got experience.”

They sit quietly for a few minutes, letting that sink in.

“You know he’ll know. He already knows.”

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“I just said he knows.” Rae’s voice again begins to show her irritation. She’s always had a difficult time with that.

Sam’s face goes blank.

In a heartbeat, Rae’s posture changes. Her eyes darken. Her smile is lost. “Yes. Yes. Yes. He’ll know. Of course he’ll know. But it’s a game and he’ll have fun with it. He fucking loves games. And he knows I need this.”

Again, Sam blinks slowly, collecting himself. “Didn’t look like he was having fun.” Sam gives his sister a serious stare. “And I don’t want any part of...” He gestures towards the beach. “... that.”

“That, my brother, is a distraction. Slight of hand.” She chooses to smile brightly, bringing her eyes back to a deep brown. She decides the best course might be to play the older sister still showing her little brother a thing or two. “And I don’t expect you to have anything to do with... that.”

“You really think you can distract the old man?” Sam laughs and shakes his head.

Rae shows the pout again. “Yes. And no.”

“Not a chance.”

She thinks for a second. “No. Of course not.” Rae looks at her brother for a minute. “But while he’s enjoying hanging out with the family... me...” She touches her brother’s shoulder. “We can accomplish

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my goal. Get things done.” Her face brightens. Her smile grows, becoming real.

“That’s ridiculous.”

Rae sighs hard, as if her brother were an idiot she’s forced to endure. “And why is that, dear brother?”

“You’re trying to distract someone who can’t be distracted… with a game that they already know the ending to. And…”

Rae puts a hand up to stop her brother. “Oh pish. You’re ruining it for me. Suspend your disbelief. Just go with it.”

They sit for a couple minutes while Rae continues to pout, refusing to look in her brother’s direction.

“Fine. Lets pretend none of that matters. Pretend.” He stresses the last word for his sister to better understand the insanity of it all. “And your end goal is….” Sam pauses, allowing his sister to finish the thought.

“To find myself.” She looks pleased, but sees the blank look on her brother’s face. “And to save everyone. I mean… this has all become crap and I’m not enjoying my part in it.”

“You’re lost.” It isn’t a question.

Rae’s smile slowly fades to seriousness. “Yes. We are. You. Me. Lost. We’ve been lost since… I don’t know… like forever.” She tries a small smile. “Maybe Mikey and Gabe still have a clue what they’re doing. But you and I… we don’t.”

“I assure you, I am not lost.” Sam’s voice is soft, but confident.

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“You’ve forgotten who you are. But I remember. You glowed with positivity. You were a beacon. And then you fell.” She thinks for a second, not really wanting to go all in on that. “And I’m not sure I ever knew who I am. Because this...” She waves a hand in the air. “... doesn’t feel right anymore. I don’t think it ever did.”

“Rae. I know who I am. I know who you are. I know who everyone is.” Sam is starting to regret allowing this conversation to happen.

“Little brother...”

“Don’t patronize me, Rae.” Sam wants to walk away and be done with this, but that’s not what the old man would want. He’s absolutely sure of that.

“I’m sorry.” Rae calms herself, feeling like she’s losing her brother. “Fine. You know who you are. But you can help me find me. Because that’s what brothers and sisters do for each other. Family. They help one another when things get tough.”

“And we save everyone.” Sam repeats. “From...” He waves a hand in the air for her to continue.

“Everyone.” Rae extends both arms up and out to show what she means. “From themselves. From each other.” She grins wildly. “Free will is a bitch. They can be...” she drops the smile. “... pretty horrible... as you of all people know.”

“Hmmm.” He considers. “And that helps you... find you?”

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“I guess. I hope.” Her face remains blank, almost hard. “One by one we save them all.” Rae finishes her thought. “And in the process, we become something… different. Better.” Rae finishes, pushing her bottom lip to a pout.

There’s an awkward pause as Sam does his best to wrap his mind around things. “And the old man is okay with all this?” Sam puts his ring back on, feeling like it’s time for this talk to end.

“I don’t know.” She points wildly towards the tide. “Why don’t you go ask him yourself?”

“Not funny, Rae.”

Without turning her head to look behind her, Rae whispers. “Perfect timing. Your little friends are here.” She makes no attempt to hide the big-sister condescension.

Sam gives his sister an irritated look. She can be so difficult.

From behind him, Sam feels small hands touch his shoulders on both sides. Rae hops to her feet, brushing the sand from her long black dress. She gives the two young women standing at her brother’s back a fleeting smile.

“Who the fuck are you?” The young woman to Sam’s right challenges.

“Charming.” Rae smiles and just stares for a few seconds, and then cocks her head to the side, realizing. “This is the first time we’ve met.” She looks down to her brother.

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“You were already out...” Sam gestures into the air. “... doing your thing... when the twins came along.” He glances up at his sister. “After Michael...” His face saddens. “... they mostly stayed away.”

“Well?” The young woman continues to challenge.

“Would you really like to find out?” Rae’s eyes darken considerably. “Better be sure.”

Sam puts a hand up, stopping anything more from happening.

“So... Sam... you in?” Rae hasn’t taken her eyes off her brother’s rude companion.

“Fine.” Still sitting in the sand, he glances over his shoulder and then to his sister.

Still staring at the rude, young woman, Rae doesn’t move or say a thing, debating whether she should make his little friend an example of just how serious she is about all this. Maybe it’ll be her first step in finding herself.

“Rae.” Sam’s voice is soft.

Rae’s voice instantly becomes girly and playful. “I’m just messin’ around.” She winks at the young woman. “Nice to meet you. I feel like I’ve known the two of you forever.” And then she looks down to her brother. “See you soon, then.”

Rae leans over and gives her brother a small hug, then immediately turns and walks away into the darkness. Suddenly she stops, somewhat hidden in the darkness, but doesn’t turn to face her brother. “We start

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small. One by one until we're ready. Work our way up." She cocks her head to the side. "After all... we've got all the time in the world."

Sam remains sitting in the sand as he and his two young friends watch Rae elegantly fade into the night.

"You left without us." The young woman who confronted Rae is slightly shaken by her confrontation. Which is an unusual feeling for her.

"I had a meeting." Sam is still considering everything his sister had to say.

"Still. You should've let us know, or at least..." She trails off not knowing what to say.

The other young woman clears her throat. "Who was that?" She points to the darkness. She has an idea. "She's not one of them."

Sam pulls himself to his feet, his clear blue eyes lighting up the night. Standing between his two friends, he brushes the sand from his pant legs. "We should probably get started."

6

Rae sits alone at a small table in a musty old bookstore, the kind that passes used books from generation to generation. She's casually flipping through the pages of a large black book without actually noticing the large black book. The pages are just blurs of dark words on yellowing paper as she turns them, not reading, but pretending to be interested in something other than what is happening all around her.

This is the third time she's been here. Waiting. Twice now, the bookshelf toppled, crushing the little boy.

Sam never showed.

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“Where is he?” She mumbles, looking around the large shop filled with tall bookcases filled top to bottom with old books.

Twice now, she sat with the boy and held his hand as he passed, and then she took him home.

Still, she sits here at her small table, outwardly content, with a happy smile on her face, an expectant smile. Just like last time. She knows he’ll show. He just hasn’t been ready. This is his first time with a new role. He’s nervous.

A mother isn’t paying much attention to her little boy as he plays at the bottom of a huge bookshelf full of dust and books. She’s looking through a bin of books made for bedtime reading and sees a few things her son might enjoy. He doesn’t really pay attention when she reads, but she enjoys it and thinks he probably enjoys it in his own way. He usually sits in his bed playing with his toys while she sits on the edge of the bed, leaning in a little, reading a short story or two from a picture book. After every page, she’ll show him the pictures, and he’ll look up from whatever toy he brought to bed with him to see the pictures mom is making such a fuss about. Right now he’s really into police cars, ambulances, and fire trucks.

Rae fidgets at the table, twirling her long hair between her fingers, and biting at her bottom lip. She can’t do this herself. It’s definitely not who she is. Her failure with those two little girls in the fire comes to mind. “Come on, Sam.”

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She surveys the room for the hundredth time, searching for her brother. After two no-shows, two complete failures, you think she'd be pessimistic, but she's not. She may be nervous, and she's definitely a little annoyed, but she's sure Sam will show this time. Just like she was sure the last time and the time before.

She fidgets more with her hair. And finally, Rae cannot contain herself any longer. "God damn you, Sam. Where are you?"

Right now, the little boy is quietly sitting on the floor with a small assortment of books. He's four with a dark brown bowl cut, with bangs nearly touching his eyes.

He turns pages in a book, quickly loses interest, and tosses it aside. He finds another book and does the same. Finally, he clumsily climbs to his feet, pulls up his pants a little and fiddles with the ties on the front that have come somewhat loose. Then, changing his focus in an instant, he looks around just to see what he can see. Seeing nothing of interest, he stares straight up and starts flipping his head back and forth, causing his hair to swing against his chubby little cheeks.

This is the third time Rae has watched him do this exact routine. Of course, nothing changes. It's not a different scenario. It's the exact same time and place. Yet she finds him more and more fascinating each time. She leans back in her chair, looks up, and starts flipping her hair back and forth to see what he gets out of it. She laughs quietly to herself. It makes her feel weird, a little dizzy. So she stops.

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“Kids are weird.” She grins and shakes her head, secretly enjoying their weirdness.

The little boy wanders over to the table next to his mom. She has a small stack of books she’s set aside as possibles for reading time. He grabs a book, flips it open to a random page, and seeing big colorful pictures, grabs it and walks away.

Just like every time, the little boy comes up to the table Rae is sitting at, and while completely ignoring her, pulls out the chair across from her, climbs up on it, and sits down. After much squirming, trying to get comfortable, because he’s a four-year-old, he places his book in front of him and starts flipping through the pages. Then, as if noticing her for the first time, he looks up and smiles, but then immediately returns to his book.

Each time this has happened, Rae smiles back at him softly, just to be nice. And each time he kind of smiled back thinking she didn’t notice. But this time Rae smiles, and just to switch things up, waves her fingers at him, like a child waving at another child. His smile immediately goes away and he looks back down at the book, completely ignoring her. He flips another page and giggles wildly at a monkey on a firetruck.

Rae sighs, bored with waiting.

The boy risks a quick peek up at her without actually moving his head.

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“Come on Sam. We’re starting with an easy one.” She mumbles, getting more and more anxious as each minute passes. “I need this. We need this.”

The little boy looks back up at her. Staring this time. Probably wondering why the crazy lady’s talking to herself. She stares back and crosses her eyes and sticks out her tongue, hoping to make a connection.

The boy looks over at his mom, back to Rae, and then back down to his book. He’s not amused.

Rae sighs, and takes another quick look around the room for her brother. No luck. Again, choosing a different approach, Rae looks down at the little boy and clears her throat awkwardly.

The little boy looks up at her, a blank look on his little face.

“Good book?” She asks.

He says nothing back. His eyes go wide. He hops from the chair and runs over to his mother, tugging frantically at her shirt until she finally gives him her attention. He doesn’t say a thing, but points over in Rae’s direction. But she’s gone. She’s no longer seated at the table. All that remains is her big, black book of words laying open just across from the little boy’s open picture book.

Rae stands in the far corner, a good 40 feet away, far out of the little boy’s view. “Nice one Rae.” She whispers. “I’m usually so good at this.” She sighs. “When they’re already gone.”

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The little boy's mom gives him a half hug and a kiss on the cheek. She pushes his bangs away from his eyes and whispers something to him. He looks back to the empty table and back up to his mom and gives her a big smile.

Rae, unhappy with herself, looks around the room one more time. She takes a couple steps out of the shadows so she can look around one of the heavy, oak bookshelves.

Then she sees him, and her whole body relaxes. Her brother. Sam. "Finally." She mumbles angrily through gritted teeth. "Sure took your time."

Sam's sitting in the same chair she had been sitting in. Rae's giddy with excitement and can't help but laugh out loud, causing several people to look over at her, wondering what's so funny.

Sam looks comfortable sitting at the little table. That's her brother in a nutshell. Comfortable. Confident and comfortable. But she wonders why it took him so long.

Rae scrunches her face as she notices that he brought his two companions with him. The obnoxious one is standing behind him, leaning against the wall, feigning boredom while watching everyone. The quiet one is sitting with him, just to his right, flipping through a book she found on the table.

Sam's just sitting there, casually flipping through the big, black book she left behind. The little boy wanders back over and pulls himself

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up onto the chair he had been sitting in earlier, now across from Sam and his friend.

The boy considers Sam for a few seconds, staring at him, a smile growing on his little face. “You’re funny looking.” He giggles. “Sparkly.”

“I am?” Sam laughs quietly and makes a funny face with his eyes and nose.

Rae laughs out loud again. “Are you kidding me?” She mumbles, snickering to herself.

A young man with dark sideburns and an unkempt mustache looks over and smiles at her. Rae’s so excited about what is about to happen that she smiles back a little too much, giving the young man a kind of crazed look. His face goes blank. He puts his book down and scurries around the bookshelf in the opposite direction.

Rae cocks her head to the side, somewhat amused by his reaction.

The little boy is flipping through his book again. He looks up and smiles at Sam again. Sam smiles back and gives him a little wave. The little boy’s smile gets wider, and after first looking over to his mom, he gives Sam a little wave back. Sam’s quiet friend, sitting next to him, smiles sweetly at the little boy, and he smiles back happily.

Rae puts her bottom lip out in a pout. “So that’s how it’s going to be.”

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The little boy turns the book so it faces Sam. He points at something on the page, and both he and Sam laugh quietly. Sam leans back in his chair, rocking back on two legs. Again, he's comfortable.

“See. You can do this.” Rae whispers. “I told you this is who you can be.”

Still leaning back in his chair, Sam glances over his shoulder, sensing his sister standing in the shadow of a huge bookshelf. He gives her a wide grin and a sly wink.

The little boy closes his book, and with it firmly in hand, hops from the chair and meanders over to his mom. He's not scared like when he encountered Rae. He's just a kid with a kid's energy, unable to sit still for too long. The boy places his book back on the pile next to his mother. She looks up from the book she's looking through and smiles at her little boy. He says something to his mom and points back at Sam, still rocking back in his chair on two legs. The mom smiles and waves politely at Sam.

Sam waves back.

“Seriously? Are you freakin' kidding me?” Rae shakes her head. “Just another one of your gifts, right Sam.” She's smiling proudly. “You charming son of a bitch.”

The little boy wanders over to one of the giant bookshelves. Old-school bookshelves made of real wood filled with tons of dusty, old books.

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Rae is confused, she looks over at Sam, still sitting at the table, not even watching, flipping through the big black book in front of him.

“Just do it now. Save him. Why wait?” She mumbles. “No one’s watching. Do your thing, whatever that is.” She scrunches her eyebrows together, narrowing her eyes. “What is your thing?” She wonders how this will happen.

Rae looks back to the little boy. He’s playing on the step ladder the staff uses to get books off the top shelves. He’s hopping from one step to the next. She looks over at Sam who’s still flipping through the pages of that damn book she left behind.

“It wasn’t that interesting, you idiot.”

“Look mum.” The boy waves at his mom just a few feet away. He’s up on the fifth step.

But his mom is lost in a stack of books, sorting them, trying to keep the overall cost down. She doesn’t want to spend an arm and a leg on books, knowing very well that he’ll outgrow them quickly at his age.

The four-year-old moves up to the sixth, seventh, and then eighth step on the ladder. He looks down and gets a little scared. His chubby little hands grip the rails more tightly as he steps up to the next step. Then a couple steps more.

He looks over to his mom. “Look mum. Look.” He tries taking a hand from the rail to wave at her, but thinks better of it and doesn’t. “I’m a giant.”

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Rae looks around. No one is paying any attention. Everyone has their nose stuck in a book. “What the hell’s wrong with you people?” Her voice is a little too loud.

Now the little boy is at the top step of the ladder, looking around at the books way up there. He sees some bright green and red books just out of reach. He puts a foot on the shelf and grabs hold of a book to steady himself. The book pulls loose and he steps back to the ladder.

Normally, Rae just watches. It’s who she is. As sad as she gets, she knows she’s only there for the end. She normally just watches things unfold. In the past, she’s remained fairly indifferent, but recently she’s pleaded for a rescuer that never came. She even made a small effort on her own to change the inevitable. But this time is different. She has clear expectations. A rescuer has arrived. Earlier she was giddy with excitement because Sam was finally there and this was their first time. But now she’s confused. She’s excited for the rescue, but Sam is just sitting there, doing nothing. She wants to go over and grab that God-damned book from his hands and smack him in the face with it.

“What are you waiting for?” She’s confused.

Sam remains at his table, flipping through the book as if each page was more interesting than what they were actually here to do.

The little boy inches forward on the top step and tries for the shelf again, this time grabbing hold of the shelf above with both hands and pulling himself up onto it, his little feet finding room on the shelf just in

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front of the old dusty books. The bookshelf wobbles quite a bit now. It's old. The wood is old. The fasteners holding the shelves together are old. And the hundreds of books are really heavy. Add a forty pound little boy and the bookshelf creaks and groans. It cracks and wobbles.

Finally, a woman across the small shop yells out and points to the little boy. The young man with the unkempt mustache runs towards the shelf to steady it. The little boy's mom, startled by the commotion, turns and sees her son clinging to the shelf as it seems to fall in slow motion, pushing the step ladder to the side. Before she can even move from her table, the heavy oak shelf crashes to the ground, crushing everything in its path, books tumbling from the shelves and scattering across the floor. Dust filling the air.

The young man trying to steady the shelf is forced to jump out of the way for fear of being crushed. A heavy-set man runs over, and the two men start tossing books out of the way, making room for them to grab the heavy shelf and pull it off the little boy.

But it's too late.

A woman screams and another cries as the bloodied little boy's body is pulled from the wreckage. The boy's mother shoves people aside and pulls her boy close to her chest as she sobs uncontrollably, making painful screeching sounds as she clings to his dead body.

Rae sits in her darkness holding the little boy's hand, rubbing it gently. He looks up at her and smiles. He's warm and comfortable.

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Rae smiles back and leans down a little, looking him directly in the eyes. “You stay here with me for just a second. You’ll be fine. I promise. I’ll be right back.”

And without leaving her darkness, still holding tightly to the little boy’s hand, Rae leaves the darkness, approaching her brother from behind.

“What the fuck was that all about?” Rae is extremely angry as she aggressively pulls her brother from where he sits doing nothing.

His companion leaning against the wall jumps, startled, but stays where she is as she sees the darkness pouring from Rae’s eyes. The quiet one jumps to her feet, but just to get out of the way. The two of them have only experienced fear once before. They’re unsure what to do.

There is crying in the background. The mother screams and wails as she holds her little boy. Someone frantically calls 911.

Rae pulls her brother to the side, into the shadow of a huge bookshelf. She says nothing, just extending both hands in front of her in a ‘I don’t even know what to say’ gesture.

“Calm down, Rae.” Sam’s voice is soft and controlled.

“This is calm, Sam.” Rae’s voice is hard and angry. “You don’t want to see not calm right now.”

Sam sighs.

“What the hell was that all about.” She takes several deep breaths, slowly exhaling, trying to compose herself. “First you don’t show. Twice. And then this...” She gestures to the small crowd surrounding the mother

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and child. “... bullshit.” Her teeth are clenched hard. She stands a little close and therefore has to look directly up at him. All the boys in her family, other than the youngest, are well over six foot, while she chose to be exactly five foot because she enjoyed the nice, round number.

Sam suddenly loses his natural confidence, looking confused, unsure. He exhales loudly. “I don’t know how to do this, Rae. This isn’t who I am. I don’t care what you say. It’s not who I am. I didn’t... not... do anything. I just didn’t know how to do it.”

Rae’s face softens as she tries another approach. She kind of understands, remembering the two little girls. “Sam. Do I ever lie? Do we ever lie?” She smiles and takes both his arms gently in her hands. “Any of us. Do we ever lie?”

Sam shakes his head slowly, feeling like a child being lectured by his older sister.

“Then trust me. I believe in you. You can do this.” She smiles through gritted teeth. “We can be whatever we want to be.”

“Then you do it.”

“I... I don’t know how.” Her gritted smile fades away. “I can’t explain. It’s not who I am. And I don’t know how to get there... even if it is possible. And it is... but for you. I’ve gotten too far from it, but you’re not.”

Sam smiles back weakly, choosing to ignore his sister’s hypocrisy. “Then help me. What do I do? How do I do it?”

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Rae forgets herself, and her voice gets hard again. “You’re the fucking light bringer. Forget your fall. Just bring some... fucking... light.” She takes another deep breath. “I’m sorry.” She lets her voice calm. “Just be you. Just be that little boy I grew up with. Forget everything that came later. Be a beacon. It’s who you are... can be.”

“Rae. I’ve never done this before.” He’s appealing to his big sister, just like when they were kids. “I mean... do I stop them from even coming in the store? Do I climb up the shelf and grab the boy before it falls?” His voice gets more and more agitated and the words tumble out quicker and quicker. “Do I stop them from leaving their house today? Or maybe I stop the world from spinning, sprout wings, and fly him away to safety?”

Rae smiles and chuckles lightly in an attempt to calm her brother. “I like that last one. But I think it might be pushing things. Freak people out.”

Sam just stares at his sister blankly.

Rae keeps her hands on Sam’s arms, squeezing gently. “First. Lose the twins because they’re freaking me out.” She glances towards the two of them.

“Fine.” Sam’s companions walk off into the shadows, no longer in the small book shop.

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“Now. Do what makes sense, but keep it subtle. We don’t want to draw too much attention.” She cocks her head to the side and gives her brother the warmest smile she has. “So, can we try this again? Please?”

Sam nods, comforted by his sister’s belief in him. That’s the big sister he grew up with.

Rae smiles softly, and her big, brown eyes tell Sam that she does have faith in him.

The little boy inches forward on the top step and tries for the shelf again, this time grabbing hold of the shelf above with both hands and pulling himself up onto it, his little feet finding room on the shelf just in front of the old dusty books. The bookshelf wobbles quite a bit now. It’s old. The wood is old. The fasteners holding the shelves together are old. And the hundreds of books are really heavy. Add a forty pound little boy and the bookshelf creaks and groans. It cracks and wobbles.

Finally, a woman across the small shop cries out and points to the little boy. The young man with the unkempt mustache runs towards the shelf to steady it. The little boy’s mom, startled by the commotion, turns and sees her son clinging to the shelf as it seems to fall in slow motion, pushing the step ladder to the side. Before she can even move from her table, the heavy oak shelf crashes to the ground, crushing everything in its path, books tumbling from the shelves and scatter across the floor.

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men start tossing books out of the way, making room for them to grab the heavy shelf and pull it off the little boy.

There is no crying. Nothing. Not a sound.

The two men struggle to lift the shelf, but it's much too heavy.

They quickly clear some more books. The mother has joined them, crying and making unintelligible sounds as she rips at the books and throws them aside. The two men again grab the shelf, struggling until the young woman who yelled jumps in and helps while simultaneously dialing 911.

The boy's mom now sobbing and screeching his name, scrambles beneath the shelf as the trio is still lifting and sliding it out of the way. It's much too heavy to lift any higher, so they lift it a few feet and slide it sideways, allowing for the boy's mom to grab him and pull him free. But she doesn't see him.

They all expect the worst, but find nothing. They toss more books aside. They dig through the nearby books that fell from the top shelves. Nothing.

“He was up there.” The young woman is still talking to 911, but lets the phone drop to her side, still in her hand. “I saw him on the top before it fell.” She looks around the area.

The boy's mom, confused and crazed, starts screaming and sobbing uncontrollably. Then she goes numb.

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Everyone stands around not knowing what to do. They kick books aside, move tables, the two men go to the downed shelf they moved off to the side and check it over once more.

Sam stands in the shadows near the small table where he'd been sitting. He's not sure what to do. He's not sure what happened. Everything happened so quickly. Then he feels a warmth go through him from head to toe. He looks down to see that he's holding the little boy's hand as they stand side by side. The boy has a red book and a green book held beneath his other arm. He's happy.

Sam exhales loud and long. He bends down on one knee and whispers something to the boy. They both laugh quietly at their little secret.

The boy runs out of the shadows and directly to his stunned mother. "Mum! Mum!"

Everything at that point seems to happen in slow motion. The mom spins around hearing the voice of her little boy. She cries even harder, pulling her son into the strongest hug she has to offer. Everyone stands where they are, stunned for a few long seconds. Then they hug each other in shock, tears of relief running down their faces. The heavy-set man drops to a sitting position on the floor, crossing himself and looking around into the creeping shadows of the many bookshelves.

"He's okay!" The woman excitedly yells into the phone at the 911 operator. Shock sends a numbness throughout her body as she sets the

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phone on a nearby table and collapses into a chair relieved. “He was thrown clear. It’s a miracle.” She looks to the ceiling. “Thank you.”

Still unnoticed in the shadows, Sam stands from his kneeling position near the small table, and quietly leaves through the back door and out into an alley. There’s a small bounce in his walk as he whistles lightly. His confidence and comfort are back.

In all the commotion of the people in the small book store happily crying and hugging one another, Rae sits quietly at the table where she began. She’s cross-legged on the heavy wooden chair, flipping through the big book, smiling like she hasn’t smiled in a really long time. She gets a giddy shiver down her spine.

The little boy, still wrapped in his mother’s arms, looks over to Rae, and gives her a big smile and a child’s wave.

7

Sam sits in a small coffee shop, just a short walk from his father's house on the beach. It's a beautiful morning, and he has a huge, happy smile on his face. Everything went well. Rae was right. The old man was right. We can change. We can be whatever we want to be. He grins wide, and nods his head in acknowledgment at a young couple passing, on their way to the counter.

Sam likes the coffee shop. He likes watching the various people come and go. He likes watching the people sitting in their overstuffed chairs, surrounded by heavy wooden tables. People sip their drinks and

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work on their laptops, tablets, and smart phones, usually without ever acknowledging one another with anything more than a passing glance and fleeting smile.

Sam finds that fascinating. In the coffee shop, everyone has their own little world, surrounded by soft music and the aroma of freshly brewed coffee. Except for occasionally holding open a door, or a brief smile, people come and go while happily ignoring one another.

Sam smiles and nods at an old woman passing by. She doesn't even bother to return the sentiment, just giving him a look as if he had rudely interrupted her day.

“Ha!” Sam laughs loudly, shaking his head.

His two friends, Nyssa and Tegan, twin sisters, are up near the counter waiting for their drinks. The three of them come here quite often for Nyssa's tea, a coffee for Tegan, and something sweet and chocolatey for Sam. He also enjoys the little lemon cakes with the sugary glaze, but they're out today, which would normally make him sad. But not this morning. This morning, nothing could take the smile off his face. He imagines this is what it feels like to be his brother, Gabriel.

Three college students pack up their laptops and leave the small couch just in front of the large shop window, facing the sidewalk. Sam hops up from the small table he's sitting at, rushes over, and grabs a seat on the couch, sitting dead center to save the two spots to both his sides for his friends.

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Besides a heavy, wooden table sitting directly in front of the couch, Sam now has a clear view out the window onto the sidewalk and busy street. Well, as busy as a small town can get. As a bonus, the door is just to the right of the window, so he can continue his people watching as they come and go. And he'll provide a smile to everyone he can, regardless of whether they want it or not.

Still showing his big grin, Sam looks over his shoulder to where Nyssa and Tegan are waiting for their drinks. Waving his arm in the air to get their attention, he points down to the couch and gives them a thumbs up, and as if it were possible, an even bigger grin. His excitement has overcome his usual calm cool.

Both Nyssa and Tegan notice his child-like enthusiasm right away. Nyssa gives him a slight smile and a nod. Tegan just glances over, acknowledging Sam with a barely noticeable, but not unexpected, eye roll.

Sam chuckles at the eye roll, not letting it change his mood in the least. The three of them have been good friends for nearly forever. Technically, they're sort of like cousins, in a way that would only make sense in his oddball family. He brings them just about everywhere, because he enjoys their companionship. He despises being alone with no one to talk to, no one to share experiences with. Besides his immediate family, the twins know him better than anyone. They were there for the good times, and unfortunately, also the bad.

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Sam shifts slightly on the couch, leaning an arm over the back, so that he can get a better view of the small coffee shop. He sees an old woman in a baseball cap staring up at the menu board. There's a mother with two teen girls looking into the glass display holding cakes and cookies.

Sam stretches his neck, looking closely, to make sure they haven't set out more of the lemon cake. He sighs in disappointment.

Just off to the side, Sam notices a pretty, young woman with long, perfectly straight, blonde hair casually watching Nyssa out of the corner of her eye. She has a small smile on her face as if she has a secret just waiting to get out. She's wearing baggy-fit, boy jeans and short, black motorcycle boots, and has a bunch of bangle bracelets around both wrists. And every finger, including both thumbs, has a silver ring on it of various designs. Some have two.

Sam glances down at his own ring-covered fingers. Gifts from his father. He almost wants to go over and compare rings, just for fun.

Nyssa finally notices the blonde woman and lets out a small snort. The young woman reminds her of a female version of Sam.

The young woman is wearing an oversized, black t-shirt with a cartoon, red devil showing his big butt, while covering his mouth with his hand in mock embarrassment. Unlike most young women her age, she seems completely comfortable with herself, yet there is something uncomfortable about her. Or at least, that's the feeling Sam gets from her.

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And he's been people watching for a long time, so he's become a pretty good judge of people.

Nyssa glances over to Sam, and chuckles to herself. She likes the girl's style. And she loves the shirt. She needlessly looks down at what she's wearing. It's the usual, a plain black hoodie, black jeans, and black boots. Her sister wears the same. It's a twin thing. She's a little disappointed, and sighs. She wants that red devil t-shirt.

Nyssa is petite with short, spiky, trendy hair and a simple, pretty face. She has her mouth firmly closed, her thin lips buried in one another, which makes her angular cheeks sink in and causes her chin to point out in defiance. Like the blonde, Nyssa wears no makeup. Unlike the blonde, Nyssa is relatively ordinary looking, only her clothes and hairstyle make her stand out from the usual coffee shop crowd.

At this point, Sam notices the young woman's shirt, and smiles to himself. He watches as Nyssa looks down to her own plain, black shirt, and then over to the blonde woman.

"No, no, no Nyssa... we can do without the satire." Sam mumbles to himself, still showing a big smile. Still people watching.

As if just now noticing the attention put towards her, the young woman gives Nyssa the sweetest of looks. Her innocence and warmth shines through, like Sam has rarely seen before.

And Nyssa being Nyssa, she chooses to completely look past the young woman, not wanting to draw attention to herself. That's so Nyssa.

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Her real goal is always to remain unnoticed. She enjoys being alone even in large groups. Like her twin sister, she's here to keep Sam company, and really nothing else. She always brings a book and sits near Sam, in the corner if possible, and quietly reads while he enjoys the people.

Finally, the young woman receives her drink and proceeds to walk back to her seat, just off to the right of the cakes and cookies. On the way, she nearly bumps into a tall, blond man in a brown, leather jacket, waiting for his order. "Excuse me." She politely smiles.

"Oh, I'm sorry. My bad." He returns a mirror of her smile, and steps just off to the side to let her pass.

Tossing her oversized, denim purse onto an empty chair, she chuckles to herself, shaking her head and smiling widely. She pulls out a small, purple notebook and pen, and goes to work.

Nyssa hears a voice call out. "Small black tea."

She freezes, holding her breath, and listens intently for the name.

"Nyssa." The barista sets the drink on the counter, shooting a friendly smile at Nyssa, and immediately goes to work on the next drink.

Nyssa takes her drink and walks over to a smaller counter off to the side and grabs a handful of napkins, quickly folding them into the front pocket of her hoodie. She spins towards the sofa and nearly knocks into a short, middle-aged woman with a bright red bow in her hair. She has both hands wrapped around a frothy drink overflowing with whip cream.

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“Sorry.” Nyssa mumbles awkwardly as she moves to where Sam is sitting.

“It’s all right, sweetie. We’re good.” The woman’s bright smile is made even whiter set against the beautiful, mocha color of her skin.

Sam sees Nyssa coming and pats the sofa just to his left, motioning for her to sit down. She slides around on the sofa a bit, making a show of it, moving into a more comfortable position before pulling her legs up underneath her and blowing gently on her tea.

Sam turns and gives her a boyish smile. “You know...”

“Yeah, I know. Cool shirt. Don’t worry.” Nyssa pulls out her book and places it on her lap. “Not going to get one.”

“Oh, well, that’s not what I was going to say. But yeah...” Sam trails off, looking over his shoulder, wondering what’s taking Tegan so long.

Tegan is Nyssa’s twin. Identical twins that look a lot alike, but different enough to be different. Tegan’s face is rounder, while Nyssa’s is narrow and angular. Both are petite young women with dark brown hair cut short in places and left longer in other places, for a trendy look that isn’t part of any trend. It’s like they had their hair cut by the same person at the same time, but as opposite sides of the same head. Matching but different. That’s Nyssa and Tegan.

Tegan moves to where Nyssa had been standing just moments ago. Unlike the calm blending in of her sister, Tegan makes a show of

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impatiently waiting for her drink. Every time a drink and name are called, she makes her frustration known that the drink is not hers, and that she'll have to wait just a little longer. She huffs aggressively, and changes her stance, crossing her arms in obvious annoyance.

“Two hot chocolates. Chris.” The girl slides both drinks onto the counter, seeing a tall, good-looking man in a brown, leather jacket. As he approaches, his longish, blond hair falls across his eyes. For just a second, the barista pauses what she’s doing and gives him her biggest smile, blushing just a bit. And then she immediately goes to work on the next drink, still watching him out of the corner of her eye.

Sam’s ears perk up and he glances over his shoulder over the back of the couch, stretching his neck, interested. But standing directly in his way is the woman with the red bow in her hair. She smiles warmly.

The tall man smiles softly at Tegan as he edges around her and grabs his two drinks. She catches herself smiling back for some reason. Something she just doesn’t do naturally. Then her frown returns as she purposely pulls her eyebrows together, annoyed that she’ll have to wait even one second longer for her drink.

“Excuse me.” The man holds his drinks up high as he slides past her. “I seem to be getting in everyone’s way today.” He grins boyishly.

Tegan notices that he smells wonderful, like an open field of spring flowers, and wonders what soap he uses. She watches as the man quickly walks to the side counter setting down the hot drinks, blowing on

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his hands while shaking them out, and grimacing in mock pain. He grabs a handful of napkins and two sleeves to put on the cups so he doesn't burn his hands again.

The show finished, Tegan storms up to the counter, nearly bumping off a round woman holding what was the last piece of glazed lemon cake on the way. She snorts, thinking of Sam's disappointment. Then, pulling herself up to her full five foot one, she stares at the young woman making the drinks. Tegan does her best to make her drink appear just by the ferocity of her stare. The barista, finishing off her latest drink, nervously glances up at Tegan, and considers asking if she needs something. But as her mouth opens, she closed it in an instant, fearing that Tegan will in fact need something.

But then the inevitable comes.

“Large. Dark roast.” She calls out, sliding the drink onto the counter. “Tegan.” She says the name softly, tentatively.

“About time.” Tegan mumbles, as she grasps the drink in both hands, enjoying the warmth of the cup, and walks to the empty end of the sofa next to Sam. Just to express her frustration at having to wait so long, she plops down with as much weight as her tiny frame can muster.

“Hey!” Nyssa gives her sister her best look of annoyance. “Watch it.” She blows on her tea and takes a tentative sip, book in hand, and turns to the page she has marked.

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Tegan returns her sister's annoyed stare with a challenging look and moves a bit closer to Sam. Taking the lid off of her drink and setting it aside, she places the drink on the table in front of them to cool and lays her head against Sam's shoulder. He doesn't seem to notice. His mood has changed to something more serious. He's staring out the window at a small group of people gathering by a bus stop.

"I'll grab yours when it's ready." Tegan leans forward and blows hard on her coffee.

Sam frowns in concern as cars zip around the corner, much too close to the bus stop.

"So. Where are you right now?" Tegan takes a tentative sip of her coffee.

"Tegan." Nyssa shakes her head. "Rude."

"What?" Tegan looks out the window to where Sam is staring. "It's just a question."

Sam turns slightly, giving Tegan a small smile, and a playful wink.

"Okayyy..." Tegan chooses her words more carefully. "Let's pretend you're not off somewhere else." She knows she's pushing buttons. "How do you know the scary girl?"

Nyssa briefly glances up, but quickly returns to her book. She's fairly certain she knows, but would rather hear it directly from Sam. She's a little surprised her sister hasn't come to the same conclusion. It's fairly obvious.

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Sam absentmindedly watches the tall man in the brown, leather jacket, his hands full with two drinks and some napkins, as he approaches the front door. He then uses his back to push the door open to leave the small shop. He stops for a second, giving Sam the brightest of smiles while lifting one drink a few inches in salute.

Sam returns the gesture with a quick nod. Just then, a preteen boy with a blond surfer cut pokes his head in the door. The bike he's riding nearly rests against the tall man's leg, almost causing him to drop his drinks.

"Whoa, watch it there little dude." He steps back a little, pushing the door open farther with his back.

"You guys got the time?" The boy looks first to Sam and then to the man holding the door open.

The tall man extends his arm so that his wrist is directly in front of the boy's face. The boy stretches his neck, reading the antique watch on the man's wrist.

"Thanks. And sorry about that." He pulls back his bike a little.

The tall man hands the boy one of his hot chocolates. "I believe this is yours."

The boy takes the drink, holding it up to look at the side of the cup. "Yep. That's mine." He wraps his lips around the straw, and takes a long sip. His eyes widen and he nods his head a few times. "Thank you."

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And he carefully peddles away, flipping a u-turn and passing the coffee shop window with a friendly wave with his drink hand.

The tall man smiles at Sam, raising his eyebrows as if in surprise, and lets the door close behind him as he moves past the large window and towards the corner crosswalk.

“Well?” Tegan huffs, and shifts her body away from Sam.

Sam sighs deeply. “Rae... the scary girl, as you call her, was Rae.”

“I new it.” Nyssa marks her page and sets her book in her lap. “So she’s...”

“Yes.” Sam laughs.

“Oh.” Tegan whispers, a thoughtful look on her face.

Sam drapes an arm around Tegan. “Yes. Oh.” He gently pats her arm. “She gets that a lot. That’s part of the problem, really.”

Again something catches Sam’s eye, as a teen boy holds open the door and a woman in a red dress and floppy, white hat walks in. She has her young daughter in tow, probably seven or eight years old, wearing a flowered sun dress with a white ribbon in her long brown hair. The little girl is holding a small stuffed monkey. For just a few seconds, the little girl stops just off to the side of the couch. Her face is blank as she looks past Tegan, ignoring her completely, staring directly at Sam. Young children don’t have certain filters. If something is interesting to them, they stare. They’ll stand uncomfortably close and just watch, mouth open with a look of wonder on their little faces.

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Sam smiles gently, making sure not to startle the little girl. Then her mother roughly pulls her to the counter to order. The little girl keeps looking back at Sam while waiting for her mother to finish.

“So. Hmm... that was Azrael.” Tegan takes a sip of her coffee. “Makes sense. The way she went all dark and scary on me.”

Sam laughs. “Yeah. You should probably apologize at some point for being so confrontational.” He grins at his friend. “And that wasn’t scary. Trust me. You don’t want to see her version of scary.”

Tegan feels a shiver go down her spine.

Sam’s attention shifts as a young man wearing a green apron cautiously approaches the sofa where the three sit. He has a drink in his hand in a clear cup with a bright green straw. A thin, chocolatey-looking drink, with whipped cream.

“Sam?” Without waiting for an answer, the shop worker holds out the drink to Sam. “Iced chocolate with double whip cream.” He smiles shyly, awkwardly.

Tegan snatches the drink from his hand like it would explode if she didn’t. The young man takes a quick step back. Startled. “S... sorry it took so long.”

“Thank you...” Sam looks at the young man’s name tag. “...Marty.”

Marty nods once, glances at Tegan, and scoots off to clear a nearby table.

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“That was also rude. You really should work on your people skills.” Sam gently pries the drink from Tegan’s fingers and takes a sip. “Mmmm. Now this is good.”

“So how do you rate, not having to stand in line?” Tegan ignores his comment.

Sam smiles broadly and holds his drink out, offering a sip to both Nyssa and Tegan.

Nyssa shakes her head, giving him a polite smile.

Tegan simply reaches out to the table to retrieve her coffee. She takes another sip. “She doesn’t look anything like I would’ve expected.”

“Who?” Sam is distracted again, watching the mother and her young daughter pay for their coffee and juice box. The mother leans down and impatiently unwraps the little juice box straw and sticks it in the top of the box, thrusting it, almost angrily, towards her daughter. The little girl moves her stuffed monkey from her hand, and holds it under her arm while she takes a sip of her juice. Mother and daughter, drinks in hand, walk towards the front door.

“Your sister.” Tegan gives Sam an irritated look. “Who else were we talking about?”

The little girl is still staring at Sam, and has been nearly the entire time she’s been in the coffee shop.

Sam does a small wave at her as she walks by with her mother. He leans forward, just a little. “Pssst.” He gets the little girl’s attention and

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then politely smiles up at the little girl's mom, frowning down at him as she reaches for the front door.

The little girl stops near Tegan, still staring at Sam.

"You dropped this on the way in." Sam grabs her little stuffed monkey from between him and Tegan on the couch, and holds it out to her, glancing up at her mother to make sure it's okay.

"Mr. Nibbles." The girl looks at the monkey and then under her arm where it had been just seconds ago. She stares at the sparkly man. She thinks he must be a magician or something. "Like Harry Potter." She's a bit in awe.

"And please... be careful out there on the sidewalk. There's lots of cars on this street." Sam's smile goes goofy and playful. "Okay?"

The little girl, still staring at the funny man, nods her head slowly and follows her mom out the door.

"Thank you." The mom says hesitantly, over her shoulder, as they exit. "I don't know what I would've done. She loves that damn thing."

