

# The Lonely God

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

# 1

“My best friend...” Her voice cracks, low and soft, barely a whisper, sounding painful. “My best friend... is...” She sighs heavily. “... the fucking devil.” The young woman sits on a swing hanging from a giant tree of old greens and ugly browns. It’s never actually been living. But it’s been dying for ten-thousand generations.

Her black, booted feet just touch the ground as she gently moves back and forth, her head hung low. She’s been crying. She feels like she’s always been crying. She lets out a short, stutter of a laugh. “My only friend.” She blinks old tears from her eyes, replacing them with new tears.

“He’s also my God damn brother.” Her lips contort angrily. “Fucking idiot.”

Applying her boots to the grassy dirt, she gives herself another gentle push, while looking at the heavy patches of dried mud on her black jeans. She glances down to the muddy ground beneath the swing. It was once just sandy dirt, before her tears slowly turned it to a dark mud. She looks back up, her weary eyes staring at the empty lawn chair sitting maybe twenty feet in front of her, near the short wire fence. She wonders how long before her tears turn this into a raging river, carrying everything including that empty chair away.

Like she’s done a thousand times before, she tries to see past the fence into the neighbor’s yard. But she can’t. She’s never been able to. It’s just not allowed. All she sees beyond the fence is darkness.

“Are you listening to me?” She abruptly puts down her feet hard in the muddy dirt, splashing it up onto her boots and pants. The swing stops in an instant. Her voice hardens. “Or am I just sitting here... fucking talking to myself... again?”

She nervously glances back at the garage towards the edge of the yard, to her right. She scrunches her eyebrows together, showing her anger through fresh tears.

“God dammit! You should be fucking listening.” Her voice wavers between fear and false bravado. She’s always been the strong one, but this place quickly tore that from her.

Again, she resumes her pattern and pushes off gently, swinging back and forth. She relaxes her face, letting it go blank, feeling the new tears roll down her cheeks on their quiet journey to the muddy ground below.

“I know what you’re thinking.” She grunts out a phony laugh and shakes her head back and forth slowly. Her eyes close as she sighs deeply. Her voice goes deeper, forming a mocking tone, feigning the stupidity she’s always been surrounded by. “You’re thinking... yeah, so what... my brother is the fucking devil too.”

She tilts her head back and forth several times from shoulder to shoulder, feeling the cracking of her neck as she lets her mouth hang open as a final show of what she thinks of stupid people. She’s always felt cursed by stupid people.

Then she opens her eyes, again looking to the empty lawn chair set against the fence. “Why don’t you pull up a little closer so we can chat more comfortably. So I can see your eyes” She anxiously glances around the empty yard. “Or at least so people don’t think I’m some sort of... fucking nut... sitting here talking to myself.” She snorts. “Not that there’s anyone around anymore.”

From deep within the darkness, on the other side of the wire fence, there’s a bright smile, and a big, red bow. The smile comes and goes as if the mouth is moving, talking. Perhaps telling a story.

But the young woman sees nothing but darkness. And hears nothing other than her own voice, and the squeaking of the swing as it moves back and forth.

She giggles nervously, completely out of character, and pushes gently to keep herself swinging.

“I know what you mean though.” She uses the back of her hand to roughly wipe the tears from her cheeks. “Everybody’s got their own devil riding their back. “Sometimes it’s a friend.” She pauses, thinking. “Sometimes... an enemy.” She roughly chuckles, thinking of her brother. “And sometimes it’s your damn brother.”

Her head spins quickly towards the garage as she hears a muffled popping noise followed by a woman’s scream, her scream, that ends with another wet, popping sound.

She remembers. How could she not?

She watches nervously, her eyes blinking rapidly, tears streaming more freely down her face. She half expects to see someone come out the back door. But she knows it’s not yet time. At this point she has the timing down fairly well.

Her eyes turn back to the empty chair as she again brushes more tears from her eyes, this time with the long sleeves of her dark hoodie. Her face is raw from frequent wiping. Her sleeve is soaked.

“But yeah... I know. I’m crazy. Right?” She forces the anger to return to her eyes, trying to become the person she once was. She pushes

for the anger she remembers before all this happened. “But mine’s the real deal. He’s the burn-you-in-hell, torture-you-for-an-eternity... fucking... devil.” She sobs and breathes in roughly. “It feels that way sometimes. At least it felt that way when we were both still living.”

A sudden wind whips through the tree, jostling the young woman side to side in the swing, causing the dark curls of her hair to pull across her face. Her pretense of strength immediately fails and she whimpers painfully, becoming the terrified young woman again.

She has no choice. It’s part of the script.

She turns her head back towards the garage. This time more rapidly. Her breathing gets short and quick, like a dog panting. Her voice becomes a hoarse whisper. “Or...” She struggles. “... at least he thought he was some kind of devil. Wanted to be.” She intentionally puts all of what happened on her brother, absolving herself, as if he really were the devil. It’s natural. That’s what people do. “Or maybe that was just a God damn act. The fucking idiot.”

She swings back and forth for a couple minutes, her mind searching for answers that aren’t there. It’s part of the process.

And then her words begin to pour out more rapidly, as if realizing how little time she has left. “He’s gone now. Dead, apparently.” She glances back to the garage, and lets out a long, weak whimper. “Anyway.” She sobs deeply, trying to calm herself. “He probably thought I was the

damn devil... after some of the things I did.” She closes her eyes to catch the tears as they grow thicker. “And maybe I am.” She mutters.

With a loud, growling, tearing sound, the air in front of the young woman, between her and the empty lawn chair, opens into a black, swirling void of pure darkness.

The young woman uses a hand to block her eyes. She’s compelled to look into the darkness, but it hurts. This is something new, something off script, which confuses her. Things like this do not happen. Not here.

She wants nothing more than to escape this personal misery she’s been forced into for what feels like an eternity. But she’s a murderer. A child killer. She and her devil brother murdered her own child in a broken act of selfishness.

And she’s also a...

“Liar!” A deep, echoing voice screams out from the empty blackness. “You fucking liar!” The voice becomes even deeper, hollow, more threatening as black tentacles reach out from the void, grabbing the young woman by the neck, lifting her off the swing and high into the air nearing the top of the great tree. The dark being lets out a guttural scream that tears through all of reality. Even those outside this personal hell have to cover their ears briefly before mindlessly going back to the normalcy of their lives, thankfully unaware that this place actually exists.

The young woman's face violently contorts from absolute fear. She stops breathing, her body briefly remembering that it hasn't been necessary for a very long time now.

"Your brother was a fucking... dumbass... piece of shit. Not the God damn Devil." The being's voice becomes even lower, even more menacing, if that's possible, now coming from every direction at once, followed by a short series of sharp echoes painful to the young murderer's ears.

The black mass swirls powerfully, throwing the young woman hard onto the ground in front of the swing, shattering both legs of the long dead creature. Then the darkness twists up through the air, looking down over the dead as the protruding, broken bones warp through this false reality, quickly healing and causing the young woman to scream out experiencing a pain that doesn't actually exist.

"Sure." The pounding echoes center into one voice coming from deep within the inky, black void. "He was an evil asshole. A child-killing fuck." A deep breath is inhaled purely for show, and then slowly released, blowing dead leaves from the tree. "Just. Like. You."

And with that, a dark, terrifying, yet delicately beautiful face takes shape in the black mass. It pushes itself towards the outside world, stretching the greasy, black void outward as it looks directly down at the young woman lying painfully in the dirt.

“But he was no Devil. That’s a misuse of a perfectly good nickname.” The mass throbs and shifts as it releases its mistress so that she stands directly in front of her prey. Her voice is still somewhat low and hollow as she forms. “He’s just a dead... fuck... rotting in a place of his own making.” A small grin barely shows through the darkness as it stretches itself thinly over the figure. “Much like this. Much like you. You fucking... lying... piece of shit.”

The young woman, still laying in the dirt, covers her face with trembling arms. Her body convulses from pure terror, remembering the bloody mist her brother had become, coating the walls, ceiling, and floor of the garage at the edge of her yard. And she knows the same thing happened to her. Her brother was the first wet pop. She screamed, and then became the second wet pop. They had angered Death herself, and she had destroyed them with delightful passion. Most times she merely takes the dead to the next place, good or bad. But sometimes, when the evil rises too close to the surface, Death violently plunges them into a sudden eternity. Efficiently, and with a smile on her perfect face.

The black void has completely morphed now into a petite, young woman wearing a flowing, black dress. She’s barefoot and standing in the air, just a few inches above the muddy ground. Her head tilted forward, her long, pitch-black hair hangs over one eye, contrasting against her smooth, pale skin.

But her eyes. Her eyes are dark voids pulsating with the same black energy she just emerged from.

She is Death. And Death is beautiful.

And she smiles, both sweetly and menacingly.

As she lets her eyes slowly return to a rich brown color and her hair lighten just a shade, her voice softens. “I’d kill you again if I could.”

Death smiles almost lovingly and looks around the yard from the tree to the garage and back to the empty swing just in back of the dead girl.

“But this isn’t my place. It’s my brother’s.” Again her voice hardens as a rich, black emptiness flows from her eyes. “The actual... fucking... Devil.” She pauses and breathes in and out several times from habit born from a billion lifetimes. “Samael. My little brother Sam. My best friend.” She cocks her head to the side. “So yeah... my brother’s the God damn Devil too.” She chuckles lightly.

The dead woman, still lying on the ground, her eyes still covered by her arms, whimpers at the mention of his name. She knew him. She remembers him. She had sought him out. Before she died and after. And since that time, the dead woman has been sitting on this swing, in what appears to be her backyard, but isn’t, for what feels like several thousand years. It’s been twenty six.

She had begged the Devil to take her son away, making life just a little bit simpler for her. But that’s not the Devil’s role. And what she didn’t

realize was that she had already done it herself. And that Death had then paid her a horrifying visit that ended in her instant and complete obliteration. When she met the Devil, she hadn't realized that she was already dead.

So now, the dead woman, once called Winnifred, sits in a place of her own making, on a swing that doesn't exist, in a backyard that isn't what it appears to be, in a bottle world set outside reality. This is Sam's place. Just one of many dark corners in Sam's place. This is the place where evil is delivered to judgement. And occasionally, given much time, and much reflection, forgiveness.

The dead woman risks a glance back towards the garage, knowing that her devil would be emerging and coming for her again, to torment her with what she'd done, for what seems like the millionth time. He would calmly, quietly, and terrifyingly walk her through everything that lead up to her murdering her own son. Her Devil could be fierce and frightening, but for the most part, he was calm and refined, almost friendly to the point where you thought he was on your side. In many ways, that made him even more horrifying. And then, he would show her things.

Horrendous things.

Things that would make him angry.

And when caught standing on the edge of his own anger, quite often, he would throw himself fully in, pulling her along on his horrifying journey.

Inevitably, when she saw all her nightmares at once, grabbing, and pulling, scratching, and tearing, everything would simply start all over again. She would be back on her swing, surrounded by muddy tears, waiting for her Devil to arrive.

“Ahem.” Death clears her throat as she lowers herself, allowing her bare feet to touch the grass as it forms below her. She wriggles her toes, trying to enjoy the feeling as she always has. But she feels nothing. Not in this place. Not in front of this dead creature. Again, she tilts her head to the side, letting her hair fall even farther across her face, and frowns, pushing out her bottom lip, like a child’s pout.

The dead woman whimpers so quietly it doesn’t reach her lips.

“Well.” Death turns her eyes towards the back of the garage as the door opens, letting a dim light spill out into the backyard. “I’ll leave you to it then.”

The dead woman, still on the ground lets out a sudden, guttural shriek, and scrambles to climb back onto the swing. It’s where he’ll expect her to be. It’s where she’s supposed to be.

Again, there’s a script. And for some reason, this time, Death has taken her from it. But only for a few minutes. Or perhaps it’s been a lifetime. This place has no middle ground.

She continues to stare down to the mud, not wanting to see the face of her executioner again.

Death, her beautiful, brown eyes quickly darkening for effect, reaches forward, gently tilting the young woman's face up to better see her. "Eye contact. If you want to get somewhere in life..." She chuckles. "... or death. You'll need to improve your eye contact."

And with that, Death turns and walks away, but stops just before reaching the fence and the darkness behind it. For the briefest of moments she sees the flicker of light. Followed by nothing but darkness.

She tilts her head to the side, wondering. Losing herself for a few seconds as she reaches back within herself, searching. And finding nothing she recognizes, she continues with her usual theatrics.

"Oh... I nearly forgot. I'm here to tell you. Sam's dead. Gone." She breathes in deeply, adhering to the habits she's created over so many lifetimes. "So you'll have to deal with my other brother... Mikey... Michael. He's been filling in. You'll like him." And she snorts out a small laugh as she disappears into the darkness on the other side of the fence.

A tall, broad figure steps from the small door in the rear of the garage, and sighs loudly, causing the ground to shake as he starts his trek straight towards the dead creature on the swing.

## 2

In the passing of a thought, Rae stands just off the beach, on the back patio of the home she grew up in. Well, a version of the many homes she remembers growing up in over innumerable lifetimes.

Although it's midday, the sky is ragged and dark, with fewer stars than there were just hours ago. And the moon is gone. It has been since the night Sam died. One of his many nicknames was 'The Light Bringer, and Rae feels like he's pulling the stars with him to wherever it is he's gone to.

She can still feel the anger from her visit to Sam's place, from her interaction with that wicked creature on the swing. Her only solace is in knowing that Michael is there to walk with her, to guide her into the dark recesses of her own being.

Rae tries to smile. And completely fails.

She glances over to the house. The patio. The French doors. The second-floor balcony. "So... what are you up to?" She waits, holding her breath, reaching out, searching. "Hmmm."

She looks up to the series of windows leading to her family's individual rooms. They are all closed, and most have their lace curtains drawn shut. Rae's is far to the left. Her father's is far to the right. But she settles on the middle window, closest to her own, wondering if he's watching her right now. Her lips curl down, forming a sad frown. She loves her youngest brother to death, but she also realizes that he's the one responsible for what happened to Sam. He's the one that allowed it to happen. He's the only one that could've said 'no', and not given Sam what he asked for.

"Whatever that was." Rae mumbles, knowing full well that he can hear her, whether he's at home or not. "Oh pish." She flicks her hand in the air, dismissively. "You're a friggin odd duck. You do know that... right?" Then she gives a small wave, in case he's up there, looking down, and this time manages a slight smile. "An odd duck." She chuckles. "Quack. Quack."

Rae now appears as she normally does, a young woman, barely out of her teens, with a long, black dress. And she's barefoot. She's always barefoot. Just a hair over five foot, she's thin and small of frame, with long, straight hair just a few shades shy of black. But that can easily darken along with her mood. And frequently does.

To show up at her father's house as Death instead of his eldest child, his only daughter, Azrael, would be disrespectful and rude. And she is neither, though that can also easily change depending on her mood. Or if you get in her way.

She frowns. She's done things, terrifying things, in a fit of rage, and doesn't like to even think about it. Or maybe that never happened, and Chris just left her with the memory as a reminder. She finds the things he's capable of hard to wrap her mind around. He's the odd duck of the family, and always has been.

"It's been a while." Rae smiles wearily, looking the back of the house over, the gardens, the patio, the comfy chairs on the balcony. "In real time. Years." She mumbles.

She hopes her father is home. She needs him to be home. She needs to talk to someone. Specifically, she needs to talk to him. She tilts her head to one side, thinking. Maybe one of her brothers will be around. They'll do, if her father isn't. Maybe even Chris. The last time she saw him, he promised they'd talk.

About Sam.

With a deep sigh, she puts on her best smile, walking up the beach path to the patio. She opens one of the French doors leading into the living room, and clears her throat theatrically. “Hey dad.” She calls out a little on the quiet side, and then pauses, listening. “It’s Rae.” She grins. “Sunshine’s come home for a visit.” She stops and thinks for a moment, letting her voice drop to a mumbled whisper. “And I’m not here to kill you this time. I promise.”

Nothing.

She walks into the living room and stops near the huge, oak shelf where her dad keeps some of his favorite books. Wherever there’s not a book, wherever there’s space to fill, there’s a lifetime of framed pictures of the family. There’s baby pictures and pictures of them as toddlers, children, teens, and even young adults. There’s even some more recent pictures from the few times they seem to all be in one place at the same time. Family barbecues, birthdays, holidays, crisis situations where your eldest child, your only daughter, nearly destroys the world. Things like that.

Rae exhales roughly, flooded by shame for a few long seconds.

Scanning the assortment of family memories, she chuckles under her breadth. “What a load of crap.” She smirks knowingly.

She pulls a picture from the shelf directly in front of her. It’s of her standing with Sam. The two eldest siblings. If she remembers correctly, she’s about twelve and Sam about eight, yet he’s already pulled

even with her in height. He was pretty proud of that. By the next summer he towered over his big sister. By then, he no longer cared.

She's wearing a small, old-fashioned, black, bowler hat, and has a blank, almost irritated look on her face, basically willing her father to get on with it and take the damn picture.

She remembers the moment perfectly. She's currently there willing him to take the damn picture.

She can remember every moment of her life perfectly. From the moment she arrived. They all can. "It's a gift..." She mutters. "... and not to be too cliched... a God damn curse."

She looks at the picture.

'Language, Azrael. Language.' Sam would say. She can practically hear his voice.

She looks closer at the picture. Her brother is holding up an armful of brightly colored comic books, fanning them out in a proud display, a huge smile on his face.

She grins. She's still there living the moment. And she's also here, reliving the moment. "Gift or curse." She whispers. "Tad bit of this... tad bit of that."

It was his eighth birthday, and dad had splurged on some of the more rare comic books. Nothing extravagant or expensive. Just harder to find. Their father loves books, and apparently when he was a child he had loved comic books just as much as Sam. Truth be told, he still enjoyed

them. So he understood just how great this gift really was. And it was one of the many things father and eldest son shared that brought them together, and made them so much alike. Sometimes, they could be two peas in a pod.

Rae wipes the dust from the glass covering the old picture with her sleeve. “My black hat stage.” Her smile grows wider. “Bowler hats. Fedoras. A black beanie. I even had a pointy, little, witch hat for a time.” She chuckles. “A very short time, thankfully.”

She remembers going through a stage where she was trying to look grown up and edgy with all black clothes; long, fingerless gloves; and a variety of black hats. She’d seen Death depicted in one of Sam’s comics, and on this rare occasion, it was actually depicted correctly, as a young woman. So for a short time, Rae borrowed the look. She even wore laced-up, black boots for a while. She glances down to her bare feet. Until she missed feeling the ground and the grass on her toes. She still wears one of the beautiful, black, Victorian-style dresses.

She uses a finger to push the remaining dust from the top of the frame and puts the picture back on the shelf just as it had been. “Death and the Devil.” She snorts. “But that wasn’t you yet, was it?” Rae’s voice is soft with a hint of sisterly love. “Soon though. Another... I don’t know...”

It’s confusing even to her, that they grew up in this house, yet they’re billions of billions of years old.

Or at least, she thinks they are. Rae cocks her head to the side.  
“Infinity minus a day.” She giggles.

She remembers hundreds of millions of lifetimes when it was just her and her father, before any of her brothers came along. She remembers feeling a little lost and confused back then. She wasn’t given her role yet, and didn’t understand who or what they were. They didn’t seem to have a purpose. She was lonely and bored.

“So what’s new.” Rae mumbles to herself, pushing her bottom lip out a bit.

Her and her father just went about their days watching people’s lifetimes come and go. Her father’s first rule was no interference. Or at least, very little interference. ‘Let them be what they are’ he’d say to her.

“It’s their lives to live. Not ours.” Rae repeats her father’s mantra. She’s heard it many times. But she remembers times when he thought she wasn’t looking where he nudged someone causing them to go right instead of left, or said ‘hello’ just long enough for a speeding car to safely pass on by.

Then, after many lifetimes, or maybe it was just a handful of years, again, she’s not really sure, Sam came along and gave her something to look forward to. Something to do. Someone to mentor, teach, play with, hang out with, tease, pester, and poke fun of in a sisterly way. Someone to help eliminate the boredom of it all. She suddenly had a nemesis and a

best friend all in one, and they could help guide each other down their various paths. Just as siblings do.

She was four.

And with many, many lifetimes between them came Mikey, Gabe, and much later, finally, Chris. Four boys. She was her father's first and only daughter. She likes to think that she was the perfect daughter and he didn't need another. And when he started with the boys, it took four of them to finally get it somewhat right. "Somewhat." She glances upstairs over the banister, just seeing the top of Chris' door. "Quack. Quack."

She giggles, and smiles a real smile, pushing aside some hair that has fallen across her face, tucking it behind her ear.

"So... dad..." Rae plops down on the big, leather couch, curling her feet up to her side. She picks up, and tosses aside, a well-worn paperback book. Like Chris, even if he's not really here, she knows her father can hear her.

Her eyes go pitch black and empty, not from anger, but from a few seconds of not keeping up the charade.

"... where's Sam?" She breathes in deeply. "I know you know. You've always known everything. So where's Sam?" And she breathes out slowly. Yet another unnecessary pretense that has long become habit.

When Sam died, Rae promised her brother that she wouldn't put on this pretense anymore. She wouldn't do those things that make them appear human. She would stop. Out of anger. Maybe spite. But that didn't

last. The habits had gotten too old, too engrained in who she was, and one day she just found herself breathing and her heart beating again. She would immediately put a stop to it, but then another day, it would just start up again. After a few thousand times, she just gave up. It wasn't important.

She realizes she could just lose this form altogether, but she kind of likes it. Sometimes she even thinks of pulling out her old bowler hat and playing goth girl again. Death had broken her promise, while clinging to a scrap of human vanity as a poor excuse. They don't lie. But in some ways, they're always lying.

"I don't think he's actually dead, you know. Dead, dead." Rae mumbles to herself, pausing to look deeply within herself for what must be the millionth time. "He's not with me. He never was."

She half smiles, her voice becoming small and light, lyrical. A better match for her appearance.

"So obviously he's not dead then. In the sense that I know what being dead actually is. So where is he?" She tilts her head towards one shoulder. "I mean... I'd know if he were, right? I figured that much out a long time ago. Though it took me a bit longer than it should've." She frowns, pushing out her bottom lip. "Unless... unless I'm just missing something."

But then her mood instantly brightens. Sam was sent away by Chris, at Sam's request for some reason. She remembers that they'd done it before when they were kids. But that was more of a goof. And it was

temporary. Just for a few minutes. Maybe to show Sam his future. Or maybe just to piss off Michael. She remembers that it definitely pissed off Michael.

But there was no dead body left behind. Not that time. Sam had simply blinked out of existence. And then he just as easily blinked back in when Chris relented to Michael's angry demands.

But this time she sat with her brother's dead body, holding his cold hand. And when she looked within herself, to the void, he wasn't there. So she should have immediately known he wasn't dead. But with Chris involved, she couldn't be certain what was going on. A lot about her youngest brother leaves her confused, leaves all of them confused. She doesn't like it. But they rarely have a choice.

She knows Sam's disappearance is all because she started him down her path. The path that took him away.

Chris told her they would talk later.

"Later." She considers. "Hmmm."

But in their world, later can be an extraordinarily long time.

"Something about a beginning..." Rae scrunches her eyebrows together. She thinks back to her brother's words that came from everywhere all at once as he took the two murdered children away with him. "And some kind of ending he's due."

Rae shakes her head and rolls her eyes.

“Not dead then. Just gone... somewhere.” She hops up with a renewed enthusiasm, and spins almost dancing to the stairs. “So that’s good, right dad?”

She stops, listening for her father.

Nothing.

Rae stops at the first step, looking up towards the second floor, towards her baby brother’s bedroom door. “Chris?” She pauses waiting for a response she knows won’t come. “Where is he? Where’s Sam?” Her voice is light and calm. Friendly. Quiet. “You promised we’d talk. You told me I was never alone... you were always with me. Always at my side.” She waits a few seconds, listening. “So let’s talk.”

Again she waits. Looking just to her right.

Nothing.

Typical Chris.

Putting a goofy smile on her face, she shakes her head in mock disappointment, and starts up to the second floor.

Rae gets to the top of the stairs and looks down the hall to her room. The door’s open with a dead, black rose haphazardly taped by the stem to it. “Brothers. So annoying.” She rolls her eyes. She bets Michael put it there.

She turns towards Sam’s room and walks just to the entrance, but doesn’t go in. His bed is neatly made, as usual, with everything put in its place on various shelves around the room. There’s a small stack of comic

books sitting alongside a pencil and old, yellow journal on the wooden desk in the corner.

“Cataloging some recent acquisitions, my nerdy young friend?” She chuckles, smiling brightly. She has a series of flashing memories of her taking him to the downtown comic shop when he was too young to go alone. Their father gave each of them a small, weekly allowance and Sam would spend his on comics. Mainly fantasy, mystery, and horror. The Devil loved a good horror story.

His room is not a big room. It’s a room that once belonged to a small child and he rarely changed anything as he grew into a man. That was Sam. He was neat and organized and had just what he needed, but not one thing more. He was sentimental, but didn’t retain sentiments.

Still standing in the hallway, Rae glances to her right where Michael’s door and Gabriel’s door form a wide, inset V right next to one another. They are very close in age and most things they do reflect that, including their rooms being somewhat conjoined.

Chaos and Order. The warrior and the quiet.

The former fixes what needs fixing. “Hmmm. Where were you when I needed fixing?” For a brief moment she finds herself disappointed. A great battle with Michael would’ve definitely shaken things up. “The warrior...” She puffs up her cheeks and makes a sudden blowing noise, causing her lips to warble like a boat’s motor. “Ha.”

And of course, when her madness was all brought to a conclusion, or at least bottled up for the time being, Gabriel was the first to rise to the occasion and seek her out. To comfort his big sister.

“The quiet.” She still feels the warmth of spirit that Gabriel provided. “Death, Devil, Warrior, and Quiet.” She whispers to herself, and then pushes out her bottom lip in a child’s pout. “And then there’s Chris.” She half chuckles. “The One.”

That’s what they teasingly called him when he was just a baby, because of how much the family fawned over him. It was as if no one else existed. Just the One.

Rae focuses, letting go of the memories, and completely returns to the present. She’s sure if she looked in Michael’s room she’d find it bigger on the inside than on the outside, with all kinds of stuff from every stage of his various lives randomly scattered all over the place. Things he no longer needed but hangs onto because that’s who he was at one time. And it would be a mess. Chaos. Even as a child, she didn’t like going in there. She thought it smelled funny. Like stale bread.

On the other hand, she thinks Gabriel’s room is probably somewhere in between, some amalgamation of both, but closer to Sam’s. Whereas Michael envied his big brother, and did everything to distance himself, Gabriel looked up to both his older brothers, and always found himself somewhere in the middle. Learning and absorbing the best of

both worlds. Order. Yet another thing that made Gabriel the most approachable and easiest to get along with. The most normal of them all.

Rae shakes her head slowly, glancing back into Sam's room. "The Devil's a minimalist. A neat freak. Totally makes sense... in a weird way." Her voice is soft and low, doing its best to keep the encroaching melancholy from taking hold. "But he's gone now..." She puts on her best smile to push back. "... somewhere."

She turns away, walking down the hall, stopping at Chris' room, just before hers, at the end. She sighs, cocking her head to the side, staring at her brother's closed door.

The only closed door.

Which is a bit unusual.

But then again, it's not.

He's complicated. The least normal. Incredibly human in so many unique ways. But then, not at all. Complicated.

"Which is definitely an understatement." She snorts out an abrupt, partial laugh, and hesitates for a second before knocking politely on his door.

Nothing.

She leans closer to the door, listening.

Nothing.

Rae tilts her head to the side, her eyes sparkling as she reaches for the door handle, holding it lightly in her hand for a few seconds, as if afraid she'll break it.

Then she carefully tries it.

Locked.

Rae scrunches her eyebrows together, slightly confused. His door is rarely, if ever, locked. "Chris. You in there?" She knocks again, this time a little more vigorously. "You doin' okay?"

Nothing.

Rae breathes in deeply and lets it out slowly. Eventually she shrugs, turns from Chris' locked door, and continues to her room. She immediately plops down heavily on her bed, laying her head on her pillow, and propping it up just a little with another pillow.

She stares blankly at the ceiling. She'd been so lost recently. And Sam had helped her, comforted her on her angry journey towards madness. She wasn't sure who she was, what her purpose was. She's Death. She's been Death for nearly forever. But she wanted more. She's had the moniker longer than humanity has had language. Death has only recently been given its more concerning definition by those who think they're in the know. But that's not who she is. Though it is who she can be.

They did the same thing with Sam. The Devil. Lucifer. Samael. They corrupted his name because they thought they knew. The Devil is a

nice guy. A neat freak. A lover of books and comics. Smart. Fun to hang out with. Witty and charming. And handsome as the Devil, as they say.

“Ha.” She snorts.

A single tear rolls down her cheek to her pillow. And then another.

Every second of every day of her existence, Death has been witness to the worst things imaginable. At this very moment she is everywhere, sitting with the dead and the dying. The old and the young. Those who’ve lived a lifetime, decades, years, days, and sometimes just minutes or seconds. Or not at all.

And it’s heartbreaking.

Rae wipes the tears from her eyes with the long sleeves of her dress as she considers some of her relatively recent, more extreme actions.

“So I went a little unbalanced.” She chuckles. “Just a smidge.” She holds up a finger and thumb closely, almost touching. “Hey. I could’ve gone all out.” She grins mischievously. “But I didn’t. Lucky them.”

Death targeted the evil and obliterated them spectacularly. She violently murdered the not so innocent, hoping it would give her purpose, make her feel better about the one’s she couldn’t save.

It didn’t.

It wasn’t who she was. It wasn’t part of the role she was given.

At first, she enlisted Sam in her quest to find herself. And then when she’d gone too far into her own nightmares, she challenged Sam. She even killed his two best friends, briefly. And she knows, that in her

overwhelming rage, she would have killed her siblings if that were possible.

It's not.

She murdered her own father over and over because he let her. He understood the pain, her cathartic need, and played his part to help her find the right path as she wandered mindlessly down the wrong path.

But of course, it was never possible for her to kill him. It was just allowed in the moment. It was meant as a release. It failed.

Just thinking about it, she can almost feel that rage again. She has to reach within and contain herself. She's fairly certain, that at some point in the future, she'll let loose again. She'll come full circle with her loss of sanity. She feels like it wasn't the first time, that she'd done it before. Perhaps many times. But she's not sure. If so, it's being kept from her, which makes it more obvious than hidden.

Rae's thoughts circle back to her youngest brother. While Sam had joined her on her path, Chris saved her before she had gone too far down that path. He stepped in and made it all go away as if it never happened. He pulled her from madness with the same ease he does everything. He gave her the choice to continue with her madness, or for him to make it so it never happened.

So now, in many ways, it never happened.

But it did.

They chatted, brother and sister.

They had a lovely breakfast at the farmhouse with new friends. “The most perfectly toasted toast”, Chris has said. “And fresh-squeezed orange juice.” She chuckles.

And then they went home for a while and just hung out. They made cutout people from colored construction paper to add to those he’d already been working on. Paper, markers, glue, and tape. It was fun, and simple.

He was back to playing the child. Eleven. Eleven and a half.

And all was good again. Well, not good, but better. She still struggles.

Rae thinks for a second to Chris’ locked door, wondering if he’s inside laying on his bed just as she is. For all she knows, if she were to open the door, the room just wouldn’t exist for that moment. She feels like things may only exist when they’re necessary.

“I should be mad at you, I suppose.” Rae tries, but just can’t. “I’m not. But I should be.” Her eyes darken just a bit. “Why won’t you let me be mad at you?” She closes her eyes, basking in the darkness, wondering if the things in her room she can’t see, or hear, or touch still exist.

There’s probably nothing to be mad about. She’s fairly certain Chris just sent Sam away. At Sam’s request. To finish what she had started. He wanted to save as many of them as he could. He’s out there somewhere, and she just can’t feel him.

“Or maybe I’m wrong. Maybe you’re dead.” Rae breathes out heavily. “Maybe you’re sitting there... somewhere... just waiting for me to find you... and take you home. Maybe... maybe I just haven’t found you yet.”

She remembers her father telling all of them on multiple occasions that everyone has to die at some point. It’s what makes living so wonderful. She thinks she understands that. Kind of.

“Such a cliché, though.” She sighs again, this time uncomfortably. “But I get it. I really do.” Her eyes flicker in their darkness. “But we don’t get to experience wonderful... do we?” She scrunches her brow. “Or do we?”

Her eyes still closed tightly, she remembers two sisters burning as she stood in their doorway, just watching, wanting to help, but powerless to do so. So she did what she was there to do. She sat with them afterward, showing them that their parents would go on. It would be difficult, but they would go on. And then she took them away to what her family calls home, her father’s special place, to exist in a very different way. But not to live. The joy of living was over.

“The joy.” She mutters, unconvinced.

But she thinks that never happened. Not anymore. But she’s not sure. Chris reset so much of what she went through during that whole mess. She assumes those sisters are still living, growing, enjoying their lives. Maybe the joy was in getting to grow old.

“Hmmm.” She considers.

If Sam did continue, alone, down the path taken by his sister, maybe he found what she’d been looking for. And it would totally make sense if he figured it all out and got there. The Devil was neat, methodical, and organized. He wouldn’t be slowed down by all the baggage that Death carries with her.

And then, in an an instant, her eyes flash open, pulling much of the darkness from the room. “Well then...” Her eyes widen as she turns her head to the side and stares down the empty hall. “... I’ve got a few things to wrap up. Then I’ll figure out where you are... and I’ll meet you there.” She snorts, pushing both lips out and scrunching her brow as she considers. “You’re gonna need a sidekick. Or. Maybe you can go back to being my sidekick.” She tilts her head slightly. “Yeah, you’re definitely the sidekick.”

She dances to her door, and skips down the hall, making sure that her bare feet touch the floor as they should. She’s breathing. Her heart is beating. She feels both cold and warm at the same time.

She’s happy.

Rae makes a quick stop at Chris’ door and knocks loudly, abruptly, letting her newfound enthusiasm lead the way. “He’s just not here.” Her voice is gleeful and out of breath. “He’s not dead. He can’t be. I’d know. He’s gone somewhere. He’s just not here.” She turns and starts down the stairs. “Why didn’t you just tell us... tell me?”

She glances over her shoulder, for a moment forgetting to let her feet touch the steps.

“You’re so... weird... sometimes. Quack. Quack.”

She glides down the stairs and skips out the French doors onto the back patio as the blackness begins to pour from her, enveloping her, taking her first to her place...

# 3

... and then instantly to Sam's place, to just a moment after she'd left. For just a few extra heart beats, she stays hidden in her darkness.

Smiling.

Still happy.

"My best friend..." The dead woman is again sitting on the swing hanging from the giant tree of old greens and ugly browns. Her voice remains low and soft, barely a whisper, sounding painful. "My best friend... is..." She hesitates, feeling something nearby. "...the devil."

It's been another three years. Not just a half hour. Not just a moment.

The dead woman pushes on the ground with her black, booted feet as she gently moves back and forth, her head hung low. She's been crying. She's always been crying. She lets out a short, stutter of a laugh. "My only friend." She blinks old tears from her eyes, replacing them with new tears. "He's also my..."

With a grinding, oily boom the thick black mass is back, as Death reveals her presence, swallowing the entire area just in front of the swing.

The dead woman lets out a shriek of terror, her face contorting with the madness she succumbed to long ago. Her knuckles go white as she can barely hold on to the swing as it violently shakes back and forth.

Slowly, Death pulls herself from her place of darkness, very gradually, theatrically, crawling from the shadows, drawing the inky black void into herself, leaving an immense hole of nothingness where the lawn chair and fence once stood.

And then with a sudden pop, it all rebuilds itself just as it was.

Sam may be gone, but this is still his place. And this place is necessary.

Death has a wide smile on her pale, beautiful face.

The dead woman on the swing pulls back farther, unsure of what new thing is happening in her personal misery. This is most definitely not in her script.

“Fuck it.” Instantly, Death’s hand tears through the fabric of this false reality, grabbing the dead woman by the throat, violently pulling and lifting her from the swing. “What’s the harm in trying?” Her voice is a menacing, dark, yet oddly girlish, whisper.

Still happy.

With a flick of her wrist, Death throws the screaming young woman high into the air, far above the ancient, dying tree, where her body explodes into a wet, black powder. Time seems to slow as the greasy, black mess clings to the air, struggling to scatter into the wind. And then, in the blink of an eye, time seems to catch up, instantly reforming the inky blackness into a vague shape of the body of the young woman. Quickly, it pulls everything back down to the swing, becoming the child-murdering, dead woman again, ready to continue on her hellish journey.

The dead woman’s eyes rapidly open and close with absolute panic as she lets out a high-pitched scream of madness until her lungs are empty. Then she takes a long, ragged breath, and screams again until blood runs from the corners of her eyes and mouth, pouring from her nostrils over her upper lip, turning her teeth bright red.

Her face is a broken mess of pain and confusion.

She is insanity.

Death stands there with her eyes pouring blackness into the air like thick smoke. Through this pretense of anger, she’s grinning slyly, like a child trying not to get caught being naughty.

Death whispers low and dark. “He’s out there somewhere... doing something I couldn’t do on my own.” She glances just to her right, looking down slightly, turning her grin into a full-fledged smile. “Something we started together.” Her eyes go from black to a bright, lively brown. “I’ll be off to join him soon.”

The tall, broad figure of Michael approaches from the garage area and steps up next to his sister, putting a brotherly arm around her shoulders. “Hey Sunshine.” He squeezes her gently, looking at the terrified dead woman, breathing rough and shallow, her face and mouth covered in blood, tears pouring down her cheeks as she clings to her childhood swing. “So how’ve you been?”

“Good.” Rae motions with her head towards the young woman. “We’ve... we’ve been working through some things. Figuring some things out.”

She grins big.

She’s happy.

# 4

Chris glances back at Rae, bringing her into existence as he last saw her. For a split second she appears to be grinning wildly. But then she's not. For a split second she's standing alongside a broad shadow. But then she's not.

She sits in the grass, while Sam's empty body lays next to her, his eyes closed as if he were merely sleeping. She holds his lifeless hand between both hers as she quietly cries to herself, looking down at her best friend.

"He isn't with me." She sniffles loudly. "He's not here."

“No. He’s not.” Chris looks up to the stars, as one by one, they begin to fade from existence.

The sky begins to gradually darken. The moon is no longer there.

Rae continues to hold the hand of the body his eldest brother wore for so long. But now he’s gone. And Chris is heartbroken. Every time it reaches this point, he’s completely heartbroken. It changes him. He turns and walks away with the two young children, Maxwell and Annabelle. And with each step he takes, reality flashes in and out of existence, and a thundering noise echoes through the universe as it shakes.

The children, one to his left, one to his right, don’t seem to notice. They calmly walk, holding the hands of this total stranger they’ve known their entire existence. Then, in an instant, the dark sky and flashing whiteness is gone, and the thundering sound fades to nothing. The moon again sits comfortably in the sky, large and bright, surrounded by an eternity of bright stars. Everything is new.

Right now the only thing that matters to Chris is the two children. He needs to get them to their new home, to a new set of parents who will only remember them as a family. Even Max and Annabelle will soon forget the way things used to be. Chris made a promise to Sam that he’d take them away, and place them together as brother and sister with truly loving parents. Something they’ve never known.

Nine-year old Max will never realize the pain of being murdered by his mother and uncle in a garage because his mother was a selfish, evil

creature who lacked basic, human understanding. Chris looks over to Max. The boy is not typical. He's quite different than most kids his age. He doesn't talk, and he sees things in unique ways, which Chris not only understands, but also finds quite refreshing.

And there's Annabelle, who won't have her life ended the night before her eighth birthday as her mother violently drowns her in a bathtub surrounded by beautiful princesses, a big-eared mouse, and a goofy duck in a sailor suit. She had just wanted to play at the park the next day, for her birthday. That's all she wanted. Nothing more. Nothing special. But instead, her mother held her under the water as she struggled and fought to take a breath and stay alive. Her mother was broken.

Chris' eyes go bluer as he becomes mildly agitated. The moon pulls against its orbit and distorts just a little before before being allowed to continue on its way.

Annabelle, holding her favorite stuffed animal, a monkey she named Mr. Nibbles, looks up at Chris. She's too young to judge a person's age, but she knows he's an adult. He appears to be a young adult like her teacher at school. And he's dressed nicely, with a brown, leather jacket; blue jeans; and perfectly clean, white, running shoes.

Annabelle approves. She may only be seven, but she already has an appreciation for how hard it is to keep nice shoes nice.

She thinks he must be kind of young, because older people don't care as much about how they look and don't dress that nice. At least all the older people she knows are like that.

"You know... Miss Finch had her twenty-fourth birthday this year. Before Christmas break." She grins, remembering. "And we had a cake and everything." She's testing him. She's a very smart little girl. Her mother had once said that she was too smart for her own good, whatever that's supposed to mean. She sounded angry when she said it.

"I remember." Chris gives her a sweet smile. "Chocolate with milk-chocolate frosting. Yum."

"Very yum." She giggles. "I didn't know you were there." She looks a little confused.

"I was."

To Annabelle, Chris looks about the same age as her teacher. Maybe even a bit younger. She makes a 'hmp' noise as she looks more closely at him. Unlike Miss Finch, who's fairly short for an adult, with short, dark hair, he's very tall with longish, blond hair pulled back in a pony tail.

"You're very handsome... for a boy. Boys aren't usually so pretty. I mean..." She scrunches her nose. "... some are. But not usually. And you're extra pretty. Kind of." She giggles. "For a boy."

He lets go of Annabelle's hand for just a second, taking a blue beanie from his pocket, putting it on, and pulling it down over the top of

his ears. His big, blue eyes light up as he produces a goofy smile for the two children. Then he takes her small hand back in his own and gives it a gentle squeeze. “For a boy.” He purses his lips, giving it some thought.

Annabelle looks up at him. He looks mischievous. Like he’s trying to get away with something. She recognizes it from all the times she snuck candy to bed, trying not to get caught by her mother. One time she snuck an entire bag of red licorice under her pajama top.

“Would it be better if I were a girl...” He considers. “... like a pretend sister or something?”

Annabelle thinks hard, almost tilting her head to one side like Chris’ sister does when she’s thinking. This makes Chris smile even brighter, enjoying the many lifetimes of memories passing before him.

“I’m not sure.” She tries picturing it. “But it’s okay... being a boy is fine. Having a sister... or brother is something I’ve never had before.” She looks over at Max. “Until today.”

And in the blink of an eye, Chris is a much shorter, female version of himself. She’s small and thin with the same blonde hair pulled back in a long ponytail. She’s still wearing the blue beanie, but now has on faded, blue jeans; a thick, black belt; an oversized, white blouse; and a very trendy, black, short faux-leather jacket. And she’s barefoot, as a subtle nod to her sister who never wears shoes. “Yeah, sisters and brothers are a lot of fun... most times.”

Annabelle can still see the look of mischief.

“Wow.” Annabelle’s a bit in awe. She stops for a second, bringing Chris and Max to a stop alongside her. “That’s amazing. You’re amazing.”

Max glances up at Chris, but seems completely unaffected by his sudden change in appearance. Instead, with his free hand, he holds up the toy car he’s been carrying and makes the sound of a motor while spinning one of the wheels. “Mmmmmmmmm. Mmmmm.”

Adjusting her grip on the now smaller hand holding her own, Annabelle pulls them forward, continuing their walk. “I didn’t know people could do that.” She thinks Chris is now definitely younger than Miss Finch. Much younger. He’s probably a teenager.

As the sun goes down, better revealing the pale moon, there’s a noticeable soft, blue glow lighting the way. Annabelle glances up at Chris, seeing that her big, blue eyes are lighting up even more than usual, illuminating the night. Annabelle thinks she’s even prettier than she was as a boy. But she decides not to say anything. That would be rude.

Max continues to spin the wheels of his car with one hand, making it drive through the blue night as he squints his eyes, seeing the car as if it were driving through the glowing sky.

“Your family’s really different...” Annabelle is sure they’re magical, like Harry Potter. “... aren’t they?”

Chris considers. “Sometimes yes. Sometimes... not so much.” She shakes her head and grins.

“Hmmm.” Annabelle glances over to Max. “Sam was super sparkly, you know.” And then she looks back up to Chris. “Even more this time than the first time, when I met him.” Her and Max had said goodbye to Sam just before he’d gone away. To them, just a few minutes ago.

Chris purses her lips and quickly nods her head. “Yeah. He’s always sparkly.” She looks down to Annabelle. “But not everyone can see it. You’re one of the special ones.”

Max tugs Chris’ hand several times without looking away from his flying car.

“Yes. Of course.” She squeezes the young boy’s hand gently. “You too, Max. I know. You saw it too.”

Max laughs loudly, abruptly, and then pulls his car down and puts it in the front pocket of his hoodie.

Chris looks Max directly in the eye, knowing that he understands what’s happening around him better than most. Something his murderer had failed to recognize. He had understood everything that had happened in his short life, right up until the moment his mother plunged a knife into his chest. He didn’t understand that at all.

For just a couple seconds, there is nothing but Chris walking alone through a black void, a nothingness, her hands still outstretched as if leading the two children at her sides. The air buzzes and rumbles low and menacingly. The look of mischief on her face is no longer there, replaced by an intensity the real world has never experienced.

And then everything is back, and she looks to Annabelle. “We’ll cut through the neighbor’s yard and come in through the back.” She stops, and takes a deep, calming breath, squeezing both children’s hands reassuringly.

“Does...” Annabelle almost can’t find the words she’s searching for. “... mom... and dad know we’re on our way?” She lets go of Chris’ hand, confusion in her eyes as her reality begins to transition. “Are... you our babysitter?”

She’s starting to forget. And that’s a good thing.

Chris looks down to Max, who has his eyes closed and seems to be enjoying the warm breeze. “And so are you. Gradually.” She grins happily. “And that’s a good thing.”

Annabelle closes her eyes for a few seconds. They feel dry, and closing them kind of tingles and burns in a good way.

“Not really. Just a friend of the family, I suppose.” Chris lets go of Max’s hand. “And I really should get you both home.” She puts a hand on Max’s shoulder and guides him forward as they continue their walk. “It’s nearly dinner time. So we kinda have to hurry a bit. So you’re not late.”

Her eyes feeling a little better, Annabelle smiles sweetly while unconsciously rubbing her bare arms.

“Oh.” Chris starts removing her short, faux-leather jacket. “You’re cold.”

“Yeah, just a bit. All of the sudden.”

She places the jacket over Annabelle's shoulders. "Take this. I don't really need it."