Sam sits back on the couch and looks out the window, briefly considering the evil thing the mother will do later this evening. He sighs, pushing it from his thoughts.

A bus tears past and around the corner in a shot. "My sister is no different than any of us. Why should she look different?" Sam sips at his drink.

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“I don’t know. I’ve heard stories.” Tegan continues. “Your brother... Michael said...”

“Tegan!” Nyssa hisses at her sister. This time she bulges her eyes.

Sam pats Nyssa’s arm and smiles at both of them. “And should I look different too. They tell stories about me too. Wild, crazy, scary stories.” His eyes light up just a little.

Tegan takes another sip of her coffee. “Of course not.”

A car rips around the corner past the bus stop somewhat startling the small group of people waiting for the bus. The woman with the floppy hat and her young daughter wait along with a few others. The mother is busy reading the bus schedule, looking for which bus number will be theirs and how long before it should arrive. She’s barely keeping track of where her daughter stands or what she’s up to.

The little girl is hopping on and off the curb, from the sidewalk to the street and back to the sidewalk. Playing the kind of game young children do when they’re bored and have too much energy.

The others in the small crowd keep to themselves, barely noticing the little girl, and if they do, they say nothing about her hopping into the street every other second.

The little girl hops back to the street and suddenly notices Sam watching her through the coffee shop window. She stops, mouth open, staring again.

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“You’re funny looking.” She says out loud, knowing very well that he can’t hear her. She quickly hops back onto the curb and takes two giant jumps forward like a bunny rabbit, towards the funny looking man.

“Sparklyyyy.” She puts both hands up and wiggles her fingers in the air.

A pick-up truck, going much too fast, pulls around the corner, losing control slightly as the driver accelerates, and hits the curb with a screech, before speeding down the street, leaving a dark streak of rubber on the curb just behind the little girl.

The little girl smiles at Sam for the first time, and gives him a cute little wave with her stuffed monkey’s hand.

8

Lenny walks into his tiny apartment, closing the door behind him and locks it before walking to the counter that separates the small kitchen from the living room slash bedroom. He carefully empties his pockets, placing his keys, wallet, and cell phone on the tile counter. He has a small bag from the convenience store on the corner. He tosses it onto his bed, and slips off his boots and pants, and tosses them towards the closet. He grabs a pair of red basketball shorts and slips them on. Walking over to his computer desk in the corner, he sits down. He has classes tomorrow and

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work to do for them, but really doesn't care. He has no intention of being there.

A car alarm goes off and Lenny peers over his right shoulder, leaning closer to the window looking out into the parking lot below.

“Not mine.” He mumbles. “Don’t care.”

Lenny is in his first year of college. He doesn't live in the dorms because he's too much of a loner for that to be comfortable. Instead, he has a studio apartment in a not-so-good, but not-too-awful neighborhood.

The car alarm outside beeps twice and then stops. Lenny glances back outside and sees his downstairs neighbor get into the car and start it. Turning his attention back to his computer, Lenny pulls up his email and glances down the short list. He's not interested in the school stuff. Nothing interesting. He brings up YouTube in his browser and looks at the recommended videos. Again, nothing grabs his interest.

He jumps as his cell phone starts vibrating obnoxiously against the ceramic tiles on the counter. Lenny hops up, reaching for the TV remote, turning the TV on, and grabs his phone. A quick glance at the screen. Pete.

“Nope.”

He pushes a button rejecting the call and puts the phone back down, this time on top of his wallet, knowing very well that Pete will immediately call back, and then call back several times after that. Pete calls every evening just to chat for as long as his phone battery will hold out. Talk about school. Talk about classes. Talk about girls. Talk about nothing.

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Pete just likes to talk. Most of the time Lenny will tell him that his battery is low and could run out. Then, a few minutes later, while in mid sentence, he'll hang up the phone and turn it off. It's the only way to end an endless conversation.

The remote still in his hand, Lenny looks over at the TV and flips through a couple channels, finding some old 90s sitcom, and leaves it on that.

His phone starts vibrating again, but this time less intense, because he was smart enough to set it on top his wallet. Lenny lets it go to voicemail again, even though Pete never leaves a voicemail. He'll just call back again in a little while and keep trying until Lenny answers, which tonight, won't happen.

He looks around the small room containing a small desk, futon, and makeshift bed. There's also a hundred or so white boxes filled with his massive comic book collection. Nothing of value. Just tons of junk. And he's read almost every one of them. He has so many boxes that he uses them in place of a bed frame to prop up a single mattress against one wall for him to sleep on.

Lenny grabs the bag he'd tossed on his bed and sits down on the old futon in the corner. He opens the small plastic bag and pulls out two small boxes, tears the cardboard open, and pulls out the pink bottles within. Flipping one of the bottles around, he reads the back. Sleeping pills. A hundred count. He opens the lid on the first and pulls out the

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cotton then does the same to the second. The little pills are small, oblong, and pink.

Lenny sets the pills aside, knowing they won't be enough on their own. With a weird, nervous energy, he hops up from the futon, and on shaky legs, hurries over to the small kitchen. He opens the cupboard right next to the fridge. Everything is neatly organized into little groups, all the labels facing forward. Lenny reaches up and grabs a nearly untouched bottle of whiskey. Untouched because... number one, he doesn't like whiskey... and number two, he barely ever drinks. He doesn't like the taste. He doesn't like the feeling it gives him. And he doesn't like the loss of control.

But tonight he's going to need the whiskey. The loss of control.

Lenny opens up the cabinet directly to the right and grabs a small, drinking glass from the shelf. He takes the whiskey and glass over to his desk and sets it down. Then he grabs the two little bottles from the futon and brings them to the desk. He dumps all the little pink pills from both bottles out into a nice little pile and pours a large shot of whiskey into the drinking glass. He knows he doesn't have the guts to do what he needs to do, so he downs the glass of whiskey to the best of his ability, not quite finishing it. He makes a face from the horrible taste and smacks his lips and mouth in disgust.

“That. Is. Awful.” He makes another face, closes his eyes, and shakes his head.

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Lenny downs the rest of the whiskey in the glass and pours some more. He repeats this two more times until his belly feels warm and he feels a little sick.

As disgusting as that was, that was the easy part. Now for the hard part.

Lenny takes three of the pink pills in between his finger and thumb, hesitates for a few seconds, thinking, and then tosses them in his mouth. He grabs for the whiskey but then thinks he'll get sick if he drinks anymore. Jumping up from his desk chair, he walks over to the fridge and gets a cold bottle of water. He takes a big gulp, swallowing the pills in his mouth that have already started disintegrating. The water is refreshing, but he feels it bring out the whiskey taste in his mouth. He shudders, and swallows hard, not wanting to get sick.

Lenny walks back over to his desk and sits down. He takes a few more pink pills and tosses them in his mouth, followed by a swig of water. He repeats this until his belly is so full of pills, whiskey, and water that he feels like throwing up. And he does not want that to happen.

Keeping the bottle of water at the desk, he grabs the remaining pills, the empty bottles, and bottle of whiskey, and walks over to the counter and sets them off to the side. He imagines that everything is already taking effect. Maybe it is. Lightheaded and a little queasy, he walks around the corner to the small bathroom by the front door.

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He thinks it makes sense to pee while he still can. He's so full of whiskey and water that his belly sloshes as he walks.

Finished in the bathroom, he flushes the toilet and walks back into the living room and sits down at his desk again, taking another swig of water. His mouth feels incredibly dry, probably from all the pink pills.

Lenny can feel it now for real. He's super dizzy, his arms and legs feel weak and weird, kind of rubbery. His body suddenly feels extremely tired. His mind is fuzzy and it's hard to think.

On the counter his phone rings again. Lenny feels like he should get up and check it. Just for the hell of it. Just out of habit. But he's pretty sure it's Pete again wanting to talk about nothing. Lenny carefully walks to his phone, and leaning heavily against the counter, turns it off. He meanders back to his desk and plops down.

Rae sits on the futon just watching everything unfold, watching Lenny with his booze and pink pills. Her legs are crossed under her butt and she's leaning back, her head against a big pillow. She keeps messing with her long black dress, fanning it out on the futon, playing with the lacy bits. She arrived a few minutes ago when Lenny was using the restroom.

She can tell Lenny's getting dizzy, uncoordinated. He's playing with the computer, looking around on the internet, going from one webpage to another, bringing up a new tab, looking at some YouTube videos, closing the tab, then reopening it. She can tell he's not thinking straight anymore. He's having trouble just keeping his head up, his arms

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and fingers are no longer working right. They look heavy and cumbersome, fumbling about, not always doing what he intends.

“You know… this is all on you.” Rae twirls her hair between her fingers as she watches Lenny get slower and clumsier. “You’re overreacting. It happens all the time.”

Lenny looks over to the futon from his desk chair. He sees a pretty girl sitting on his futon twirling her hair and messing with her dress. He wonders when he let someone in and why. Or did he leave the door unlocked? But then he remembers the whiskey and he’s pretty sure that’s it. He tries to smile at her, but he just drools and his head bobs around like it’s come loose.

Rae shakes her head slowly. She’s more disgusted by Lenny than she is saddened. He’s doing this to himself. It’s not like she hasn’t seen this a million times, but this one is different because she’s here to do more than just hold his hand as he fades away. Her face is hard as she watches Lenny slowly kill himself. He’s a good kid. Just a bit of an idiot.

Even with his limited thought process, Lenny now knows for sure that everything is taking effect. He thinks that he should use the bathroom one last time so he doesn’t accidentally wet himself. Even through the worst, he’d like to keep some of his dignity. He tries standing up from his desk, but his legs no longer have the coordination, and he falls to the carpet. On all fours, his head hanging low, his body swaying, his arms finally give out and he falls face first on the carpet, his butt up in the air.

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Rae sighs sadly as she hops off the futon and walks over to Lenny. For a few seconds she just stands above him as he lays there looking like a drunk idiot. She pushes against his butt a few times with a bare foot, causing him to sway on all fours. She snorts and giggles. Then with another sigh, she leans over and takes him by the shoulders with both hands. She pulls a little, while he pushes against the floor as much as he can, and she brings him back up on all fours. His arms threaten to give out again and he becomes super wobbly, so Rae steadies him until he's ready to try for the bathroom.

With a sudden movement, more like a fall forward, Lenny begins to crawl his way to the bathroom, slowly, awkwardly, like a newborn calf just learning to walk. Rae stays with him the whole way, leaning over and steadyng him whenever he threatens to topple over. After several awkward tries, and some help from Rae, Lenny manages to pull himself up onto the toilet. Completely uncoordinated he pulls his red shorts down just far enough to pee.

Rae looks away, giving him one last moment of privacy. "The things I do." She shakes her head in disbelief. "This better not involve any wiping."

After a minute Lenny feels like he peed, but he's not really sure. He couldn't feel anything. While Rae still has her back turned to him, he falls forward, head first to the hard bathroom floor with a loud thump.

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“Oh.” Rae spins around and rolls Lenny onto his back and struggles to pull up his shorts while looking away. “You’re not exactly keeping that last semblance of dignity you’re so concerned about.”

Now his body is even more clumsy and out of it as he tries to turn over but can’t. Rae has almost had enough of this, but leans down and roughly turns him onto his stomach. Then she harshly pulls him back up onto all fours. For a second, she considers simply picking him up by the scruff of his neck and carrying him to his bed.

Lenny slurs out a cry of pain as Rae begins to drag him forward to get him crawling. Something kicks in with his body, and with the help of Rae, he’s able to start crawling slowly back into the living room towards his bed. He just wants to lay down at this point. He wants everything to be comfortable and peaceful. He wants the pretty girl to go away and just leave him here alone to fall asleep.

“Don’t look at me like that.” Rae’s voice is hard. “I don’t want to be here anymore than you do. You just happened to be next on my list.”

Lenny’s arms give out when he’s only a few feet from his bed. His face hits the carpeting, and he just lays there for a few seconds, his eyes nearly closed, his butt in the air. He gathers the last of his energy, opens his eyes, and after several clumsy tries, pulls himself back to all fours. He raises his head to see how far he is from his bed. He sighs raggedly, drooling all over the carpet. His terrible journey is made more difficult because the bed is about a foot higher, sitting on top of a layer of white

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comic book boxes. He's not going to make it. He falls again, his face resting against the side of the mattress as he sits on the floor.

And that's when Lenny looks to Rae as more than a figment of his imagination caused by too much whiskey. He turns his head to the side, letting it flop against the side of the mattress, trying to focus his eyes on the pretty girl as his face pleads for help.

Rae stands there scowling at him for a minute, but finally leans down and helps him pull his body onto the bed.

Lenny attempts a thank you smile, his mouth opens awkwardly, showing his teeth as his lips lay dead and useless. Drool runs down from the corner of his mouth as he lays on top the blankets, his head on his pillow. He's breathing hard, his eyes partially open, just laying there, his body now completely unable to move.

Rae folds his blanket over his body for comfort, briefly putting her hand on his chest to let him know she's still there. Then she walks over to the front door and unlocks the deadbolt, opening the door just a crack. Finally she returns to the futon to sit with Lenny for the last time, readying to meet him in the void.

“So Lenny. Is this how you expected it would be?” Rae’s voice is soft and comforting. “Cuz it looks pretty awful to me.”

There’s a soft knock on the door as it opens slowly, “Hello. Anyone home?” Sam’s voice is relaxed and casual as he enters the small apartment.

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“Just me. And Lenny’s still half here, I suppose.” Rae shakes her head as her brother enters, closing the door with a click behind him. He leaves it unlocked.

He walks into the living room and over to the bed where Lenny lays. Lenny’s breathing is shallow and labored, but he opens his eyes a bit to put a blurry face to the voice.

“Hey Rae.” Sam looks over at his sister sitting on the futon. He grins like a child.

“I could’ve used your help ten minutes ago as this guy tried crawling all over the place.” Rae hops up and gives her brother a hug. “And then he fell face first off the toilet.” She sits back down on the futon, pulling her bare feet up underneath her.

“So is he already with you?”

“Yep. I just pulled him in… a little early. I’m holding his hand.” She winks at her brother. “He’s comfortable.”

“Ha. I’ll bet.” Sam is looking around the room at all the white boxes.

“He’s a really sweet kid. Just depressed. You know, sad and lonely. Doesn’t think he has any real friends. Just wants to move on.” Rae looks over to Lenny, watching as his breathing becomes quick and shallow.

Sam lifts the top off one of the boxes. “Comic books.” His face lights up. “These are all comic books.”

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Rae grins and shakes her head. “Way to nerd out, little brother. But we’re not here for you two to compare collections.” She motions with her head over to Lenny, who just stopped breathing. His eyes stare vacantly towards the ceiling.

Sam puts the top back on the box and glances over at Lenny. “And you’re sure this is helping him out?”

Rae gives her brother an odd look. “Of course I’m sure.”

“Hey. He’s the one that wants to move on.” Sam stares at his sister blankly. “Free will and all that.”

“He knows this was a bad move. He won’t try again until he’s thirty four and has his heart broken.” She tilts her head to the side. “He’ll succeed.”

“He’s already dead, Rae. I can’t bring him back to life.”

“He’s not dead. Dead dead. Like I said, I pulled him in early.” She cocks her head to the side, thinking. “He’s just not breathing... functioning.”

Sam looks down at Lenny, laying there motionless. “Yeah I think most people call that being dead.”

“Oh, just... I think...” Rae motions to her brother and then to Lenny. “... just reach into the darkness and grab him... put him back.” She motions towards the body with her head. “And we’re good to go.”

“You think.” Sam looks down at Lenny, unsure, then back to his sister. “You’re not sure, but you think?”

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She puts on a big, patronizing smile. “Sorry. Bad choice of words. I’m absolutely sure.” And she nods her head vigorously, showing a crazy smile.

“Yeah. I’ll bet.” Sam sighs loudly. “All right Leonard. We’re done with this.” He reaches to the side, taking the top off another box, and pulls out a random comic. “Your mom is going to wake from a nightmare tonight. She’s going to give you a call, but your phone is off. She’ll think the worst. She and your father will drive here in the middle of the night to check on you.” Sam flips though a couple pages of the comic. “Your dad’s going to be grumbling about it the entire drive.”

Lenny’s breathing returns, slows, and deepens as his body adjusts. His eyes flutter and then close and he sleeps.

“So you got about six hours to get yourself together. The door’s not locked… which your dad will also grumble about.” Sam plops down heavily on the futon next to his sister, causing it to shift, pushing her small frame upward. “His dad’s kind of a dick.”

“Hey!” Rae pulls her feet up and throws her legs across her brother’s lap to make room.

“They recognized me, you know.” Sam looks at his sister, his face serious.

“Who?” Rae glances over at Lenny and watches his chest rise and fall as he sleeps.

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“The kid in the bookstore. And a little girl in the coffee shop.” Sam’s face remains blank. “They saw I was... different. They thought I was funny looking.”

“You are funny looking.” Rae laughs. “I’ve been telling you that since we were kids.”

Sam isn’t amused. He pushes his sister’s legs to the side and pulls himself off the futon. “I mean... it’s happened before... but for some reason I thought this would be different.”

“Oh pish.” Rae sticks out her bottom lip. “You know kids... they’re like that.” Rae pushes down several times on the futon, shifting it so she’s sitting almost even again. She pulls her legs back under her and fusses with her dress.

Sam turns and walks over to the counter. He takes the remaining pink pills and empty bottles and puts them in his jacket pocket. “Hmmm.”

“It’s sweet, really.” Rae has a pleased smile on her face. “They see you for what you are.”

Sam turns and gives her an unhappy look.

Rae’s smile fades. “Oh, not the whole package. Of course not. They’re not screaming and running, are they?”

“Ha. Ha.” Sam picks up the half empty bottle of whiskey, reading the front label, then unscrews the top and sniffs it. He quickly pulls his face away. “That’s awful.”

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Rae jumps up from the futon. “You know... you shouldn’t be so hard on yourself.” Rae leans against Lenny’s makeshift bed.

Sam walks into the kitchen and places the whiskey bottle in the cupboard exactly where Lenny keeps it. He turns it slightly so that the label is facing forward.

“You can hide behind a facade of amazing blue eyes, long brown hair and three days of stubble... but when those kids look at you, they just see Sam. They see the light.” Rae walks closer to her brother and leans on the counter across from him. “Sparklyyyy.” She waves her fingers in the air.

“What do they see when they look at you?” Sam turns on the sink and rinses the drinking glass.

“I’m a lot older than you. I’ve been doing this...” Rae uses her hand to gesture around the room, settling on Lenny. “... for a long time. Nearly forever, really.”

“So your facade is more reliable.”

“Absolutely.”

He recognizes her ‘big sister, I know more than you’ voice.

Rae smiles brightly.

Sam dries the glass on a dish towel he finds under the sink. “So the kids...” He looks over his shoulder, towards Rae, motioning from her head to toe. “... they see this.”

“Pretty much.”

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“Even the naughty ones?”

“What am I Santa Claus?” Rae snorts a small laugh. “Yeah, even the naughty ones.” She leans her head to the side. “For the most part.”

“For the most part.” Sam raises an eyebrow. “What about the adults?” Sam puts the drinking glass away in the cupboard and closes it.

“Adults don’t get a pass.” Rae’s voice is suddenly hard and distant. The smile is gone. “They see what I want them to see.”

9

It's just after midnight and the streets are glistening wet. The freshness of a recent rain hangs in the air. Everything feels cleaner and cooler, and there's the scent of life creeping from all the nooks and crannies. Rae walks down an alley and around the side of a building, thoroughly enjoying the impossibly black night. She peers up into the sky and smiles to herself. The stars are nowhere to be seen, and the moon is hiding behind the clouds. As Rae walks down the narrow sidewalk alongside a beautiful old building that is the NorCal Children's Hospital,

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the streetlights flicker and dim, one by by one, losing their battle against the dark.

She stops just outside a rarely used side door and breaths in deeply a last few breaths of the wet, night air. And then she enters.

The hospital hallways are dark and quiet, and peaceful. It's well after midnight and there's not a soul in sight, except for the occasional nurse doing their rounds. The only sound is the humming and soft bleeping coming from the patients' rooms. Rae can feel all the nearly dead as she walks past room after room after room. She knows she'll be back soon for some. She knows she's already here sitting with others.

She walks down the hall quietly, not wanting to disturb any of the sleeping children. She turns left down an adjacent hall, up a flight of steps, then down a hall to the right, and then takes another right. If she'd allow herself, she'd be flooded with memories. She's been here hundreds of times. She makes a sour face and slows down, seeing her destination just two doors ahead. She stops and takes a seat in a lone chair sitting just outside a darkened room. She has a smile on her face, and keeps giggling to herself nervously, quickly putting a hand over her mouth, trying not to wake anyone. She's excited about this one. This one will be a victory against the evil things.

Inside the dark room, a three-year-old boy lays in his bed, his breathing shallow and ragged, his blankets pulled aside by the fever. His Ninja Turtle footy pajamas, a Christmas gift from grandma, warm and

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sweat soaked, cling to his frail, little body. Nearby, the boy's parents sleep restlessly in the room, his father in a chair, his mother on the sofa, both covered by a thin hospital blanket. They've been doing this since day one. There hasn't been a moment where at least one of them wasn't at their son's side. They think of him as their sick little angel. But Rae considers them the real angels here.

It all started with a hacking cough that wouldn't go away. They thought it was from a cold he'd just fought off, all of them had just fought off. Mom was concerned right away, while dad kept saying 'it'll get better, it's just the cold hanging on'. But it just got worse, so one night they bundled him up in his favorite blanket with his favorite teddy bear, and brought him to the emergency room. They expected the doctor to tell them about a particularly bad cold or flu going around, and to give them a prescription, or maybe even keep him overnight. It ended with them being told that cancer had taken root in his lungs and comfortably spread out, taking hold of the small boy's entire respiratory system. Overnight became forever. And forever wasn't going to be very long.

Rae hears a slight noise from down the hall and hops up from her chair. Her smile drops as she's disappointed to see an elderly man mopping the floor near one of the elevators at the end of the hall. For just a second, she lifts herself up on her toes and peaks into the dark hospital room to check on the small boy and his angels.

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Tonight, like every night, once the boy's parents have fallen asleep, the cancer, like grinning evil, will reach out to grab the small boy, to hold and hug him, to slowly smother him from within. The doctors, all various specialists, say it will slowly pull him down into itself, as it has painfully been doing for the past six months.

Still peering into the room, Rae sees that the window blinds have been drawn nearly closed. And that the little bit of light coming through the trees and into the room is causing shadows to creep and dance throughout.

She cocks her head to the side and frowns, mumbling to herself. "It's toying with them... his family... the doctors." She grinds her teeth, agitated.

The shadows darken and dance as the trees outside are moved by another violent gust of wind. Rae knows that tonight the monster intends to rear up and reach out to take final hold of the child, to pull the child in and smother him in his parent's grief. She knows the exact moment the little boy will come to her.

His mother shudders in her sleep and cries a little.

Rae opens the door just a crack, uncertain as to whether she should make herself known to the shadows, or simply continue to wait in the hall for Sam.

Little Emilio wakes. Partially opening his eyes, he turns his head slightly, seeing a dim light coming in through the door. He watches as Rae

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enters his room, stopping at the door for a second. A small smile on her face melts away as she witnesses the swirling, black shadows moving across the room towards the young boy. The darkness dances fitfully as tree branches just outside the window blow hard in the wind. With every gust, the shadows reach out closer to the sick child.

With an irritated sigh and a look of distress, Rae takes a deep breath and flings the door open wildly, like a gunfighter entering a saloon, looking for trouble. The moon outside brightens considerably, and the shadows and darkness retreat behind the curtains and couch. Rae creeps past the mother and father, still sleeping restlessly, and moves to the side of the boy's bed.

She smiles sweetly. "Hello Emilio. May I sit with you?" Not waiting for an answer, Rae pulls herself up onto the side of the boy's bed and crosses her legs underneath her. "Rough night, huh?" She pulls his blankets from the side and covers his body up to mid chest. "You should really keep covered. You may feel warm... but that's just your body fighting the sickness."

Emilio's eyes dart around the room, looking for the shadows.

Rae glances around the room, still smiling sweetly. "Don't worry about them. They can't hurt you while I'm here." She glares out into the darkness and the shadows slowly retreat behind the furniture and the curtains.

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Emilio's breathing goes from ragged to calm. He manages a weak smile in Rae's direction. He trusts her. It's one of Rae's gifts. But it also means he's very close to his end.

"Would it be okay if I held your hand?" She asks. Again not waiting for an answer, she moves to reach under the blanket for his left hand. "Oh wait." She pulls back her hand quickly and begins briskly rubbing her hands together. "Sorry." She grins wildly. "I don't want my hand to be too cold. My hands are always so cold." Rae reaches under his blanket, pulling his limp arm out, and takes the boy's tiny hand in her own. She gently rubs the back of his hand with her thumb.

Rae glances over at the boy's parents, still sleeping restlessly. "They love you very much you know. They'd do anything for you." She looks back down at the little boy, her eyes tearing up just a little.

Emilio struggles to pull his other arm out from under the heavy blanket and reaches up to touch one of Rae's tears as it rolls down her cheek.

"No llores." His voice is barely a whisper.

Rae uses the sleeve on her free hand to wipe the tears from her face. "I'm sorry. I never used to cry... but lately..."

Emilio's dad rolls to one side in the big chair he sleeps in. He mumbles his son's name and whimpers a couple times as if in pain.

Rae's face saddens. "You know... your dad prays every night for you." Rae reaches over with her other hand and wipes a few beads of

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sweat from Emilio's forehead. "Not to..." She pauses, cocking her head to one side, thinking. Suddenly lost in thought, her voice gets weak. "He prays to me... to take him instead of you."

Realizing she probably just said something scary to a three-year old, she puts on a wide smile and gives his hand a firm squeeze. "That, my little buddy... is a daddy's love."

Emilio looks past her as he sees the hallway light up brightly through the small window in the door.

"Well." She gives his hand another little squeeze and a gentle pat. "That'll be my brother."

"Fuego?" Emilio whispers, his throat hoarse with thirst.

Rae rolls her eyes comically. "Yeah. It's one of his things." She reaches over to the small table next to Emilio and pours a little water in a cup. "I like traveling in the dark, but he always brings the light." She grins and shakes her head, while releasing the boy's tiny hand as slowly and gently as she can. "You'll like him. Most people do. He'll take good care of you." She puts a hand behind his head, lifting it slightly, and uses the other to give him a drink from the cup.

"Gracias." His voice remains soft and hoarse.

"Well, I have to go now." Rae pushes herself off the bed, giving Emilio one last, warm smile, and starts walking towards the door. "Hey. My brother's hands are always warm. So don't you worry about that." She

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gives Emilio her best smile as she walks to the door. “It’s another of his things, I guess. Fuego.”

Emilio watches as she stops right at the door.

“Can I tell you a secret?” Rae gets a mischievous smile on her face.

Emilio nods his head slowly.

“I won’t be seeing you again for a very very long time.” She smiles brightly. “So you should ask my brother to show you his... wings.” A devious look crosses her face. “They’re amazing. Fuego.”

Now at the door, Rae grabs the handle but stops. She turns her body slightly. “And you.” Her eyes go dark as she glances around the room to where the shadows meet the light. “Don’t you dare.” Her voice hardens and goes deep. “You don’t wanna have to deal with me right now. It’s not a good time.” She smiles coldly.

And with that, she steps out into the hallway, letting the door slowly close behind her. Rae takes one last look into Emilio’s room. His eyes are closed again and his breathing had become ragged the moment she left. She turns away and nearly runs right into Sam, who is standing directly in front of her. She takes a quick step back, not accustomed to being startled.

“Hey Rae.” Sam’s voice is full of life.

Rae allows some irritation into her voice. “Just in time... as usual.”

Sam shakes his head, but remains silent. He knows his sister well, and can tell when she’s about to be difficult.

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“So what’s with all this last minute shit?” Rae stares directly into her brother’s eyes.

“Language, dear sister.” He grins, pulling his hair back and tucking it behind his ears.

Rae just stares at him with an annoyed look on her face as she sits down in the chair outside the room, pulling her feet up underneath her.

Sam takes a passing glance through the door window, seeing Emilio breathing heavily. “We do this when you’re supposed to be here. Not before.” He reaches for her hand, hoping to make her feel better, but she pushes him away. “We don’t take a moment from them.”

Rae nods her agreement.

Sam turns from his sister and pushes the door open with a flourish. Not even attempting stealth, he walks confidently past the sleeping parents and directly to the boy’s side.

“Hello Emilio.” His voice is strong. He pulls the blankets down a little with father-like love. “And how are you feeling tonight?” Sam straightens Emilio’s pajama shirt and immediately takes the boy’s hand in his own. He’s not exactly sure how this new gift of his works, but he’s certain that genuine love and compassion are a main ingredient.

“Calentar.” Emilio’s voice is a little stronger, his fever gone.

Sam smiles sweetly, touching the back of his own hand with his other hand. “I suppose I am.”

“Alas?” The boy asks, a look of wonder on his face.

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Sam is amused. “You’ve been chatting with my sister.” He glances over both shoulders at his own back. “Yes. Sometimes.”

Emilio’s face lights up for the first time in months.

Sam pats Emilio’s hand gently. “But not now okay? It’ll wake your mom and dad. And we don’t want that, do we?”

Emilio’s face gets serious. He turns on his side, resting on his elbow and looks to the shadows dancing near the window. “Oscuridad. Demonios.”

“What?” Sam looks to the shadows. “Oh. No. They’re just shadows. Nothing else.” Sam points out the window. “See. The moon is shining through the trees and the wind makes the branches move, which makes the shadows move.” He gives Emilio’s hand a little squeeze. “Trust me, they’re just shadows.”

Emilio laughs. “Gracias a Dios.”

“Ha.” Sam likes this kid. “I suppose we should.” He chuckles and leans closer to the small boy. “I’ll tell him next time I see him.”

Emilio grins happily, but still sneaks a sideways glance at the darkness at the edges of the room.

Sam takes a brief look around the room at the moving shadows. “My sister has an overactive imagination. I assure you, there’s nothing to worry about.” He spreads his fingers and moves his hand quickly through the air like a magician, leaving sparkles that float and fade into the night.

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Emilio giggles and looks over to his mom and dad, still sleeping restlessly, but completely unaffected by everything that's happened since Rae and Sam showed up.

Sam lets go of Emilio's hand and stands up next to the bed. "Why don't you wake your mom and let her know that you're feeling better?" Sam nods his head and raises his eyebrows approvingly.

Emilio excitedly sits up, pulling the blankets completely aside, moving towards Sam, taking his hand firmly. He looks back to the shadows, still uncertain. He doesn't want to let go of Sam's hand. He doesn't want Sam to go.

"It's okay little buddy. I promise. Nothing in this room can hurt you." Sam gently pulls his hand from Emilio's and walks towards the door. "I'm really glad you're feeling better, little guy."

Sam opens the door. Seeing that Rae has gone, he glances back, deep into the shadows for a second, his eyes lighting up threateningly. And then a big smile crosses his face as he exits the room pulling the light with him as he confidently strolls down the hallway.

Emilio's parents' breathing calms and gets noticeably deeper, like a silent sigh of relief. Their restlessness is replaced by a tranquil, deep sleep as their little boy climbs up on the couch and crawls under the covers with his mother. He considers waking her, but decides that it can wait until morning. Within seconds he falls into a much-needed sleep.

10

“Hey old man. You home?” Sam peeks his head through the French doors in the back of his father’s house. He takes one exaggerated step into the large living room, followed closely by Tegan, rolling her eyes at Sam’s goofiness.

The old man looks up from the notebook he’s writing in at an antique desk in the corner. “Hey there buddy.” He smiles wide, setting his things aside on the desk. He’s genuinely happy to see his eldest son. He turns himself in his wheelchair, and wheels it forward a couple feet to greet his family.

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Sam furrows his brow, looking over at the wheelchair. Confused.

“And of course you brought the beautiful...” He quickly puts his hands up in mock surrender. “... and fierce... and intelligent... and loyal... and just overall wonderful...” He chuckles. “... Tegan.”

Tegan tries to hide her smile by taking a quick glance around the big room. She hasn’t been to the house in ages.

The old man rolls his wheelchair a couple feet towards her. “It feels like forever since I’ve seen you... or your sister.” He smiles brightly.

Sam grins. “Tegan...”

The old man puts up a hand to silence his son. “Tut. Tut. Tut.” He rolls a little closer to Tegan. “We’ll have to have another barbecue soon. Get everyone together and catch up.”

Tegan gives the old man a half smile and a quick series of nods.

Sam walks to his father, leans over and gives him a big hug. It’s returned in double by the old man, who squeezes firmly and holds on just a second longer than his son.

“So. Did you bring a board game like I asked you to last time?” The old man glances back and forth from Sam to Tegan with a childlike look on his face. He knows well that his son hasn’t. “I’ll clear some space on the table by the sofa.” He rolls over to the table, tossing magazines and books aside onto a pillow chair off to the side, next to the sofa.

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“What’s with the wheelchair?” Sam follows his dad over to the table, tossing the magazines and books right back on the table, making room for him to sit down.

“No game?” His work undone, the old man furrows his brow, as he watches his eldest son plop down in the overstuffed chair. “Now I’m a little disappointed.” He glances over to Tegan, giving her a sly grin. He’s playing the goofball. Like father, like son.

Tegan slowly walks around the room, looking at all the small objects stashed away on decorative tables and shelves. She catches eyes with the old man for a second, and softly returns his smile. She genuinely likes Sam’s father. He reminds her of a much older version of Sam.

The old man turns back to his son, and pulls himself out of the wheelchair, standing stiffly for a second. He stretches his back a little to both sides. “Hit my head recently. Been getting some mild dizzy spells. So I thought it best to stay off my feet when I can.”

“Hmmm.” Sam remembers the beach.

“Anyway...” He looks from his son to Tegan. “... why stand when you can sit?”

Sam nods, while leaning forward looking over the various magazine and books laying on the wooden table in front of him.

The old man raises both eyebrows. “I know. I know. It’s like I’ve become an old man or something.” He smiles broadly and again winks in Tegan’s direction.

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“Yeah...” She smiles back. “...imagine that. Getting older.”

“Tegan” The old man sighs. “Please. Come sit down.” He gestures to the couch in the middle of the room.

She clears her throat. “I’m good, thanks.” She walks to one of the shelves against the wall and picks up the first thing she sees, a raggedy doll with long red hair and freckles.

“That was Rae’s when she was little. I don’t think you’ve met my eldest.” He scrunches his eyebrows together in thought. “Or my youngest as a matter of fact. Just the middle three I guess.” He gives Tegan a serious look. “Well good for you. They’re the easiest.”

Tegan looks uneasy as Sam grins wildly.

The old man remembers. “She used to bring her doll everywhere. She actually lost the original somewhere, and this is a replacement.” He looks down at Sam. “But don’t tell her. She never knew. She was so upset that she’d lost it...”

“So you bought a duplicate and claimed you found it under the big chair while cleaning.” Sam finishes his father’s sentence and immediately hops up from the sofa and sits down in the empty wheelchair, rolling himself around a little, getting a feel for it. “I’ve heard that story too many times.” Sam gives a nice big push with his hands on the wheels and glides towards the dining room. He stops and spins the chair around like a pro, pushing himself back to the center of the living room.

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The old man ignores his son's teasing and steps over to Tegan, joining her at the big shelf. "So how have you been, young lady?"

She smiles awkwardly, showing a row of perfect, white teeth, and carefully places Rae's doll back on the shelf. "I've been..." Tegan chooses her words carefully. "... fine. Everything's been, you know, fine."

"Good. Good." The old man smiles wide. "And where's your sister? I rarely get to see the two of you together. I'm starting to think there's really only one of you, and you're playing some sort of trick on an old man." He chuckles at his own joke, turning his head and smiling even wider at his son.

Tegan takes a quick moment to study the old man's face. She smiles at the same joke he tells every time she visits. He probably tells Nyssa the same joke when she visits alone. This makes her laugh abruptly. "Ha." She brings a hand to her mouth to cover her smile.

The old man grins knowingly. "I know. I know. But it's funny, right?" He pats her arm gently.

She scrunches her nose up, a smile still on her face, and shakes her head quickly. "Not really."

"Ha." The old man laughs. "I'll try to remember that for next time. But anyway... where is your sister this beautiful day?"

"She stayed behind... at that coffee shop down the street." Sam answers for Tegan. He tries to pop a wheelie and nearly knocks the chair

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backwards, catching himself awkwardly. His smile widens as he looks up at Tegan and his father. He raises his eyebrows in mock surprise.

“I was asking Tegan, not you.” The old man says matter of fact, staring blankly at his son. He turns back to Tegan. “Dear?”

Tegan, fidgets, looking a little uncomfortable. “Yeah… what he said. Reading. Like always.”

“Oh!” The old man gets excited, clapping his hands together and rubbing them gleefully. “What’s she reading now?” He shuffles to his small desk to grab the book he’d been reading the day before. “She should stop in soon and tell me all the stories. Or at least leave the books she’s finished. She does that, you know.” He nods his head. “We do a kind of book exchange.”

Still sitting in the wheelchair, Sam zips over to his father’s desk and grabs at a large notepad he’s spotted, moving it closer to get a better look.

“Tut. Tut. Tut.” The old man reaches over and closes it. Feigning irritation. “That’s not for you. Just some thoughts that I can return to in my old age.”

Sam starts to say something, but is quickly cut off by his father.

“My older age.” The old man doubles down on his mock irritation. Turning back to Tegan. “Please. Tegan… have a seat.” Again, he motions to the sofa. “Please.”

Tegan meanders to the end of the sofa and sits, slumping forward slightly, unwilling to let herself get too comfortable. Against the far wall,

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opposite the sofa is an incredibly large TV screen mounted on the wall. The local news is on, but the old man has the volume turned way down, making it barely audible.

“The controller is on the table if you’d like to change the channel...” The old man uses his eyes to point to the TV remote. “... or turn up the volume.”

Tegan smiles weakly at Sam’s father. “That’s okay, I’m good.”

“Sorry dad. We just stopped by for a quick visit.” Sam gives himself a big push from the desk, rolling backwards towards the couch. “You know... this is actually a lot of fun.”

The old man walks over and sits down at the end of the sofa. Using a hand, he beckons Sam to come closer so they can all properly visit. “So then... tell me what’s new in your lives.”

Sam wheels himself closer to the sofa. “Not much, really. I just thought we should talk.” He lets the chair rock back and forth by playing with the wheels.

“I love family talks.” The old man chuckles in Tegan’s direction.

“Yeah.” Sam clears his throat. “It’s about Rae.”

“Oh. Yes yes. Of course.” The old man seems to remember, rubbing the top of his head absentmindedly. “And what about Rae?” His face gets serious as he stares at his son. “And can you please stop messing with that chair... it’s distracting.”

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“Tegan?” Sam gets his friend’s attention. “Could you give us a few minutes?” He smiles gently. “Maybe you can take a walk on the beach or something?” He gives her a shrug and bemused look. “I’ll come find you when we’re finished. Okay?”

Tegan nods, and stands up.

The old man reaches out and gives her arm a small squeeze. “It was great seeing you again.”

She pats the old man’s hand lovingly, and walks to the door.

“Tegan.” The old man calls out.

She stops and turns.

“You and I can visit another time.” He gives her his best fatherly face. “Bring your sister... and leave this one behind.” He uses his head to motion towards Sam. “We can break out one of the board games, and the three of us can catch up.”

Tegan smiles weakly. “Sounds good.”

She turns and exits through the French doors in the back of the room and walks down the stone path leading to the beach. She sits down at the glass table at the edge of the sand, and gets comfortable. It’s one of her favorite spots at the house. Especially when it means some alone time.

As the sun begins to set, and the air starts to cool, Tegan closes her eyes and leans her head back, comfortably alone, happy, and content. She’s with Sam and her sister so often that sometimes she forgets how enjoyable alone time can be.

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“Hello.”

“Seriously.” Tegan flips her head forward and her eyes open wide. “Are you freakin’ kidding me?”

Standing in the sand just a few yards away is the young blonde woman from the coffee shop. She’s grinning like a child that just won a game of hide and seek.

She waves with her fingers and walks towards Tegan. “Funny seeing you again. Twice in one day.” She looks younger out in the open than she did in the coffee shop. She’s probably in her late teens at the oldest.

Tegan snorts, leaning her head back and closing her eyes. “Not interested... so move it along, blondie.”

The girl immediately stops in her tracks. She’s holding her motorcycle boots in one hand, a denim purse in the other, and has her jeans rolled up at the bottom, letting her bare feet play in the sand. “I’m Chris, by the way.” She’s clenching a small bouquet of freshly picked flowers up against the purse.

“And those better not be from our yard.”

The girl glances down at the flowers in her hand and then back to Tegan. “I saw you guys earlier at the coffee shop down the street.” She pauses for a second. “I wanted to say hi, but there was so much going on. So...” She smiles brightly. “... hi.”

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Tegan doesn't bother to look at her. "That was my sister. Not me. And she's not interested either. So just keep walking."

The girl laughs. "No, I think you got me all wrong." She walks over to the table and sits down in a chair across from Tegan. "And yeah... I know you aren't her. You're the other one. The one that was making an effort to look intimidating."

"I wasn't making an effort." Tegan plays being offended. "It comes naturally."

"Hmmm. Right." The girl grins. "I'll bet."

Tegan, still relaxed, leaning back in her chair, tilts her head forward, opening her eyes. "You've got balls. I told you to keep walking. I'm not interested in being chatted up by some random chick who followed us home and is now trespassing on our beach." Tegan leans her entire body forward, putting her arms on the table in a threatening way. She gives the intruder her most intense look.

The blonde girl smiles broadly, not looking threatened at all. "And there it is.... it really does come naturally." She turns her chair to the side, and leans forward, casually brushing the sand from her bare feet. "Look. I apologize for bothering you. I was just in the neighborhood... and like I said... I wanted to say hi."

Tegan glances to the table where the girl just set her purse and the flowers she was holding. "Just in the neighborhood."

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“Pretty, aren’t they.” The young woman grins as she starts rooting through her purse. “I love the smell of fresh flowers.”

Tegan watches as the girl, slowly and methodically, pulls some rolled, black socks from her purse and puts them on her feet, taking care to get every last bit of sand off first. Then she slides her stocking feet into her boots, one at a time, neatly rolling down her jeans over them. She picks up her purse and puts the strap carefully over her head, onto her opposite shoulder, and stands up just as the sun begins to set behind her, creating a halo of light around her head.

“Wow.” Tegan’s face is blank. “I mean... really. Wow. That took... like... forever. I should drag you down the beach and plunge you head first into the water just for being so incredibly slow and irritating.” Tegan shakes her head slowly, but can’t help a partial grin of admiration. “And I think those flowers are from the garden at the side of the house.”

Now standing in the sand just in back of where she’d been sitting, the young woman’s face goes serious. “I’d like to see you try.” She changes her stance, widening her legs, doing a good job of imitating Tegan’s threatening look. But then she can’t help herself as she’s overcome by a sly smile, and she starts laughing. “It must take practice. You really are good at it.” She mumbles between giggles.

“Big. Balls.” Tegan shakes her head. “You have no idea who you’re dealing with here.” She chuckles, more amused than irritated. She would

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never admit it, but she kind of likes this odd, young woman. “Why are you still here?”

“Wait. Who am I dealing with?” There’s a playful look on her face, and a glint in her eye as she stares at Tegan.

“You know...” Tegan loses the half smile. “... there’s still time for me to throw your ass in the ocean.”

The young blonde sighs and walks around the table, onto the stones that make up the patio. She shakes each leg so that any sand on her boots falls free. “I just wanted to say hi. I thought it might be fun.”

Tegan just stares blankly at her for a few, long seconds.

The young woman looks at the bushes just to the side of the house. “Does this still go all the way through... to the front. She walks closer to the corner of the house, peeking her head around the corner into the bushes. “This is a big house.”

“Yes. So leave. Now. Please.” Tegan continues her intimidating stare.

Her purse clutched up against her chest, the young woman just stands there, happily grinning at Tegan. “Okay. Will do.” And she steps into the area between the line of bushes and the side of the house, and disappears around the corner.

“So who’s your friend?” Sam steps from the French doors and walks to the center of the stone patio. “She’s from the coffee shop, right?”

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“Yeah.” Tegan is somewhat lost in thought, noting everything she can about the encounter. “And she’s not my friend.”

“People skills, Tegan. You need to work on your people skills.”

Sam leans back and closes his eyes, breathing in deeply, enjoying the ocean air. “So what did she want?”

Tegan shrugs. “Just said she was out for a walk... saw me... and wanted to say hi.”

“Ah.” Sam smiles, thinking he understands. “Did she give you her name... number?”

“What?” Tegan can’t help but sound irritated, thinking of the young woman.

“Name.” Sam says calmly, still leaning his head back. He takes another long breath, breathing out slowly.

“Chris. She said...” Tegan puts on her best girly voice. “I’m Chris by the way’ in the most annoying way possible.”

Sam suddenly lets his chair fall forward onto all four legs, and he opens his eyes wide, looking over to the side of the house.

11

“Knock knock.” Rae, full of smiles, holds her dad’s front door open and sticks her head in the foyer. “Dad. You home?”

“Living room.” The old man is lying on the sofa, resting with a good book, his head propped up by pillows.

Rae steps in, closing the door, and walks through the foyer to the living room. “Hey dad.” She leans over the back of the sofa and gives her father a quick peck on the cheek.

“Ah, Sunshine. My favorite daughter.” He sits up, taking off his reading glasses, setting them on the table next to the sofa.

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“Your only daughter. So. Ha. Ha.” She walks around the sofa, finding a place to sit, close to her dad. “Such an overused dad joke.”

The old man pulls the small blanket he was using to the side to make room.

“That’s okay.” She looks around the room, seeing her father’s wheelchair sitting off to the side. “What’s that...” She pauses, realizing.

“Dizzy spells.” The old man dips his head slightly, getting a better look at his daughter’s eyes. “Nothing to worry about.”

“Okay. So I won’t worry then.” Hesitantly, she stands up and reaches for the wheelchair, moving it closer to the sofa, and sits down. She wonders if this is part of the game. If this was his move. She decides to simply look past it, and continue what she came here to do.

“Good.”

Getting an immediate feel for the chair, she fiddles around with the wheels, making it spin in a circle for fun. Rae looks at her father and grins, appreciating his allowing her the space she needs. “This is kind of fun.” She does a wheelie and then spins the chair in a circle while holding the wheelie.

The old man watches, reminded of everything Sam and him talked about earlier. “You just missed your brother by about an hour. He and...”

“Which one?” She cuts him off, now completely absorbed by the fun she’s having in the chair.

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The old man gives his daughter a sterns look, but she never looks up to see it. “He and Tegan stopped by and chatted for a bit.”

“Oh, Lucky.” She spins the wheelchair again, and does an impressive wheelie.

The old man sits up completely, and places his feet on the floor in front of him. “Yeah.” He watches her spin around, having way too much fun with his chair. “You guys are more alike than you’d think.” He chuckles.

“Not really.” Rae continues toying with the chair, but takes a moment to look up, giving her dad a huge grin. “But I’ve got plans... so who knows what the future holds.”

“Hmmm.” The old man nods, and takes a quick sip of his water and sets the bottle back on the side table next to him. “So what brings you by to see an old man twice in a matter of days?”

Now Rae knows he’s playing. She hops up from the wheelchair, and in one fluid movement, sits down on the sofa next to her father, and brings her legs up underneath her. “Nothing special. Just thought I’d stop by and see what you’re up to.”

The old man smiles gently, but says nothing.

“So what’d Sam want?” She asks, cocking her head to the side. Her eyes show some intensity as she waits for an answer.

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“Nothing. He just stopped by to say hi.” The old man tosses his pillows and the small blanket onto the wheelchair. “What else would he want?”

“I don’t know. When Mikey and Gabe stop by it’s usually to check on you... make sure you’re okay.”

“Yeah, well Sam doesn’t check on me. He stops by once in a while to play chess or fill me in on what he’s been up to. Sam leaves the checking-up-on-me stuff for the others.”

“Maybe stopping in to say hi is his way of checking up on you... without looking like he’s checking up on you.”

“I suppose.” The old man chuckles.

Rae hops up from the sofa, her bare feet making pattering sounds as she leaves the carpet of the living room and walks into the kitchen. “But I’ll bet you had a nice time visiting...” She calls out. Her voice is muffled by the distance. “... with the two of them.”

“You’d think so.” The old man follows, walking into the kitchen. He sits down at the small dining table. “Tegan is always so quiet.”

“Ha!” Rae laughs once loudly. “Not with me she isn’t.” She glances back at the old man, realizing that he followed her into the kitchen.

“But yeah... we had a nice visit.” The old man suddenly has an idea. “Hey. You wanna play a game?”

“I feel like we already are.” Rae says quietly as she reaches into the sink and pulls out two unwashed coffee mugs.

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The old man smiles at her back, but again says nothing.

Rae glances over her shoulder as she washes the two mugs.

“I have a chess set in my desk drawer.” His face saddens. “I think it’s missing a few pieces though.” Then the light returns to his face. “You should pick up a new new set while you’re out. For next time.”

“I’ll try to remember.”

“I asked your youngest brother to stop by the Goodwill to see if they have a set, but he keeps forgetting.” The old man makes a tutting noise with his tongue. “I think he just doesn’t like going in there. You know how he is about smells.”

At the mention of her brother, Rae automatically turns and looks to her father, but chooses not to say anything. She glances around the room, as if expecting him to appear out of the living room or from the hallway leading to her father’s den. “He’s not around. Is he?”

The old man strokes his chin. “Nope. We have the house all to ourselves.”

Done surveying the kitchen, Rae’s eyes stop on her father. “I think I’ll skip the chess thing this time. Not really my game.” She opens a cabinet below the sink, looking for something to dry the mugs with. “You don’t have any clean dish towels?”

The old man shrugs.

Opening a couple of drawers next to the sink, she finds a lone towel. “I’m making us some hot chocolate. It’ll help you sleep better.”

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“What makes you think I don’t sleep well?”

“Okay. So it’ll make me sleep better.” Rae looks over her shoulder at her father, grinning like a child.

“I didn’t realize you slept.” He says half jokingly.

“Yeah. Not really, I suppose.”

“Is it getting that late already?” The old man looks up to the television mounted in the corner of the kitchen, near the ceiling. It’s on with the volume turned low.

Rae glances up to where her father is looking. “Would you like me to turn it up, so you can hear it better?”

The old man says nothing, suddenly lost in thought, watching some ghastly story of death and destruction in South America.

“Dad?” She pauses, waiting, turning away from the counter to face him. “Dad.” She says it curtly to get his attention.

He smiles gently, looking away from the television and to his daughter. “No. No. I can hear it fine.”

“Are you sure?” Rae reaches for the remote on the end of the counter.

“No. It’s fine. Looks like there was an earthquake in Chile.”

The mug cleaned and dried, Rae fills a kettle with water and waits for it to heat up on the stove.

“You should have started the water boiling first.” The old man continues to stare up at the screen in the corner.

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“Yeah. I wasn’t thinking. My mind was elsewhere.” Rae sits down for a minute in the kitchen chair beside her father.

“You seem a little happier than you were on your last visit.” He looks over and gives her a warm smile.

“Do I?” Rae tilts her head to the side. “Yeah. I guess I am. I guess I figured some stuff out.”

The old man looks pleased. “You said you felt lost. Did you find what you were looking for?”

“It’s a work in progress.” She looks over to the stove to see if there’s steam coming from the kettle yet.

“Good. Good.” The old man reaches over and pats his daughter on the wrist.

At the first sign of steam, Rae hops up and pulls the kettle from the stove. “We don’t want it too hot.”

“Yeah. I’m always burning my mouth that way.” Absentmindedly, he reaches up and runs a finger over his lips.

Rae turns her head, looking over her shoulder. “Yeah you burnt it last time on the ravioli.” She scrunches up her face, feeling his pain.

The old man laughs. “Tegan usually makes hot chocolate when she visits. When she’s not with your brother. Sometimes she brings white chocolate... which is really interesting. But yeah... she always makes it a little too hot.” He shakes his head. “And I burn my tongue.”

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“Of course she does.” Rae laughs to herself. “So besides making you scalding hot chocolate, how’s she doing?”

“Good, I suppose. Like I said, she’s pretty quiet. Always has been. Except in a fight.” He grins. “She’s just been hanging out with your brother. Like always.” He remembers their recent visit. “Sam says you recently met for the first time.”

“Mmm hmm.” She nods her head, wondering what else her brother told him. “And her twin?”

“Nyssa? She’s fine too, I guess. She visits much more often than her sister.” He wrinkles his forehead in thought. “We have a shared love of books. I guess that helps. We do a book exchange.”

Rae opens the cabinet where her father keeps the chocolate mixes and other sweet snacks and chips. “Hey. There’s some white chocolate packets in here with the regular packets.” She looks over to her father. “So what flavor will it be?”

“Let’s do the regular hot chocolate.” The old man purses his lips and scrunches his nose a bit. “The white stuff is good... but a little odd. I’m not sure you’d like it.”

“Alright. Old school hot chocolate it is.” She pulls two packets from the cabinet and closes it.

The old man gets up from the table, and walks to the edge of the living room. “Let’s have it on the sofa where it’s more comfy. I’ll fill you in

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on what Mikey and Gabe have been up to.” He moves into the living room and sits at the end of the sofa.

Rae pours the hot chocolate mix into the mugs and gives them a quick stir. Then she brings the steaming mugs into the living room, placing them on the big table in front of the sofa. She rolls the wheelchair a little closer to the sofa and plops down in it, wiggling her butt into place to get comfortable.

They sit in silence for a few minutes, carefully sipping at their hot chocolates.

“It’s hotter than I would have thought.” The old man mumbles.

“Yeah. Sorry about that.” She takes a tentative sip.

He brings a finger up to feel his bottom lip. “How’s yours? Tasty?”

“Not as sweet as I thought it would be. Kind of bland.” She answers automatically, without really giving it any thought. “Is it supposed to be like this?” She smacks her lips a couple of times like a child tasting something she can’t quite place.

“Hmmm. I think I’ve had that box for a while.” He takes another careful sip. “Maybe they’re expired.” He looks up at his daughter. “Do these expire?”

Rae shrugs.

“I’ll check later.” He takes another sip. “Mine seems to be okay.”

Rae smiles weakly, and decides to move this visit along. “Can I ask you a simple question?”

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The old man nods.

“But I need an honest answer.” Her voice has gotten softer.

The old man sets his drink down on the side table. “Of course. Would you expect anything else?” He reaches out and gently pats her arm. “What’s on your mind?”

“Hmmm.” Rae smiles sadly at her father, taking time to choose her words.

“The sadness is back.” The old man is pained. “You were so happy. Did I say something?”

Rae tries a better smile. “Of course not.” She chooses her words carefully. “When you play chess with the boys... or any game really...” Rae cocks her head to the side, letting her hair fall across one eye. “...or with any of us... do you ever cheat?”

“Cheat?” He pushes out his lips and scrunches his eyebrows. “Cheat how?”

“Just cheat.” Her eyes narrow and meet her father’s. “In any way. You know, to get an advantage.” She doesn’t take her eyes off her father’s eyes.

The old man leans back, taking his hand from his daughter’s arm. He picks up his hot chocolate and takes a careful sip. “No. Of course not.” He takes another, longer sip. “It’s cooled off nicely. I think it tastes better when it’s not quite so scalding. Give it another try.”

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Rae takes a small sip, and nods without actually considering. “So you don’t peek ahead?”

“If this is some kind of analogy to see if I’m always watching... keeping tabs on you kids... no. I expect you guys to do your own thing... make your own path.”

Rae immediately leans over to the sofa and gives her dad a small hug. “Thank you for that.” She thinks for a second. “From all of us.”

“But it doesn’t mean that I’m completely unaware of things that are happening.” He looks away, pretending to glance upstairs to the bedrooms. “I’m not completely oblivious.”

It’s Rae’s turn to push out her lips and scrunch her brow.

“Like...” The old man takes another long sip of his hot chocolate. “... sometimes I get the feeling that your brother is cheating when we’re playing chess.” He laughs, remembering some of the more obvious times.

“Who? Sam?” She’s instantly excited. Unsure. Relieved that this is where her father went with this. “Which brother?” She makes a mental guess. “Sam!” She’s certain. “Yeah, Sam.”

The old man shares her laugh. “No. But that would’ve been my guess too.” He scratches his balding head and slicks some stray hairs back with his fingers.

Rae hops up from the wheelchair and onto the sofa, gathering her legs like a child listening to a bedtime story. “Not Gabe?” She giggles at

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the thought, instantly dismissing it. “No, no. Definitely not Gabe. Mister what you see is what you get.”

The old man laughs so hard he nearly spills his drink. “No. But that would be good. Sometimes I wish he would.”

“Oh my God, yes.” Rae quickly covers her mouth, bulging her eyes at her father. “So Mikey then... yeah Mikey. Of course.”

There’s a moment of silence and then they both burst into laughter. They share family memories for hours, laughing and reminiscing. Just having some quality father daughter time without all the boys hanging about.

Their stories finally exhausted, and their sides split with laughter, Rae hops off the couch and grabs her father’s empty mug, bringing it along with hers to the kitchen to wash and put away.

Still smiling from all the laughter, the old man gingerly gets up from the sofa, stretches his back, and follows his daughter into the kitchen. He sits down at the table to see if he can catch tomorrow’s weather report.

“So. Did you get the answer you came for?” He watches as his daughter turns the sink water on to wash the mugs.

“Answer?” She glances over her shoulder. “Hmmm. I suppose I did. Yes.” Rae shakes the mugs to get most of the water off, and then puts one of them back in its place in the cupboard, taking the other one with her as she walks back towards her father.

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She pulls the heavy, mug up to her chest, inspecting it in the light.

The old man glances up at her, smiling. “It must be getting pretty late by now.”

“It is.” Standing beside him, just to his left, Rae places a hand lovingly on her father’s shoulder.

Her father reaches up, and places his hand over his daughter’s. “Please forgive me Sunshine, but I’m actually getting a little tired. I think you’re right about that hot chocolate.” He looks back to the TV in the corner. “I hope it helps you sleep a little better too.”

Rae raises the heavy mug above her father’s head with her left hand, and swinging it down across her body, crashes it down on the bridge of his nose, causing blood so splatter across the table and onto the wall. Once. Twice. Three times, until he’s dead.

The world, all of reality, goes black.

For a full minute nothing exists.

12

Rae sits on a beat-up, 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.

She holds the red and white aluminum can up to get a better look. “This may be the best drink in the history of mankind. Present, past, and future.” She says to herself, while holding the can up in mock salute.

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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.

Rae takes another sip of her Coke, watching 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.” Rae mumbles, and takes another sip of her Coke.

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. When the big man turns as she walks out, she 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.

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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 Rae sits on.

The young girl stops to catch her breath at the top of hill, directly in front of the picnic table.

“Hi.” Rae cocks her head to the side and smiles warmly at the young girl. She kind of wishes Gabriel was here for this. It’s kind of his thing.

The young girl eyes Rae cautiously, but says nothing, her eyes wet with tears.

“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?”

The girl glances down at the Coke Rae is holding out to her. Saying nothing, she robotically turns away, and walks past the picnic table, around the big trees, towards town.

“Nice to meet you!” Rae calls out over her shoulder.

Rae takes another sip of her Coke and looks back down the hill at the orange tent. A middle-aged, heavy-set woman walks out, her long, mouse-brown hair in a ponytail, her jeans and 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.

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Finally, looking up the hill, she spots the distant figure of Rae sitting on the picnic table.

She waves tentatively.

Rae waves back.

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.”

Rae’s fake smile fades some. “No. I don’t think so.”

“It would’ve been just a couple minutes ago.” Kate looks around. “Her name’s Noel. She wanders.”

“She wanders?” Rae cocks her head to the side, interested.

“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 does she wander?”

“Well... we live down there.” Kate points down the hill.

“Temporarily of course.”

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“Of course.” Rae sounds bored.

“Times have been a little rough for us, so you can imagine how tough it is for a teenage girl.”

“No. Not really.” Rae’s phony smile returns.

Kate looks closer at the young woman on the picnic table. She’s flawless, clean, long beautiful hair, bright teeth, an immaculate black dress. She’s barefoot, but her feet are perfectly clean. Kate looks down at her own bare feet, covered in dirt, her toenails yellowed and curling under with a thick coat of mud underneath. She glances around the area, but doesn’t see the girl’s shoes anywhere.

“I don’t like shoes.” Rae answers, and half shrugs. “Everybody asks.”

The woman nods, and giggles nervously. “You don’t live around here, do you?”

Rae shakes her head. “Just out for a walk.”

“Yeah. It shows.” Kate’s voice hardens as she squints her eyes at Rae, trying to determine if the young woman is judging her.

“I’m not.” Rae grins wickedly.

“What?” Kate scrunches her eyebrows together, confused.

Rae takes a slow sip of her coke, still grinning. “Judging you. That’s not who I am.”

Kate takes a step back without even realizing it. “If... if you see her around, let her know my...” She pauses, thinking. “... tell her not to

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worry about Eddy. I'll sort him out." Kate turns and quickly walks back down the trail, taking care not to fall as her feet slide in the dusty dirt.

"Will do." Rae says coldly to herself and turns her attention back down the hill to the orange tent.

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 looks upward, only seeing a few white clouds slowly moving through the blue sky.

"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.

Rae smiles genuinely. "I guess they should've asked you then."

The woman's big, brown eyes twinkle in the sunlight. "Nah. I wouldn't have told them anyway. Some things are best figured out on your own." 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.

The woman grins wide and stares back at Rae, looking her directly in the eyes. "Well, I should get going. My little ones will be wondering why I'm late." She walks past Rae, past the dirt path, and to the gentle slope of grass leading down to the big green field.

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“Little ones?”

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... you know... for when it’s my time to shine.”

“Well that sounds nice.” Rae remembers her own family playing and enjoying time together on that same field when they were all kids.

“Would you like to join us?” The woman puts a hand above her eyes, blocking the sun. “I tell some pretty great stories. Or so I’m told.”

Rae turns her attention back to the row of tents at the bottom of the dirt path leading down to the river. “I appreciate the invite. But...”

“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.

Rae tries to put on a brave smile, not looking away from her intended target.

On the other side of all the trees, Noel reaches the opposite side of the hill and walks down to the main road towards the old strip mall on the corner. She tried so hard not to cry, but a few tears let loose, and she’s not proud of that.

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“Fucking Eddy.” She mumbles. He sent her off to get him a pack of smokes, but didn’t give her the cash. She’s on her own to get the cash for the cigarettes, and she dare not come back empty handed. Last time he nearly busted her jaw.

Noel’s been on her own for nearly three years now. She’s lived on the streets, first with her mother, and then alone, since she was eleven. Sometimes they’d have a place to live. Sometimes they’d be living in a tent in the park or out of some kind soul’s garage. Then one day her mom left to collect some cans for food money and never came back. Noel waited like she’d been told to do. She sat in their shelter in the alley behind the grocery store and waited. She must’ve waited two or three days. She had water, but got so hungry she finally had to go out looking for her mother and some food.

Eventually she found food, but she never found her mother. She remembers crying a lot. Crying for her mom. Crying because she was scared. Crying because she was all alone. She eventually went back to the alley to rest in the collection of tarps and boxes they had called home. And she cried more. Finally, she gathered up her mother’s few things, mostly clothes, and tossed them out of the tent in anger. She felt abandoned. Unloved. She was alone now.

Now it’s been a couple of years and she’s done whatever it took to survive. And she’s not proud of that. She’s about as unhappy as you can imagine. She feels dead inside. She doesn’t care about anyone or anything,

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not even herself. It's all about survival. Food, water, and shelter. And if she was able to get liquor and drugs, that was a bonus. Anything to numb out the world around her. That's the only reason she sticks close to Eddy and Kate. When they get food, liquor, and drugs, sometimes they'd share, sometimes not. But it's worth the chance. Plus, Eddy protects her from everyone but himself. And for a fourteen-year-old girl, alone on the streets, that can be worth it at times too.

It wasn't long after her mother left that Noel went out to beg for food and money, and returned to find her shelter torn down and most of her things gone. The few things they didn't take, an old stuffed bear from her lost childhood, a dirty pillow missing half its stuffing, a handful of personal items and clothes, were scattered throughout the alley. She remembers collecting those items into an old duffle bag and moving on. It was time to leave that alley behind anyway. There were too many bad memories.

So now she shares a good-sized tent, along with a bunch of tarps and plywood boards to extend their space, down by the river with Eddy and Kate. Kate befriended her about a year ago when it was pouring rain and Noel was just sitting by the side of the river, letting her feet dangle in the churning water. Noel sometimes wonders if Kate even knows that she extended her life that day. She was minutes away from just letting herself drop into the river and having it decide whether she lived or died. Kate had walked up and sat down beside her, taking off her sandals, and put her

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feet into the water. They chatted for a bit and then Kate invited her to stay with her and her boyfriend. Maybe Kate knew. Maybe Kate just needed her.

Eddy had found Kate in much the same way a year earlier. They'd bonded over their love of meth and the fact that they had actually gone to the same high school twenty some years earlier. So Kate brought this young teen home as a kind of companion slash daughter figure. She was company when Kate needed it, but more than that, she was someone Eddy could beat up and force himself on who wasn't Kate.

Eddy and Kate were both raging alcoholics and drug addicts, and Noel would surely be well on her way to being both if Eddy would share more often. But he'd only share when he wanted something from her. Kate would usually be so out of it she wouldn't even notice what was happening. But anyway, Kate really didn't care, so long as it wasn't her Eddy was hurting.

Today Noel woke up late, the tent still stinking from Eddy's breath as he snored all night. She had to get out. When she woke, she saw that Eddy was gone, and was relieved. That is, until she stepped out of the tent and there he stood, stretching and yawning, and stinking. Like usual, he hit her a couple times and told her to go off and get him a pack of smokes, and maybe some cash if she could find someone generous. He told her not to come back at all if she didn't bring something good with her. Because she was otherwise worthless. And then she'd be alone again. She

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really wasn't sure which would be better, living with Eddy and Kate and all that came with it, or living alone without Eddy's protection.

Today, her grand plan was to beg outside the grocery store. Not the big one further down the street. Those people would pretend to not even notice her. She'd go to the small one in the strip mall on the corner. The one that said 'Market' in hand-painted letters above it. The people that used that store were usually more sympathetic, more down to earth, and more generous.

Over the years, she'd tried begging a lot, but had never gotten good at it. Even with the extreme desperation, she was a meek beggar. She was too timid to walk right up and ask. She would just stand off to the side looking hungry and sad. Today she didn't even have time to bring along the handwritten sign that asked for food and money, anything to help. And of course it said 'God Bless'. Today she would just stand there and look pitiful, her red, bruised face begging for help. Maybe someone would even give a crap, and take her away to some institution for runaway kids or something. But usually, even the cops acted like she were invisible.

As she passes a small eatery just before the strip mall entrance, a man calls out. Noel hesitates to look, fearing who he is or what he wants.

"Hey." The voice calls again, sounding pleasant and gentle, not angry or like someone who expects something.

Noel stops walking and slowly turns her whole body to see who it is. The man is dressed nicely, has long brown hair and big blue eyes. She

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thinks he's kind of handsome. Although his eyes are sad, they're kind and beautiful. He's sitting outside a small Italian eatery at a metal table by himself. He has a half-eaten meatball sub and a Coke in front of him. Noel's so hungry.

“You look hungry.” He smiles warmly. “Can I help?”

“Yeah.” She's unsure. “Can you spare a couple bucks to help me and my family out?” Noel's voice is soft and nervous. She's not looking directly at him. That's the way she is used to doing things. That's the way Eddy likes it. “And you wouldn't happen to have a pack of cigarettes on you?” She gets ready to flip him off and run if his end of the offer is what she expects it to be. What it often is.

“Ohhh. I think I can do better than that.” Although his eyes remain sad, his voice is upbeat and happy. Somewhat childlike. “I'm Sam by the way. And you're...” He raises his eyebrows and waits.

She thinks for a second, looking for any hint of danger. ‘I can do better than that’ she thinks, wondering what he's going to want in return. She exhales loudly to show she means business. “Noel.”

“Well. How festive.” His smile widens. Sam reaches for his wallet and pulls out a crisp hundred dollar bill and holds it out to her. “I'll have to tell my brother.”

Noel walks a little closer, trying to feel this guy out. Okay, so he's a strange one. But is he actually offering help just to be nice, or does he want something for it. She gets close and looks down at the hundred and

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back in Sam's direction, afraid to look him in the eyes. choosing instead to stare at his stubbly chin.

“Look mister. I think you have the wrong idea.” Noel considers snatching the hundred from his hand and running, but decides against it, there being too many people in the area. Disappointed, she turns to walk away.

“Hey.” Sam’s voice softens, his eyes get bigger and bluer. “No. I have absolutely no ideas. I’m just offering some help. Free of charge.” He smiles gently. “I was in a bad situation... a bad place one time, and not one person offered me help.” The smile on his face fades as he remembers. “Well at least not the kind of help that mattered. So I’m offering you some now.”

“Oh yeah.” Noel’s voice hardens. “Your mom abandon you in an alley when you were eleven?”

Noel and Sam’s eyes meet for the first time. Hers are hardened beyond her years and quite sad, while his are gentle and real.

“Not quite. I was a bit older. And it was my dad.” Sam answers honestly. “I never had a mother.”

Noel stands there looking at this man holding a hundred out to her, not sure why she doesn’t just take it and run.

“For reals?” Her voice cracks.

“For reals.” Sam leans back a little. “I was... challenging... when I was young. He told me to leave if I thought I could do better without him.

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Do better... than... him.” Sam gives Noel a sad smile. “Had some good times. Had some bad times. And one day I grew up a little, showed up at his door... and he just forgave me. And we’re good now.”

Noel considers this good-looking stranger for a minute, his story, his whole act. “Yeah, well my dad left my mom for some woman he worked with, my mom and I had nothing but bad times, and one day she just took off.” She pauses to breath. “There’s no door to show up at. And I have no intention of ever forgiving her. Or him.”

There’s a moment of silence between them.

“Fair enough.” Sam sighs, his eyes getting sadder. “Suppose your mom didn’t leave you... suppose she was taken from you. Let’s say that one night she went out to earn some food money and was raped and stabbed to death in an alley.” He furrows his brow. “I’m sorry for being so blunt.”

Noel stares, unblinking, at Sam.

“And she never made it back to you no matter how much she fought.” He sighs hard. “And trust me... my sister says your mom fought hard.”

Noel is still staring. “Who are you?”

Sam considers for a minute. “Let’s pretend I’m your guardian angel. I messed up. I got sidetracked and you got screwed over.” He smiles weakly. “And I’m here to make things right.”

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Tears begin to run down Noel's face, and her bottom lips quivers. "First... I'd say you're insane and need some serious psychological help." She looks down to the hundred dollar bill, still held out to her in Sam's hand. "Then I'd say you were the worst guardian angel of all time and there's no way you could make things right. A hundred bucks isn't going to do it."

Sam can't help but smile gently. "So you don't believe me?"

"About you being my guardian angel?"

"No, because I'm exaggerating about that... about me wanting to just make things right." Sam tries his most charming grin.

Noel wipes the tears from her face with the back of her hands. "Is my mom in hell?"

"Why would you think that?" Sam lets his smile drop, thinking for a few seconds. "What do you see when you look at me?"

Noel studies his face and then both his hands. 'At first... just another good looking, rock star wannabe.'

"I get that a lot." Sam's voice is soft. "And now?"

"Light." Noel takes a deep, rattling breath. "I'm scared. I see you. But full of light. Like you're ready to burst." She makes a slight crying sound. "Oh my God. What's wrong with me?"

"Noel." Sam's voice is soft but firm. "You need to calm down. You're fine. Nothing is wrong with you. Please. Trust me." He does his best version of Gabriel.

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They both say nothing for a full minute as they stare at one another.

“Look. Would you believe me if I told you I can bring you somewhere. Get you some help. No strings attached.”

Noel still isn’t sure, but something inside her says she should trust this guy, as unreasonable as that sounds. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

“Yes and no.” Sam grins. “But technically... no, I’m not from around here.”

Noel looks to the hundred, then the Coke and the meatball sub. A warmth flows through her, telling her that it’s all over. She can rest now. She hears her mother sobbing, telling her she’ll be okay, that everything will be okay. Noel realizes she has her eyes closed tightly. She feels warm and dizzy. She slowly opens her eyes hoping she’ll be anywhere but where she is.

Sam is watching her with sad eyes, his lips pursed together firmly as if he’s trying to hold something within. He’s even brighter with light than he was a few minutes ago. Only Noel can see it.

“Will my mom be there?” Noel isn’t even sure why she asked that. Her mouth just opened and the words came out.

“Yeah. She will.” Sam tries a weak smile.

“And it’s not somewhere around here? Is it?” She feels crazy for asking, but there’s something about this guy. She can feel it.

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Sam shakes his head slowly.

“Then she can’t be in hell, because I’ve been living right here in hell for the last three years.” Noel’s voice is soft. “And she’s nowhere to be found... but you are, spaceman... and you shouldn’t be here, should you?”

Sam shrugs lightly.

There’s a moment of silence.

“Well I don’t care if this is hell and you’re the Devil himself... I just want out. Wherever that takes me. Spaceman.”

Sam can’t help but chuckle. “You know... you’re a very intuitive young lady, Noel Marie Blanchard.”

Noel slowly smiles for what feels like the first time in months. A real smile, not something manufactured. She doesn’t even question how he knows her full name. It’s somehow not important.

Sam leans forward slightly, causing Noel to flinch slightly, and then Sam to frown.

“Here.” Sam sets the hundred down on the table and pushes his chair back away from it, causing the metal to scrape loudly on the cement. “At least take the hundred. Get something to eat. And if you feel like it, come back and see me. I’ll always be right here when you get here.”

Noel tentatively reaches out and takes the money from the table.

Sam doesn’t move.

“Always?” She finds herself smiling again.

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“Always. For ever and ever. Every second of every minute of every day until you decide to come back for help.”

She snorts in laughter. “Thank you.” She backs away slowly, and when she feels safe, turns, and starts to walk down the sidewalk.

Sam moves his chair back to the table and takes another bite of his sandwich. He thinks he’ll have to bring Michael here.

Noel looks back, watching this stranger enjoying his sandwich, not paying her any attention. She stops walking, takes a deep breath and exhales. “At this point... it doesn’t really matter.” She turns and walks back to the table, this time pulling out a chair and sitting across from him, but still keeping some distance and a quick exit strategy.

Without looking up from his food, Sam tears his sub in half and places half on a napkin and pushes it over to Noel.

Noel stares at the food for a second, still holding the hundred in her hand. “Fine spaceman, or whoever you are. But I’m trusting you from my heart. I’m just a kid... trusting you... from my heart. My head says to grab the hundred and run.”

Sam chuckles, putting a napkin up to his full mouth. “Mine would too.”

“And I’m keeping the hundred.” She tucks it into the front pocket of her jeans. “Just in case I need a ride back from wherever my stupid heart is letting you take me.” She pauses, thinking. “And I’m scrappier than I look, so you better be on the level... spaceman.”

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Sam smiles wide and puts a finger up to attract the attention of a young man cleaning one of the tables. “Excuse me. Could we get another meatball sub and two more Cokes? Please.”

Back at the picnic table, Rae lays back on the table with her eyes closed. She’s been waiting.

“Hey you.” The voice is gruff and rude.

Rae pulls herself up to her elbows, opening her eyes and presenting her biggest, most genuine smile. “About time.”

“Well. You’re a sexy young thing, aren’t you?” Eddy leers at Rae, looking her up and down. “You know, you lay out here on a picnic table and you’re just asking for trouble.” The menace in his voice is obvious.

“You must be Eddy.” Rae dials down her smile a little. “And how do you know... I’m... not the trouble?”

“Oh, I’ll bet you are, aren’t you?” He cackles showing quite a few empty slots where teeth should be.

Eddy immediately likes this girl, but he knows she doesn’t belong. He can’t just take her home to his dirty tent and intimidate her into staying like he did Noel and the others before her.

“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.

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It disperses in the wind just before reaching her.

“That’s repulsive.” Rae’s smile goes cold.

Eddy takes another drag from his cigarette, again blowing the smoke towards Rae. Again, the wind takes it.

He smiles disgustingly. “Well?”

“I haven’t seen anyone that could possibly be your daughter.”

“Humph. I’ll bet.” He takes another drag from his cigarette, blowing the smoke upward. He looks her up and down, noticing the beautiful dress. “So what’s some rich bitch like you doing in this neighborhood anyway?”

Rae smiles. “A young girl was supposed to die here tonight from a severe beating from some human lump of shit... but my brother took care of that. She’s safe. So now here I am... looking for someone else to occupy my open time slot.”

Eddy stares at her for a few silent seconds, then clears his throat and spits on the ground between them. “You’re a fuckin’ weird chick.” He turns and starts back down the path to his tent.

Rae sits alone for half an hour, before casually hopping from the picnic table, walking down the dirt trail, to the riverfront, and to the dirty, orange tent. “Knock knock.” She says in a playful, singsong voice.

Rae hears voices whispering in the tent, quietly arguing, and then a loud slap.

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Kate unzips the front flap, her cheek raw and red. She looks surprised to see a smiling Rae. “You.” And suddenly she looks hopeful. “Did you find Noel?”

Rae shakes her head. “No. Sorry. I’m here to see the man of the house.”

Kate scrunches her eyebrows in confusion.

“You should probably leave.” Rae’s smile completely disappears and her eyes go black. “Now.” Rae whispers.

Kate instantly goes cold as a whimper catches in her throat. Then, taking a deep breath, she carefully moves past Rae and scurries up the hill, not risking to look back.

From within the tent you can hear Eddy’s voice. “Kate!” He mumbles something, grunting as he pulls himself to his feet, reaching for the tent flap, ripping it open violently. “Noel?”

He’s surprised to see the young woman from up the hill.

“Oh great. The crazy bitch.”

Rae smiles and cocks her head to the side innocently.

“What the fuck do you want?” Eddy has to stop himself from punching this girl right in her smiling face.

“I’m here to sit with you... while you die.” Blackness pours from her eyes.

Eddy screams.

13

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.

The small man, Joseph Sherwood, is a lawyer. He and his partner take pride in the work they do for the poor in their neighborhood. They take the cases that the typically expensive and self-serving in their profession pass up. When a family loses everything and the insurance company won't pay, Joseph and his partner step in and makes sure things are made right. When a poor neighborhood is being bullied by a developer, Joseph and his partner push back. When a man is shot and killed by the police, just for standing up for his dignity as a human being, Joseph and his partner grieve with the family and makes the city pay.

Joseph used to consider himself one of the good guys. But that time has passed.

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

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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.

“So are those your sons?”

Joseph looks up and sees a young woman with long black hair sitting across the table from him. “Holy 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. “Where the fuck did you come from?” He slurs.

“I’ve been sitting here for quite some time actually.” She reaches forward, turning the bottle of Jack Daniels so that she can read the label. “Why would you drink something that obviously tastes so awful?”

“You’re not real.” Joseph catches his breath, recovering his composure. “Right? You’re not real.”

“I’m Rae.” She waves her hand at him in one short movement to say hello.

Joseph tries to think, using the palm of his hand to slap the side of his head a couple times. “You’re just the whiskey talking. Making me see

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things. You're not real." Joseph pours another shot and downs it, gagging slightly into the back of his hand.

"Am I real? Good question." Rae scrunches up her eyebrows, thinking. "That's pretty deep though. I'm not really sure. Maybe that's my whole problem. I can't find myself because I'm not even real." She grins wildly at Joseph. "I'll have to ask my dad the next time I stop by to kill him." Her grin gets wider.

Joseph looks around the room nervously, and then picks up the picture he dropped on the floor when he first spotted the girl.

"So." Rae leans forward, but gets a whiff of the alcohol and decides to lean back again. "That. Does not smell good." She puts a finger under her nose and breaths in and out to clear the smell from her nostrils. Then she decides to stop breathing for the time being. "So... are those your boys?" She uses her head to point to the picture in Joseph's hand. She knows they are.

Having forgotten he was holding it, Joseph looks down to his hand and sees the picture. A tear drops from his cheek. "Yeah." He coughs once to clear the slur from his voice. "Joseph Junior and James."

"Handsome boys." Rae smiles weakly.

"Yeah, they take after their mother." Joseph chuckles drunkenly.

Rae just stares, a weak smile still on her face. "They look like good kids."

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Joseph nods. "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 Rae. "Not the big one. That little mom and pop place in the strip mall that just says 'Market' above it."

Rae nods. She knows the place. "And James?"

"Ha." Joseph laughs. "He's a freshman, still finding his place. He's a bit of a troublemaker. Like I was when I was a kid. Nothing big. He got caught smoking earlier this year. And he was suspended for three days for mouthing off to a teacher just last week." He smiles, remembering a bad memory, fondly. "But he's a good kid. He's just being a teenager. He'll find his way."

"Will he?"

Joseph thinks for a second, pouring another shot and sipping from it. "No." He uses the back of his hand to wipe the tears from his eyes. "But he would've."

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.

"What's that for?" Rae's voice shows no emotion.

"This..." He holds the gun up a little, drunkenly pointing it directly at Rae.

She casually reaches out and gently pushes his arm to the side so that the gun is no longer pointed at her.

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“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.

“I know.” Rae reaches up and pulls her long hair back, tucking it behind her ears. “Your office was robbed while you were working late. You got shot. You were terrified. You nearly died.” She was there. She remembers. “Once you recovered, he bought it for you to protect yourself, to make you feel better.”

Joseph sips at his whiskey and just listens. He smiles drunkenly. “Now I know you’re just the whiskey talking.” He mock toasts her and downs the shot of whiskey.

“Hate the gun. Love the box.” Rae leans forward, pulling the empty gun box towards her, turning it, closing it, and reading the inscription “Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”

“Romans 13:10.” Joseph slurs.

“I know.” Rae’s voice is dull and lifeless.

“We’re the neighborhood lawyers so it made sense.” He smiles, a glazed look in his eyes.

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 Rae, a crazed look on his face.

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“I didn’t hear anything.” She allows herself to lie to the damned. “Probably just your guilty imagination.” It’s part of their punishment.

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.

Joseph returns to the kitchen table and opens the box of bullets. He was expecting Rae to be gone when he got back. For his adrenaline to have overcome a little more of the alcohol and remove her from his subconscious. But there she is, sitting at the other side of the table, twirling her long hair between her fingers, watching his every move.

Sitting back down, ignoring the figment of his imagination, 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 muffled giggle, again 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.

“Are you sure? Maybe I was wrong.” Rae smiles menacingly, showing a mouthful of bright, white teeth. “Maybe it’s the Devil. Waiting.

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Watching. Excited to catch you when you fall.” Her smile drops. “And you will fall.”

Joseph stares at his uninvited guest.

She stares back, her eyes dead and cold.

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. “You should be helping me, not making me so God damn jumpy.”

Rae’s face remains blank, and her eyes go black.

Joseph rubs his eyes awkwardly. “Fuck you. And fuck your devil.”

Again, Rae smiles as her eyes get even blacker.

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 Rae’s direction, but she’s not there. The chair is neatly pushed in and his box is sitting right where he left it, directly in front of him, open, and facing him.

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Joseph thinks for a second, confused by his own drunken imagination. “Like I said... fuck you.” 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, 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 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, and to the bottom of the stairs. He stops and listens to make sure everyone is still asleep.