"Are you sure?" She feels so grown up in the jacket. "You're not cold?" The jacket is still warm from Chris' body heat. And it smells nice. Like fresh flowers.

Chris nods and then shakes her head all in one motion. "I don't think I've ever been cold... or warm come to think of it." She glances around, letting her big eyes look to the sky for a quick second, causing the moon to briefly turn blue. "Though I've pretended plenty of times. It's fun to pretend. Sometimes I think everything is just pretend."

The trio walks to the end of the block and around the corner in brief silence, only their footsteps sounding in the night.

Then, abruptly. "You don't sparkle... like your brother." Annabelle furrows her brow as she considers.

"Nope." Chris lets out a short chuckle. "I do not."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I never really thought about it." She begins to sparkle like Sam, with the air all around her lighting up like a million fireflies in the night. "I can, though... if you'd like?"

Max looks up and stops. His face lights up with a huge smile as he reaches out with both hands, carefully touching the air around Chris' head and in front of her body.

“No.” Annabelle giggles. “You don’t have to.” Like Max, she touches the air and feels a tickle go from her hand straight down her arm and then back up again. “You should just be you. I think that would be best. You can even be a boy again... if you want.”

Chris grins. “Maybe later.”

“You do smell like the prettiest of flowers though. Even when you were a boy, you did. I noticed right away.” Annabelle pauses. “And that’s pretty nice, really. Kinda like sparkling... but for the nose.”

It’s Chris’ turn to giggle. “You’re a very smart little girl, Belle.”

The young girl smiles incredibly wide at being called by her favorite nickname. She wonders how Chris knew.

They arrive at the back way into Max and Annabelle’s yard. It’s a short, gravel alleyway with a crumbling, stone fence around the yard. There’s a big, arched wooden gate. It’s closed, and there’s some broken tree branches gathered up against it.

Annabelle, looks up at Chris. “It’s locked from the inside. Dad...” She hesitates, thinking for a second. She feels like she’s remembering something that never actually happened. “... dad doesn’t like us going out this way. He says the alley can be a little scary sometimes.”

“Well. Then we’d better get inside.” Chris reaches for the brass handle.”

“It’s locked.” Annabelle scrunches her eyebrows and looks at Chris oddly.

“Oh.” Chris widens her eyes comically, as if she’d momentarily forgotten. “Right. Locked.” She extends both hands, closed tightly into small fists. “Pick one.”

Max immediately taps Chris’ left hand.

She flips the hand over, opening it, showing a big, brass key. Unlike the gate itself, the key is shiny and new. “Good job, Max.” She uses the key to open the gate lock, which amazes Annabelle.

“I knew you were like Harry Potter.” Then she quickly looks Chris up and down. “Or maybe Hermione.”

Chris lets the two children through the gate, and then walks through behind them, and closes and locks the gate. She then playfully tosses the key back and forth several times between her hands, quickly grabbing it in one hand and closing both tightly. Then she opens both hands and the key is gone.

Max laughs loudly, touching both of Chris’ hands to see that the key is actually gone.

“I just knew it.” Annabelle giggles. “Definitely Hermione.”

The yard is fairly large and recently mowed. There’s a large flower garden off to the side, which makes Chris think of her father. She smiles brightly. It was a nice touch.

There’s a swing set and slide setup in the center of the yard facing the back of the low, brick house.

Max immediately runs to the slide, climbs the short ladder, and slides down, laughing loudly. As the two girls walk to the swings, Max runs back around and climbs the ladder again, sliding down with the same roaring laugh.

There are three swings, and Chris chooses the middle one and sits down. Annabelle sits in the one to Chris' right, and they both gently swing back and forth. Max sits at the top of the slide and pulls out his toy car, again making engine noises as he pushes it through the sky while squinting at it with one eye closed.

"Those other people were your brothers... and your sister? Right?"

Annabelle can see her mother through the big kitchen window facing out to the backyard. She knows it's her mother, though she's never met her before. She also wasn't actually present when all Chris' siblings were there together, but she feels like she was. Like she was just hidden away for a few minutes to give focus where focus was needed.

"I know Sam of course. He was the one that helped me find Mr. Nibbles when he wandered off." She smiles down at the stuffed monkey she's holding tightly in the crook of her arm. She'd totally forgotten that she was carrying it the whole walk. But then she thinks back to putting Chris' jacket on, but doesn't remember having it with her. But it was there when she remembered, or when she needed it to be.

“Yeah. That was all of us.” Chris uses her feet to push herself a bit higher in the swing. “My older sister. Rae. She’s the eldest. My brother Sam who’s a bit younger than Rae. And my other two big brothers, Mikey and Gabe. The middle brothers.”

“So you’re the youngest?” Annabelle pushes herself a bit higher to match Chris. “Like me.”

Max slides down the slide again, this time feeling a bit braver, doing it backwards, laughing loudly. He looks over to Annabelle for approval.

She nods and smiles. “Nice job. That looked really cool.”

Chris glances sideways at the little girl. “You’re pretty grown up for seven.” She remembers Rae telling her something similar recently. Just before their breakfast with the Millers.

Annabelle sits up a little straighter on her swing. She giggles, looking away, almost shyly.

Chris immediately nods and smiles. “But yeah... I’m the youngest.” Again, mimicking her sister, she tilts her head to the side, giving it some thought. “Kind of, but not really.”

“You know...” Annabelle sees her mother peer out the window, smiling and waving. She waves back. The feeling of never having met her is now gone. “... that’s not a very good answer.”

Chris gives it a quick thought. “I suppose not. But it’s the only answer I have.”

Max climbs onto the swing to Chris' left. He takes a second to hold his toy car up high, against the light of the moon, spinning the plastic wheels and making race car sounds.

Chris grins happily. "You know... that used to be mine when I was your age. My dad got it for me at a swap meet in the town center." She tilts her head slightly. "Well... a town center. It's always been one of my favorites."

Max scrunches his eyebrows together in thought, and then offers the toy car to Chris, holding it out to her, smiling brightly, and making a mumbling noise.

"No. You hold on to it, Max." Chris leans her head closer to the boy. "It's yours now. A gift from me... and my dad."

Max hesitates, not quite understanding. But then he tucks it neatly into the front pocket of his hoodie and pats it twice.

"Well..." Annabelle watches as her mother sticks her head out the back door. "... are any of them sparkly? Or just Sam?"

"Five minutes, you two." Her mother calls out. "Dinner's almost ready and you'll need to wash your hands before coming to the table. Maxwell..." She waits for eye contact. "Five minutes." She holds up a hand with all her fingers extended.

Max looks up and nods his head up and down strongly. Like his newly anointed sister, he only remembers them being family, and nothing else. None of the horrors that came before.

Their mother smiles sweetly and closes the door, going back to the kitchen.

Chris gives it a few seconds before answering Annabelle's question. "No. None of my other siblings sparkle. Just Sam." Anticipating the little girl's next question, Chris thinks for a second. "I'm not sure why. It's just the way it is, I guess. I've never really given it much thought."

"My dad says everyone is different in their own way." Annabelle looks over to Max. "Sometimes it's obvious, and sometimes it's not. But there's nothing wrong with it. It's a good thing to have differences. He says it would be a boring world if we were all the same."

Chris grins wildly. "Are you sure you're only seven? You know a lot of stuff for a seven-year old. And I should know. I spend a lot of my time being seven."

Annabelle thinks her new friend is pretty funny. "It's probably because I turn eight tomorrow. That's like a whole year older in just one day." She gets excited, thinking about all the fun they'll have tomorrow. Mom and dad are taking them to the big water park just outside of town. "At this point, I'm probably more eight than seven."

Chris can't help but grin. "That's right." She reaches over, gently touching the small girl on the arm. "Happy birthday, Belle."

"It's not until tomorrow. But thank you."

The three of them swing back and forth a few times, completely in sync, which makes all of them smile.

Annabelle remembers Chris making herself sparkle for just a few seconds. “You know... you don’t have to sparkle like Sam. Your eyes are the bluest I’ve ever seen.” She looks out into the yard. “They light up the whole backyard.”

Chris smiles sweetly.

They continue to swing silently for a couple minutes.

Then she chuckles to herself. “You guys wanna see what happens when I blink? Or just close my eyes for a few seconds?”

Max nods, bringing his swing to a stop, and setting his toy car in his lap.

Chris closes her eyes.

And the world disappears. There is nothing. No moon, no stone fence, no swing, no backyard, no house, no mom, no Max, and no Annabelle. No reality. Just Chris. For a very long time, she just exists. Alone. She does this every now and then, sometimes losing track of time for extended periods. She sits alone in the nothing. She almost forgets that she doesn’t have to be alone. That she can open her eyes.

She allows her heart to beat once. And hundreds of years pass. Then she opens her eyes and grins knowingly at the two children.

“What was supposed to happen? Nothing happened. Nothing at all.” Annabelle pushes out her bottom lip, confused, as if she was supposed to notice something big. And somehow missed it.

Chris nods. “I know. Nothing. There was nothing at all.” She stares out into the night. “Sometimes... it’s nice.”

The little girl giggles to overcome her confusion. “You’re kinda silly.” She sees her mother wave for them to come in, and brings the swing to a sudden stop, hopping off. She reaches over to take her big brother’s hand. “Come on, Max. Dinner’s ready.”

Max puts up a hand, palm towards himself, and waves goodbye to Chris. Annabelle giggles and gives Chris her biggest smile as they turn and walk towards the house.

Chris continues gently swinging back and forth, her eyes glowing blue in the night. This has been more enjoyable than she expected it to be, considering the circumstances.

As Annabelle reaches the patio, she remembers the leather jacket. “Ooh, I almost forgot.” She quickly removes it and turns back towards the swings.

All three swings are empty, with the center swing still moving steadily back and forth, throwing a vibrant blue out into the night. Annabelle grins and shrugs, and goes in the house to get ready for dinner.

# 5

Chris sits in a dark bedroom surrounded by toys in every corner. It's his bedroom. Or at least the bedroom he's always wanted. He hears someone enter from the downstairs patio, clear their throat dramatically, and tentatively call out to their father.

“Rae.” He smiles happily.

Chris is now a a seven-year-old boy with shoulder-length, medium-brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. He thinks this is perhaps the closest he will come to his actual likeness, if he in fact, has just one.

Along with all the toys, there's a set of bunk beds with the bottom converted to a fort with blankets hanging down on all sides, and a large bookshelf filled with toy dinosaurs made from various Lego collections accumulated over his seven years. He's proud of his setup. There's a group of Sauropods gathered around blue Lego watering holes, a forest-green triceratops standing under matching Lego trees with several dark-red Stegosauruses, and a half dozen Raptors, hiding in the shadows, near the back wall, definitely on the hunt.

Chris loves his dinosaurs. They contain a lot of memories, both real and not.

On the far, top shelf stands his all-time favorite. A huge Tyrannosaurus Rex, its large mouth open wide with Lego hinges, showing more white, Lego teeth than all the others combined. Chris and his father had put that one together on a rainy birthday, just last December. He remembers the fun they had, and the pride when it was all finished and they had not even one leftover piece. They almost always had leftover pieces, and this was a rare exception, which makes the toy feel a bit more special.

But Chris knows that's not how it really happened. It's a memory of a memory of a story he once told to one of his siblings. He remembers it perfectly, but likes to pretend that he doesn't remember which sibling it was. It feels more human that way.

And keeping the Lego dinosaurs shelved like that is also a bit of an inside joke. They had their time. He had a lot of fun with them, but eventually even that got boring, and he moved on. He tells himself that someday he'll take them all apart and use the pieces on another project.

Chris half smiles. "Probably not."

He sighs, looking all around him at his most recent project laid out so neatly on the carpeted floor all around him. He's been working on this one for quite some time. He's surrounded by little cutouts of various people made from all colors of thick construction paper, glue, and tape. Most have their faces roughly drawn on with colored markers. Others are done much more carefully, with a higher level of detail. But they're all just approximations made by small hands and a huge imagination.

Chris forces a smile, barely managing to briefly hide the sudden sadness on his face. Closing his eyes for a few seconds, he collects himself. He remembers how it helped relieve the burning and dryness in Annabelle's eyes earlier this evening.

Blinking away the tingling, he picks up two, brightly colored cutouts that appear to be a small boy and small girl, and sets them to the side. He has modifications to make.

Then there's a polite knock at his door, followed by some nervous shuffling outside in the hallway.

"Hmmm." Time outside his bedroom is moving at a different rate than that inside the bedroom. Maybe he'll fix that later.

“Probably not.” He forces another smile.

He hears a hand take hold of his bedroom door handle, grasping it for a few seconds, unsure, before finally trying it.

It isn’t locked.

But it is.

“Chris. You in there?” His sister’s voice, sounding timid and a bit confused. Which is quite unusual.

He considers inviting her in, but the time isn’t right. He’s not ready to have that conversation. The ending of this story is still in the making. And he knows his sister doesn’t stay timid and confused for very long. Better to let her work things out on her own for a bit. It isn’t her time yet.

She knocks again, this time a little more vigorously. “You doin’ okay?”

Still, he doesn’t respond.

As his sister walks away to her room, Chris returns to the task at hand, sorting through his colored papers, finding just the right shade of brown. Grabbing his scissors, he cuts a small, crude-looking monkey out of the paper, trying to give it a furry look. And using a black Sharpie, he draws a little face on the monkey and sets it on the cutout of the little girl, carefully placing it just under her little arm.

Then he grabs a dark brown piece of paper and cuts out a short jacket. Using a spot of glue, he attaches it to the little girl just over her shoulders. “It’s a little big right now...” He reaches up, pushing some stray

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*Martin E Ericson Jr*

hairs back behind his ear. "... but you'll grow into it soon enough." The seven-year-old, little boy smiles happily, enjoying the moment before the moment is gone.

## 6

“I don’t know why I’m fucking here.” Michael looks sullen, his dark curly hair framing a face fighting sadness with anger. “What’s the God damn point of this?” His big, brown eyes light up, become white as he curls the corner of his upper lip. “And I sound like my sister.” He almost smiles, but catches himself.

He plays the gruff beast, and loves doing so, but he’s got many other facets of who he is conveniently tucked away.

People walking nearby in the downtown area are shaken as an explosion goes off. Then another. And another.

“Fine.” Michael lets out a small growl as he watches the people react in their various ways to the explosions. “And... here we go.”

Everyone hesitates, 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.

Suddenly the big glass doors making up the entrance to the luxurious hotel burst open as dozens of people come running out terrified, not realizing what’s happening.

“So right now...” Michael half smirks. “... three assholes are fucking things up, and I’m supposed to take my dear sister’s place.” His slight smirk becomes a cocky grin. “I’m just guessing.”

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 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.

Markus, their leader, is an ex-Marine and is now the hotel’s night manager. He has the combination and knows that today the safe would contain more than \$200,000 in jewelry and cash.

“For money.” Michael shakes his head. He suddenly feels tired for some reason.

Their purpose was to rob the safe in the manager’s office. 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.

“For fucking money.” Michael looks through the settling dust, towards the front door of the building.

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, 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, open the safe, place everything in a duffel bag, head around to the back, and meet the others in the alley.

At least that was the plan.

Michael uses a massive hand to pry the remains of the big glass door open, holding it firmly, letting a few scared people run under his arm and through, before he steps inside. “But plans change.”

He looks over to the stairs where the three gunmen move down, step by step, attempting to shoot the few people who have fallen behind or have chosen to hide in the corners. But this time their guns only lock up and fail.

“It’s a God damn miracle.” Michael steps over the debris, towards the middle of the great room. “Though... I suppose... a more impressive miracle would’ve been to show up a bit earlier.” He considers for a moment, but then just shakes his head imperceptibly. “Must be a reason.”

Not yet seeing or hearing Michael through the dust and debris, the three gunmen move down the last few steps, tossing their guns aside. What they do see is a young woman in a long, black dress sitting in the center of the room, on a sofa, next to a dead man. Markus is positive she hadn’t been there just seconds ago. The young woman is holding the dead man’s hand. She looks up and grins wildly, like she’s actually happy to see the three gunmen.

And then as a blackness begins to swirl around her like a cloud of dark energy, she turns slightly, looking directly at her brother, giving him a sly wink as time slows to a crawl. “You shouldn’t be here, Mikey. This isn’t the way it happened.”

Michael snorts a small laugh. “There’s a lot of fucking things that I’ve run into... that I’ve been doing lately... that aren’t the way it happened.” He glances away from the gunmen, letting his eyes roll to look at his sister. “So either I’m doing them because something’s changed... or more likely... I’m doing them because something is really fuckin’ wrong here.” He pauses, considering. “Have you seen the moon lately?” He gives his head a quick shake. “Me neither.”

And time immediately speeds back up as Rae fades into her darkness, taking the dead man with her. “Thanks, Mikey. I do appreciate this.”

“Now... where were we?” Michael looks back to the gunmen and shrugs theatrically. “Oh yeah... I should’ve gotten to you earlier. Blah. Blah. Blah.” He shrugs.

“El Diablo.” The guy on the right mumbles, staring at the empty spot where the young woman just disappeared from.

“Not even close.” Michael laughs false and loud, getting their full attention. He enjoys making a good show of it.

“What the fuck!” Markus, still standing between the other two, pulls out his pistol, aiming carefully with shaking hands, and shoots Michael directly in the face six times, emptying his gun.

Michael watches as all six bullets freeze in the air just inches in front of his face and then fall to the ground with a clattering of metal on marble. “That’s some Matrix shit there.” He grins.

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.

“Are you actually sitting here... in front of me... after all this...” Michael extends both arms out towards their surroundings. “... praying?” He begins to light up out of legitimate anger. “How... fucking... dare you.” His voice is low and hard.

Both terrorists, on each side of Markus, are slowly lifted high into the air.

“Anyway...” Michael becomes pure, white light, instantly blinding Markus and the gunman raised in the air to his right. And completely burning away the closed eyelids of the one still praying while hanging in the air, causing him to scream out as he too goes completely blind. Michael slowly tilts his head to the side. “... I don’t think anyone’s listening right now.”

And then the two outer gunmen in the air burn so violently that the air and even the stone building around them catches fire, burning through reality itself into the great darkness beyond, and dropping what remains into Sam’s place to await further judgment.

Markus drops to his knees, bleeding heavily from dead eyes. He cries out in pain, dropping his gun, and puts his trembling hands over his bloody face.

The hotel lobby now empty, the last of the frightened people having found their way out, Michael explodes the remaining lobby windows outward one by one, just for effect, and throws all the furniture against the outside walls, clearing the center of the room completely. All without making a move of any kind. Which, if Markus could have seen, would have made it all that more frightening as he huddles on the marble floor with his executioner standing directly in front of him.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” Michael’s voice is deep and comes from everywhere at once. “Before your removal.”

Markus, now completely blind, and with a painful ringing in his ears, whimpers, trying to find his voice. He frantically reaches out and finds his gun, placing it under his chin and leaning his head back.

Click. Click. Click.

It fails, causing him to scream out in frustration. “Fuck!”

He weakly tosses the gun towards Michael as his last living act.

“This...” Michael whispers. “... is for my crazy sister.”

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 what’s left in his eye sockets to bulge, and 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 Michael,

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.

“Hmmm.” Michael coldly pretends to think. “How many times did she do this before ending you?” His face shows no emotion. “One more, I think.”

Again, Markus is slowly pulled forward towards Michael, 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 against the floor slowly towards Michael for the final time. “You’re not unconscious... because I won’t allow that.” His voice sounds hollow, bored, sad. “You’re not dead... because she 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.

“I’ll bet it hurts... doesn’t it?” Michael lets the light go from his being. “How many did you kill... or cause pain... before I arrived?”

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.

Michael puts on his best fake smile. “At some point... I’ll come back for you.”

Instantly, Michael is standing in a long, sterile, hallway. He’s been bouncing around like this for a while now, so at this point it doesn’t affect him much. But it’s not the way he normally travels, and he actually finds it a little uncomfortable.

With a quick glance around, to get his bearings, he begins a slow, purposeful walk down the long hall. When he nears the exit doors of the hospital, he makes a big show of sitting down in a chair next to a thin man in a grey suit. The two chairs are pulled close together, and with Michael being six foot four and two-hundred-and-forty-plus pounds, it makes the other man noticeably uncomfortable.

Michael takes a moment to study the thin man, staring right at him, trying to imagine what his sister was thinking the first time this happened, with her insanity sitting to the forefront. Just like last time, and all the times before, he knows he’s been brought to a specific place so that she doesn’t have to come to that specific place. At least not for the same purpose.

The man sitting next to him is not quite middle aged, with neatly-combed, dark hair streaked with small patches of silvery grey, matching his suit. Michael thinks he looks like a corporate douche. They sit together, yet alone, for another two minutes before Michael decides it’s time.

“You’re not supposed to be here, you know.” Michael’s voice is soft but threatening. He’s very good at that.

The man tries to appear lost in thought, not wanting to start a conversation with this massive stranger violating his personal space.

“Hey.” Michael, nudges the man’s arm roughly, and then smiles broadly, showing a mouth full of beautiful, white teeth.

The man begrudgingly turns and looks at the young man sitting next to him. “I’m sorry. What was that?” He tries to sound relaxed, unaffected.

“I said...” Michael instantly drops the smile. “... you’re not... supposed to be here.” He uses his head to motion around the area. “At this fucking hospital.”

A coldness goes through the man’s body from head to toe. He begins to sweat. “I don’t mean to be rude, but... please... I have a lot going on right now.” He turns away, completely uncomfortable by this sudden encounter.

“I don’t think you’re hearing me.” Michael leans closer. “You. Fucking. Shouldn’t be here.”

The man hesitates, searching for words stuck behind a nervous lump in his throat. “Look. 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.”

“Yes.” Michael grits his teeth as his upper lip curls. “And he’s near death upstairs because you shoved him down a flight of stairs.”

The man pulls back both from shock and fear. “I... I did no such thing.” He pulls himself to his feet to walk away from this lunatic.

“Sit down. Lawrence.” Without moving from his seat, Michael grabs the man’s right wrist, and pulls him back to the chair with such unnatural force that it breaks the back of the chair and both back legs, causing the broken wood to dig into the man’s back.

Lawrence 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 looks up from his magazine, and glances over with a blank look.

Lawrence’s face is contorted in pain as he screams. “What the fuck! I’ll have you fuckin’ arrested for this.” He looks around for a way to escape this madman.

“I seriously doubt that.” Michael’s voice is hard, matching the intense look on his face. “But maybe you could push me down a flight of stairs or something.”

“Are you fucking insane?” Lawrence glances up at the big man again, and quickly looks away. “Who the fuck are you?” His voice is a terrified whisper. “And how do you think you... fucking know me.”

Michael continues to glare at him, saying nothing at first, which just makes him more nervous. “That’s a lot of... fucks. Lawrence.”

Having enough of this, and intent on getting away from this angry giant, Lawrence quickly jerks forward to stand up. But Michael's big hand clamps down on his wrist, hard, pinning it to the arm of the chair. The man whimpers in discomfort as he gives his jailer a terrified look.

"Seriously. Please." Lawrence is more terrified than he's ever been in his life. "Please. Just let go of my arm. I won't tell anyone. I won't."

Michael's face remains stoic and blank as he tightens his grip, causing Lawrence to squirm in pain as bones are pushed towards their breaking point.

"Doesn't feel good to be on the other end of a bully..." Michael allows himself a chilling smile. "... does it?"

Lawrence looks down to the big hand on his wrist. "Seriously. I didn't push him down any stairs. He fell on his own. He's clumsy like that. He's my son for Christ's sake."

Michael sighs, rolls his eyes, and tightens his grip even more, causing a high-pitched whimper to come out of Lawrence. At this point the arm is broken, the bone shattered, but all Lawrence can feel is the iron-like grip.

"You said the same thing to my sister and she threatened to tear your God damn arm off and beat you to death with it." Michael chuckles imagining his sister doing just that. He's fairly certain she has at some point.

Lawrence's eyes bulge with pain as he lets out a small cry, and a look of confusion. "I have no idea what you're talking about." Sweat begins to run from his forehead down his face. "Look. Please. I don't know who you are, but I never pushed him. I've never harmed my son. I would never..."

"I dislike liars." Michael quickly releases Lawrence's wrist, flicking his arm back, smacking him in the mouth with the back of his hand. Instantly his hand is back to pinning his wrist to the chair.

Lawrence screams out again, bringing his other hand up to his mouth, checking for blood. "No. Honest. I'm not lying." With his free hand, he pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and wipes the blood from his mouth. "Please." His voice nearly breaks into a cry.

"I dislike liars." Michael repeats, a low growl.

Lawrence looks around for help. He looks to the man sitting just down the hall and pleads with bulging eyes.

The man continues to casually flip through a magazine. He glances up for a brief moment, but then goes right back to his magazine.

"You hit your son, Lawrence. Often." Michael squeezes his wrist just a little to get his attention. "A father doesn't hit his son. So repeat with me... I'm. Lying. I beat. My son." And with that, he pops him in the mouth with the back of his hand a second time.

Lawrence 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 hit

him.” Full of tears, his voice trembling, he looks down the hall for help again, but all he sees is that same guy, this time not even paying them any attention.

“How many times?” Michael snarls and gives his arm another squeeze, as a warning.

“Lots of times. I don’t know. Dozens.” Lawrence slouches forward in defeat, openly crying like a small child. “I don’t know why. I’m just tired. I’m stressed.”

“Weak, Lawrence. Weak.” And with that, Michael reaches over with his other hand, putting it over Lawrence’s face and slams his head into the plaster wall behind him so hard that it breaks through the other side.

Then Michael releases his grip on the man’s face, and stands up, reaching over and taking Lawrence’s handkerchief, and wipes the blood from his hand.

“Can you imagine... what it feels like to fear your own father?” Michael’s eyes go white hot just at the thought of it. “Well, I’m stressed too. And I’m tired too.” He adds. “And sometimes I just lose control.” He grins. “But not this time. Total control.”

Michael folds and places the bloodied handkerchief neatly in Lawrence’s lap. “I think my sister said it best when she said... ‘I take it you’re done beating up on kids.’”

Continuing his journey down the hall, Michael approaches the tall, young man sitting in the small group of chairs, staring right at him. Michael smiles politely. “Nice day. Isn’t it?”

The stranger says nothing at first, but continues to watch Michael as he walks past. “I don’t know... things are getting pretty dark.”

And that’s when Michael notices the smell of fresh, spring flowers in the air, pulling at a memory made hidden. He doesn’t quite understand the feeling. Nothing is hidden from Michael. It’s his job to be aware of everything, good and bad, so that he can act when action is needed.

He stops and slowly pivots, taking a moment to study this stranger sitting so confidently, and still staring directly at him. Michael isn’t accustomed to being challenged.

He enjoys it for several moments.

And then he immediately hates it.

The man sits tall and handsome, with longish, blond hair pulled back into a ponytail. He’s dressed nicely, with a brown, leather jacket paired with jeans and immaculate, white running shoes. His piercing blue eyes just stare. He has yet to blink.

Michael knows him. But doesn’t. He isn’t allowed to for the time being. And he isn’t allowed to question the impossibility of that.

Again, he feels challenged. He thinks it’s kind of odd considering what the stranger obviously witnessed. He looks back to where he left Lawrence with his head embedded in the wall.

“Was that...” The stranger uses his head to motion back to Lawrence. “... really necessary?” His voice is soft. “I mean...”

“Sam.” Michael chuckles. “You remind me of my brother. Sam.” He looks him up and down. “A little taller. A little younger, I think. Sam... with a bit of young Brad Pitt thrown in the mix.” He shakes his head. “I don’t like Brad Pitt.”

“Was. That. Necessary.” The stranger’s voice remains soft, but shows immense confidence.

Michael chuckles. “You work here? Or are you just visiting someone?” If there’s one thing he appreciates, it’s confidence.

Until he doesn’t.

“I’m here to see you.” The man’s eyes haven’t left Michael’s. And he still hasn’t blinked.

Michael returns his stare with a big grin. “Rae. My sister. You got a bit of... Rae going on...” He points at the stranger, swirling his hand about. “... in there, too.” His brain fights his confusion.

The young man leans forward in his chair and gestures back towards the other group of chairs with his head. “Well? I need to understand... why are we...” His voice hardens briefly. “we...” And then returns to soft and confident. “... choosing to meet violence with more violence.”

Michael glances in that direction, and then back to this strange man. Something is still nagging at his mind. That hidden thing. He can't feel that it's hidden, just that it's not there. Flowers.

“Just a little misunderstanding. And assholes like that... deserve... violence. Death. Destruction. Having their head put through a wall.”

“Was it necessary? Isn't there another way?” The man's eyes sparkle the bluest of blues. “We don't have much time left. I'd like to know... for next time.”

Michael's grin grows into a cocky smile. For the moment, he's decided to enjoy this confrontation, but he knows that if this guy keeps pressing him, that will end. Michael is quite aware of his limitations.

The stranger's expression doesn't change.

Michael quickly drops the smile. His limitations surpassed. “Are you trying to be intimidating?” He laughs hollowly. “If you knew me... if you weren't just some... fucking... stranger prying into my personal... fucking!... business, you'd know that I always do what's necessary. Nothing more. That's what I do... that's who I am.” He grits his teeth. “I. Am. Necessary. To keep people like you moving forward... and people like him...” He motions towards Lawrence. “... from moving forward.”

They stare at one another for a full twenty seconds.

And then Michael turns, about to walk away. “I think we're done here.”

The stranger abruptly chuckles. “Of course!” He shakes his head as he leans back, putting an arm up on the back of the chair next to his. “You... and Rae... you’re acting out because I need you to act out. I need that release of energy. It’s cathartic. I won’t do it... but I do... through you. Still not good though. Not good at all.” He’s not talking to Michael. He’s talking to himself.

Michael has been completely ignored for a few seconds, as if he weren’t even present.

“Shut. Up...” Michael’s irritation reaches well beyond his limits. “... you babbling idiot.” He shakes his head. “I’ve never seen anything like this in all my years. And I’m...”

“You’re older than you look.” The young stranger suddenly smiles brightly, now happy that he decided to revisit this moment. There’s something he’s always found enjoyable about Michael’s antics, as odd as that seems.

Michael makes a grand show of looking this human up and down. “You really do remind me of my brother, Sam.” He takes a couple steps closer to the man in the chair. “Except... he minds his own fucking business. Well...” He’s scrunches his thick eyebrows together in mock thought. “... most of the time.”

The young man casually stands up, making the two of them uncomfortably close, maybe just a foot apart. They are the same height, eye to eye. The young man might actually be a hair taller.

“You don’t wanna go there, buddy.” Michael’s cocky smile is back. He’s now squarely back in his element, and intends to thoroughly enjoy the next few moments. Hopefully without hurting the young man more than necessary. That would be unfortunate.

Reaching out, he puts the flat of his right hand on the young stranger’s chest. And his eyes flash white hot with anger. “Before I go...”

He pushes firmly on the man’s chest, intending for him to fall back to the chair, hard. But to Michael’s impossible surprise, the stranger doesn’t budge. Instead, he looks down at the big hand on his chest, like he just noticed it. And now, looking years younger, he has an annoying, childlike grin on his face. He’s enjoying the moment.

Again, Michael smells the fresh flowers, and the hidden memory is immediately unlocked. He remembers the story Rae told him about this exact moment when it happened to her.

“Chris?” He’s confused. “Fuck!”

And the world immediately goes black with a thundering, metallic crunch.

# 7

There's a rushed knock on Chris' bedroom door.

"He's just not here." His sister's voice is gleeful and out of breath. "He's not dead. He can't be. I'd know. He's gone somewhere. He's just not here." She runs down the stairs. "Why didn't you just tell us... tell me? You're so... weird... sometimes. Quack. Quack."

Chris, still sitting on the floor in the center of his room, surrounded by his paper cutouts, smiles. It's nice to hear her so happy. He knows how she'll react once he fills her in on the whole story. It's always the same. But for now, she's happy. And that makes him happy.

He reaches far to his left, just a bit under his bed and retrieves some light grey, almost-white construction paper he'd set aside for his latest creation. He pulls the scissors, tape, and glue closer, making a small pile just in front of him.

But then he stops and waits a few seconds, considering whether to begin or not. He reaches up to his bed and takes a small, black remote into his hand. He points it to the tv sitting on his desk and turns it on, quickly turning down the volume. It's an old timey cartoon with a duck and a squirrel, something from ages ago. Just a couple of anamorphic buddies on one of their wacky adventures. He thinks maybe he and Sam should go off on a wacky adventure. Change things up. Take a break. A mini vacation. Maybe he'll ask him the next time he sees him.

He watches the cartoon for a couple minutes, letting a small smile creep across his face, before adjusting himself, turning his whole body towards his bedroom door.

And he waits another twenty-three seconds.

There's another knock at his door. This time it's quiet, followed by a woman's voice. "Hey buddy, why's your door closed. Are you in there?"

She opens the door, forcing the darkness of the room to scatter to the corners, to hide behind the curtains and under the bed.

Her face lights up as she sees Chris sitting with his toys. Playing. She's shorter, like Rae, but built a bit thicker, like a female Gabriel or

Michael. Probably a gentle attribute of middle age. She has mid-length, very dark, curly hair tied up in a bun.

“Is everything okay?” Her big, brown eyes and white smile shine from the hallway. She’s a beautiful combination of both Rae and Michael, with just a bit of Sam and Gabriel sprinkled in for continuity. “Why are you sitting up here all alone?”

Chris shrugs, looking over to his mother. “I cleaned my room... and now I’m just playing.”

“Well. I can see that.” She glances around his room appreciating how neat and organized everything is. “You did a great job.” Even the top bunk of his bed is perfectly made, it’s fluffy, white pillow at one end with his blue sheets and Darth Vader comforter pulled straight and taut all the way down the bed.

“Yeah, I tried real hard.” He gives her a small grin.

“Was that your sister I heard run by in such a hurry.” She steps into his room and picks up some paper scraps and a ball of crumpled tape. Mistakes that he’d tossed aside for the trash. “I thought she was out back with your brothers.”

“Yeah. She is.” His blue eyes twinkle mischievously. “But this her knocked on my door and called me... weird.” Chris half smiles, letting the memory of her happiness chase away some of the oncoming sadness. “Well... she actually just said I was ‘so weird sometimes’.” He lets out a short snort of a laugh. “And then she quacked like a duck.”

“Ohhh, that’s just Rae being Rae.” His mother squats down beside him, leaning her head down to look him directly in the eyes. “She doesn’t mean it, honey. She’s just teasing. She teases all you boys. Your sister thinks it’s one of her sisterly duties.” She smiles big and bright.

“I know.” Chris does his best to give his mother an equally bright smile.

“So...” She stands back up, walking to the door. “How come you’re not outside on the beach... with your brothers and your father? I think they’re playing badminton or something.” She steps out into the hall, stopping to look back at Chris. “I’m sure they’d love to have you join in.”

Chris shrugs, locating some beige paper he’d set off to the side, and then returns his attention to the light grey construction paper from under the bed. He picks up the scissors, and pretends to try to remember how long to make the hair for his latest figure.

His mother watches from the doorway. “Are...” She hesitates, not wanting to press him too much. He’s always been the most sensitive of the bunch. “... are you sure everything’s okay?” She knows that he’ll tell her when he’s ready, and not a moment before. He always does. She scrunches her eyebrows together, trying to remember if that’s true or something convenient she just now made up.

Chris nods weakly, only half listening at this point, his attention off somewhere else. He temporarily sets aside the grey paper and scissors, and picks up the cutout boy and girl and monkey to make room. He folds

them neatly in half and leans back to carefully tuck them into the front pocket of his pants. Adding them to a never-ending wad of his cutout friends.

“Hmmm. Well... all right. We can let it be for now. But if you wanna come down and help me make dinner or just hang out, please do. I’d love the company.”

For a few seconds, Chris continues doing what he’s doing without answering, and then, almost as an afterthought, he looks up. “Okay. Maybe I’ll come down in a few minutes.”

She gives him a sweet look and nods silently.

“Maybe.” And he looks back to his project and begins sorting through a stack of paper setting various pieces off to the side.

She hesitates, but then turns and walks away to the the stairs.

“But probably not.” Chris mumbles.

## 8

There's a rapid knock at the apartment door. Then another. A short pause. And then another, more tentative knock. "Anybody home?" It's a young woman's voice. "I don't mean to be a bother. I'm your new neighbor... from across the courtyard. Blue swing on my balcony." She waits patiently for a full minute, enjoying the blue sky and warm breeze, before casually walking away.

Rae sits inside, on the kitchen counter, her bare feet swinging freely below her. She knows the young woman will come back. She's the one who will smell the smoke and call the fire department.

Rae has been sitting in various areas of the apartment, patiently, for three days. She started in the bedroom on the edge of the bed, of course, where her visit started. Then she moved to the far end of the couch in the living room, then to a chair at the kitchen table for a short time, and finally to the kitchen counter. She understands that it may be intrusive and a bit rude, but she believes she will be forgiven in the end. She almost always is.

An elderly woman painfully walks from the short hallway to the living room, stopping for a second to put a hand on the back of the sofa to brace herself, to catch her breath. She gets light headed and dizzy from at least one of her many medications. She's at least ninety.

"Ninety three." Rae says brightly, glancing over to the kitchen table and smiling wide. "Thank you very much."

Getting her balance back, the elderly woman shuffles into the kitchen and opens the fridge. She's wearing a long, pink robe, and fuzzy, blue slippers with broken holes in the toes. She could easily buy new ones, but these have become increasingly comfy over the past two years. Plus, they were a birthday present from her sister. She intends to wear them until she no longer needs them.

She glances to her left. "You're..." Then she looks to the table. "Her sister's ninety seven." Rae wiggles her toes as she waits. "I feel like that's a good, long life."

The old woman pulls a pack of deli meat from a plastic drawer and tosses it onto the counter far to the left of where Rae sits, to the other side of the stove. Then she grabs a half head of lettuce, a bright tomato, and a small jar of brown mustard, holding them awkwardly with gnarled fingers.

She lets the fridge door slowly close as she carefully shuffles over to the counter, neatly setting everything down, pointing at each item as she mumbles, as if deciding if she's forgotten anything.

"Mayo." Rae grins like a child helping her grandmother with lunch. Again she looks over to the table. "She's forgotten the mayo. I know... horrible stuff... but to each their own, I suppose."

"Yes. Yes. Yes." The old woman turns and shuffles back to the fridge, taking the mayo from the door shelf, and walking it back to the counter. "Mayonnaise."

She takes a well-worn, red pot and places it on the stove and then moves to the pantry shelf to get a can of soup.

"Licia." She holds up a can of soup to better see the label. She's forgotten her reading glasses in the other room. "Licia." She calls out, looking over to the bedroom doors at the end of a short hallway, just off the living room. "How does tomato..." She tilts the can to get a better look. "... tomato bisque sound?"

She waits, her hand shaking slightly as she holds the can high. "Licia. Tomato bisque. Does that sound good?"

There's no answer from the bedroom area.

The old woman makes a clicking noise with her tongue, shaking her head as she walks back to the counter. She opens the silverware drawer, searching for the can opener. For a second, she seems to look directly at Rae, still sitting comfortably on the counter. In the blink of her old eyes, she can see a young woman with long, black hair, pale skin, and a black dress. She's smiling brightly with kind eyes.

The old woman remembers her. And then, as quickly as she saw her, she is gone, and the old woman immediately forgets her.

Finding the can opener, the old woman places it on the can, and tries her hardest to squeeze the two arms to get it to pop through the top. But she can't get it to quite cut into the can. She sets it down, flexing a cramp from her twisted fingers, and decides to go get her sister, to see if she can manage it.

"Alicia and Allison. You remember." Rae reaches over, taking the can and opener, and smoothly opens the can. She sets the open can on the counter, and places the lid and opener beside it.

She first met them when they were children. They were supposed to die in a house fire. Burn to death. Alicia was fourteen, and Allison was ten. Now they're ninety seven and ninety three. She remembers them terrified and crying, crawling down the stairs, trying to avoid the heavy smoke in the house. Their mother had gone out to get something from the market. Something she'd forgotten for their dinner.

“Spaghetti sauce.” Rae glances to the table. “She was going to make spaghetti, but didn’t have any spaghetti sauce.”

The girls had turned the stove on to get started, but then forgot to turn it off while they waited for their mother to return.

A fire started. The house burned.

Death was there, waiting. Just as she is now. She’s always there. Everywhere, all at once. Waiting.

And they did burn.

But then they didn’t.

They were given their miracle. Chris first saved Rae from herself, and then saved the two children, as a favor to her, and because it was the right thing to do. He stopped the fire before it ever happened. Rae remembers. She was so happy that he went back to get them. Her family tends to not get involved. But it was the right thing to do. He didn’t save everyone. But he did save those two girls.

But he hadn’t simply gone back. He’d pulled the moment back to him. And then allowing time to move forward, altered the outcome. Her youngest brother, the odd duck, had abilities even the others couldn’t comprehend.

The old woman, Allison, shuffles back into the kitchen, her slippers rhythmically scratching away at the vinyl flooring. She looks oddly at the open soup on the counter, but doesn’t give it much thought. Her

memory has long gone. She picks up the open can and pours the soup into the pot sitting on the burner, spilling a few dribbles over the side.

“Ah.” She takes the red towel she has looped over the oven handle, and wipes up the small mess, leaving the towel lying on the stove. It’s just touching the burner.

She turns on the burner, and adjusts the heat to medium. Then she stands there for a few seconds, as if she can’t remember what to do next. She moves a crooked index finger through the air as if counting. Finally, she makes a tutting noise and shuffles over to her sandwich makings.

As the old woman lays out four pieces of rye bread and unwraps the small package of deli meat, the corner of the dish towel catches flame. It starts to burn towards it’s center, with the flames now leaping above the red pot. Ashes float through the air, just in front of Rae, crossing her body, and landing on the paper towel roll neatly tucked up against wall.

Rae shakes her head slowly side to side. She’s always known how Allison would die, and that’s the reason she’s here. That’s why she’s been waiting these last few days. She knows how everyone will die, and when. She knows before they are even born, before they ever exist. Still, she occasionally finds it incredibly difficult. This one particularly so. But at least they were given their lifetime.

She looks just to her left with sad, glossy eyes. And then back to Allison on her right, just past the stove.

The old woman finishes making the two small sandwiches while occasionally stirring the soup. She looks directly at the blackened towel and then the flaming paper towels, but has no reaction, and does nothing to upset it. It's as if she doesn't recognize the danger. Or no longer cares.

Rae looks back to the kitchen table, glaring, her eyes darkening. "So. We're just gonna let this happen." She breathes in and out several times, heavily. "I hoped maybe we were going to... do something... again. Just you and me. I thought maybe this would just be more sister brother time."

As the soup begins to bubble, the old woman ladles a big scoop into each of two small bowls.

Rae's eyes go pitch black. She balls her hands into tiny fists. "I feel like this shouldn't be happening. Not like this. Not again" Rae closes her eyes tight for a few seconds. "I hoped..." She breathes in deeply. "You didn't... undo... anything. You just postponed it." Her voice drops to a whisper. "I hoped."

Allison places everything on two wooden trays. Each has a small bowl of soup, a sandwich cut diagonally, and a cup of cold water straight from the tap.

Rae's voice remains a whisper, and her eyes go back to a natural brown as she looks to her immediate left, just in front of the trash bin where burning ashes are slowly raining down, starting small fires. "I'm sorry. Really. I'd like to help... but... I'm just here... because I'm

supposed to be.” She spares a quick glance towards the kitchen table. “I’d stop this... or at least do it differently... but it’s not who I am.”

Again, the old woman looks to the fire now lapping at the wooden cupboard above the paper towel holder. She can feel the heat on her face. She makes a tutting noise, and just looks down to the sandwich. “I wish we had a pickle. A pickle would make a tasty side.”

There’s another knock at the door. This time different. Firm but almost musical. Three quicks knocks, followed by one slightly heavier knock. And then a short pause, and another three knocks followed by the heavier thump.

Rae tilts her head to the side. It isn’t the same young woman. It’s not that time yet. She recognizes the knock, and the warmth that comes just after.

Another short pause. And a third set of knocks.

Allison, tray in hand, hesitates, hearing the knocking, but then walks to the hallway and to the far bedroom to bring her sister her lunch. She’ll be hungry.

Finally, there’s another series of melodic knocks at the door, then the shuffling of feet on the welcome mat, and a gentle clearing of his throat.

“That’s Gabe. Gabriel. My brother.” She looks to her left and puts on a big smile. “He’s here to help.” She then glances to the kitchen table. “Thank you. I’m sorry for getting upset.”

“Ally?” The voice on the other side of the door is soft and warm.  
“Do you have time for a short visit? I brought pickles.”

Gabriel stands outside looking at the number eighty-three placard on the door. It has a small piece of blue tape on it with ‘Licia and Ally’ neatly written in black marker. Sometimes the sisters forget the number, but never the names.

There’s another soft knock at the door. “Ally. It’s Gabriel.” He pauses, to give her a moment. “I’m sorry to stop by without calling first... but I brought some dill pickles.”

He reaches out and turns the handle, gently opening the locked door, and quietly walks in. He closes the door behind him, and re-locks it with a solid click of the deadbolt just above the handle. He looks over at the fire now consuming the trash bin, part of the counter, and the cupboard directly above. He glances around, listening for the smoke alarm.

“They’ve removed the batteries.” Rae looks down to her left.  
“Right?” And then nods. “They’ve been burning the toast a lot lately. Kept setting it off. It was becoming a bit of a nuisance.”

Gabriel gives his sister a glancing, sad smile. “Hmmm.”

And the fire and smoke are gone. The red towel is hung neatly over the oven handle. The burner on the stove is off. The fire never happened.

Rae looks over to the kitchen table with a beaming childlike smile on her face.

Having left the tray of food with her sister, Allison comes shuffling down the hallway, through the living room and back into the kitchen. She takes the second tray, and carries it to the sofa.

She sits down, taking a few seconds to catch her breath, and that's when she acknowledges Gabriel, still in the kitchen, standing near the front door. "Would you like half my sandwich?" She begins to carefully pull the two halves from one another. "I can never eat the whole thing. I nibble on the second half out of guilt... not wanting it to go to waste. I should probably have just made a half sandwich."

"Thank you." Gabriel nods politely, and walks closer. "May I." He gestures to the other end of the sofa.

"Oh yes. Of course." She picks up her napkin and sets his half of the sandwich on it, moving it to the center of the long coffee table. "If you would be so kind as to get another bowl and spoon, I'll share the soup too. I'm not really in much of a soup mood, but my sister requested it. Tomato bisque, she said. So that's what I made."

Rae turns her head slightly, and smiles warmly.