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 is a thief. He hasn’t always been one of the good guys he tries to be. He’s been stealing from his clients, the poor people he has sworn to protect. Opportunity arose, and Joseph skimmed money from

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their settlements. He took their money for helping them and then he took a little extra just because he could. Just enough from each person to not be noticed, not get caught. He thought he was smarter than them. They were poor. He wasn't. He was educated. They weren't. They'd never know. He'd been doing it for years.

He got so good at it that he's not even sure his partner is aware. Or maybe he skims too and Joseph's the one unaware. He's tried to instill doing the right thing in his kids, to show them right from wrong, to make them good guys. And they have grown into good guys. Kids who stick up for others against the school-yard bullies. Kids who don't harm others. Kids who do the right thing even when the wrong thing is easier. Joseph should have been the one learning from them.

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's been stealing and it's taken its toll on him. He hasn't been exposed. No one's caught on yet. No one has said anything, and he's probably no closer to being caught than he ever was. He doesn't take a lot at any one time. And he doesn't buy expensive things. He just uses the extra money to make his family's life a little bit better, but at the expense of others much less fortunate.

These are the things he tells himself over and over. And every time he steals from someone, he vows it will be the last time.

But it never is.

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And he knows they will catch on. Someone will notice. Someone will see what he's been doing. He knows it's only a matter of time.

Joseph feels that he is no better than the drug addict that shot him and robbed him and his partner at gunpoint all those years ago. The guilt of all he's done has finally taken hold. Joseph has gone numb inside.

He drunkenly mumbles. "I'm not a good guy. I'm showing my boys the wrong path. I'm a bad father. I don't deserve any of this. This house. My wife. My family. I've let everyone down." He looks up to the ceiling, dizzy, talking to no one in particular.

Joseph nears the top of the stairs.

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.

He's done his research. The internet is a horribly wonderful thing. Three bullets. 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,

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with the guilt and shock of what he just did. He's not sure he'd have the courage otherwise.

On the last step, Joseph's nerves take hold. He hears a giggle again from the living room. It's louder and more obvious. Definitely a young woman.

He spins on the stairs to go back down and investigate.

Rae stands on the step just below him smiling wildly up at him, her eyes pitch black and completely empty.

“What the fuck!” He yells, and stumbles.

Joseph falls backward, nearly blacking out when his head hits the top step. He slides down the stairs on his butt in one big ungraceful mess, knocking the breath out of his lungs. He catches himself towards the bottom by grabbing at the handrail on the wall, but the gun in his hand hits the bracket holding up the handrail and pops loose from his sweaty grip. It bounces once on the floor, hits the wall, and goes off, the bullet passing directly through his throat.

Joseph Sherwood is already dying as he reaches for his throat, instinctively covering the hole trying to keep the gushing blood from squirting out. Rae sits with him at the bottom of the stairs holding his other hand as he gasps for life. Wide eyed, he stares up into her big, brown eyes, realizing that she's the most beautiful thing he's ever seen. He holds onto her hand as tightly as he can. He's sure he'll be lost if he lets go.

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Sam stands at the top of the stairs watching his sister do what she does. This is who she is. He's not sure why he's here, or what brought him here. Everything leading up to this moment, has been a sister he barely recognizes. It's not who she is.

He looks within the void and sees Rae and Joseph sitting comfortably on the edge. She's holding Joseph's hand with great care, giving him the strength to hold on. Joseph's wound is no longer. They're both smiling and seemingly happy, just sitting together and chatting like old friends.

But in an instant she goes dark, growing in size, towering over and around the small man as she viciously shoves him over the edge.

Joseph will fall for what seems forever, completely aware, screaming the entire time, until Sam finally decides to catch him, and take him to a place outside reality itself. Not a pleasant place, but a place of reflection.

14

It's a Saturday morning and the coffee shop is quite busy. When he arrives, Sam is surprised that Nyssa has gotten them the same spot in front of the big window again.

"Where's Tegan?" He sits in the center of the couch and reaches for the drink Nyssa ordered for him.

Nyssa, her eyes firmly in her book, shrugs. "Probably up there, ordering."

Sam reaches over and gives Nyssa's hand a quick squeeze as his hello. "Hmmm." He looks over his shoulder, scanning the busy room for

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his friend. “There she is.” He sees her up by the counter, scowling at the barista as she grabs her coffee.

Sam gives her a small wave, and in return, she rolls her eyes and gives her friend a small smile. She’s happy to see him, but refuses to give him too much. It’s just her nature. She edges through the long line at the counter and sits on the opposite end of the couch from her sister.

“That took forever.” She huffs, setting her drink on the table in front of them. She leans forward to look around Sam to her sister. “You didn’t wait for me this morning.”

“I did not.” Nyssa turns a page in her book. “I was enjoying some alone time.”

“No one tried to sit here?” Tegan nods her head slowly, giving her sister a cocky ‘nice going’ look.

Without looking up from her book, Nyssa smirks. “Actually several people have sat here over the past hour. They came. They sat. After a while, they went. The two of you just got lucky and came at the right time.”

Sam frowns, looking hurt.

“Alone time.” Nyssa gives Sam a quick wink, and goes back to her book. “It was... nice. They didn’t say a word to me.”

Tegan pushes herself back on the couch heavily. “Ha.”

Sam takes a sip of his drink, makes an obvious face of disgust, and quickly sets it back on the table. Sam doesn’t like coffee. He’s disappointed

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in what he just had to experience, and keeps smacking his lips with his tongue trying to rid himself of the awful taste.

Tegan sighs loudly and leans forward, grabbing Sam's drink, and tastes it. Then she takes a sip of the one she was given. She sets hers down in front of Sam and continues drinking his.

Sam gives her an odd look.

“That ones yours. It’s a disgustingly sweet, hot chocolate. Which is actually quite good.” Tegan smirks and pulls herself from the sofa to sit on the floor at the wooden table. She glances over her shoulder towards the barista. “I have no idea how they managed to screw that up.” She pulls a rolled up magazine from her hoodie pocket and begins flipping through it as she sips at her drink.

“Did you go see your dad again this morning?” Nyssa doesn’t look up, turning another page in her book.

Sam shakes his head. “No. I went for a long walk on the beach.” He seems suddenly lost in thought.

Nyssa lowers her book to her lap. “Everything okay?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t save your spot. It just seemed rude to shoo people away like that. Especially since you weren’t even here yet.” Now Nyssa feels bad. She’s not her sister. She was just teasing.

Sam gives her a half smile, still a bit lost in thought.

Tegan glances up at him over her shoulder. “So what’s up?”

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“She’s up.” Sam looks past Tegan, past the front door, to his sister sitting at a small table against the wall.

“Shit. What’s she doing here?” Tegan slouches down a little, taking her coffee in both hands, sipping quietly.

“Language, Tegan.” Nyssa and Sam say together, looking at each other and grinning.

Nyssa looks over to the far wall. “Oh. Your sister. Yeah, she was here when I got here this morning. She reads a passage from that book of poetry and then scribbles away in her notebook. Over and over. It’s kind of cute. She moves her lips when she reads.”

“Yeah, she always has.” Sam watches.

“Just part of her show.” Tegan blows gently on her coffee.

Sam’s positive his sister has seen him, but she continues to write furiously in a leather-bound notebook, while an untouched drink sits nearby. She keeps pulling her long hair back behind her ears and then she leans way over, her face to one side, almost laying against the paper as she writes with an unusual intensity for about thirty seconds at a time.

“How do you know it’s a book of poetry?” Tegan sips her drink, looking through her magazine. “She doesn’t seem the poetry type. Unless we’re talking The Raven.” She chuckles to herself.

“Did she see you? Did she say hi?” Sam takes a long sip of his hot chocolate. “Mmmm. This is nice. Thank you.”

“She saw me, but did her best not to show it.”

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Again, Tegan chuckles.

Sam grins as he realizes he can hear the pen scratching loudly against the rough paper from halfway across the room. He remembers when they were kids. She kept a journal and was always scratching away in it loudly. One time Mikey got hold of it and was reading passages to the other brothers, and when Rae caught him, she nearly killed him she was so upset.

“It’s a book of Ancient Greek poetry. It was published in the early 1900s. Nineteen oh eight. I’ve read it. It may have actually been mine. If so, it’s a signed, first edition. I left it for your dad on his desk a while back.” Nyssa glances over at Sam. “It’s a difficult read. Wordy. Not fun.”

Rae continues to write in thirty-second spurts, pausing each time to put the pen down and shake her hand in the air, massaging the muscle between the thumb and index finger to ease the cramping. She repeats her process over and over. Reading a passage, filling a portion of the page with bright blue words, and shaking the cramping from her fingers. She makes an extraordinary show of it. Like she’s never really done this before, but saw it in a movie or something.

From her spot on the floor, Tegan yawns and stretches.

Sam glances down at his friend. “How’s your incredibly disgusting coffee?” He knows she gets easily bored by all this. Unlike her sister, she doesn’t find it easy to just relax and enjoy her surroundings.

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“The same. Always the same.” She glances out the window.

“Good, I guess.”

Rae leans way back in her chair, both arms extended above her head, stretching. A childlike smile on her face, she casually looks around at the people scattered at their seats around the room. Then she sees Sam looking right at her. Their eyes lock for just a second and his brighten considerably. She gives him a small wave. She’s pretending to have just now seen him and his friends.

And Sam is quite aware of that. His face remains blank, still considering everything.

Rae cocks her head to one side like a dog listening to something in the distance. She puts on a pout, her bottom lip sticking out like a child. Then she closes her book and puts it in an oversized, green denim purse along with her notebook and pen. She holds it awkwardly, as she half walks, half glides over to side of the couch, stopping nearest Tegan.

“Hello, dear brother.” Her voice is light and girly. “May I join you and your friends?”

Tegan awkwardly slides out of the way.

“Hello again, Tegan.” She smiles, looking down at Tegan and then over to her sister. “Nyssa.”

Nyssa keeps her book open, but shifts her eyes up to Rae. She wasn’t aware that Sam’s sister knew them by name. Nyssa gives her a small smile.

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“Oh pish.” Her smile drops to a pout. “I don’t bite. I’m sorry if I came across as a bit... grumpy... last time.”

Sam just stares at his sister. She’s going to be difficult.

“May I?” Rae motions with her eyes towards the empty spot on the sofa to the right of Sam.

With a sudden burst of defiance, her heart racing nervously, Tegan hops back up to the sofa, letting her legs hang free and wide, taking up as much room as possible.

“You know.” Rae grins and turns to Tegan. “Most people actually like me. They enjoy my company. You’re one of the few who doesn’t.” She moves some stray hair from her eyes, as they go dark for just a split second. “And those few are usually the ones about to get a little push.” She drops her smile briefly. “And I do bite.” And then noting her brother’s continued stare, she gives Tegan her best smile.

With no room on the couch, Rae sits down on the wooden table in front of the trio, facing them. Reaching forward, she politely takes Sam’s drink from his hand and takes a long sip. She raises her eyebrows and gives him a delighted nod, handing it back to him. Then she crosses her legs and pulls them up and under herself. She sets her purse next to her leg, hovering her hand in place for a second, a look of irritated concentration on her face as she watches to make sure it doesn’t fall over.

“We should probably talk.” Rae tilts her head like a perfect little bird. “Right?”

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“Yes.” Sam plays relaxed, but allows some irritation to show. “We should.”

Rae looks first to Nyssa, then to Tegan, finally settling back on Sam. She sticks out her bottom lip. “You’re upset.” She sighs, slumping forward just a little. “About the little man on the stairs.”

Sam says nothing.

“Have you got him yet?” Rae is playing. She feigns excitement. “Are you off somewhere right now doing your thing?” She takes an exaggerated glance around the area. “Making him see the errors of his ways.” She giggles. She’s always enjoyed teasing all her brothers. It’s one of the perks of being the eldest.

Nyssa marks her page and sets her book in her lap, looking first at Rae and then to Sam.

“Let’s go for a walk.” Sam smiles weakly, trying not to let his sister get to him. He has a lifetime of practice.

Rae hops to her feet in one swift movement. “Let’s all go. Just like a family.” She smiles wide, looking pleased. “Or a street gang.”

Sam closes his eyes and slowly shakes his head.

The group takes a few last gulps from their drinks, tossing them in the trash, and leaves the coffee shop, walking slowly down the sidewalk towards the old man’s house just a few blocks away.

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Tegan is up front, while Nyssa walks alongside Sam. Rae trails at the back, fascinated by her surroundings, by everyone and everything they pass.

Sam glances over his shoulder. “You seem a lot happier.” He’s feeling a little less irritated now that they’re out on a nice walk.

“Hmmm.” Rae grins wildly. “I guess I am.”

Tegan is walking faster than the rest of the group. Every few minutes she gets too far ahead and has to stop to let everyone catch up. Impatient as ever, her eyes squint just a little, as she taps a booted foot as she waits for them to catch up. No one seems to notice.

“Nyssa, why don’t you walk ahead with Tegan.” He gives her a look and uses his head to motion over his head to Rae. “I need to talk to my sister.”

Sam stops to let Rae catch up, while Nyssa walks ahead, joining her sister in the front. Then they all continue their walk.

After a few steps, Rae suddenly stops, putting on a schoolgirl pout. “You’re still upset with me.”

“Well... yeah.” Sam turns to face his sister. “That was a little aggressive... wasn’t it?”

Rae’s eyes briefly darken as a show of who she is. “I’ve always been a little aggressive, little brother.” A show of who she can be. “It comes from helping raise four boys.” She grins.

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“Hmmm.” Sam considers. “True. But not so much on the job. I was there. I was going to take care of it. That was the plan. That... is... the plan.”

Rae cocks her head to the side, scrunching up her eyebrows. “I thought you don’t do plans?” There’s a definite edge in her voice. “Anyway. He deserved it.”

Tegan stops yet again, exhaling loudly, waiting for them to catch up.

“I think your little buddy’s getting upset too.” Rae says in a playful, teasing voice. “Should I make her go away?”

Sam stops, motioning with his hand for Nyssa and Tegan to continue. He looks back to his sister, a stern look on his face. “What the hell’s wrong with you?”

“Awe, Lucky.” Rae wraps her arm around her brother’s, pulling him along, continuing their walk. She doesn’t want to lose him on this. She still needs his help. “I’m sorry I upset you. I took things too far.”

“Look...” Sam begins.

“Nothing’s changed.” Rae grins up at her brother. “I said I was sorry.”

“You caused the death of one man and blatantly killed another.” Sam pulls his arm free and walks a little faster, seeing that Tegan and Nyssa have gotten quite far ahead.

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“Yes.” Rae struggles for a few seconds, thinking. “It’s a possible... path... I’m trying out.” Rae’s voice is quiet, unsure. “I’m just weighing all the options.”

They walk in silence for quite some time, first passing their father’s house, then approaching the small, neighborhood park they used to play in as kids.

“Tegan.” Rae calls ahead to the sisters, her face full of excitement. She motions with her head that they should all take their walk into the park.

Nyssa and Tegan have little choice but to walk back and follow Sam and his sister into the park.

Rae stops for a second, taking her brother’s arm gently. “I’m sorry. I’ll do better.” She lifts herself up on her toes and gives her brother a small peck on the cheek. “I’ll make you proud.”

Sam puts an arm around his sister’s shoulder and squeezes gently.

Suddenly Rae’s eyes flash with a childlike happiness. She pulls free of her brother’s arm, pushes past Nyssa and Tegan, and skips wildly to the merry-go-round like a small child. Her smile and giggle come from pure delight as she sits down and uses a bare foot to push herself in a circle.

Sam looks over to Nyssa and Tegan and half shrugs. “She’s in a good mood.”

“Lucky, come push me. Really get this thing going” Rae laughs. “I haven’t done this since we were kids.” She looks over at Tegan, standing

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off to the side. “Come on, Tegan... you push too.” She pushes her bottom lip out in a pout. “Please.”

Tegan gives Sam an irritated look. “I think I preferred scary.”

Over on the swings, three young men, are sitting, just hanging out. Two of them wear light-blue, matching jackets and the third, a much larger guy, wears a dark hoodie and sunglasses. Rae has caught their interest as she spins like a crazy woman on the merry-go-round. The smallest of the three, motions towards the merry-go-round, and they all get up, walking closer with a well-practiced strut.

“Hey.” The mid-sized guy says. “What’s up with you, girl?”

“Yeah, how you doin’?” The small one grabs at the rails of the merry-go-round, letting it slap against his hand, slowing it down so he can sit on it without making a fool of himself.

Sam stops pushing, and steps back. “It’s not a good time, guys.”

“Not talking to you. Talking to the little hottie here.” The small guy doesn’t even look at Sam.

Rae smiles from the merry-go-round. “That’s my little brother. Don’t be rude.” Rae knows where this is going, and she plans to enjoy it. “Or you’ll end up pissing me off.”

Tegan moves to Sam’s side as Nyssa saunters over.

The big guy in the hoodie stands off to the side, saying nothing, but tilts his sunglasses down on his nose, making it obvious he’s checking Rae out head to toe.

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“Well.” Sam looks to Nyssa and Tegan. “We should probably get going anyway.”

“That’s a good idea.” The small one strokes the few hairs on his chin, trying to look cool and tough. “Take the lesbians. Leave the hottie.”

“They’re sisters, actually.” Rae hops off the merry-go-round, taking a few running steps to stop herself. “And I think you’re definitely going to piss me off... which should be fun.”

Rae grabs the rail of the merry-go-round hard, pulling it to an immediate, jarring stop so she is facing the small one who has to keep himself from tumbling to the side.

“This was a family outing and now you ruined it.” She glances to Sam. “It’s usually Michael’s job to ruin family outings. Right Sam?” Grinning, she looks back to the trio of thugs.

Sam chuckles and begins walking away with Nyssa closely following. “Rae?” He motions with his head. “Tegan. Let’s go.”

“Aww, come on Sam. We can take ‘em. Just you and me like the old days.” She glances at Tegan, a wild smile on her face, her eyebrows raised. “Or how about me and Tegan? We can definitely do some damage. Girl power and all that.”

Sam shakes his head and walk away. With recent events being what they’ve been, he know this won’t end well for the boys.

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Rae turns and gives the big guy one last look, tilting her head to the side slowly, and smiling dangerously. “Soon.” She gives him a small wave and follows her brother. “Very soon.”

The three guys look at each other, a little surprised. Amused. The big guy nods slowly, smiling. They were interested before, but now she really got their attention. “I like your style, girl.” The big guy speaks for the first time, his voice deep and husky.

Tegan glares at each thug one by one. “Fucking losers.” And follows behind Rae towards the park exit.

They leave the park, heading back the same way they came. For a couple minutes, no one says anything.

Finally, Tegan can’t help herself. “Why didn’t we just take ‘em?” She spits the words, defiantly, empowered by Rae. She quickly catches up with Sam and Nyssa, leaving Rae to trail again.

“Yeah, Sam. Why didn’t we?” Rae doesn’t sound angry in the least. She’s smiling.

As Tegan looks back at her, Rae gives her a friendly wink.

Sam ignores them, and continues walking. He’s considering a nap on the couch when they get back to the house. Or maybe he’ll just go out to the beach and watch the tide come and go. Maybe put his feet in.

Suddenly the two smaller guys from the park step around the corner, near the crosswalk, standing just a few feet in front Nyssa and

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Tegan. They do their best to simply look menacing. Then the larger guy walks up, just behind Rae.

As she notices the guys in their way, the smile on Rae's face gets bigger. "Oh! Our new friends." She lets out a short laugh. "How fun."

Nyssa moves a little closer to her sister's side, just in front of Sam.

"Very soon really was..." Rae lets out another snort of laughter. "... very soon."

"They're just boys." Sam sighs.

"We'll show the hottie we're not just boys." The mid-sized guy makes a rude gesture and shows a small pocket knife in his hand, flashing it threateningly just in front of Tegan's face. "Who's the loser now... bitch?"

With incredible speed, Tegan flicks her hand forward punching him in the face. He hits the ground about six feet from where he'd been standing, blood splattered across his face where his nose had been. It's now completely pushed flat and to the side.

"Tegan!" Sam hisses, his eyes widening. He immediately steps forward between the twins.

"He called me a bitch." Tegan takes a quick glance over her shoulder at Sam and then to Rae, before turning her attention back to the small guy now standing alone looking somewhat scared and shocked.

"Is he dead?" Nyssa can barely make out a face through all the blood.

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“No.” Rae answers from the back of the group. “He’s not.”

The smaller guy up front, now with his own knife out, swings it up in front of Nyssa and Tegan, showing that it exists. Then he pulls it down low, near Sam’s stomach, jabbing it forward several times rapidly to show he means business. Nyssa instinctively places herself between the knife and Sam, pulling her fingers into a tight fist to match her sister’s.

Sam stops her with a look, his eyes shining bright, his hair blowing wild with sudden anger. Between his sister looking for a fight, and these idiots looking for trouble. He’s had enough.

Tegan smiles. “About time.”

“What the fuck!” The guy unconsciously moves his shaking hand forward, nearly touching the front of Nyssa’s hoodie.

She immediately steps forward, allowing the blade to bury itself in her stomach while she stares him directly in the eyes. Horrified, the little man takes a quick step back, pulling the knife smoothly from Nyssa’s body.

“Fuck!” He looks down. But there’s no blood. There’s no wound. There’s not even a tear in the fabric of her jacket.

Instantly, Sam sprouts great, flaming wings, and the air around him warps with heat as his entire being lights up like a small sun.

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ!” The guy makes the sign of the cross with his knife hand.

And Nyssa immediately punches him in the face, and he lands a broken, bloody mess right next to his friend.

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“What the hell are you people?” The big guy in the rear suddenly speaks. Everything has happened so quickly, that he struggles to register it all. His terrified voice, no longer deep and husky, becomes high and strained as he stares with wide eyes at the back of Sam’s flaming wings. “Oh God. Oh God. Oh God.”

With a giggle and a small snort, Rae turns to face the large man. She tilts her head to the side, and smiles like a happy child given a new toy.

The big man manages only a stumbling step backward, nearly falling.

“Rae. Please.” Sam says quietly. “It’s my bad.” He pulls his wings back in and his body immediately cools. “We need to be on our way.” He turns to face his sister.

A sudden wind picks up, causing Rae’s long, dark hair to dance wildly in the breeze. The big guy immediately drops to his knees, shaking to the point of convulsions. He’s crying. And praying. His eyes are closed, afraid of what he’ll see next.

“Look at me!” Rae’s voice changes, getting much deeper. Her eyes go dark, she goes dark. She becomes nothing but a huge, empty void, pulsating and throwing an inky blackness in all directions.

“Rae...” Sam searches for the words.

Both Nyssa and Tegan watch, completely mesmerized. They have never witnessed Death.

The Death Experience

Martin E Ericson Jr

“Rae.” Sam steps towards his sister, putting a hand into the darkness where she once stood. “We don’t have to do this right now.” He tries another approach. “Another time. I promise.”

A few quiet seconds pass.

“I’m sorry, Sam. For disappointing you.” Her voice is even deeper than before, and sounds hollow, coming from deep within the void. “This isn’t their first time. They’ve done things. Bad things. They’ve hurt people. Young women.”

“I know.” Sam’s voice goes soft. “And they’ll be dealt with... when it’s time.” He takes a deep breath, releasing it slowly. His eyes lighting up. “I’m quite sure of that.”

“I. Said. Look at me.” Rae’s voice is thunderous.

The big guy looks up at Rae as he was told. “Oh my God... please... what are you?” His voice is small and high pitched. Losing complete control, he wets himself without even realizing it.

He turns his eyes to Sam, terrified, pleading.

“Not him. Me. Look at meeeee!” Rae screams from deep within her darkness, causing the air all around them to bubble and hiss, and burn away violently.

Slowly, theatrically, she leans down towards the big guy, showing him her real face from deep within the empty blackness of her realm. She shows him the void. She shows him her power. She shows him his death. She shows him everyone’s death. Ever. Past. Present. Future. One by one.

The Death Experience

Martin E Ericson Jr

“Rae!” Sam yells her name to get her attention. “Not! Now!” He lowers his voice to a whisper. “Please.”

She instantly lets the darkness go, pulling it back within, showing him a toothy, girlish smile. “You will remember me.” She says softly. “Not for this thing I wear...” She cocks her head to the side. “... but for what I am. For what you saw.”

The big guy curls up on the ground in a puddle of his own urine. And he screams and cries, and rocks himself back and forth. He'll never stop screaming and crying for the remainder of his short life.

15

Rae walks down the long hall, nearing the exit doors of the hospital, and sits in a chair next to a tall, thin man in a grey suit. The two chairs are pulled close together. She studies the man. He's not quite middle aged, with neatly-combed, dark hair streaked with small patches of silvery grey, matching his suit.

“You’re not supposed to be here, you know.” Rae’s voice is soft and girlish.

The man, lost in thought, doesn’t even hear her.

“Hey.” Rae, playfully nudges his arm with hers. She grins broadly.

The Death Experience

Martin E Ericson Jr

Awakened from his deep thoughts, the man turns and looks down at the young woman sitting next to him. “I’m sorry. What was that?”

“You’re not supposed to be here.” Rae uses her head to motion around the area. “At the hospital.”

He looks down at the young woman dressed all in black, not really registering what she’s saying. “I don’t mean to be rude, but please... I have a lot going on right now.” He turns away and goes back to his thoughts. His face lined with worry.

“You really shouldn’t be here.”

The man turns, instantly angry, and looks Rae over with obvious contempt. Long black dress and bare feet. He snorts and shakes his head. “Look. You’re obviously not of any importance. And I’m here because my son...” His lip quivers and his eyes go red. “... my son is here in the hospital. I need to be here.” His eyes start to water.

“Not of any importance?” Rae pushes her bottom lip into a pout, and cocks her head to the side. “Still. You’re still not supposed to be here.”

The man sighs angrily. “And why is that?” He has a hard edge in his voice, like a man ready to break.

“Well...” Rae faces forward, watching as an old woman in a wheelchair is pushed past. She waves gently as the woman stares wide-eyed at her the entire time. “... because I don’t think it’s appropriate.”

The Death Experience

Martin E Ericson Jr

“What?” The man’s face goes hard. “And who the hell are you? And how is it your fucking business?” His voice is loud and angry. He glances around, nervously.

Rae turns her smile off. “But mainly because a boy is dying upstairs because you shoved him down a flight of stairs.”

The man pulls back in shock. “I did no such thing, young lady.” He pulls himself to his feet to walk away.

“Sit down, Lawerence.” Without moving from her seat, Rae grabs his right wrist with her left hand and pulls him back to the chair with such unnatural force, that it breaks the back of the chair, causing the broken wood to dig into his back.

He screams in pain as the broken chair tears through his grey suit and dress shirt and pushes up against his bare back.

A tall, blond man in a leather jacket is sitting alone in another cluster of chairs just down the hall. Noticing the commotion, he glances over with a concerned look on his face.

Lawerence’s face is contorted in pain as he screams. “You fucking bitch! I’ll have you fuckin’ arrested. And then I’ll sue your goth ass.” He’s so angry that he considers hitting her in the face, public place or not.

“I think you’ll find that your lawyer’s no longer interested in defending a child beater.” She pushes the hair from her face. “I recently paid him a visit...” She smiles wide. “... and I assured him, his life would be much shorter if he did.”

The Death Experience

Martin E Ericson Jr

Lawerence, completely dumbfounded, stares at her for a few long seconds.

“I think you’ll find him hiding in his closet, crying and mumbling to himself about the darkness and seeing his own death or some such nonsense.”

“Are you insane?” He looks down to her bare feet again. “What the fuck are you talking about? And who the fuck are you?” His voice is an angry whisper. ‘And how do you think you fucking know me?’

Rae just continues to smile at him, which infuriates him even more. “That’s a lot of fucks. Lawerence.”

Having enough of this, and intent on finding a security guard, Lawerence goes to stand up again, but Rae’s hand clamps down on his wrist hard, pinning it to the arm of the chair. The man whimpers in extreme discomfort as he gives his jailer a terrified look.

She smiles pleasantly at him, still pinning his wrist hard to the chair, cracking the wood beneath his arm.

“Seriously.” Lawerence is getting scared. “Just let go of my arm.” He wriggles to free himself. “Please.”

Rae’s face goes blank and she tightens her grip. Lawerence squirms in pain.

“Doesn’t feel good to be on the other end of a bully, does it?” Rae’s childlike smile returns.

The Death Experience

Martin E Ericson Jr

Lawerence looks down to her hand on his wrist. “Seriously. I didn’t push him down any stairs. He fell on his own. He’s my son for Christ’s sake.”

She tightens her grip even more, causing a high-pitched whimper to come out of Lawerence. “You say that word again... and I’ll tear your God damn arm off right here, and beat you to death with it.”

Lawerence’s eyes bulge with pain as sweat pours down his forehead.

“Yeah, he fell.” Rae smiles again, this time at a young nurse as he passes. “He fell down the stairs... because you shoved him hard, got in his face, and scared him so badly that he stumbled backward. He thought you were about to hit him.” She drops her smile completely. “Again.”

“Look. I don’t know who you are, or what you think you know, but I never pushed him, and I’ve never hit my son.”

Rae quickly releases Lawerence’s wrist, flicking her arm back, smacking him in the mouth with the back of her hand. Instantly her hand is back to pinning his wrist to the chair.

Lawerence screams out again, bringing his other hand up to his mouth, checking for blood. “What the hell!”

“You’re lying.”

“What?” Lawerence wriggles his wrist trying to get free, but finds she has an iron grip. “No. Honest. I’m not lying.”

The Death Experience

Martin E Ericson Jr

Rae flicks her arm back, smacking him in the mouth with the back of her hand again. And then continues to pin his wrist to the chair.

“What the fuck!” With his free hand, Lawerence, pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and wipes the blood from his mouth. “That fucking hurts. Stop it!”

“You’re lying.” Rae repeats.

Lawerence looks around for help. He looks to the man sitting just down the hall and yells. “Hey! Hey you! Get security. Please. This little bitch keeps hitting me.”

The man is flipping through a magazine. He glances up, again with a look of concern on his face, but then goes right back to his magazine.

“You hit your son. Often.” Rae squeezes his wrist just a little to get his attention. “A father doesn’t beat his son. So repeat with me... I’m. Lying. I beat. My son.” And with that, she pops him in the mouth a third time.

Lawerence cries out in pain. His lips are now swollen and cut from being pounded against his teeth and gums. “Okay. Okay. I’m... lying. I beat him.”

“So no more bullshit about not causing him to fall down the stairs.” She squeezes his wrist harder. “Agreed?”

“Yes. Yes. Please.” Lawerence is full of tears, his voice trembling. He looks down the hall for help again, but all he sees is that same guy, not even paying attention, just flipping through his magazine.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

“So how many times have you beaten him?” Rae’s smiles inappropriately as she asks.

“I...”

Rae gives his arm another squeeze, this time as a warning.

Lawrence flinches, expecting another pop in the mouth. He’s unsure what to say. His eyes, red and watery, dart around for help. “I don’t know. I don’t remember. A couple. A few.”

Rae squeezes his arm hard and he screams out loudly and starts crying.

“Lots of times. I don’t know. Dozens.” He slouches forward in defeat, openly crying like a small child.

“Why?”

“Why what?” His crying muffles the words.

Rae doesn’t say anything, but cocks her head slightly to the side, like she’s thinking of popping him in the face, or worse.

Lawerence is sobbing out of control. “I don’t know. I’m tired. I’m stressed.” He looks at the young woman holding his arm. “Why are you so strong?”

Rae gives him a blank stare. “Pilates.”

Lawerence resists the urge to say something he knows will get him hit in the face.

“So you take it out on your son.” She says matter of fact, and gives him a scary, crazy grin.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

“I guess.” He looks as the smile suddenly disappears from Rae’s face. “Yes! Yes! It’s wrong I know, but I just lose myself and do it. I don’t mean to. I lose control.” He’s crying hard now and uses the bloodied handkerchief to wipe the tears from his face. “And now my son’s going to die upstairs in some room. And for Christ’s sake, I’m too ashamed to even be there.” He catches his error and his eyes bulge in fright. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” He screams.

“Can you imagine what it feels like to fear your own father?” Rae smiles grimly at her thoughts. “Well, I’m stressed. And I’m tired too.” She adds. “And sometimes I just lose control.”

Then she adjusts the grip she has on his wrist, moving her hand farther up his arm towards his elbow. And she squeezes hard. Lawerence screams louder than he ever thought possible, until he screams himself right into near-silent gagging.

Rae releases her grip. Reaching over and taking Lawerence’s handkerchief, she wipes the blood from her hand. Lawerence, dizzy and somewhat out of it, looks down at his right forearm. It’s mashed beyond recognition, only blood, pulp, and shattered bone fill out his torn, blood-soaked sleeve.

Rae places the bloodied handkerchief nicely in his lap. “I take it you’re done beating up on kids.” Her voice is back to playful and childlike. “Especially with that arm.”

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Martin E Ericson Jr

Lawerence nods violently as he breathes hard, fighting the oncoming shock, suppressing grunts of pain.

“Wait.” Rae pretends to be unsure. “You’re not left handed are you?” She looks to his other, undamaged arm.

All Lawerence can do is shake his head quickly as his eyes bulge with fear.

Rae stands up and straightens her long, black dress with great care. “You’ll wanna get that looked at. You could lose that arm.” She winks playfully. “And I’ll be seeing you again. Soon.” Rae smiles wide and begins her walk down the hospital hallway, leaving Lawerence sitting in the chair, now in shock, afraid to move.

Walking down the hall, her bare feet patting on the clean, hospital floor, Rae approaches the tall man sitting in the small group of chairs. She smiles politely. “Nice day.” She quietly passes him, noticing a smell of fresh, spring flowers in the air, causing her to slow her walk. Something pulls at a hidden memory. Something she’s not allowed to see.

“Was that really necessary?” The stranger’s voice is soft but strong.

Rae stops, but doesn’t turn to face the man. “Excuse me?”

He says nothing, waiting for her to turn and face him.

Rae turns in place, like a dancer, her long, black dress catching the air as she spins. She’s grinning because she’s still having fun.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

“That.” The man points towards Lawerence, still sitting where she left him, but now frantically talking on his phone. “Was that really necessary?”

Rae takes a moment to study this stranger sitting so confidently in his chair. He’s tall and handsome, with longish, blond hair pulled back into a small ponytail. His piercing blue eyes just stare at her. He’s not angry. He’s actually extremely calm considering what he just witnessed. He’s dressed quite nicely, with a brown, leather jacket paired with jeans and immaculate, white running shoes.

“Sam.” She chuckles. “You remind me of my brother. Sam.” She looks him up and down. “A little taller, I think. A little cuter. How is that even possible?”

“You haven’t answered my question.” His voice is soft, very much in control.

Rae can’t help but smile. “You work here? Or are you visiting someone?” She’s genuinely interested.

“A little of each... I suppose.” The man’s eyes haven’t left hers.

Rae stares back, enjoying being challenged by someone other than one of her brothers. She finds this so unusual.

Finally, after a long minute, the man leans forward and gestures back towards the other group of chairs with his head. “Well?”

Rae glances in that direction.

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Seeing the young woman still so close by, and afraid to stay any longer, Lawrence has wrapped his arm in his suit jacket and is walking, hunched over, down the hall in the other direction, searching for the help he called on his phone.

“Oh. You mean my little misunderstanding with Lawrence.”

“Is that what you call that? A misunderstanding.” The man’s eyes sparkle the bluest of blues. “And it was necessary?”

“Are you asking me or telling me?” Rae cocks her head to the side, her grin growing into a full smile. She’s thoroughly enjoying this confrontation and is working out how she plans to end it. “Because it sounds like you agree... that it was necessary.”

The man’s expression doesn’t change.

Rae scrunches her eyebrows, still smiling. “Are you trying to intimidate me?” She laughs loudly, throwing her head back. “Oh you have no idea.”

He shakes his head, and gives her a genuine smile, showing his bright, white teeth. “Of course not. I would never do that.” He considers for a moment. “It’s not who I am.”

Rae feels like he’s somehow mocking her. She drops her smile, becoming agitated. “If you knew me... if you weren’t just some stranger prying into my personal... fucking!... business, you’d know that I always do what’s necessary. No matter how much I hate doing it.” She squints at

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the man, suddenly doubting her fun. “It’s kind of my thing. It’s who... I... am.” She turns to walk away. “And I think we’re finished here.”

“What makes you think I didn’t call security?” The tone of his voice hasn’t changed. He’s quiet and calm. “Or the police?” He lets his smile fade slightly. “Maybe I’m stalling you until they get here.”

Rae stops, and tilts her head to the side, her smile becoming fake and sinister. “Because I don’t really care if you did. We can call them together if you’d like. And I’ll wait with you until they arrive.”

The man leans back in his chair, putting an arm up on the back of the other chair. He’s starting to irritate Rae more than she’s willing to admit. And that isn’t his intent. He wants her to think about what’s she’s done, what she’s in the process of doing. He wants her to come to a realization all on her own.

“You are one confident human.” She shakes her head. “I’ve never seen anything like it in all my years. And I’m older than I look.” Rae walks back and sits down in the chair next to him, imitating his casual demeanor. “Look. I’m going to sit with you for minute. I’m not sure why. I really don’t. Maybe I like you. But probably not.”

She makes a show of looking him up and down, and then stares back into his big, blue eyes.

“You really do remind me of my brother Sam.” She carefully takes the stranger’s arm, removing it from the back of her chair, and places it on

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the arm of his chair. “Except he minds his own fucking business... most of the time.”

Rae places her hand on the back of his forearm, resting on the chair. She flexes her fingers a couple times. She debates teaching him a lesson.

The stranger looks down at Rae’s hand and then back to her face, smiling childlike, almost looking happy, amused.

“Let me clear things up for you a little bit.” She pats his arm twice, and making her decision, squeezes it gently. “If it’ll make you feel better.”

“Please do.” He reaches down with his other arm and takes her hand lightly in his. His eyes bulge slightly, like an interested child.

Rae scrunches her eyebrows together, squinting, tilting her head to the side. Suddenly feeling uneasy, she slowly pulls her hand free of his, using it to straighten her dress. She wants to get up and leave. She regrets this little side mission where she intended to have fun with the human.

The stranger grins and uses his now freed-up hand to casually pick a few stray bits of fuzz from his jacket.

“That guy over there...” Rae points to where her and Lawrence had been sitting earlier. “...deserves more than a few pops to the face.”

The man interrupts. “Well, to be fair... I believe you broke his arm too.” His smile fades to concern. “And severely... from what I could see.”

Rae looks to where Lawrence was sitting, trying to judge how good of a view this guy really had.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

“My uneducated guess...” He frowns, looking down at his own arm, so recently in the young woman’s grasp. “... is that they’ll have to amputate.”

Rae looks down the hall and then back to the handsome stranger. “There’s a kid upstairs who would’ve died, if not for my brother saving him, because of what that man did.” She watches his eyes. “So at this point, I wouldn’t even think twice about breaking his other arm...” She flashes a smile. “... severely... if he were still here.”

The stranger gives her a distasteful look, shaking his head slowly. “This isn’t really about a Lawerence. It’s more of a big picture thing.”

“And at this point you’re really starting to irritate me.” Rae quickly stands up. “So I’m going to go on my merry way before I do something we both might regret.”

“I’m sorry” He leans forward, looking genuinely apologetic. “I’ve upset you.” His boyish smile is back.

Rae takes a quick step towards this irritating stranger. Her voice remains soft, but with a razor edge to it. “I should drag you up to the roof and throw you off.” She grins wildly. “Not killing you. I wouldn’t let that happen. Just break you a little.”

The man stands up, making the two of them uncomfortably close. Rae takes this as a direct challenge.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

She looks up at the tall stranger, putting a hand flat on his chest. Her eyes flash with anger. “Before I go...” She pushes firmly on his chest, intending for him to fall back to the chair, hard.

To her unbelievable surprise, he doesn’t budge. Instead, he looks down at her hand on his chest, like he just noticed it. He still has that annoying, childlike grin on his face.

Rae’s not sure what’s happening. She’s confused. “You need to go.” She reaches within, finding the darkness, regaining some of her confidence. “Now.” Rae’s eyes darken slightly. Her voice becomes a deep whisper. “Go now... while you still have both your arms.”

The stranger’s head drops, looking concerned, almost sad. But not scared.

Rae cocks her head to the side. “I’m going to count to three.”

The man sighs. “Look...”

“One...” Her voice is hard.

He shakes his head and takes a deep breath, releasing it slowly.

“Two...”

He steps back, turns, and walks away slowly.

Rae watches. Annoyed that he seems to be taking his time, that he isn’t running from her. “And next time...” She calls out. “Mind your own fucking business.” Her voice softens, getting deeper, as her face darkens more. “Or I’ll take you to a place where you don’t wanna be.”

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Martin E Ericson Jr

As he approaches the end of the hall, she hears the tall stranger's sad voice. "Ring ring."

16

Fifteen-year-old Troy walks slowly into his friend's yard. It's a warm, summer day and he'd been skateboarding all morning at the elementary school playground. But after dropping off his skateboard at home, he wants to see if his buddy, Curtis, wants to hang out. Troy stops for a few minutes in the yard, hoping his friend will eventually spot him and just come out. He hates knocking on the door and having to talk to Curtis' mom. And the dog, don't even get Troy started on 'the dog'.

Troy sighs, looking at the three creaky, wooden steps leading up to the screen door. They'd been painted white at one time, but the weather

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Martin E Ericson Jr

has aged them and peeled away the paint, leaving dry, splintering wood peeking through.

Troy kicks around in the front yard for a couple minutes, before deciding that Curtis isn't coming out, and he'll have to knock on the door. But as Troy's foot touches the first step, Bobby the Chihuahua, 'the dog', starts barking like mad through the screen door. He goes nuts every time someone so much as walks past the house. He must have been sleeping for it to have taken this long.

Troy doesn't bother knocking. Bobby's just sounded the alert. Troy steps back onto the little sidewalk, putting his hands in the pockets of his blue shorts and stares out into the park. Bobby barks a few more high-pitched times and then starts growling to himself.

Now Troy's last hope is that Curtis will come to the door before his mom does.

No such luck.

Curtis's mom walks to the door. Ducking her head down, she looks out to see who is causing the disruption. Not the dog, of course.

Bobby starts barking like crazy again.

"He'll be out in a minute." She spits the words out at Troy, and then turns her head and yells into the house. "Bobby! Knock it off!"

Bobby immediately stops barking, and goes smoothly into growling mode with the occasional agitated yip.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

“You boys got plans today?” She turns away, and yells again at Bobby. “Shut up!” She does this without a pause, and Troy wonders for a second if she’s yelling at the dog or him.

Before Troy can answer, she gives him a squinty-eyed look, her mouth opening a bit, and then she moves off into the shadows.

A few seconds later, Curtis slouches out the door, letting it slam hard, wood on wood. Bobby goes completely nuts again. Troy can just make out his bulging eyes staring at him from the shadows just inside the screen door. At least he thinks it’s Bobby. For all he knows it’s Curtis’ mom.

“What’s up?” Curtis plops down on the steps, his hair a complete mess, standing up on one side and flat on the other. His eyes still have that stuff in the corners that says he just woke up, even though it’s nearly noon.

While Troy is tall, thin, and athletic, Curtis is small and skinny. And appears to be easily breakable. He has short, curly, brown hair and a great big nose that he’s completely unable to breathe through without making a heavy wheezing sound.

Bobby continues to growl menacingly, making the occasional sharp barking sound. Curtis turns his head, and whistles sharply. Bobby immediately quiets again.

“Ah, so it was the dog.” Troy mumbles.

Curtis looks at him strangely.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

“You wanna do something?” Troy shuffles his feet on the sidewalk. He knows Curtis has nothing better to do, so now he’s just waiting for him to get ready.

Curtis doesn’t say anything. He just sits on the steps picking at a small scab on his arm, near his elbow.

“That’s gross dude.” Troy turns and takes a couple steps towards the park across the street. “Come on. Hurry up.”

“Yeah, I guess.” He tries looking up, but the sun gets in his eyes. “Come in for a second while I get my shoes and tell my mom where I’m going.” Curtis stands up and scratches the back of his head roughly. “Should I put on pants or can I just wear my shorts?”

Troy smiles on the inside, looking at Curtis’ scrawny white legs. “I don’t give a shit. Just hurry up. Whatever’s faster.”

“Well. Are we going swimming? It’s hot enough out for it.” Curtis blocks the sun from his eyes this time and looks over to Troy.

“I don’t know.” Troy continues shuffling his feet impatiently. “Maybe... I guess.”

“Then come in for a second.”

“I’ll just wait out here. Your dog hates me.” His voice drops to a mumble. “And I don’t think your mom’s a fan either.”

Curtis shrugs and goes back inside, letting the door slam again. His mom yells something and Bobby starts barking like crazy.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

A couple long minutes later Curtis comes shuffling out of the house, carrying his shoes. He still has the shorts on, but has changed his shirt to an old, blue, football jersey for some non-existent team. His hair's still a mess, but the sleep has been wiped from his eyes. "Let's go, he mumbles." My mom's in a mood today.

Troy chuckles. "Dude, she's always in a mood. Her and that damn dog."

From inside the house you can hear Bobby barking at something random again.

"So what are we doing?" Curtis looks over at Troy as they cross the street and head into the park.

"I don't know. We'll figure it out."

As they walk through the park, Curtis finishes picking the scab from his arm, causing it to bleed a little, starting the process over for about the fifth time. Troy looks over and just shakes his head. Neither boy has much to say as they walk. Troy is trying to figure out what they should do, and Curtis is just happy to be out of the house and not being yelled at for every little thing.

After about five minutes, they get to the big, green fence that separates the part of the park full of trees from the part with all the playground equipment. Having gone this way many times, Troy automatically stops and links his two hands together and holds them low. Curtis uses Troy's hands as a step, and is lifted up to grab the top of the

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fence and hop over. Then Troy walks back a few yards, and takes a deep breath to prepare himself. He sees a couple girls watching, so he waits for them to look away before taking a run at the fence, grabbing the top, and clumsily pulling himself over. It still takes a bit of effort, but by next year he'll easily clear it.

Although it's only been about thirty seconds, Curtis has already wandered off.

“Zero patience.” Troy sighs. “Just like the damn dog.”

Troy looks around for his friend, finally finding him sitting on the edge of a small sandbox with some dark-haired, young woman. Troy freezes for a second. She's gorgeous.

Seeing Troy, the young woman tilts her head to the side, smiles a beautiful smile, and gives him a friendly wave as if she'd been expecting him.

Troy stares at her, trying not to think about how cute she is, as he walks over as coolly as he can and sits down next to Curtis. Now they both sit opposite the pretty girl.

“Hey Troy, this is Rae. With an E not a Y.” Curtis points first at Troy and then at the young woman. “She's just chillin'.”

Troy grins at his friend's attempt to impress. “Hi.” He looks at her awkwardly, thinking she is way too hot to be hanging out with them. Plus, she's probably in her early twenties. And of course, what's she doing in the sandbox.

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“Hey.” She smiles back.

Both boys are nervous, and aren’t sure what to say, Curtis because he’s really still just a boy, and Troy because he has no experience talking to pretty girls, or girls in general.

Finally, Troy overcomes his nerves. “So... you’re just... sitting in the sandbox... playing?”

Rae giggles, which makes her seem much younger. “Kind of. I like the way it feels on my toes.”

Both boys look to her bare feet. Troy notices how small they are, and that her nails are unpainted and perfect. He wonders if maybe she’s younger than he first thought.

“So what are you guys up to on this...” She looks up to the sky, her eyes taking everything in. “... beautiful summer day?”

Curtis likes that she called them guys and not boys. He sits up a little straighter, feeling a little more confident.

Troy looks her over without making it obvious or being creepy. She isn’t dressed to be sitting in a kid’s sandbox. She’s wearing a long black dress, but no shoes. He takes a quick glance around to see where she kicked off her shoes, but doesn’t see them anywhere. She isn’t even sitting on the edge of the box like they are, trying to stay out of the sand, or trying to look a little less like a kid. She’s comfortable just sitting in the sand like a child.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

“So how old are you? You in high school?” Curtis sounds awkward, speaking without thinking first. “You know stray cats piss in the sand, right?”

Troy closes his eyes for a second, embarrassed, wanting to call his friend an idiot.

“Ha.” Rae giggles and cocks her head to the side again. “I’m older than I look. Not in high school.” She smiles brightly. “And ewww. Thanks for telling me.” She glances around at the sand with her nose scrunched. “I guess it’s a little too late now.” Then she looks up to Curtis and then Troy, looking them both in eyes, a big smile on her face.

Troy and Curtis look strangely at each other. Then all three of them laugh.

Pretty girls usually make Troy uncomfortable, like they’re watching his every move and can tell what a dork he really is. But Rae is different. He likes how comfortable Rae makes him feel. He loosens up a little, feeling less embarrassed by himself. He’s not even that annoyed with all the stupid stuff Curtis says and does.

Completely forgetting what they just said about the cat urine, Troy reaches down and scoops up a handful of sand and lets it run through his fingers. The sandbox is warm in spots and cold in other places. It’s really late in the morning, but the sun hasn’t reached out to warm everything just yet. Troy looks up into the sun, shading his eyes with his hand. Rae’s eyes follow Troy’s, looking directly up into the sun. She doesn’t shade her eyes

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or even squint. She just smiles broadly like a child seeing the sun for the very first time.

“So why are you wearing a nice dress in a kid’s sandbox?” Curtis blurts something out again, just to kill the awkward silence of the past couple minutes. He’s almost always comfortable with himself.

Rae glances down at herself, like she isn’t aware of what she’s been wearing. She holds out her arms in front of her and studies her lace sleeves, turning her arms all around for a better view. Putting her arms down, she uses them to hold out sections of her dress as she looks it over.

Both boys look at each other with confused smiles on their faces.

“You’re a different kind a chick.” Curtis says.

Troy punches him in the arm just hard enough to get his attention. “That was rude.”

Suddenly done looking at her clothing, Rae brushes the sand from her dress and laughs out loud. Very out loud. Like a small child. The laugh surprises the boys, and they can’t help but to laugh with her.

“See.” Curtis snickers. “Different kind of chick.”

Rae’s eyes become bright and just a little wild. “This is what I almost always wear, silly.” She reaches down and lets an ant walk from her ankle onto her hand, and then carefully, making sure not to hurt it, shakes it loose into the sand to her side. “I don’t have a lot of clothes. Except for a jacket and a few old hats.” She tilts her head slightly to the side. “And

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gloves. I was into those for a short time. Not the winter ones, but the fashionable kind for balls and parties.”

“Hey!” Curtis startles Troy with his sudden outburst. “We should go swimming.” He looks to Troy to see what he thinks of his idea.

Troy looks over at Rae, noting that she doesn’t look ready for a swim. “I don’t know...” He’s hesitant, wanting to hang out longer with the girl.

“You’re invited too, of course.” Curtis turns quickly to Rae, still excited about figuring out what they should do. He looks her up and down, thinking about the dress. “Well. You could dangle your feet in the water at least. It’s going to get a lot warmer soon and it’ll help keep you cool.” He tries one last thing. “It’ll feel good on your toes.”

“Or...” Troy struggles to find his confidence, blushing before he even says it. “We could all go skinny dipping in the river in back of the high school.” He looks expectantly at Curtis, and then watches Rae out of the corner of his eye.

“Ha.” Rae throws her head back in mock laughter. “You wish.” She jumps to her feet, causing all the sand on her legs to fly right into the boy’s faces.

Neither of them complain. They just wipe the sand from their watering eyes.

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“But yeah. Letting my toes wiggle in the water sounds nice.” The sudden seriousness in her tone and look on her face says otherwise. She remembers why she’s here.

The three of them walk the remaining distance of the park, out the gate, and down the street towards the high school. Just before the school, Troy leads the small group into a small, old cemetery that hasn’t been used in many decades.

“Shortcut.” He says over his shoulder, trying to sound a little older than he actually is.

The cemetery is just a small area to the side of the old high school, with a dozen or so graves and a small stone building. The graves are all hundreds of years old, from when the old church was still here, back when Apple Valley was a much smaller, farming community.

“See how the graves are all sunk into the ground.” Troy points as they carefully walk around the stone markers. “It’s from the river flooding when it rains heavy.” He steps over a small puddle in the dirt. “At least that’s what my dad says.”

They walk single file through the wet grass and mud surrounding the graves. Troy is followed closely by Curtis, and trailing by quite a bit, is Rae, who seems most interested in reading the names on every tombstone she passes, and then nodding to herself.

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“Pretty scary, huh Curt?” Troy teases Curtis. “Like the dead could climb out of their graves and eat our brains.” His voice goes all scary and weird.

“Don’t be an idiot.” Curtis gives Troy an angry stare, and motions with his eyes towards Rae. “Not cool.”

Now Troy feels like the idiot, saying stupid things.

“He’s right. These were real people with real lives.” Rae walks past the two boys and towards the river. “I knew every one of them.”

The wind suddenly blows so violently that Rae has to hold her dress down as she walks over the ridge and out of the small cemetery. If the boys bothered to look down, they would have noticed that Rae’s feet have remained perfectly clean.

Troy holds Curtis back by the arm, letting Rae get ahead. “Dude. I think she’s not all there.” He points to his own head. “Maybe we should just bring her back to the park. Someone could be looking for her.”

Curtis pulls his arm free. “She’s just... different. I mean... look at her.”

“Yeah.” Troy starts walking. “Maybe.”

As the boys walk over the ridge, to the river, they see Rae already sitting on the short, wooden dock, dangling her feet in the river. Troy quickly strips off his shoes and shirt and dives into the murky water, while Curtis sits down on the dock right next to Rae. He takes off his shoes,

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tossing them aside, and dangles his feet in the river alongside hers. He gives her a small grin, but she just stares into the water.

Troy pulls himself out of the water onto the riverbank near a small building connected to the high school. “Check this out, guys.”

He runs past the dock, to where the building stands right up against the riverbank. Without slowing, Troy jumps up and grabs the lowest branch of a tree, pulling himself up. Within half a minute, with lots of effort, he climbs up the tree far enough to hop onto the roof of the old, gym building, and disappears from view.

Curtis blocks the sun from his eyes, watching for his friend. They've been swimming here for years and he knows what to expect. He glances over at Rae, but she's not even watching. She's just staring down into the water with a sad look in her eyes.

Suddenly Troy comes sprinting across the roof, flying through the air, his arms and legs flailing furiously, carrying him off the second story roof and into the river below with a huge splash, diving down deep into the murky water.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Troy pops up from under water with a great gasp and a huge grin.

Curtis claps loudly above his head. “Woooo hoo! Awesome jump.”

Rae looks up from where she was staring and puts on a weak smile. She doesn't say anything.

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Both Troy and Curtis have done this jump dozens of times, but this is the first time they have someone to impress, other than each other.

Curtis hops to his feet. "My turn." He runs down the dock, stripping off his shirt awkwardly on the way, nearly tripping over his own feet, running to the big tree.

Troy pulls himself out of the water and onto the dock next to Rae. "Watch. He's actually pretty good at this."

Rae turns to Troy. Her face suddenly goes serious, almost scary. "Be ready. This isn't going to go well."

Troy nods blankly, not understanding.

Curtis reaches the tree and uses every bit of his strength to pull himself from branch to branch and then onto the roof of the old gym. Then, like Troy, he disappears for a few seconds, only to come running as fast as he can, jumping through the air with his arms extended and his legs tucked up underneath him. He flies almost as far as Troy and lands with a huge splash, disappearing under the water.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven.

Troy's face changes. Suddenly looking concerned, he sits up straight, peering down into the water.

Eight. Nine. Ten.

Troy tenses, his heart starts beating heavy and fast.

Rae puts a hand on his arm, squeezing gently. "Go. Now. Get him. Something's wrong."

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Eleven. Twelve.

Troy jumps to his feet and dives head first into the water.

Thirteen. Fourteen. Fifteen. Sixteen.

Troy surfaces with a mighty gasp, and without waiting even a moment, is back under the murky brown water. A second later he surfaces again, this time with Curtis in tow. He swims on his side, holding Curtis by the chest under his arms, keeping his head above water the best he can. He swims to the riverbank and drags Curtis up onto the muddy slope where Rae is already waiting.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” Troy is terrified. “What do I do?” Troy, completely lost, looks to Rae. “What do I do?”

She calmly sits down cross legged next to Curtis and takes his cold, muddy hand in hers, stroking it lightly with her other hand. “You’ll be fine, just sit here with me for a moment. My brother is on the way.”

“He’s not breathing.” Troy’s eyes show his panic as he jumps to his feet, slipping in the mud and catching himself on one hand. “We need to get help. You know CPR?” Completely panicked, he doesn’t even wait for an answer as he sprints down the dirt path that leads back to the little cemetery.

A gust of wind blows hard and the air shimmers with a dark red light as Sam comes walking out of the shadows of the nearby building. “He’s with you?”

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Rae looks up as her brother approaches. “Of course he is.” She smiles. “He drowned. He stopped breathing. His heart stopped. I’m with him.”

Sam kneels down in the mud, looking down at Curtis.

“Well? Do your thing.” Rae’s face shows some of her natural impatience.

“He’s not there.” Sam remains calm, looking at his sister with a confused look on his face.

“What?”

“Not there. Not on the edge. It’s just you.” Sam’s voice remains calm as he wonders why this one is different.

Rae shoves her brother’s shoulder harshly. “Don’t be fuckin’ stupid. He’s right here. I’m fucking holding his God damn hand right now.” Her eyes go black as the darkness pours from them into the air. “He’s a good kid. He’s right here with me. He’s a good kid.”

Sam stands up, a look of thoughtful confusion on his face. “Well then. Let’s try this again.” He turns and walks away back into the shadows causing them to glow red for a split second.

Rae sits with Curtis in the void, holding his hand. “It’s okay. That’s my brother. He’ll be right back. We got this.”

17

The world dims and slows down, missing a few beats like a stone skipped across a pond. And then, within a heartbeat, everything is pulled back a few minutes in time. Sam's not sure how this works, but the same thing happened with the boy in the book store. Rae says it's part of her being connected to the darkness, being so close to their death. She says they're cheating a bit, but it's okay. Sam doubts that. He's fairly certain it's something else. And he's grateful for that.

“Hey!” Curtis startles Troy with his sudden outburst. “We should go swimming.” He looks to Troy to see what he thinks of his idea.

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Troy looks over at Rae, noting that she doesn't look ready for a swim. "I don't know..." He's hesitant, wanting to hang out longer with the girl some more.

"You're invited too, of course." Curtis turns quickly to Rae, still excited about figuring out what they should do. He looks her up and down, thinking about the dress. "Well. You could dangle your feet in the water at least. It's going to get a lot warmer soon and it'll help keep you cool." He tries one last thing. "It'll feel good on your toes."

"Or..." Troy struggles to find his confidence, but decides not to say what he was thinking.

Curtis looks at Troy, expecting him to finish. "Or what?"

Troy shakes his head. "Nothing. I got nothing."

"Ha. You wish." Rae says hollowly as she looks around nervously for her brother. "That's definitely not happening."

The boys both look at one another, equally confused.

Troy notices how preoccupied their new friend has suddenly become. One minute they were all hanging out and the next she's somewhere else. She looks nervous and her playful nature has completely changed. She almost looks a little older.

"You okay?" Curtis asks.

Rae spies her brother in the distance, sitting alone on a swing, deep in thought, with a concerned look on his face. Her mood brightens a bit.

"Hey." Troy glances over to where she's looking. "So..."

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She jumps to her feet, still somewhat preoccupied. She's barely listening. "Yeah, I'm good." She carefully brushes the sand from her dress and legs. "Dipping my toes in the water sounds nice."

The three of them walk the remaining distance of the park, out the gate and down the street towards the high school. Curtis is walking alongside Rae, noticing that she keeps looking over her shoulder.

"You sure everything's okay?" Curtis is a nice kid. He's genuinely concerned.

Rae takes a deep, calming breath and smiles weakly at Curtis. She's still sitting with him, both in the mud and in the void, holding his hand, waiting. "I'm fine. I'm just expecting someone to show up soon and don't wanna miss him." She takes Curtis' hand as they walk, swinging it back and forth, doing her best to ease the tension.

"Boyfriend?" Curtis wonders aloud.

"No." Rae tries smiling, but remains distracted.

Curtis looks down at their joined hands and instantly gets sweaty as his nerves kick in. "We can always go back to the park and wait for your friend, if you want."

Just before the school, Troy leads the small group into a small, old cemetery. "Shortcut." He says over his shoulder.

Rae smiles sweetly at Curtis. "No. It's okay. It's my brother. He knows where to find us."

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“Oh. Okay.” Curtis scrunches up his face, not understanding what is happening, or what changed to make his new friend so preoccupied.

The cemetery is just a small area to the side of the old high school, with a dozen or so graves and a small stone building. The graves are all hundreds of years old, from when the old church was still here, back when Apple Valley was a much smaller, farming community.

“See how the graves are all sunk into the ground.” Troy points as they carefully walk around the stone markers.

“The river floods the ground when it rains heavy.” Rae finishes without even thinking.

“Yeah.” Troy notices that she’s holding Curtis’ hand “Well, at least that’s what my dad says.”

They walk single file through the graves. Troy is followed closely by Curtis and Rae.

“Pretty scary, huh Curt?” Troy teases Curtis. “Like the dead could climb out of their graves and eat our brains.” His voice goes all scary and weird.

“Not cool.” Rae glares at Troy for a quick moment. “I knew these people.” She lets go of Curtis’ hand, and quickly walks past the two boys, towards the river. Using both hands, she holds down her dress just before a gust of wind blows wildly. Her bare feet covered in mud, she walks over the ridge and out of the small cemetery.

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Troy holds Curtis back by the arm, letting Rae get ahead. “Dude. She is so bizarre. Let’s ditch her and go do something else.”

Curtis pulls his arm free. “She’s just... different. I mean... yeah, she’s pretty weird. But...” He’s not really sure. “... some girls are just like that. I guess.”

Curtis follows after Rae, leaving Troy to stand alone to brood for a few seconds. Then Troy quickly follows, jogging over the ridge, and catching up with Curtis.

As the boys approach the river, they see Rae standing on the river’s edge, her feet buried in the mud. She’s looking up and down the river, thinking Sam will be watching, and will intervene just a few seconds earlier this time.

“She’s expecting her brother. He was supposed to meet her.” Curtis tells Troy, showing off the sudden bond he has with the girl.

“Here?” Troy scrunches his eyebrows, looking around.

Rae wanders over to the short, wooden dock, sits down, and dangles her bare feet in the river, letting the mud wash from them. Troy quickly strips off his shoes and shirt and dives into the murky water, while Curtis sits down on the dock right next to Rae. He takes off his shoes, tossing them aside, and dangles his feet in the river alongside hers. He gives her a small grin, but she just stares into the water.

Troy pulls himself out of the water onto the riverbank near a small building connected to the high school. “Hey Rae! Check this out.”

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He runs past the dock, to where the building stands right up against the riverbank. Without slowing, Troy jumps up and grabs the lowest branch of a tree, pulling himself up. Within half a minute, with lots of effort, he climbs up the tree far enough to hop onto the roof of the old, gym building, and disappears from view.

Curtis blocks the sun from his eyes, watching for his friend. Rae watches quietly, still appearing lost in thought, looking around for her brother.

Suddenly, Troy comes sprinting across the roof, flying through the air, his arms and legs flailing furiously, carrying him off the second story roof and into the river below with a huge splash, diving down deep into the murky water.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Troy pops up from under water with a great gasp and a huge smile on his face.

Rae looks unimpressed. She just stares, blank faced.

Curtis hops to his feet excitedly. “My turn.”

Before he can take off, Rae reaches up and grabs his hand. “Hey. Take it easy... you don’t need to impress anyone.” She tries a sweet smile, still sitting with him in her void.

He nods his head quickly, smiling, and runs down the dock, stripping off his shirt awkwardly on the way, nearly tripping over his own feet, running to the big tree.

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Troy pulls himself out of the water and onto the dock next to Rae. “Watch. He’s actually...”

“Watch out for him.” She doesn’t let Troy finish. She grabs his arm firmly, looking directly into his eyes. “Be ready.” She glances out to her surroundings, looking for Sam. “Be ready.”

Troy wants to tell her that she’s hurting him, but he just looks down at her hand on his arm, a little scared by how strange she’s acting. And how strong she is.

“You hear me?” She lets go of his arm, letting the blood return to the area. She looks down, noticing the whiteness of the area. “Sorry. Just be ready. He’s going to hit his head on the rocky bottom and drown.”

Troy nods blankly, not understanding. He glances up to where Curtis is climbing and wants to say something to stop him, but doesn’t know how.

Curtis uses his last bit of strength to pull himself onto the roof of the old gym. Then, like Troy, he disappears for a few seconds, only to come running as fast as he can, jumping through the air with his arms extended and his legs tucked up underneath him. He flies almost as far as Troy and lands with a huge splash, disappearing under the water.

One. Two.

Rae immediately stands up, looking incredibly agitated.

Troy looks up at her, imagining that the air is rippling around her without actually touching her.

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Three.

Rae turns her head and looks down to Troy, her eyes go pure black, her voice gets deep and hollow. “Go. Now. Get him.” The darkness pours from her eyes. “Now!” She screams.

Four. Five.

Troy flinches, his heart starts beating heavy and fast. He’s scared. He’s in shock. He doesn’t move.

Six.

“Now! You little fuck!” Rae reaches down and grabs Troy by the arm, throwing him forward into the water.

Caught off guard, he struggles in the water for a couple seconds.

Seven. Eight.

Then he takes a deep breath and dives under the water.

Nine. Ten. Eleven. Twelve.

Troy surfaces with a mighty gasp and without waiting even a moment, is back under the murky brown water. A second later he surfaces again, this time with Curtis in tow. He swims on his side, holding Curtis by the chest under his arms, keeping his head above water the best he can. He swims to the riverbank and drags Curtis up onto the muddy slope where Rae is already waiting.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” Troy is terrified. “What do I do? I don’t know what to do.” Troy, completely lost, overwhelmed, now fully in shock, looks to Rae.

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“Go get help. Now!” She sits down cross legged next to Curtis and takes his cold, muddy hand in hers, stroking it lightly with her other hand. “You’ll be fine this time. Just stay where you are. Sam’ll come for you.”

Troy’s eyes show his panic as he jumps to his feet, slipping in the mud and catching himself on one hand. “What are you talking about?”

Rae looks up at him, her eyes black as night. “Go! Get the fuck out of here. Now!”

Terrified, Troy falls backward into the mud. He awkwardly climbs to his feet and sprints down the dirt path that leads back down to the little cemetery. He doesn’t look back. He’ll never come back to this place again.

A gust of wind blows hard and the air shimmers with a dark red light as Sam comes walking out of nothing. “He’s with you this time?”

Rae looks up as her brother approaches. “He was there the last time, dumbass.” She spits the words as if he should know better. “Don’t fuck it up this time.”

“He wasn’t there, Rae.” Sam gives her a calm, cold look. “I assure you. He wasn’t there.”

“Get. Him.” Rae grits her teeth as she speak. Her eyes are still black and her dark hair is swirling in the wind.

Sam kneels down in the mud, looking down at Curtis. He sighs hard. “Rae...”

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“Then find him you son-of-a-bitch.” Rae’s entire being has gone black as she kneels in the mud next to Curtis. “Go get him. Jesus Christ! Do I have to do everything?”

“That’s not how it works, Rae.” Unlike his sister, Sam remains calm. “This is different. Something’s different.” He looks up, wondering why he’s not getting the help he’d asked for.

“You’re the God damn Devil, Sam. What the hell do you give a shit about how it works? Just do it!” Rae’s darkness pushes hard against her brother without actually touching him. “I’m sitting with him right now.”

“I’m telling you...” Sam’s voice remains calm. “... he’s not here.”

“Bullshit!” Rae grabs her brother’s wrist hard enough to crush worlds.

“Don’t test me, Azrael.” Sam’s body lights up like fire and his flaming wings instantly spring from his back as he pries his sister’s hand from his wrist and pushes her off of him.

She falls backward, sitting in the river mud, leaning back on both hands.

The wind stops blowing. The sounds of nature go silent. The world slows down. And then, in an instant, everything goes back to normal.

Sam’s eyes dart around, unsure what just happened.

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Rae just lays there staring up at her brother. Her voice becomes a whisper. “I need to find myself. How am I supposed to find myself?”

Sam calms, pulling in his wings. “He’s not there.” He lets his body cool. “You are. He’s not.”

Her eyes begin to water, as she looks to her brother, pleading. “He’s right here. He’s a good kid.” Her voice is lost as she turns within herself and joins with the darkness.

Sam turns to walk away, his voice is a harsh whisper. “Then do your job, Azrael. Take the boy home.”

18

Nyssa looks past a couple hugging and lightly crying into each other's shoulders. She sees a coffin of beautiful wood and brass sitting in the far corner, its top propped open to show the body of the fifteen-year-old boy who drowned a few days before. The corner is dimly lit by several flickering candles, with dancing shadows crawling up the wall. Nyssa imagines that Rae, in her current mood, will not be happy to see the shadows.

Nyssa watches as every few minutes someone stiffly walks over and visits the boy and says something nice, offering a flower, a pleasant

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memory, or just a few tears. She's fascinated by this need for everyone to get together to console each other, share memories of the deceased, and cry as a family. Nyssa will never share this experience. She'll never have a friend or family who dies.

While Nyssa is fascinated, her sister is appalled. Tegan thinks it's creepy the way everyone is just hanging out with each other with a dead child laying in the corner displayed for all to see. She moves silently around the room, hovering at the edges, ready for an easy escape if someone tries striking up a conversation or crying on her shoulder. She watches as everyone talks in quiet voices to one other. Some even laugh quietly amongst themselves, standing in small groups, consuming cakes and coffees, as they tell an amusing story of the boy or share a fond memory.

Tegan returns to her sister's side, her walk around the room come full circle.

Just a few minutes ago Rae, still in a crazy funk, brought them along with Sam into this old house through a screen door in the back, off the kitchen. It creaked loudly as it opened and slowly creaked closed with a sharp slam as they let go of it. Rae led them through a small kitchen area and into a large sitting area, darkened because all the drapes had been pulled tightly shut. First her, then Sam, Nyssa, and finally Tegan trailing behind.

Within seconds, Nyssa had pulled Tegan off to the side to leave Sam and his sister alone. She couldn't handle the tension between brother

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and sister. It was strange enough being here at all, let alone being here with them, especially Rae. She was used to Sam and who he was, but felt a shiver as she thought of Rae and what she could become.

“It smells funny in here.” Tegan blurts, waking her sister from her thoughts.

“Yeah. Like someone cooked something recently.” Nyssa sniffs the air lightly. “That and all the cheap perfumes and colognes.”

“You can kind of taste the smell.” Tegan snorts. “It’s awful.”

“Maybe that’s why they’re burning all those candles.” Nyssa had earlier counted twenty-two candles in the living room alone.

They share a chuckle, and Nyssa pushes her shoulder into Tegan’s. She’s glad she’ll never have to go through something like this for her sister.

An older woman, her eyes red from crying, glances over at them, giving them a severe look.

Rae impatiently leads Sam through the crowd, rudely pushing people to the side when necessary, to get nearer the coffin in the corner. There’s a small group of mourners paying their respects to the deceased. Rae marches straight towards them, but Sam grabs his sister’s arm to stop her from being impolite or creating a disturbance.

“I’m not sure what we’re doing here.” Sam wonders allowed. But he’s not sure he really wants to hear what Rae has to say.

She spins at him, her eyes all black, with soul-staring intensity. Sam looks into his sister’s eyes with ease, and drops his hand from her arm.

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Angered, and with obvious irritation, she roughly pushes herself and Sam off to the side to wait their turn.

“So why’d you bring...” Rae motions with her head over her shoulder towards Nyssa and Tegan. “... them? I said... you and I... needed to see this. Not you, I, and them.”

Sam raises an eyebrow at his sister.

She just stares at him, waiting for an answer.

“I find them comforting... helpful in small ways.” He glances over to where they stand. “And they’re my friends.” Sam grins at his sister, trying to lighten her mood.

“So you get two someones to hold your hand while you go through life. But I don’t get shit.” She glares at her brother. “Nice.”

Sam says nothing. His sister has been in this mood since losing the boy. He remembers when they were kids, and something would happen to put her in this same mood for days at a time. They’d all just have to wait until to came out of it on her own. There was no pulling her out of it.

Rae takes a slow, deep breath. “Have you ever been to a funeral?” Her voice is hard and challenging. She is no longer a woman playing the child.

“No. Have you?” He doubts she has. “You know... this really isn’t even a funeral.” He pauses, expecting her to interrupt. “This is the bit where friends and family say their goodbyes to the body. To make peace.” He glances around the room. “Closure.”

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“I was at a funeral... recently. An actual funeral. But I’m not sure it counts.” She looks up to her brother, a sadness in her eyes. “It was a work thing.” She pauses, remembering. “An old man died while mourning his wife who had just passed. He just died in a chair. Quietly. No one even noticed at first.” She purses her lips firmly. “I was there for that. I noticed.”

Feeling his sister’s discomfort, Sam puts an arm around her shoulder and gently squeezes.

An old woman, very old, in a great, black hat and a black jacket looks over at Sam and his sister, believing she knows the young woman from somewhere. She remembers the beautiful, sad face, but can’t quite place it. Then the old woman’s face lights up. A dream. She remembers her from a dream. The young woman sat with her and held her hand when she was sick late last year. Really sick. Her immune system had failed. But then she unexpectedly recovered. She smiles fondly, taking a sip of her coffee. She’s comforted knowing they will soon meet again. She can feel it.

“Sooo... why are we here?” Sam’s voice is soft, careful.

Again, Rae takes a deep breath, fighting to stay in control. “I need to see him. The boy.” Her black eyes stare directly into her brother’s eyes. “Why couldn’t we save him?”

Sam scrunches his eyebrows together. “I don’t know. It felt... different.”

Rae’s face hardens as she considers things. “Dad?”

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“The old man? No... I don’t think so.” He gives it some thought. “When someone is dying...” He glances down at his sister, seeing that she has been staring directly at him the entire time. “They end up with you, while you...” He waves a hand in the air. “... do your thing.”

“My thing.” Her voice is low, fighting anger.

Sam closes his eyes for a second, and exhales slowly. His sister can be so difficult. And he doesn’t want to go there.

“But this time... he...” Sam gestures towards the kid in the coffin. “... he wasn’t there.” Sam watches as another small group visits the boy’s body. “Every time has been the same. Or similar at least. But this time... you were there. He wasn’t.”

Rae’s eyes go empty and get wild as her face darkens.

“I know.” Sam raises both hands in surrender. “You say he was there... with you... in the void. In the darkness.” He raises both eyebrows. “And I believe you. But I didn’t see him. To me, he wasn’t there. All the other’s were just sitting there with you, calm and cool... and reached out to them.” He gestures towards the coffin. “But not this guy.”

“I am... the God damn void... the God damn darkness.” Rae’s response is immediate, her voice low and harsh. “It’s not a God damn place.” She pauses, collecting herself. “So I know when someone’s there... and when they’re... fucking!... not there.”

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Martin E Ericson Jr

Sam just stares, making sure she's finished. Still not wanting to go there. "Well, it's done now. You brought him home. We just move on to the next one."

Rae says nothing as she looks away briefly and then back to her brother, her eyes still dark and powerful.

"Rae?" Sam narrows his eyes. "You did bring him home?"

"I have two options. I either take them home or I push them to you. That's it. Nothing else." Rae calms, letting her eyes go back to normal. She knows she's on the verge of losing Sam. "Those are my options."

"Okay." Sam is looking around the room, watching people come and go from the boy's body. People watching at its worst.

"I did... not... bring him home." Rae takes a nervous glance around the room, and then returns her eyes to her brother. "I looked away for a second and..." She scrunches her eyebrows, thinking.

Sam impatiently waves a hand in the air at his sister, wanting her to continue, afraid of what she will have to say. "And what?"

"He wasn't with me."

"That's what I was telling you." Sam feels his frustration coming to the surface. He can feel the heat building in this body he wears.

Rae's answer comes without patience, her voice louder than expected. "No. He was there. You left. I looked away for a second... and he was gone." The words tumble out as a warning.

"Looked away? What do you mean... looked away?"

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Martin E Ericson Jr

“I don’t know. There’s no good way to explain it.” She glances around the room. “Occasionally... they’re just gone. It happens. It’s rare. But you know it happens.”

Sam’s face begins to show more frustration. “Pardon my language, but if you’re the God damn void... the God damn darkness... how is that possible? Where could he go?” Then he realizes. “Oh. Of course. I hadn’t considered that.”

She looks back to her brother. Her voice calms. “Someone dies, but they get a second chance. And they’re just snatched away from me. It happens. It’s usually Gabe, but not always.” She almost smiles. “It’s kind of wonderful when you think about it.”

Sam gives it some thought. Everything they’re trying to do is more of a Gabriel thing, though perhaps on a bigger more random scale. It’s not really a Sam and Rae thing. He almost wonders why she didn’t go to Gabriel instead of him. Or maybe she did, and he said no. He knows what she said, but he’s not so sure.

“So then why are we here. And why is he still dead in the box.” Sam whispers, glancing around the room, finding Nyssa and Tegan sitting together off to the side in a couple of folding chairs eating cakes and drinking coffees.

“Hmmm. Well now I’m not sure. Now that we kind of figured it out. I just wanted to see the body.” Rae looks at her brother. She seems a bit happier. “Let’s go check it out.” She looks towards the coffin. “Maybe

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we're supposed to... I don't know... do something. Move things along."

She cocks her head to the side. "Maybe this is the way we fix this one.

Third time's a charm or something."

Sam stares off at the mourners, thinking. Lost in thought about how much of this they are actually doing, and how much they are simply playing witness to. He's certain that none of this has been their doing. And he knows Gabriel doesn't work in the shadows.

Sam slowly smiles.

"Sam!" Rae is quickly irritated again. "Are you even listening?"

Sam sees that the line to the coffin has gone away, and he absentmindedly walks away towards the coffin to pay his respects. And to see what happens next.

With a sudden, wicked grin on her face, Rae breathes in deeply, and follows her brother to the coffin.

Sam stands just a few feet from the boy. He's not sure why, but he keeps a respectful distance. Maybe it's because of who he is. Maybe it's because of his failure. He glances over as his sister approaches. "We shouldn't be here. You and me."

"Oh pish." Rae takes his hand and pulls him forward, right up to the coffin.

The boy lays there looking pretty much like he did the last time they saw him, laying in the mud on the side of the river. He's just cleaned up, his hair combed, and he's wearing a dark blue suit with a matching tie.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

“Sam...” Rae puts both her hands on the edge of the coffin. She’s no longer breathing. Her heart is no longer beating. “... I want to see a miracle. I... need... to see a miracle.” Her voice is barely a whisper. She turns her eyes up towards her brother, a small grin on her face. “Let’s do the impossible. You and me.”

Reaching over to Sam, Rae places her hand over the top of his, and guides his hand down into the coffin, slowly, deliberately, touching his fingers to the dead boy’s wrist, as if he were taking the boy’s pulse. Her eyes have gone completely black again, and she giggles nervously.

At first, nothing happens.

But then the boy’s hand twitches. His fingers spread and move, flexing as if to get the blood flowing. He takes several stuttering gasps of air.

His eyes flash open, wide.

Sam quickly pulls his hand from the boy’s wrist. He’s immediately lost, confused, terrified.

As the world slows and then comes to a sudden stop, Sam’s body burst into flames, his flaming wings springing from his back.

Rae steps back from the coffin. “You... you can bring them back?” She has a happy, bewildered look on her face. “I... I had no idea.”

She watches as the boy’s chest moves up and down with each breath he takes.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

“Rae. This isn’t us.” Sam looks around at the room of humans frozen in time along with Nyssa and Tegan. He frowns. “This isn’t...” He looks down at his sister.

He wants to tell her. But knows she’s not listening.

Tears stream from Rae’s eyes. “We found you, Sam. We found you. This is who you are. This is who you can be.” With a sudden gasp, she starts breathing again. “Now do me.” She turns her head up towards the ceiling, and extends both her arms out and to the side. “Now do me.”

Nothing.

“Rae...” Sam’s voice is soft.

Rae cocks her head sharply to the side as if she’s listening to something in the distance. “I don’t understand. Why? Why are you doing this?”

Sam clears his throat, softly. “Rae.”

“He...” She turns, looking at her brother. “I don’t understand.”

Sam gently reaches over, taking his sister’s hand gently by the wrist. “This isn’t who we are. This isn’t us.” He pulls his sister closer, and slowly moves her hand down into the coffin. “It’s a nice feeling. But it isn’t us. We’re not doing this. This shouldn’t happen. I’m sure of that. I don’t know how... but I’m sure of it.”

Rae has tears in her eyes as her breathing becomes raw and rapid. Her heart begins to beat again, erratic, and out of time. The fear on her face pleads with her brother. “Why is he doing this to me?”

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Martin E Ericson Jr

Sam guides his sister's hand farther down as the boy's arm slowly raises, still waking from death. "There was no finding me. I wasn't lost." He wraps her hand around the boy's hand. "And this isn't you, it's just..." The two hands grasp one another, comfortably.

And Rae does what she always does. She holds the boy's hand, reassuring Curtis that everything will be okay. But that she made a mistake. She needs to take him home. She turns her head to face her brother. "I need to take him home." The sadness on her face is overwhelming.

Sam's face softens as he pulls in his wings and cools his being. His big blue eyes water as he watches the tears roll down his sister's cheeks, dropping down into the coffin, landing on the boy's wrist, running down his arm, and under his sleeve.

The boy puts his arm back down, letting his grasp loosen and his hand fall free of Rae's. His fingers fall silent as his breathing stops and his eyes slowly close.

"I am Death." Rae whispers. "I need to take him home. It's what I do. It's all I can do."

Sam puts his arm around her waist and walks her away from the coffin, through the kitchen, and out the back door of the small house, letting the screen door slam shut behind them.

The world slowly speeds up, back to normal, leaving a slight burning smell in the air around the young boy in his coffin.

19

The old man walks down the stone pathway that leads from the house to the beach. He carefully sets an old chess set on the table, making sure that he didn't drop any pieces along the way. He already has too many misplaced pieces from various board games. Then he places two, frosted bottles of root beer on the glass table and produces two glasses from his robe pocket, placing them on the table next to the root beer.

“Thank you Mikey.” He chuckles to himself.

He pulls out a chair, wiping the sand from it, and sits down. He pulls a bottle opener from his other pocket, but sees that these are screw

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tops. He sets the opener aside, and unscrews one of the bottles, pouring himself a half glass, all foamy and sweet, and takes a long sip.

“Mmmm. Very good. Very nice, Mikey.” He chuckles again.

“Where do you find these, my boy? I have looked everywhere.”

He unfolds the chess board and looks through the pieces one by one while carefully placing them on the board in their proper position.

Finished, the old man sits back in his chair and takes another sip of his root beer, admiring the reset board. It’s not reset to a starting position, but reset to where it last stood many years ago in an unfinished game between him and his youngest son. He’s not sure why, but he feels like it’s long overdue to finish this particular game.

The sun is still bright in the sky, moving slowly towards a spectacular sunset. The day attempts to hold off the night for as long as possible. Fighting. Pushing back. The old man can feel the strain of the universe threatening to burst in two. Day and night. Finally the light can hold no longer. Bursting from the strain, the sun races across the sky and fades from the horizon in an instant.

And it’s dark.