"No. No. That's okay." Gabriel takes the napkin and sandwich and sits at the opposite end of the sofa. "I'm really not much of a soup person. The sandwich will do nicely. And I brought some really good pickles. The sour kind." He pops open the lid and pulls two pickles out, placing one on his napkin and the other at the side of Ally's sandwich.

“Oh my... just what we needed...” She thinks for a second. “... Gabriel.” And takes a loud slurp of tomato soup off her spoon. “Are you sure? It’s actually quite nice.”

“No thank you. I’ll stick with the sandwich and pickle.”

“Get yourself some water, or a juice from the fridge.” Allison takes a nibble of her pickle. “Oh. This is a good sour one.”

Gabriel politely takes a couple bites of the half sandwich while enjoying the old, black and white cartoon playing on the TV. The volume is turned down low, but he knows the episode by heart.

“Duck and Squirrel.” Gabriel laughs at their shenanigans. “My father loves these guys. Sam too. We had the whole collection on DVD when I was a kid.”

“Hmmm?” Allison seems a bit lost. She takes another nibble from her pickle and wipes her fingers on some balled-up tissue laying on the side table.

“They were a little before my time... if you can believe that.” Gabriel laughs at the exchange between the two animals. “This is the one where Duck has to get dressed up for an award show. He wears a chicken suit.” He chuckles. “A duck. Wearing a chicken suit.”

The old woman looks over her shoulder to the bedrooms. “Licia. Gabriel’s here if you’d like to come say hello.” She listens for a second.

“My older brothers would love this.” He holds the sandwich up briefly before taking another bite. “Both of them. Especially Mikey.”

Allison's sister doesn't respond to her call.

"She's been a bit under the weather recently." Allison looks to Gabriel. "So I'm sorry... I don't think she'll be up to it today."

Gabriel nods politely. "So how have you been, Allison?" Quickly finishing the last bite of his sandwich and then pickle, Gabriel uses the napkin to wipe the crumbs from his mouth and crumples it in his hand.

The old woman turns her head towards him, but keeps her eyes on the TV. "Good. Good. Getting old. This week's been a handful, with Alicia getting sick and my having to play nurse. It's been a bit of an ordeal to say the least."

Gabriel nods while continuing to watch Duck and Squirrel.

"Licia!" Allison calls out, rather loudly, over her shoulder. "Come say hello to Sam. He brought pickles."

"Gabriel." He looks towards the bedroom at the end of the hall.

"Oh. Yes. Yes. Yes." She puts a hand up to her forehead, tapping it twice. "I'm sorry. I knew that. Slip of the tongue. Gabriel."

From her place on the counter, Rae can see the little girl within Allison, sitting on the couch, her feet not touching the floor. It's one of Gabriel's gifts.

Rae's also there while the two sisters, ten and fourteen, are crawling out the back door of their childhood home. But then the patio roof caves in, falling on them, trapping them until the fire could reach them and burn them beyond recognition.

But of course, that never happened.

Well, it did.

But then it didn't. Much like the fire today.

"Licia. Alicia!" Allison calls out sharply, looking somewhat irritated.

Gabriel stands up, gently tossing his napkin on the side table, and motions towards the hallway. "Would it be okay?" He looks to Allison.

Rae can feel Gabriel's warmth pushing around the great room. All her brothers can be charming, and even she can show a few moments of charm and charisma when necessary, but Gabriel exudes something greater than that. It goes with his role.

"It's kind of fun to watch him work." Rae grins directly to her side. "He's me... but he works in the light. While I work in the dark." Her small grin turns into a child's pout. "Hmmm. I like that. I'll have to remember that. Maybe I'll get us some shirts."

"Of course. Of course." Allison takes a series of small bites of her sandwich, holding it like a raccoon with both hands. "She'll be so happy to see you. She hasn't been feeling well for a few days now." She frowns, letting some crumbs fall from her lips. "Did I already tell you that... she's been a bit under the weather. I've been playing nurse."

Gabriel takes a few steps towards the hallway.

Again, Rae looks directly to her left. "Are you doing okay? We can go, if you'd like? I can come back alone to get your sister."

The elderly woman standing next to Rae, at the edge of the counter shakes her head slowly. She'd have tears in her eyes if she could. But Alicia's not unhappy. In fact, she feels great, and happy, and a tremendous love for her little sister.

Alicia is with Rae, both here and there, in the void. She has been for three days. It feels like just a few minutes to Alicia. They've been waiting for the fire that would take her sister, and bring them together for the trip home. But now she knows Gabriel is here to intervene in some way. He does that occasionally. It's one of the best roles their father gave him.

Gabriel can smell the decay even more now that he's nearer the hallway. It's the strong smell of death. He knows it well. He remembers being a child and smelling it on his sister after particularly eventful days. Wars. Plagues. Disasters.

He goes to the farthest bedroom, respectfully stops at the doorway for a few seconds, and then enters.

"Will she suffer much?" Alicia asks Rae, her voice soft and far away. She can't remember her own last few minutes. She doesn't know if it hurt or not. She knows the last few days of sickness were uncomfortable, and feels that living hurt, but dying did not. She thinks that's an odd way to exist.

Rae takes Alicia's hand and gives it a small squeeze. "No." Rae nods her head. "Gabriel won't allow that." Rae takes a deep breath,

looking to the table, searching for the smell of fresh flowers, wondering if Chris is still with her, or ever was. But all she can smell now is the decay spread throughout the apartment.

Alicia watches Rae closely as they sit together on the edge of her void. The pretty face, caring eyes, long black hair, timeless dress.

And then she remembers.

She remembers Rae from when they were children, from the fire that never happened. She remembers the pale, beautiful woman standing in the kitchen doorway of her mother's house as they crawled, struggling to find a path around all the smoke and fire. She was trying to guide them, help them find their way out.

Gabriel steps from the hall into the living room. Walking to the front of the sofa, he reaches down and extends his hand out to Allison, still sitting there with her lunch tray in front of her, still watching Duck and Squirrel.

The old woman slowly looks up and smiles, her eyes moist with tears. Her big sister has been gone for three days and she's just now coming to terms with it. She played nurse for as long as she could, and when her sister was gone, she wrapped her body comfortably in blankets, brushed her hair, and did her nails one last time.

"It's okay, Allison." Gabriel's hand is so warm that she can feel it throughout her entire body. "You did your best. It was peaceful. And everything's going to be okay."

When Allison stands, she's no longer the ninety-three-year-old woman suffering from arthritis pain, cataracts, and a bum hip she should've had replaced two decades ago. She's ten. The age she was that day her and Alicia crawled through the smoke and fire that never happened. The day they were meant to die. But didn't.

Gabriel gently leads Allison to the kitchen.

Rae's moved to the kitchen table, grinning wildly. She briefly looks into her void, but she is alone. Standing in front of the kitchen counter, just to the right of the stove, is Alicia. Fourteen-year-old Alicia. She can no longer see Rae, just Gabriel, dimly flickering like a candle, and her little sister, staring at her in awe.

Gabriel lets go of the younger sister's hand, and the two girls immediately embrace, enjoying a long, sisterly hug.

And Gabriel waits.

And Rae watches.

When he feels that a sufficient amount of time has passed, Gabriel takes both girls by the hand, and guides them towards the front door.

And instantly the two sisters are no more. They are elsewhere. Young, healthy, and again with their parents. In a big, green field enjoying a picnic of sandwiches, potato salad, and dill pickles.

Gabriel stands in the kitchen, with both hands extended outwardly to both sides, as if still holding their hands.

“He’s not dead.” Rae says casually. “Sam. He’s just gone off somewhere.” She shrugs. “Like when we were kids. Like that one Halloween. Remember?”

“When Chris sent him away. And then brought him back.” Gabriel tilts his head slightly, considering. “Nice.”

“Yeah. But I don’t think he’s coming back this time.” Rae should be unhappy about that. But she isn’t.

“Hmmm.” Gabriel steps forward into the brightest of all lights, and is gone from this place.

Rae looks across the table, to the empty chair sitting opposite her. “Thank you.” She closes her eyes and breathes out quietly. “Again.”

There’s a rapid knock at the door. Followed by another knock, and a young woman’s voice. That same young woman from earlier. “Hey. It’s your neighbor from eighty four again... across the courtyard. Sorry if I’m being a pain. I just thought I’d check one more time if you were home... if maybe you wanted to go down to the pool.” She knocks lightly, one last time, counting down from ten, deciding to walk away when she reaches one.

Rae hops down from the counter, and casually opens the door. She’s instantly greeted by a brunette woman about her own age with a friendly smile lighting up her entire face.

“Hi.” She gives Rae a small, childlike wave. “I’m Natalie. I’m in eighty four. It’s my first apartment... and well... I saw you around and thought...” she half shrugs, a little embarrassed.

Rae smiles brightly and cocks her head to the side.

“I’m going down to the pool...” Natalie gestures with her head, causing a fringe of hair to fall across her eyes. “... and I thought you might want to come along... hang out or something.”

Rae glances up to the dark sky with the sun either hidden away or completely gone by now, just like the moon. “Sure. Why not? I got nothing going on.” Rae steps out and closes the apartment door.

“Cool. So...” Natalie tentatively takes her new friend’s hand and leads her away, much to Rae’s amusement. “Let’s make a quick stop at my place and grab you some sunblock.”

Inside the apartment, Chris is sitting in the center of the long sofa. He briefly glances over his shoulder as his sister leaves and the door closes. Turning back toward the TV, he reaches over to the abandoned lunch tray and picks up the TV remote, clicking the plus button a few times to turn up the volume.

“Duck and Squirrel.” He smiles, watching Duck squeeze himself into a fancy-dress, chicken suit. “A duck... in a chicken suit.”

He giggles.

## 9

And then he's in his room, sitting on the floor surrounded by all his construction-paper people. He can hear someone shuffling up the stairs.

"Chris?" His mother knocks at his door and then immediately opens it. "Hey buddy. You sure you're okay?" She stays in the doorway, a smiling shadow framed by the light coming in from the great room behind her. "You didn't come down to hang out. I missed you."

Chris uses the remote to turn off the TV. "Sorry. I was just watching Duck and Squirrel and kind of lost track of time." He casually

tosses the remote up to the bed. “But I’m good.” He gives her his best smile.

“Hmmm.” She sounds skeptical. If anyone knows her son, it’s her. And she can tell he’s off. He’s been a little off all day. “You’re not dwelling on what your sister said? Right?”

“That I’m a weirdo. No.” His smile becomes a silly grin. “Quack, quack.”

His mother raises an eyebrow, pushing out her thick lips to match his silliness. “Well. Okay. But how about coming down in about five minutes and setting the table for me? Dinner is about ready.”

Chris nods. “Yeah, I can do that. I’ll put my stuff away and I’ll be right down.”

“Thanks little guy.” She takes a couple steps into his room and leans down, giving her youngest a kiss on the cheek. “I appreciate the help. I always do.” She musses his hair a bit, turns, and walks away, pulling the door partially closed behind her.

It slowly opens a bit, allowing some light into the dark room.

Letting his smile drop away, Chris sighs softly and gathers up a few sheets of his colored paper, his scissors, his glue, and his markers. He stacks them neatly, pushing everything under the end of his bed.

Then he hears his brother, Gabriel, toss his keys into the glass bowl in the foyer and step into the living room, talking to himself. It’s not

this Gabriel. He's outside playing with Sam, Michael, and their father. But it is Gabriel.

“Wibbly wobbly, timey wimey.” Chris absent-mindedly quotes one of his favorite shows.

Time has always been irrelevant to Chris. But right now it's all starting to to flip around, go forward, reverse, meld into one, repeat. And that can be tiring to manage. Not for him, but for everyone else.

He stands up, walking to the bedroom door, peaking out, from the dark into the light, looking down into the living room as his brother plops heavily onto the sofa. He wonders if he should fix this now or later.

“Later.”

# 10

Gabriel unlocks the front door and steps into the foyer, tossing his keys into a green, glass bowl on a small table. He looks into the mirror on the wall above the table.

He looks tired.

He's alone.

His warm smile was temporarily left behind when he brought the two girls to their forever. Or maybe they're off doing something even better. He hopes so.

Gabriel breathes out deliberately and waits for his smile to catch up. He half grins. “There it is.” And follows up with a tired chuckle.

He can smell food cooking, so he peaks his head into the kitchen to see who’s around. There’s no one. And he doesn’t see anything sitting on the stove. The oven is off.

“Hmmm.” He closes his eyes and breathes in deeply. “Pork chops... baked beans. Brown sugar on the beans. Those little, golden potatoes.” He pats his stomach twice. “My favorite.”

He glances towards the empty stove briefly, and then simply walks away into the living room. Before reaching the sofa, he stops and listens for his father or one of his brothers. Or maybe even Rae got home before him. But he hears nothing, which makes sense. They all tend to spend most of their time off doing whatever it is they do. Though lately there’s been a lot of activity around the house.

“Alone for the moment.” His grin returns in full. “How absolutely wonderful.”

He sits heavily onto the sofa and lays his head back, looking at the ceiling. Directly behind him is the upstairs bannister and all the bedrooms. He considers going up to his room to lay down, think things over, take a long-overdue nap. But he doesn’t want to accidentally run into any of the others. Today, that sounds like work.

So he turns to his side, fluffing a small pillow, and lays down on the sofa, kicking off his shoes and putting his stocking feet up on the far armrest.

“Ahhh.” He closes his eyes and wonders if he should allow himself to sleep. He can’t remember the last time he actually made the effort to sleep. And then Gabriel is asleep. His head cocked slightly forward towards his chest, he snores lightly, like the purring of a big cat.

He dreams of a time when he and his siblings were all a bit younger. He and Michael would have been in their mid teens, fourteen and fifteen at the most, with Sam maybe seventeen, and Rae just on the other side of adulthood. Nineteen, maybe twenty. Just a couple years younger than she currently appears.

He sees his father sitting at his desk. He has streaks of grey in his long, brown hair. Looking back, Gabriel can see a lot of Sam in his middle-aged father.

And there is Sam, standing just off to his father’s side, looking fairly upset. They’re in the living room. This living room. It looks pretty much the same, but with different furniture, different decorations on different tables, and a different set of family pictures on the wall near the French doors going out to the patio.

The small desk his father is sitting at is in the exact same spot, up against the wall, between the hallway and the stairs. It’s one of the only things that has always been a constant. That same antique, wooden desk

with papers, books, journals, pens and pencils. And in this time period, there's even a black, metal typewriter with flat, round keys. For a time, his father was really into typing pages, and notes, and even the first few chapters of a book he intended to author, but never got around to. Gabriel imagines a noir mystery, as that suits his father's literary taste. Bedtime stories were a treat, but you had to really pay attention.

Making more noise than is necessary, Michael enters the room followed closely by Gabriel. He can't believe how young he looked. His teen self is wearing an Iron Maiden t-shirt. He liked their music because it was almost like a hard rock opera. Michael liked their mascot, Eddie, because he was a monster.

"Found it." Michael casually holds up a well-worn Monopoly box above his head. "Unfortunately." He grins.

The old man puts up a hand, a silver ring on every finger but one, waving it in the air, dismissing Michael's negativism. He's deep in conversation with his eldest son, Sam, the wearer of the old man's final silver ring. It was a gift from father to son, a symbol of the bond that makes them one. They don't realize it yet, but he'll slowly gift Sam all his rings over the years until it will be Sam wearing almost all of the rings, and his father, just the one. A sort of passing of the torch. And when Sam is gone, the rings will all go to Michael.

The old man sits comfortably in a black, leather desk chair while Sam stands next to him, restless, somewhat defiant, his stance looking more like Rae or Michael than his usual self.

“That’s...” Sam hesitates, but doesn’t hold back. “... bullshit, dad.”

Gabriel chuckles in his sleep. He remembers this. Eventually Sam will rebel. For now he just trying to find his path, as teens do.

The old man closes his eyes tightly. He just wants to go away and not do this again. He knows how it always ends. Not today. Not tomorrow. But eventually. “Language... boy. Language.”

Sam realizes he hasn’t been breathing, and he takes a slow deep breath. “But I don’t get it. Why?” Sam’s young eyes bulge slightly as he kind of pushes his head forward, wanting an answer to something he feels deserves an explanation. This is not a new conversation between them. The question has been asked many times, always with the same unsatisfying answer. “Why bother? Why allow them do it in the first place? They just end up stuck with me. And I’m stuck with them.”

“It’s their lives to live.” The old man remembers what it feels like to get such an empty answer.

“Not ours.” Sam huffs. “I know.” He gestures out to his brothers. “We’ve all heard it like a million times.”

This is young Sam. Before his fall. Before he mellowed with age. Before his return from the abyss. Before the day he returned, knocked at the door, and was welcomed back with a hug.

He was always thoughtful, calm, and charming, but at that young age he also had an edge. Nothing like his brothers, especially Michael, but teens are teens, no matter how many billions of years they've lived. They are on the verge of adulthood and push themselves, and the nerves of those around them, in hopes of getting to adulthood just that much quicker. To not be considered a child. To be listened to with respect that typically comes with experience, which often arrives hand in hand with age.

Now Gabriel remembers. Sam was seventeen.

Michael glances up from the Monopoly game he and Gabriel are setting up. "I have not. Please continue."

The old man looks over to Michael, pursing his lips. "Mikey. Now is not the time for your..." And shaking his head. "... shenanigans."

Michael chuckles at the word 'shenanigans'.

Sam can feel his voice tighten. "That's..." He does hesitate, but this time goes all out. "... that's... bullshit and you know it. Mikey knows it. Gabe knows it. We all know it." He gestures with both arms into the air. "Let's go ask Rae if she knows it."

"She knows." Michael finds his brother amusing when he's like this. It's like watching the teacher's pet acting up.

"Michael." The old man spins his head first to his middle child and then immediately back to Sam, an intense look on his face. "And you... I don't appreciate... the language." His voice is especially hard.

Sam looks down to the floor, trying to hide the anger in his eyes. “Sorry. It just came out. I don’t like it either.”

The old man puts up a hand and nods gently. “I know.” He remembers this conversation. “We’ve had this conversation. Or will have it. Or both.” He scrunches his eyebrows. “I’m getting old, and I’m not sure which.”

Michael lets out a single snort of laughter.

The old man glances over to see both his middle sons, leaning against one another on the sofa, having a bit of a chuckle at their old man’s expense.

“You want to say... if we can do something for the overall good, we should do it.” The old man recites from an exact memory of this very moment.

Sam sighs, pushing his lips together, disappointed at where this conversation has gone. “Yeah... I guess.”

The old man remembers the feeling.

“We do... sometimes. I know I do.” Gabriel doesn’t even look up as he continues setting up the Monopoly game. “And we all know Mikey does things... when he has to. It’s kind of his thing actually.”

“I break things. I fix things. I break other things.” Michael shrugs, while leaning back on the sofa. “It’s what I do.”

Sam rolls his eyes, and turns back to his father.

The old man feels exactly what Sam is saying. He remembers his response from the last time. “I know this isn’t going to help. But they do what they do. And we can’t fix everything.”

“Well...” Sam mumbles to himself. “Maybe we should.”

The old man gets up and walks over to the sofa, sitting down beside Michael. He picks the shiny boot and moves it in front of him. Then he pushes the race car to Gabriel and the thimble to Michael.

“I’m not being...”

“You’re being the thimble...” The old man’s blue eyes flash. “... for sassing me.”

Michael also chuckles at the word ‘sassing’. “Chris is always the thimble.”

“And now you are.” The old man grins. “Chris can be the iron.”

Sam sits on the floor on the other side of the coffee table. He reaches out and takes the top hat as usual. Then he moves the ship to where he expects Rae to sit when she comes down. Rae is always the battleship.

“Samael.” The old man’s eyes soften considerably as a fatherly smile crosses his lips. “You do you. You be you. If you want to change the world. Change it. Do whatever you feel is right. It’s up to you.” He stares deeply into his son’s eyes. They match. They’re the same. Father and eldest son. “If I’m a disappointment, do better. If you think I’m doing just

okay... do better. There's nothing a parent wants more, than for their kids to be better than them in every possible way."

"I believe it's Michael's turn to go first." Gabriel wants to change the subject. He pushes the dice over to his brother.

Michael throws the dice hard on the board, knocking his father's piece off the table. "Oops." He looks to his father and puts the boot back on Go. "My bad."

His father just breathes out. "He breaks things." And shakes his head.

Michael takes his turn, moving his piece and buying the first railroad. "Don't even think about buying any of the railroads." He puts on a toothy grin. "They're all mine."

"I'm... sorry. I was just venting." Sam mumbles. "Sorry for cursing."

With a warm smile on his face, the old man reaches over the board and taps Sam once on the arm, accepting his apology.

Gabriel rolls the dice, landing on Michael's railroad and pays him what he owes. "So. Is Rae playing or not?" He moves the dice over to where the battleship sits.

"Not." Rae comes walking down the stairs, followed closely by Chris in his Halloween costume. "I'm taking the little guy out for tricks and treats."

Just behind Rae comes a very young Chris in his Halloween costume, long tail and all. Gabriel's dreaming mind can't remember exactly, but puts him at three, maybe four-years old.

"Four." Chris stands alone at the top of the stairs, grinning.

Michael immediately bursts into laughter, followed closely by the quiet chuckling of Gabriel. Even their father smiles big and holds back a laugh.

Sam just stares, open mouthed.

Chris starts quickly down the stairs, intending to catch up with his sister.

"Rae." The old man quickly points at his youngest son. "Take his hand. That tail's going to throw him off balance."

"Yeah, Sam..." Michael tries to control his laughter. "... tell her the tail's going to throw off his balance."

Sam glances sideways at Michael, rolling his eyes and shaking his head. It is funny though. But he's not really in the mood.

"Grab my hand." Without looking, Rae extends her hand to Chris who gladly takes it, and they trot down the stairs to the living room.

"So." The old man's face is beaming with pride. "What do we have here?"

Chris steps up to Rae's side, letting go of her hand. He puts both hands out, grandly presenting himself and his homemade Halloween

costume. “Rae helped me put it together.” He smiles, all bright, white teeth. “Pretty cool, huh?” He takes a bold step closer to Sam.

“And who... what...” Sam is still feeling his conversation with his father. He pushes back his disappointment, trying to enjoy the moment. “... are you supposed to be?”

“I’m you.” Chris grins, looking himself over. “I’m the Devil.”

He’s dressed in tight, red pants, a red hoodie, and his feet have several pairs of thick, red socks covering them, making what appears to be faux boots. He has a long wire tail with a red, cardboard cutout on the end in the shape of a triangle. His cheeks are painted with red makeup, and his hood is pulled tightly over his head, drawn closed, with black styrofoam horns glued in place above his forehead. He stands straight, looking very much like the proud four-year old he isn’t.

Almost in unison, everyone’s eyes move to Sam.

“I do not... look like that.” Sam carefully hides a smile. “I have... never... look like that.”

Michael snickers. “Show us the tail.”

Chris looks a little hurt, but turns to show the tail he and his sister made from an old wire hanger, wrapping it in red yarn.

“I was actually talking to Sam.” Michael leans back, out of his brother’s reach.

Gabriel snorts, and also leans away from Sam.

“I think we found our substitute Devil if you ever need a few days off.” His father glances over to Sam and winks.

Chris turns back around towards his family, still looking a little hurt, and confused.

Rae puts her hand on his shoulder, giving him a squeeze, pulling him close to her. “I think he nailed it. I think he looks awesome... and we’re going trick-or-treating.”

Sam stands and takes a step over to his little brother. Pretending to carefully look him over, he places a hand on top the boy’s head and moves his brother in a complete circle. “Yeah. You got it all. Nice job.” He gives the boy a huge grin. “You even got the tail just right.” He glances over his shoulder at Michael and Gabriel.

Chris’ disappointment instantly turns into a beaming smile, showing two missing front teeth.

And then he sneezes.

Sam steps back. The looks on everyone’s faces is mild confusion. They do breath, and sweat, and their hearts beat, but only when they want all those things to happen. They allow it. It’s not something that just happens. And this, by all appearances, just unexpectedly happened.

The old man looks at his three older sons, amused by this moment he remembers so well.

As everyone watches, Chris reaches into the front pocket of his bright, red pants and pulls out a wadded piece of tissue. He carefully

unfolds it and brings it up to his nose, blowing into it awkwardly, in a way that shows he's probably never done this before. They watch as Chris wipes at each nostril before wadding up the tissue and putting it in the pocket of his hoodie.

Sam slowly grins. "Is the Devil not feeling well?"

"Yeah." Chris smiles brightly up at his big brother, still standing just in front of him. "I think I'm getting a cold."

Michael laughs loudly. "You've got... to be kidding."

Gabriel stands up, and walks around the table to get a little closer. "Is it catchy?" And he immediately sneezes, for the first time in his existence. Well, not for the first time, but for the first time without making it happen.

Michael leans away from Gabriel, shaking his head, with a big smile on his face.

Rae puts her hand on the back of Chris' neck and gives it a little squeeze. "You boys should cover your mouths when you sneeze."

"That. Was. Amazing." Gabriel reaches up, feeling his nose. "It tingles." And he immediately sneezes again.

Michael move over a bit as Gabriel lays down on the end of the couch, closing his eyes, experiencing his first real cold.

The old man stands. "Hmmm." He steps around the small table, looking towards the kitchen. "I think we have some cold medicine in the medicine cabinet."

Rae takes Chris' hand and leads him towards the front door. "Well. We're off to collect some candy for our little red Devil here." She looks down at Chris. "I don't think he'll give anyone else his cold. Right?"

"Nope." He grins. "Unless they want me to." He glances to Gabriel.

And the world flickers like a loose light bulb and goes black leaving just Chris standing by the door in his Devil costume, his hand still extended up as if holding onto his sister.

Gabriel is still laying on the couch with his eyes closed, his stocking feet up on the far armrest. His nose almost feels tingly.

"Nap time's over, Gabe." Chris pulls his horned hoodie back, letting his long hair fall out across his eyes. "There's not much time left."

And Gabriel wakes, slowly opening one eye, and then the other.

# 11

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

The big man tries to fake a smile, not quite getting there, looking more pained than friendly. “Yes.” He looks down at the small dog at the end of her leash. It’s a small, beige chihuahua with a nearly hairless, pink chest and belly. Michael likes dogs. Especially small dogs. All animals, really. His family had a chihuahua and a few pugs over the years.

The old woman returns his smile as she sits down beside him. “I thought so. I’m so sorry. The wedding party is huge, and I feel like...”

“You’re meeting a bunch of new people... can’t remember all the names.” Michael rudely cuts her off. He’s done this one about a hundred times, and he doesn’t understand how Sam managed it without it driving him insane. It gets old. Fast.

The old woman looks confused. She reaches out to shake the handsome stranger’s hand.

“I’m Michael.” He doesn’t look up from the dog. “We’ve done this before, and we’ll do it again. And again. And again.”

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

Michael glances up quickly to enjoy her awkwardness. Then he looks out to the surrounding tables, and can’t help but smile at the celebration around them. He enjoys a good party. He wonders if he could get a bottle of root beer.

“Did you see how dark it’s gotten out there?” The old woman looks over to the beautiful bride. She’s sitting with her new husband at the main table in the middle of the large ballroom, surrounded by their family and close friends. “It looks like it might storm. I do hope it doesn’t affect the festivities.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed.” Michael sighs. “And I have a feeling something’s brewing that’s going to be bigger than a wedding that’s never actually happened.”

The old woman pretends not to hear him. She’s quickly becoming uncomfortable with her table mate. “Are... are you a friend of Annabelle’s?”

“Your daughter?” His face begins to show a bit more of his natural intensity. “No.” He turns his eyes sideways to the old woman. “She’s a friend to my eldest and youngest brothers.” He furrows his brow. “My sister too, I suppose. Sort of a family friend.”

“Oh.” The old woman picks up the small dog, setting him on her lap. “Charlie.” She smiles and gently pets him from the top of his head all the way down his back.

Michael looks down at the dog, wanting to pet it too. But he doesn’t. It’s not actually a dog. It’s nothing. And it’s not actually here.

“My doggie. His name is Charlie.” She purses her lips and continues to stroke him behind his ear.

Charlie growls, unsure if he should be happy or be a chihuahua. His little mouth shakes as he eyes Michael.

“My brothers and my sister... they used to say I had some chihuahua in me.” Michael smirks ever so slightly at the fond memory.

“But you’re so big.” The old woman looks over to the bride and groom, her smile becoming forced and unnatural. Rigid. Then she looks

down to her lap, suddenly becoming fidgety and even more uncomfortable.

“I was a child.” Michael lets himself enjoy the memory another moment. He’s there as they tease him. “They said I was happy being angry.” He chuckles. “It’s just who I was... am... I suppose.” He shrugs with one shoulder. “A bit of a chihuahua.”

“Well, siblings can be...” She notices that her hands are wet, slicking down the fur of her pet.

Michael glances over at her hands, seeing the growing wetness. “My brothers and sister can be irritating more often than not. But we had a good childhood.” He suddenly frowns hard, remembering why he’s here. “Unlike your daughter... whose childhood was taken from her at seven.”

The old woman moves her mouth to say something, to tell this rude young man to stop with his nonsense. To go away. That he doesn’t know what he’s talking about. But she can’t. A coldness runs through her body as she risks a sideways glance and catches Michael’s eyes staring back at her with such intensity that they appear to have gotten brighter, lighting up his entire face.

The old woman instantly looks away to her daughter. “Why... why...” She fights for the words to come out. “... why is she sweating so much?” The words pour from her mouth, becoming high-pitched with her sudden concern. She immediately appears panicky as she turns to face

Michael. Her voice cracks. “Sam. What’s wrong with her... her face and her hair...”

“Michael.”

She stares at him, confused, scared. Her heart is pounding. Looking down, she sees water running down both arms, dripping from her fingers, causing her pet to get wetter and wetter as he proceeds to settle in on her lap, still watching Michael closely with his bulging eyes.

“You called me Sam. My name is Michael.” His voice is matter of fact. “But you know that. I think this is the first time you’ve made that mistake. Maybe we’re finally getting somewhere.”

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

“What did you say about... about my daughter... my Annabelle?” The old woman turns back to Michael, pure panic in her eyes. Her voice becomes squeaky and nervous. “What’s happening here?”

Michael’s face remains cold and blank. This isn’t real. And he finds no enjoyment in being here. He’s sure Sam felt the same way. He remembers some of his brother’s more intense conversations with their father.

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

Michael sighs impatiently. There’s a lot of places he’d rather be right now than here. He thinks maybe he should visit his father at the house once he wraps this up. He’s willing to bet there’ll be root beer in the fridge.

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

Michael looks down to her arms, and then sharply turns his head away, completely disgusted in what they represent.

The old woman suddenly sees her own soaking arms, in her soaking lap, holding the dead body of her drowned seven-year-old daughter.

She wants to scream. But can’t.

She wants to jump up and run. But can’t.

She wants to cry. And does. Hard. Sobbing and squealing uncontrollably.

“Annabelle.” Michael is still looking away, towards the bride and groom. He decides to see them as they should have been, and not as the old woman sees them. “You’re at the wedding of your daughter. A wedding that never took place.” His voice is low and hard. “Because you drown her in a bathtub... the night before her eighth birthday.”

“She... she was such a headstrong child. Difficult.” The old woman fights through her crying, shaking her head, her eyes closed tightly, remembering a lie she made up to make herself the victim. A lie she’s told over and over. A lie that’s become her truth. “So difficult. It was just me and Annabelle, you know. Right from the beginning. Her father ran off.

“No! He did not.” Michael’s voice booms over the fake wedding. “You... are a fucking liar.”

Everyone stops what they’re doing and looks over to Michael and the crying woman. And then, just a quickly, they turn away and continue with their celebration.

The old woman immediately ceases to cry, just shaking violently as she holds the dead, water-logged body of her young daughter. She can feel the thick rubbery skin on her own. Cold and wet. Dead.

Michael continues to look over at the bride and groom, watching a toast by the bride’s father. Something witty and quick. Everyone laughs,

raising their glasses. As her father sits down to her right, the bride leans over and gives him a long hug, and a loving kiss on the cheek.

“I notice that you’re not sitting with the family.” Michael turns back to the old woman, leaning in close, without actually looking at her. “You were not invited. You would not have been invited if this were real. You are not wanted. Even here.” He gestures outwardly with both arms. “In this... place. No one wants you.”

The old woman concentrates on the cheers of the guests. She wants to block out everything Michael is saying, everything she is remembering. She opens her eyes and looks over at the happy couple. “Ahhh!” A small, garbled scream escapes her throat.

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

Annabelle’s pregnant.

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

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

Then she stares right across the table directly at her mother.

Instantly, the old woman, now middle-aged, is in a bathroom, crouched over a bathtub holding the lifeless body of her only child under the water as it sloshes back and forth violently. As if the water itself is still fighting for the child to live.

“In the... God... damn... bathtub. The night before her... fucking!... birthday.” Michael stands off to the rear, near the door. “I think I’ll just leave you to it then.” And he turns to walk out the door, but then stops, and glances back over his shoulder. “You just stay right there, would you? Doing what you’re doing. I’ll be back...” He turns away. “... eventually.”

And he steps out of Sam’s place back into reality.

But the wrong time.

“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.” He looks past his daughter, watching as his middle son slowly walks from the water towards them. “In all of you.”

Michael is confused. “Why here? Why now?” He mumbles to himself, the ocean tide swallowing his words. “You said Chris put a stop to this. You said it didn’t happen.”

Rae, still sitting in the sand just in front of her father, her back to her brother, continues to dig and search the sand with her small fingers. She can feel Michael behind her, but she continues. This shouldn’t be happening anyway, she thinks.

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.

“It doesn’t make things any easier.” She whispers to herself. Her head down, she risks a hidden peek over her shoulder at her brother.

The moon fades. The stars dim to near black.

“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.” He glances briefly over her shoulder, giving his son a sad smile. “We all do.”

Everyone's 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.

"Michael..." The old man closes his eyes, his head still held low. "... he shares your pain. We all do."

Rae raises the rock far above her head, intending to crash it down on her father's skull, killing him instantly. But Michael steps forward, and reaching out, grabs her hand, covering the rock entirely in his enormous palm, and stopping her from doing something she won't be able to finish. "Not this time, Rae." His voice is a hoarse whisper. "I suppose this is how it didn't happen."

The light of the moon and stars flicker quickly several times, and then everything goes pitch black for just a second.

And Michael finds himself at the front door of his father's house. The sky is dark grey and stormy. The front door flickers in and out of reality, and after several tries, Michael has to catch it just right to grab the handle and push it open.

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 alongside the wall.

"So. Did you get the answer you came for?" He watches as his daughter turns the sink water on to wash their mugs. Of course she's still troubled. He knows that, and the question is merely a polite formality.

"Answers." She glances over her shoulder. "Hmmm. I suppose I did." 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.

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." He turns his eyes slightly to his left, seeing his middle son standing in the dark foyer just before the kitchen entrance. His blue eyes sparkle slightly, just happy to see another of his children. Even with all that's happening.

“It is.” Standing beside her father, her back to the doorway, Rae places a hand lovingly on her father’s shoulder. Again, she feels Michael’s presence behind her. She resists just turning, and confronting him. Telling him to go away. That this never happened. That she was told this never happened.

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 mug above his head with her left hand, intending to crash it down across the bridge of his nose. She knows it will take more than one hit. Once. Twice. Three times, until he’s dead.

But again, from behind, Michael’s big hand covers the mug, her hand, and part of her wrist all at once. Just as she suspected he might.

“I said...” His voice is softer than last time.

Rae glances back at her brother, a sad smile on her face. “... not this time.” She has a relieved look in her eyes. “Maybe next time.”

The world, all of reality, goes black. For a full minute nothing exists. Then two minutes. An hour. A week. A year.

And then Michael finds himself on the beach, just off to the side of his father’s patio. Off to the side of where his father sits, and his sister stands.

The old man takes another sip of his root beer, glancing slightly to his left, again seeing his middle son watching from just off the patio.

This time Michael has anger in his eyes.

The old man looks over his shoulder, at his daughter. He has a sad smile on his face.

“So are we all just dreaming while awake.” 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.”

They chat about art, painting, and life for a few minutes. All analogies for what they should do, and what they shouldn’t do. And how involved they should get. The same old thing that her father has been spouting since the day he brought her home. She’s fairly sure that he has it memorized, and simply pulls it out just for these special occasions.

When he’s finished his lecture, Rae smiles back warmly, then lets her face go hard and blank as her father turns away again, towards the ocean, and sits in silence for a few minutes, just listening to the tide.

“We should probably get going.” Rae looks down at her father, smiling a beautiful white, but altogether false smile.

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. He dislikes reliving these events, but there must be a reason.

He's come to realize that he really shouldn't be here. He has other responsibilities elsewhere.

"No." She shakes her head slowly. "I have a visitor."

The old man pours himself another half glass anyway, sticking to the script as it had been written. "Michael."

"Yes." A dark smile crosses Rae's face. "Michael." She whispers, and cocks her head to the side, listening to her brother not breathing. "Michael, Michael, Michael."

She was told this never happened. And now she know's why. Her big brown eyes go solid black as she reaches over her father for her glass. She takes several big gulps, then sets the half-empty glass back down on the table next to the unused bottle opener.

The world fades to nothing.

# 12

Rae sits alone at the top of the hill, overlooking the river.  
She's sulking.

Chris had promised to pull back all that nonsense with her father so that it never happened. "But it kind of did happen." She continues to pout and sulk. And think.

She pulls her long, black dress flat beneath her on the worn picnic table. At this point, she's lost track of how many times she's been here, and how many times she's done what she's about to do. It's been her first option whenever she's bored or stressed. Today she's stressed. And he

deserves it. She wonders if she's simply become part of the Devil's process.

She turns, looking over her shoulder, letting her imagination run wild, almost hoping to see her brother, Sam, maybe even Chris, standing off near the slope of the hill. But there's no one there. That was the past. That was when Sam was still here. How long in the past, she doesn't remember. But it feels like another lifetime.

"Or ten minutes ago." She sighs. "Who can tell, right?"

She grins wildly, glancing around in mock nervousness, taking a deep breath. Deciding to play the child once again, if only for herself, she waves, letting her fingers flicker through the air. The memory of that moment when Sam came over the hill will have to suffice.

Rae thinks back, remembering that first night of her most recent madness. That night on the beach, when she pleaded with Sam for his help. This was just after telling her father that she was the strongest, and then murdering him with a rock. Not out of anger, of course, but out of disappointment, and her want to give him a small role in her game of crazy.

It was the first time she murdered him, but certainly not the last. She claimed it was a distraction. She told her brother that it was a distraction for her father, a game for him to play and work his way through, without cheating and looking ahead to the outcome. She thinks killing him with a rock was kind of like getting him an early Father's Day

gift. She doesn't really believe that, but allows the idea to persist so she doesn't have to feel so bad about it.

But really, it was more of a warning to the old man. Not a very subtle warning. Rae isn't known for being subtle.

"Leave me be." She softly mumbles to herself, deep in thought, but reliving the moment. "Let me do this myself. Let me be myself... find myself... no interference."

But of course she never used the rock, the mug, the bottle opener. And she never found herself. She only got more lost. Incredibly lost. Scary lost.

Her youngest brother, almost always the least meddling of the group, finally got involved, and pulled her back, saving her from herself, and everything from her. As Tegan had said, 'he went big'.

And when things were put back as they should be, he'd asked her if she was still lost.

She told him the truth.

"Maybe a little. And maybe a lot. It's not so simple, you know." She mouths the words, a hint of a smile on her face as she talks to him as if he were sitting right beside her. He just might be. "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."

She puts her hand down, palm up, resting on the black, lace dress covering her leg. And she closes her hand, feeling. She's almost positive

that he's there. She can feel his energy. His comfort. He had told her that he would always be there for her. That she was never alone. She wonders if he was being literal.

Rae's eyes darken as she watches Eddy wander out of his makeshift tent, down the dirt path, at the bottom of the hill, at the side of the river. Fat and filthy.

"Fucking Eddy." This is what she comes here for.

The big guy stands out in front of his tent enjoying the sunshine that has long turned to darkness. But now he's just lost and confused. Scared. At this point he should be looking for someone to bully as they pass by. Someone to abuse. But now he's alone. He's been alone for a long time. But he can't quite see it. He lives in a shadow that only shows him what it wants to show him. And he has no idea that the shadow exists.

Rae glances just next to her, where Sam had been sitting that last time, and of course he's not there. She wasn't expecting him to be. But this was his place. Sam's place. Where he met with the damned. And even she's not certain what it's fully capable of.

"Gone." She mumbles. But then smiles brightly, causing her darkness to slowly dissipate. "Just gone."

She looks down to her open hand still laying across her leg, and squeezes her fingers together several times, quickly. "You should've just told us... told me... and Sam. I don't understand why you didn't just say

something.” She tilts her head to the side. “I don’t understand why you feel the need to say so little about so much. You’re so...” And she stops.

At that moment, a woman with a red bow tied in her hair appears from a small group of thick trees off to the side. Her hands on her hips, she’s looking up to the sky. “They said it was going to rain today.” She smiles sweetly.

Rae glances over, her mind slightly clouded by confusion. This has already happened, the first time, in the real world. And then it happened again when she came to Sam’s place to revisit Eddy. And it’s happening again. Now. And it shouldn’t be happening at all.

“Well...” The woman lets out a short cackle-like laugh. “They really weren’t talking about today though... were they?”

“You shouldn’t be here.” Rae just stares.

“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. She glances up to the moonless sky again. “Well, actually... it is a bit darker than usual.”

“It’s not possible. How...” Rae trails off, remembering the entire conversation. From both times this happened. She takes a moment to feel if she’s indeed where she’s supposed to be, or if she accidentally stepped back to a prior moment. Something she’s done occasionally when distracted.

“Oh, posh.” The woman winks mischievously.

“Pish.” Rae corrects her. “I say pish, not posh. You know that. You said it correctly the last time.”

“Oh...” The woman cocks her head to the side and scrunches her brow theatrically. “Okay.” And again the woman winks mischievously. “Oh, pish.”

Rae just stares.

“Maybe neither one of us should be here.” The woman 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. She feels like there’s something there. In the eyes, though they’re the wrong color. “Chris?” A spark. Something deep within.

The woman purses her lips, pushing them out a bit, and shakes her head just a little. “Mick, actually. Kind of like the mouse.” Out of habit, she rests a hand on her belly. “It’s short for...”

Rae puts up both hands to stop her. “Don’t care.”

“Oh... okay.” After a short pause, the woman continues. “And I’m sorry, but I’m not your brother.” She suddenly grins. “The kids call me the storyteller.”

Rae considers looking within this person, but if it is Chris, he’ll only show her what he wants to show her. So it’ll have no meaning. Plus, she’s not sure she wants to see what lives inside her youngest brother. Some things are better left unknown.

“Not everyone is your rascal of a baby brother.” She chuckles deeply. “Michael’s wrong about that.”

Rae cocks her head to the side, and scrunches her brow, realizing that the annoying woman shares some of her own mannerisms.

The woman looks up to the darkening sky. “How long do you think we have... you know...” She motions with a crooked finger towards the stars.

“How long?” Rae looks up and counts the remaining stars in an instant.

“I give it 3 days.” The woman looks back to Rae. “Five at the most.” She laughs loud and awkward and again taps the side of her nose twice with her index finger. “Or maybe just the blink of an eye to you. Maybe you’re already there... at the end.” Her face briefly goes serious. “It all depends on you, I suppose.”

Rae changes her mind, and looks within the woman, but sees nothing. Not an emptiness. Not a darkness. Not a person. Not her brother. No light. Nothing. Nothing but the tiniest of glimmers. A small spark in her center. In the distance.

“I’m not your brother...” The woman again allows herself to grin. “... any more than you are... or Michael is... or Gabriel... or the moon. She uses her eyes to motion to the sky. “Oh. Right. Gone.”

Rae glances briefly up to the sky. “How do know my brothers?” She immediately looks back to the empty creature standing in front of her.

“You don’t have to keep doing this, you know.” The woman reaches up with one hand to adjust the red bow in her hair, while keeping her eyes directly on Rae. “I saw what you did to the...” She rolls her eyes upward, considering. “... child killer... on the swing.”

“You were there.” It’s not a question. Rae sees her in the darkness on the other side of the fence. The smile. The bow.

“No. Not really.” She finishes adjusting her small ponytail.

Rae watches. If this isn’t Chris messing around, then what is this empty thing.

“Why don’t you come with me and say hi to the little ones.” The woman walks past Rae, the picnic table, and the dirt path, to the gentle slope of grass on the other side, leading down to the big green field.

Chris’ field.

“Little ones.” Rae remembers this from the first time. When Eddy was still amongst the living.

“I’m sure you remember. Like I told you before...” The older 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 round. Telling stories.” She grins happily. “I love the wonder on their little faces.”

Rae can’t help but think of her own family playing and enjoying time together on that same field when they were all kids. She wonders if

they're out there right now. She wants to hop down from the picnic table and look down into the field. But she doesn't.

"You should just go." Rae lets her eyes darken again. "You shouldn't be here." She sighs heavily. "This place isn't for people... or whatever..." She waves her hand dismissively at the woman. "... to just wander into."

The woman gives Rae a stern frown, putting both hands on her hips. "Young lady. I didn't just... wander... into anything." Her voice is hard but loving at the same time. Like a parent scolding a child. "I'm on my way to the field of green... to the children."

"Yeah." Rae's eyes stay dark. "Stories to tell."

The woman's voice immediately regains its natural cheer. "We'd love it if you could join us?" She puts a hand above her eyes, blocking the sun that no longer shines. "Before we're out of time."

Rae glances upward, examining the rapidly darkening sky. Ever since Sam's disappearance, the moon and half its stars have gone missing. And even more blink out of existence as she watches.

The woman looks back over to Rae, watching the young woman closely. "I tell some pretty great stories." She chuckles. "And I'll..."

"Stories." Rae whispers. "I could tell you some stories." She looks down at her bare feet dangling over the edge of the picnic table.

"I'll bet." The woman's voice softens, again losing some of her natural cheer. "I'll bet you could."

“But I ...” Rae turns her attention back to Eddy, now trudging heavily up the slope from the river below.

“I know. I remember.” The woman purses her lips and nods. “You have other plans.”

Rae slowly nods, her eyes still on Eddy’s approach.

The woman take a few more steps towards the slope leading down to the green field.

“You’re not my brother. You’re not Chris.” It’s not a question. Rae looks down to her hand, laying across her leg, open and holding nothing. She feels the calmness.

“Nope. Just Mick.”

“The storyteller.” Rae’s eyes return to Eddy.

The woman barely nods. “Well, if your plans change, you know where to find me.” She turns and starts down the hill. “Or maybe just catch up with me after you’re finished. You can tell me one of your stories.” Her natural smile drops to a blank stare. Her voice slightly deepens. “I’ll bet they’re absolutely heartbreaking.”

And she carefully walks down the slope.

Rae closes here eyes tightly, and then blinks several times, clearing the confusion she’s been fighting.

Breathing heavy, covered in sweat, Eddy appears at the top of the dirt path overlooking the river.

“Hey...” He takes a few shallow breathes. “... you.” His voice is gruff and rude, and then Rae truly catches his eye. “Well, well, well. You’re a sexy young thing, aren’t you?” Eddy leers at Rae, looking her up and down. “You know, you sit out here on a picnic table all alone and you’re just asking for trouble.” The menace in his voice is obvious, yet seems almost rehearsed. Even he feels that something isn’t quite right.

“Deja vue. Feels weird, right?” Rae mumbles, letting her eyes go pitch black as her voice fails to hide her distaste. This was supposed to be fun, but Rae’s mind is now on other things. “I’m not even sure how many times it’s been at this point.”

In this place, if Eddy notices the eyes, he’s not allowed to say anything about it, to go off script. “Look, b...” He hesitates, almost putting up a fight against what is about to happen. “... b... bitch. I don’t want any trouble.”

“You really don’t.” Rae breathes out heavily.

“Kate says you saw our daughter this morning, but you ain’t telling. I’m... I’m looking for her. She should’ve been home by now.” This is the way it happened originally. But without the feeling of dread and fear that Eddy feels.

His hands begin to shake to the point of convulsions as he pulls out a cigarette. And after multiple unsuccessful attempts to pair the flame with the tip, he manages to light it.

“S... so... did you see her or not?” He takes a couple of plodding steps up to the picnic table, and remaining on script, blows smoke right at her face. The smoke moves off to both sides, not getting too near.

Rae scoots forward and stands up, letting her eyes go full black, the darkness pouring from them like a thick smoke. Fun or not. She no longer has time for this. Her small frame slowly darkens and the void empties from her, easily towering over and extending around the big man standing in front of her.

Suddenly remembering everything as it happened, Eddy takes a quick step back, nearly falling. “Wh... what the fuck are you!” This is the part in the original happening where the fear surfaced and took over.

Rae smiles brightly, showing a mouth full of perfect, white teeth as the blackness continues to flow from her, adding to the already darkening sky.

Eddy spins around clumsily, nearly falling in the dirt, and runs and stumbles to the top of the path. But there she is, impossibly standing on the path just in front of him.

“Hmmm.” She opens up, becoming absolute darkness, her voice becoming an echo from deep within. “I don’t think so. Creature.”

And then Eddy glitches.

He’s frozen in a short loop, like a video jumping back a full second and then playing forward a couple dozen frames before jumping back, and repeating the process over and over.

Rae steps from her darkness, instantly pulling it all back within, and stands before him as the petite, young woman in the long, black dress. Deep in thought, she sniffs the air gently. “Something’s burning.” She cocks her head to the side and pushes out her bottom lip like a child pouting because she didn’t get what she’d been promised. “Is it you?”

Rae slowly reaches out a hand, passing it directly through Eddy as he continues to spasm in time and space. Suddenly the air is sucked from this place to nowhere leaving a slowly blackening emptiness behind.

And then the world flickers out and immediately back into existence, and Rae finds herself sitting on the old picnic table at the top of the hill. She takes a deep breath, testing the air. “No. That’s not right.” She looks to her right, to no one. “Is this you? Are you doing this?”

There’s no answer.

At that moment, the woman with the big, red bow appears from the trees off to the side. A weary smile on her round face, she looks up to the sky. “They said...” She sighs, letting the sadness go, doing her best to manufacture the innocent delight she’s supposed to show. “... they said it was going to rain today.”

Without looking in her direction, Rae throws up a hand, palm out in an effort to stop the impending dialogue. “Eh. Eh. Eh. Not right now. Wait.” The words tumble out quickly.

“They were wrong, of course. I knew...”

Rae violently spins her head to give the woman her most intense stare, darkness pouring from her eyes, nose, and mouth. “I said. I. Need. A minute.” She clenches her teeth after each word, turning her head back to look down the path to see Eddy approaching, about a quarter of the way up the hill.

“No. That’s not at all what you said. You said... ‘not right now. Wait.’”

For just a moment, Rae considers exploding this annoying non-person into a fine red mist, or whatever color nothing becomes when it explodes. But she looks down at her right hand laying open, palm up, resting on her leg. And imagines that she can feel a bit more of that calm.

The woman takes a couple steps forward and stops just a few feet from where Rae sits. She glances up to the moonless sky and continues. “Well, actually... it is a bit darker than usual.” She makes a tutting noise. “Right?”

“Maybe...” Rae fights to hold in her madness. “... maybe neither one of us should be here.” She turns back to the woman and violently taps the side of her nose over and over with her index finger like a crazy person. “Mick.”

The woman studies Rae’s face, her beautifully pale skin, small mouth, bright teeth, and settles on her big, brown eyes. Angry. Hiding the sadness and confusion.

“You should just go. Mick.” Rae lets her eyes darken a shade. “You shouldn’t be here... Mick. I’m fairly certain neither one of us should be here. Mick.” She keeps over enunciating the older woman’s name as if a threat.

The woman walks past Rae, making sure to give her a wide birth. Stopping at the edge of the green hill, she turns her whole body back towards the younger woman.

But before she can say anything, Rae turns her head and glares. “Yeah, I know... Mick.” Rae’s eyes reach pure black. “... stories to tell. Little ones. Big green field. You’d love it if I could join you. Blah. Blah. Fucking. Blah.”

The woman tries an encouraging smile, but understands. “But you have other plans.”

“That I do.” Rae points her angry glare towards an approaching Eddy.

“Well...” The woman pauses, deciding how hard to go. Rae’s always been the difficult one, even as a child. “... if you have a sudden... attitude change... you know where to find me.” She turns and starts down the gentle slope of the hill.

Rae closes here eyes tightly, and blinks several times, trying to understand what is happening. Her earlier confusion is pushed away by annoyance and anger. If she were human, she would feel the adrenaline rush. But she’ll have to settle for annoyance and anger.

Breathing heavy, covered in sweat, Eddy appears at the top of the path, overlooking the river behind him.

“Hey...” He takes a few shallow breathes. “... you.” His voice is gruff, and rude. Shaky and weak. Again, there’s a script he’s unaware of, but feels the need to stick with.

Rae sighs hard, out of pure annoyance. And anger. She wants to put herself back in control. The older woman worries her more than she’d be willing to admit.

“Well... well. You’re a... you... you’re... you’re a sexy... young thing.” Eddy does his best to leer at Rae, robotically looking her up and down, while at the same time shifting his eyes from side to side as if hiding from something, or expecting something to jump out and snatch him. “You... you know... you sit out here... all alone... and you’re just...”

“I’m just asking for trouble.” Rae briefly closes her eyes, collecting herself.

Eddy’s attempt to menace is obvious, but feels incredibly off and stiff. Manufactured. As if he’s just not into it. He’s more scared than scary. And Rae hasn’t even done her thing yet.

Rae scoots forward, letting the darkness stream from her eyes. A thick, coarse smoke. Fun or not. She no longer has time for this. But after the last attempt, the glitch, she’s interested in where this takes the both of them.

Eddy takes a quick step back. “Wh... what the fuck.” It’s half hearted, as if he already knew what was coming, but he was required to be surprised anyway.

He spins his bloated body around clumsily, nearly falling in the dirt, and runs and stumbles to the top of the dirt path. But there she is, impossibly standing on the path just in front of him.

“Hmmm.” She immediately opens up, becoming pure darkness, her voice becoming an echo from deep within. “I don’t think so.”

And again, he glitches. He’s frozen in that same short loop.

Like a bolt of lightning, Rae extends her arm, grabbing him by the throat. “Oh no you don’t.” She lifts him off his feet. “Not this time. I was ready this time.”

Eddy continues to spasm through the same short loop, unchanged, as she turns, letting her arm drop to drag him down the path by his fat neck.

And again, reality blinks out and back into existence, and Rae finds herself sitting on the old picnic table at the top of the hill.

She takes a long, deep breath. “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! I said I was ready this time.” She looks to her right. “If this is you fucking around, I’ll...” She jerks her hand violently back from where it had laid, palm up, on her leg. She pulls it close to her body, and pushes her bottom lip out into an angry pout.

This time the older woman is a few minutes ahead in the action, already starting over at the slope leading down to the green field. “There’s not much time left.” And she throws a small wave over her shoulder as she starts down the hill.

Breathing heavy, covered in sweat, Eddy appears at the top of the dirt path, overlooking the river. “Hey...” He takes a few shallow breathes as his bloodshot eyes dart around wildly. “... you.” His voice is gruff, and rude. And absolutely terrified.

Rae sighs, closing her eyes tight, and lets out a scream that tears open Sam’s bottle world, causing it to briefly flow into reality like a dark fog. And then the tear is instantly sealed as her scream ends when she forces her eyes open in a crazed stare directly into Eddy’s empty soul.

His hands tightly covering his ears, he takes a lumbering step back.

And he spins around clumsily, nearly falling in the dirt, and runs and stumbles to the top of the path, falling over the hill, landing in the dirt and rolling a few yards before struggling to get, first to his knees, and then awkwardly to his feet.

Rae scoots forward, letting the darkness drain from her eyes into the air like a thick, sticky, ink. “This ends now.” She looks to her right. “You hear me? Now!” She clenches her teeth, fighting to bring the volume of her voice back down to something showing some semblance of control. “We need to talk.” She grits her teeth. “We. Will. Talk.”

Eddy half runs, half falls and crawls down the dirt path until he reaches the side of the river where his home of tents and tarps sits. He climbs to his feet, and not knowing what else to do, or where else to go, uses his sweaty, convulsing hands to fumble with the long zipper at the front of his tent, pulling it down forcefully, opening it so he can enter and hide from the Devil herself.

As he straightens up, he find himself staring directly into the eyes of Death. Not the Devil, but Death herself.

With incredible speed, Rae extends her arm, grabbing him by the throat and lifting him off his feet. “Now let’s see. What did I say last time we did this? Maybe the first time. I don’t remember. It’s all a God damn blur to me at this point.”

She tries to smile for effect, but can’t quite pull it off. It just looks crazed and pained, which terrifies Eddy even more.

“Ah yes. I want to watch you die.” And now she’s able to fight the madness for that smile. Showing bright, white teeth from within the dark chasm she’s become. “Again. And again. And again.”

# 13

It looks like a small town in Northern California. Blue skies, a warm breeze, birds chirping, and the sun shining brightly down, warming everything it touches.

It's spring. Even in Sam's place.

A group of firemen walk quickly past, dragging a long hose, struggling to put out the last remains of the fire that took out most of a large apartment building. The building still stands, blackened and smoldering, trails of dark smoke lingering in the air towards the front where the fire really took hold.

Seven bodies have been brought out. So far. And numerous people injured by the fire and smoke. The fire keeps finding new footholds to keep it going, even in the smallest of ways.

And then in the blink of an eye, Chaos arrives. He tears open the clear, blue sky, replacing it with fire and lightning, smoke, and for just a second, the emptiness of nothing. The air sizzles and reality splits, violently, crackling with energy as Michael, lit up like a small sun, steps through time and space, entering just behind a small group of unreal onlookers in the small town. In Sam's place.

The remains of the fire are instantly extinguished, much to the relief of the exhausted firefighters.

The would-be sun god cools to match the beautiful, spring day.

He's a handsome warrior. Tall. Broad. Six foot four. Big, solid, and strong. He has a head of unruly, curly, dark hair and bushy, even darker eyebrows. Normally he'd wear a big, cocky grin to match his big, cocky personality.

But not today.

Directly in front of where Michael stands is a spindly, elderly man with long, wispy, grey hair blowing in the unnatural wind of Sam's place. With a complete lack of emotion, he stares at Michael, directly into his eyes. Or right through him.

Three paramedics push a severely burned woman past on a gurney. She's barely recognizable, her skin charred and melted, her face nearly

gone, her hands black, fingerless stumps. Her mouth is just a mess of goo sticking together, keeping it painfully closed. She breathes from an oxygen mask through the messy, gaping hole that had once been her nose.

As Michael breathes out heavily, Sam's reality cries out, becoming a long, drawn-out moan of sorrow. "So." His voice erupts, deep and powerful, almost gravely. "This is you." He gestures both arms out wide, referring to the carnage all around them.

As the world shudders and ripples, the elderly man stumbles forward slightly. But the deadness in his eyes, the blank stare and withdrawn expression remain unchanged.

Michael swallows slowly, deliberately, doing his best to contain himself. This is Sam's place, and things are meant to be done differently here. "So." Again he gestures, this time thrusting his arms out emphatically, to drive home his frustration. "How did you cause the fire? Why?"

The elderly man says nothing, remaining expressionless, still appearing to stare right through Michael. Then his eyes slowly, painfully close for a full thirty seconds as if hoping that once they open, all this will be long in the past and no longer a consideration. While here, in Sam's place, it has been too long since he's thought of anything else.

"She's... hurting. Hurting so badly that the pain feels like ice. Like she's being ripped open by ice." Michael's voice is low and hard, becoming a coarse whisper. "She's also pregnant."

The old man says nothing. And does nothing. He remains quiet and emotionless. Completely still.

“I’m talking to you.” Michael’s voice is now a hard, threatening whisper. “Fuck!” He can feel himself begin to light up, and fights to bring his temper under control. His heart begins to beat slow and heavy, matching his breathing. Unnecessary habits.

The elderly man slowly opens his eyes, feeling the burn return as the dry air hits them. He turns his head slightly to the side, watching as the burned woman is lifted into the nearby ambulance. The empty look on his face becomes utter sadness, despair. He knows Death all too well.

Michael takes a step closer. They’re nearly face to face, with just a couple feet between them. The two men are about the same height, even though the elderly man’s back is arched and his shoulders slumped by time.

“This is...” The elderly man breathes in deeply, and then out slowly, methodically. “... our first time.” His voice is soft and weary, but with a hint of some long-unused strength. He looks away from Death, turning his head back to Michael, again looking him directly in the eye. “You and me. It’s usually...”

Michael thrusts up a hand, to stop him from continuing.

The old man takes another long, deep breath, this time releasing it forcefully through his nose. He knows where this will go. He casually reaches up, scratching the top of his head lightly. And he returns to silence, saying nothing more.

The entire time, his eyes never leave Michael's.

Michael's eyes burn to pure white. "Fuck!" And he take two powerful steps forward, right through the elderly man's body, tearing him open, causing a white-hot fire to pour from the open void of his body.

The old man screams in agony, his face contorting in otherworldly pain, as the entire area around him bursts from burning light to white flames, then orange, red, and finally blue, as they cool and retreat back into the tear in reality as the old man's body slowly closes and reforms.

And with that, Michael has gone.

# 14

Gabriel 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 happy smile on his face. Even through the worst of times, he almost always has a smile on his face. That's Gabriel.

He likes the coffee shop. He should have done this sooner. Sam had told him of his people watching and how much he enjoyed it. People sitting in their overstuffed chairs, surrounded by heavy wooden tables. They sip their drinks and work on their laptops, tablets, and smart phones,

usually without ever acknowledging one another with anything more than a passing glance and fleeting smile.

His brother's words.

Gabriel's smile begins to fade just a little. He misses his brother.

And now, those same people are completely unaware of the darkening sky, missing moon, and fading stars. And all the other changes Gabriel's either witnessed or can feel happening. He imagines that Michael must be just as perplexed, but with less of a smile on his face.

And just like that, Gabriel's big smile is back. He chuckles, imagining the look on Michael's face. Plus, now it appears that the sun has also gone the way of the moon and stars. And that certainly won't help his brother's mood.

Gabriel's smile falters just a bit, but not completely. He makes a mental note to seek out his brother and see what he knows about all of this. This feels like something Michael would already be on top of. Or maybe he's the one that broke a few things on his way towards fixing some overall problem. It wouldn't be the first time. Though it's never been to this extent.

Gabriel glances over to Nyssa and Tegan, twin sisters, Sam's best friends, and considered members of the family. They're both up near the counter waiting for their drinks. Separate but together. This is the first time they've been here without the intention of meeting up with Sam. And neither one of them will ever completely recover from that.

Gabriel stretches his neck to better see what is taking them so long. He's eager to try one of the sweet, chocolate drinks that Sam used to rave about. Gabriel thinks Sam was probably here more for the sweets than the alleged people watching.

"Mmmm." He licks his lips.

Maybe something warm. Maybe he'll burn his top lip just a little, but it'll be worth it to taste something that his brother said was the sweetest, tastiest drink he'd ever had. Better than the Cokes Rae loves so much. Better than those little bottles of root beer Michael would fight you for.

Gabriel looks back to his friends in the small crowd, waiting for their orders. He's known the two of them for a very long time, practically since Sam first brought them home, but he still gets a chuckle out of their 'twin-ness'.

They look enough alike to be twins, but have their subtle differences to make them individuals. They both are petite with short, spiky, trendy hair and simple, pretty faces. Nyssa 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. Tegan's face is rounder yet shows twice the defiance, and they share the same dark brown hair cut short in places and left longer in other places, for a trendy look that isn't part of any trend.

Or at least that's the way Sam always saw the two of them. Gabriel simply sees them as two sisters, probably in their early twenties, who look a lot alike, while struggling to be completely individual. Sam's friends, family, protectors. Gabriel sees them more as his cousins. Or perhaps nieces since they are his brother's creation.

"Hmmm." He considers.

Nyssa had ordered a tea, and Tegan, a black coffee. Normally they order something sweet and chocolatey for Sam, and one of those little lemon cakes with the sugary glaze that they always seem to be out of, much to Sam's disappointment. But not knowing this brother as well as the other, Tegan wonders if the French vanilla smoothie she ordered will make him happy. Well, happier. Tegan thinks that Gabriel is the most straight forward, and easiest of the brothers to read, and he seems like a French vanilla kind of guy.

When he reached out to her and Nyssa about a trip to the coffee shop, she'd been somewhat surprised and a bit reluctant. Her and her sister had been hanging out at home. Actual home, not the family house. They'd been doing pretty much nothing, with very little contact with the family for ages since Sam died. And she was fine with that. They were both fine with that. Tegan had taken up running and swimming, while Nyssa had read more books than anyone would have thought possible.

The simplicity of life after Sam was welcome in their time of mourning.

And when Gabriel approached them, Tegan was typically skeptical. She asked why, of all places, he suddenly had an urge to come here. To the coffee shop. With them. It was a first. It's not like he didn't have plenty of opportunities to join them in the past, with Sam.

After scrunching up his face, giving it some thought, Gabriel said he didn't really know. Maybe it was just time to celebrate his brother and learn to move on, not without him, but alongside the people and things he enjoyed. And Gabriel liked the twins, and wanted them to be more of a part in his life and the lives of his family. He told them that they were family, and that they needed to be reminded of that every once in a while.

That's Gabriel. That's what he is. That's what he does. He makes you feel warm and welcome. Of all the members of the family, he's the closest to 'what you see is what you get'. He's just a nice guy.

He certainly isn't going to kill you because he's having a bad day. "I'm looking at you Rae." Tegan mumbles, still waiting for her order. And then a shiver goes down her spine as she glances around to make sure Rae isn't actually in the building. She thinks that would be just awful.

While Tegan waits center stage, Nyssa is off to the side watching everything and everyone. She's more observant than her twin, and feels like they've been here before. Not just the coffee shop. Because they have. Many times. Not just ordering drinks while one of the brothers sits comfortably waiting. Because they've done that often too. No, this feels

more like *deja vu*. She looks around at the various people doing the things people do in a coffee shop.

She recognizes all of them. She knows everything they're doing. They've been here before. This exact moment.

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

With a heavy, wooden table sitting low in front of the couch, he 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 the people watching that his brother had enjoyed so much. And he'll provide a smile to everyone he can, regardless of whether they want it or not. He'll push his warmth towards them, and he knows they'll smile right back. Every one of them if he chooses.

Tegan glances over, watching Gabriel take over the entire couch as if it were his own, as if he were simply sitting in the middle of his living room. And that's the moment everything clicks, and Tegan sees what her sister sees. As twins do, they both turn towards one another in complete sync. Without collecting their drinks, they both quickly move to the couch, one to each side of Gabriel, who is just staring out the window at the passing traffic.

“We’ve done this before.” Tegan blurts, rather abruptly.

Her sister bulges her eyes and puts out a hand to signal the need to say calm and not get too excited. It’s their nature to watch out for the family. For Sam really. It’s who they are. And now it’s Gabriel literally sitting in his place. They were created for this. Sam made them as companions and friends, but they quickly became protectors and gate keepers, first from Michael when he argued with Sam after the fall, and when they failed at that, from anything else that could possibly come along and cause harm. Nothing could, of course. But it gave them purpose beyond mere companionship and friendship. And when you’re eternal, you need purpose.

Rae once told them that they were only created as fodder for Michael’s coming. But Nyssa knows better. “Gabe. Are you listening? We’ve done this before.” She’s quiet and direct.

Gabriel grins. “Of course you have.” Then he smiles wide. “With Sam. I know. That’s why I asked you here.”

“No.” Nyssa says calmly. “We’ve done... this...” She makes an expression with her whole face to emphasize the word. “... exact... moment before.”

Gabriel purses his lips, but his face keeps the smile as he considers. There’s very little he hasn’t experienced in his long life, including reliving the occasional moment. Which is something he and his siblings are perfectly capable of. In fact, they simultaneously live in every moment,

past, present, and future. And they do so with complete independence moment from moment, so as not to suffer too many spoilers. But this is something different, and not of his doing, which makes it much more interesting.

“Watch.” Nyssa points to a pretty, young woman with long, straight, blonde hair casually glancing back at Nyssa out of the corner of her eye.

“She looks pleasant. I’ll bet she’s nice.” Gabriel notices the small smirk 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.

“Ha.” Gabriel lets out a short laugh. “Reminds me of Sam.” His eyes saddens just a little.

Time slows as he notices her oversized, black t-shirt with a cartoon, red devil showing his big butt, while covering his mouth with his hand in mock embarrassment. And that seems somehow familiar. He scrunches his eyebrows together, and lets his smile drop completely. He knows the young woman. They’ve met.

“I know you.” He mumbles to himself.

She seems completely comfortable with herself, yet there is something uncomfortable about her. Or at least, that’s the feeling Gabriel

gets. But he's brand new to this people watching thing, so he's probably seeing something that's not really there. He wishes Sam were here to help him understand.

"She still looks... friendly." He shows a weak smile as time catches back up.

"Now watch." Nyssa gestures with her head, trying to remain unnoticed. "She's going to get her order... and then she almost runs into a tall, blond guy in a leather jacket."

"The guy looks enough like her to be related." Tegan adds, unknowingly stating the obvious.

But no one is allowed to connect the dots. Not just yet. It's too early. They're not even allowed to know the dots need connecting.

Gabriel watches, suddenly grinning happily. "You've done this before." He's somewhat enjoying the twins excitement at knowing what comes next. "That's cheating." He wants to think of it as a game, maybe a puzzle. "Hmmm. Where's dad when you need him?" But he realizes something isn't right.

Tegan continues, watching closely. "Maybe her brother... but then..."

"... they don't seem to know one another." Nyssa finishes.

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 the tall man as he waits for his order.

“Excuse me.” She politely smiles.

“Oh, I’m sorry. My bad.” The tall man returns a mirror of her smile, and steps just off to the side to let her pass.

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

Gabriel peers through the small group near the counter. He’s trying to get a better look at the tall man, wanting to look within to confirm his suspicions. He’s already looked within the young woman, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. She’s a college student. Nineteen. Raised in a single-parent home. No siblings. She has two dogs. Pugs. Frank and Chester.

Gabriel sits up a little taller, stretching his neck to see. But standing directly in his way is a middle-aged woman with a bright, red bow in her hair. She’s unintentionally blocking his view. Briefly locking eyes, she smiles sweetly at him. He returns the smile and turns back to the front window to consider what could be causing this.

Tegan turns to face the front. “And now a woman in a red...” Her voice drops to an excited whisper. “... there she is.”

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.

“Mr. Nibbles.” Gabriel immediately recognizes the little girl and her monkey. “And her murderer.”

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 Gabriel. 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.

“Belle.” Gabriel smiles sadly, glancing first to Nyssa, then Tegan. “She’ll die tonight in a bathtub. Her mother drowns her.” He just says it. Not a whisper. Not trying to hide what he’s saying. He’s not even angry. He’s just stating a fact. It will happen.

Her mother roughly pulls her to the counter to order. The little girl keeps looking back at Gabriel while waiting for her mother to finish.

Gabriel’s attention shifts as a young man wearing a green apron cautiously approaches the sofa where the three sit. He has three drinks on a tray. “Gabriel?” It’s not a question. It’s a realization. He sets the tray down quickly on the table, and hesitantly, somewhat nervously, leans over to give Gabriel a hug.

Tegan thrusts out a hand to stop him from coming into contact with her friend, causing the young man to pull back a little, startled.

“It’s okay, Tegan.” Gabriel stands, and gives the young man a warm hug. “Marty and I are old friends.” He pulls back, leaving his extended

arms resting on the young man's shoulders, so that the two of them remain face to face. "How's Benjamin?"

"He's good. Really good." Marty looks uncomfortably at each of the twins sitting to Gabriel's sides. "I mean... you know, he's still dying... but he's in a better place about things."

The twins both shift their eyes to one another.

"So... again... thank you. He'd definitely want to thank you himself... again." Marty takes the drinks off the tray, setting them on the table as Gabriel sits back down. "And grandma says you need to come for dinner again soon. She'll make your favorite."

"Her wonderful beef stew." Gabriel breathes in slowly through his nose. He can smell it. "With lots and lots of those little potatoes."

Marty nods enthusiastically. "Yeah. She'd really like that." He bounces his head back and forth awkwardly. "We'd all really like that. I know grandpa would."

Gabriel nods and raises his eyebrows. "I will. Soon." He can't help but glance out the window to the sky that is darkening more and more by the minute. It's already much darker than it had been just hours ago. "Very soon. I promise."

Marty grins wildly. "Good. Good." He awkwardly looks over to the twins. "I'll let her... and grandpa... know." He backs away from the couch a few steps. "Soon, then. I'll let them know." He turns and walks off to a nearby table.

“Okay. So that was new. That didn’t happen last time.” Nyssa is thinking aloud. “But everything else... yes.”

Gabriel looks away, again distracted, this time by the mother and her young daughter as they pay for their coffee and a juice box.

Nyssa looks to where Gabriel is staring. “Is she planning it? Has she been planning it?”

“Is it something she knows she’ll do tonight?” Tegan glares, her body tensing.

“No.” Gabriel shows a rare frown, making him look more like Michael, or even Rae. “It just happens.” There’s definitely a strong family resemblance between all of them. And at the same time, they’re all so different.

Tegan frowns. “I should just go over and snap her fuckin’ neck.” She moves as if getting up, but stays seated, knowing very well that she’d be stepping outside the rules. And that wouldn’t be allowed.

And suddenly there’s nothing but Gabriel, sitting alone in the darkness that flickers several times to a bright, white light, and then back to complete darkness as he glances around, taking in his complete lack of surroundings.

He tilts his head to the side listening.

But there’s no sound.

He reaches out to feel for his father, for his siblings.

But he’s alone.

He notices that he isn't breathing, his heart isn't beating. Which isn't all that unusual, but it's something rarely outside of his control. When he tries breathing in, there's no air. When he pushes for his heart to beat, there's no heart. Wherever he is, there's no pretense. The facade is unveiled. Gabriel is what he is. He'd love for there to be a mirror handy. He wants to see what he looks like.

He feels like he recognizes the nothingness. It's not darkness. It's nothingness. This, he's experienced on numerous occasions, especially when they were all children. "Hello?" Gabriel's voice echoes once and then dies, swallowed up as if in a sound dampening room. "Chris? Are you okay?"

Nothing.

Gabriel waits. He's fairly sure it's been numerous lifetimes since he arrived in the nothingness. But he's patient. He's always been the patient one.

Having forgotten to, he forces himself to blink.

And everything is instantly back in place, as if someone simply flicked the lights back on, causing reality to reappear just as it was the moment it went dark. Not a moment has passed.

"We really need to talk." Gabriel says somewhat quietly to himself. He glances to Tegan at his right, and puts on a small, weak smile. "Language. Tegan. Language." He shares Sam's distaste for cursing. Or does he? He scrunches his brow, uncertain if that's true.

The mother leans down and impatiently unwraps the little juice box straw and stabs at the top of the small box numerous times, struggling to get it through the foil-covered hole. Then she thrusts the juice box, almost angrily, down towards her young 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 as they both walk towards the front door. She is still staring at Gabriel, and has been almost the entire time she's been in the coffee shop.

Gabriel gives her a child's wave as she walks by.

Briefly, for just a couple seconds, she sees a different man sitting there. Similar, but different. He's sparkly.

But then he's gone.

Gabriel leans forward, just a little. "Pssst." He gets the little girl's attention and then politely smiles up at the little girl's mom, frowning down at him impatiently as she approaches the front door.

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

"This too." Tegan's nods her head, her body bouncing on the couch. "This too. This happened too." She sounds like a child trying to get a parent's attention. She looks to the area of the couch just between her and Gabriel.

"You dropped this on the way in." Gabriel grabs the 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.

The girl looks at the monkey and then under her arm where it had been just seconds ago. Then looks back to Gabriel. “You’re on fire. Does it hurt?”

“Yes. I am.” Gabriel’s smile grows bigger. “And no. It doesn’t.”

Having had enough of this nonsense, the mother pulls hard at the little girl’s arm, towards the door. “Annabelle. Time to go.”

She turns.

And walks directly through the tall, blond man in the leather jacket, his hands full with two drinks and some napkins, as he approaches the front door.

The woman goes cold, completely overwhelmed by the impossibility of what just happened. A darkness passes through her vision as she nearly passes out. She immediately lets go of her daughter’s arm, leaving her on the opposite side of the tall man, but with her arm still outstretched right through him.

“Holy shit.” Tegan flops heavily to the back of the couch, causing it to skip back on the floor an inch, making a loud squeak. “What the fuck?”

The mother pulls back her arm, dropping everything she’s holding, letting it crash to the floor, and screams long and shrill, causing her face to achieve a deep, broken red. Then she turns and runs, shoving the door open and leaving her daughter behind as she flees down the sidewalk away from the coffee shop.

“Nyssa.” Gabriel says nothing more.

Nyssa stands. Carefully stepping in front of the couch, she reaches to the front of the tall man, giving him an awkward smile. She gently takes the young girl’s hand in her own, making sure not to startle her. The young girl is now staring, open mouthed, at the tall man. Another thing about small children is that when confronted by the impossible, they are often more open and accepting of the experience.

“This is my friend, Nyssa.” Gabriel smiles warmly, leaning a little closer to Annabelle who can feel the warmth of his fire. “She’s going to help you find your mom. Okay?”

Still staring at the tall man, Annabelle nods slowly, overcome by a warm calmness, and walks away with Nyssa.

“Why?” Tegan seems annoyed.

“Because this has already happened.” Gabriel give her a quick look, which reminds her of Sam. “And what’s going to happen...” He trails off, not wanting to give it too much thought.

Completely unfazed by the encounter, the tall man follows behind Nyssa, using his back to hold the door open to leave the small shop. He stops for a second, giving Gabriel the most familiar smile and lifting one drink a few inches in salute.

Gabriel tilts his head slightly, furrowing his brow as he looks within the tall stranger. There’s nothing out of the ordinary. Twenty two. Raised by his mother. No siblings. Two dogs. Pugs.

“Frank and Chester.” The stranger grins childlike, his blue eyes sparkling against the darkness outside the door.

Gabriel feels a wave of confusion pushing his warmth to the side. He knows this young man. And it’s obvious. But for the moment, he’s not allowed to see it. No matter how hard he fights, no matter how obvious, he’s not allowed to see through the confusion. It doesn’t even matter that he knows who this absolutely has to be. He’s not allowed to see it. And he’s not allowed to see that he can’t see it. He just feels, off.

Suddenly, 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 spill his drinks.

“Whoa, watch it there little man.” The young man steps back a little, pushing the door open farther.

“You guys got the time?” The boy looks first to Gabriel and then to the man holding the door open.

“This...” Tegan turns her eyes to Gabriel.

Something tugs at the recesses of Gabriel’s memories. He is overwhelmed by the smell of fresh flowers. He remembers the young, blonde woman, and quickly sitting forward, turns to glance over his shoulder to find her. He knows all of them. The young woman, the tall man, and the boy on his bike.

He looks back to the scene at the door. “I know you.” His brain fights to see the obvious, but can’t. Not yet.

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 stranger 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." 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 turns his head towards Gabriel, a serious look on his face. "You should wrap things up. Say your goodbyes. We're nearly out of time. We'll talk later." And he lets the door close behind him as he moves past the large window and towards the corner crosswalk.

Then Gabriel knows. He's allowed to know. "Chris." He watches his brother pedal away in one direction, while crossing the street in the opposite direction. He quickly turns on the couch, searching for the young, blonde woman. "Dammit, Chris." His voice is a whisper.

But she's gone. All that remains is the smell of fresh flowers, which has completely overwhelmed the smell of coffee in the small shop.

Gabriel hops up, tensely standing in front of the couch for a few seconds as he considers.

Tegan, quickly sits up.

But without even looking, Gabriel extends his arm towards her, palm out. “Please. Stay. I’ll be right back. I need to talk to my brother.”

He opens the front door, politely holding it for an older couple to enter, and then steps out, and stops, just standing there, deciding which would be easier to catch up to. He turns and hurries towards the crosswalk.

“Wait... Chris? Pipsqueak?” Tegan slumps back on the couch, letting her head rest easily on the backrest. She sniffs the air gently , smelling only flowers. “Yeah... well... that totally makes sense.”

# 15

“Is it time?” The man’s dark, deeply lined face looks tired, almost relieved, ready. He reaches up running a hand through a mess of tight curls, grey and rough.

He’s happy.

From the parking lot, Rae walks towards him, not letting her bare feet quite touch the hot pavement. In one hand, she’s carrying a brown bag with a big, yellow M on it. “I got you a little something.” She holds the bag up high as she approaches.

“A last meal?” The man smiles brightly against his dark skin. “My last supper.”

Rae shakes her head, playfully rolling her eyes. “No, Ethan.” She reaches down to where he sits on the curb, by the grass, and hands him the goody bag. “Not yet.” She avoids even a glance at the bandaged stubs where his feet had once been.

“Just another friendly visit then.” His eyes change ever so slightly, showing his pain. But the gap-toothed smile remains.

Standing just in front of him, Rae uses both hands to smooth the back of her long, black dress, before sitting down beside Ethen, half on the curb, partly in the grass. She does her best to tuck her dress around her legs to keep it from the slight breeze. She lets her feet extend out into a small grassy area where the curb ends and some bushes begin. She’s a small woman, so they don’t extend very far, just enough to make her relatively cozy considering it’s a fast-food parking lot, much too close to a trash bin, on a day with absolutely no reason to be this hot.

Rae looks over to her friend as he blocks the harsh sunlight from his eyes with his hand and moves just a little to his left where a tall tree is providing shade from the bright sun. Fidgeting with the sleeves of her dress, she casually glances up to the dark sky where there is no sun. No bright sunlight. No slight breeze. No hot day.

Like its sibling, the moon, the sun has recently gone missing, not that anyone seems to notice. Which is probably a good thing.

Always the gentleman, Ethan waits until his friend is fully seated, and appears half-way comfortable, before opening the bag and looking inside. “Oh. Yum.” He pulls out a Big Mac and then a large fries, extra salt. “My favorite.”

When Ethan looks up, Rae is holding two large Cokes. Her sweet smile full of mischief. “I didn’t forget.” She looks genuinely pleased to see her old friend. “And stop asking. I promise... I’ll let you know when it’s time. You’ll be the first to know.” She cocks her head to the side and grins wildly. “Well... the second.”

Ethan’s face lights up, his eyes widening, feigning relief, while hiding disappointment. “Oh.” He shows a big smile with a few gaps where various teeth have since gone the way of the moon and sun. “Well. We can’t have everything. The Coke will have to make up for it.” He winks a mushy, wet, bloodshot eye. “Maybe next time.”

“Maybe.” She hands her friend one of the Cokes, and then unwraps both straws, placing one in his drink and the other in her drink. She immediately takes several long sips through the straw.

Ethan watches closely as she pulls her lips from the straw and swallows, getting the timing just right.

“Best. Drink. Ever.” They say in unison. This isn’t the first time they’ve shared a meal. But he hopes it’ll be the last.

Ethan wipes one hand, and then the other, through the condensation on the outside of his drink, and then uses one of the

napkins from the bag to clean his hands the best he can. Then he pours the fries out onto another napkin and sets it on the curb between him and his friend.

“Thank you, Ethan.”

He takes a small nibble off the edge of his Big Mac, intending to make it last as long as he can, and enjoy every morsel. “How long...” He stops and chews. “... how long have we known each other, Rae?”

“Hmmm.” She pretends to think about it, picking out an especially salty fry, holding it between her thumb and finger, feeling the grittiness of the salt. “Since you were thirty seven.” She blows on the fry before taking three quick bites in succession. “I think.” She closes her eyes, enjoying the fry as much as Ethan enjoyed the first bite of his burger.

“You think.” Ethan half laughs, half cackles, only stopping when his mouth gets a second bite of burger. “I’ll bet you’re sitting with me right now...” He can’t help himself and takes a much bigger bite, and reaches for a scoop of fries. “... that very day.”

Rae stares at the fries in her hand, their grease glistening even in the darkness. Her eyes briefly wander to her friend’s injuries, when they happened. And then back to the present, to the fries in hand.

Ethan watches, knowing exactly who and what Rae is. They’ve been friends for a very long time. Ever since the accident that cost him both his feet, and a whole lot more.

Rae shrugs, munching down the two glistening, golden fries, and then again closes her eyes in delight as she takes a long sip of her Coke. Rae, like all of her siblings, loves sweet, sugary things. And salty things. And things with a tremendous amount of flavor. They despise things that are bitter or sour or lack any discernible flavor. If you're forced to live forever, you may as well have something that keeps you going, keeps you happy, and in Rae's case, keeps your sanity somewhat in check.

With Ethan sitting to her left, she looks just to her right. She holds out a couple fries briefly, raising her eyebrows, but then shrugs, and puts them in her mouth with two eager bites.

Ethan watches her, but doesn't say anything. He coughs roughly a few times into his hand, and then takes a long sip of his Coke to quell the tickle in his throat, and disguise the taste of blood. "So... thirty seven. And how old am I now?" Ethan really doesn't know.

Without thinking, he reaches down to rub the cloth wrapped around his right ankle stub. He misses having feet. He can still feel the right one. But the left one, not so much. He's not sure why. He's even left handed, which makes it even more of a mystery. He wiggles the non-existent toes on both feet, only feeling three of the five on the right. None on the left. He frowns, and takes another bite of his burger.

"You're sixty four." Rae can hear him as he thinks about the accident that took both his feet, his dignity, some of his sanity, his loved ones, and the future he had worked towards.

She remembers along with him. She was there, before and after. She sat with him in the hospital for months, waiting patiently, as he slowly deteriorated. And then on his final day, just moments before it was time to take him, Gabriel came. Not from the shadows where she quietly hid, but from the light.

The doctors would call it a miracle. But it wasn't really. Gabriel couldn't give him back his feet. But he did give him back a life. Not the life he had been living, of course. That had been altered. That no longer existed. Ethan's body healed to the point where he could leave the hospital and go on with things. But his mind was damaged. His spirit was broken. He left so much behind with the motorcycle accident.

"Oh man." Ethan takes the last bite of his sandwich, a little sad that it was all gone. "Really?" He looks over to Rae, and shakes his head. "I've gotten that old? Man. Where has the time gone?"

Rae takes the wrappers and empty fry box and puts them back in the greasy, brown bag they came in. She rolls the top of the bag down, crumpling it to keep it closed. She'll toss it in the bin when she leaves. She thinks she'll leave her friend be for his last two days, and maybe do something special for him when she comes to take him home. She knows she'll find him laying in the bushes over to her right, face down, cold, and stiff. There won't be a lot of time to sit with him as he dies. It'll happen fast. He has a blood clot in his lung that will hit his brain. And he'll immediately stroke out.

So she'll sit with him afterward. They can chat and reminisce. Maybe they can have one last meal. Maybe he can finally feel all ten toes as he wiggles them. Maybe he can take one last walk.

Again, Ethan reaches down with both hands to gently rub the dirty wrappings that cover his nubs. Sometimes they burn. Sometimes they hurt a little. Sometimes he gets a cramp in a foot that is no longer there. That's a tough one to work out.

He tries not to revisit the moment, but sometimes the brain does what the brain does. A drunk driver hit Ethan's motorcycle from the rear at a stop sign, pushing him straight into a garbage truck, crushing him between them. He was lucky to be alive.

Twenty-three days later, Ethan woke in the hospital, and for the first two days, as he worked to eat enough to regain some of his strength, he didn't even realize both feet had been crushed and left behind in the twisted frame of his bike.

When they finally broke the news to him, all he could do was cry. Everyone left the room except for his wife, who did her best to comfort him. And Rae who sat alone, off to the side, hidden in the shadows.

But at least he was alive. Or so they kept telling him. They did all they could to help him regain his spirits and push him to continue moving forward. It took him another seven days before he would eat on his own again, without the feeding tube being forced upon him.

And that only happened after another particularly heartwarming visit from Gabriel where Ethan was told that he would go through so much more, and possibly worse. But in the end he would do something that really mattered. Not his end, but the end. He was promised that he would do something beautiful and selfless that would affect the entire world. He was needed. And coming from Gabriel, Ethan wanted to believe it.

“Hey. Hey. Hey. So what’s up with you... beautiful?”

Rae always knew they were coming. That’s the problem with seeing your entire timeline all at once. No surprises. And no avoiding the tiresome parts of living you’re forced to bear witness to as you walk that line into your future.

Two young men, almost boys really, wearing somewhat similar, light blue jackets come walking through the hedges separating the McDonald’s from the bank next door.

“Yeah sexy, how you doin’?” The smaller of the two steps forward. He’s just a couple steps from the curb where Ethan and Rae sit.

Rae remembers them from the incident at the park with Sam and his friends. The incident that no longer happened. There were three of them. Both the smaller and the mid-sized one are here today. The big, lumbering one is not. The one that pissed his pants, and died a crying husk after Death showed him her face, his death, and everyone’s death.

Rae can't help but subtly shake her head and grin, thinking of those three young thugs with villainous pasts and evil intentions, getting more than they bargained for from her, Sam, and the twins.

Rae turns her head slightly to her right. "Do I get to make someone wet themselves again?" She giggles lightly, her eyes flashing a subtle insanity within. "Is this a gift?"

"Hey." The small one raises his voice. He's the leader of this duo. "You deaf? I'm fuckin' talkin' to you."

As Rae looks up to the young punks from the curb, she tilts her head to the side, watching the stars rapidly blinking out of existence from trillions of light years away. There's no moon. No sun. No wind. But interestingly, there's light, and her hair blows as if there's wind.

She wonders how Michael is doing. She wonders if anyone has seen or spoken to their father. She wonders if Sam's removal from reality has as much to do with this as she suspects.

"He's not here." She repeats her new mantra. "He's just not here." She reaches out into all of existence, but cannot feel him. She can feel everyone, every single soul. But not Sam. And not her father.

The bigger punk steps closer to his friend, both are now directly in front of Ethan and Rae. "Maybe princess hotness here is too good for us." He laughs and snorts, and then spits heavily on the pavement off to the side, letting the vulgarity drop slowly from his mouth. Making a big, gooey show of it.

His friend sneers, and laughs loudly.

“She don’t wanna talk to you boys.” Ethan tries for bold. He has nothing to lose. He doesn’t care what happens to him. Living on the streets these past few decades, he’s had his fair share of beatings. It’s not that bad once you no longer care about living. “She don’t want anything to do with you hoodlums.” He knows they can’t do her any harm, but the right thing to do is to stand up for your friends. Even if they don’t need you to.

“Shut up old man.” The bigger of the two glares angrily at Ethan, and then glances to his buddy for backup. “Just shut... the fuck... up.”

Rae laughs. “Hoodlums.” She remembers using the term herself to describe a couple of bad characters. Tegan laughed at her and called her an old lady. With a beaming smile on her face, Rae turns to Ethan.

“Hoodlums.” She shakes her head.

Ethan chuckles nervously, his eyes still on the two young men.  
“Yeah, hoodlums.”

“Hey!” The smaller one’s voice is sharp. “Eyes over here, princess. You don’t need to be chatting all social with this homeless piece of shit.” He looks to Ethan and glares hard, waiting to see how far the old man wants to take things.

His friend snorts loudly, and spits ridiculously hard and fast on the pavement just in front of Ethan.

“You do that again and I’ll remove your face.” Rae’s voice drops and darkens. “But I’ll let you live.” Two punks attacking her makes for fun. Two punks attacking her friend is a problem. “Maybe your entire God damn head.” She considers showing them a little of the darkness. “Let you run around for a while like a freshly killed chicken.”

Both boys aren’t sure what to make of their pretty prize. She’s tough, and they like that. But she’s also mouthy. “You’re lucky you’re fuckin’ cute.” The small one puts on a cruel smirk, doing his best to look tough.

“Just go away.” She dismisses them with a wave of her hand.

“Look. Boys. Please... you don’t want any part of my friend here.” Ethan licks his dry, broken lips nervously. “Seriously. Trust me on this one. It’s for the best.”

“Shut. Up.” The smaller one steps forward, putting a foot on the curb just between Rae and Ethan. He leans down to make sure he’s understood. “Shut... the fuck... up.”

“Where’s the big one?” Rae doesn’t really care, but if she’s going to deal with these guys, she’d rather do it all at once. Plus the big one proved to be so much fun the last time.

“I’ll show you the big one.” The mid-sized hoodlum grabs at his crotch in a vulgar manner.

And both young men laugh hysterically.

Ethan nervously glances at his friend. He reluctantly puts his hands on the curb to push himself to stand, but Rae gently reaches out, placing her hand lightly over his.

The mid-sized one reaches around his back, and pulling something forward, flashes a small knife under his jacket. “We got a tough guy here. A tough guy that wants to get himself stabbed.”