“There you are.” Her voice strains to be soft, to be in control. “I’ve been looking for you in the house.” She’s careful. “It’s time.” Rae walks up behind her father, putting cold hands on his shoulders, feeling the fuzzy warmth of his thick robe.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

“Sunshine.” The old man smiles and puts a hand over hers, still cold on his shoulder. Her touch has become a cold touch with warm hands. “I found my old chess set. The one from when you guys were all kids.”

Rae glances at the table, trying to remember the board and it’s small, hand-carved pieces. She sees that the white king is still missing and has again been replaced with the thimble from an old Monopoly game. She tries to remember what happened to the white king, but can’t. Her mind is clouded, and that’s not supposed to happen.

“It’ll turn up again... it always does.” The old man makes a clicking noise with his tongue.

Rae tilts her head towards her shoulder, and slowly glances around the patio and the beach. She looks up to the bedroom windows on the back of the house.

The old man takes a sip of his root beer, continuing to stare far down the beach, into the darkness. He opens the second bottle and pours some root beer into the other glass. “Sit. Have some root beer with me.” He motions to the open chair next to him. “Mikey left this in the fridge last time he was here.”

“You sound tired tonight?” Rae’s voice is dead, but still going through the motions to sound young and alive.

“I am a little tired tonight.”

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Martin E Ericson Jr

She looks to where he's staring. "What are you looking at?" Rae massages her father's shoulders, gently at first, and then more firmly, her hands becoming tense.

The old man glances over his shoulder at his daughter. "Your brother."

Rae, her dark hair a halo dancing around her head to the rhythm of the wind, looks as far down the beach as she can. But she doesn't see anyone in the darkness. "Sam? I was just with him. What's he doing?"

The old man doesn't answer. There's several minutes of silence as he enjoys the sounds of the tide breaking as it rolls in against the beach. He can hear the squawks of a lone bird looking for a late night snack near the water.

"It gets so dark out here at night. And not the kind of darkness I'm used to." Rae looks to the sky. "Like there are fewer stars each night to light the way." Her voice has a far away edge to it.

The old man sips his root beer. "When I sit in the dark, sometimes I find myself with nothing better to do than just think. Just sit her all by myself and think."

The squawking bird swoops down, finding something in the tide, and then flies off into the night.

"It seems like we all have a lot on our minds lately." Rae reaches over her father for her glass and takes a sip, then carefully places it back on

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Martin E Ericson Jr

the table. “Yummy.” She smacks her lips. “Mikey makes a good root beer.” She chuckles.

“I suppose we do.” The old man sighs. “The dark lets you focus better... think and dream while awake. You remember things. You remember the details. Contemplate. Reminisce.”

“Is that what we’re doing? Is that why you brought out the chess set?”

The old man takes another sip of his drink and glances at his daughter over his shoulder, smiling sadly. “I really don’t know why I bothered with the chess set.” He knows why she’s here.

“So are we all just dreaming while awake.” Again, Rae reaches for her glass and takes another sip. She raises her eyebrows, enjoying a moment of hopefulness. “Maybe we’re all just figments of someone’s overactive imagination... and none of us really exist.”

“Hmmm. That would make things convenient, wouldn’t it? Take all the blame from ourselves and put it on them.”

Rae nods her head thoughtfully behind her father.

“Remember when you and your brothers were kids and would break out the paints?”

Rae furrows her brow, thinking. “Not really.” Again, her mind has been getting cloudier and cloudier. She realizes it, but isn’t sure what to do about it. It’s not something she has ever experienced.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

“Sure. You remember. We’d all sit down with the paints and brushes... and all you kids would search through the attic, picking out and fighting over the perfect canvas size.” The old man chuckles, remembering “And we’d all sit there as a group with so many ideas, not sure what we actually wanted to put to canvas. It was fun.”

There’s a moment of silence.

“We’d sit there afraid to make that first stroke.” Rae’s hands just sit coldly on her father’s shoulders. “The canvas was so perfect and clean. We didn’t want to mess that up. We’d all wait to see who made the first move.”

“Because then you’d be committed to creating something.” The old man takes another sip of root beer. “And that scared all of you.”

“Not all of us.” Rae does remember.

“Well... you and Sam for sure. You guys wanted to get it right... get it perfect the first time.” The old man scratches at his beard. “Even though you could’ve just painted over your mistakes and started over.” He grins. “That’s what I do.”

“Mikey and Gabe would just watch what you were doing, and try to copy that... make their own version of that.” Rae laughs silently. “I used to get so mad at them. They had no creativity.”

“They were so much younger than you two.” The old man reaches up and gently pats her hand on his shoulder. “Plus... they’ve always been followers. They lacked the fire you and Sam had. They always had the two of you to show them the way.”

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Martin E Ericson Jr

Rae tilts her head to the side. “I don’t know. Mikey can be plenty fiery.”

“Hmmm. True.” The old man chuckles, and shakes his head. “Different kind of fire.”

“Eventually you’d splash a paint stroke on each of our canvases, forcing us to make up our minds. Or at least cover it up.”

The old man looks over his shoulder, grinning wildly. “I thought you didn’t remember?”

Rae smiles back warmly, then lets her face go hard and blank as her father turns away again, towards the tide. “They were so perfect... and then suddenly they were ruined. We had no choice...” Her voice drifts off.

“But whatever picture you designed in your heads, didn’t always make it to the canvas... at least, not as you intended. But they were good, nonetheless.”

“In their own way, I suppose.” Again, Rae reaches over her father and takes a sip from her root beer. “But yeah. None of us were the artists you encouraged us to be.”

“Most of them are still in the attic.” The old man glances back to the house. “I saved what I could.”

“Hmmm.” Rae sets her glass back on the table.

“Sunshine.” The old man sighs. “Are we going to stick with the analogies tonight?”

Rae doesn’t answer.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

“Okay then.” He frowns. “I made my fair share of bad choices too. Strokes too thick, or a bad brush choice. Or just a complete mess to start with. And I could never do hands and fingers. They always looked like fat little, distorted blobs.”

Rae nods her head. “And we’d keep painting over the mess, trying to make it right.” She becomes somewhat lost in thought. “And pretty soon all we’d have is a shadowy shape of what should’ve been... what was meant to be.”

The old man reaches back and pats his daughter’s hand gently. “You see now?” He chuckles. “Even the best laid plans and all that nonsense.”

“We should have just kept things as they were. Clean. Perfect... until we got our little hands on them.” Her voice cuts through the cold air.

“More analogies.” Then the old man sits in silence for a few minutes, listening to the tide. Waiting.

“We should probably get going.” Rae looks down at her father, smiling a beautifully white, but altogether false smile.

“Ah yes.” The old man looks back over his shoulder. “Do we have time for another glass of root beer?” He notices how watery his daughter’s eyes have become.

“No.” She shakes her head slowly. “I’m expecting visitors.”

“Well the...” The old man pours himself another half glass anyway. “... I believe it’s your move, Sunshine.”

The Death Experience

Martin E Ericson Jr

Rae is startled. For just a moment, she becomes that unsure, young girl again. The one that came first, before any of the boys were even a thought. The little girl who expected her dad to have all the answers. Part of her still wants to trust that everything will be alright.

“We’re not alone. You’re not alone.” The old man downs his glass of root beer and sets the empty glass down on the table. “You’re never alone... and never have been... no matter what you think or how you feel.”

Rae looks down the beach into the darkness again, but she still sees nothing. “Sam.”

Then a dark smile crosses her face. Power overcomes the young girl inside. She cocks her head to the side, as if listening. Her big brown eyes go solid black. She reaches over her father for her root beer. She takes several big gulps, then sets the half-empty glass back down on the table, and reaches for the bottle opener.

“No.” The old man answers with a sad whisper. “Not Sam.”

Rae closes her eyes.

In one fluid movement, she grabs her father’s thinning, grey hair and violently pulls his head back. And with the other hand, jams the bottle opener into his exposed throat, gritting her teeth as she pushes harder and harder, grinding and turning it back and forth until blood is pouring down his chest, soaking his robe.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

“I didn’t ask for this.” Her voice is dark and hollow. “I liked my canvas just the way it was. Clean. Blank. That can be art too.” Her voice drops to a whisper. “You should’ve just let everything be. Now I’m lost...” She shakes her head. “... and I don’t know what to put on my canvas.”

Rae lets go of the opener, and her father’s head slumps forward with it firmly stuck in his neck.

She slowly opens her eyes, as if the lids have somehow become too heavy. Taking a deliberate, deep breath, and releasing it slowly, she reaches past her father and sets the bottle opener carefully on the table.

“I’m sorry, sunshine. What was that?” The old man’s voice is low and tired, as if he just woke from a nap. “It’s getting late. And honestly... I’m more than a little tired.”

Rae gently pats her father’s shoulder and then walks around him and sits in the chair next to him, facing the beach. She gives him a weak smile before briefly closing her eyes to listen to the waves crash against the beach.

The old man puts a hand on the table, using it to stand up. “We’ll figure it all out tomorrow. I promise.” Walking around the table, he retrieves the empty bottles, glasses, and bottle opener. He leans down and gives his daughter a small kiss on the cheek. “I think I’ll go in and get ready for bed now. You have a good rest of your night.”

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Martin E Ericson Jr

Rae watches with dead eyes as her father walks up the path to the patio. She closes her eyes again, but she can no longer hear the crash of the waves.

Hours pass.

Everything flickers on and off from light to dark. The house the beach, the stars... everything. Reality itself dims and threatens to expire for good. And then like a slow burn, everything fades back to life as the remaining stars fight to light the sky.

Sam walks down the stone path coming from the house, past the table and his sister, barely giving her a glance as he walks by. He stops when he reaches the sand of the beach, and stares out into the ocean.

“Did you feel that?” Rae doesn’t open her eyes. “For a second I thought...” She stops, unsure what she actually thought.

“It felt...” Sam scrunches his eyebrows together in thought. Uncertain. He chuckles.

Rae laughs. “I don’t think either of us have a clue.” She opens her eyes wide and tilts her head slightly. “So then... it wasn’t you down the beach.” She glances over to the patio.

At that moment, Nyssa and Tegan appear from the open French doors and exit onto the patio. They pass by Rae, giving her only the briefest of looks, and walk to the sand of the beach, just a few feet from where Sam stands. He gives them a friendly smile, appreciating their support in such a difficult time.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

Nyssa sits down in the sand, facing away from Rae and the house, staring out to the water.

Tegan sits next to her sister. She glances to her right, to Sam. “You left without us... again.”

“Hmmm.” Sam nods. He had good reason.

“Well. Ladies.” Rae tries to sound hurt. “Don’t say hi.” She giggles awkwardly. “Wait. Wait. I can do better than that.” She clears her throat and put on her best pout. “Well then, ladies... don’t say hi.” She laughs out loud like a small child telling a joke only they understand.

Sam turns and gives his sister an irritated look.

“Sam. Please. Sit.” Rae gestures to the empty chair across from her. “Dad just went to bed...” She frowns, thinking. “... well... he went to bed a few hours ago, I suppose.”

“No thank you.” Sam turns and stares down the beach to where their father was looking earlier. He realizes they are not alone, but isn’t surprised. He feels like it’s nearly that time. He’s felt it since the boy’s wake.

“So what is so... damn... interesting?” Rae stands, but sees nothing through the darkness down the beach. The harder she looks, the more the stars seem to dim. She looks up to the sky, letting out a small growl of anger. “Ahhhh.”

Sam turns towards his sister, giving her an irritated look.

Rae does not like being challenged. “Fuck the both of you.” Her eyes go completely black.

The Death Experience

Martin E Ericson Jr

Sam sighs heavily. “This has gone too far, Rae. Thing’s are getting out of control.” He purses his lips, deciding. “I think I’m going to end this.”

Rae’s eyes go even blacker as her entire body darkens with a power rippling the air around her. “No. You aren’t.” An inky blackness begins to pour from her eyes into the night air. “This isn’t yours to end.”

Becoming increasingly uncomfortable, Tegan begins to hum quietly to herself. Not wanting to be witness to their conversation.

Sam’s eyes brighten considerably, pushing back the darkness of the night. He considers how far he’s willing to take this at the moment. He feels for his sister. He understands better than anyone what she’s going through. He glances back down the beach. Searching.

Rae sighs. “You’re looking for something neither one of us has a God... damn... chance of seeing” Her voice becomes deep and dark. “Unless he wants to be seen.” She turns her head to look at Tegan. “And would you... please!... stop that toneless humming.”

Tegan immediately stops humming, glancing to her sister who is still just staring out to the ocean.

“I asked for help. I got nothing!” Black streaks of energy leap from Rae’s body surrounding her, swirling and grabbing at the air, threatening to reach out and touch the Devil himself. “They just burned. Burned in each other’s arms.” The darkness grows around her, completely enveloping the young woman she pretends to be. “I asked. I got nothing.”

The Death Experience

Martin E Ericson Jr

Sam looks first down the beach, and then up to the house where their father sleeps.

The moon and stars fade completely, and the waves go still and silent.

“You see... do you feel that?” Rae glances around at the empty sky and frozen night. “It’s him... isn’t it? He’s doing this. Fuck.” She pulls the darkness closer. “Of course it is Why does he do this? Why is he letting this happen? Why does he let any of this happen?”

Sam takes another slow step forward, now standing directly in front of his sister. “Rae...” He tentatively reaches out.

Nyssa and Tegan slowly stand, brushing the sand from their pants, stepping closer to Sam. They feel like it’s about time to go. Anywhere but here.

Rae’s voice goes calm as she lets the darkness completely drop away, her eyes going from black to brown. Her beautifully pale face shines in the darkness of the empty night. “What do you propose we do?”

“End this.” Sam’s voice softens, pleading. “We all get together. Talk things out. Find another way. Let Michael do your thing for a while. Take some time...”

“End this?” With a roaring ferocity, Rae’s dark power shoots out of her, straight to the heavens, like a solid, endless, black pillar. “Fine!” Her voice is deep and powerful, coming from everywhere and nowhere all at once.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

Instantly, Nyssa and Tegan drop to the sand.

Dead.

Sam doesn't flinch. He doesn't move. He doesn't look down to his fallen friends. He doesn't look away from his sister for even a second, but his eyes can't help but flash white with anger. And with a sound-shattering whoosh, his flaming wings are out, and his entire being is lit, forcing back the frozen darkness of the night. The patio tiles melt. The metal and glass table and chairs instantly burn away to nothing. The sand of the nearby beach turns to a flowing, liquid glass. The air around them is burnt away in a heartbeat.

The two siblings stand, facing off, light versus dark. Universes come and go around them as they stand in their stalemate unwilling to actually move against one another. That would not be allowed.

Rae turns and walks away, her bare feet just above the melted sand and tiles. She walks towards the house, but stops just before the French doors without looking back. "You disappoint me."

The moon and stars light back up, and the waves resume their crash against the beach. The patio, table and chairs, beach sand, and the air itself are back as they were.

Sam stands there alone, his body cooled, his wings pulled back in.

"There he goes again." Entering the house, Rae folds into the blackness she holds within. "It can be a little unsettling? Frightening even. Maybe I'm not the scary one after all."

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Martin E Ericson Jr

And she's gone.

Sam remains alone on the beach for a few minutes. Considering everything. "Ladies..." He looks down at their bodies laying dead in the sand. "I think we're going to need to take another approach. This is about to get..." He sighs, hard. "... difficult."

And with that, Sam walks away, down the beach, towards the darkness he and his father had both been staring into. He's immediately joined at both sides by Nyssa and Tegan, looking pretty much the same as they always have, except for a somewhat startled look in their eyes.

"I have a favor I need from each of you... while I get some help. Some serious... serious... help."

20

“Get the fuck out of the car!” He points a shotgun through the open, driver’s-side window.

“What the fuck are you doing!” Karl shoves the gun out of his face. “That thing’s loaded, you fucking idiot!” He opens the car door hard, intentionally hitting his friend with it.

“You fucking twat.” Brad sets the shotgun on the hood of the car, rubbing his hip. “That fucking hurt.”

Karl hops out of the car, grabbing the shotgun off the hood. He walks past his friend and sets it in the open trunk along with the others.

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Martin E Ericson Jr

Karl's beat-up, red Mustang sits in the closed garage at Brad's house. The two boys are both seventeen and should be at school right now, but they have other plans for today.

Karl, a tall, gangly ginger, sits down on an old bar stool and lights a cigarette. He takes a long drag, blowing the smoke in Brad's face as he walks closer. Brad is the shorter of the two. He has a dark buzz cut and a compact, wrestler's body.

“So is that everything?” Karl does a mental count of everything. “Four shotguns, loaded. Ten shells each. Two AR-15s, loaded with one magazine each, 40 shots. Four extra magazines, two each. Two revolvers, six shots each.” He’s proud of his ability to stay organized. It’s the one thing he’s always been good at.

Brad reaches in the trunk and grabs something, holding it up. “And a grenade if we need it. I’m not sure it works, though. Took it from my grandpa. So we’ll see.”

Karl takes another drag on his cigarette. “Put that back dumbass. Before you drop it and blow us up and ruin everything. I can see the news now... ‘local honor roll student and his dumbass friend blow themselves up in the dumbass’ garage... full story at eleven’.”

“Fuck you.” Brad carelessly tosses it into the trunk on an old folded blanket.

Karl holds his breath for a second, then releases it. “Dumbass. If that pin falls out, we’re dead in seconds.”

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“Stop calling me dumbass, dumbass.” Brad kicks the leg of the bar stool, almost toppling it over with Karl still on it.

Karl steadies himself with one hand, making sure not to drop his cigarette with the other. “Then stop doing stupid things.”

Hopping up, he puts out his cigarette on the bar stool, and walks to the open trunk of his car. They have an old packing blanket laying flat in the trunk, with all the guns and ammo neatly laid out on top of it. The other blanket, still folded with the grenade lying on top of it, will eventually be laid over the guns to help hold them in place for their short drive.

“Okay. So let’s go over this again.” Karl looks over at his friend, who’s picking his nose. “You’re fucking gross, man.”

“Fuck you.”

Karl looks back to the trunk. “Two shotguns each. One AR and one pistol each.” He looks over to Brad. “You got the backpacks?”

“Right here.” Brad grabs them from a shelf and tosses them to his friend.

Karl looks at them closely. “Star Wars? Really?” He stares at his friend, waiting for an explanation.

“Who cares. They’re all I had.”

“You already had these?” Karl laughs.

“Shut up. Star Wars is pretty fuckin’ bad ass.”

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Karl shakes his head slowly. “Fine.” He sets them aside as he carefully takes the grenade from the trunk, and making sure Brad isn’t watching, sets it on the shelf against the side wall and covers it with an old rag. “That thing’s just bad news.” He mumbles to himself.

Brad walks to the back of the garage and through a door into the kitchen, returning with a six-pack of cheap beer. “One last drink for the road.”

Karl looks back and smiles. “Nice.” He unfolds the second blanket in the trunk and lays it over their stockpile, and then places the two backpacks on top, pushing down a little all around the blanket to better hold everything in place. He closes the trunk with a heavy thud.

“Hey.” Brad tosses a beer to Karl, who appropriately sits back down on the old bar stool. Brad pulls himself up onto the closed trunk of the car and pops open his beer, downing it in seconds.

Karl opens his beer and takes a long drink. “Don’t pound ‘em. You’ll get sloppy and fuck things up.”

“These are the last beers I’ll ever drink in my entire life. I’ll do whatever the fuck I want.” Brad opens another beer, but this time, taking his friends advice, takes a couple long drinks.

“What are you gonna miss most?” Karl’s voice has gone soft and serious.

Brad takes another drink. “You mean besides beer and girls?” He laughs.

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“Yeah, like you’re not a fucking virgin.” Karl smiles broadly.

“Yeah, well at least I’m not gay.”

“Fuck you, Brad.”

“You wish.”

This makes Karl laugh and Brad joins in. He hops off the car and walks over to his best friend, his only friend. “Cheers.” Karl holds his beer up for a final toast.

Karl taps his beer against Brad’s. “I’ll miss my mom. She was good to me.” His smile drops. “My dad’s an asshole, but my mom was always there for me.”

“Yeah. Your mom is pretty cool.” Brad smiles suddenly. “Hot too, for an older lady.”

“Shut up, dick.” Karl finishes his beer. “It’s time.”

Brad smashes his empty beer can on his forehead. “Fuck!” He bends over in pain.

“Dumbass.”

After a couple minutes trying to shake loose their nervousness, the two boys hop in the car. Karl starts the old Mustang up after a few unsuccessful tries. They grin to each other and Brad hits the garage remote, tossing it out of the car onto the front lawn as they exit the garage. Karl drives carefully, so that the guns in the trunk don’t move around too much. They have them laid out perfectly, and he wants

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everything to go smoothly. He pulls down the block and then around the corner and down a few blocks to a stoplight across from the high school.

As they sit at the red light, Tegan crosses in the crosswalk, walking quickly, a determined look on her face, trying not to look in their direction. The two boys watch, making fun.

“Check out this chick.” Brad laughs. “Nice hair, dude.”

Karl honks the horn just as Tegan crosses in front of the car. She doesn’t flinch, but she fails herself and looks over at the boys, her face filled with anger. For a second she considers smashing the front of the car in with a good kick, but she doesn’t want to mess things up. Sam gave her explicit instructions on what needed to be done, and what needed to be avoided.

“We should pop the lesbian right here.” Brad sits up straight, grinning, looking at his friend for approval. “Just for fun.”

“No fuckin’ way. That’ll blow everything.”

Tegan crosses the street and starts down the sidewalk towards the high school, stepping over some low shrubs and into the parking lot, full with cars.

“That bitch’s going to the school.” Karl spits his words.

“Awesome!” Brad grabs a beer from his jacket pocket. “I’m gonna fuck her up if I find her.”

“Ha. Bad day to be visiting old friends.” Karl laughs.

“Nah. Probably a sub.” Brad takes a sip of his beer.

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They watch as the young woman stops in front of the school entrance, turning and smirking in their direction. Then she flings the heavy doors open and enters the school like she owns the place.

The first thing Tegan notices is two adults and three students working off to the side in a small office area. Then she looks down the hall and sees hundreds of kids milling about, walking to classes, standing at their open lockers.

“Shit.” Tegan exhales, overwhelmed for a second. “That’s a lot of people. So how am I going to do this?” The world slows around her and brightens, making everything appear more clearly to her. She breathes in deeply, smelling fresh flowers breeze by. Suddenly, feeling a complete sense of calm, she knows what to do.

“That bitch was looking right at me, smiling like she knows something’s up.” Brad takes another gulp of his beer.

“She doesn’t know shit. And you’re a dumbass.” Karl shakes his head and gives his friend a look.

The light turns green and Karl pulls the Mustang down the street and into the high school parking lot. He drives at a snail’s pace through the lot, past the teacher section, and into the general student area. He parks beside a big truck to partially conceal them, and as close to the school as he can without standing out. He can feel the butterflies in his stomach start to awaken. He’s so nervous he feels like he’s going to throw up. He turns the car off and the two friends sit there for a few seconds in silence

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while Brad slowly finishes his beer, this time using every precious second like it's his last.

“Okay.” Karl finally feels like he can open his mouth without throwing up. “Let’s go over this again.”

Brad nods eagerly, making sure to sit up and pay attention. This is important to him. This is the only important thing he’s ever done.

“I go in the East entrance. You go in the West.” Karl starts. Still feeling nauseated, he pauses, swallowing dryly a few times. He feels warm and a little dizzy.

Brad pulls his last beer from the floor of the car and pops it open, spilling it everywhere. “You take out anybody at Principal Dickhead’s office.” Brad takes a long drink. “Shoot the motherfucker in the face for me.” He laughs and burps loudly. “Or better yet... in the throat and watch him bleed out.”

“Oh, I will.” Karl grins. “You immediately take out that bastard cop in his office on your side before he can call for help.”

“I’m gonna shoot him in the fucking dick and let him live.” Brad immediately throws up all the beer on the floor of the Mustang.

“Dude! What the fuck!” The smell immediately grabs Karl and he has to fight back the urge to do the same.

“Who cares. Not our problem anymore.” Brad wipes his face on the front of his t-shirt and grins.

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Karl stares at his friend for a minute, pissed off about his car.

“You okay? You’re not gonna fuck this up, are you?”

Brad gives his friend a blank look and continues. “Then we head down the halls shooting everyone we see...”

“Not the chicks unless you have to.” Karl interrupts.

“Not the chicks... unless they’re dating one of those douches.”

Brad corrects his friend. “Then bang.”

“Fine. Not the chicks and if you see Jason, Andy, Martin and all those dweeb guys... not them either. They didn’t do shit to us.” Karl’s face goes angry. “Just make sure to get the teachers and the jocks and anyone else that pissed us off.”

“I’m gonna crotch shot all the jocks and save the next generation from becoming assholes.” Brad slurs a little, sounding like the beer is taking effect.

“Look who’s got a thing for dicks.” Karl snorts.

“Fuck you.”

“Whatever. You ready to do this?” Karl immediately throws up on himself, down his shirt and into his lap.

Brad starts laughing uncontrollably, pointing at his friend’s mess. “Dude. That was fucked up.”

“Fuck you.” Karl strips off his soiled shirt, wipes his lap the best he can, and tosses it with a wet slap into the backseat. He pops the trunk,

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throws open his door, and climbs out of the car. He's so nervous, he's sweating cold, and shaking.

Brad climbs through the open window on his side and they meet at the trunk. They work quickly, each packing one of the backpacks and putting it on. Then they put their extra shotgun in the backpack in easy reach. They've practiced this many times in Karl's basement, but without the Star Wars theme. Each takes an AR-15, attaches the strap and hangs it around their neck.

“They seem heavier today.” Brad mumbles.

“They’re not.”

For a few seconds they just look each other over to make sure everything’s good. They take turns adjusting the backpack straps on the other, making sure everything is easily in reach, but securely stashed away in the proper place. They take a few seconds to practice reaching for their spare guns, making small adjustments where necessary.

“Alright.” Karl has to hold his breath for a second, swallowing carefully, trying to keep himself from throwing up again. “This is it.”

Brad takes a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “Let’s do this.” Brad clasps hands with Karl, like warriors in old movies, grabbing hold of each other’s forearm. “See you in heaven, brother.”

“Probably not.” Karl shrugs. “I don’t believe in that shit.”

Without a look back, or even a glance at the other, both boys walk around the big truck and quickly to their respective entrances.

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Karl gets to the East entrance, takes a deep breath, flings the double doors open, and rushes in. No one's in the hall. He jogs several yards forward pulling up the shotgun to fire into the front office, hoping for Principal Wood to just be standing there. He isn't. No one's in the front office. Karl pushes the swinging door on the front counter, walks through the small area, and kicks open the Principal's door. He isn't there.

"Fuck!" Karl curses, partially out of frustration, but mainly because he's scared. Something doesn't feel right.

He walks through the office and back into the hall. He flings open the first classroom door he finds. The room is empty. He walks to the second classroom where the door is already open. He jumps in front of the door and fires his shotgun out of pure nervousness. No one's in the room.

Entering the West entrance, Brad immediately heads to the first door on his left. A door to a room he knows all to well. He fires his shotgun several times through the closed wooden door of the school police officer. He pops the door open, but Mr. Olsen isn't in his office. Brad walks down to the first classroom, flings the door open and starts firing. The classroom is empty, but Brad finds satisfaction in the destruction he's causing. He shoots a desk just to watch it explode into fragments of wood and plastic. Reaching over his shoulder, he grabs some shells and reloads the shotgun.

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Brad continues down the hallway, opening door after door to empty classrooms, shooting up desks, walls, windows, everything, just for the adrenaline rush. He stops again and again to reload the shotgun, but finally it overheats and jams. He tosses it aside and decides it's a good time for the AR-15. He lifts the strap over his head and positions the gun like he's seen in hundreds of video games and movies.

The goal for the two boys is to see if they have enough ammo and enough skill to meet halfway around the horseshoe hallway. That, and kill everyone that ever hassled them. Then they'd use the pistols on each other.

Halfway down his side of the school, Brad approaches the library which has no door. It's just a huge open area full of books and computers. At this point, he's confused about all the empty classrooms and expects that everyone had seen them coming and is hiding in the library. He runs around the corner firing the AR like a madman. Books and computers, desks and chairs are obliterated by bullets. He pops the magazine, grabbing a fresh one from his backpack, and jams it into the gun, nervously missing several times until he gets it right.

“Can I help you?” A girl's voice comes from behind the desk, set off to the side of the library entrance. It's Mrs. Mull's desk, but it's not her voice.

Brad spins, pulling the gun's trigger to get his first taste of blood. The gun doesn't fire. He shakes it and bangs on the magazine a few times, and then fires into the ground in front of him about a dozen shots. He

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flips the gun back up, seeing a young woman now sitting on top the desk, looking at him with her head tilted to the side. She's very pretty with pale skin, and long black hair to match her dress. He doesn't ever remember seeing her around. He pulls the trigger again. The gun fails to fire.

“What the fuck!” He screams, throwing the gun down and grabbing his second shotgun from his backpack.

He swings it around at the girl and pulls the trigger. Click. Click. Click. It fails like the AR-15. He bangs the gun on the floor and it fires into the tile, ricocheting across his leg into his inner thigh. He screams out in pain, dropping to the floor into a quickly spreading pool of his own blood. He looks up through tears and shock to see that the young woman hasn't moved from her spot on the library desk.

“You poor thing.” She tilts her head to the other side slowly, smiling madly, looking unnatural. “Why are you doing this?”

Brad reaches for his shotgun laying in his blood. “What the fuck do you care?” His voice is rough and painful.

“I care.” She pulls back her smile a little bit. “That’s the only reason I’m here.”

“Who the fuck are you anyway? You don’t go here.” Brad grits his teeth in pain. “No way I would have missed seeing you.”

The young woman’s face goes dark as she tilts her head back upright. “Call me Death. And it was nice to meet you Bradley. Well... not really.”

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And Brad explodes into a fine red mist, coating the walls, ceiling, and floor. The mist hangs in the air, slowly falling to the floor as Death walks through it, not a drop touching her.

On the East side of the horseshoe, Karl has opened several classrooms, finding all of them empty. He's heard lots of shots from the other side of the school. He grins, a little jealous that Brad has been having all the luck. Getting all the action. He figures that everyone must have heard them coming and are hiding in the cafeteria up ahead of him and probably the library on Brad's side. As he approaches the cafeteria, he tosses the shotgun aside and prepares the AR-15.

"Fuck the chicks. They're dead too." Karl mumbles nervously, ignoring the nasally, smallness of his voice.

He pushes the double doors of the cafeteria open and moves inside, letting the AR spray the area with bullets until it's empty. Nobody. It's empty like all the classrooms. He pops the magazine free, dropping it to the ground, and reaches into his backpack for a fresh one. He looks down to the gun and pops the new magazine in like he's practiced a hundred times. As he glances back up, a dark-haired, young woman is standing right in front of him.

"Holy shit!" Karl stumbles backwards, falling on his ass, letting loose a flurry of bullets at the girl.

She just stands there, smiling.

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“What the hell!” He lets loose again, firing like wild. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” He curses as the magazine empties.

Again, she just stands there. But now her smile is gone. The look in her eyes is absolutely terrifying. They’re pitch black and empty.

“Stand up.” She commands, her voice much too deep for her small size.

Karl, tears streaming down his face, doesn’t move from his sitting position on the floor. “Who the fuck are you?”

“Now!” She screams at him, her voice growling, going even deeper, echoing throughout the cafeteria.

“Please. Please. Please.” Karl begs and cries. “What are you?” He stands, unsteady, his legs shaking to the point of convulsions. “You’re the fucking devil.” Karl whispers between deep sobs, completely losing it. “The devil.”

“Look at me.” Her voice becomes much softer, but still has a hard intensity.

Karl, can barely hold himself up as he stands directly in front of her. And he still can’t find the courage to look directly at her.

“You would be so lucky if I were only the Devil.” Her face darkens. “But rest assured my little friend... I’m here to help you find him.”

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She goes completely dark, the void reaching out from within her, with blackened tentacles of pure energy and unlimited power. “Now look at me before you really piss me... the fuck... off.”

Karl lifts his head just a little, and looks Death in the face, in the eye. He screams silently, nothing but a long gurgle coming out. He wants to drop to his knees, but he’s unable to command his body to do anything at this point.

“You’ll remember this moment for eternity. I could keep you alive... not allow you to die. Ever. People would say, ‘there goes Karl... they say he’s ten thousand years old and his mind is gone... his body continually rotting away. He met Death... and she rejected him.’” She cocks her head to the side and smiles brightly, her grin the only thing shining out of complete darkness she has become.

She giggles girlishly.

Karl’s legs give out and he drops to his knees, shaking but unable to cry, unable to think or move. A stream of drool pours from his mouth as his head drops so his chin rests against his chest.

Death walks around him, slowly dragging a finger across his face, tracing an imaginary line from ear to ear. Then, pulling her hand back, she walks away a few feet down the hall, and suddenly stops. She takes a deep breath, not looking back, and breathes out heavily.

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“But that would be cruel, wouldn’t it?” A small chuckle echoes from the void that is Death. “Well then.” She sighs dramatically. “It’s a lucky thing you’ve caught me in a good mood.”

And like his friend before him, Karl explodes into a fine red mist, covering everything like a light, summer rain. Her path chosen, Death walks away, disappearing into the shadows, to the sounds of oncoming sirens.

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“Cassie!” A middle-aged man drunkenly stumbles from the house party late in the evening. “Don’t you dare get in that fuckin’ car.” He runs out in the middle of the yard.

“Fuck you, Bill.” She slurs, falling forward against the car parked in the driveway. “Stay the fuck away from me. You’re being a dick.”

A few people crowd the window of his small house, watching but not wanting to get involved. “Go help him.” A short, plump woman pushes her equally plump husband towards the door. “She can’t be driving.”

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The man resists, spinning free from his wife's grasp and putting an arm around her. "He's got it."

Bill jogs up and shoves the car door closed as she opens it. "Gimme the keys." He pins her against the car door with his body, using one hand to grab her hand, and the other to grab at her purse.

"Get off me, you asshole!" Cassie pushes Bill sloppily, half falling, half laying against the side of the car. "Get the fuck off me!"

"I said..." Bill rips the purse from her hands, tossing it into the front yard. "... You. Aren't. Driving."

Cassie shoves him away from her, nearly falling, but steadyng herself on the car's mirror. She kicks at him, but misses. "You son-of-a-bitch!" She screams.

Bill falls back on the grass, near the purse, scooping it up and holding it close. "I'm trying to help. You wanna get another God damn DUI?" Bill takes a deep, calming breath. "Jesus fucking Christ."

"I'm going home." Cassie slurs, stumbling backwards, nearly falling.

"I'll get you a ride. Just go back inside... hang out for a while." Bill's not sure what set her off this time. But he should know by now. One-too-many glasses of wine and this is what Cassie becomes. It's always been a problem.

She takes a couple unsteady steps forward and kicks Bill in the side of the leg hard, and then in the hip even harder. "Gimme my fuckin'

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purse!” With a wild swing, she manages to smack him in the mouth with the side of her fist, while falling on her butt in the middle of the lawn.

“God damn it, Cass!” Bill puts a hand up to his mouth, feeling his already-swelling lip. “Jesus, that hurt.”

Seeing an opportunity, Cassie grabs at her purse, but Bill angrily swats her hands away. But he knows they’re being watched and he can’t take this as far as he wants to.

For a couple minutes, both catch their breath, just sitting on the lawn facing each other. Cassie picks grass off her stockings while Bill holds his fingers over his mouth, feeling his bruised lips.

“Come on, you’re a fucking mess.” Bill uses his finger to wipe some blood from the corner of his mouth. He looks at Cassie with her messed-up makeup and long, red hair falling all over her face. For a split second it looks like he’s won, but then he speaks without thinking. “You look like shit.” He laughs, spitting blood on the ground in front of him.

“Yeah. Well you’re a real fucking winner too.” Cassie slurs. “We’re done. And I wanna leave. So gimme my fucking keys before I punch you in your God damn mouth again.”

“You’re not fucking driving, you dumb bitch.” Bill kicks out with his leg to show his anger, accidentally hitting her in the ankle.

Cassie curls up in pain, and starts drunkenly crying, while rocking back and forth in the grass.

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“Oh shit! I’m sorry, babe.” Bill leans forward to get up, but Cassie kicks out, hitting him right in the face with her foot.

Bill falls back again. “Fuck!” He sits there, rubbing his cheek for a few seconds, trying to calm himself. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” He can feel that he’s seconds away from going off on her, and he doesn’t want that to happen in front of an audience again. “I just don’t want you gettin’ hurt.”

“Fuck you. Gimme the fuckin’ keys.” Cassie slurs through clenched teeth.

Bill throws her purse at her in anger and defeat. “Fine, you dumb bitch. If you wanna go... go.”

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.

Cassie climbs to her feet, brushing some dirt and grass from her skirt and torn leggings. She stumbles to her car, opens the door, and practically falls in. Fumbling with the keys for a few seconds, she finally manages to start the engine.

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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.”

Cassie puts the 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. She 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.

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

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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.

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 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.

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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 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.

The man's arm moves, grabbing out at the pavement.

"Oh thank you, thank you, thank you." Cassie's breathing is heavy but shallow, making her even more lightheaded.

She 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.

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“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. She continues to watch the crawling man. “What’s he doing?”

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 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 slowly forward, 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.

“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.”

The young father, Mateo, lays in the road, his legs severely broken, his left shoulder dislocated, the other arm broken, and half his ribs shattered. But he won’t fail his daughter. He pauses ever so briefly to catch his breath. He doesn’t even feel the pain of his injuries as he takes a second to say a silent goodbye to his loving wife. Then with a renewed energy, he crawls towards the car. He will save his daughter. He has no

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doubt. No other options. He'll lay with her on the side of the road, away from the fire, until help comes. Then he'll die, happy.

Mateo pulls himself towards his car, to the fire threatening his baby. Between him and the car are small puddles of gas and other fluids that have burst into flames from the sparks of the overturned car. He'll need to get past the fires to his daughter. He glances around for an alternate route, but there isn't time, and he doesn't have that kind of strength. At first, he feels the gentle warmth of the fires, then he begins to feel the painful heat as it licks towards his body. Although the flames are far enough away to allow a path to his baby, Mateo's skin begins to blacken from the heat. His eyes water and cloud over as the heat and shock work to overcome him.

"Please. Please." He mumbles, his lips dry and burning. "Give me the strength." His body finally falls to the pavement, defeated.

"Daddy's..."

Then the heat is gone. The fire is out. He can no longer see, but he can hear crying coming from the car. Mateo is certain that he's died, and is hearing the last cries of his daughter.

A young woman puts her hand on Mateo's shoulder.

He immediately feels comfort. He breathes easier. "Leave me. Just save her." His voice croaks through blood collecting in his mouth and throat. "Please." Mateo's eyes clear enough for him to see what appears to

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be a small, young woman, with brown eyes, and short, cropped brown hair. Her eyes glow brightly against the night sky. “You’re... an angel.”

“Nyssa.” She smiles gently at Mateo, squeezing her hand on his shoulder to let him feel that she’s real. “Just Nyssa.”

“Please.” Mateo mumbles. He isn’t listening. “Save her. Please.” He begins crying, not from pain, but from happiness. The shock takes over, and his body goes cold.

Nyssa looks around for Rae. This is her thing. But she’s not here. She frowns in disappointment. Sam didn’t warn her about this part. About what to do if Death was a no show.

Nyssa moves her hand from Mateo’s shoulder to his chest, pausing, and removing it, unsure what she should do. On the verge of panic, she breathes in deeply, noticing the smell of fresh flowers wafting in the night air. Then the wind picks up, whispering directly in her ear.

Nyssa places her hand back on his chest. “Here. Rest. Wait right here. I’ll be back for you.” She hesitates, looking over to the overturned car. “Isabella.” She reaches down, using her other hand to close Mateo’s eyes. “She’ll be fine. I promise.”

Nyssa stands up and walks to the car. She kneels, reaching in through the broken, side window, and unbuckles the little girl, pulling Isabella tightly to her chest. The little girl immediately stops crying, and sleeps. Taking the child with her, Nyssa walks away into the night, while she also sits with Mateo, holding his hand, talking about all the wonderful

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things his wife and daughter brought into his life. And all the amazing things they would do in the future.

Waiting a lifetime, Nyssa allows Mateo to watch his little girl grow up and have a little girl of her own.

And then, when he's ready, she takes him home.

The adrenaline is beginning to take affect, helping Cassie to overcome the alcohol. She's caused an accident, maybe hurt or killed someone. Maybe a child. She needs to just get home, and she believes everything will be okay. By the time someone comes asking, she'll be sober. She'll lie. The other car crossed the line and hit her, and she had no idea they were injured. She would have stopped and helped if she had known.

For just a second she pictures the little girl in the car seat burning to death, screaming in agony as her flesh melts away. She shudders, and violently shakes her head to clear her thoughts as tears run down her face.

Cassie speeds down the old highway much too fast, intent on getting home as quickly as possible.

“When I get to Miller Road...” She tries to keep her thoughts straight. “... take a right, towards home. I’ll be fine.” She’s panicked, cold sweat running down the sides of her face and the back of her neck. “It’ll all be fine in the morning.”

The car’s one headlight does its best to push through the darkness, keeping up with the speed of the car. But Cassie’s blurred vision and her

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erratic driving are making it difficult to see. As she turns a bend, the wheels squeal hard, struggling to stay in contact with the pavement.

In the distance, Cassie can make out something standing in the middle of the highway. A young woman, her hair and dress so black that the only thing Cassie can make out is her pale skin. She's smiling. "What the hell."

Cassie's adrenaline takes over completely and she swerves the car at the last minute to just miss the woman in the road, nearly losing control of the car again.

"Shit. Shit. Shit." Cassie wants to pull over and catch her breath, compose herself, but she's afraid, and just wants to get as far from the accident as possible.

Then. Once again, the young woman is in front of her, standing in the middle of the road, this time with a wicked smile on her face. Her dark hair and dress, both blacker than the night, blow wildly in the wind.