Rae sighs hard, blowing air from her mouth and nose “The last time I ran into these... hoodlums...” Rae quickly glances towards Ethan, while keeping a casual watch on the two knife-wielding idiots. “My friend... a young woman of... eh... maybe five foot one...” She smiles big, and looks back to Ethan. “... punched the bigger of these two little boys... square in the face...” She looks back to the mid-sized one. “... knocking him about six feet from where he stood and completely out. Caved his entire nose in.” She laughs loudly. “It should’ve killed him, I suppose. But I was off the clock.”

The smaller one makes a chuckling, grumbling noise and looks to his friend.

“You lying, fucking bitch.” The mid-sized one snarls. “We’ve never even seen you before today.” He pulls the knife completely free of his jacket, holding it low and somewhat hidden in his hand. “I say we cut her face... like we did Jackie. Cut her all up.” He turns his head, looking at his friend for approval. “Teach her a fucking lesson.”

“Well...” Rae glances back to Ethan. “... it happened none the less. I even made the biggest one... he’s not here today... piss himself.” She looks back to the two thugs. “And he cried like a baby.”

The two young men look at one another, their faces torn between confusion, anger, and amusement. “You’re one crazy fuckin’ chick.”

“And a lying cunt.” The smaller one wipes his wet lips on the back of his hand. And that’s when he starts laughing loudly, like a child trying to get noticed. “This motherfucker doesn’t have any feet.” He points rudely at Ethan and grabs his buddy by the arm, getting his attention. “He ain’t got no fuckin’ feet.”

Ethan finds it hard to believe that they hadn’t noticed right away. It was pretty obvious. “Idiots.”

Losing some of their anger, both young men laugh wildly like it’s all become some big joke.

Rae’s smile is gone. Her eyes go black. She turns to her right, away from her friend and the two young men. “I’m sorry.” She sighs. “I’m sorry for what I’m about to do. If you’re a kid right now, please don’t watch.”

“Hey guys.” A voice comes from just behind the two thugs. “Did I miss something?” Gabriel steps right between the two, young men, stopping, and looking to his sister and Ethan. He sees the greasy bag sitting between them. “Oh. I don’t suppose you saved me a few fries at least?” He completely ignores the two thugs, who have now ceased their show of laughter, and just stare at the big man.

Gabriel had tried catching up with his brother, but somehow lost him rounding the corner near the bank. But then he spotted his sister and Ethan, and immediately looked forward to what he knew would be a pleasant distraction. And hopefully some fries.

“Gabriel.” Ethan is happy to see another of his friends. And he’s hoping Gabriel’s arrival will cause the two thugs to move on. Challenging a young woman and a disabled man seems right up their alley. But Gabriel is a different story altogether.

“Gabe.” Rae lets go of the darkness, her mood instantly changed by seeing her brother.

“What... the fuck.” The smaller thug, puts all his weight into shoving Gabriel from the side, intending to knock him into his buddy, knowing that he’ll then shove him back, putting the scare into the big man before he can get too comfortable.

Gabriel doesn’t budge. It’s like trying to move a brick wall. He only ends up hurting his own hands.

Ethan watches, and lets a small smile creep across his face, satisfied that everything will be okay. He wishes he would’ve saved some fries for his friend.

The little man, steps back, startled by the strength of the stranger.

Gabriel glances to his left and then to his right as if noticing the two young men for the first time. “Oh. Hey. You guys can go now.” He gestures dismissively with his left hand in the air just as Rae did earlier. “I

really need to talk to my sister.” He gives her a sweet smile, and a playful wink. “And it wouldn’t interest you.”

“The quiet.” Rae tilts her head towards Ethan. “When we were kids, he used to follow me to...” She hesitates, bouncing her head from shoulder to shoulder, thinking. “... to my place... and he would leave little, handwritten notes for me to give to the dead.” She smiles proudly.

Gabriel steps forward and sits on the curb on the other side of Ethan. “I didn’t understand.” He shrugs innocently. “I thought I could help.”

The two young men just stand there, a few feet from one another, and a few feet in front of the sitting trio. They’re being ignored. And they don’t like it. But at this point they aren’t too sure what to do about it.

“It was sweet.” Rae touches Ethan’s arm. “They were fine. The dead. That’s my thing, right?” She looks to her brother. “But still... it did a lot for me.”

“Hey. What the fuck. We’re not done here.” The smaller thug’s face is red with a sudden, real anger. “You fucking...” He turns his eyes to stare directly at Gabriel. “... bitch.”

“Go.” Gabriel stands up. He’s not quite as tall, broad, and menacing as Michael. But he’s close. And he’s quite a bit larger than the two thugs doing their best to assault his sister and his friend. While growing up, his siblings teased him, calling him the quiet. But he’s perfectly capable of being the warrior if need be.

Without realizing it, both young men take another step back, their legs weakening as a cold sweat goes from head to toe. “Pretty boy, motherfucker.” The bigger of the two thugs laughs fake and awkward. Scared.

Gabriel steps from the curb, smiling brightly, looking a bit like a crazy man. His big blue eyes gleam in the sun that isn’t really there. His wavy, brown hair blows without any actual wind.

Both thugs can feel the heat coming from him, but it doesn’t quite register in their small brains. They take yet another unconscious step back, glancing nervously to one another.

“Yeah... well...” The small one’s voice noticeably cracks again. “We’re outa here. We’ll be seeing you around... big man.”

“Yeah. Another time.” And they both turn and walk away with a completely fabricated confidence.

Rae begins making a series of clucking noises that slowly morphs into a pretty good imitation of a crazy, frightened chicken.

Gabriel glances to his sister and shakes his head. He did his best to deescalate the situation and simply send them away, while she does her best to stoke their fire and bring them back.

Suddenly Ethan notices for the first time that he can feel both feet. All ten toes.

Then reality flickers several times, like a loose bulb fighting to stay lit. Everything violently goes pitch black, and then comes back on again.

Gabriel stands in the same spot, but Ethan and his sister are no longer there. Just off to the side of where Rae was sitting is a woman with mocha skin, thick lips, and a red bow neatly tied in her hair. “Oh.” She smiles warmly. “Hello, Gabe.”

# 16

It looks like a small town in Northern California. Blue skies, a warm breeze, birds chirping, and the sun shining brightly down, warming everything it touches.

It's spring.

In Sam's place.

A group of firemen walk quickly past, dragging a long hose, struggling to put out the last remains of the fire that took out most of a large apartment building. Others carry out the injured or dead.

And then Chaos arrives, tearing open the clear blue sky, causing the air to sizzle violently, crackling with energy, and for just a moment, the emptiness of nothing. Michael, lit up like a small sun, steps through time and space, entering just behind a small group of unreal onlookers.

In the small town.

In Sam's place.

The remains of the fire instantly goes out, much to the relief of the exhausted firefighters.

And Michael instantly cools to match the beautiful, spring day. A handsome warrior, tall and broad.

Standing directly in front of Michael is a spindly, elderly man with long, wispy, grey hair blowing in the wind. With a complete lack of emotion, he stares at Michael, directly into his eyes, but as if looking right through him.

This time, now his second visit, Michael notices the blood running from both long sleeves of the old man's shirt, down his wrists, into the palms of his open hands, dripping slowly to the pavement below.

"How..." Michael takes a deep breath. "... boring." And breathes out roughly, not caring, not even wanting to know. "It's been done before... so many times. And done better."

Three paramedics push a severely burned woman past on a gurney. She's barely recognizable, her skin charred and melted, her face nearly gone, her hands black, fingerless stumps. Her mouth is just a mess of goo,

melted flesh keeping it painfully closed. She breathes from a heavy oxygen mask through the messy, gaping hole where her nose had once been.

Sam's reality begins to cry out painfully, but this time Michael instantly thrusts up a hand bringing it to an abrupt end.

The elderly man stumbles forward slightly, as the world shudders and ripples. The deadness in his eyes gleam for just a split second, showing a small spark of life.

Michael swallows slowly, deliberately, an expert at intimidating others. "You." His voice erupts, deep and powerful, almost gravely. "This is because of you." He thrusts both arms out wide, referring to the carnage all around them.

The elderly man says nothing, staring Michael directly in the eyes for a few seconds, until he finally drops his chin to look down at the droplets of blood accumulating at his feet.

Michael rolls his eyes and tilts his head slightly, studying the elderly man's face, still showing no interest in the dripping blood. "So... what's your name? What do I call you?"

The elderly man, his head still tilted down, looks back up to Michael with just his eyes. But he says nothing.

Again, Michael considers ending this meeting for now. Ending it dramatically. Just to make another violent point. But he waits. "I could pull it from you. But I..." His voice begins to show his distaste for his subject. "... I don't want to see what's going on inside your head. You're here..."

He thrusts both arms out and upward. "... so I assume it's some pretty ugly stuff."

"You're honoring your brother." The elderly man wants to give Michael the smallest hint of a smile, but doesn't. It wouldn't be wise. "I understand. I think it's fitting. Very..."

"Frank." Michael immediately cuts him off, not wanting to hear any more about his brother from this sad creature. "I'll call you Frank. Maybe Frankie. You look like a Frankie to me." He lets out a short chuckle.

He looks back to when they were kids, him, his sister and all his brothers. They had a chihuahua and numerous pugs. One was a little black pug named Frank. They called him Frankie. He always looked so worried.

The elderly man returns to silence. He just continues to stare straight ahead, towards Michael. It's less a stare of defiance, and more like he's allowing himself to go through the motions, the expectations of what are destined to happen. He tells himself that he doesn't have a choice. This is all on him.

"She's still alive, you know. Well... sort of." Michael motions with his head towards the ambulance. "Pregnant too." Michael's voice remains low and hard, working towards a coarse whisper. "Mikaela. Her name's Mikaela. And the baby's name is..." He pauses, stepping forward, jutting his arm out, grabbing the elderly man by the throat, and proceeds to drag

him both forward in time and into a hospital room half way across Sam's little town.

The old man tries to scream out from the pain of being pulled through the fabric of time and space, but Michael's hand, clenched tight, restricts all sound and breathing, making for a painful silence.

"As far as I'm concerned, things like you can just fucking rot in your God damn loops." Michael glances over to the hospital bed where Mikaela lies in an oxygen tent. "I have no need to rehabilitate. That's Sam, not me."

Michael notices the lingering shadow of his sister sitting in the chair next to the already dead woman. At the time, Rae was doing what she always does. Comforting. "Hmmm." He looks back to the elderly man, now standing a few feet in front of him, facing both him and Mikaela's bed. "And Sam's gone. And you've got me." Without realizing it, in his agitation, he's been twisting the silver rings on his fingers that once belonged to his brother. One of his brother's habits that he's now taken on.

The elderly man turns his eyes slightly to the side, looking to the empty chair next to the hospital bed. The empty look on his face becomes complete sadness. He recognizes Death all too well.

"Since when do you just..." Mikaela coughs several times. "... hover near the door without coming in, sitting down. That's not the Sam I know."

Michael looks over at the woman lying in the bed in front of him. She's in an oxygen tent with two pillows propping up her head. Bandages cover nearly every inch of her body, including her eyes. Her eyelids were burned away, and her retinas damaged, causing instant blindness. Off to both sides of the bed are the machines, blinking and beeping, reminding her that she may still be alive. She's not.

Her breathing is rough and labored, and her voice sounds like someone who's inhaled too much smoke too many times. If you could see through the severe burns and bandages, the missing hair, fingers and toes, you'd see a forty-four-year-old woman, heavily medicated, but still in great pain, her mind coming and going as she tries to keep it all together. She has no choice.

Michael feels the sting of being called by his brother's name. He feels like a fraud. He was never the one that was there for her. That was Sam, and to an even greater extent, Rae. His sister kept Mikaela from dying until her child could be born. And both her and Sam sat with her nightly, taking shifts, doing their best to keep her spirit uplifted and positive. It seems like more of a Gabriel thing, but Sam and Rae were both going through some things at the time, and it was a nice way to allow the two of them something positive.

"So..." Mikaela coughs roughly. "Am I getting the silent treatment today? Cuz I'm okay with that. I can just lie her and listen to your breathing if you don't want to talk. At least I won't be alone."

Michael takes a step closer to his current project. They're nearly face to face, with just a few feet between them. The elderly man is almost the same height as Michael even though his back is arched and his shoulders have slumped with age.

The shadowy figure of Death, sitting in the chair beside the hospital bed, moves, pulling her feet up underneath herself and adjusting her long black dress. She looks directly at her brother, and then to Mikaela.

Michael is a little surprised.

Rae gently clears her throat. "You're not alone, Mikaela. You're never alone."

Listening to the echo of what was his sister's voice, Michael breathes in slowly and out heavily, fighting the comfort it provides. He feels like a child again. He wants a hug from his big sister, but doesn't know how to ask. He rarely did.

"This is..." The elderly man hesitates, glancing over to the shadowy figure in the chair. "... our first time." His voice is soft and weary. He looks away from Death, turning his head back to Michael, again looking him directly in the eye. "You and me. It's usually..."

"Second time. I just cut the first time short. But still... second time." Michael puts up a hand. His eyes become pure light. "And I already said... he's gone. You're stuck with me."

The elderly man takes a long, deep breath, releasing it quickly through his nose. He knows where this will go. He's known from the very beginning.

"Ahhh, there he is." Mikaela breathes in course and painful. "Who's gone, Sam? What are you talking about?" She chuckles roughly. "So, did you bring your deck of cards?" Her voice cracks, sounding painful. "We can either play some blackjack..." She chokes on her own saliva. "... or you can read my future." This makes her laugh all the way through a rather harsh coughing attack. She can taste the blood washing down her throat.

The first night Mikaela met Sam and Rae was three days after the fire that brought her here. She was in a coma for the first two days, probably her body's way of saying you can't handle this right now. But then on the third day, there was Sam and his deck of cards. He'd hang out. They'd chat a little, and play blackjack for hours, sometimes until she fell asleep. Then Rae would arrive and sit with her throughout the night. And the next day all three of them would do it all over again.

Michael takes a step closer to the elderly man. They're so close they're nearly touching. "You did this. I don't know your whole story. I haven't looked. But you did this. And you'll tell me. They all do." Again, Michael finds himself twisting Sam's rings. "And eventually... you'll figure it out... and you'll ask for forgiveness." His heart stops. His breathing

stops. “And I’ll say no.” His voice hardens to a growl. “I’m not Sam, Frankie. So the answer will be no.”

The elderly man reaches up, scratching the top of his head lightly. “I did...” His eyes never leave Michael’s. “... nothing.” His voice drops to a pained whisper. “I did nothing.”

With that, he returns to silence, the two of them just staring at one another. One with sadness in his eyes. The other showing only anger.

“Fuck this.” And Michael steps right through the old man, tearing him open, along with time and space, stepping through him and out of this place.

And the elderly man burns and screams for another lifetime.

# 17

“Is it time?” Ethan’s dark, deeply lined face looks tired, almost relieved, ready. He reaches up running a hand through a mess of tight curls, grey and rough.

He’s happy.

From the parking lot, Rae walks bare foot, not letting her feet actually touch the hot pavement. She’s carrying a brown bag with a big yellow M on it. Suddenly, she stops. She just stands there for a few seconds. Working through her confusion.

“You got us a little something.” Ethan shows a toothless grin from where he’s sitting on the curb.

Tilting her head to the side, Rae lets her eyes survey her surroundings as she unconsciously holds the bag up high for her friend to see. Everything seems to dim slightly and flicker a half dozen times, then slowly returns to normal. Rae thinks back to her recent meeting with the old woman at the picnic table, and the oddities she encountered before killing Eddy again.

She allows herself a half smile.

“A last meal?” Ethan laughs roughly, and then lets out several harsh coughs, a splash of blood touching his lips. A little embarrassed, he quickly wipes his mouth with the underside of his shirt.

Rae can see the sickness that will soon bring him to her. She can see it coursing through his blood, stopping off in his lung, on its way to his brain. He’ll have a stroke in three days. It’ll be quick. She’s happy for him. He’s had a difficult existence.

She shakes her head, as she approaches. “No, my friend.” She reaches down to where he sits on the curb, by the grass, and hands him the goody bag. “Not just yet.”

Ethan notices something different about his friend. Something unusual. Something missing.

“Hey.” Standing just in front of him, Rae uses both hands to smooth the back of her long, black dress. “Did we do this yesterday?” It’s a legitimate question she can’t believe she’s asking. “Lunch?”

Ethan slowly shakes his head and chuckles. He searches for the sparkle in her eye or the usual sly grin. But for the moment, she seems almost human, and not at all herself.

Rae sits down beside her friend on the curb, tucking her dress around her legs, and extending her feet out into a small grassy area where the bushes begin. She looks over to Ethan as he blocks the sunlight from his eyes with a hand and moves just a little to his left where a tall tree is providing shade from the bright sun. Fidgeting with the sleeves of her dress, she glances up to the dark sky where there is no sun, no moon, and about half the stars there should be.

“What do you see up there, Ethan?”

He closes his eyes, and leans forward, letting the sun warm his face. “I see just how small I really am in the grand scheme of things.” He chuckles. “No matter what your brother says.”

Rae frowns, watching him closely.

Ethan opens one eye, seeing her closely studying him.

“What else?” She’s serious.

Ethan knows her well enough to know that she must have a reason for asking. She isn’t playing or teasing. The spark in her eyes is missing.

He gives his friend an easy, comforting smile. “I see my good friend sitting next to me, but her mind is clearly elsewhere.”

Rae’s face remains stoic and thoughtful. She stubbornly waits for a legitimate answer.

Ethan decides to go with her on this journey, and hopefully bring some of her joy back. “I see a bright, summer day. I see the sun shining down on us. Some fluffy, white clouds moving slowly through the blue. The bright, green bushes behind you gently moving in the breeze.” He pauses. “And an unopened bag of goodies that we should probably dig into before it gets cold.” He grins like a child.

Rae purses her lips, pushing them out into a slight pout. And then allows herself a sudden, beaming smile.

Ethan immediately opens the bag, looking inside. “Oh. Yum.” He pulls out a Big Mac and then a large fries, extra salt. “My favorite.” And inside the drink holder are two large Cokes, one for each of them. She rarely brings herself a sandwich, but they always share the fries.

Rae tries to relax, and look pleased to see her old friend, even if this is something of an unexpected repeat. “And don’t worry... I’ll be sure to let you know when it’s your time.”

Ethan’s face lights up, his eyes widening. “Soon. I hope.” His eyes bulge wildly. “This cough ain’t getting any better, you know.” He winks a mushy, wet, bloodshot eye. “So... maybe next time?”

“Maybe.” She unwraps both straws, placing one in his drink and the other in her drink. She immediately takes several strong sips through the straw.

Ethan watches closely, getting the timing just right.

“Best. Drink...”

And for just a few seconds, as Rae watches, Ethan is gone, with Gabriel sitting just to the side of where her friend had been. Her brother looks bemused as he looks directly at her. “Oh.” He grins. “Hello, Rae.”

Then with a flash of burning light that forces Rae to close and cover her eyes with the back of her hand, Ethan is back.

“... Ever.” He says it alone, making it sound odd and hollow. Now he knows something isn’t right. And if he’s not dead, he’s not sure why she’s acting so strangely.

Rae squints her eyes. “You sure we didn’t do this yesterday... maybe the day before?” Her head tilts to the side. “Hell... maybe twenty minutes ago?” She glances up to the stars to gauge the time. But so many are missing, and the sky is so dark, she isn’t able to tell.

“Nope.” Ethan shakes his head. “A man in my position would remember a feast like this.”

He wipes one hand, and then the other, through the condensation on the outside of his large cup, and then uses one of the napkins from the bag to clean his hands the best he can. Then he pours the fries out onto another napkin and sets it on the curb between him and Rae.

“Thank you, Ethan.” She breathes in, smelling the fake breeze. It’s completely wrong.

Ethan takes a small nibble off the edge of his Big Mac, intending to make it last as long as he can, and enjoy every morsel. “How long...” He stops and chews. “... how long have we known each other, Rae?”

Reaching out, she hears him from another point in reality, but not this timeline. He asks the same question. Thoroughly confused, she immediately returns to this Ethan.

“Hmmm.” She pretends to think about it, intending to pick out an especially salty fry, but decides she isn’t hungry. “Since you were... thirty seven.”

They sit quietly for a couple minutes, as Ethan enjoys his lunch.

“You think.” Ethan half laughs, half cackles, only stopping when his mouth gets another bite of burger. “I’ll bet you’re sitting with me right now, that very day.” He can’t help himself and takes a much bigger bite, and reaches for a handful of fries.

Rae furrows her brow and twists her head to the side in thought. “I didn’t say that... this time. That was last time.”

Ethan knows exactly who and what Rae is. They’ve been friends for a very long time. Ever since the accident that nearly took his life. “Say what?” He pushes a few fries into his mouth, munching away with pleasure.

“I didn’t say the words... ‘I think’.” She takes a small sip of her Coke. “I said them last time... not this time.”

Ethan’s face shows his confusion as he takes another, smaller bite of his burger. “I don’t follow.” He coughs roughly a few times into his hand, and then takes a long sip of his Coke to quell the roughness of his throat.

Rae looks within her friend. He only has two days, three hours, and a handful of minutes left before he moves on. “We’ve been here before.” Lost in thought, she takes a small bite of a particularly salty fry. “We’ve done this already.”

There’s been many times when Rae has gone on to repeat certain actions or times that interested her for one reason or another, but this is not one of those times. She feels like she’s stuck in someone else’s moment. She thinks of Gabriel’s flash in reality just moments ago, but shakes her head. He seemed just as surprised as she was.

Ethan watches the serious face of his friend. He watches as she shakes her head. He decides to move on. “So. Weird question... but how old am I now?” He really doesn’t know. He reaches down to rub the cloth wrapped around his right ankle stub. He misses having feet. He can still feel the right one. But the left one, not so much. He’s not sure why. He frowns, and takes another bite of his burger.

“You’re sixty...”

Time pauses, skips back and forth several times for several seconds, like an old TV changing channels, and then lands where it should. All the while, Rae just watches it happen around her as she's left relatively unaffected.

"... four."

Ethan frowns briefly, considering. "Oh man." He takes the last bite of his sandwich, a little sad that it was all gone. "Really?"

Rae takes a few moments to relive her encounter with the woman with the red bow. She said they didn't have much time left. And then things got all wonky with Eddy.

"Sixty four." Ethan looks over to Rae, and shakes his head. "I've gotten that old? Man. Where has the time gone?"

Rae takes the wrappers and empty fry box and puts them in the greasy, brown bag they came in. "Time." She mutters as she rolls the top of the bag down, crumpling it to keep it closed. She'll toss it in the bin when she leaves. She pushes out her bottom lip in a childlike pout, not actually remembering her leaving the last time. Something happened. And she never really left.

She makes a mental note to look back and see what happened. But right now she expects those two clowns to show up and then Gabriel. She nods her head almost imperceptibly, allowing herself the smallest of grins, and looks to her right. "Yeah. A do-over? Really? For little ole me?" She gently pats the grass next to her.

Ethan tries not to intrude too much into his friend's personal space. He looks away, while again reaching down with both hands to gently massage the dirty wrappings that cover his nubs.

"Does that mean I get to..." She uses a hand to push some long, black hairs from her face, pulling them behind her ear. "... oh. Okay. Mikey then." She pushes out her bottom lip in a pout and glances to Ethan. "Hmmm. I'm sorry, Ethan. We're being rude."

"Hey. What's up with you, beautiful?"

Rae looks over and sighs. "And step one... enter these two sad, little clowns."

Ethan looks over to the two young men approaching, and then glances nervously at his friend. He's seen these two around. And he has a feeling this won't end well.

"What the fuck did you say?" Now standing just a few feet in front of Rae and Ethan, the smaller of the two aggressively steps forward, instantly angered.

Rae wonders if this is a test of her control. She considers just striking out at these two creatures right this instant. Michael can go off and have his own fun somewhere else. She looks to Ethan. She considers asking him to close his eyes and cover his ears for just a second. There's no reason to traumatize her friend so close to his own conclusion. Seeing who she is and who she can be could prove confusing in the end.

“Hey.” The small one raises his voice. “You fucking deaf? I’m talking to you.” He makes a head nod to his buddy, and then looks Rae directly in the eyes. “I said... what... the fuck... did you say?”

He takes another half step closer, causing the insanity within Rae to smile wide with true happiness. “I called you... clowns. Two... pathetic... little... clowns.” She tilts her head to the side, seeing the stars behind the two young men rapidly blinking out of existence from trillions of light years away. There’s no moon. No sun. No wind. But somehow there’s light, and her hair blows as if in the wind.

“Sad.” Ethan clears his throat, his voice soft and nervous. “You said sad, little clowns.”

“Oh. Yeah. That’s what I said. Sad. Sad, little clowns.” She gives her friend a warm smile. “Thank you, Ethan.”

The mid-sized guy steps closer to his smaller friend, unsure of what they’re about to do. “Maybe princess hotness here is too good for...” He laughs and snorts, and then spits on the pavement off to the side. Jerking his head violently, making a big show of it all. “... a couple a clowns.”

His friend says nothing, just staring at the girl, deciding what he wants to do with her. He glances around quickly, considering just grabbing her, pulling her into the bushes, and cutting her face. That would teach her to be nicer next time.

Rae stares back intensely, taking a deep, empty breath, just now registering the complete lack of air all around them. She looks to Ethan, watching his chest move comfortably in and out, and wonders how long it's been like this. And if it's just local, somehow attached to her, or if it's happening everywhere.

"She don't want to talk to you boys." Ethan tries for bold. He has nothing to lose. He doesn't care what happens to him. Living on the streets these past few decades, he's had his fair share of beatings. "She don't want anything to do with you... hooligans."

What's one more beating for the sake of chivalry. He knows they can't do her any harm. But he thinks it's still right to stand up for one's friends even if they really don't need you to. Ethan has lost a lot, but not his sense of right and wrong. Plus, even if it's a small thing, he'll probably just end up saving them from her. And from some of the stories she's told him, her from herself.

"Shut up, old man." The mid-sized guy sneers at Ethan and looks to his buddy for backup. "Just shut... the fuck... up."

Rae laughs loudly. "Hoodlums. You mean hoodlums... not hooligans. I think hooligans have something to do with soccer or something." And reaching over, she takes Ethan's hand and cheats a bit, pulling him forward to her future self, just a few minutes ahead of where they currently sit. She's getting bored, and just wants to avoid some of the

more obvious nonsense. The back and forth with the clowns. If she has to do this again, she can at least skip to the good parts.

Suddenly. “What... the fuck... happened to your God damn feet... old man?” The smaller punk, steps away from his friend, and spins around leaning over laughing, holding his stomach, cupping his other hand over his mouth to show just how funny he thinks this is.

Rae sighs, breathing out the nothing, letting her eyes darken. Blackness begins to pour from them as she prepares to remove these two evil things. She glances just to her right. “Fuck Mikey. I’m doing this now.”

And instantly, as Ethan stares in disbelief, the two young men explode into a fine, red mist slowly dispersing in the wind, but still keeping the vague shape of their former selves. Everything seems to lag as the bloody mess hangs in the air, ever so slowly falling to the ground as Death watches, grinning wildly from her spot on the curb.

His brain not quite comprehending what just happened, Ethan reaches forward, extending a finger, wanting to feel the mist to see if it was actually there since it’s moving so much slower than the world around it. He imagined that he could gently push the red mist causing it to stop and change direction mid air. For a moment, the grisly scene has his complete fascination. But then he pulls back his hand, utterly nauseated by the realization that just seconds ago this red cloud was two human beings. Two awful human beings that probably deserved it. But he still feels sick, like he may throw up.

Death frowns, seeing her friends discomfort turn from wide-eyed terror to utter disgust. She sighs hard, shamefully dropping her eyes to look to the grass at her side. Instantly, the red mist stops its slow fall, reverses, and rapidly comes back together re-forming the two young men, leaving them cold and numb but relatively unaware of what just happened.

And that's when both Rae and Ethan see Gabriel approach from just behind the two men.

"Hey guys. Did I miss another lunch?" Gabriel steps between the two, young men, stopping briefly, and looking to his sister and Ethan. His big smile, and natural warmth casually pushes back against the horror that just came full circle.

Gabriel ignores the two young men as they freeze up with pained expressions on their faces. They experience an overwhelming feeling of discomfort, as if they had been pulled apart and then sucked back into their bodies from some dark, distant place. Their burning flesh forming around a cold emptiness just a millisecond later. The blood vessels in both boys' eyes are broken, causing the whites to go completely red.

In that moment, they're oblivious to everything outside of themselves. They briefly and fearfully lock eyes. They have no idea of anything other than the need to flee.

They turn.

They run.

And Rae grins.

“Gabriel.” Ethan is relieved to see another of his longtime friends.

“Gabe.” Rae lets go of the darkness, her mood instantly changed by seeing her brother. This time she knew he was coming, but it still feels like a welcome surprise.

“We need to talk, Rae.” He gives her a sweet smile, and looks to Ethan. “I’m sorry. I know I’m interrupting. I was actually following Chris... trying to catch up with him.”

Rae tilts her head towards Ethan. “... and he lost him.” She grins, remembering parts of a conversation that she’s uncertain ever happened.

Gabriel steps forward and sits on the curb on the other side of Ethan. “I lost both of him.” He shrugs innocently. “All three of him, really.”

Thoroughly confused, Ethan’s mind drifts, and he notices that he can feel both feet. All ten toes. He wiggles his non-existent toes and laughs out loud. “Ha!”

“Sooo...” Rae tries to remember. She fights to remember the questions and the answers, the conversation itself. But she can’t. She’s sure that it happened, and that it didn’t happen. And that’s disturbing enough without delving too deep into things. “... you brought the girls home... right?”

Gabriel tilts his head slightly, mirroring his sister’s confusion. He has to think about it.

“Alicia. Allison.” She wonders if that no longer happened. “Or...”

“No. Not home.” Gabriel breathes in deeply, feeling the emptiness of his lungs. “There’s no air.” He sniffs the wind that shouldn’t be.

Rae nods unconsciously, her mind still searching through time for the moments she’s missing.

Ethan breathes in and out a few times, blowing on the palm of his hand, unsure what Gabriel means.

“Yeah.” Rae reaches out and touches Ethan’s hand, gently pushing it down. “Nothing to worry about.”

“I took the girls to the path above Chris’ field.” Copying Ethan, Gabriel breathes out into the the palm of his own hand, feeling nothing come out. “They walked down on their own. Seemed quite pleased. And then they were gone.”

Rae tilts her head to the side. “The field? Why? Why there?”

“Don’t know. Chris stuff. I assume they were given... you know... another shot.” He smiles at Ethan. “So how have you been, Ethan? I know it’s been a rough ride.”

“Will I...” Ethan’s eyes flare a bit with concern. “...get another shot?” He prays not.

Gabriel shakes his head. “No. You’ve had enough. Right? Time to move on.”

Ethan raises both eyebrows, his eyes regaining a bit of their sparkle. He’s relieved. He looks to Rae.

“Not today my friend. Not today.” She gives him a small grin and a friendly wink.

Ethan nods. “But soon.” He looks to Gabriel and then quickly back to Rae.

Her growing smile, and a slight nod tells him yes.

Rae and Gabriel then have their talk. She starts by telling him about Sam, about what she thinks he’s up to and where he went. And then they both piece together what they believe is happening all around them. The stars and the moon. The sun. The darkness. The lack of air. The fact that this moment already happened. But then didn’t. But now has.

“We need to find...” Gabriel mumbles.

And that’s when everything jumps and skips.

First they sit alone on the curb, with Ethan having left them.

Then everything goes bright white and pops into complete darkness like an old fashioned light bulb exploding. They can barely see one another. Gabriel can smell burning ozone.

They stand.

Rae instinctively takes her little little brother’s hand. Ever the big sister wanting to reassure the others. They take a few steps to where the parking lot should be. But there is nothing beneath their feet. The pavement has gone. Looking back, the curb, the grass, the bushes where Ethan’s body will soon be found. All gone.

Then everything flickers violently, with reality popping in and out, with Ethan sitting there again, and then not, and then he's there again. Over and over and over. Flickering faster and faster and faster.

Finally, in an instant, everything is back. Ethan's smiling at his two friends, not understanding the concern he sees on their faces. He's completely unaware of the last few seconds.

And then everything slowly fades to black as Rae gently squeezes her brother's hand, trying to remain close, to stay together in case this is something they've never experienced. "... Chris."

Some kind of ending.

# 18

Gabriel's smile is gone as he watches his brother move away from the small coffee shop in two different directions, in two different bodies. He's not surprised. Chris has done these types of things his entire life. It is a bit mystifying, though not at all unusual. He claims it's out of boredom. And Gabriel understands to some extent, but even he gets a little annoyed when things are hidden from him in plain sight.

For a brief moment he considers following his brother, to catch up with him, to put an end to the mystery and find out what's going on. But then Tegan makes a sudden, irritated tutting noise with her tongue.

“Nyssa will be back in a couple minutes.” Gabriel sits back, letting himself relax in the center of the couch. He picks up the drink Tegan ordered for him. He’ll catch up with his brother later.

Tegan, her head tilted back on the couch, her eyes wide, shrugs loosely. “Doesn’t matter. It’s not like we’re doing anything new.” She motions lazily with her head towards the bus stop outside. “The guy in the purple hoodie’s gonna start scratching his ass.” She scrunches her nose in disgust.

Gabriel tilts his head slightly in her direction, like a disappointed father.

“Are you kidding me?” Tegan rolls her eyes. “His butt. He’s going to start... and there he goes.” She pulls her head back slightly, scrunching her nose even more. “He really gets in there too.”

Gabriel does his best not to look.

Tegan feels comfortable with Gabriel. Probably more comfortable than she ever was with Sam. Though he was her best friend and she loves and misses him dearly, they weren’t all that compatible. Sam and Nyssa were much more compatible.

Or maybe it’s just that Gabriel makes everyone feel compatible.

She glances to the side, giving him a quick look, wondering. He’s clearly watching the guy in the hoodie. He’s even scrunching his face a little.

She grins mischievously.

Yeah, she's pretty sure everyone is comfortable around Gabriel. Making people comfortable is his greatest gift. If it wasn't, everyone in the room would have freaked out when the woman walked directly through Chris and screamed. It would have been chaos. But nobody even noticed. Or cared. That's Gabriel. Then again, nobody seems to be aware that the world seems to be going dark, perhaps ending, as she's come to consider. And she doesn't think Gabriel has anything to do with that.

"So. What's actually going on?" Tegan's calm makes her sound more like her twin than herself. Even she can hear it in her voice, her change of cadence, her lack of edginess. She still feels somewhat irritable, and she's always vigilant, but the warmth put out by Gabriel is clouding that, dulling her spirit. Affecting her 'Tegan-ness'. And at the moment, if she wasn't so relaxed, that would really piss her off.

Right on schedule, the front door opens, and Nyssa casually strolls in, her thin lips pursed in thought. She stops for a second, seeing something off to the side of the small coffee shop, near the wall. Her eyes widen slightly. And then she remembers. She quickly looks away, wondering how this will go with Gabriel in place of Sam.

"Ahh. See. There she is." Gabriel nudges a still zoned-out Tegan.

"You know... you sound a lot like Sam." Tegan wants to yawn, but holds it back. "You have the same vibe. Right now, at least. Not always. But right now for sure." She blinks her eyes rapidly, fighting through the warmth.

“Thank you.” Gabriel turns his head briefly and smiles appreciatively at Tegan. Then he turns back and gives Nyssa a small wave as she approaches. “And thank... you... for doing that.”

Nyssa sits in her usual spot at the end of the couch.

“See.” Tegan lifts her head slightly. “That was so...”

“Sam.” Gabriel grins wide, first to Tegan, and then quickly back to Nyssa.

“You’re a bit quirkier though.” Tegan closes her eyes, feeling her voice echo through her head. “Maybe cuz you’re younger. You’re like three quarters Sam, one quarter Chris.”

“The little girl’s fine.” Nyssa’s voice is low and monotone, almost sounding bored. Typical Nyssa. “I found her mother standing near a bus stop two blocks over, still a little freaked out, and kind of panicked because she...” Nyssa makes air quotes with her fingers on both hands. “... couldn’t find her daughter.”

“Yeah. Apparently she has an appointment to murder her tonight. Couldn’t have her go missing and throw the whole evening off.” Tegan still sounds calm and zoned out, but with a bit more of her usual spirit, her ‘Tegan-ness’ showing through.

“Tegan.” Gabriel frowns and shakes his head.

“Again... Sam.” She snorts out a laugh. “And could you turn that down a little.” She waves her hand lazily in his direction, motioning from

his head to toes. “It’s starting to suck the joy out of everything I am.” She wonders if maybe it’s Michael she’d be more compatible with.

“Hmmm.” Gabriel glances around the coffee shop.

Nyssa can feel the warmth too, but doesn’t really mind. She never has. “So why did...” She uses her head to motion towards the front door. “... that whole thing with the tall guy happen? She went right through him.”

“Chris.” Tegan chuckles lightly. “And she fucking deserved it.”

“Oh.” Nyssa glances past Gabriel, again looking towards the far side of the small shop. Then she sits back, considering all the puzzle pieces that need putting together.

Gabriel frowns, giving Tegan another parental look. “It’s just Chris being Chris... I suppose. He was also the young lady that bumped into him while getting her drink. And the boy on the bike.”

Gabriel takes a small sip of his drink for the first time, makes an obvious face of disgust, and quickly sets it back on the table. He’s disappointed, and keeps smacking his lips with his tongue trying to rid himself of the awful taste. He glances out the window as a bus pulls up to the stop and people get off and others get on.

Tegan sits up fully, suddenly more interested. Besides the occasional family get together, she’s had a few recent, outside-the-house encounters with the youngest member of the family. And she found each time was fun, kind of exciting, and a little bit terrifying. She remembers

when he brought them together, with Sam, into something that was nothing. Sam called it nothingness. She nearly had a panic attack. It wasn't quite Rae killing them, that was a truly awful experience. But it was still extremely disorienting, almost suffocating, like being underwater without the water. Tegan can't help but let out a full-body shiver.

"Really?" Nyssa catches her sister's eyes, noting her odd stare. "They were all Chris? Does he do that a lot? It seems like he does that a lot." She realizes she's kind of talking fast. "But multiple people at once seems... a bit much."

"Yeah." Gabriel watches as a homeless man walks past using crutches to help him walk. He has heavily bandaged stumps where his feet should be. "My little brother gets bored." Gabriel recognizes the man. But doesn't. A coldness goes through his body from head to toe. Something he's completely unused to. "Or so he says."

Tegan nods her head rather quickly. "When I first met him, he was this annoying teen girl with the coolest boots. I really wanted those boots. Still do." She takes a sip of her coffee, makes a face, and reaches over, switching it with Gabriel's drink. She glances over her shoulder towards the back of the coffee shop, near the drink counter. "I didn't recognize her. But yeah... I think that was the same chick." She narrows her eyes, feeling the memory surface. "Definitely. It was definitely the same chick."

As if a cloud were lifted, Nyssa also remembers her. "Yeah. He came to one of the barbecues looking like that. Remember? A while back.

Before Sam..." A sudden sadness makes her trail off. But then she has another thought. "And the shirt... I think I... I..." She huffs, blowing out quickly, frustrated. "Why is this so difficult to process? To remember?"

"Just what he does." Gabriel gives Tegan an odd look, and then motions with his eyes to their drinks.

"Your buddy... Marty... gave us the wrong drinks." She nods to the other drink on the table. "Disgustingly sweet... French vanilla. You're welcome."

Gabriel's face lights up. "Mmmm." He takes a sip. And it's pure delight. "Yeah, if he... she... doesn't want to be seen, he... she... whatever... does that. We never knew what we'd wake up to when we were all kids. He was difficult to say the least. At least with Rae and Mikey you knew what you were getting, even if it wasn't always agreeable."

Tegan scrunches her eyebrows together, trying to remember times she'd probably been sitting right next to him and never noticed. She looks around the room trying to pick him out of the crowd.

Gabriel passes his hand in front of her face. "Jedi mind tricks. Now you see him... but no... you don't."

"Maybe he was the guy in the purple hoodie." Tegan snorts.

"Ha." Gabriel laughs. "And eww."

"Speaking of sister and brother. She wasn't here earlier." Nyssa uses her eyes to motion to the far wall. "But this is where we first met her."

“Who?” Like an oblivious child, Tegan turns her whole body to look. “Oh.” She turns back to the window. “Oh yeah. I remember this.”

“Rae.” Gabriel looks past Tegan, to his sister sitting at a small table against the wall. He frowns. He was just with her. But he wasn’t. “No. We were just...”

“I don’t have it in me today.” Tegan unconsciously slouches down a little, taking her coffee in both hands, and sipping quietly. “I just don’t.”

Nyssa looks to Gabriel, nodding her head. “We’ve done this...”

“I know.” He cuts her off, understanding. “I know.” This time he can feel it. He feels like he’s been sitting here the entire time. Waiting for Nyssa to return. But he also remembers chasing after his brother, not finding him, and then finding Rae and... “Ethan! That’s his name. Ethan.” He stretches his neck to the side looking out the front window, knowing very well that even with his disability, he’s long gone at this point. Probably back at his usual place behind that fast-food place.

Gabriel looks over to his sister again. He’s sure she’s seen him, but she continues to write furiously in a leather-bound notebook, while an untouched drink sits nearby. She keeps pulling her long dark hair back behind her ears and then she leans way over, her face to one side, almost laying against the paper as she writes violently for about thirty seconds.

“She reads a passage from that book of poetry...” Nyssa starts.

“... and then scribbles away in her notebook.” Tegan finishes.

“Over and over.” Nyssa glances from her sister to Gabriel.

“She moves her lips when she reads.” Gabriel mutters, a small smile on his lips. He can hear the pen scratching loudly against the rough paper from halfway across the room. “When we were kids... she kept a journal... and was always scratching away in it. One time Mikey got hold of it and was reading passages to me and Sam. When Rae caught him, she nearly killed him.” He chuckles. “I mean... literally.”

Across the room, Rae leans way back in her chair, both arms extended above her head, stretching. With a confused look on her face, she looks around at the people scattered at their seats around the room. Then, as if she hadn't already seen them, she pretends to notice Gabriel and the twins for the first time, all three looking directly at her.

And she remembers. She sighs. “Again.”

She gives them a small, awkward wave as she closes her book and puts it in an oversized, green denim purse along with her notebook and pen. She picks the purse up, looking it over as if it's the first time she's ever seen it. But she knows it from the last time, when she did this with Sam and the twins.

Gathering herself, she pops up and casually walks over to the three of them. “Gabe.” Even with a smile on her face, her voice sounds tired and heavy. “Hey Nyssa... Tegan.” She winks playfully. “We've met already... right?”

Nyssa nods, completely understanding why the question had been asked.

“Oh joy.” Rae exhales dramatically. “At least we don’t have to do all that again.”

Tegan slides out of the way to give her room, knowing she’s about to ask.

Rae’s smile grows as she watches Tegan scoot over. “May I?” She motions with her eyes towards the empty spot between Gabriel and Tegan. And without actually waiting for an answer, immediately sits down.

“I’d say we need to talk...” Gabriel looks unusually serious. “... but this would be the third time. Right?”

Rae nods. “Did you feel everything... black out... go away?” She looks down at her hand, still feeling his as it happened.

Gabriel turns to Nyssa. “When you went after Annabelle... anything strange happen?”

Nyssa shakes her head. “Like I said... the mom was still all worked up about Chris, but no... nothing unusual.”

“Chris?” Rae leans forward, looking past her brother, to Nyssa. “You saw Chris? Talked to him?”

Nyssa shakes her head slowly. “Saw him. Didn’t talk to him.” She notices that without the condescending smile, Rae actually looks sweet, concerned, and very much like the young woman she pretends to be.

“Oh. That’s right.” Rae remembers, shifting her eyes to her brother. “We talked about this already. You and I.”

“Twice.” Gabriel takes another sip of his drink. It doesn’t taste as delightful as it did just a few minutes ago.

Tegan leans forward, turning towards Rae and Gabriel. “Well. If we’re really doing this all over again... this is where we head to the park.”

“This is where we go kick some butt.” Nyssa almost remembers.

Gabriel raises both eyebrows.

Tegan’s eyes dart around as she feels the memories drifting around, some just out of reach, and others comfortably touching her mind. “We go for a walk... three assholes...”

“Done.” Rae sits back, hard. Fast. “A bit different. But done. For now. And I’ve been promised that Mikey will remove them at some point. Spectacularly.” She sighs. “Could’ve already happened for all I know.” She quickly turns within to look. “No. Not yet. But it looks like fun.”

Nyssa looks to Gabriel, and then outside to what he’s so interested in. Another bus full of people are getting off.

“Maybe this is just the end.” Rae’s voice shows no emotion. “And like a long train coming to a stop... it’s all just crashing into itself, in one... big... jumbled... mess.”

Gabriel turns his head slightly to look at his sister. He pats her gently on the forearm.

“Just tired.” She breathes in deeply, and then out slowly. “Yeah. I’m just tired, Gabe.” She smiles weakly. “It’s... hard to stay in control. That’s

all. Maybe I'll go home... finish all this up in my room. Take a nap or something. People seem to always enjoy a good nap."

Gabriel nods and gives his sister's arm one last solid pat, and stands up. "We need to go find dad. Find Chris."

"And Michael." Nyssa is beginning to think Rae is on to something. "We should all get together." She looks Rae right in the eyes. "Meet in the last train car. Figure this all out... before the crash."

And in the blink of an eye, the coffee shop is no longer there, the town of Apple Valley is gone, the people are gone, even Nyssa and Tegan are gone. Gabriel stands next to his sister who is sitting in the grass a few feet from him, her black dress fanned out across the green.

The sky is blue.

The sun is shining.

There's a warm breeze.

The darkness of the skies is no longer pushing down at them.

Gabriel looks around, listening, but there's nothing but the two of them. No birds. No insects. No anything. The air is cleaner than even he can remember it ever being. Everything is fresh. New. Different. But the same.

He reaches out, feeling for the others, for his family. His father. Anyone. But it's just the two of them.

Then the world dims and slows down, missing a few beats like a stone skipped across a pond. And within a heartbeat, everything is pulled elsewhere.

Gabriel is sitting in the center of the small coffee shop, in a leather chair with three other chairs all facing one another. Nyssa and Rae sit in the two directly facing him. Tegan is sitting on the floor in front of a coffee table centered between all the chairs. And the third chair, right next to Gabriel, remains empty.

“You okay?” Rae fidgets, trying to get comfortable as she watches her brother. She takes her drink from the table, and takes a long sip of her drink, making a loud slurping sound. “You seem to be a million miles away.”