"What the fuck!" Cassie screams, completely losing it.

This time her reflexes give in to the alcohol and she knows she won't be able to swerve, so she puts the peddle down to the floor, intent on running through this lunatic and just getting home. She doesn't care anymore. She just wants off this highway and back home to her bed. She just wants to wake up in her own bed and forget any of this happened.

"God please please please." The cold sweat is filling Cassie's eyes and she can barely see.

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As the car speeds up, the young woman in the road extends her right arm out in front of her. And with incredible force, the car hits her unmoving body, causing the metal and glass to crunch and splinter into pieces, tearing in half around her. The engine pops free from its mounts and smashes like glass against her body, shattering in all directions, not even tearing her dress or disturbing her perfect smile.

Death's arm remains fully extended, smashing right through the front windshield, grabbing Cassie by the throat, instantly breaking her neck, collapsing her trachea, forcing her body to collapse her seat backward, shoving her through the backseat, tearing her body through the rear window and metal trunk of the car, leaving both legs, one arm, and half her torso behind.

The car, now completely split in half, runs off the road both right and left, crashing into the trees on one side and the ditch on the other.

Death stands in the middle of the dark highway, holding what's left of Cassie in her extended right hand. Cassie is nothing but a bloody mess, her face and scalp half torn away, shredded in the wreckage of the car.

Death pulls what remains of Cassie in close to her own grinning face. "I should keep you alive like this. Not let you die. Blah, blah, blah. I keep saying and not doing." She shakes her head. Her face is dark and terrifying, her eyes completely black. "I could just toss you off to the side of the road and let them find you like this. You could live like this forever. A half person. Or they could cremate you thinking you're dead and you'd

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still be living... feeling... forever. Just ashes and chunks of bone." She chuckles. "You deserve nothing better."

Death drops her arm low and to the side, still holding the broken woman by her throat. And thinking about it for a few seconds, she casually tosses Cassie to the side of the road.

And she walks away.

22

“Hello, little brother.” Sam sits alone on the upstairs patio, just outside his father’s room.

After a long walk down the beach, he had come home looking for his youngest brother. And when he couldn’t find him in his room, or anywhere else, he thought maybe the old man would be available to give some fatherly advice. But the old man wasn’t home either. There was a note on the fridge about him checking in on Michael and Gabriel at home. Not the house. Home. It was rare that the old man went home, so Sam figured he already knew about Rae’s latest breakdown.

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So Sam came up to his father's room, opened the French doors, and pulled out one of the big, overstuffed chairs the old man keeps in his bedroom. "I know you're there. Listening." His voice is quiet, but hangs deeply in the night air. "So I'll just talk."

He glances around the patio, waiting for a sign. This was a favorite place for all the kids when they were growing up. They'd play out here whenever they had the chance. And it was a great place to be alone sometimes. Read a good book. A good comic book, in Sam's case. Or just do some thinking away from the others.

"Remember when we'd break out the sleeping bags and have a mini camp out up here." Sam scrunches his brow and pushes out his lips. "Or maybe you don't. Before your time. But the others would. Even Rae, occasionally."

Sam smiles as he remembers a pretty good childhood with his siblings. Azrael, the eldest, was daddy's little girl. Sunshine. Though mischievous, she rarely did anything she wasn't supposed to. In fact, she helped her father with the family as much as she could. Yeah, she teased her brothers, bossed them around, and played tricks on them, but they were harmless, sisterly things. And in a lot of ways, she was the closest thing they had to a mother. She taught them a lot. She helped them grow and become who they are today.

Sam was the second child. Samael. For a time, he and his sister were inseparable. She was finally given someone to properly lord over, and

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mentor to some extent. He did learn a lot from her, and they had a lot of good times, just the two of them hanging out with their father. Then, after Sam, came Michael, and very soon after that, Gabriel.

For the longest time, Sam had thought he would always be the youngest. It just felt that way. It never occurred to him that someone else would eventually come along to push him up the ladder, making him one of the lost middle children.

Michael turned out a lot like Rae, confrontational, domineering, and hot headed. While Gabriel was more like Sam, slower to react, charming, and thoughtful.

But today Sam needs to talk to his youngest brother. The baby of the family. The one that finally pushed Gabriel up that sibling ladder. Everyone likes to point out that Sam was the old man's favorite. And while it may have been true for a while, although Sam believes it had always been Rae, when the old man brought the baby home, both their reigns were over.

Death, the Devil, Chaos, and Order.

All but the youngest had nicknames they chose for one another. They were mainly used when they were teasing one another, and at times, angry with one another, taunting one another. For a while, Rae called the baby 'The One' because she said that she was the only daughter because their father got it right the first time. But it took four boys to finally get

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“The One”. But that nickname never really stuck. “The One” wasn’t too fond of it.

A noise behind him pulls Sam from his memories, and he glances over his shoulder into his father’s darkened bedroom, half expecting to see the old man shuffling out to sit with him. To give that much-needed, fatherly advice.

“Sam?” Tegan’s voice is unusually soft as she finds her way through the darkness and stands between the open French doors. “Who you talking to? Your dad’s downstairs in the living room...” She snorts. “Watching soccer of all things.”

“Oh. So he’s back.” Sam smiles gently, and motions for her to join him on the patio. “Just having a little chat with my brother.”

Tegan glances around the patio, looking confused as she sits on the padded chair to Sam’s right. She reaches behind her and pulls several pillows out of her way, tossing them back into the old man’s room.

Just behind Tegan, comes Nyssa. She walks onto the patio and glances over to her sister, giving her a questioning look with her eyes. Tegan responds with a small shoulder shrug.

“Sit. Sit.” Sam pats the other padded chair to his left. “So you got Mateo home then?”

“Yeah.” She pauses, deciding what else to say. If anything. “I almost stayed. It was nice being home for a change.”

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Sam nods, grinning to himself. “Maybe you should’ve. I think this has gotten beyond us. I’m surprised you didn’t run into my dad. He was visiting Mikey and Gabe earlier tonight.”

Unlike her sister, Nyssa pulls the big pillows closer, taking one in her arms and holding it tight to her chest, resting her chin on it. “Yeah. We just missed him.” Nyssa’s voice is soft. “Gabe says hi.”

Sam nods, looking back out to the dark night sky.

“Sam.” Nyssa hesitates. “Your sister... she’s... freaking me out. Freaking us out.”

Tegan nods, but adds nothing. She knows that Sam has a lot on his mind. She’s decided to follow her sister’s lead, and not be difficult.

“I’m sorry about that.” Sam continues to stare out into the night. “You know... about what happened.”

Several minutes pass without anyone saying a word. Tegan keeps glancing over at her sister, bulging her eyes, raising her eyebrows, pleading for her to end the silence.

“Soooo...” Nyssa quietly breaks the silence. “... which brother were you talking to?”

“What?” Sam is still lost in thought. “Oh.” He looks to both sisters, one at a time. “The youngest. You haven’t met him. I...” He pauses, thinking, frowning. “... pretty much left home when he was just a baby. Before your time.”

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“Oh.” Nyssa looks at Tegan, again raising her eyebrows. “Him.”
And bulging her eyes “I thought maybe Michael was here.”

Sam shakes his head.

“Yeah, this feels like... well... a Michael thing.” Tegan looks away before he can catch her eye.

“Yeah. Him. Not Mikey.” Sam gives them both a grin. “If you thought meeting my sister was... interesting. You’re about to get a whole new definition of interesting.” He chuckles.

Tegan looks around. “He’s not here is he? I’ve heard stories.”

Sam smiles wide. “More stories from Mikey?” He shakes his head. “I really want to know what stories he tells about me.”

Nyssa smiles weakly and shakes her head. “No. You really don’t.”

“Hmmm.” Sam’s smile fades away. “I’ll have to have a little chat with Mikey.”

“So...” Tegan huffs, but quietly. “Your sister. What’s the deal with your sister?”

“She’s lost herself.” Sam remembers his own episode. “I’ve been there. I’m sure you remember.” He pats the back of Tegan’s hand. “She’s not sure who she is or what her purpose is.” He thinks back to arguments he had with the old man when he was a teenager. “Or maybe she’s just not happy with how it’s going.”

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“She’s Death.” Tegan says quietly, remembering the experience. “It’s pretty clear who she is and what she does.” She briefly looks to her sister.

“Death.” Sam smiles fondly. “It means … she who waits.” His smile drops. “It came before human language. They corrupted it… changed it to mean what they wanted it to mean.”

Nyssa leans forward, pushing her chin farther into the big pillow. “Yeah. They do that.”

“When we left you on the beach, after your sister… killed us…” Tegan visibly shivers. “… you were walking away down the beach.”

Sam nods quickly. Almost happily. “He was there… watching. My brother. He’s been watching all along.” He smiles knowingly. “He does that sometimes. And I think he was pushing… helping in some ways.” He looks out to the dark night. “He does that sometimes too. He’s not a big doer… but when he does… he goes big.”

“He’s been watching from the start of this whole….” Nyssa scrunches her eyebrows together. “… mess.”

“Oh yeah.” Sam grins. “From the minute I asked for help. Probably before.” He looks to both of them. “I asked for some help with Rae.”

“No offense, but….” Tegan considers. “… his help kind of sucks.”

“Tegan.” Nyssa gives her sister a hard look.

“Well….” Sam grins. “… he just hasn’t gone big yet.”

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“So why here?” Tegan looks over her shoulder, half expecting to see Sam’s brother standing between the French doors.

“I walked for a while... and he was there, I’m sure of it... but I never got any closer. So I came back here thinking maybe he’d just come to me when he was ready.” Sam looks first at Tegan and then at Nyssa. “And... you know... it’s home.”

“This place isn’t home.” Tegan mumbles.

Sam half shrugs. “It’s where we grew up...” He grins. “Kind of.”

“Maybe he’s in his room?” Nyssa quietly jokes.

“No.” Sam chuckles. “That was the first place I checked.”

“Seriously? You thought your mysterious... no offense...” Tegan smiles wide, forgetting herself for a moment. “... odd duck of a little brother would just be hanging out in his room.”

Sam grins, raising both eyebrows.

“Michael tells stories.” She shrugs and smiles broadly.

“Ha.” Nyssa laughs. “Yeah. Like he’d just be laying on his unmade bed... dirty clothes all over the floor... several empty soda cans off to the side...”

“Oh. Oh.” Tegan joins in. “And a half eaten sandwich from three days ago just chilling on a napkin next to the bed.”

“... while playing a video game or something.” Nyssa laughs. “Something that hasn’t even been released yet. The system doesn’t even exist.” She laughs even harder.

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“Actually, he’s quite neat and organized.” Sam looks to both girls, amused by their sudden joy in making fun of his brother. It’s rare for them to let loose like this. It makes him happy.

“No. No. No.” Tegan is nearly crying, she’s laughing so hard. “He’s texting his crush about the school dance.” It feels good to briefly push away their recent horror. “He’s super nervous that she’s going to laugh at him and say ‘who are you again?’.”

“Actually.” A child’s voice comes from everywhere at once. “I was out riding my bike.”

Both girls laughter instantly ends in an awkward squeak, causing Sam to laugh even harder.

Sam reaches out and touches both his friends on the arm. “Out riding your bike.” He has tears in his eyes. “I’ll bet you were.”

Nyssa and Tegan remain silent, but can’t help smiling.

“And I didn’t have a date for the school dance. So as a favor to dad, and to the envy of all my classmates, Rae took me.”

Tegan grins at the thought of Rae being incredibly awkward at a high school dance.

“Middle school actually.” The boy chuckles. “Sixth grade Christmas dance. It was just last week. And she was fairly charming to everyone except Eliza Pierce who was rude and said she didn’t know who I was.”

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Nyssa looks to Sam, a puzzled, somewhat surprised look on her face.

“We didn’t go to school. We were home schooled.” Sam tilts his head to the side, returning Nyssa’s look.

“You, Mikey, and Gabe didn’t go to school. Rae went for a short time. Didn’t fit in. Obviously. I went for a time. Fit in fine. But apparently I was unremarkable.”

Sam shrugs. “Speaking of Rae...”

Instantly, everything is gone. Sam, Nyssa, and Tegan are standing alone in complete darkness. It’s not the kind of darkness that you try to look through to see what’s on the other side. It’s complete darkness because there is nothing on the other side. There is no other side. At this moment in time, they are the only things in existence.

“Well...” Sam recovers almost instantly, grinning as he looks to his two friends. “That was a bit disorienting.”

“Sam?” Nyssa remembers her all-too-recent death at the hands of his sister.

Tegan says nothing, her eyes are wide with shock.

“This isn’t Rae’s void.” Sam puts a hand on her shoulder. “He’s removed everything. Just pretend to be impressed. He’s showing off for the two of you.” He chuckles.

And with that, the sisters are gone.

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Sam sighs. “Thank you.” And sits down in the nothingness.
“They’ve been through a lot recently.”

“I know. Sorry about that.” Sam’s brother appears out of the darkness and sits next to his big brother. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“Hmmm.” Sam looks his little brother over. “So this is what you’re going with now?”

“Eh. Most times.”

“What’s with the games. Sam shakes his head, breathing in deeply and exhaling. “You’re still playing the child, aren’t you?”

“Amongst other things. I almost got beat up by Tegan and then Rae on separate occasions the other day.”

Again, Sam shakes his head. “Would’ve served you right. We’re all tiring of it, you know.”

“Probably.”

Sam gives in, remembering everything that’s brought them to this point. “Thanks for listening... for being there. I needed the help.” He gives his brother a small smile. “Rae appreciates the help. And I know they appreciated the help.”

“I went big.”

Sam sighs heavily. “So... what now?”

“Nothing. It’s almost over. One way or another.”

“She wants to make a difference.” Sam thinks aloud, glancing to his brother. “Rae. She wants to do more than just usher them out.”

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“Judge and jury. She intends to stop some of the more outrageous things, and punish those she considers in need of punishment.”

“By becoming the Death they define her as.” Sam shakes his head.

“It’s an honorable goal, really.”

“Hmmm.” Sam scrunches his eyebrows. “But it wouldn’t be... for you?”

They sit for a few seconds, saying nothing.

“But things took a dark turn, and Rae decided she had to ultimately choose a single path.”

Sam considers everything, thinking about some of the more recent events. “And the drowning boy?”

“Rae needed a little push to see which direction she’d take. Which path. She’s always been the hero. But how far would she go to get there.”

“She asked you for help.” Sam’s voice is soft with thought as it all starts to make sense.

“She wanted everything fixed. I can’t do that.”

“You can...” Sam nudges his brother’s shoulder with his elbow. “... but the old man says we shouldn’t go there. Right?”

“She wanted an out. She knew this darker path was a possibility. She wanted a quick fix. But that was no good. She wouldn’t find out anything about herself, because there’d be no journey.”

“Hmmm.” Sam stands, taking a few steps, giving it some thought. “Ultimately. She’d still be lost.”

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“Sometimes to show someone who they are, you have to let them find out who they’re not.”

Suddenly the blackness is gone, replaced by the night sky, ocean tide, and the old man’s house. Nyssa and Tegan are sitting in the same padded chairs they were sitting in before.

Sam is standing between the French doors behind them. “Well. Okay then.”

23

People walking nearby in the downtown area are shaken as an explosion goes off. Then another. And another. They stop what they're doing, bracing themselves, waiting for a fourth explosion to rock the streets. But nothing happens for a few seconds, until smoke starts pouring out the windows of various floors at the Bilson Hotel. The big glass doors in the front burst open as dozens of people come running out, terrified, not realizing what's happening.

Within seconds, a second wave of people come running, stumbling out. Unlike the first group, who were milling about in the first

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floor lobby, these people are coming from the floors directly above. Some are just coughing from the smoke. Others have torn and bloodied clothes, with tears painting clean streaks down their soot-covered faces. A few are limping, or holding themselves in ways that show they've been injured, sometimes severely. A mother in a red coat is being carried by a young man as she holds her baby close to her chest. All three are soot covered and crying in panic.

Earlier, three men in ski masks, wearing camouflage, and military-style jumpsuits entered the back of the hotel through the staff entrance, off the alley. Each was armed and carried a duffel bag containing a home-made bomb. They got the recipe and instructions on the internet. The tallest of the four gave orders to the other three. They were to each use the cargo elevator in back and go to an assigned floor, set the bombs just outside the elevator, walk all the way down the hall and exit down the front, guest stairs as the bomb's timer expired, setting them off.

They treated this like a military mission, using as much precision and expertise as three guys from the neighborhood could pretend they had. Their noble purpose was to rob the safe in the manager's office just off the lobby downstairs. The bombs were only meant to create chaos, acting as a distraction. If a few people were hurt or even killed, that was a willing price to be paid.

Markus, their leader, is an ex-Marine and is now the hotel's night manager. He had the combination and knew that today the safe would

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contain more than \$200,000 in jewelry and cash. His two soldiers were in their late teens and worked in guest services, helping guests and making their stay more comfortable.

Markus came up with the plan six months ago. He recruited two guys he could trust, and they prepared and waited for a time when the safe was a ripe target.

As each of the bombs went off on their various floors, the whole building rocked and shuddered, with dust and rubble filling the air. People immediately started screaming and running. Thinking they were the target of terrorists, they ran for the exits, covering their heads. The hotel lobby filled and then emptied as people ran down the stairs, through the great, marble room, and out the door, pushing and shoving each other in terror as the air filled with debris, causing the whole building to go dark.

The whole time, Markus and his two accomplices huddled together on the second floor, just before the stairs, in an empty guest room. Once all hell broke loose, the plan was for all three of them to head down the grand stairway, shooting a few people along the way to scare everyone else away from the lobby area so that Markus could head off unnoticed for the manager's office. He'd kill his boss, who he assumed was probably in his office doing nothing, open the safe, place everything in a duffel bag, head around to the back, and meet the others in the alley. From there they'd hop in a stolen car and head down to the river where they'd lose all their gear by sinking it in the river. Leaving the car behind, they'd meet up

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later at Markus' house just outside the city. They would be each other's alibi. They'd been playing poker and drinking beers all day.

That was the plan.

The three gunmen move down the stairs, shooting the few people who have fallen behind or have chosen to hide in the corners. One by one they shoot people as they come across them. Head shots when possible. They don't care about these people or their families. They only care about their easy payday. They communicate with each other with hand signals, never uttering a sound, so they can't be identified by their voices. That was also part of the plan.

The two guys on the outside look to Markus in the middle for instructions. He points quickly to a couple huddling in the far corner near the huge, glass doors, motioning for the guy on his left to handle them. Then he motions to the big, plush sofa in the middle of the room where a large, fat man has fallen, his eyes wide and staring as he bleeds to death. The gunman to his right should make sure the guy actually dies.

As they all move down the last few steps, they see that a young woman has silently moved to the sofa next to the fat man. She hadn't been there just seconds ago. The young woman is sitting, and holding the guy's hand.

As a blackness begins to swirl around her like a cloud of energy, the young woman looks up at the three gunmen and grins like she's happy to see them.

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She places the now dead man's hand on his chest and pats it twice. "Hang on there, Gregory. Just stay there with me. I'll be back with you in a minute." Her voice is soft and girlish.

Markus, still standing between his soldiers, lifts his pistol, pointing it at her as she stands up and gives him a great, big smile. He shoots her dead center in the forehead twice. Bam. Bam. That military training finally paying off.

There are two small black holes in the middle of her pale forehead, but she doesn't fall. There's no blood as she slowly tilts her head to the side. Her smile fades and her eyes going pitch black. Slowly, the two bullets are pushed from the holes in her forehead, and drop to the lobby floor.

"Neat, huh?" She laughs as the holes disappear.

"Holy shit!" The guy on the left breaks the group's silence.

In a heartbeat, Rae is Death. She instantly goes all black with an energy moving all about her as she slowly walks through the thick dust directly towards the three gunmen.

"El Diablo." The guy on the right mumbles.

All three gunmen raise their automatic weapons and fire straight at her, completely emptying their clips.

Death stops, watching as ninety-seven bullets freeze in the air just a foot in front of her and then fall to the ground with a clattering of metal on marble.

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“What the fuck!” The guy on the right pulls out his pistol, aiming carefully with shaking hands, and shoots her directly in the face six times, emptying his gun.

Death opens up into a great black void and swallows the bullets, sending them straight to the void, and then closes again into the vague shape of the young woman still bristling with black energy.

The gunman on the left drops to his knees, his legs giving in to his fear. His eyes closed tightly, and his head held low, he begins praying silently while he cries.

The black void of Death turns her head towards the gunman, slowly tilting it to the side. “I don’t think anyone’s home right now.”

Both terrorists, on each side of Markus, are slowly lifted high into the air. And then they explode with such a violent, obscenely loud boom that Markus drops to his knees, bleeding heavily from his ears. He screams in pain, dropping his gun, and puts his trembling hands over his bloody ears.

Without making a move of any kind, Death explodes the remaining lobby windows outward one by one, and throws all the furniture against the outside walls, clearing the center of the room completely. The remaining people in the lobby huddle close to the walls, waiting for their chance to run for the doors. The only thing still in the middle of the great, marble room is Markus, on his knees, with his impending Death standing directly in front of him, smiling like a proud child.

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Markus is completely deaf, with a ringing in his ears, as he whimpers, trying to find his voice.

He looks up at the small woman, completely enveloped by an inky black, tentacled void as she stands directly in front of him. And as humans do, he picks up his pistol and shoots at her several times, unsuccessfully, until his gun is empty and just clicks with each subsequent pull of the trigger.

Death looks around, catching the eyes of several of the people still hiding in the shadows against the walls, now much more frightened by her than by the gunmen who tried to kill them. “What’s with you people and your constant thirst for violence.”

Markus makes one last attempt, swinging a rifle off his back and turning it on himself, placing it under his chin and leaning his head back. Click. Click. Click. It fails, causing him to scream out in frustration. He points the gun back at the void and it fires twice, straight into the blackness. “Fuck!”

As his last living act, he throws the gun at Death. It completely disintegrates into a fine, ashy powder just before it reaches her.

He puts his head down and sobs quietly. This was supposed to be so easy. He had planned it for months. They had prepared for everything. “Our Father, Who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name...”

“Are you actually sitting here in front of me, after everything you’ve done... praying?” Death softens, pulling the blackness back within

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herself, showing the pretty young woman in the long black dress. “How dare you!” Death booms. “How dare you even think to ask!”

In an instant, Markus is lifted high into the air and flung backwards into the marble wall to the back of the stairs. He hits the wall so hard it cracks, and his blood splatters in all directions as his bones push through his flesh. The shock on his face, causes his eyes to bulge, his mouth to open, letting a pool of blood flow down the front of his shirt. Then he’s slowly pulled forward in the air, towards Death, and then flung against the wall a second time, causing a great boom and the marble to crumble, and more blood to vomit from his mouth. Then again, he’s slowly pulled forward towards Death, and flung against the wall a third time, causing the entire back wall to crack and crumble. He’s slowly lowered, still pinned against the marble, leaving a dirty smear of dark, red blood from the top of the wall to the floor.

Then he’s dragged head first, face down against the floor slowly towards Death for the final time. “You’re not unconscious... because I won’t allow that.” Laughter comes from deep within her. “You’re not dead... because I won’t accept you.”

Markus tries opening his mouth to beg for his life, but his body is no longer his. The beating has left him a broken, bloodied pulp. He no longer has any control.

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“Do you hurt?” Death cocks her head to the side, letting the black go from her big brown eyes, as the broken man is lifted high into the air. She giggles girlishly. “I’ll bet you do. Don’t you?”

Markus isn’t making any noise. He’s not moaning in agony. He’s not even breathing. Tears no longer roll down his face. His blood no longer pours from all the breaks and openings in his body, because his heart is no longer beating.

“This is what you are now. Because I reject you.” She smiles pleasantly. “You’re on your own. And good luck with that. I won’t even bother sending you to the Devil.” And she drops him to the floor with a wet smack, where he lays, staring straight ahead, feeling everything that has just happened to him, but unable to even wince from the unbearable pain. “I’ll leave you here as a warning to all the others.”

A sudden, immense heat envelopes the room, burning away the air itself, revealing Sam standing near the front door. His blazing wings are fully extended eight feet out, with flames flexing and pulsating around his entire being.

Nyssa and Tegan stand a few feet back, to each of his sides.

“Azrael!” The heat pulses with each angry word. “What the hell are you doing!”

Death turns to face her younger brother. “Look Sam… I’ve found myself.” She spins gracefully in a full circle with her arms extended. She

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glances from Nyssa to Tegan. “Welcome back ladies. Did you enjoy the experience?”

Sam looks around the room filled with rubble, blood, and dead bodies. “Oh Rae. What have you done?” He stares at his sister, smiling so innocently in front of him. He points to Markus laying off to her side. “This isn’t you. This isn’t who you are. You’ve found nothing but a lie.”

“Are you sure?” Rae tilts her head to the side innocently. “Why can’t this be me? Dad said we’re a lot alike.” She glances down at the husk that once was Markus. “And this is who you are. Isn’t it? You show them their errors. You... teach them.”

“Sometimes.” Sam’s voice is big, filling the entire room. “When it’s called for. When it’s necessary.” He looks down to Markus, Sam’s wings getting bigger, the flames reaching out to nearly touch the broken man. “He’ll get his... later.”

Rae laughs abruptly. “Ha.” She grins wildly, glancing over to Marcus’ corpse. “You hear that? It’s just gonna get worse.”

Sam looks back to his sister. “What are you doing? What is this? I thought we were working together... a team... to help you... find you.”

“I don’t need you anymore.” She smiles dangerously. “At one point you were so strong. I was proud of you.” Rae walks with complete confidence directly up to her brother, her eyes going black. “I thought you still were. Deep down inside. But you’re not.”

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Sam sighs hard, pulling his wings in and letting the heat and flames disperse with a sudden whoosh that briefly sucks the remaining air from the room. “You know what strength is? Strength is not doing what you’re doing to these people no matter how much they may deserve it. Strength is walking away. They’re not your concern.” He gestures towards Markus’s mangled body. “This isn’t you. Push them to me. He’ll get what’s coming to him. I assure you.”

Rae lets the black melt from her eyes.

“Please. Because if you keep doing this...” Sam softens his voice, gesturing around the room. “... where will you draw the line?”

Rae’s face instantly goes dark with a sudden resurgence of rage. “That’s the fucking point! I... draw the line. I do. Not anyone else. Me. I do.” And with that, every human in the lobby, still clinging to the shadows, drops dead.

Sam quickly glances all around the big room. “Fuck!” He uncharacteristically curses. Loud and hard. He slowly spins in a circle looking at all the newly dead faces. “Fuck!”

“Language, dear brother.” Rae grins. “Language.”

Sam turns just his head to look at his sister. His eyes are aflame, violently burning the air around him, like the flame from a welder’s torch.

Rae gives Sam her best look of innocence, turning and casually walking away towards Markus’ body. “What? At least this time I spared your pets.” She glances at Nyssa and then Tegan.

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“Fuck!” Sam’s eyes light up fully with anger, his flaming wings shoot from his back in full force, threatening to fill the entire room. He’s absolutely beautiful in full rage. His body lights up with such intensity that Markus is instantly burned away to nothing and sent to wait for his inevitable damnation.

Nyssa and Tegan are pushed to opposite sides of the room by the sheer force of the heat.

Sam takes a couple quick steps towards his sister, the air around him bubbling with a heat that melts the marble floor beneath him, leaving a trail of molten rock. “Azrael, you can’t kill everyone in this room, the innocents in this room, and not expect consequences.”

Rae stands her ground, intent on showing her brother true strength. “Samael. You underestimate me.” Just to dare him, she steps right up to him, face to face, dark meeting light, cold meeting heat. “You underestimate who I am. I am Death.” The anger on her face is instantly replaced with the sweetest of smiles. “Not just everyone in this room.” She spins elegantly in a circle. A huge smile on her face, she extends her arms up and outward. “But everyone. Everywhere”

“Shit.” Sam sighs knowingly, pulling in the flames, allowing himself to instantly cool. He reaches out to all reality. Only his family exists. “Shit.” His voice is a whisper.

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“Every one. Every where. Every when.” Rae’s enjoying herself. “I killed them all.” She turns away, and pulls herself fully into the void and is gone.

Sam breathes out heavily, slowly, and looks upward. “Now would be a good time.”

And in an instant, the hotel lobby is back, completely intact. The recently dead people, minus the three terrorists, are back, going about their day as if the last twenty-three minutes never happened. A woman in a bright red coat, holding an infant, walks past, smiling pleasantly at Sam as she passes.

“He went big.” Tegan mumbles.

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One. Two.

Rae immediately stands up, looking incredibly agitated.

Troy looks up at her, imagining that the air is rippling around her without actually touching her.

Three.

Rae turns her head and looks down to Troy, her eyes go pure black, her voice gets deep and hollow. “Go. Now. Get him.” The darkness pours from her eyes. “Now!” She screams.

Four. Five.

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Troy flinches, his heart start beating heavy and fast. He's scared. He's in shock. He doesn't move.

Six.

“Now! You little fuck!” Rae reaches down and grabs Troy by the arm, throwing him forward into the water.

Caught off guard he struggles in the water for a couple seconds.

Seven. Eight.

Then he takes a deep breath and dives under the water.

Nine. Ten. Eleven. Twelve.

Troy surfaces with a mighty gasp and without waiting even a moment, is back under the murky brown water. A second later he surfaces again, this time with Curtis in tow. He swims on his side, holding Curtis by the chest under his arms, keeping his head above water the best he can. He swims to the riverbank and pulls Curtis up onto the muddy slope where Rae is already waiting.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” Troy is terrified. “What do I do. I don't know what to do.” Troy, completely lost, overwhelmed, now fully in shock, looks to Rae.

“Go get help. Now!” She sits down cross legged next to Curtis and takes his cold, muddy hand in hers, stroking it lightly with her other hand. “You'll be fine this time. Just stay where you are. Sam'll come for you.”

Troy's eyes show his panic as he jumps to his feet, slipping in the mud and catching himself on one hand. “What are you talking about?”

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Rae looks up at him, her eyes black as night. “Go! Get the fuck out of here. Now!”

Terrified, Troy falls backward into the mud. He awkwardly climbs to his feet and sprints down the dirt path that leads back down to the little cemetery. He doesn’t look back.

A gust of wind blows hard and the air shimmers with a dark red light as Sam comes walking out of nothing. “He’s with you this time?”

Rae looks up as her brother approaches. “He was there the last time, dumbass.” She spits the words as if he should know better. “Don’t fuck it up this time.”

“He wasn’t there, Rae.” Sam gives her a calm, cold look. “I assure you. He wasn’t there.”

“Get. Him.” Rae grits her teeth as she speaks. Her eyes are still black and her dark hair is swirling in the wind.

Sam kneels down in the mud, looking down at Curtis. He sighs hard. “Rae...”

“Then find him you son-of-a-bitch.” Rae’s entire being has gone black as she kneels in the mud next to Curtis. “Go get him. Jesus Christ! Do I have to do everything!”

“That’s not how it works, Rae.” Unlike his sister, Sam remains calm. “This is different. Something’s different.” He looks up, wondering why he’s not getting the help he’d asked for.

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“You’re the God damn Devil, Sam. What the hell do you give a shit about how it works? Just do it!” Rae’s darkness pushes hard against her brother without actually touching him. “I’m sitting with him right now.”

“I’m telling you...” Sam’s voice remains calm. “... he’s not here.”

“Bullshit!” Rae grabs her brother’s wrist hard enough to crush worlds.

“Don’t test me, Azrael.” Sam’s body lights up like fire and his flaming wings instantly spring from his back as he pries his sister’s hand from his wrist and pushes her off of him.

She falls backward, sitting in the river mud, leaning back on both hands.

The wind stops blowing. The sounds of nature go silent. The world slows down. And then, in an instant, everything goes still. The river is frozen in place. The clouds stop their journey across the sky. The sun fades to a bare minimum.

Sam’s eyes dart around, unsure what is happening.

Rae just lays there staring up at her brother. Her voice becomes a whisper. “I need to find myself. How am I...”

“What’s happening to you?” Sam points at her, a look of bewilderment on his face.

Rae looks down at herself as her body begins to fade out of existence. “What the hell?” She sits up, extending both hands out in front

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of her, watching as they slowly fade away. It starts at the tips of her fingers, moving to her hands, slowly working its way up her arms. She can see the very atoms that make up her body dissipate and float away into nothing. “Sam?” Her voice is small and scared.

As Sam watches, completely unsure what to do, as his sister fades to nothing. Slow at first, speeding up as it goes. Even the marks in the mud from where she ran over and sat down are now gone. All that remains is smooth mud. It’s as if she were never there.

Then Sam notices his own hands. As he looks down to them, the fingers slowly begin to fade away, then his hands, and his arms.

Ring ring. Ring ring. It’s the greeting of an old-fashioned, metal bicycle bell, operated by a small thumb lever on its side. It’s old school, rarely used in this more modern time.

Sam turns to the sound behind him, seeing someone approaching out of a swirling, dazzling light. The light is so overwhelmingly bright that even Sam is forced to use his fading arms in an attempt to block the light from his eyes. It’s the brightest thing he’s ever experienced.

Just before fading completely, Sam squints his eyes as narrow as possible, looking through what remains of his hand, trying to see the figure stepping through, into the mud. It’s a blond boy walking his bike alongside him through the grass and mud, towards the riverbank.

Sam immediately knows. And he can’t help but smile as he fades to nothing, leaving Curtis’ lifeless body laying alone in the mud.

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The boy carefully lays his bike in the grass, off to the side of the mud. He walks closer, kneeling and reaching, touching Curtis' wrist with just his finger tips. Curtis opens his eyes and breathes in heavily, exhaling slowly. He's greeted by a warm smile and the friendly, blue eyes of a boy younger than himself, kneeling in the mud just to his side.

“Hi Curtis. I’m Chris.” The boy gives a small, awkward wave. “I believe you’ve met my sister.”

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There's a soft knock at the door. A very small, gentle knock. The old man hears it from the kitchen, where he's cleaning up after his dinner. Looking around at the dirty dishes piled in the sink, and the unclean plate and bowl sitting on the table, he's not sure if he's ready for company just now.

There's another small knock at the door. This time he recognizes the source of the knock and smiles. He quickly dries his hands on a dish towel and heads into the foyer to let her in.

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“Dad. The door’s locked.” The voice is that of an annoyed little girl. “I forgot my key again. Why do you even keep it locked anyway?”

As he opens the door, the smell of fresh rain rushes in, pushing back the stale air in the house. “Sunshine.” He takes a quick step back, looking her over, a little surprised.

“Hey dad.” A preteen Rae grins up at her father, her long, dark hair and black dress damp from the rain.

He smiles at how young and energetic she was at that age. In some ways, she still is.

Rae gets up on her tippy toes and gives him a big hug around his chest. He puts his arms around her tiny body and hugs her back, squeezing gently and lifting her off her feet just a little. They’ve always been a family of huggers. Even through the dampness of the rain, she’s warm and comfortable.

“How’s my little girl tonight?” The old man steps back, looking down at his sweatshirt, tutting at how wet it’s gotten.

“Why’s it so dark in here?” Her eyes search the room, taking in everything, completely at home in the pitch black.

With a sudden, quick, little hop and skip of a child, she’s standing at the doorway to the kitchen. She flips the light switch several times, but nothing happens.

“What’s that smell?” She scrunches up her face, sniffing the air. “It’s not good.”

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“You sound like your brother.” The old man closes the door and follows her into the kitchen. “That’s my dinner you smell, young lady. I just finished eating. You caught me in the middle of doing dishes.” He slicks back the thin grey hairs at the top of his head.

Rae shrugs. “In the dark?” She grabs an old blanket from the chair next to the door and moves it over to the kitchen table, laying it out nicely on one of the wooden chairs. She sits down, pulling her legs up and tucking her small, bare feet underneath her. “What’s wrong with the dishwasher?”

“You didn’t notice? The light switch?” The old man looks around the room, motioning with his eyes. “The lights?” He opens a drawer near the sink and grabs a couple candles and some matches. “The storm knocked out the power in the whole neighborhood.”

“Didn’t notice.” Rae pulls her long, dark hair back into a makeshift ponytail and then wipes her wet hands on the blanket beneath her. “Even our house? That’s weird. Why?”

He again motions around the room, this time with open arms. “Yeah. Of course. The whole neighborhood.” He lights one of the candles and uses it to light the other, and places both in the center of the table.

The entire room lights brightly, and then the candle flickers and dims to a bare minimum, allowing him to see his daughter’s face a little better. It’s comfy.

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“Why don’t you just fix it?” She gives her father a blank stare.

“Why let it happen in the first place?”

The old man shrugs and makes an odd face as if he hadn’t thought of it. “It’s not that simple. You can’t just fix everything.”

“Sure you can.” Rae reaches forward and pushes out a chair for the old man to sit down. “Are the boys home?”

She leans back in her chair, looking over all the bread crumbs on the table.

The old man glances at the mess. “I had a sandwich and some soup for dinner. Chicken with dumplings... that’s what you smell.” He watches as she uses her hands to brush all the bread crumbs into a small pile. “It wasn’t very good. Kind of bland. Salty though.”

With a quick movement, Rae snatches her hand from the table, and using what candlelight she can reach, she squints her eyes to find the small sliver of wood that so rudely grabbed into her skin.

“Oh. Let me see that.” The old man reaches for one of the candles and brings it a little closer to Rae’s hand. It flickers, and brightens.

“For a second he rolls her hand around in his, comparing them.” He smirks, getting a glimmer in his eyes. “You’re all growing up so fast... getting so big.”

“Dad.” She scrunches up her entire face. “You don’t tell a girl she’s getting big.” She makes a clicking sound with her tongue. “You say she’s becoming a young woman.”

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“Ha. You’re right. Sorry, Sunshine.” The old man examines her hand, glancing up for a second to catch her eyes and then back to her hand. He plucks a relatively large sliver of wood from her palm with his fingernails and tosses it into the flame of the candle, watching it burn away in a hiss of smoke.

Rae puts her hand to her mouth and sucks gently at the small puncture. She pulls her hand away to look at the area, before again putting it to her mouth, absent-mindedly sucking on the area. The wound, that was never really there, is already healed.

An eight-year-old boy in a Scooby-Doo robe wanders into the room, a comic book folded open in his hand as he reads while walking. “Hey Rae. How’d you get all wet?”

Rae looks up from examining her hand one last time. “Rey Rucky. Rice robe.” She giggles, doing her best Scooby impression.

Sam opens the fridge to grab a drink. “Dad… fridge is out.” He grabs a bottle of water, shuts the fridge and turns towards the table, looking up from his comic for the first time.

“Power’s out, Lucky.” The old man shows the same surprised look he had upon seeing his daughter at the door just a few minutes ago. He remembers getting Sam that robe for his eighth birthday. It feels so long ago.

“You didn’t notice the power was out?” Rae laughs, shaking her head at her little brother. “What a goof you are.”

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The old man gives her an amused look.

Sam looks back to his comic. “I’ve been reading in my room all evening. How was I supposed to know?” He always had a way of sounding calm and collected beyond his years.

“That.” Rae points at his comic. “Is not reading. That’s a comic book.” She teases. “Betty and Veronica, I believe.”

“You still read them.” Sam turns to leave. “So that’s kind of a dumb thing to say.”

“Sam.” The old man says his name curtly.

Sam stops, not bothering to look back. “Sorry, Rae.” He walks towards the living room. “But yeah… I was reading.”

“In the dark.” Rae teases him a bit more.

“My room has light… of course.” Sam calls back over his shoulder, a little annoyed by his know-it-all sister.

“Right. I forgot.” She giggles. “What was I thinking?”

The old man grins at his daughter, enjoying the moment more than he probably should.

“Are Mikey and Gabe in bed already?” Rae picks up a few more crumbs from her father’s sandwich and tosses them into his empty soup bowl.

“No. It’s just the three of us tonight.” The old man stands up, taking his soup bowl and sandwich plate, and moves them to the sink with

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the other dirty dishes. “If I remember this night correctly, they’re at a sleepover with that nice Engstrom boy at the end of the block.”

“Erik.” Rae sees another sliver of wood sticking loose on the ancient table. She pulls it free and tosses it into the flame of the candle like her father did. “Hmmm. That’s gotta be interesting.” She giggles, picturing her two youngest brothers interacting with other kids their age. It’s unusual for their father to let them do things like that.

“So...” The old man turns. “Would you like to play a game or something on this dark... and stormy... evening?” He does a scary movie voice. “Ha. Ha. Ha.”

Rae giggles at her father’s attempt at humor. He’s a lot of things, but he’s no Dracula.

A length of black hair loosens from Rae’s ponytail and falls across her forehead covering her left eye. She brushes it aside, but it falls back down, completely covering her eye. She extends her lower lip, seeming to pout, and then quickly blows upward to remove the hair from her eye. “Sure dad. A game sounds fun.”

With a boom that knocks out the power to the entire city all the way down to San Francisco, the entire front of the house bursts in, the walls breaking and crushing to the sides of the living room. The old man wakes, his eyes opening in an instant. He lays on his sofa in the middle of the living room.

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“Knock. Knock.” Rae, not much taller than she was at twelve, stands where the far wall once stood. She’s surrounded by the rubble of the front of the house as it floats in the air around her, being held in place by the black tentacles of energy slowly dancing around her.

“Rae.” The old man sits up on the sofa, swinging his feet to the floor in front of him, and tucking them neatly into his favorite, fuzzy slippers. “I was just having a dream about you and Sam. Remember that night when the power...”

Rae reaches out with black energy, grabbing her father by the throat and tosses him against the far wall, shattering the big screen, causing it to fall in pieces onto her father, now crumpled on the floor beneath it.

Rae goes completely black, losing herself to the void. “How many times do I have to kill you... kill them... everyone... before I get what I need?” She violently slaps the side of her head several times.

The old man struggles to sit up, and slumps back against the wall, a trickle of blood coming from his nose. “And what’s that, Sunshine?”

She rises into the air about two feet, letting the blackness grow around her. “We had something so incredible... so wonderful.” She cocks her head to the side. “There was so much fun at the beginning... you and I... and then Sam... Mikey, Gabe, Chris.” Death’s voice is deep and dark. “But then you let it get corrupted and ugly. You allowed it to slowly rot away and die... like that God damn tree.”

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She reaches out with black tentacles and lifts the old man up the wall, dragging his body through what remains of the big screen, still hanging on the wall. Shards of plastic dig into his back, tearing the flesh free, cutting up against the bone.

“Then you ask your only daughter to just sit there and watch over them... every fucking one of them... as they fucking rot and die along with everything else.” The blackness that is Death grows to fill the room from floor to ceiling. “And you don’t do a God damn thing to fix it... correct your mistakes. Correct their mistakes.”

Death turns away from her father as she pulls the entire wall forward, bending it unnaturally, letting it wrap itself around the old man, crushing him completely until blood and pulp squeezes between the pieces and drips down to the floor.

“Do you know how painful it is to sit with... every... living... thing in existence... and just watch them die in the most horrific ways you can fucking imagine. Chatting away about what could’ve been... while not being able to lift a God damn finger to help?”

And Death screams. Loud and long. A sound so broken as to cause all of existence to shudder and falter, threatening to come completely undone.

“That’s enough Azrael.” The voice is not her father’s.

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Everything instantly goes black, with the only thing existing now being a father and daughter sitting at their small kitchen table in the middle of the nothingness.

Rae's big, brown eyes show how startled she is by the instant change in her surroundings, and her appearance. She finds it dizzying, and looks over to see her father, sitting comfortably next to her at the table. The candles are no longer lit, but there's still a few remaining bread crumbs on the table.

“What have you done?” She shakes her head and blinks her eyes rapidly several times to clear them.

The old man, looking just as he did before her attack, glances around the darkness in all directions. His neck somewhat stiff, he turns his chair slightly so he can see behind himself. “I didn’t do anything, dear.” He reaches down, removing one of his fuzzy slippers, scratching the bottom of his foot, and putting the slipper back on. “This isn’t my doing. And you should know that.”

“What the... fuck!... are you talking about?” Rae’s eyes go black as her anger begins to overcome her initial surprise.

The old man spins his head forcefully to face his daughter. His eyes go so bright they are beyond white, so bright against the surrounding darkness that Rae has to shade her own eyes with a hand. “I’m getting tired of your filthy language, Azrael.” His voice is hard, but shows more disappointment than anger. “I’m still your father.”

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Rae stays silent as they both calm.

“What do you need Rae?” The old man’s voice softens, suddenly sounding tired. “Really need? No analogies.”

Rae searches for an answer. “I don’t know. I’m not sure anymore.” She sounds defeated.

The old man leans forward, towards his daughter, wanting to take her hand to comfort her.

She pulls back, scooting her chair away from the table, away from her father. “I’m tired. I just can’t do this anymore.”

The old man exhales loudly.

“I’ve had a long time to think about this. A lot of hand holding.” Rae’s eyes begin to darken. “I’ve sat with them on the edge. And we always talk. Did you know that?” She smiles sadly. “I ask them things.”

The old man nods slowly.

Rae continues to stare off into nothing. Her breathing has stopped. Her heart no longer beats. She finds the pretense no longer necessary.

“I sit with them all. Good. Bad. Old. Young.” She pauses, swallowing hard. “I’ve sat with infants who haven’t had the chance to utter a single word to their parents.” Rae slowly turns her head and stares straight into her father’s eyes. “But they sit with me and we talk. They have a lifetime inside of them that they didn’t get to use. They had things to say. Things to do.” She tries a half smile. “So I let them stay as long as I can.

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And we just talk. And in a sense... they live. It's nice." She sighs, but there's no air in her lungs to exhale. "They live their lifetime with me... just talking... but never doing. I'm sitting with them right now... as we speak. Right. Fucking. Now."

Rae turns away quickly, her darkened eyes watering, threatening to burst, to show some remaining weakness.

"They had their doing... taken from them. Sometimes torn from them... in the most devastating, unspeakable ways." Rae regains her composure by letting herself go dark. "And it's something I can't fix. Because no matter how much I try... no matter whose daughter I am... it's just not... who... I... am."

The old man sighs hard, feeling the intensity of his daughter's pain. "No one can fix that, Sunshine. We're not the cause. We're just the caretakers." He takes a long, deep breath, releasing it slowly. "All we can do is send them home at the end." He furrows his brow, knowing how empty his words are.

Rae lets go of some of the darkness. "Or push them to Sam."

The old man nods, his head barely moving. "You're the last thing they ever see. And that makes you incredibly important to them... to me."

"Sam avenges them." Rae almost grins through the darkness, her insanity remembering the feeling. "I do... almost nothing."

"Sam pushes them... teaches them... to see their wrongs. But he's no avenger." The old man chuckles. "Don't envy your brother for

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something he's not." He pauses, thinking "Admire him for doing things... unpleasant things... that simply need doing."

"It really doesn't matter anymore." Rae's eyes flash darker. She begins to breath again out of habit, but quick and shallow. She gets darker as the energy begins to flow from her. "I found a new path."

The old man sighs. "This isn't you, Sunshine. If it were, I would never have asked you to take this role in the first place." He tries a warm smile. "You're the warmest, kindest, most gentle soul in the history of existence... and that's why I gave you to them."

They sit uncomfortably for a few seconds, each feeling the other's brokenness.

"She who waits." Again, he tries a warm smile.

"Dad..." She breathes in deeply, trying, but failing to understand.
"... you can bring us back now"

"What?" The old man's head has dropped low. He's not even looking at her anymore.

"This." Rae stands up abruptly, causing the kitchen chair to skid back and disappear into the darkness. She gestures up and out into the nothingness. "You can bring us back. I think we're done here."

He looks around into the darkness surrounding them.

"This..." He gestures around them. "... isn't me And you know that. You're just not allowed to see it... yet." He glances around into the

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nothingness. “I think this is the final part of your journey... finding out who you’re not.”

Rae just stares blankly at her father for a second. “Bring. Us. Back.” Rae allows her energy to pulse out of her body rhythmically, pushing back at the nothingness with her own darkness.

But to no effect.

“Sunshine...”

“I’m going to count to three.” Her voice is deep and threatening, but somehow uncertain. “One.”

The old man pulls himself to his feet, looking tired and worn out as his chair and the table fade to nothing. He takes two steps and stands just in front of his daughter.

“Two.” Her voice goes deeper as an inky blackness pours from her eyes.

He remembers her coming home that night, wet from the rain. He remembers her teasing her brother over that silly comic book. She was wrong. It was an Archie, not Betty and Veronica. He smiles fondly. “Those were simpler times.” His words are quiet, lost in the past.

“Three.” The voice comes from the nothingness masquerading as darkness. It’s soft and familiar. Power through warmth. It’s a child’s voice.

The nothingness around them flickers with pure light, as if the sun was struggling to turn back on, trying to pull itself free of a black hole. Then with a slow burn, the light returns, overcoming the darkness, slowly

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burning it away like a lightbulb slowly turning itself up to full brightness. Everything flickers to absolute darkness several times like a final battle between light and dark, until the slow burn reaches its peak and everything is instantly turned back on. Like someone flipping a switch.

Father and daughter stand in the middle of the old man's living room. The damage from earlier is gone, repaired back to the way it was.

Or like it never happened.

Confused, and a little dizzy from the experience, Rae becomes Death in an instant moment of rage. The ferocity of her anger bulges the room out, forcing the furniture to the sides. The walls crack and push out a little, a gust of wind coming from within her, pushed through the room and into the foyer, exploding the front door out into the yard.

Death stares directly at her father while not seeing him at all. "Dad." Her voice is young and girlish, coming from somewhere deep within the void. She's small and lost. Pleading. "I'm so tired."

The old man stands alone near the French doors leading out to the patio. He's untouched by the madness, watching quietly, his mouth held firmly closed. "Hoc itaque est finis." His voice is soft and uncertain as he looks away, not wanting to watch.

The black energy of Death reaches out, slapping wildly at anything in its path, grabbing and pulling everything it can grasp into the void, towards Death herself. Within seconds the room is destroyed and emptied

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of everything except for father, daughter, and a small figure standing just inside the shattered front door, watching.

“Ring ring.” A child’s voice comes from behind Death, from the dark shadows of the foyer.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!” Death spins around and extends inky tentacles out to both sides, surrounding the entire room, and towering up and over the boy. With lightning speed, she seizes him in a powerful darkness, allowing it to crush him in its insane embrace, throwing his battered, broken body to the ceiling in one corner of the room, and then to the opposite corner in the blink of an eye.

His small body smashed and broken, she slowly pulls him towards her until Death’s blind rage begins to calm. A beautifully pale face with big, brown eyes slowly peeks out from within the darkness that is Death. And she sees the broken child looking up at her. In a sudden panic, she lets go, and his bloodied, shattered body drops to the ground with a wet slap.

Death’s power is instantly pulled away to nothing by something outside her control. She collapses, completely drained, onto her knees in front of the child’s body. She is the beautiful, young woman with the long, black dress, the perfect, straight hair, the flawless skin, and big brown eyes. She is her father’s Sunshine. She is the eldest of her siblings. She is their sister. She is Azrael. She is Rae.

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“Oh my God.” Her eyes fill with tears, immediately forcing long streams down her face. “She turns her head slightly, looking for help. “Dad?” She spins her head towards the French doors, her bloodshot eyes screaming for help.

The doors are open. The room is empty.

There is complete silence, except for the shallow, raspy breathing of the broken child laying in front of her. “Hello Rae.” His voice is soft but strong. He smiles warmly, looking up at her watery eyes. “I came to check on you.”

Sliding back into her most natural role, Rae sits down close to the boy, taking his bloodied hand in hers, and squeezing it gently. Tears race down her cheeks, dripping to the carpet below as she pushes his blond, surfer-cut hair out of his eyes, so she can look directly into them. Her bottom lip is pushed out and quivering. She begins to sob violently, releasing a series of deep, guttural sounds that echoes throughout eternity.

The boy’s voice gets even softer, broken and weak to the point of being barely audible. “You were so sad down by the barn that day... I had to come check on you... see if you finally found what you were looking for. See if you were still lost.” He coughs several times, choking on his own blood.

Fulfilling her role, Rae smiles through her tears, slowly shaking her head. She wipes her eyes on the back of her hand, sniffling and breathing

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in loudly, composing herself. Her big, brown eyes get clearer as she bites her bottom lip to keep it from quivering.

And she waits with him... for him.

“Well... we should probably get going.” Blood runs from the corners of his mouth. “We’ve got a journey to finish.”

He closes his eyes, letting his head slowly roll to the side.

And he dies.

Rae looks within, where she was holding his hand on the edge of the void. But he’s not there. She realizes he never was.

And suddenly Rae smells flowers.

26

“Okay, I’ll call dad and let him know that dinner will be late and see if he can make it. This could work out even better.” She grabs her car keys and purse from the counter. “I’ll run out and quickly grab some spaghetti sauce from the market on main street.”

“The market.” Allison snickers.

“Grocery store.” Mom smiles and shakes her head.

“Mom’s old.” Allison snickers again, making Alicia laugh.

“Okay. Ten minutes and I’ll be back.” Mom opens the door to the garage.

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“Twenty.” Allison and Alicia both say in unison.

“I know. I know. Twenty then. I’ll be right back. I have my phone if you need me.” Mom closes the door. Then it reopens and mom pops her head back in. “Be good.” The door closes. Then it opens again. “And Alicia... turn the burners off until I get back.” The door closes and the girls hear the car start, the garage door open, and the car leave.

As mom pulls the SUV out of the garage and slowly rolls down the driveway, her foot just barely pushing on the brake, she looks down to send a quick text to her husband. ‘Spaghetti night in an hour. Can you make it?’

As the SUV reaches the end of the driveway, she looks up just in time to see a man’s face as she bumps into him on the sidewalk, knocking him to the ground.

“Oh shit!” She instinctively stomps on the brake hard, to avoid running the man over. The SUV lurches back and forth a couple jerky times. “Oh shit. Oh shit. Oh shit.”

She puts the car in park, leaving it running, and jumps out, jogging around to the front. A man with longish blond hair, wearing a brown, leather jacket is sitting on the sidewalk, looking up at the front of the SUV. He’s holding his arm and grinning like a happy child.

“Oh my God. Oh my God. I’m so so sorry.” She bends down to check on the man, to make sure he’s okay. “I didn’t see you. I’m so stupid.”

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The man smiles even wider, his big, blue eyes sparkling in the twilight.

“Are you hurt?” Before he can even answer, she notices a small tear in his jacket sleeve where he’s holding his arm. “Oh.” She reaches down, gently pushing his jacket sleeve up to inspect the wound on his forearm, just below his elbow. “You’re bleeding.”

“Am I?” He lifts his arm a little, awkwardly twisting it so he can see his elbow. “Oh. I am.” He touches the blood with his finger, bringing it up to his eyes to inspect it more closely.

“It’s not bad. Just a small cut.” She glances to the grill of her SUV, seeing a cracked plastic piece sticking out. “Is everything else okay?” She turns her attention back to the man. “Nothing broken?”

He finds her worried expression oddly comforting. “No. I don’t think so. It would hurt, right? I could probably tell, right?”

She looks at him strangely, almost smiling. “Yeah. I think you’re okay though.”

He looks at his elbow again, pulling at the torn jacket with his fingers, smoothing the sleeve of his shirt out so he can better see it. It’s torn and has a tiny bit of blood on it.

“Awww. This is my favorite shirt.” He puts a hand down on the sidewalk and pushes himself up to his feet.

“Are you sure nothing’s broken?” She takes him by his other arm as if to steady him. Breathing in deeply to compose herself, she notices the

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smell of fresh flowers. And this makes her feel a little bit better about everything that's happened in the last two minutes.

“Just my favorite shirt.” He mumbles, looking down at her, grinning wildly like a child. “You wouldn’t happen to have a needle and thread I could borrow?”

She notices just how tall he is. And how insanely blue his eyes are. How could she have not seen him? She shakes her head at her own recklessness.

“I’ll pay for it. I promise. I’ll get you a new one. And the jacket too, of course.” She lets go of him and scurries to the side of the SUV where the door sits open. “Hang on a second.” She reaches in and turns the car off, closes the door, and quickly returns to the man.

“I’m Chris.” The tall man extends his hand awkwardly for her to shake. “The jacket’s not important.” He still has the biggest smile on his face. “This isn’t the first time I’ve been hit by a car. But it is the first time in someone’s driveway.” He chuckles.

“Karen. Karen Andrews.” She takes his hand, and then immediately, takes him by the wrist and starts walking him towards her open garage.

Her genuine concern makes Chris happy. “So where we going, Karen Andrews?” He looks down at her one hand guiding him by the wrist, and her other hand carefully holding his injured arm. “Needle and thread?”

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Martin E Ericson Jr

She laughs and shakes her head. “Into the house. First we need to clean that up... get a bandage.” She motions with her head to the small cut, still bleeding.

“Do we?” Chris gives her a boyish grin. “It’s fine, really. I heal fast.”

As Karen opens the door that enters the kitchen, they both immediately see and smell the smoke. It’s not a lot. It hasn’t even set off the alarm, yet. It’s just enough to send an immediate shiver down a mother’s spine.

“Girls!” Karen released her grip on her blue-eyed guest, and steps into the smokey kitchen, looking panicky. The smoke seems to be limited to the kitchen.

Chris walks directly over to the stove and turns the burner off. He grabs the cast iron frying pan with his bare hand, putting it in the sink, under running water, causing it to hiss violently as it cools.

Alicia and Allison come running into the kitchen, now seeing the smoke for the first time. They had been up in Alicia’s room.

“I’m so sorry mom. I messed up.” Alicia is nearly crying. “I forgot to turn off the burner.”

Karen grabs both girls and pulls them into a hug.

Chris reaches up above the sink, and using a small crank, opens the double window to let the smoke out.

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“Thank you so much, Chris. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

She feels like his being in the wrong place at the right time just saved her family. Her life. “I didn’t even know those opened.” She laughs awkwardly, and holds both her daughters tightly, her hands and arms shaking.

Chris grins like a mischievous child at the trio of women, his eyes shining brightly through the smoke. “Oh...” He rolls his sleeve back down, the cut totally healed and forgotten. “Well... my bad.”

27

Thomas pulls his truck into the driveway, putting it in park, and turning the engine off. He leans over to his baby daughter, Agnes, and tweaks her nose between his finger and thumb. "... and you were so good on this trip."

Agnes, still chewing away at her stuffed bear's nose, glances up at her dad with her big blue eyes and makes a mumbling, cooing sound.

"That's her way of saying 'she knows'." Thomas smiles proudly and glances up to his passenger.

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The young woman giggles and runs a hand over the baby's little head, smoothing her soft curls back away from her face.

"Hey. And I'm glad you decided to accept my offer to get out of the cold. To come along. You were sort of... our good luck charm."

Thomas grins happily, unbuckling his daughter from her car seat and pulling the blankets to the side. "The minute we saw you standing out in the cold like that... it was like a miracle. The fog started clearing and we were on our way. And I'll tell you..." He pauses, getting a serious look on his face. "... I was really getting nervous just sitting there. I had a bad feeling." He shakes his head.

There's a rapid knock on the driver's-side window of Thomas' truck. Startled, he jumps, and then seeing the smiling face peering in, he takes a deep breath and opens the window. "You scared the devil out of me." He chuckles, patting his chest.

The woman leans towards the window to accept a small kiss from her husband. "Sorry..." She hesitates for just a second, breathing in the smell of fresh flowers coming from the open window. "I saw you guys pull in and thought you could use an extra set of hands. And I was just so excited to see my little cupcake."

Thomas turns away from his wife, towards his passenger. "She means Agnes, not me."

The young woman giggles.

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“Your mom and dad went to bed a couple hours ago.” She touches her husband’s arm. “Your dad had kind of a rough day.”

“Hmmm.” Thomas purses his lips and nods.

His wife moves closer to the window, blocking the light on the corner of the garage from her eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m being rude. Thomas texted that he was giving you a ride.” She looks down to the young woman’s bare feet, and then catches her husband’s eye.

“Yep. No jacket. No shoes.” Thomas opens the doors and carefully hands Agnes to her mother. “I told you.”

“Oh, my little cupcake.” She gives her daughter a series of small kisses on her chubby, little cheeks and pulls her close for a hug. She glances to the young woman. “That’s my Thomas. He’s one of the good ones.”

Thomas reaches over and wraps a blanket around his daughter, tucking it into his wife’s arms. “Now it’s me who’s being rude.” He leans back so both women can see one another better. “This is my wife, Catherine. Catherine, this is Chris. She’s going to stay the night on the couch, if that’s okay.” He glances to Chris. “Maybe a few days if that works... we’ll play it by ear.”

Catherine nods and smiles warmly at the young, blonde woman sitting in the passenger seat of the truck. “And I’m sure we can set you up with some warm socks, shoes, and a nice coat.”

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The young woman gives Catherine her warmest smile, letting the blue of her eyes light up the inside of the truck just a little. “Thank you so much. You’re both so nice.” She looks to Agnes wrapped in her mother’s arms. “All three of you.”

Thomas looks a little embarrassed by the attention. “She came up to the window when we were stuck in the fog and I couldn’t just leave her out there. It’s not safe. I mean, look at her... she’s just a kid.”

Chris giggles. “I’m older than I look.” She grins like a happy child. “But I was glad for the ride... and the company.”

Catherine smiles brightly, leaning in closer to see their new friend better. “Oh. Well I found your devil, Thomas. Didn’t scare it too far off.” She laughs at her little joke.

Chris tilts her head down to look where Catherine is staring.

Catherine chuckles. “Sorry... I like the shirt though. It’s funny.”

All three of them look down at Chris’ t-shirt with the cartoon, red devil on it.

“Oh. Yeah.” Chris grins. “Made it myself. I’m kind of an amateur artist... when I find the time.” She uses her hands to smooth her shirt out for better viewing. “It’s supposed to be my big brother. It’s sort of a family joke.”

“I know exactly what you were going for.” Catherine laughs, rolling her eyes. “I got that kind of big brother too.”

28

“Welcome to Apple Valley, California.” A young boy coasts up on his banana-seat bike and rings the old-fashioned, metal bell on the handlebars twice. Ring ring. Ring ring.

Rae turns and flashes him a smile. “Hi.” She sits just outside the old, faded barn, far to the left, a hundred or so feet from the barn door. There had once been a huge apple tree here, but all that is left now is a big stump for her to sit on. “So...” She looks confused for a second, tilting her head to the side, searching for the words. “... are you...” She closes and opens her eyes wide several quick times, trying to clear her thoughts.

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“... are you the local welcome wagon then?” She’s not even sure what that means.

The boy shows a bright smile, his big blue eyes nearly hidden by his blond, surfer-cut hair. “I’m lots of things. Pretty much everything really.” He moves the hair from his eyes. “But yeah, that’s me, I guess. So, welcome back, Rae.”

Rae, hesitates, looking confused. She stares at the young boy for a few seconds, waiting for her mind to clear. She feels like she knows him. He’s probably just shy of his teens. Then, as if she’s returning to a script, she continues. “So do you cover the whole Bay Area? Or are you just local?” She puts on a skeptical, playful, but confused look.

“I go everywhere actually. Wherever I’m needed.” The boy grins triumphantly, extending his arms up and out to his sides to describe what he means. “Everywhere.” He returns his arms to the handlebars of his bike. “But right now... I’m needed right here.”

Rae pulls her legs up onto the large stump, sitting with them crossed, her long, black dress blowing slightly in the summer breeze. She takes a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “Everywhere is quite a big place, you know. You must get pretty busy.” She raises her eyebrows.

The boy’s grin fades for a few seconds, failing to hide the sadness in his eyes.

“So anyway... how do you know I need welcoming?”

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Martin E Ericson Jr

The boy lays his bike in the grass and sits next to it, crossing his legs in front of him.

A cold shiver goes down Rae's spine. She feels dizzy. "How do you know my name?" She tries to smile, but it comes across as forced and unnatural. She can almost feel the darkness coming on, but then it's gone and she's not sure where it went. Or why it was so close to the surface to begin with.

"Well..." The boy tries a wider smile. "... we've done this before, you know. You sitting on the same old tree stump. Me sitting here in the grass."

"Hmmm." Rae allows herself to look deeper at this young boy in front of her. It's not something she enjoys doing, but it's one of her gifts. She looks into his past, present, and future.

And she sees nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

"That's not..." She stops, trying to think. She's confused. She feels something move throughout her entire body. She thinks it could be fear.

"It's okay, Rae. With me it's a little different." The boy's eyes go even bluer than they already were. "You can only see what I let you see." He gives her a half grin. "And sometimes... what I want you to see."

She closes her eyes, hoping the darkness will return. All she wants to do is run away into her darkness.

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“The tree of life dad called it.” The boy furrows his brow.

“Although... I guess now... it’s just the stump of life.” His smile returns.

“Ha. I like that.” He nods slowly, looking to the ground in front of him. “I keep it around as a reminder that not everything turns out as you expected. There are always surprises... good... and bad. And you just need to keep moving forward.”

He doesn’t like doing this to her, but he needs to let her ease into it. He doesn’t want shock. He wants realization. This is still a part of her journey. She needs to choose a path.

“Of course that wasn’t the first time we met.” He pulls some grass free and tosses it to the wind, watching as it carries down to the barn door. “We’ve known each other our whole lives.” He cocks his head to the side. “Well... my whole life.”

Rae’s heart begins to beat more rapidly. Her breathing gets shallow and quick. She’s sweating. For the first time in her existence, these things feel out of her control. She opens her eyes, studying her new friend. She shakes her head slowly. “I think you’re mistaking me for someone else.” She feels her clouded mind pushing to clear her thoughts.

“Rae.” The boy fakes a hurt look. “Look closer. Don’t you recognize me?”

She looks deeper, concentrating on a level that she’s never had to. Then she sees a bright light shining through the darkness of her thoughts.

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A bright light far in the distance. “Why is this so hard with you?” She whispers breathlessly. “This isn’t...”

Then she sees it.

Because he lets her see it.

“Oh my God.” Rae’s truly startled for the first time in her existence. Or so she believes. “I killed you.” Tears immediately form in her eyes as they begin to go dark, as her entire being slowly darkens.

He’s also given that back to her.

The boy’s eyes shift up, away from the grass he’s been staring at. “There’s no need for that.” His tone is the same soft voice of the young boy. But at the same time, it’s bigger than that. It’s charismatic and commanding. It’s warm and inviting. It’s old and forever. “We’re family.”

The hidden away areas of her mind clear and fully open.

And she smells the flowers.

The darkness instantly fades from Rae. Her voice becomes a whisper. “Chris.”

He smiles brightly, his sadness completely lifting, his voice going back to that of the excited little boy who rode up on his bike just to greet his big sister. “Hello Azrael. It’s been a while.” He tilts his to the side, furrowing his brow. “Well... not really.”

Rae starts sobbing and crying, tilting her head back to catch the tears, relieved to finally not be alone. “My baby brother.” Her voice is trembling and barely audible. “I’m so sorry. I’m so so sorry.” She sounds

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very much like the petite, young woman she appears to be, and not the version of Death she's been pretending to be.

He gives her several minutes to sob and cry, loud and honest. The whole time, she mutters things to herself in languages dead and gone, and languages yet to be. The entire time, she has a crazy smile of relief on her face. She rolls her eyes and curses the things she's done, and the thing she'd become. She gets angry at herself. She tries forgiving herself. Her little brother is here. Not Samael or Michael or Gabriel, but the only one that could truly help. The one she needed from the very start. Everything will be okay now. She's sure of it.

Chris pays no attention and lets the words, the explanations, the profanities, fall softly to the grass between them. All forgotten and forgiven.

“So how are you?” He throws some grass into the air, watching the breeze carry it down towards the old barn. “How have you been?” It’s a silly question, but he needs her to continue moving forward.

Rae’s crazy smile fades in an instant. She suddenly looks incredibly sad as a gust of wind blows her long, dark hair across her pale face. “I killed you.” Her voice goes nearly silent, fighting through the tightness in her throat. “That’s how I’ve been. I killed you.”

Chris shrugs, and pulls another handful of grass free, tossing it to the breeze. As the wind dies down, they both hear a man’s voice in the distance.

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Rae looks up the hill to the old, white farmhouse. A man walks out on the back porch holding a cup of coffee. “Hurry up boys, it’s a nice day.”

Chris grins up at his sister. “Well... you kinda killed me. But not really. Obviously.” He gives her a little wink. “I mean... who do you think you are?” He chuckles, trying to lighten the moment.

Rae says nothing, trying to compose herself, wiping tears on both sleeves. She looks around at everything, noticing slight differences from the way things should be. She’s been here before, but hasn’t. This is the same place, but it’s not.

“I hit the reset button, Rae. Kind of.” Chris sits up, puffing out his chest a little, looking proud of himself. “I figured... there’s a few things we may wanna change... do over. Or not do at all.” He climbs to his feet, pulling himself up onto the large stump next to his sister. “Can I show you something?” He leans in closer.

Rae nods her head quickly, wiping away the last of her tears.

Chris sits up, leaning back a little, casually picking at some stray threads on the elbow of his favorite shirt. And in a fraction of a moment, she sees everything he wants her to see.

They sit for a few minutes, while Rae collects herself. She remembers everything as if it were a dream and not the reality it was or wasn’t.

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“Did I... did I really do all that?” Her eyes are wide in horror. All cried out, she just sits there in shocking disbelief.

“I don’t know, Rae. You tell me.” He playfully bumps his shoulder up against his sister’s. “If that’s the way you want to play it... tell me... and then, yeah... you really did all that. And we’ll go from there.”

Rae turns slightly, shifting her body to face her little brother better. Her mind races to take everything in and make sense of it all.

“It’s up to you.” Chris grins.

Deep in thought, she looks up towards the big, white farmhouse at the top of the slope.

“Come on boys. It’s a beautiful day out here. Stop lallygagging and get your butts out here.” The man sets his coffee cup down and picks up an old, worn football, laying in a chair. “Let’s toss the old pigskin around before breakfast.”

“That’s Mr. Miller.” Chris pulls the hair from his eyes, and looks over to Rae. “He’s a really nice guy. A good dad. And a good son.”

Rae nods her head, but her face remains blank. She looks away from her little brother, afraid she’ll burst into tears again. She remembers why she’s here.

“Are you okay?” Chris’ voice is soft and caring. His clear blue eyes reach out to his sister.

Rae risks a glance at her brother, giving him a half-hearted smile, but keeps her attention on the farmhouse. “Yeah. I’ll be fine. I guess.” She

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pauses, considering this new old place. “So how do you know the Miller family?”

Chris grins wildly, his smile taking over his whole face. “Really?”

Again, he laughs and playfully nudges his shoulder up against his sister’s.

“Oh. Yeah.” She puts an arm around him and gives him a proper hug, like she should have done the moment she was allowed to recognize him. “For a second I forgot which brother I was talking to.” She hugs even tighter, squeezing, taking a deep breath. “Yeah. It’s been a while, little bro.” Rae fights back her tears again, still somewhat lost in thought, but enjoying her brother’s presence. He has a way of making you feel better than you’ve ever felt before. It’s not a gift. It’s who he is.

“Like I said… not really.” He gently pulls free of his sister’s hug and straightens his shirt, looking a little uncomfortable. “I’ve been with you since the beginning. I was always there. Right beside you. Right from the start.”

“The beach? That night with Sam?” Rae looks a little embarrassed. “And dad?” She hangs her head low as her voice trails off. “You were there.”

“The beginning, Rae. The beginning beginning.” Chris leans down a little to look up into his sister’s sad eyes. “Right from the start of everything there ever was.”

She looks directly into her brother’s eyes. She can remember whispers in the breeze. She remembers warm hugs from the sun. She can

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remember the smell of fresh, spring flowers wafting in the air. She remembers all the times he was there, but he kept himself hidden, even when he was right there in plain sight.

“No.” Rae mumbles.

“No?” Chris scrunches his face, pretending to not quite understand. “I’m pretty sure I was.”

“The answer to your question. None of that actually happened. I didn’t really do those things. I don’t want to have done those things. Please.” Rae gives her brother a weak, embarrassed smile. “But thank you for showing me. Thank you for... you know... the reset.”

Chris grins proudly. “Anytime, Rae.” He looks away, up towards the old farmhouse. “That’s what family’s for. They help one another when things get tough.”

Rae nods. “Does Mr. Miller know you’re down here? Are you a friend or something?”

Chris shakes his head, but says nothing.

“You’re not here to visit then?” Rae looks over to the barn door, knowing that she may still have things to do. But she feels like this time she’ll let Chris tag along.

“Well... they know me, of course. I live like five minutes from here. On the same street.” Chris gives his sister an odd look, again trying to make her laugh. “You know the place. It needs a new front door. And

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the living room is a complete disaster.” He scrunches his brow. “But wait... that never happened.” He grins. “So it’s probably all good.”

Rae half rolls her eyes, letting her brother have his moment.

Chris smiles even wider. “But no, I didn’t come to visit the Millers.”

Rae scrunches her face, turning her head slightly in confusion. “Sooo... you’re here just for me?”

“Yep. This is where I pushed the reset.” He leans a bit closer to his sister. Whispering. “There’s not really a big, red button or anything... it’s just a figure of speech.” He looks her straight in the eye as if he’s completely serious.

Rae sighs, shaking her head, smiling. “Yeah. I kind of figured.”

They sit in silence for several minutes as Chris lets his sister grasp the particulars of this changed reality.

“So this is the point you decided to pull us back to?” She uses her sleeve to wipe her eyes, clearing away the last remnants of her tears.

“Kind of.” He laughs out loud. “But to use your own words... you underestimate me.”

Rae squints her eyes, grits her teeth, cringing.

“Nah, we’ve always been right here. We never left the tree stump. I pulled everything back to us.” Again, the little boy in him comes out, and he puffs his chest out a little, grinning wildly. “I don’t move through time, Rae. Time moves through me.”

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“Hmmm. I’ll try to remember that.” Still smiling, Rae looks around as if noticing her surroundings for the very first time. The colors all seem more vivid. The sounds more crisp and perfect. Even the wind has a different smell.

“And… why am I here? At the Millers’ barn?” Rae looks over to her brother and gives him a weak smile. “The usual?” She motions with her head towards the barn door. The door is several shades redder than the last time she was here.

Chris lays back on the large stump, staring up at the sun. “No, not this time. Yeah, their grandpa had a heart attack. But this time… he made a full recovery.” He winks playfully. “He’s laid up, taking things easy. So his family’s here helping out.”

“Really?” Rae’s face lights up as her voice regains its natural singsong quality.

“Yep.” Chris grins. “So… you still lost?” He sits partially up, still leaning back, resting his elbows on the stump. “Because… you know… when you’re lost, the easiest thing is to ask someone for help.”

“Yeah, so I’ve heard.” Rae chuckles.

“And you did ask for help.” His shirt catches on a sliver of old bark. “Oh, man. My favorite shirt. Again.”

“Well, you sure took your sweet time, little brother. Not that I’m complaining about the outcome.” Rae reaches down and carefully releases

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the elbow of his shirt from the bark. She smoothes her hand over the blue fabric, pushing the loose threads back in place the best she can.

“Thanks.” Chris pulls his elbow close to his face, inspecting his shirt. “Just like new.”

“No problem. I have little brothers.” She winks and smiles broadly.

Chris leans in closer to his sister. “Anyway. I took the exact amount of time that it called for.”

“According to what?”

“Me.” Chris doesn’t do smug very well. It’s more of a Michael thing. “According to me.” But he tries.

The two siblings sit for several minutes, letting the sun warm them and the wind cool them. Rae continues to watch the man up by the farmhouse as he’s joined by his two young sons in the yard. They start tossing the football back and forth between the three of them. They look happy.

“Sooo...” Chris prods, placing a brotherly hand on Rae’s shoulder.

She tilts her head to the side and scrunches her eyebrows. “Oh. Am I still lost? Maybe a little. Well... maybe a lot. It’s not so simple, you know.” She smiles weakly. “But I think I can find a better way. And if I wander too far, I’ll let you know... and maybe you can... you know... hold my hand for a while. So I don’t feel so alone.”

Chris nods. “You’re never alone, Rae. I told you that.”

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Rae closes her eyes and looks within herself, to the void, where she sits with countless others, holding their hands as they pass. She briefly sees her brother sitting quietly next to each and every one of her, his hand lightly on her shoulder. And then she can't see him anymore. But she knows he's still there. Because he just told her he would be.

She opens her eyes to see his happy face staring back at her.

“So what about...” Rae holds her breath, searching for a description of what's in her mind.

Chris' face gets serious. “Things are being... handled.” And his boyish grin instantly returns.

Rae exhales slowly, closing her eyes for a second, enjoying the warm sun, the gentle breeze, the sound of laughter in the distance, and the smell of spring flowers all around her.

Chris turns slightly and gestures up towards the house. “I'm pretty sure Mrs. Miller is cooking up some breakfast right now in that very kitchen.”

Rae smiles knowingly. “You're pretty sure, huh?”

“Yep...” He nods. “Pretty sure.”

They hear the screen door on the back of the house creak open as Mrs. Miller pokes her head out. “Boys. Breakfast.”

“Absolutely sure.” Chris says with a beaming confidence.

The siblings both climb off the great stump, and Rae takes her little brother's hand in hers, like she had done thousands of times while

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they were growing up. She looks over to the barn door. “So... what about that?”

Chris catches her eye and follows it to the barn. “Oh. That.”

She hears a loud crack of wood, and then some crunching and shuffling as the barn loft breaks free and falls harmlessly to the ground below it.

“Thank you.” Rae smiles gratefully at her brother. “So... anyway. How old are you supposed to be right now? I forget.”

“Eleven.” He stands up a little straighter, as if to show Rae his full height. He’s nearly as tall as his older sister, but not quite.

“You’re pretty grown up for eleven, you know.” She says proudly, watching as the Miller boys file in through the kitchen door to have their breakfast.

This makes Chris laugh. “Well... I’m told I have an old soul.”

“I’ll bet.”

They both share a long laugh.

“You know you owe dad an apology, right? Several actually.” Chris squeezes his sister’s hand gently. “Nyssa and Tegan too. And definitely Sam.” He scrunches his eyebrows in thought. “And you might as well apologize to Mikey and Gabe while you’re at it.” He grins. “And you did kill me.”

“I thought none of that happened?” A look of concern crosses her face.

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“Well... I left a few things for you to work out on your own.”

Chris nudges his sister as they walk up the hill towards the old farmhouse.

“Part of the journey.”

“Well.” She scrunches her eyebrows together. “That’s going to be awkward.”

“Hey. I got an idea. Let’s see if we can get ourselves invited to breakfast.” Chris’ face lights up as he pushes the hair from his eyes. “You know. I’m pretty sure they’re having eggs and bacon. And hash browns. And the most perfectly toasted toast.” He instantly stops. “Oh. And fresh orange juice. I love fresh orange juice.”

“I know you do.” Rae giggles. With the slightest of flutters, she extends the most delicate and perfectly black wings out from the back of her long dress. They carefully reach around to embrace the both of them as they approach the farmhouse to have the best breakfast they’ve ever had.

Epilogue

Karl looks back to the trunk. “Two shotguns each. One AR and one pistol each.” He looks over to Brad. “You got the backpacks?”

“Right here.” Brad grabs them from a shelf and tosses them to his friend.

Karl looks at them closely. “Star Wars? Really?” He stares at his friend waiting for an explanation.

“Who cares. They’re all I had.”

“You already had these?” Karl laughs.

“Shut up. Star Wars is pretty fuckin’ bad ass.”

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Karl shakes his head slowly. “Fine.” He sets them aside as he carefully takes the grenade from the trunk, and making sure Brad isn’t watching, sets it on the shelf against the side wall and covers it with an old rag. “That thing’s just dangerous.” He mumbles to himself.

Brad walks to the back of the garage and through a door into the kitchen, returning with a six-pack of cheap beer. “One last drink for the road.”

Karl looks back and smiles. “Nice.” He unfolds the second blanket in the trunk and lays it over their stockpile, and then places the two backpacks on top, pushing down a little all around the blanket to better hold everything in place. He closes the trunk with a heavy thud.

“Hey.” Brad tosses a beer to Karl, who appropriately sits back down on the old bar stool. Brad pulls himself up onto the closed trunk of the car and pops open his beer, downing it in seconds.

Karl opens his beer and takes a long drink. “Don’t pound ‘em. You’ll get sloppy and fuck things up.”

“These are the last beers I’ll ever drink in my entire life. I’ll do whatever the fuck I want.” Brad opens another beer, but this time, taking his friends advice, takes a couple long drinks.

“Hey guys. Sorry to be a bother... you got a minute?”

Karl looks up, startled as a cold shiver goes through his entire body. “What the fuck?” He nearly dropping his beer.

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Brad spins around on the trunk. “Where the fuck did you come from?” Although completely surprised and a little angry, his voice sounds small and lost.

“Hi. I’m Rae.” She gives them an awkward, childlike wave. “There’s been a change of plans if that’s okay.”

Standing near the closed garage door, just to the side of Karl’s Mustang, they see a beautiful, young woman in a long, black dress. She instantly darkens to pure blackness and grows in size to fill the entire front of the garage.

“Holy fuck!” Brad hops down from the car trunk and stumbles in Karl’s direction, falling face first to the ground at his friend’s feet.

Terrified, a cold sweat instantly covering his body, Karl jerks himself backward, causing the bar stool to topple forward while he falls backward, landing on his back next to his friend.

“Oh... this is silly.” The darkness that is Rae is roughly pushed away from her body, exploding outward, and immediately disappearing into the shadows. “This isn’t me.”

Where Rae once stood, Sam stands fully aflame with great, flaming wings dancing behind him, charring the wood of the garage, melting the door, and blowing out the tires and windows in the old Mustang.

With a sudden flick of his shoulders, Sam fully extends his wings with a mighty whoosh, covering the entire front of the garage, sending

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everything in the garage up against the side walls, and completely burning away the garage door in back of him.

The force of his wings expanding throws the Mustang sideways up against the the garage wall, causing everything to tumble from the shelves. Tools, boxes, car parts, cleaning supplies, and grandpa's old grenade all tumble to the cement floor. The grenade bounces once, jarring the pin loose, separating it from the grenade body. The grenade rolls between Karl and Brad, resting against Karl's foot.

“Please accept my sister’s apology. She couldn’t be here this time.” Sam tilts his head and shrugs. “She’s taking some much-needed time off.”

“Fuck! The pin.” Karl kicks out at the grenade, trying to get it away from him, not knowing what else to do.

“I’m Sam. And I’m here to sit with you while you die.” He grins devilishly. “Would you like me to hold your hands?”

Thank you
I hope you enjoyed my little story

“I. Said. Look at me.” Rae’s voice is thunderous.

The big guy looks up at Rae as he was told. “Oh my God... please... what are you?” His voice is small and high pitched. Losing complete control, he wets himself without even realizing it.

He turns his eyes to Sam, terrified, pleading.

“Not him. Me. Look at meeeeeee!” Rae screams from deep within her darkness, causing the air all around them to bubble and hiss, and burn away violently.

Slowly, theatrically, she leans down towards the big guy, showing him her real face from deep within the empty blackness of her realm. She shows him the void. She shows him her power. She shows him his death. She shows him everyone’s death. Ever. Past. Present. Future. One by one.

“Rae!” Sam yells her name to get her attention. “Not! Now!” He lowers his voice to a whisper. “Please.”

She instantly lets the darkness go, pulling it back within, showing him a toothy, girlish smile. “You will remember me.” She says softly. “Not for this thing I wear...” She cocks her head to the side. “... but for what I am. For what you saw.”

The big guy curls up on the ground in a puddle of his own urine. And he screams and cries, and rocks himself back and forth. He’ll never stop screaming and crying for the remainder of his short life.



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