Gabriel doesn’t answer as he takes in his new surroundings.

Rae takes another deep breath, and sets her drink back down on the table. “This is certainly not what I ordered. Tea.” She can’t help showing a hint of a smile to the twins. “But you already knew that. Should’ve reminded me.”

And that’s when Michael steps over Tegan and plops down heavily into the chair to the right of his brother. His large frame causes the chair to jump back a few inches with a loud squeak on the wooden floor. “You guys do realize you’ve caught the attention of a couple of horrible creatures directly across the room.”

Tegan smirks. She's happy to see Michael. He feels safe. Not the way Gabriel makes you feel safe. More like, if something is about to go down, Michael will be the first to knock it on its ass and ask questions later. That kind of safe. Now that he's here in person, she definitely thinks he makes a more compatible friend.

Rae tilts her head to the side. "I am an old lady." She mutters the words, remembering them from the first time.

"What?" Michael reaches to the table, and right before grabbing the drink sitting in front of his sister, gestures with his eyes towards it, not risking a slap to the hand. Or worse.

She nods slowly, looking forward to his overreaction once he gets a taste. She'll have that to enjoy as the train comes to its crashing end.

"She said that the last time." Gabriel answers his brother's question, looking to Tegan for confirmation.

Tegan nods.

Michael sniffs the tea before trying it. "Nope." And he sets it back on the table, turning his head away from the smell, a look of disgust on his face. "You did not order that. They got it wrong."

Nyssa watches Michael, also somewhat relieved that he's arrived. "You're wearing Sam's rings."

Michael puts both hands up in front of him, spreading the fingers, showing her. "Yeah." His voice almost cracks, and he clears his throat quietly. "He left them for me. With a nice note."

“He’ll want those back, you know.” Rae’s voice shows some nearly forgotten excitement as she finally has a full audience.

“Of course he will.” Michael’s voice is flat as he puts his hands down, and stares, knowing that his sister has more to say.

She’s sitting a little straighter, and both hands are clamped to the armrests. “He’s not dead. He’s just gone off somewhere. To do something. Or just to take a break.” She grins happily. “Yeah, a break. Or something.”

“A break.” Tegan mumbles. “Or something.”

Rae’s smile drops. “What are you, a parrot?”

Tegan looks away

“Chris sent him off.” Rae looks first to Gabriel and then settles on Michael. “You remember... like when we were kids. He did weird stuff like that all the time.”

“Halloween.” Michael rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

“Annoying little bastard.”

“How do you know?” Tegan pulls herself to her knees, still sitting in front of the wooden table. “How do you know he’s not dead?”

“I’m fucking Death. How do you think I fucking know?” Rae’s eyes go black, the void opens showing her sitting inside the blackness, alone on the edge of a great precipice. “I know when someone’s... fucking... dead, and when they’re not... fucking... dead.” She’s not angry. She’s just making a point the best way she knows how.

Tegan looks down at her coffee. Not wanting to see any more than she's already seen.

Gabriel rolls his eyes, and shakes his head, but says nothing.

Michael laughs loudly. "Okay. Well then. He can have the... fucking... rings back... when he's... fucking... ready." Moving just his eyes he surveys the room, half expecting Sam to suddenly pop in along with another batch of madness.

Rae lets go of the darkness in her eyes, a smug expression on her face.

Michael's eyes move to the two young persons as they stand and prepare to leave. "Ah. Now back to the creatures." He looks to his sister. "I'm sure you'll remember them..." He shows a mocking grin. "...fucking Death."

Rae's glances over her shoulder, and then back to her family. Her eyes darken, but her voice becomes girlish and playful. "Well. I guess I could pop over there and give them a little bit of the ole..."

And for just a few seconds she sees Sam sitting where Gabriel was. "No. Please. They'll come to me when they're ready." His eyes ask her to stay put.

Rae cocks her head to the side as Gabriel blinks back in, replacing Sam. He continues to stare off towards the back of the shop, piecing together all the happenings of the past few days. Everything leading up to the train crash.

“Well... anyway...” Rae hesitates. “I suppose it can wait a couple more days.” Again she looks over her shoulder, towards Winifred and her brother Sebastian, and makes an exploding sound, gesturing with both hands above her head to show them their future.

And again, everything instantly goes black and reality pops back in with Gabriel and Rae sitting in the grass, while Michael stands nearby, a serious look on his face. In the distance they can see a tall, blond man walking with two children, a boy tossing a baseball, and a dark-haired girl in a long, black dress.

“Chris.” Gabriel’s voice is a soft whisper as he turns to his sister. “And you.”

“I don’t remember this.” Rae reaches back to her twelve-year-old self. “This never happened.”

Michael looks to his siblings as reality flickers between the great, grassy field and the small coffee shop, getting faster and faster until finally coming to a stop on the coffee shop with Gabriel, Rae, and Tegan sitting on the couch facing the window, while Michael and Nyssa stand just to their side, near the front door.

They all see it at the same time.

Through the window.

There is nothing.

It’s not just darkness, it’s nothing. No sidewalk, no bus stop, no bus, no people. Nothing. They know the difference between darkness and

nothingness. They've all seen both before. They've all experienced their brother's nothingness.

"Fucking Chris." Michael walks to the front window, followed first by Rae and Tegan, and finally Nyssa. "What the hell's he up to?"

Gabriel stands, and walks closer to the door, pulling it open to look out. A young man carrying a skateboard carefully steps inside just between the two brothers. He appears straight out of the nothingness as if he didn't exist until coming through the door opening.

"Hey." Michael, quickly reaches out, extending his arm, palm out, partially blocking his way. "What were you doing just before you got here."

The young man neatly sidesteps Michael's massive arm, somewhat startled. "Jesus, dude. What the fuck?"

Gabriel immediately does his thing. "I'm sorry. My brother's kind of an idiot." He gives Michael a quick glance. "By the way. You're not Chris, are you?" Gabriel gives the stranger a quick look up and down.

"Oh... kay. No." The young man looks down to the skateboard in his hands. "And... well... if it's any of your idiot brother's business..." He stands a little straighter, wondering if the bigger of the two lunatics is going to come at him. "I was at the skate park." He grins smugly directly at Michael. "Skating."

Michael isn't amused. He just stares blankly, as the young man backs away towards the other side of the shop, then turns and walks away, glancing over his shoulder as he approaches the short line at the counter.

Gabriel immediately steps past Michael and grabs the still-closing door, jutting one of his arms out into the nothingness.

“Gabe. Stop.” Rae’s voice is deep and hollow. “What are you doing?”

“I’m not a child, Rae.” Gabriel smiles big and bright, and a wave of warmth pushes its way through his siblings into the room. “I’ll be fine. I’ll be right back. We all know it’s just Chris... being Chris.”

“Being a bored little pain in the ass.” Michael grumbles.

Tegan clears her throat awkwardly. “Maybe no one survives this train crash.”

“Thirty seconds.” Standing off to the side, Nyssa’s voice is low and ominous, sounding much like Rae when she’s warning someone.

“Thirty seconds.” Gabriel grins and nods to the group. “Twenty. I’ll be back in twenty seconds.” His smile widens, and he steps outside the door, completely disappearing into the nothingness.

Making a slow creaking sound, the coffee shop door slowly closes behind him.

Nyssa closes her eyes and starts counting to twenty in her head, finishing out loud. “Sixteen. Seventeen. Eighteen. Nineteen...”

Immediately, there’s the sound of tearing metal, and a burning, whooshing sound. When Nyssa opens her eyes everything seems to be happening in slow motion. She sees Michael standing just outside the small coffee shop, holding the crumpled door in one hand, his great, white

wings fully extended. The nothingness has somehow become less nothing and more dark when lit by Chaos himself.

Rae, completely out of character, is in full sprint past the barely visible bus stop, her bare feet slapping against the pavement as she moves farther and farther into the darkness, until she completely disappears just as Gabriel did.

Then everything, Michael, Nyssa, Tegan, the coffee shop itself, even the darkness, violently burns away into a brilliant, flickering white light.

And for just a split second, reality cleanses itself as a lonely God takes a deep breath and speaks.

# 19

“Twenty.” Little Chris breathes out heavily, sadly. Still in full Devil costume, he pushes the front door open, and followed closely by Rae, steps through the foyer and into the living room.

He’s tired.

Gabriel, as the only adult in the room, sitting in his father’s favorite chair by the fireplace, feels compelled to ask. “So... how’d you do? Any full-sized candy bars I can have?” He glances over his shoulder to his sister and younger brother, and then looks over to the coffee table where young

Sam and Michael are packing up the Monopoly box. “Or better yet... Tootsie Rolls. I loved those as a kid.”

“Snickers.” Chris skips past Rae, nearly tripping on a throw rug, and jogs over to the coffee table. “And some Kit-Kats. Not sure about the Tootsie Rolls.” He dumps his candy haul on the table.

“What about ‘em?” Michael immediately grabs a Hershey Kiss wrapped in gold foil. “This is the one with nuts, right?” He peels the foil.

Rae walks to the couch in front of the table and plops down as heavily as her tiny frame will permit. “Dad go to bed already?”

Sam nods.

“So who won?” She starts looking through the candy for anything odd, always playing the big sister.

“Gabe.” Michael pops the small piece of chocolate in his mouth.

Gabriel looks over from his chair.

“I’d like to say he cheated somehow... but...” Michael rolls his eyes. “... you know... Gabe.”

Sam snorts out a small laugh.

“Dad said to save him some peanut M&Ms if you got any.” Michael balls up the foil from the Hershey Kiss between finger and thumb.

Gabriel remembers every move in the game. Everyone’s moves and their outcome. And even though he was sick, he’d won, finally bankrupting his father. Then he helped pack up the game and went

upstairs to sleep off his new cold. It was a lot of fun, and the next day the cold was gone. He assumes Chris had tired of it, or had simply forgotten.

But currently, Gabriel feels completely detached from all of them, as if he was somewhere else altogether, and not sitting here in the living room warming himself by the fire. Maybe it's because he's either napping in his room, or somehow, still napping on that very couch.

Chris glances up in Gabriel's direction, and then back to the candy, giving all his goodies a quick look. "I got some" He takes two small packs of peanut M&Ms and a plain pack from his haul and sets them at the end of the table, next to his father's book. "He likes both."

"Where's your horns?" Sam can't believe he's asking. The game did little to make him feel better about the rest of his day.

Chris snuffles several times, pulling a tissue from his pants pocket and wiping at his nose.

"Hmph." Michael chuckles. "Still got that cold, huh?"

Chris leans back and reaches into the front pocket of his red hoodie. He pulls out the two styrofoam horns that had been glued in place above his forehead.

"One fell off." Rae sounds a little tired. "And he said he felt like a unicorn." She giggles. "So I pulled the other one off. He still had the tail. They could still tell he was the Devil."

Michael grins wide, looking over to Sam

Sam gives his brother a knowing smile.

“So... little red Devil...” Michael finishes the chocolate in his mouth. “... what did everyone think of your costume?”

Chris doesn't look up. He's busy sorting the candies his sister finished inspecting. “I don't know.” He half shrugs. “No one really said anything about it.”

Rae reaches over and pulls his hood back from his head. He hadn't even realized it was still up.

She giggles, still sounding a little tired. “They loved it. They were probably just too scared to say anything. Bunch of sinners.”

“I'll bet.” Michael sees another Hershey Kiss and grabs it from the pile. This time it's the regular kind in the silver foil. He starts unwrapping it.

Gabriel continues to stare into the fireplace, watching the fire dance and jump, puffing into the air. “Just a dream. Just remembering.” He smiles lazily.

“Nope.” Chris finds another pack of peanut M&Ms and sets it on his father's book with the others.

“And what about your costume, dear sister?” Sam pops a piece of candy corn into his mouth. “Was the Lady Death a big hit?” He gives her a huge, teasing smile.

“She got hit on a lot, if that's what you mean?” Chris continues sorting his candy, but again looks over to Gabriel sitting alone by the fireplace, acknowledging him as no one else has.

“Hmmm.” Gabriel considers, remembering all those sibling discussions. All the posturing for who’s best, smartest, strongest, scariest, dad’s chosen one. Especially between Rae and Michael. Gabriel figures that if he’s still asleep on the couch, maybe he should just go upstairs to his room, to the comfort of his own bed. He bets the sheets would feel so crisp and cool on his back and legs.

Rae gently nudges Chris’ knee with her bare foot, an amused look on her face.

“And what does a...” Michael hesitates, turning to Sam for help.

“Four.” Sam pops another piece of candy corn into his mouth.

“I’m pretty sure he’s four.”

Chris’ smile nearly lights up the room. Without looking up from the table, he nods vigorously.

“Four.” Michael chuckles, making a short snorting sound. “What does a four-year-old know about stuff like that?” Michael carefully unwraps a caramel. The ones with the white swirl through their middle. “Getting hit on.” He pops it into his mouth, letting it soften.

“Well.” Chris tilts his head slightly. “I’m not sure any of them have any idea what Death actually looks like...” He glances up at his sister.

“Lucky for them.” She quickly raises both eyebrows, being silly.

“... but all the boys about your age and Sam’s age, and maybe even a bit older, sure were hanging around us a lot.” Chris unzips his hoodie

and pulls it off, setting it on the couch beside him. “And I think the only reason I got so many full-size candy bars... was to impress Rae.”

Rae looks to Sam and shrugs, grins, and nods.

“I was tempted to give them all my cold.” Chris snorts and shakes his head.

Gabriel laughs.

“I’ve watched a lot of 80s movies. And even for a four year old, it was pretty obvious what they were up to.” Chris grins wide. And pleased with himself, he looks over to Gabriel for reassurance. “They liked Rae. And by the middle of the movie, they would’ve asked her on an awkward date.”

Without looking away from the fire, a half smile on his face, Gabriel gives him a lazy thumbs up. “Sounds about right.”

“I think you’re forgetting that you’re supposed to be four at the moment.” Michael chuckles.

“Hmmm.” Sam grins at the accuracy of his baby brother’s assessment. “Very awkward date.”

“You know...” Rae sits up, pulling both feet into her long dress and under her. “... I had this school friend who could see that I was Death.” She leans her head to the side. “Of course she may have just been kidding. I did wear a lot of black for a child that age.”

“She wore a black bowler hat briefly. And then a top hat for a while.” Sam looks to Michael. “Like a magician or something. Even had long, lace, fingerless gloves.”

“And an ankh necklace.” Chris doesn’t look up, continuing to sort his candies into small groups. “The symbol of life. Ironically.”

Rae, Sam, and Michael all look to their youngest sibling, not the least surprised. Then Sam and Michael laugh. And Gabriel joins in from his chair.

Rae leans her head sideways, towards her brothers, and rolls her eyes dramatically. “But who knows... maybe she could just see it.” She looks to Chris, and shrugs. “Either way... I told her.”

“Really?” Michael reaches for another piece of candy. This time, a lone, green mint. “And?”

“You know... it wouldn’t hurt to ask?” Chris gives Michael a small pout. “Rae and I worked pretty hard to get all this.”

“Apparently Rae didn’t have to work hard at all.” Sam uses his shoulder to nudge Michael in the arm.

“Oh.” Michael mockingly raises his eyebrows. “I’m sorry. May I have this tasty, little, green mint?” He speaks like a child speaking to an even younger child.

Chris immediately drops his pout and nods, more than happy to share. “Yes. Of course.”

“We didn’t go to school.” Gabriel, still lazily watching the flames, speaks up from his chair.

Michael pops the mint in his mouth and sits back, crossing his arms. “I call bullshit. We were all home schooled. And I’m fairly sure we all knew you were Death.”

“Subtlety is not your strong point.” Sam chuckles.

“Rude.” Rae cocks her head to the side. “And yes, we did the whole home school thing.” Rae glances down at Chris “But before any of you came along... I tried school. For a very short time.” And she looks over to the empty chair by the fireplace. “To check it out. To see if it was... you know... for us.”

“It wasn’t.” Gabriel remembers the first time he’d heard this story. Actually, it may have been this very night.

“I’d like to try school.” Chris continues sorting through his candy.

“So you told her?” Michael remains interested. “And she believed you? There’s no way she believed you.”

“Like I said... I think she already knew. Or at least suspected.” Rae considers stepping into the moment, but decides against it. It was a sad time. “It’s rare. Extremely rare. But sometimes they see it. Kids. Some kids see it.” She scrunches her eyebrows. “At least I think they do. They look at me funny. They stare. Anyway... she was a smart kid.” She glances to Chris.

Gabriel turns his head, catching eyes with his sister for just a moment. He recognizes the sudden sadness in her eyes as she stares.

And then she quickly looks away. “My friend... Kelly... she said that there shouldn’t be anything older than Death. That Death was probably one of the first things ever. But there I was, only five years old. Kindergarten...”

“You wore all black as a five-year-old?” Michael shakes his head.

Rae gives him an annoyed look. “And that confused her. That I wasn’t a dark-cloaked man with a scythe.”

“Ha.” Chris laughs once, loudly. He’s never heard this story. But he’s enjoying every second of it.

“So I showed her.” Rae pushes her lips together, remembering.

“Oh shit.” Michael’s glances to Chris, and tentatively reaches for another little, green mint.

Without looking up from his sorting, Chris smiles and nods.

“Did you... you know... go all Rae on her.” Michael’s eyes light up eagerly, imagining all the crazy ways his sister could show herself.

“Well.” Rae considers for a few seconds. “I didn’t scare her or anything... if that’s what you mean. She was a friend. A five-year-old little girl.” She frowns at Michael. “So don’t be such an idiot.”

“Okay. So?” Michael bulges his eyes. “What happened?”

“I pulled her into the void... showed her all the people I was sitting with for a few moments as they came and went.”

‘Oh God.’ Sam slides a hand over his face imagining what that must have felt like. “So basically you killed her.”

“She was fine.” Rae gives both Michael and Sam her best irritated, older-sister look. “She was with me. That’s what I do.”

“Oh. I’m sure she was..” Michael nods his head and rolls his eyes, looking to Sam. “I’ll bet she was absolutely thrilled.”

Rae sighs hard. “May I continue?”

“Sorry” Michael wants to hear the rest of the story, hoping it goes somewhere good. “So then what happened?”

“Nothing, really. Like I said, I think she already knew. But now she saw it.” Rae shrugs. “We were friends. We stayed friends.” She cocks her head to the side. “Well... at least for a short time... you know... while I tried out the whole going to school thing.”

“That’s it?” Michael sits back, a little disappointed. He had expected to either hear some horrifying Rae thing, or maybe even some incredible Rae thing. He knows she’s perfectly capable of both.

‘I left school two months later and never went back. It wasn’t for me. It wasn’t for us. And that’s why we were homeschooled.’”

“I’m going to ask dad about trying school when I’m old enough.” Chris looks up at Michael and grins.

“Did you ever see her again? After school ended?” Gabriel remembers the story well, but he wants her to finish. Maybe then he can just wake up.

Rae looks over to the chair. “Of course I did.”

Gabriel turns his head, looking right into his sister’s eyes.

“Did she recognize you... when you saw her again?” Chris finishes sorting, and pushes several mints and a handful of Hershey Kisses towards his two brothers. And then a full-size Kit-Kat for each.

Rae smiles sadly. “It was seventy-two days later. Seventy-two days after I’d stopped going to that school.” She suddenly looks distant, like she’s somewhere else. “Killed by a drunk driver... her whole family, actually. It was a Saturday. They were on their way to that water park up north.”

“But she did remember you.” Chris leans into his sister, giving her a warm hug.

“Yes. She remembered me.”

## 20

Rae runs until the brightest of lights bursts open the black, empty nothingness, enveloping all of reality for just a moment.

The lonely God speaks. “Twenty.” And tired as he is, breathes out heavily.

Rae finds herself sitting under a tree, in the grass, near a sidewalk. Her mind feels clouded, as if waking from a particularly dense dream. She stares out to the commotion near the intersection, just down the street. There’s a handful of people milling about, doing their best to help where

they can. And there's a small crowd of onlookers gathered in a nearby parking lot, keeping their distance, wanting to help, but not knowing how.

"They've already called 911. Help's on the way." Rae pauses, looking many years ahead. "She'll be okay." She sighs. "How about you though? Are you sure you're doing okay? I know this isn't easy. But I'm here to help." Leaning to her right, she shows the sweetest of smiles. "It's what I do. Kinda my thing."

And with a burst of blinding, white light that slowly fades to nothing, everything is gone.

# 21

The lonely God speaks. “Twenty.” And tired as he is, breathes out heavily.

Chaos arrives violently, tearing open the sky, causing the air itself to sizzle and burn. Standing high in the air, Michael is still holding the crumpled, metal door in one hand. And then as an afterthought, it instantly goes red hot, white hot, and finally completely melted, pools from his hand, forming a dense, metallic puddle on the ground below.

It looks like a big, back yard surrounded by absolutely nothing. Dark skies, no moon, no stars, and a calm, stale air that tells Michael that this is not his reality.

He's in Sam's place.

A demon's back yard.

He hates this place.

There's a sudden flash of blinding white.

And as the garage blinks into focus, the back door opens and Michael now finds himself stepping out into the yard, still holding the crumpled coffee shop door. "Hmmm." It sounds like a growl. He dislikes the unexpected.

He casually tosses the door to the side.

A young woman sobs quietly on the swing hanging from the big tree in her backyard.

"The demon." Michael's voice is low and guttural.

As she glances nervously over her shoulder, she sees her garage flickering in and out of existence. She sees everything flickering in and out of existence.

Tears roll down her cheeks as her body immediately tenses. "I can't do this again. Please." Her voice is a painful, hoarse whine. She forces her eyes to close tightly, hoping it will all just go away. "I need to rest. I need to think."

As he approaches, Winnifred opens her eyes and looks up at her jailer. But it isn't Michael standing there, it's Sam. An older Sam. Same long brown hair, but with streaks of grey. Same piecing, blue eyes, but with age and experience displayed as lines, jutting from the corners. But she knows it should be Michael. It's been Michael for a very long time now.

Sam looks startled, confused. He shouldn't be here. Something is wrong.

Winnifred blinks away some tears, almost happy to see Sam again. She thinks maybe it's time for her to move on. Or at least Sam might be easier to convince. She really has changed. She knows it's the truth. She is a different human being, or whatever she is now in this place. But she's also fairly certain that Michael will never see that. But maybe Sam will. Maybe that's why he's come back.

And then, with a final flicker of this false reality, it's Michael again, not Sam.

"Sam?" She questions her own sanity, unwilling to accept that it had been lost on this swing a lifetime ago.

And like a flame swiftly burning across the thinnest of tissue, everything becomes fire, followed by a choking smoke, until Sam's place is no more.

No Winnifred.

No Michael.

Only absolute nothing.

## 22

Rae runs until the brightest of lights bursts open the black, empty nothingness, enveloping all of reality for just a moment.

The lonely God speaks. “Twenty.” And tired as he is, breathes out heavily.

Rae, her memories somewhat muddled, sits in the grass, watching, and ultimately comforting the recently deceased. After being pulled from their living bodies, they are almost always confused and unsure. They need the comfort that Death brings as she acclimates them to the afterlife.

A young man, somewhat on the heavy side, with a thick head of slick, black hair approaches wearily from the grass, just behind Rae. He clears his throat as softly as he can manage, politely informing her of his presence. The last thing he wants is to frighten the young woman.

Her head now cleared of her initial confusion, Rae realizes she's not alone. "I'm never truly alone." She pulls her long, black hair behind one ear. "Right?"

She briefly glances over her shoulder at Robbie who is now standing just to her side. Then she looks back to the overturned SUV.

"It was just your time, I suppose." Rae tilts her head to the side, thinking. "Sounds lame... but that's all it is." She looks over to Robbie again. "People are good." She considers for a second. "Well... most of them anyway. But some are just stupid... and they do stupid things." She stares for a second at Robbie, watching as he absent-mindedly pats his fingers on the cut on his scalp. "And sometimes it hurts others, I suppose."

Robbie wobbles slightly. Nearly losing his balance, he feels his legs go suddenly weak as the coldness of shock catches up to him.

The firemen have now arrived and have managed to pull the driver from the overturned car. She's a young, dark-haired woman, covered in blood, convulsing badly from severe shock. Two random people are holding her hands as the firemen strap her to a gurney. Another person has unzipped her jacket so she can breath easier. And a young man brings a blanket from the ambulance to lay over her for warmth.

“But they can also be pretty amazing.” Rae looks straight down for a few seconds. “I’m going to take you home now. No rush. We can stay as long as you’d like. They’re trying... and we can stay for that... if it helps. But they won’t be able to save you.”

Robbie looks down at his hands, seeing them covered in his own blood. “I think... I should be...” He mumbles, and wobbles slightly, walking away towards the ambulance.

And with a burst of blinding, white light that slowly fades to nothing, everything is gone.

## 23

The lonely God speaks. “Twenty.” And tired as he is, breathes out heavily.

Chaos arrives violently, tearing open the sky, causing the air itself to sizzle and burn. And as the garage settles into focus, the back door opens and Michael steps out into the yard. “Hmmm.” Still holding the crumpled, metal door in one hand, he casually tosses it off to the side.

It looks like a big, back yard surrounded by absolutely nothing. Dark skies, no moon, no stars, and a calm, stale air that tells Michael that this is not his reality.

He's in Sam's place.

The hellish back yard.

The one with the swing.

He hates this place.

There's a sudden flash of blinding white.

And Michael instantly finds himself off to the side of the garage just in time to see the shadow of a tall man walking with two small children into a a blinding light that completely envelops them, and they disappear with a small pop, like a soap bubble hitting a child's finger.

"Chris." Michael scowls, shaking his head, wanting to follow. But he's not sure that he could.

Looking the other way, into the big, back yard behind the garage, he sees her. He breathes in deeply and blows out angrily. He doesn't feel like he has time for this. Not now. Not with everything that's happening. Reluctantly, he starts his short march towards the demon on the swing.

Winnifred nervously begins pushing herself on the swing as she knows she should be doing. It's what she's always done, and she knows her Devil dislikes change. She briefly closes her eyes tightly, always fighting the ever flowing tears.

But then as he gets closer, Winnifred opens her eyes and looks up at her jailer. But it isn't Michael standing there, it's Sam. An older Sam. Same long brown hair, but with streaks of grey.

“Sam?” She questions her own sanity, wondering if that was lost on this swing many lifetimes ago.

“Winnifred?” He looks startled, confused. He shouldn’t be here. He has other responsibilities now.

And instantly, Winnifred is standing on the beach, just down the path from Sam’s house. She knows the place. This isn’t the first time. This is the way it always goes. But she’s nonetheless shocked, because she’s almost positive it was Sam she saw. Not Michael. Sam. Just for a split second. He even said her name.

Sitting on the beach just a few yards in front of her should be Sam letting his feet touch the waves as they flow in and out from the shore. She has that memory from the first time. The real time. The real world, not this pretense. It was the last time she still thought she was alive. Though she wasn’t.

Each time, she just goes through the motions as if it were the first time. She has no choice. If she strays, something pushes her back. Sometimes it pushes hard.

She stares straight ahead, where Sam should be, between her and the ocean. She tries unsuccessfully to clear her throat. “What the... what the hell are you doing?” She says to no one, her voice trying to show anger, but coming up raw and vulnerable.

“You tell him, Winnifred. Show him who’s boss.” Michael stands in the shadows off to her side. He’s also going through the motions. He

sounds bored. He is bored. This is not as enjoyable as he once thought it would be. When they were kids, he sometimes envied his brother for his role.

Winnifred's voice gets angrier and rougher. "What the... hell... are you doing?" She's lost and full of phony rage.

In reality, she was on the edge of a complete breakdown at this point. She remembers it well. Like it was just moments ago. But this isn't reality.

Winnifred stands there, looking exhausted and broken. She's been crying furiously, both in the real world, and now outside of it. Her eyes are sunken and bloodshot, surrounded by valleys of deep purple. Her skin is blotchy and red. She licks her pale, dry lips. Her long-dead lips.

And then he's there. Sam. Sitting with his back to her, with his toes in the water. Even from the rear, she can see the grey streaks in his long hair, the thinness on top. He's not the Sam she remembers. But it's still him. She can feel it.

"Sam... I... I can't find him anywhere. I can't find Max." Her voice gets soft and squeaky, and even more tears run down her raw face. "I searched the house, the yard, the garage. Everywhere he could be. Everywhere he's able to go on his own." She takes a ragged, broken breath. "Please help me. He can't be alone." She shudders, remembering how she felt. She was scared. Her little boy was gone. She'd killed him. And she just wanted him back. She was blaming Sam.

Sam takes a couple seconds before asking. “How’d you find me? How’d you bring me here? I shouldn’t be here.” He glances over his shoulder, and sees his brother standing in the shadows, frozen and flickering. “Michael. What’s happening? Why am I here? I need to go back.”

And like a flame swiftly burning across the thinnest of tissue, everything becomes fire, followed by a choking smoke, until Sam’s place, and everything it contains, is no more.

Until there is only absolute nothing.

## 24

Rae runs until the brightest of lights bursts open the black, empty nothingness, enveloping all of reality for just a moment.

The lonely God speaks. “Twenty.” And tired as he is, breathes out heavily.

Rae looks up and over her left shoulder, giving her visitor a sad, almost vacant look.

“Sorry.” The young man tries a bright, welcoming smile, which due to the circumstances, comes across as weak and unsure. “I don’t mean to bother you.” He nods his head once in the direction of the accident. “Do

you know what's going on?" His voice is quiet. Respectful. He's fairly sure someone could be dead, or in the very least, severely injured.

Rae pats the grass to her left twice, like she's summoning a child or a pet, and then looks away to her right and smiles sweetly.

"Robbie." He pushes his body down to sit beside the girl, but not too close. He doesn't want to make her feel uneasy. "My name... Robbie. My... my name's..." He suddenly feels a cold sweat run through his body in a failing attempt to overcome the trauma of what he's just been through.

"Car ran a red light." Rae points to the black car up against the brick building on the opposite corner. "And hit another car." Rae uses her other hand to gesture to the overturned SUV in the middle of the intersection. "Spinning and flipping it before smashing into the building across the street."

Robbie leans forward, pushes his thick neck out. "Oh. God. That's horrible." He coughs once, tasting iron. He brings his hand up to his mouth, feeling the wetness of the blood on his bottom lip.

Rae glances to Robbie for a brief second, measuring his reaction. She wonders why he's here with her. Why she's allowing this interaction.

"Are they..." Robbie scrunches his eyebrows, concern wrapped in confusion. "... okay? Did they get the driver out? It looks... it looks really bad." His words tumble out awkwardly. He can feel something like a throbbing pressure in his head. "I think..." He touches his temples with

both index fingers. “I think...” His confusion grows, clouding his mind further.

Rae puts on a gentle, half smile. She carefully gestures to the grassy area where they brought the small child. “She’ll be okay. No broken bones. A concussion. She’ll have mild headaches for about a year and a half. And then they’ll just fade away.” Rae frowns briefly. “I’m sorry about that. But they won’t be too severe. And then she’ll grow up healthy and happy.” She tries another weak smile. “Well... as happy as you can be after...” She hesitates. “... after the loss of a loved one... a parent.”

“Drunk?” Robbie massages his temples, also feeling a headache coming on. The sunlight is hurting his eyes. A migraine.

“No. Nothing like that.” Rae pulls a handful of grass from the park lawn and starts tossing the blades one by one onto the sidewalk in front of them. She leans a bit to her right, away from her unexpected visitor. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Robbie nods, but doesn’t say anything, his body going cold and numb. He keeps looking over to the overturned car.

“Everything will be okay.” Rae smiles gently. “The young man was just driving a little too fast, a little bit distracted... and he ran a red light. Those kinds of things happen.” She pushes out her lips into a pout. “Unfortunately.” She scrunches her eyebrows together. “I wish there was something I could’ve done. But my father always says... we need to let you

be. We need to stay out of things the best we can.” She frowns. “And it’s not my role. Not who I am.”

Robbie blinks rapidly, slowly pulling his hands down from his temples. That’s when he notices the blood on his right palm and wrist. And there’s blood on his finger tips.

And with a burst of blinding, white light that slowly fades to nothing, everything is gone.

## 25

The lonely God speaks. “Twenty.” And tired as he is, breathes out heavily.

Chaos arrives violently, tearing open the sky, causing the air itself to sizzle and burn. Standing high in the air, Michael is still holding the crumpled, metal door in one hand. He unclenches his hand, and simply lets it drop to the ground below.

He’s in Sam’s place.

The demon’s back yard.

Again.

He hates this place.

There's a sudden flash of blinding white.

And as the garage blinks into focus, the back door blows open and violently off its hinges. Splinters of wood fly out in every direction. Michael steps out into the yard. He breathes out heavily, nearly growling with irritation. "I God damn hate this shit."

He marches over to the side of the garage, hoping to find his brother standing there, looking back at him with that goofy smile of his. But he only finds darkness.

Further into the yard, the young woman sobs quietly on the swing hanging from the big tree in her backyard. Tears roll down her cheeks. "I don't wanna do this again. I can't." Her voice is a painful, course whine. She forces her eyes to close tightly, hoping it will all go away. "I just wanna go home."

As he approaches, Winnifred opens her eyes to see Sam standing just a few feet away. An older Sam. Same long brown hair, but with streaks of grey. Same piecing, blue eyes, aged and lined with experience.

He looks startled, confused. He shouldn't be here. Something isn't right. "Fred?"

Winnifred blinks away some tears, almost happy to see Sam again. She thinks maybe it's time for her to move on, and that's why he's come back. "Sam."

And instantly, Winnifred is standing on the beach, just down the path from Sam's house. His father's house. She knows the place. Sitting on the beach just a few yards in front of her should be Sam letting his feet touch the waves as they come and go.

Winnifred stares straight ahead, where Sam should be, between her and the ocean. "What are you doing?" She says to no one, her voice, once angry and raw, is low and scared.

Michael sighs. "Winnifred. You can do better than that. Show him who's boss." Michael stands in the shadows off to her side, playing his part. "Put some effort into it for Christ's sake."

Winnifred's tries again, for anger, remembering what real anger once felt like. "What the... hell... are you doing?" She sounds lost and confused. Scared that her Devil will become displeased with her. More displeased.

Winnifred stands there, looking exhausted and broken. She licks her pale, dry lips. Her dead lips. With her dead tongue.

And then he's there. Sam. Sitting with his back to her, with his toes in the water. Even from the rear, she can see the grey streaks in his long hair, the thinness on top. He's not the Sam she remembers. But it's still him. She remembers.

"Sam... I... I can't find him anywhere... Max." Her voice gets even softer. She forces some tears to run down her face. "I searched... everywhere he could be. Everywhere." She takes a ragged, broken breath.

“Please help me. He can’t be alone.” She shudders. The tears, now real tears, flow freely now. She’s no longer just going through the motions. She’s not sticking to a script. She’s not pretending. She’s scared for her little boy. She wants him back. She wants him to go away somewhere and have a great life. She wants Sam to keep him far from her broken grasp.

She murdered him in the family garage. Her and her brother, Sebastian. With a knife.

Sam gives her a couple seconds before asking. “How’d you find me?” He glances over his shoulder, and sees his brother standing in the shadow, frozen and flickering. Unmoving. “Mikey?”

Winnifred hesitantly moves her eyes to see Michael in the shadows. He gives her a quick, angry stare, and then looks back to his brother, his eyes wet with tears.

“Sam.” Winnifred sobs heavily. “I... I need your help. Please. I can’t find him.” She wipes her face on the sleeve of her hoodie. “I just want him to be okay.” She’s had a moment to give it some thought. Maybe he’s here to help. Maybe he’s come back to tell her he’s found Max, and that he’ll be okay. “Sam... please.”

“Are you going to hurt him?” Sam returns to what he remembers. “I shouldn’t be here, Mikey.”

“You did hurt him, Winnifred.” Michael’s voice breaks and crackles as he flickers in and out several times like a broken hologram.

“Hurt him?” She remembers. “Oh. Max.” A vivid picture of his moment of death rages through her mind. The knife. “What a stupid thing to ask.” She knows it isn’t.

Sam says nothing, just listening to the waves and the birds searching for food along the beach. Making the best of whatever this is. He’ll ask Chris the next time he visits.

Winnifred sits and cries for a few minutes, forgetting that she’s not alone, completely forgetting the disguise she always wore in public to keep people at a distance, to keep herself from feeling. Forgetting that she’s no longer alive. Forgetting that she’s been here, done this a thousand times. Maybe ten thousand times.

“I’m...” Sam thinks back, remembering that sweet little boy. He had spent a little time with him, gotten to know him some. “I’m... sorry.”

Time impatiently jumps forward by just a few minutes.

The waves go silent. The wind stops. The birds are no more. It’s just the three of them on the beach in a void of complete silence.

Winnifred remembers screaming in anger, but no sound came out.

She screams in anger, but no sound comes out.

She remembers screaming again but only feeling the shaking in her throat as the silence hit the cool air.

She screams again, feeling the silence as it hits the cool air.

She begins hitting herself in the sides of her head, wildly slapping her ears and face like she did. Like she always does.

She remembers all of this. She remembers feeling nothing when she learned of her own death for the first time. She only felt for her son. But it was too late, and not enough.

The knife.

She remembers the knife. She can feel the weight of it in her hands. She can see the blood. Her little boy's blood. Then the blood of Sebastian as he explodes. Then her own blood as it splatters the walls all around her in that garage. It hit the walls so quickly, she could see her own misting death, just before her sight failed to the darkness of Death smiling coldly back at her.

A coldness sweeps through her long dead body, and remains, keeping her ice cold from the inside out.

Again, she remembers.

She swallows hard, tasting thick, old blood in her mouth and throat. She can feel the sudden dryness of her eyes, mouth, and skin. She reaches up, touching her face. It feels hard and cold, rough against her fingertips. Dead. Her voice drops to a near-silent whisper. "I just didn't understand. I couldn't... I couldn't help him. We were both so lost." She pauses, considering. "I was wrong. I was the only one lost."

They sit in silence for a long time, just listening to the tide come and go. She contemplates her death and what it has meant for her so far. She knows she'll never have a chance to see her son again. She won't be able to hold him, hug him, and say she's sorry. Her mind fights between

self-pity and anger. She slowly raises her head, looking directly at Sam's back, flickering in and out of this unreality of his own making. She hates him for not being the angel she thought he was. She wants to blame him for what her and her brother did to Max.

Winnifred flicks her rough, dead tongue around and licks her broken lips. Her voice is soft and ragged. "I was wrong. I was stupid and selfish. I changed my stupid fucking mind. I just wanted you to save him. From me."

There's another lifetime of silence.

"I did." Sam wants to go back. He shouldn't be here. This world is dying. He wants to go where there's life. "I asked my brother... and I did."

Instantly, Winnifred is standing in the backyard near the swing. She is surrounded by nothing but darkness. No moon. No stars. No garage. No fence. No tree. No swing.

Nothing real. Nothing fake. Just nothing.

Michael is standing in front of her.

"We're done here." He looks deep into the darkness, searching for something he knows is there, but that he's not allowed to see. "Did you hear me? I said we're fucking done here. I'm taking her home."

And he does, as the darkness stands alone, slowly fading to the comfort of its nothingness.

## 26

Rae runs until the brightest of lights bursts open the black, empty nothingness, enveloping all of reality for just a moment.

The lonely God speaks. “Twenty.” And tired as he is, breathes out heavily.

Rae finds herself sitting under a tree, in the grass, near a sidewalk. Her mind feels clouded, as if waking from a particularly dense dream. She stares out to the commotion near the intersection, just down the street.

A black, sports car, driving much too fast, ran through a red light and struck another car crossing the intersection at the same time. The

sports car sits up against a small building, it's front end partially smashed through the brick and glass doors of the building.

The other car, an older, red SUV, still running, lays overturned in the intersection. There are two people still inside. Two bystanders are using a tire iron to pry the handle off of one of the doors trying to get them out. It digs and bends the metal as they frantically work to open the door. They initially tried breaking the window, but it proved impossibly strong, resisting blow after blow, and they began to fear that once the glass broke it could critically injure the person laying so close within.

A young man, somewhat on the heavy side, with a thick head of slick, black hair approaches wearily from the grass just behind Rae. He clears his throat awkwardly, politely informing her of his presence. The last thing he wants is to frighten the young woman.

"Sorry." The young man tries a bright, welcoming smile, which due to the circumstances, comes across as weak and unsure. "I don't mean to bother you." He nods his head once in the direction of the accident. "Do you know what's going on?"

Rae pats the grass to her left twice.

"Robbie." He pushes his body down to sit beside the girl, but not too close. "My name... Robbie. My... my name's..."

"Robbie." Rae absentmindedly reaches over herself, extending a small hand for him to shake. "I'm Rae." She turns her hand slightly, looking at the blood on his wrist and palm. Then she turns, looking back

to her right. “Rae... but with an E.” She smiles brightly like a child doing her best to make you smile back. “My dad calls me Sunshine.”

Slowly, Robbie delicately removes his hand from Rae’s so as not to offend her. “So. What happened?” His eyes look out to the accident in the intersection. “Looks bad.”

Rae continues to look to her right, away from Robbie. Her smile remains bright and hopeful. This is a bit outside her role, and she’s not sure why she’s allowing it to happen. “Maybe I’m not...” She whispers to herself, letting her eyes search the immediate area. “... Gabe?” She searches for her brother.

As Robbie watches, the two men, now joined by a third, continue in their attempt to tear through the side of the car. Finally, with a muted cheer from the onlookers, the three men pool their strength and tear open the back door. Carefully, they reach inside, and after many minutes of prepping the neck and body, they pull a small person out and place her on a long, board-like carrier. She’s just a child, maybe four or five. She’s unconscious, blood in her hair and across the shoulder of her dress, but she’s breathing comfortably.

“Car ran a red light.” Rae points to the black car up against the brick building.

“Shit.” Robbie points over to the black car. “The driver. The black car. The driver. Did they...”

“They got him out. A few minutes ago. He was injured. They brought him in there. Out of the sun.” She gestures towards a small flower shop across the street.

Robbie remembers the shop. It was closed, but the owner quickly opened the door to let them in. He remembers being helped to a chair. He remembers feeling cold.

“He’s in shock. The rescue workers took him aside, to care for him. But he wandered off at some point.” She looks just to her right. “Don’t worry. He’s going to be okay. Doesn’t really understand what happened. Like I said... shock.”

“Drunk?” Robbie massages his temples, feeling a massive headache coming on.

“No.”

Robbie nods, but doesn’t say anything, his body going colder and feeling numb. He just looks over to the overturned car.

Bringing his right hand back up to his head, he feels around his hairline, above his right eyebrow, where it’s sticky with blood. Not a lot, just enough to vaguely concern him in his confused state. He wipes his hand on his pants and looks back out to the intersection. He feels his heart beat heavier, and his breathing becomes shallow and ragged.

Shock.

Are you sure you're doing okay. I know this isn't easy. I'm here to help." Leaning to her right, Rae shows the sweetest of smiles. "It's what I do. Kinda my thing."

"I'm okay." Without thinking, Robbie gingerly touches his scalp again. "Though I'm bleeding for some reason."

Rae briefly glances over her shoulder at Robbie who is now standing just to her side. Then she looks back to the overturned SUV.

"It was just your time, I suppose." Rae tilts her head to the side, thinking. "Sounds lame... but that's all it is." She stares for a second at Robbie, watching as he absent-mindedly pats his fingers on the cut on his scalp.

"He didn't mean for it to happen. He just made a mistake." Rae smiles through a frown and turns to her right, looking at the young, dark-haired woman sitting at her side. She squeezes the woman's hand gently. "But your daughter will be just fine. She'll have a long, happy life." She nods reassuringly. "I promise." Rae darts her eyes around, pretending to be nervous. She lets her voice drop to a whisper as she leans in closer. "I should know. I peaked ahead."

The young woman, Emily, stares out at the ambulance where her daughter lays. "Can I go to her? Can I see her?" She's tried getting to her feet a few times now, but couldn't. It's not that her body didn't work. It's just that she somehow knew that she should stay right where she was for

the time being. It was as if something held her back until the time was right. “I’d like to be with her... for just a little longer. Please?”

“Of course.” Chris sits tall and straight, just to Emily’s right. His long blond hair blows wildly in a breeze that doesn’t reach Emily or Rae.

Only Emily can see and hear him. He’s not ready for Rae’s anger. That’ll come later when it’s necessary. It always does.

Instantly, the three of them are standing at the rear of the ambulance. Emily looks to Chris, and he nods slowly. She climbs into the ambulance and holds her young daughter’s hand as the paramedics check her blood pressure and look into her eyes with small lights.

And then time skips a few moments back.

“Of course.” Rae gives Emily’s hand another gentle squeeze.

Instantly, the three of them are standing at the rear of the ambulance. Emily looks first to Chris, and then to Rae, who nods slowly. Emily climbs into the ambulance and holds her young daughter’s hand as the paramedics check her blood pressure and look into her eyes with small lights.

Rae patiently waits, allowing Emily all the time she needs. A lifetime, if necessary. It’s what she does. She looks to her right, to the sun and the wind and the smell of fresh flowers. “Thank you.” But she sees no one.

And with a burst of blinding, white light that slowly fades to nothing, everything is gone.

## 27

Chris sighs, breathing out slow and heavy. He keeps doing this. “Twenty.” And he’s getting tired. But in his quest to move on to something new, he keeps revisiting the old.

Just like every time, he’s procrastinating out of sentiment. He’ll miss everyone as they are now. He’s better with beginnings than endings.

He takes all his little cutouts and places them in a neat stack. He even pulls out the ones tucked into his front pocket, a bit crumpled along the edges, but still serviceable. Pushing them into a neat stack, he sets them on the end of his bed, just inside his latest blanket fort.

Then he climbs up the end of the bunk bed and lays down on the top bunk, resting his head on the fluffy pillow, letting both his hands feel the reassuring texture of his favorite comforter. Darth Vader. He'd gotten it for Christmas.

He rolls, first to his side, and then settles nearly face down in his pillow.

And he cries quietly, hoping no one will hear him.

## 28

It looks like a small town in Northern California. Blue skies, a warm breeze, birds chirping, and the sun shining brightly down, warming everything it touches.

A group of firemen walk quickly past, dragging a long hose, struggling to put out the last remains of the fire that took out most of a large apartment building. Others carry out the injured or dead.

Chaos arrives violently, tearing open the blue sky, causing the air itself to sizzles and burn. He's still holding that crumpled, metal door in

one hand. It goes red hot, then white hot, and then completely melts away into steam, dispersing as a super-heated wave of wet air.

Michael stands there, a still portrait of burning light, staring down his quarry with white hot eyes.

In the small town.

In...

“Sam’s fucking place.” Michael’s voice is low and hard. He shakes his head slowly.

The elderly man, his long grey hair blowing in the wind, shows zero reaction, a complete lack of emotion. Even when the super heated air slaps across his face, he does nothing, shows nothing. He stares at Michael, directly into his eyes, or maybe he’s simply looking right past him. Or directly through him.

Michael momentarily wonders if this is a show of defiance, strength, or if the old man has simply had enough and just doesn’t care anymore. He would actually admire any of those things.

Three paramedics push a severely burned woman past on a gurney. She’s barely recognizable, her skin charred and melted, her face nearly gone, her hands black, fingerless stumps. Her mouth is just a mess of goo, melted flesh keeping it painfully closed. She breathes from a heavy oxygen mask through the messy, gaping hole where her nose had once been.

Michael tilts his head slightly, studying the elderly man’s face. “Hello, Frank.” And just as Sam’s reality begins to scream out painfully, he

steps forward, jutting his arm out, grabbing the elderly man by the throat, instantly dragging him both forward in time and into a hospital room half way across Sam's little town.

The old man tries to scream out from the pain of being pulled through the fabric of time and space, but Michael's hand, clenched tightly around his throat, restricts all sound and breathing. Then he's thrown fully into the room, landing against the wall beneath a big window, overlooking the parking lot.

Michael glances over to the hospital bed where Mikaela lies in an oxygen tent. He also sees the lingering shadow of his sister as she once sat in the chair next to the already dead woman. It's a bit more defined than the last time. A bit more real. His sister is doing what she does so well, comforting the dying. The dead. "Hmmm." He looks back to the elderly man.

The old man turns his eyes slightly to the side, looking directly to where Death sits.

He can see her.

This surprises her.

She's looking right into his eyes. Like him, there's no emotion. Unlike her brother, Rae hides her anger until it's needed. It isn't, just yet. It'll build, and she'll release it at some point in the near future. When it's time. The elderly man knows this. He's counting on it.

“Since when do you just...” Mikaela coughs several times. “... hover near the door without coming in, sitting down. That’s not the Sam I know.”

Michael looks to the woman lying in the bed in front of him. He wants to tell her that he’s not Sam. He’s a false Devil she has never met.

But it doesn’t really matter.

She’s not real.

This isn’t actually Mikaela.

The real Mikaela died in the fire, then was kept amongst the living until she gave birth to her child, and was finally given her peace by Rae. She was taken home to experience eternity, while her child grew up and had a long, beautiful life.

This fictional thing, this shadow version of Mikaela, is just a tool used to show the elderly man his wrongs, to get him to feel true remorse, to ask for forgiveness, to deserve forgiveness, to be forgiven, and then to move on.

But that was Sam’s thing, not Michael’s. It won’t be quite so simple for the old man to move on.

As her counterpart in reality did in her final days, this Mikaela lays in an oxygen tent with two pillows propping up her head. Bandages cover nearly every inch of her body, including her eyes. Her eyelids burned away, her retinas damaged, she’s completely blind. Off to both sides of the bed

are the machines, blinking and beeping, giving off the illusion that she's still alive. Or ever was.

Unlike the actual Mikaela who died weeks, months, decades before, in the fire, this one has never actually lived, except while Michael and the elderly man are in this room. She is no different than the light switch being turned on when they are here, and off when they are not.

Her breathing is rough and labored, and her voice comes out as a smoke-damaged croak. "So..." Mikaela coughs roughly. "Am I getting the silent treatment today? Cuz I'm okay with that. I can just lie here and listen to your breathing if you don't want to talk. At least I'm not alone."

Michael takes a couple slow, deliberate steps into the center of room, never taking his eyes off of the elderly man, who has now painfully pulled himself to his feet. He stands there hunched and somewhat leaning against the chair.

The dark figure of Death, sitting in the chair beside the hospital bed, pulls her feet up underneath herself and adjusts her long black dress. She clears her throat quietly. "You're not alone, Mikaela. You're never alone."

Michael breathes in sharply, and out heavily.

The elderly man begins. "This is..."

"Yes." Michael thrusts up a hand. "I know."

The elderly man takes a long, deep breath, and slowly exhales through his nose, wheezing and whistling with age.

“Ahhh, there he is.” Mikaela breathes in roughly. “So...” Her voice cracks painfully. “Blackjack? Go fish?” She chuckles and chokes a bit on her own saliva. She can taste old blood washing down her throat.

“How about we just sit here and chat a little?” Rae’s voice is soft.

To Michael, she feels distant, even as she reaches under the plastic tent and takes Mikaela’s fingerless hand in her own.

But this is no longer a shadow of the past.

This is his sister.

This is Azrael.

Michael wonders why she’s here as he takes a couple small steps closer to the elderly man. “Tell me about the fire.” Again, Michael finds himself twisting Sam’s rings, just as his brother had so often done. It’s quickly becoming habit..

The elderly man glances down at the blood rhythmically dripping from under his sleeves to the floor. “I did...” He closes his eyes for a moment, feeling them burn. “... nothing.” His voice drops to a rough whisper. “I did nothing.”

As the elderly man opens his eyes, he looks back up, and directly into Michael’s hard stare. With that, he returns to silence, the two of them just watching one another. One with sadness. The other anger and contempt.

“Sam. You’ve visited me every day for the past two months, and we’ve always played cards.” Mikaela coughs. “You changing things up like this... it makes me think this is the last time you’ll be visiting.”

Michael says nothing, feeling a slight sting from hearing her again call him by his brother’s name.

“The truth, Sam.” Mikaela croaks. “You said you would never lie to me.”

“No. This isn’t the last night, Mikaela.” Still holding the dead woman’s hand, Rae glances out the window into the hospital parking lot. It’s raining and everything glistens as passing headlights catch the raindrops and small puddles. Rae looks ahead and sees that there will be one more time. The four of them will work through this process one more time. Though the end remains hidden from her. And she’s doesn’t even realize it.

Michael turns his eyes towards his sister, but addresses the elderly man. “Fire.” His eyes dart back to the old man, and he drops his voice to a menacing whisper. “Tell me about the fire.”

The elderly man says nothing. Does nothing. He just stares.

“Hmmm. Not my last night then.” Mikaela chuckles roughly hanging onto some hope that she’ll somehow get through this. “Fire, huh. Okay.” She sighs. “Let’s talk then... while I still have my voice.”

Michael shakes his head, letting his eyes close. And then he juts out his hand, right through the elderly man’s body, tearing it open, causing him

to overflow with light, and break open along with all space and time in the immediate area. “I asked you something... and expect an answer.”

The old man screams in agony as the entire area bursts into burning white flames, then yellow, orange, red, and finally blue, as they cool and retreat back into the tear in reality as it begins to close the hole in his wounded chest.

Mikaela lays in her perpetual darkness, wondering why Sam is suddenly so interested. “I... I suppose... I suppose we can talk about it a bit... before you have to go. Before your sister gets here.”

Rae gives the woman’s hand a gentle squeeze.

The elderly man breathes in and out, quickly, raggedly, as his body, slowly cools.

“She still comes every night, just after you go.” Mikaela coughs several times, choking. “Maybe she’ll keep coming... even when you don’t.”

“Maybe.” Rae releases her hand, and stands, pouring Mikaela a small cup of water from a plastic bottle. She lifts the oxygen tent a little. “I have some water for you.”

“The fire, Frank.” Michael whispers. “The fire.”

Mikaela nods and gets her mouth ready. She can feel someone next to her. She hears the crinkle of the plastic as Rae reaches under and puts the cup to her lips. She takes a drink. It hurts when the cup touches her lips. It hurts to swallow.

Sam never touches her. Sometimes she wishes he'd accidentally brush his fingers against her cheek or somewhere there's no bandages. It would make her feel better somehow, like she's still human, and not some mummy wrapped up in her death bed.

Rae puts the cup on the table and sits back in the nearby chair, pulling her feet up underneath her. "If you need more, please... let me know."

"I smell flowers. Fresh flowers. Do you smell them?" Mikaela tries smiling, her broken lips painfully grimacing. "It's not a perfume smell. It's the real thing. Real flowers. I can still tell the difference... even without a nose." She croaks out a short giggle. "Anyway... it's comforting."

"I..." Rae scrunches her brow. She looks around, taking a long sniff of the air. "I don't." She looks to her brother and tilts her head. Then she looks directly to her right, wondering.

"When it happened, I immediately felt the heat... the pain." She pauses, struggling to remember. "But then you go cold. It's like you're still on fire. You can see the flames, feel the warmth, but something goes ice cold in you. So cold that it hurts."

"Your core temperature lowers." Rae mumbles from her chair. "Trying to compensate. Like when you have a sunburn... and get the chills." She feels like this is not quite correct. But she knows these are Sam's words, and were likely meant for comfort.

“Hmmm.” Mikaela half nods, trying not to move too much. “It’s hard to remember, really. I guess the mind doesn’t want to remember. It’s doing its best to keep you safe. Maybe so you don’t break. We can break, you know.”

Michael’s eyes light up as he listens, while watching the elderly man’s complete lack of reaction.

“You know... when we first met, I tried to figure out if you were a young doctor or maybe a medic or a fireman.” Mikaela’s voice sounds dry again. “I can tell you’re young, because of your voice. Old men have old voices.”

Rae stands to get Mikaela another cup of water. “You’d be surprised.”

“Thank you.” Mikaela carefully licks her broken lips, feeling their permanent roughness with her tongue. “You didn’t seem like a doctor though. You kept your distance.” She chuckles.

“Sam wasn’t a doctor, or a medic, or anything that helpful... unfortunately.” Rae hesitates. “He was... is... something quite different.”

“I know.” Both Mikaela and the old man say in near harmony.

There’s a full twenty seconds of silence, with only Mikaela’s rough breathing, and the beeping of the machines.

“The fire. There was no reason for the fire. Nothing out of the ordinary.” Michael’s voice tries for matter of fact. “So why did it happen?”

“Will I die tonight?” The words tumble from Mikaela’s mouth out of fear. She feels a coldness rolling through her damaged body from her feet, to the top of her head, settling heavily in her brain. The cold’s been getting worse each day, and it seems to be at an extreme right this minute.

“No.” Rae’s answer comes immediately. “Not tonight. I’m sure of it.”

Michael turns away as this little piece of Sam’s reality, the hospital room, the elderly man, Mikaela, the parking lot outside, the night sky, everything, instantly burns away to a fine, grey ash.

Now standing alone in an emptiness that was once a corner in Sam’s place, Michael angrily walks away, violently tearing this false reality open as he steps through from this place to be anywhere but this place.

## 29

“Is it my time?” Ethan’s dark, deeply lined face looks relieved, ready. He reaches up, running a hand through a mess of curls, slick and fuzzy at the same time, and rapidly turning grey.

He’s happy. His friend made a promise. And he fully believes this is the time where she finally makes good on that promise. After decades, he’s sure she’s here to take him. He can feel it. It starts as an electrical burst in his chest, an echoing thud, like a solid door being slammed on an empty room with a wooden floor. It’s quickly followed by an ice cold tingle playing on the back of his neck.

From the parking lot, Rae walks towards him, bare foot, but not letting her feet actually touch the hot pavement. She's carrying a brown bag with a big yellow M on it. "I got us a little something." She casually holds the bag up, just in front of her, as she approaches.

She walks a little quicker than usual. With purpose. This time is new, not some cosmic hiccup causing her to revisit the same warped event over and over again.

The cold tingle on the back of Ethan's neck warms and slowly works itself down his spine, left to right, repeating all the way down. Like someone climbing down a ladder.

It's time. He's knows.

"A last meal?" Ethan smiles bright white against his dark skin. His hair may have greyed, his skin gone patchy and red, but his teeth, for the most part, remain relatively healthy.

"Yes." Rae gets right to the point of her visit, using her head and eyes to motion to the bushes just twenty feet or so to his right. "It's time, Ethan."

Her voice isn't quite as soft and playful as usual. She still seems a bit distracted. She's a busy young woman. Ethan knows her well enough to realize that she's not only with him, but with maybe hundreds of others like him, at this very moment. But he's just happy that she's here as more than just the bringer of death. She's his friend. Maybe even his best friend.

Ethan looks to where Rae has gestured, and sees the back of a man's head and shoulders laying face down in the dirt, just sticking out from between the bright, green bushes. He recognizes the fuzzy grey curls. If he were still alive, another cold shiver would likely go through his body. But this time, he just feels warm and comfortable. Content. It's a nearly unrecognizable feeling he hasn't had in decades.

Rae reaches down to where her friend sits on the curb, by the grass, and with a comforting smile on her face, hands him his last goody bag. She watches closely, to gauge his reaction, and to help him work through all the necessary feelings as they arise.

But Ethan just grins. "Well. Thank God that's over with." And he proceeds to unroll the top of the bag of food she's brought for them to share. "It's a last meal then." Even through the bravado, his voice is a bit shaky and uneven. "What about Gabriel?" He gives her a look, his eyes beginning to wet with tears. "The reason I'm still here. The reason I had to wait. The purpose. He said I had a purpose. Something I was needed for" He seems disappointed, frustrated. Nearing a breakdown. "I... I waited so long." He's a little angry. Disappointed.

Rae uses both hands to smooth the back of her long, black dress, before sitting down beside Ethan on the curb. She still has this nagging feeling like there's something else she should be doing. Something she's forgotten. Someone. The darkness. The nothing. Her brother. 'Which one', she wonders. She feels something pulling at her sanity as she

simultaneously sits in a hospital hallway with a child-abusing father, crushing his arm into the side of a chair. Michael will eventually put the man's head through the wall, ending his abuse.

She smiles.

"You know." Ethan turns away, a little embarrassed as he wipes the tears from his eyes. "In the hospital... he told me. He told me to hang on... that I needed to pull through everything. That I was important." He snorts roughly, his voice getting weaker. "He said I was supposed to do something. Something big." He roughly clears his throat. "I... I think he meant it."

Ethan stops, and holds out both arms, looking more closely at himself.

Rae waits for her friend to finish.

"But look at me... I haven't done anything. Not a damn thing." Again, there is an attempt to show and feel anger.

Rae looks up, still fiddling with her dress, picking a few stray pieces of grass from her waist and knee, and tossing them to the side. It isn't necessary, but made of habit that she's practiced for thousands of millennia. "Gabriel wouldn't lie." She stops fidgeting, and shrugs. "He wouldn't exaggerate either. It'll happen."

Ethan shrugs, and decides to allow a goofy smile to cross his face. He eagerly reaches into the brown bag, knowing what to expect before he even sees or feels it. It is his last meal, after all. "Oh. Yum." He pulls out a

Big Mac and then a large fries, extra salt. “My absolute favorite. Thank you so much.”

When he looks up, Rae is holding two large Cokes. “I didn’t forget.” She motions with her head to his burger. “And I had them put on extra sauce... since it’s the last time.”

She hands Ethan one of the Cokes, and then unwraps both straws, and places one in his drink and the other in hers.

She takes several strong sips.

And Ethan bursts into tears, holding his head down with his weathered, shaking hands now covering his face. He sobs and cries. The small screeching sounds he makes echo out into Death’s void as he sits both on the curb at the edge of the parking lot, and in the afterlife alongside Death as she waits to take her friend home to his eternity.

Rae lets him have his moment. She doesn’t touch him. She doesn’t console him. Not yet. He needs this. Most do.

She’s seen this happen to billions of people, billions of times. Sometimes they have to have that break down. It can come from a lot of things. Sadness, regret, anger, disbelief, and sometimes even relief. And most times it come from nearly all of those things at once. That’s what can make it so overwhelming. And touching them or consoling them too early doesn’t help.

She reaches over and takes the Coke from where it sits between Ethan’s legs, and moves it to the side so it doesn’t accidentally get knocked

over as he rocks gently back and forth, sobbing. Then she simply stares off into the dark sky, waiting. Allowing him his grief, and his eventual relief. It's part of what she does, who she is, her role. Her father once told her when she was very young that Death doesn't just usher in an ending. She's also there to ring in a new beginning. She's always liked that. She thinks she might have a shirt made.

After about twenty minutes, the crying comes to a long, sniffling end, and Ethan pulls his hands from his face. The tears are gone. There is no redness. No puffiness around the eyes. He looks as if it never happened. He looks healthy and more alive than he did before he died. His skin has healed. His hair has darkened and thickened just a bit. Nothing too over the top, just enough to make a difference. To signify change.

Ethan picks up his Big Mac, still sitting in its wrapper next to him, unwraps it, and takes just a nibble, intending to make it last as long as he can. "It's still warm." The words are muffled by the meat and bun as he chews thoroughly, enjoying every morsel.

And that's when he notices that he can feel both feet. All ten toes. He looks down and sees that his wrapped nubs are no more. He has both feet. They're bare, and clean, with neatly clipped nails. Even though it's been twenty-seven years, he recognizes them as his from before the accident. There's even that small bruise on his big toe from when he stubbed it the day before the accident on that heavy ottoman his wife loved so much. He's not sure why he remembers that, but he does.

And then he's flooded with memories of his wife. Miriam. How she loved him. How she put everything aside to help him heal, bring him back from the darkness of losing a part of himself. But he pushed her away, not wanting the accident to consume the both of them. He never regretted that. It was both selfish and selfless. He hopes she had the life he didn't.

Now he feels the tears wanting to come back as he sets his burger aside and reaches down, first touching both feet and then each individual toe one by one. "My feet. I have my feet." His voice is weak and raw, trembling as he looks over to his friend, grinning wildly. "And I don't even need to trim my nails." He chuckles. "Look. Someone's done it for me." He laughs loudly, feeling a tear stream down his cheek.

As if awakened, Rae turns her head back to her friend, pushing her thoughts about everything else to the back of her mind while she does what she always does. She nods and they sit together, chatting, laughing, the occasional crying, just enjoying their meal. The meal seems to last much longer than it should. That's just the way it works. Every bite replaced by another. Ethan is having the best ever first day of his death. Most do.

Normally Rae would've taken him completely within, fully to the void, but she's known Ethan for a long time, longer than most, and wanted to give him his last meal, his last taste of life, in the odd little place where they shared so many memories.

As friends.

And she has so few actual friends.

Plus, a small, self-serving part of her was staying close, waiting, knowing that an extraordinary end was also coming for those three vile creatures that have seemingly been on the edge of her peripheral for so long. And she figured Ethan, as her friend, would allow her the latitude to take care of both things at once.

“Hey beautiful. Guess who’s back?” The young man puts on a cartoonish accent. “The three amigos... amigo.”

Rae smiles wide, and glances briefly to her right, mouthing the words ‘thank you’.

She turns her head back to the three young thugs approaching from the parking lot. “And there they are.”

She was told that they would be coming, and that their end would arrive almost immediately thereafter. She was here only to watch. To enjoy. Their end would come from Michael. And there was no doubt that they deserved what Chaos would bring.

The two young men, now joined by their much larger friend come walking around some small trees separating the McDonald’s from a side street.

“Yeah little hottie, how you doin’?” The small one, the leader smirks and winks in an ugly way.

“And stumpy.” His buddy fake laughs, gesturing towards Ethan, not actually seeing just how untrue his insult has become.

The biggest of the three, nearly Michael’s size, but with quite a bit more belly girth, steps forward, between his two buddies. They’re just a few feet from the curb where Ethan and Rae sit.

And the big guy sees Rae.

Locks eyes with Rae.

With Death.

And he remembers. He remembers something that no longer happened. He sees her for what she is. For what she was the first time they met, but actually never did. He remembers her towering over him as a vast darkness. He sees the void within. The vast darkness. He sees her real face. A terrifying portrait of what he pictures Death to be. He sees the real her, as much as she allows, as much as his small brain can comprehend.

He witnesses his own death.

Everyone’s death.

Everyone.

Ever.

Past and future.

One by one.

He lets out a pathetic series of breathless whimpers. And like last time, uncontrollably, his bladder releases. He turns to run, stumbling, nearly falling.

That's when the air violently tears open behind them as Chaos steps through. Michael immediately, with a warrior's purpose, walks forward directly through the three young men, pulling and stretching reality with him as the pure force of his arrival struggles to keep pace, and then catch up with him. It's like running a finger through the thick, wet paint of reality.

As if dropped into a blender, the three young men are instantly torn to shreds, the absolute violence of it causing them to burst into flaming chunks of flesh, throwing blood and charred meat high into the air in every direction. And then as if time slows, briefly holding the pieces in the air, it just as rapidly catches back up, and the burning flesh falls all around Michael with a series of sickening, wet thuds and splats on the pavement and in the nearby grass.

"Rae. We need to talk."

"Holy shit!" Ethan falls back in the grass onto his back and crosses his arms just in front of his face to block the incoming mess.

But everything falls short of Ethan and Rae as if hitting a glass wall, smudging the air with blood and chunks as it slides straight down onto the curb and pavement in front of them.

"Jesus Christ!" Ethan frantically scuttles back from the curb a bit. Then he instinctively reaches for his bare feet and pulls them in closer to his body.

Although she had been warned, and this was destined, and very much desired by her, Rae still appears to be annoyed. She breathes out long and steady, her tiny frame releasing more air than it could possibly hold. She reaches out and gently takes Ethan's hand, pulling him back to a sitting position.

"Ethan. This is..." She breathes in deeply, theatrically, and out quickly. "... my brother. Michael." She looks up to her brother standing just a few feet in front of them.

Michael just stands there, his face showing nothing of what just happened.

"Michael... this is Ethan." Rae tilts her head slightly. "He's a longtime friend. He's one of the good ones."

Michael purses his lips, and stoically nods his head once to say hello.

Ethan darts his eyes quickly to Rae. "Michael?" He's met Gabriel numerous times, sometimes for long periods of time. But he's never met any of the others. She's mentioned the others, of course. Sometimes at great length, with wonderful stories. When she talked about Gabriel, it had made Ethan want to go on, to live up to what was expected of him. But when she talked of Michael, it was like a bedtime story about your favorite superhero.

"Yep." Rae smiles, choosing to play the proud older sister.

“Michael.” Ethan stares, a twinkle in his eye, the beginning of a silly smile on his lips.

“Yes.” Still grinning, Rae rolls her eyes. “Michael.” She feigns annoyance. “Ethan. Michael.” She gestures to her brother. “As you can see...” She motions to her friend. “... he’s a bit awestruck at the moment.”

“Is that why you killed them?” Ethan looks up at Michael more closely, using his hand to shade his eyes from the bright sun that isn’t there. “Because they were bad guys?” He glances down, just now realizing that Rae’s been holding his hand. For how long, he’s not sure. He remembers that he’s dead.

“What?” Michael sighs, feigning confusion, and looks all around him at the obvious bloody mess. “Oh. Them.” He grins wickedly, and gives his sister the briefest of winks. “No. I just didn’t see them standing there. My bad.”

Rae quickly turns her eyes towards her brother, and exhales fast and loud, letting her head fall forward in disbelief. She loves all her brother’s dearly, but this particular brother likes to test her patience more than all the others combined.

Ethan’s eyes widen. “Oh.” He seems a little shocked and uncertain. Whatever smile he had is half lost to confusion. And horror.

Rae, her head still turned down towards her chest, rolls it to the side slightly, towards Ethan. “He’s kidding. He’s just kidding” She turns

her eyes up to her brother, bulging them slightly. “Tell him. Tell him you’re joking.”

Michael just looks at both of them as the smile on his face grows wider and more mischievous. He says nothing, choosing to let Ethan believe whatever he wants.

“Trust me.” Rae turns back to Ethan and gently squeezes his hand. “He’s just kidding.”

“Rae, we need to talk.” Michael completely loses the smile, returning to the reason he’s actually here. “Something’s not right. Seriously not right.”

For several seconds Rae just stares at her brother, an annoyed look on her face. Then. “As you can see...” Rae uses her head to motion to the body laying in the bushes. “... I’m with a client.”

Michael follows her eyes, and sees the old man’s body laying face down in the grass and dirt. “Oh.” He looks back to Ethan, seeing him sitting next to his sister in the grass, but also on the edge of her void. “Yeah.” In his haste, he hadn’t immediately seen it. It wasn’t something he was expecting. His voice softens. “I apologize. I’m... interrupting.”

“Maybe...” Ethan gently separates his hand from Rae’s, and using both his hands, reaches down to touch his ankles, then the tops of his feet, and finally all ten toes. “... maybe I can just... you know... take a short walk... in the grass. Maybe around the block or something?” He glances over to Rae and then up to Michael. “And you guys can talk.”

Rae smiles brightly at her friend, raising her eyebrows and widening her eyes. “Yes. Of course.” She nods enthusiastically. “Please. Take as long as you need.”

Ethan pushes himself up to his feet, nearly falling. Michael quickly reaching out to steady him.

“Thank you. It’s been so long.” He shows Michael a big grin. “It’ll be nice to have one last go at it. There’s time, right?”

Again, Rae nods, the smile still on her face. The insanity shows her the moment she obliterates Winnifred’s brother, Sebastian, in their garage. Then she does the same to the child-killing monster.

Her smile grows wider. It’s nearly time.

Ethan takes a few tentative steps away, farther into the grass. “I’ll be back in...” He looks back at his friends, old and new. “... soon. I’ll be back soon.”

# 30

Rolling over on his top bunk, Chris stares blankly at the ceiling for a few minutes. He wipes the tears from his eyes and face, sits up, and breathes out like no seven-year-old ever has before. Long and powerful. Overflowing with sorrow.

He puts his legs over the side of the bed and drops gracefully to the bedroom floor with a solid thump. Pulling the blanket of his makeshift fort to the side, he reaches in and retrieves his collection of cutout people. He quickly sorts through the ones that he had previously folded, and gently folds them once and pushes them back into his front pocket.

Chris walks to his closed bedroom door, stopping to put his hand on the knob, and his best pretend smile on his face. The one that no one can see through, not even his family.

He turns the handle, pulls the door open, and steps out just at the top of his great, green field. Sitting just a few steps outside his door, just before the hill begins to slope down, is his eldest brother, Sam.

Without turning his head, Sam smiles to himself. “So. How’s Rae?” The last time he saw his sister, she was sitting with his body, holding his hand, crying.

Chris, now appearing to be in his early twenties, steps away from his bedroom door, pulling it closed behind him. “Rae’s...” He makes a face, quickly raising his eyebrows and nodding his head a few times. “Rae’s... Rae.” He steps closer to his brother, who still hasn’t looked back. “But she’s good.” Chris sits down beside his brother. “Or at least she’s working on it. You know... Rae’s...”

“Rae.” Sam sits comfortably with his legs splayed out in front of him.

“I was going to say... complicated.”

Chris looks down the slope and sees a young boy and girl playing in the huge, green field below. Further into the field, there are dozens of families, hundreds of kids, playing and picnicking. It’s the size of four soccer fields put together in a grid, two by two. Across the field, he sees a

woman with a red bow in her hair sitting with a small group of children. He knows she's telling them her stories. Fantastic, wonderful stories.

"It must be Saturday." Chris glances over to his brother.

"Sure is." Sam marks the page of a well-worn book he's been reading, and sets it down in the grass to his side. He reaches out, putting a hand gently on his brother's shoulder for just a quick second to say hello. He looks decades older, his hair is beginning to thin and grey, and lines have formed around his eyes and mouth.

"And Mikey and Gabe are good too." Chris reaches over his brother and picks up Sam's book, looking the cover over, flipping it and reading the blurb on the back. "Mikey's angry. Gabe's currently taking a nap on the couch."

Sam chuckles.

Chris puts the book down between them, and gives his brother a bright smile. "A mystery. Nice. You wanna know how it ends?" He raises an eyebrow, giving his brother a mischievous look.

"I do not. I'll get there on my own." Sam gives Chris' forearm a gentle squeeze. "So everyone's good."

"Well... we're all still in mourning... but yeah... good, considering." Chris grins even wider. Again he looks across the field and this time sees all the kids looking up the hill towards him and his brother. He gives them a friendly wave.

“That makes me happy.” Sam looks over his shoulder at the bedroom door just a few feet behind them, looking incredibly out of place, standing all by itself surrounded by trees and blue sky.

Chris closes his eyes and leans his head back, letting the sun warm his face. “I’ll take it with me when I go.” Slowly, his smile is replaced by a simple look of tranquility. He’s missed the sun. Everything is still fresh here. Not decaying and failing. Blinking in and out of existence. Dying.

Sam studies his brother’s face for a few seconds before looking back down the hill at the children as they toss a bright red frisbee back and forth. It has been several millennia since he’d last seen his siblings. Though Chris has visited here and there. “So, you went with the grown-man look for once instead of that annoying eleven-year-old skateboarder wannabe.” He smiles gently, nudging his brother’s shoulder with his own. “You can’t imagine how much I appreciate that.”

“Eleven and a half.” Chris opens his eyes, staring directly into the sun, forcing it to dim slightly. “Soon to be twelve, actually.”

Sam chuckles. “Twelve...” He motions with his head at the two kids at the bottom of the hill. “... and eight.”

“Nice.” Chris continues to stare into the sun. “That’s a fun age.”

“So. What are you now? Twenty four... and a half?” Sam chuckles at his own bad joke.

Without turning his head, Chris squints out of the corner of his eyes at his brother. “Don’t be ridiculous.” He puts on that bright smile

again. The one no one can see through. Not even his family. “Twenty two.”

“Oh.” Sam purses his lips, pushing them downward as he nods his head slowly.

“And a half.” Chris finishes with a snort and a goofy laugh, sounding more like the child than the man.

They sit in comfortable silence for a while, watching the two children toss their frisbee back and forth at the bottom of the hill.

“Let’s walk.” Chris turns, giving his brother a sudden serious look.

And the two brothers stand in the field just past the two children.

Finding himself suddenly on his feet sixty yards from where he was sitting, Sam has to keep himself from stumbling by reaching out and grabbing his brother’s arm.

“Oh.” Chris steadies his brother. “Sorry about that.”

The young boy walking just a few steps in front of the brothers, stops and tosses a baseball for Chris to catch. “So who’s your friend?”

Chris snatches the ball out of the air with ease, and looks to his brother with a bit of pride. “My friend.”

“Yeah... your friend... or... dad... uncle... I don’t know.” The boy doesn’t want to be rude or disrespectful, but isn’t sure what else to say.

“The old man.” He grins sheepishly, and gestures to Sam.

“Old man.” Sam laughs. “I’ve become the old man.”

“Well. You have gotten a little grey around the edges.” Chris reaches up, pointing to the areas on his own head. Just then the wind picks up, and he has to pull some long hairs from his face, tucking them behind his ears. He looks to the clear blue sky, pretending to be irritated, and the wind immediately calms.

The boy continues walking, and Chris and Sam follow. “This is my eldest brother. Sam.” He tosses the baseball pretty high and the boy has to run ahead a little to catch it. “Sam. This is Danny.”

The boy jogs closer and puts out his non-catching hand for Sam to shake. They’ve never met, but Sam recognizes him from the last time he walked with Chris in the field. The one in the other place.

“Let’s keep walking, okay? There’s something pretty cool I want to show Danny.” Chris looks first to Sam, and then to the boy.

They continue walking. Danny isn’t sure what he’s doing here. He’s not even sure where here is. But he loves the smell of the grass and flowers. Everything’s so fresh. For some reason, he feels like he’s been stuck indoors for a long time and needs the fresh air to clear his head.

“Sometimes when I feel cooped up, the fresh air clears my head too.” Chris breathes in through his nose, enjoying the fresh smell of the field and all its flowers. “It makes me feel alive.”

“I can’t believe how many butterflies there are. They’re everywhere. Birds too.” Every once in a while, a butterfly will actually get

close enough to land on Sam or Danny, or even Chris for a few seconds looking for nectar, and then quickly fly off to find a flower.

Danny tosses the ball up, and Sam catches it behind his back, smiling and flexing his eyebrows several times. “Not bad for an old man.”

Danny chuckles. “You’re not that old. I was just goofing. I do that sometimes when I’m nervous.”

“It’s okay.” Chris watches as a butterfly lands on his wrist. “I do that too.”

“So how many times have we done this?” Sam takes a quick glance at his brother and then looks far over his shoulder to Rae and little Sam, still tossing the frisbee back and forth. “I mean...” He scrunches his eyebrows, and shakes his head quickly. “This isn’t the first time? Is it?”

“No.” Chris remembers every single time they’ve had this conversation. He knows exactly how many times. “Not the first time.”

Sam nods, thinking. “So. Danny. How old are you? You look about eleven or twelve.” He grins over at the boy. “Chris here is eleven most of the time. But apparently he’s going for twenty-two...”

“And a half” Chris nudges his brother’s shoulder with his own.

“And a half. Today.” Sam tosses the ball and his brother does his best to catch it behind his back, but mishandles it and drops it to the grass.

“Good try.” Danny runs ahead just a little, seeing two humming birds zipping around as the group continues their long walk through the field.

Sam wonders if they're 'here' or back 'there'. No matter how many times his brother visits, he's never quite gotten a grasp on that. And even when he knows, he quickly forgets. But he wonders why Danny is here.

"A little of each, I suppose." Chris' smile diminishes a bit. "Until Rae does her thing. Makes her choices." He looks over to his brother. "And Danny's not here... he's there. I just brought him along for the walk. He had my baseball."

Sam looks far down the field as they continue walking, unsure what any of that's supposed to mean. And he decides not to ask.

Chris says nothing further, enjoying the beautiful flowers growing all throughout the field. Every once in a while he leans over, reaching to the ground, and grabs a few blades of grass. And then continuing to walk, he tosses them one by one to the slight breeze, watching them blow in random directions.

"Hey." Danny stops. "The baseball. I think we left the baseball back there." He points. "You dropped it. Nobody picked it up."

"Oh. Yeah." Chris keeps walking but turns, walking backwards, looking back to where they left the ball. "It's okay. I'll grab it on the way back."

"You know." Sam scrunches his face a bit. "It's a little bit of a mind bender." He gestures over his shoulder to where they left the kids playing.

Chris laughs. “I’ll bet.” He turns back towards Danny. “But I totally get it.”

Sam watches over his shoulder as the young girl throws the frisbee high. The wind catches it, and carries it way over her brother’s head so he has to run and get it from the bushes. “Nah. I don’t think you do.” He looks at his brother out of the corner of his eye. “You’ve probably met yourself hundreds of times.”

And instantly Sam is replaced by twelve-year-old Rae. “Heck, you’ve probably had sleepovers where it was all just different versions of you.” She giggles, putting a hand over her mouth.

Brother and sister laugh.

Danny joins in the laughter, totally not understanding what they’re talking about. But not wanting to be left out.

The boy turns around, walking backwards, looking at Chris and Rae. “So where are we going, anyway? We’ve been at this for a while now.” He turns back around, seeing nothing they could be walking towards, just grass, flowers, and blue sky going on forever. “Right? Or am I just...”

“Home.” Chris grins, looking down at Rae. “Your mom has been asking me to bring you home.”

“Home?” Rae raises her eyebrows, widening her eyes as a question.

“His home.” Chris clarifies.

“My mom?” Danny fights through some confusion, his mind feeling heavy, hard to think, and then his face lights up. “It feels like forever since I saw my mom.”

They walk some more, and Danny is starting to wonder how big this field really is, how far he’s been from home.

Again, Danny turns, walking backwards. “Rae. Have you met my mother?”

She shakes her head. “No. But I’ve met your father.” She glances up at Chris, who is staring away into the distance. “Or... I will meet him... in a few years, I guess.” She’s there right now, in that hospital hallway, sitting in the chair next to Danny’s father, gripping his arm to the point of crushing the tissue, breaking the bones. She can feel the surge of insanity waiting for her to grow up a bit more.

“That’s there... not here.” Chris smiles.

Rae scrunches her eyebrows, not sure what her brother means. And not sure it’s the right time to ask.

Danny looks slightly confused, but somehow sees Rae for what she is. “I’m not dead... am I?” He doesn’t seem particularly concerned.

Rae gives him an innocent look, her twelve-year-old face looking even younger. “Of course not, silly. Why would you even ask that?”

“I don’t know. The field. You. My dad pushing me down the basement stairs again.” Danny struggles to think clearly. “I think I hit my

head pretty hard this time.” He reaches up, feeling the back of his head with his hand, and then pulls it down to check for blood on his fingertips.

“There.” Chris stops and points to a long, chain-link fence stretching out in front of them, blocking their way for as far as can be seen in both directions. “Your mother’s on the other side.”

Though there’s nothing on his fingers, Danny wipes them on his jeans.

“There’s a gap in the fence.” Chris looks to Rae and then to the boy. “Just where it meets the trees.”

“It was nice meeting you, Danny.” Rae turns away, looking back to where she had been throwing the frisbee back and forth with Sam.

“Go on, Danny. Your mom’s waiting for you just on the other side.” Chris starts to turn away. “She’s missed you these last six months.” He looks to Rae. “Coma. He’ll be coming out of it in just a few seconds.”

Rae and Chris start their journey back to where they started as Danny crawls through the hole in the fence, and back to his hospital bed.

“So.” Rae looks out to the big, green field ahead of her, full of children playing, and their families preparing picnics and barbecues and all kinds of fun games. Danny has gone. Now’s the right time to ask. “So what’s going on? This place... this is new. This isn’t the old place anymore. It has a different smell. The colors are a bit more vivid.”

“It isn’t.” Chris purses his lips and makes a mildly puzzled face. “I mean. Yes. This place is new. No. It’s not the old place.”

For a brief moment, Rae can see the dark skies, the stars flickering off one by one, and then, in the blink of an eye, everything's completely back to blue skies and fluffy white clouds. "What are you doing?"

Chris lets out a sharp sigh. "End of the world. The old one. Blah, blah, blah." He glances down to gauge his sister's reaction. "But this one's new. For Sam. It's what he asked for. You know... second chances... save them all... and all that." He grins wide, like a child in a man's body. "It's kind of my thing." He chuckles.

Rae reaches over, grabbing her brother's arm, gently pulling him to a stop. "The end of the world?" As she holds her brother's forearm, she can feel her future self crush Danny's abuser's arm. She sees herself explode a teen boy holding a number of guns in a nearly empty school. She feels a selfish woman's body shred as she reaches through the speeding car, tearing her through the steel and glass. She tosses the broken body to the side of the road. The insanity feels a little closer. It just needs to wait for her to be a little older. For it to be the right time.

Chris frowns. "Well. More like the end of reality. That's a better way to put it." He remembers Sam's reaction to this conversation, and looks at Rae's face, comparing her reaction to his. "Yeah. That's definitely a better way to put it."

They stand together amongst the birds and butterflies for a couple minutes. She slowly releases his arm.

Chris reaches down and massages the blood back into his forearm. “You’re stronger than you look.” He grins to show her it’s okay.

“The end of the world.” She mutters. Her heart stops beating. She stops breathing. She lets her eyes go black. Not out of anger, but out of briefly forgetting about the facade she so often wears. “Okay. The stars. The moon. The sun. Gone.” She works through everything she remembers happening to a version of her future self. “Well now it all kind of makes sense.” She scrunches her eyebrows. “I guess.”

“Reality.” Chris corrects her. “The end of reality.” He gives her a serious look, only remembering to put on a smile as an afterthought. “When you’re ready, of course.”

“When I’m ready?” They continue to walk, getting closer to where her brother is playing alone in the grass. He quickly gave up on finding Rae after retrieving the frisbee.

“Yeah. It’s always your call.” Chris takes his sister’s hand, leading her towards the worn trail that leads up the hill towards her father, and just past that, to her favorite picnic table, where she’ll visit Eddy whenever she feels the need. “Well... almost always your call.”

They stop walking where the path begins. Chris watches as Rae considers everything as a whole.

He gives her time. He finds it interesting that twelve-year-old Rae finds out before twenties Rae finds out. Which would normally make sense. But they are far from normal.

“What are you, Chris?” She lets go of her brother’s hand, and without realizing it, thoroughly wipes her hand on the hip of her black dress.

Chris’ eyes briefly stray to her hand, and then immediately back to her face. “I’m everything, Rae.” His sadness returns. “Everything... and I’m your little brother.”

They’ve reached the bottom of the hill, near where eight-year-old Sam sits in the grass holding the red frisbee. Rae can see her father sitting at the top of the hill with someone. Someone she doesn’t know, she doesn’t recognize. They’re talking. They’re comfortable. Like old friends. Like brothers.

A warm feeling goes through Rae as she turns back to Chris. “I’m sorry... what were we talking about?”

Chris puts on his best pretend smile. The one even his family can’t see through. “It’s not important.”

# 31

It looks like a small town in Northern California. Blue skies, a warm breeze, birds chirping, and the sun shining brightly down, warming everything it touches.

A group of firemen jog past, dragging a long hose, struggling to put out the last remains of a raging fire. Others carry out the injured or dead.

Chaos arrives, an angry, terrifying force beyond nature, tearing a hole through time and space, causing this false reality to violently burn

away to nothing, but then instantly blink back into existence purely as a necessity for what is to come.

As this reality reforms around him, Michael stands untouched, a handsome portrait of burning light.

This is just a small town.

One of many, many corners.

In a false, pocket reality.

In what used to be Sam's place.

For the briefest of moments, Michael hesitates as two paramedics push an extraordinarily burned, and obviously dead woman past on a gurney.

Death follows just behind.

"Mikaela." Michael whispers. And with blazing speed, he stabs his arm out, grabbing his elderly project by the throat, causing everything around them to immediately burst into white flames and again burn away in a dead woman's heartbeat.

The old man screams out from the intense pain of being pulled violently through the fabric of reality. As the hospital room forms around them, Michael casually throws the man across the room where he lands heavily against the visitor's chair, beneath a big window.

A faint echo of Sam is there. Sitting in the chair. Watching out the window.

But no one sees.

Michael looks over to the hospital bed where Mikaela lies in an oxygen tent. “Hmmm.” He looks back to the elderly man.

“Ahhh, there he is.” Mikaela breathes in roughly. “So...” Her voice cracks painfully. “How about some blackjack tonight? I’ll spot you a few bucks if it’s getting a little close to payday.” She chuckles and chokes a bit on her own saliva.

The elderly man looks up at Sam from his place on the floor in front of his feet. He sees him. But Sam chooses to continue looking out into the dark night. He knows he shouldn’t be here. He no longer wants to be here.

The man closes both eyes tight, breathing in and out strongly. And when he opens his eyes, Sam is no longer there. The echo of another time and place has again moved on.

Reaching out, the old man uses the heavy chair to pull himself to his feet, and now standing, slightly hunched, he turns his old eyes slightly to the side, looking to where Death sits.

She’s looking right into his eyes. She is not an echo. She is the real thing. Rae wonders what he is. Where he comes from. She tilts her head to the side, considering. She sits up a little straighter, continuing to watch him closely. She looks at his long, grey hair. Thinning. His watery, grey-blue eyes. His long, thin, bony body, bent over with the posture of great age. Greater age than even her father. Much greater. But that isn’t possible.

“The first.” She mumbles to herself, though the words come not from her, but from the insanity, as if it knows more than she does.

Michael stares hard, his eyes growing brighter. “Why are you here, Frank? What do you have to do with any of this?”

“Hmmm. I don’t know. I don’t remember much, really.” Lost in false pain and memories not her own, Mikaela has only been half listening. She swallows roughly, bringing on a short coughing fit.

Michael sighs.

“Fire, huh. Okay.” She lets out a ragged sigh, and her voice fights to clear. “Let’s talk fire then.” She can feel the blood in her throat. Thick and coagulated, it’s no longer slick and coppery. “While I still have my voice.”

Not getting the answer he wants, Michael steps forcefully forward and thrusts his hand right through the elderly man’s body, tearing it open, causing him to completely burst with light and break open along with space and time in the immediate area. “Sometimes I break things.”

The man screams in agony as his entire being becomes burning light, then white flames, then red, then blue, as everything cools and retreats back into the open wound in this universe.

Mikaela lays completely still in her perpetual darkness. “I suppose we should talk about it a bit... before you have to go. Before Death takes me.” She turns, and with blind eyes and a melted smile, looks directly at

Rae still holding her hand so tenderly. “Tonight Death will finally take me. This version of me. I know this. I’ve been told this.”

“Yes.” The elderly man breathes raggedly as his body, still somewhat lit, continues to cool.

As if allowing him his moment, Mikaela coughs roughly several times, choking on thick blood.

“The fire, Frank.” Michael steps forward, and leans in close. He whispers. “The fire.”

Rae rises from her chair to her feet, and pours Mikaela a small cup of water from a bottle. She carefully lifts the oxygen tent a little. “I have some water for you.”

Both Michael and the old man watch quietly and patiently, only the old man’s coarse breathing disturbing the moment.

Mikaela nods and gets her mouth ready. She can feel the closeness, the comfort, as Death moves up next to her. She hears the crinkle of the plastic as Death reaches under and puts the cup to her lips. She takes a small sip. The cup is rough against her lips. And it hurts as she swallows.

“You know... Sam never touched me.” Mikaela thinks it would have made her feel more human. “But I’m sure he had his reasons.” She breathes in and out harshly, feeling the dryness of her throat and lungs.

Rae glances to her brother, catching his eyes with her own.

There’s no hiding it any longer. Mikaela is dead. Has been dead. Has never actually lived.

“But you do, Azrael. You hold my hand.” She smiles, feeling her dry lips tear. They’d bleed if it were necessary to the narrative.

Rae sets the empty paper cup down on the side table, fumbling slightly, knocking it on its side. “I’m sure he...”

“Death’s touch.” Mikaela croaks. “The most comforting thing I’ve ever experienced isn’t humanity, but a petite young woman... or whatever you really are... who’s probably older than life itself.”

Without looking, Rae reaches to her side and turns the cup upright on the table, and then promptly sits back down in the chair. She allows her bare feet to remain grounded on the cold, hospital floor. “If you need more, Mikaela... please let me know.”

“Do you smell the flowers?” Again, Mikaela tries smiling, her broken lips painfully tearing. “I do. I always do.” She croaks out a short, abrupt giggle. “It’s... comforting.” She coughs twice, loudly. “But not as comforting as Death’s cold hand.” She laughs. “At least, at this point. When I’m so close to my end.”

Rae glances around the room, taking a gentle sniff of the air. Turning her head back to Mikaela, she sees a big red bow sitting so perfectly in what’s left of the dead woman’s hair.

It was not there just moments ago.

“Mick is short for Mikaela.” The dead woman snorts out a short series of giggles. “You said you didn’t care. But I’ve decided to tell you anyway. I don’t know why I didn’t then.”

The old man, one of his knees propped up against the chair to steady himself, stands a little straighter, removing his leg from the side of the chair. This moment is coming to its conclusion.

“And you.” Mikaela makes a hissing, tutting noise, like a disappointed school teacher, or mother.

The elderly man, filled with shame, looks to the bloody floor around him, like a scolded child. He shuffles his stocking feet on the floor.

“You did nothing. But here we are... in this place. This horrible... horrible place.” She breathes out roughly. “And that kinda sucks. Even if I’m not real.” Again, she makes a tutting noise with her tongue and teeth. “Even if Mikaela was never real. Her child... her children... they hurt. Even if they were never real. And you hurt. Are you real?”

Michael steps away from the elderly man and closer to the end of the dead woman’s bed. He’s unsure how she sees the old man, how she’s acting on her own.

“When it happened, I...” Painfully, Mikaela reaches up with fingerless hands to pull at the plastic surrounding her.

Rae reaches out and pulls the plastic aside.

“Mikaela... she... she immediately felt the incredible heat... the impossible pain.” The dead woman pauses, not wanting to sort through someone else’s memories. “And then she went cold. It’s like you’re still on fire. She... I... could see the flames, feel the warmth, but... the cold that comes hurts even more than the fire.”

Rae says nothing. First she looks within the elderly man. And although there's something there, it's not human, and it's not something she recognizes. It's completely alien to her. It doesn't seem to belong to this false place, or any place she's been witness to. Then she looks within Mikaela, and sees just a dim spark of light off in the distance. That same glimmer from before, but now much closer.

"Fuck." Rae whispers, beginning to realize.

Michael turns just his eyes to his sister, but then looks back to Mikaela.

"And you did nothing." Mikaela nods carefully, her bandaged neck rubbing on her plastic-covered pillow.

The elderly man, still looking down, uses his bloody sleeve to wipe away his tears, leaving behind thick red streaks on his face.

Mikaela's voice goes dry again. "Why didn't you do something? You could have... but each... and every time... you did nothing." She briefly chokes, feeling a burning in her throat. "And that's why you hurt. You're not bored... you're lonely... lost. Afraid."

Rae stands to give Mikaela another sip of water. "Who are you, Mikaela? What are you?" Again, she looks within, but only sees that small light in the distance, but this time a little closer. "You're not alive." The spark of a life not yet born. "But you contain life."

“All life.” The old man, stands up even straighter, achieving his full height, looking just a bit younger. His eyes remain overwhelmed with sadness as he reaches up and pulls his long, grey hair back behind his ears.

“Chris?” Rae looks to Mikaela.

“No.” Mikaela carefully licks her broken lips, feeling their permanent roughness with her tongue. “Just Mick.”

Rae’s eyes darken considerably as she jerks her head to the side, towards her brother. Not Michael. Her other brother.

“This one.” Mikaela pushes her chin out a bit towards the elderly man. “He’s the first. In this place. He’s the first.” She coughs a couple times, hard and loud like a dog’s bark. “He was here before Sam. Before any of us. He was born to this place.” She reaches down, placing a hand on her stomach. “He came... and he waited. He waits for all of us. He always... just waits. Watches. Alone.”

And then there is nothing but blue sky and a great, green field of grass. Sam’s false reality forgotten. The hospital room gone. The parking lot, the night sky, everything. Gone.

They stand in Chris’ beautiful, green field. Butterflies and birds. Blue sky. Soft, white clouds. The sun shining bright.

Mikaela stands, completely healed, to the side of Rae, still holding her hand, while her other hand rests on her extended belly. Life. The thing the real Mikaela was kept alive for. “He’ll grow up strong. He’ll live an amazing life. They all will.” She gently rubs her hand up and down on her

belly, making a tutting noise with her tongue. “Well... most will. Not all.” She smiles sadly. “But that’s what life’s all about.”

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuckkkkkkk!” Rae screams, becoming pure darkness, and retreats to her void.

Michael turns to the elderly man, but only sees Chris standing in his place. He immediately takes two big steps, and stands face-to-face with his youngest brother. “I think we’re finished here.” He breathes out heavily. “I know we’re finished here.”

And then there’s nothing. Absolute. Nothing.

## 32

“I could end this right now... I could put a stop to this, you know.” Michael glares at his little brother, candy still piled on the table between them. “It’s what I do... kinda my thing.”

Four-year-old Chris’ face saddens. Feigning confusion, he looks to the eldest, to his sister, sitting next to him at the small table in front of the couch. “Why’s he so mad? I just did what Sam wanted. It’s what he asked for.”

Rae gives her baby brother her best smile, a completely made-up smile, fighting something within herself that she doesn’t quite understand.

“He doesn’t really want it though.” She turns her eyes up towards Michael.  
“He’s just...”

“Full of shit is what he is.” Michael returns his sister’s sudden glare. “What? Sam’s just whining. That’s what he does. Every few months we go through this. Well not this exactly.” He uses both hands to gesture at Chris. “But yeah... Sam gets all whiney about things, and then he settles back in and does what he has to do.”

“I totally remember this.” Gabriel remains apart from the rest of his siblings, sitting in his father’s favorite chair by the fireplace. “Sam’s angst period.”

No one pays him any attention except for Chris who momentarily looks over to him, his eyes searching for an ally, and then back to Rae and Michael in the present. Their present.

Gabriel sits alone because he feels out of place. They’re all children. He chuckles lightly to himself. He’s fairly certain he’s still asleep in another time, on that very couch, and that only Chris is meant to see and hear him. Though Rae seemed to have spoken directly to him earlier. “Hmmm.” He glances towards his sister, wondering.

“He said he was tired.” Chris’ voice is small with a slight lisp because of two missing front teeth. “That he was tired of having...”

“Blah, blah, blah.” Michael rolls his eyes. “Just bring him back. Now.”

Chris glances to Rae, still searching for support.

She just nods quietly, a vacant look on her face. She sees herself in a large tent as it unzips. She grabs a man's throat and tells him she's here to watch him die. And she kills him, while smiling happily.

"But he wanted to just go... somewhere... anywhere... and not have to deal with it anymore." Again Chris looks over to his brother by the fireplace. "His words."

Gabriel gives his little brother a tired smile. "Yeah... that's pretty much what I heard too." He winks, showing his support. "And he probably got tired of Mikey's BS too."

Chris puts a hand up to his mouth and giggles like the four-year-old he's not.

Rae gives her youngest brother an odd look. "Chris. Please." She glances over to where he's looking, the lit fireplace, the empty chair.

Michael retrieves a full size Nestle Crunch he'd hidden beneath some licorice. Looking directly at his youngest brother, he slowly unwraps it, takes an oversized bite, and chews defiantly, opening his mouth wide as he chews like an animal.

"Gross." Rae rolls her eyes and shakes her head. "And fucking rude."

"It's okay." Chris smiles weakly. "I get it. Dad says the bully always picks the easy target. I'm the easy target."

"It's a sign of weakness. His." Gabriel mumbles. "And dad's right."

“He’s not a bully. He’s just... a big brother.” Rae’s eyes get darker as she looks over to Michael. “And an idiot. And kind of a bully.”

“Rae knows all about being a bully.” Michael raises the edge of his lip in a challenging smirk. “She’s an expert.”

“Just bring Sam back.” Gabriel says quietly, but firmly. “And we can all go do something else. Something fun.” He glances over to his siblings, and then turns his head away, looking into the fire, watching it flicker and dance. “Anything but this.”

Rae’s eyes dart over to the empty chair by the fireplace, and then back to Chris. She nods her head, short and quick, giving her baby brother the most encouraging smile, while her eyes have unconsciously gone completely black and empty.

“Now.” Michael leans in, across the table, closer to Chris.

“Chris, please.” Rae breathes out, getting frustrated with both her brothers. She considers just going up to her room and leaving them to whatever outcome they choose.

She’s tired.

“Let him be, Rae.” Michael completely drops any type of smile he still had. “Maybe he’s testing me. Maybe he wants me to put a stop to all this.”

“No.” Chris looks to his sister, seeing the darkness within. “That’s not what I want at all.”

And everything is gone.

Chris sits alone in the darkness. His nothingness.

He has his little cutout figures beside him.

There is nothing else.

He breathes in deeply, raggedly. And doesn't bother to breath out.

He's not sure why he's doing this. Normally, he stays out of Sam's business. He lets Rae be Rae. He doesn't get caught up in Michael's nonsense. And he surely doesn't treat Gabriel as if he doesn't exist.

He's tired.

He should just wake Gabriel, say their goodbyes, and let them all just move on. Let Rae get on with it and do what she always does.

And as he breathes out, everything is instantly back, with no one even realizing they had been removed from his reality for exactly twenty-three seconds.

Rae's head drops a little and her eyes close. She sighs hard. "Boys!" And abruptly she stands, shoving the table a few inches, causing the candies to scatter and some to fall to the carpet. "That's enough."

For a paused moment in time, Rae forgets what version of herself she is, which reality this is, if she's future her or current her or simply her. She feels the eventual insanity she's always fighting against surge and move through her mind, asking to be released in a spasm of guilty pleasure. She sees herself throw someone up against the wall. This wall. The living room wall. She sees their broken body fall to the floor just in front of her. She sees herself kill someone. Again.

The insanity breathes in sharply, and hides a small smile.

“Chris.” Gabriel’s voice is a whisper. He sits up a little straighter, wearily feeling like he should step in, being the eldest in the room. “Just bring him back, okay?” He smiles, pushing as much warmth into the room as his sleeping form can manage. “You can always send him off in the future to do whatever... to change the world... if he still wants to go.”

“He will.” Rae mumbles, heavily sitting back down. She glances towards the fireplace. The empty chair. “I’ve been there.”

“Well...” Michael hasn’t moved and his stare hasn’t relented, even when the table moved beneath his arms. “... what are we doing here?”

“Doing.” Chris’ eyes grow many times bluer, pushing back against the growing darkness in the room. Forcing Rae’s insanity temporarily back in the box his sister struggles to keep it in.

There’s a quick ripple throughout reality that everyone in the room can feel, but not see. And Sam is again sitting at the table, between Rae and Michael. He looks happy, with the biggest smile on his face. His hair is a complete, wind-blown mess, and he has sand on his hands and arms. He’s holding a bright red frisbee.

“I was eight.” He instantly recognizes the tension in the air, but decides he’s much too happy to play along. “So what did I miss?”

“Not much.” Rae puts on a phony smile. “Mikey was just playing tough guy... and showing everyone who’s boss.”

“Ah.” Sam sets the frisbee on the table, and runs a hand through his hair, smoothing it out, pushing it away from his face. “The usual, then.”

Michael makes a snorting sound and rolls his eyes. He’s just happy to have his brother back. He purposefully doesn’t look in Chris’ direction, but instead nudges Sam’s shoulder as a brotherly greeting.

While Rae and Michael show an immediate interest in where Sam had gone and what happened, Chris hops to his feet, and walks over to the fireplace. He extends his arms out to warm his hands at the fire.

Gabriel realizes that he hasn’t actually seen his younger brother in months, maybe years. The last he remembers seeing him was the day Sam died.

“Not died.” Chris reaches towards the fire, feeling the heat of the flames. “He’s just off changing the world.” He tilts his head slightly. “It’s what he does. Kinda his thing. It just takes him a while to realize it.”

Gabriel grins.

“In some ways Sam’s more complicated than Rae. Well...” Chris tilts his head to the side. “In some ways.” He grins just thinking about it. “Even his fall wasn’t a fall... just a slight stumble.” He looks over his shoulder at Gabriel, and playfully tosses him a Tootsie Roll. “He wasn’t ready yet.”

Gabriel snatches the candy out of the air. “Walk before you run.”

Chris nods. He's now a young adult, maybe in his early twenties, tall and thin. Longish, blond hair. The only thing that hasn't changed are those big blue eyes, still pushing back the darkness in the room. Causing the flames in the fireplace to look faded and weak.

Chris extends his hands and arms directly into the fire. "So." The fire grows and dances, reaching up and tickling his fingers, lapping away at his arms. "It's been a while. How have you been?"

"Not great." Gabriel's answer is immediate. He pushes the Tootsie Roll in his front pocket for later.

"You will be." Chris pulls his arms from the fireplace, holding the fire in his hands as it continues to breath and dance in his upturned palms. "Everything's going to be fine."

And he abruptly claps his hands together, instantly extinguishing the fire in both hands, as well as the fire in the fireplace, the light in the room. Existence itself.

## 33

Gabriel finds himself standing in pure nothingness. “Chris?” He instantly recognizes his brother’s comfort zone.

The last thing Gabriel remembers is stepping outside the door of the coffee shop to investigate the dark, the nothing. He left Rae, Michael, Nyssa, and Tegan waiting just inside the door for him. That was just a few seconds ago. He said he’d be back in twenty.

Gabriel half shrugs. “Pretty much figured out it was your doing before I even stepped out.” He looks all around him for a way to peek back into the coffee shop, and give everyone an update, but there’s only

nothing. “Well there goes my twenty seconds. Nyssa is not going to be happy.”

Not sure what else to do, he starts walking. And after what feels like half an hour, Gabriel gets a glimmer of something ahead in the distance. It’s the first thing other than pure darkness that he’s seen since arriving in the nothingness. He can hear a muffled buzzing, like when you’re underwater and can hear someone outside the water talking.

As he gets closer he can just make out his brother and sister, Michael and Rae, standing, facing one another, having a somewhat animated conversation. “The usual.” He shakes his head.

Much to Gabriel’s relief, they are their adult selves. For some reason, his brain was telling him they would be teens. Super annoying, bickering, teens.

As soon as Rae sees her brother coming, she runs over and launches her small frame into the air, straight into his arms. She gives her brother a big hug, and a sisterly peck on the cheek. “You bastard. You fucking bastard. You scared the hell out of us. Both of us.”

Michael walks up, and playing it cool, leans in, wrapping both his siblings in a powerful hug, nearly lifting them both off their feet. “What happened? Where have you been?” He pulls back and all three of them stand together. “What the hell happened when you walked out that fucking door?”

Gabriel looks confused. He is confused, which isn't something that happens. He doesn't remember even the last few minutes. Except that he had been walking in the dark. In the nothingness. And all three of them are now standing in the nothingness.

Rae cocks her head to the side, wanting an answer. "The God damn coffee shop." She immediately gives up, turning to Michael. "We are... never... going back... to that fucking place."

"I don't..." Gabriel suddenly wonders if this is real, or if he's still asleep on the couch, or maybe even asleep in the chair in front of the fireplace. He can feel the heat of the fire warming his legs. He does remember the fireplace. "Nothing..." But everything else feels lost. "Nothing happened. I was just... here." He grins happily. "I walked out into the darkness... and now I'm here with you guys." He shrugs. "And I think there was a fireplace at some point."

Rae and Michael briefly look to one another, somewhat amused, and then back to Gabriel.

Gabriel grins wide. Happy. "Thanks for waiting." He looks down at his hands and arms, double checking that it's not him that's the child. He almost remembers children arguing. And a table full of candy.

"What?" Michael scrunches his eyebrows and narrows his eyes. "You idiot. We didn't wait for you."

Rae backhands Michael in the chest to shut him up. "You've been gone..."

“Hey.” Michael reaches up, rubbing his chest. “That was completely unnecessary.”

Rae scowls. “...gone ... for a while. Not twenty seconds. Not thirty seconds. A while.” She rolls her head back and forth as if counting. “Hours. Days.”

Michael looks hard at his sister, still rubbing his chest.

“Seriously?” Gabriel remembers his confusion. And suddenly he remembers Halloween. “The fireplace. Chris.” He reaches into the front pocket of his jeans and pulls out a lone Tootsie Roll.

“Okayyyyyy.” Rae scrunches her eyebrows together and pushes out her bottom lip in thought.

“Yeah. Chris. Who the fuck else?” Michael turns slightly, looking off in every direction. “This is his place. Figured that out while you were...” He waves a hand in the air. “... lost.” His eyes look to the Tootsie Roll his brother is rolling between his fingers.

Gabriel hands Michael the candy. “Chris’ place isn’t a place.”

“Semantics.” Michael unwraps the Tootsie Roll and pops it into his mouth.

Gabriel suddenly pictures him popping candies into his mouth at the table in front of the family couch. He even remembers him being rude and gross about it.

Rae shrugs. “He does this when he wants to be alone.”

“And yet...” Michael slowly chews the hard tootsie roll, softening it up. “... here we are.”

“He’s here. Somewhere.” Rae frowns, her eyes darkening. “And the four of us are the only thing that exists.”

Gabriel grins. “He doesn’t really want to be alone then.”

“That little fucker. We were just with him.” Michael reaches out, pulling at reality.

Rae looks to Gabriel. “Hospital room.”

Michael tries tearing through the nothingness, back to reality. He fails. “I’ll wring his scrawny neck.”

“Hospital room?” Gabriel looks to Rae.

“Mmm hmm.” Rae tries to pull herself into the void, but fails.

“Sam’s place. Chris was there. Long story.”

“We’re still in that God damn field, aren’t we?” Michael breathes out hard.

A little confused, Gabriel slowly turns in a complete circle, peering as far into the darkness as he’s allowed.

“Okay buddy.” Rae clears her throat, turning on her best big-sister voice. “What’s this all about? Nobody’s angry. Let’s talk.”

Nothing.

“So what the fuck are we dealing with here?” Michael gives his sister a quick, irritated glance. “Eight years old? Four years old? Teen,

tomboy girl? A God damn old man, tall, skinny, sad, and irritatingly defiant?”

Rae smacks her brother in the chest with back of her hand, this time causing a small explosion of dark meeting light. She remembers something.

“I really wish you’d stop hitting me.” Again, Michael rubs his chest. “It’s not very ladylike.”

“He’s saying goodbye.” She turns her head to Gabriel. “This is goodbye.” Her eyes return to their natural brown as she glances around into the darkness.

“Goodbye?” Copying his sister, Gabriel peers into the darkness and thinks he sees something in the distance. “Hang on.” Quickly stepping around his sister and brother, he starts walking away from them at a brisk pace.

Michael makes a huffing noise, breathing out through his nose. “What the hell?”

“You two stay here... and continue not being angry.” Gabriel glances over his shoulder at them. “I’ll be back in twenty seconds.”

“Yeah, that’s what you said in that God damn coffee shop.” Michael turns to his sister. “That’s what he said in the God damn...”

Rae puts up a hand. “I got it.”

Michael grins.

Gabriel sees a glimmer of light in the distance. Like a spark. Worst case, he thinks he'll eventually reach the edge of the nothingness and won't be able to go any farther. Maybe he'll even find the door back into the coffee shop. Chris has always done odd things like that. He slows down for a few seconds, feeling slightly disoriented by the darkness. The nothingness. He briefly wonders how they're even able to see with absolutely no light source. He just shakes his head.

Finally, after what feels like half an hour of walking, Gabriel again sees the glimmer of something ahead. It's the first thing other than pure darkness that he's seen since arriving in the nothingness. He can hear a muffled buzzing, like when you're underwater and can hear someone outside the water talking.

As he gets closer he can just make out his brother and sister, Michael and Rae, standing, facing one another, seemingly having a somewhat animated conversation. Their usual. "Hmmm"

As soon as they see him coming, Rae yells his name and runs over to give her brother a big hug, squeezing the air from his lungs as she holds onto him. "Oh my God. Where have you been? We've been out looking for you... like... forever." She bulges her eyes. "Literally. Feels like forever."

Michael walks up and playfully grabs his younger brother by the back of the neck, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Dude. You scared the shit out of us, taking off out the door like that."

The three of them stand together for several seconds, just enjoying the moment, scrutinizing the darkness surrounding them.

“So what happened when you went out?” Michael steps back, giving both his siblings some space. “You know... into the dark.”

Gabriel looks confused. He is confused. He doesn’t remember even the last few minutes. “I... I was just walking.”

“That God damn coffee shop.” Rae throws up both hands, making a grand show of her irritation. “We are... never... ever... going back to that fucking place.” She feels relieved that they’re all back together. “When Sam gets back, we’ll find him a new hobby.”

“Hmph.” Michael snorts, patting his brother once on the shoulder.

Gabriel wonders if this is real, or if he’s still asleep on the couch down in the living room. Suddenly he remembers that Halloween night. The fireplace warming his legs. “Chris?” He glances around into the darkness, the nothingness, and smiles big. “I’m ready to wake up now.” Remembering, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out the lone Tootsie Roll.

Rae and Michael, confused, glance to one another.

Then Rae gives Gabriel a hard, playful shove to the chest. “Twenty seconds my ass.” She looks back and forth to both brothers. “That’s what you said... that’s what he said... twenty seconds.” She mocks the way he said it, giving him a dumb guy voice. “I’ll be back in twenty seconds.”

Michael laughs.

Gabriel's smile falters. He gives his sister a look of confusion.

"Days dude. You've been gone for days." Michael turns to Rae for confirmation.

She nods her head. "So?" She leans in a bit, expecting an explanation.

"I..." Gabriel looks confused, handing the Tootsie Roll to his brother. "Here. I think you want this... it's... it's Halloween."

Michael rolls his eyes towards his sister, scrunching his eyebrows together. He unwraps the candy, pops it into his mouth, and flicks the wrapper into the darkness.

"I'm... I'm taking a nap. I'm on the couch, taking a nap." Gabriel turns slightly, looking off in every direction. "I knew it. I friggin new it." He shakes his head. "I should've just gone up to my room. Next time I'm just going up to my room."

"Chris." Rae puts on a stern face, letting her eyes darken a bit as she looks out into the nothingness. "That's enough. Put us back. Bring it all back."

As if in a dream, Gabriel immediately steps around his sister and brother, and starts walking away without saying a word.

Making a huffing noise, Michael starts to follow.

Rae juts out a hand, grabbing Michael by the forearm. "Chris. Please." And she gives him her most encouraging smile, pushing away that thing inside her that wants out. "Now."

Instantly everything is back, and Rae and Michael are standing just inside Michael's room, her hand still firmly gripping his arm.

Rae breathes out long and steady. "Thank you." She slowly releases her brother's arm.

Michael reaches with his other hand and gently rubs the reddened area of his arm where she'd been holding him.

Rae glances around at all the clutter in Michael's room. There's two bikes against the wall, and another partially taken apart on an old rug. Every wall is covered with posters from every recent decade. The bed is unmade. And there's a pile of recently washed clothes dumped on the end of the bed.

She sniffs the air once. "Ugh."

"What the... fuck!... was that?" Michael throws both hands up in the air, shaking his head. "Fuck!"

"Are you finished?" Rae gives him a look that says she's close to losing it herself. She's often wondered if Michael also holds something inside, and he's just better at it than she is.

"No." Michael returns her hard look. "No. I'm not... finished. Not even fucking close."

Suddenly, everything blinks in and out continuously, as if deciding between the nothingness and the family home. Slowly at first, and then speeding up faster and faster like someone looking through an old flip book, watching the pictures seemingly move and animate across the page.

Michael throws up a hand, somewhat blocking the movement from his eyes. And then he looks around, waiting for his brother to make up his mind. “Oh, come on!”

Her patience rapidly waning, Rae immediately decides to go right to the source, Chris’ room. Again, she grabs Michael by the arm and practically pulls him towards the doorway.

“Hey.” He makes an irritated face.

They step out into the hall and the flickering immediately stops. She lets go of her brother’s arm, and together they walk the last few steps to Chris’ closed door.

Rae puts a hand to her mouth, and clears her throat. She then knocks lightly on the bedroom door.

“He’s got thirty seconds.” Michael puts his face closer to the door. “You’ve got thirty... no... twenty seconds, and I’m going to kick your God damn door in. Fifteen seconds.”

Rae casually reaches out, and with the palm of her hand, firmly pushes her brother away from the door, giving him an even more severe look. “You absolutely... will not.” An inky darkness pours from both eyes.

His back against the bannister, Michael glances down into the living room, seeing Gabriel comfortably laying on the couch with his eyes closed. “Hey.” Michael motions with his head and eyes. “Check this out.”

Her eyes black and empty, Rae steps closer to the handrail, looking down at her brother.

Gabriel's eyes immediately open wide, and he's instantly standing with his siblings outside Chris' bedroom door.

Michael's done.

He roughly grabs the handle, and without turning it, violently pushes the door open, shattering it from the frame.

And the three of them stand, staring into their favorite childhood pizza place. The one their father would bring them to on special occasions. The one with all the games, and the creepy animatronic chicken that would attempt to sing happy songs to all the kids.

A cold shiver goes down Gabriel's spine.

Their youngest brother, his long, surfer-cut bangs hanging into his face, sits alone at the far side of the room, at a big, round table. He's casually watching a large group of people having a birthday party at a nearby table.

# 34

Michael sighs, feeling completely exasperated. But deciding to make the best of things, he puts up a hand, getting the attention of a young woman carrying an empty pizza tray. “Excuse me.” He gives her a charming smile. “Could I get three slices...”

Rae quickly shakes her head, an extremely agitated look on her face.

Gabriel nods, flexing his eyebrows and grinning.

“... two... slices of pepperoni. And two root beers. In bottles if you have it.”

She nods. “Of course. Anything else?” She glances to Gabriel and Rae.

“No. That’s all. We’ll be at...” Michael gestures to where Chris is sitting. “... that table.” He raises one eyebrow. “He’s paying. And thank you.”

She looks over to Chris. “The boy’s paying?” She purses her lips, looking skeptical.

“Absolutely.” Michael continues to smile warmly. “Don’t let him fool you. He’s older than he looks.”

Again, Gabriel nods. “Big tipper.”

The waitress shrugs, and walks off towards the kitchen.

“It smells awful in here. I don’t remember that.” Rae uses the thin sleeve of her dress to cover her nose and mouth as she looks around the room at all the people playing carnival-like games and eating mediocre pizza.

“It’s the alcohol. The beer.” A young woman, just a little taller than Rae, with long blonde hair and big blue eyes walks past the siblings. “And all the fake cheese.” She sits down in the same chair she’d just been sitting in as the surfer boy. “And the carpet has that old, musty smell... like a bowling alley.” She sniffs the air a couple times, and scrunches her nose.

“Chris.” Gabriel follows behind the young woman. He swings a leg over the chair to her right, sitting down, and reaches out to touch his youngest sibling on the wrist in gentle greeting.

Michael walks over and sits across from Gabriel. “Why do you even...” He gestures with one hand to where Chris is sitting, and then to door she just arrived through.

“Even what?” She produces an oversized, denim purse, pulling the strap from her shoulder over her head, and sets it on her lap.

Rae rolls her eyes, and sits in the empty chair between Chris and Michael. She pulls her feet up onto the chair, sitting with her legs crossed.

“Forget it.” Michael leans back in his chair, looking around the room. “I’m not in the mood. No one’s in the mood.”

“Sorry.” The blue of Chris’ eyes slightly dims as she looks at all three of her siblings, one by one. She settles on Gabriel, the only one with a semblance of a smile on his face. “Here. I found another one.” She hands him a Tootsie Roll.

Rae huffs, looking away to a bunch of college kids one table over.

Michael groans loudly.

“Awwwe... thank you.” With a smile on his face, Gabriel unwraps the candy and pops it in his mouth.

“No! We’re not fucking doing this.” Michael leans forward.

“Enough bullshit.”

And Chris, Rae, and Gabriel are sitting alone, Michael’s chair is empty and neatly pushed in as if he had never been there.

Gabriel purses his lips, and shakes his head slowly, giving his youngest sibling a disappointed look.

Rae sighs hard. Really hard.

A few of the college kids look over, before immediately going back to their pizza and beer. One of the guys gives Rae a cocky wink.

Rae ignores the young man, letting her eyes darken as she looks to her sister. “Was that necessary?”

Chris shrugs, and reaches up, casually pulling her long, blonde hair into a makeshift ponytail. “He was about to become a bully. Again.” She gives a quick half smile. “Maybe when he comes back, he’ll be more inclined to have a conversation instead of just playing the asshole.”

Gabriel and Rae glance to one another, locking eyes. It’s rare that they see Chris in this type of mood. Serious, with his childlike mischief pulled back, hidden away.

They both blink in unison.

And Rae, surrounded by darkness, looking utterly confused, comes walking up from the water towards the back of her dad’s house on the beach. She glances over, seeing Nyssa and Tegan sitting at the big, glass table in the sand. “Hi.” Her voice is quiet. Though her eyes have become jet black.

Tegan looks away, briefly closing her eyes. Nyssa smiles weakly.

Rae wonders if they are experiencing this again, or if this is the first time for the girls. She looks within the twins, nodding as she sees. “First time.”

Her father looks up from where he's placing cut peppers and squash on the grill. He gives his daughter a warm smile.

She doesn't dare look within her father, and she resists immediately running over to him for a big hug. It's been a while since she's seen him.

"That's quite an entrance, dear sister." Gabriel says with less of his usual charm as he and Michael come walking down the stone path, carrying the sofa from the living room. "At least it was the first time we did this." He shrugs. "Still... good though... I guess."

Michael scowls as they let the couch drop heavily on the edge of the stonework, just before the sand. "This is bullshit!" He plops down as hard as he can on the far right of the couch, not learning his lesson from the pizza place.

Gabriel carefully sits down on the other end. He looks to Nyssa and Tegan, pushing out his warmth. "Hello, ladies. You know... we should get together soon. Hang out. Sugary drinks. People watch and all that."

Nyssa returns his smile, and she and her sister share a quick glance, confused by everyone's odd behavior.

At that moment, Chris appears out of Rae's still-trailing shadow of darkness. She says nothing as she leans her head back a little and pulls some stray hairs from her face. For a moment, her blue eyes easily outshine the few stars that still remain. And then both her eyes and the stars dim slightly as if completely in sync.

Rae resists looking back over her shoulder. She knows this is where Chris made her appearance the first time. So she simply closes her eyes tight, and breathes out long and steady as she silently counts to ten. She's beginning to struggle.

Again, their father looks up from the grill. This time he says something directly to Chris, gesturing to his own hair, but no sound comes out. He doesn't seem to notice. The twins don't seem to notice.

Rae then realizes that there is no sound from the waves. No wind. No birds or insects. Except for the noises her siblings have added, there is absolutely no sound. She blinks long and hard, and takes a couple trudging steps in the sand to the front of the couch, turns, and plops as heavily as she can muster, landing between her two brothers.

"Not so elegant after all." Michael snorts out a short chuckle. "But I get it."

Chris walks past her father and to an empty chair just beside Nyssa and Tegan. The one Rae sat in the first time. She pulls her legs up, wrapping her bare feet up underneath herself just like her sister does. Then she smoothes out her long, floral dress, just as she's seen Rae do a million times with her own. It's the little sister wanting to be more like the big sister.

Chris says nothing to the twins, and doesn't even acknowledge their existence, nor her father's. Briefly, she considers just sending them all away, as they are unnecessary to this conversation. She's already said her

goodbyes in different moments. But she decides that they might help to keep everyone somewhat grounded. Especially Michael. Plus, they are family.

She gives them sound. It would be rude not to.

Chris puts on her best pretend smile. The one even her family can't see through. "So."

They immediately see the sadness behind the smile. The pain. The loss. The lonely child.

"So how many times have we done this?" Michael gets right to the point. "Because we seem to be doing a lot of repeats lately."

Chris shrugs. "A few times, I suppose. And not always at a family get together... or barbecue." She glances over her shoulder at her father, still at the grill. "We've done this at a random cafe. Sam's coffee shop. A Burger King. At the park. A little league baseball game." She remembers every single time. "A few times we've been in the living room. And once... just once though... we bowled. It was fun." She grins. "A little loud though... and I believe I won. I had the high score. High score in bowling wins, right? It's not like golf?"

"Bowled?" Tegan laughs, and is immediately shushed by her sister.

Chris turns her head to the left, towards Nyssa and Tegan, smiling brightly. "Yeah... you know... bowling." She makes a motion with her hand as if she's tossing a ball down the alley." She then throws up her hands like an explosion. And makes a smashing sound. "Strike!"

“I don’t bowl.” Rae sounds bored. Her eyes remain black and empty. She looks to Michael. “Shoes. They make you wear shoes. Bowling shoes. Terrible... ugly... stinky... shoes.”

Gabriel pushes a bit of warmth, and tilts his head slightly. “I’d be surprised if we hadn’t brought our own.”

“Please stop that.” Rae turns her head hard towards Gabriel. “It isn’t helping.”

“I’m an amazing bowler.” Michael pushes his head proudly upward.

“And yet...” Chris playfully rolls her head to the side, towards the twins. “... I had the high score.”

“Ha.” Their father, still tending to his vegetables, breaks his silence, and abruptly laughs while glancing over his shoulder at his children. “She’s got you there, boy.”

Rae clears her throat abruptly. “So why do we even do this? I know what you told me in the field. But why? What’s the purpose of revisiting this particular moment. If this train is crashing, we could say our goodbyes anywhere. Or not at all.”

“I like this moment.” Chris almost sounds hurt that maybe the others hadn’t enjoyed the time as much as she did.

“In the field?” Michael scrunches his brow, turning his head towards Rae.

She immediately puts a hand up to silence him. “Why the disappearing moon, disappearing stars... sun... blah blah blah.” She rolls her eyes up and rocks her head back and forth several times. “This place. That place. What the hell is the fucking point? Just say your goodbye... and hit the lights on the way out.”

“Rae.” Gabriel continues to push, not wanting this to become another family quarrel.

Michael smiles brightly.

Just then Sam comes trotting down the stairs from the second-floor balcony. As he gets to the stone path, he starts clapping his hands slow and deliberate. “Look at this. The whole bunch of misfits, all in one place, at the same time. Nice.” He makes an exaggerated point of looking around in the dark sky with no moon, no stars. “I’m shocked that time and space hasn’t ruptured from all this crazy in one place.” He stares to the sky. “Although...”

“Lucky!” Setting her anger aside, Rae jumps up, skips around the back of the couch, and gives her brother a big hug. “Please don’t go. Don’t go. Please. We’ll figure all this out.” She looks to Chris. “Right? No end. No goodbyes. We can just figure it all out.” She gives her youngest sibling a weak smile.

Sam pulls himself from his sister’s grip. “Whoa. What did I miss here?” He glances to his brothers on the sofa. Then he looks to his left, to

Chris just sitting there with an empty look on her face. “Oh.” Sam completely drops his smile. “I... I really shouldn’t be here.”

And instantly they are kids again, sitting in their living room around the coffee table, a fresh game of Monopoly setup in front of them.

Halloween eve.

Rae comes jogging down the stairs, while four-year-old Chris stands at the top. “Sam!” As she gets halfway down, she slows and stops, remembering all this for what it is. A random night a lifetime ago. Another memory Chris has decided to visit. Another try at goodbye.

Sam looks at her awkwardly from his seat on the couch, next to their father. “What?”

Following behind Rae comes a very young Chris in his Devil costume, long tail, horns, and all. He’s the only one that’s a child. Rae, Sam, Michael, and Gabriel are their adult selves. The same adult selves that were just sitting on the patio on another random night.

“Rae.” Their father quickly points at his youngest son. His concern tumbles out. “Take his hand. Help him down the stairs. That tail’s going to throw him off balance. He’s gonna fall.”

Even in his current mood, Michael can’t help but smile.

Without looking, with an angry look on her face, Rae thrusts her hand up to Chris who gladly takes it, and she helps him down the final few stairs.

Her hand is ice cold. So he warms it.

She's ice cold. So he warms her.

Once they are at the bottom, she steps away from him, and looks down at him sternly. "Why are you prolonging this? Why are we here? Goodbye already. Just fucking say it. Good. Bye. What's so fucking difficult."

"It was a fun night." Chris looks up at her blankly. "Anyway... I told you... it's all up to you."

Time skips ahead, causing Rae, Michael, and Gabriel to squint their eyes, turning their heads slightly, as if something painful was happening. When they are able to open their eyes fully, both Sam and their father are no longer in the room.

Chris looks over to Michael, now sitting alone at the board game, and then back to Rae who just plopped down next to Michael. Her eyes are back to being pure black. Their father used to say that it was a defense mechanism. Her way of saying 'I'm unhappy and I want everyone to know that I'm unhappy'.

Gabriel sits in the chair by the fireplace considering what Chris just said.

"Jesus fucking Christ. I don't wanna do this. I don't care anymore." The darkness begins to pour from her eyes into the air. "Good... fucking... bye." She sound like she's about to cry.

Chris looks away, incredibly sad.

Michael immediately grabs a Hershey Kiss wrapped in gold foil. “This is the one with nuts, right?” He throws it hard, just past Chris’ head. It hits the far wall, near the kitchen.

“Enough.” Rae puts up a hand. “Knock it off, you idiot.” The blackness streams from within her void into the air around her as she loses even more of her humanity.

“Fuck you.” Michael stares hard at his sister. Then he turns his gaze to his youngest brother. “And fuck you too. I don’t give a shit about whatever the fuck you’re doing.”

Rae goes completely dark, removing any remaining appearance of humanity she had still been wearing. She stands as a pulsating, black void, tentacles reaching, pulling, grabbing at everything around her.

Chris breathes out heavily, causing all of reality to violently shake as he roughly pushes his sister’s insanity back in the box. His voice comes out deep and old, and from everywhere all at once. “It’s not time. I’m not finished yet.”

And he stands alone in his room, surrounded by all the memories of a childhood that never happened.

## 35

Sam walks out of the backyard, leaving Winnifred to her swing, and her journey. The night air goes cold, so he pulls his jacket closed to keep in the warmth. As he gets to the side of the garage, he sees a tall man sitting on a bench against the outer, garage wall, near the side door. He's framed by two small children, a boy and a girl that Sam is quite familiar with.

Michael stands in the shadows, but doesn't approach. Seeing his big brother again makes him feel sluggish and slow.

"So is this your big boy look? I forget." Sam approaches the bench.

“Yeah, I guess.” Chris smiles. “I hope you appreciate it more than Rae and Michael did.” His smile widens. “I almost got beat up twice.”

“Ahhh. They didn’t recognize you.” Sam would have loved to have been there.

“They did not.” Chris shakes his head.

“You didn’t allow it.” Sam chuckles. “Kind of put that on yourself, then... didn’t you?”

Sam looks down at the two children, Max and Annabelle, and grins happily. He kneels down in front of both children. The smile in his eyes lights up their faces. He looks to the boy. “Hello Max.” He gently lifts the boy’s chin, so that he can better see, and then signs ‘hello’.

Max uses his empty hand to wave through the sparkles he sees where Sam kneels.

“I’m shiny.” Sam glances over to Chris.

“Yes you are.” Chris nods, and then looks out to the shadows to subtly acknowledge Michael’s presence. He’s feeling a little better than he did earlier. Visiting with Sam and Max and Belle, even for the last time, gives him a warm feeling.

Michael takes a half step back into the darkness, not ready to do this. Not just yet.

Sam breathes in and out deeply several times to control everything that he’s feeling. He looks over to the young girl. “Hello, Annabelle.” He quickly corrects himself. “Belle.”

“Hi.” Her voice is small and soft.

“You’re even prettier than I remember.” He locks eyes with the young girl, hoping she will remember him from their brief meeting at the coffee shop.

“You’re the funny looking man.” She smiles brightly, reaching forward to touch the sparkles. “You found Mr. Nibbles for me when he wandered off.” She looks down to the stuffed animal under her arm.

“That’s me.” Sam’s eyes light up.

“Thank you for finding him.” She smiles. “He gets really lonely when I leave him by himself for too long.”

Sam chuckles. “I’ll tell you a secret...” His voice goes hushed. “I think we all get a little lonely when we’re left by ourselves for too long.” He glances over to his brother.

Michael tilts his head slightly as he watches Chris take a knitted blue hat from his hoodie pocket, and roughly pull it onto his head.

Sam stands up, grinning at their youngest sibling. “You little weasel.” He laughs, remembering the boy running around, playing at the playground that day when he was working through things, trying to find his path. “Blue hat.” That’s what he had called him.

“I’m told we look a lot alike.” Chris grins. “And I do appreciate you letting me tag along to the park like that.”

“And hiding in plain sight.” Sam shakes his head. “You really do bring these things upon yourself, you know. Maybe Michael should have kicked your butt. Rae too. Definitely deserved it.”

Chris half shrugs. “Michael still might. This is his hat.” He glances to the shadows.

Sam shakes his head, chuckling, and then looks down to the kids. “Will they stay together?”

“Absolutely.” Chris gives each of them a little squeeze on the neck. “I’ll place them with a great family. It’ll be as if they were always there.” He gives his brother a half smile. “You can check in on them whenever you like. I’m sure they’d like that.”

Sam can already feel himself on the green field, watching his own kids playing below. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees a door open behind him. But he doesn’t look. Not yet.

Michael remembers Rae’s words. This place. That place. He thinks he understands. And he wonders if this was all brought into motion because of her recent journey into madness. “Fucking Rae.” He shakes his head slowly.

Sam smiles and talks with the two children for a few minutes more. He looks both happy and sad.

Michael finds himself smiling at his brother’s happiness in finding purpose in the role he was given. He realizes he’s been going about filling in for him with the wrong attitude.

And then both children are gone.

Elders brother leans in and gives youngest brother a hug. And he whispers something in Chris' ear.

Michael can hear the whisper as if it were whispered directly into his own ear. His smile grows wide. "Go do your thing, Sam. And don't look back. We'll all be fine."

Sam and Chris reluctantly pull from their hug.

"They all know that they won't be seeing you again... that you're going away." Chris looks from Sam to Michael, still hidden in the shadows. "When the time is right... they'll figure out the rest. They always do."

Michael's smile fades.

Sam nods and turns, letting out a long breath. He walks over to Rae, who's standing off to the side, near the grass. She's completely stoic. Her eyes are empty and black. She's isn't breathing. Her heart isn't beating. She looks past Sam, first to Chris, then to Michael. They lock eyes for a moment, and then she looks away to nothing.

Sam says something, briefly, and then gives her a long, brotherly hug. She doesn't hug back. Her arms remain at her sides. She's angry at having to go through this nightmare again.

Sam gently pulls away, taking a step back, lowering his head slightly, wanting to say something more. But he doesn't. He turns back to Chris, and takes a few steps, stopping just in front of him. "I shouldn't be here. This isn't helping anyone."

And Sam is gone.

Michael sighs heavily, and collects himself emotionally. He steps from the darkness towards his youngest brother, walking right up to him as if he isn't going to stop. But of course he does. And he stares his little brother in the eye one last time.

“You gave us nothing. You sent him away... and didn't say a God damn thing. You could've just told us... and we would've been happy for him.” Michael's shoulders broaden, and his head tilts up and back a little in an unconscious show of intimidation. “You do these things because you're bored. Because you're tired. Because you prefer beginnings... and dislike endings.” He breathes in and out several times, heavily. “This has become tedious, Chris. Revisiting all your bullshit. It's selfish.”

And Michael turns, and walks away back towards the shadows, a powerful purpose in each step. His body has gone bright white to the point of becoming just pure light. He tears open time and space, burning away the parts of the universe that dare touch him.

Chris new what to expect from Michael. And he's glad his brother stayed true to exactly who he is.

Turning his head, he looks to his sister standing alone in the grass. He takes a lone step towards her, but stops, noting the look on her face. Last time she was sad, lost, and angry. This time there's nothing. No emotion whatsoever. If anything, she's gaining purpose. And that could be frightening, if it wasn't necessary to their story.

“You should’ve just told me. Trusted me.” Rae slowly gets darker and darker, a blackness pouring from her body like an inky smoke. “You keep so much to yourself. It must be lonely.” Her voice echoes darkly from within the void. “You must be so... so lonely.”

And everything is gone.

Chris sits alone in his nothingness. Thinking. Contemplating. He’s isn’t the boy, the man, the girl. He’s nothing. He just isn’t.

But then Gabriel approaches from the darkness. From the nothing. “Chris? Hey buddy... you okay?”

“Gabriel. You’re here. You came.” Chris sounds like a happy child. And he sounds a little surprised that his brother has followed him into his place.

But he isn’t. He’s just playing the child.

He reaches down, touching the pocket containing all his cutout people. And he smiles wide.

Gabriel looks around for his little brother, but sees only the darkness at first. Then he notes a tiny spark in the distance and starts walking towards it, but stops. “Do we...” Gabriel hesitates. “... do we have to do this?” He gestures out to the nothingness. “I dislike this so much... when you do this. Normal people just talk to one another. Without removing absolutely everything.”

“Hmmm.” Chris’ voice is soft. “They probably would if they could.”

And then they are in Chris' room, and he is that blond, eleven-year-old boy. Both brothers sit side by side on the edge of the bottom bunk, a blanket hanging behind them over the top bunk.

"How's this?" Chris pushes the long bangs of his hair out of his face, lighting up the room with his big, blue eyes. "Better?"

Gabriel glances around, a warm smile growing on his face. "Much." Then he notices that it's not just Chris that's the boy. They are both boys again. It's something he's gotten used to from Chris, but looking himself over, and seeing that he's maybe thirteen, fourteen, throws him off for a few seconds. He chuckles lightly. "Yeah, this is good. This works."

"Hey." Chris hops up from the bed and walks over to the window, looking out. "It's getting late." He spins around to look at his brother, showing a sudden energy that comes with youth. "Do you wanna have a sleepover? You know... like the old days."

Gabriel stands up, feeling so small compared to his usual size. Seeing everything from this height again is weird to him. He thinks it must be how Rae sees the world, and maybe that's why she has so much attitude. "I don't know... that doesn't sound like a lot of fun at the moment." He does his best to look sympathetic, not wanting to hurt his brother's feelings. "You know... considering everything that's been happening."

“We’ve got time.” Chris’ excitement falters, and Gabriel can see some of the sadness hidden behind the smile. “You know... before Rae does her thing.”

Gabriel considers what he means by that. “About Rae...”

“Endings are Rae’s thing, not mine.” His eyes drop down to their natural blue, causing the entire room to darken. “I just can’t do it.”

“Hmmm.” Gabriel watches as the room flickers in and out, deciding whether to stay or go. “You know what... Okay. Since we’re waiting for Rae. Let’s make one more memory.”

And suddenly there’s a blanket fort in the middle of the room. A few kitchen chairs with some big blankets stretched over them to strategically create a flat-top tent.

Gabriel dips his head and peers inside the little fort, seeing two sleeping bags, a couple of fat pillows, and a small stuffed monkey he instantly recognizes. “Ah. Mr. Nibbles.”

Chris glances to the monkey and back to his brother. “She’s good. Annabelle. She’s moved on. Sam’s request. She has a family. And a little brother. Maxwell.”

“It’s that easy.” Gabriel’s not really asking.

“Sometimes.” Chris moves Mr. Nibbles to the side, making sure to set him upright so he can see what’s going on. “Not always.”

“Well then.” Gabriel claps his hands together and rubs them briskly. “Should we tell dad what we’re up to?” He looks down at his

skinny, little arms. “Or are we just going to freak him out when he comes up to say goodnight?”

They both laugh, knowing that nothing, absolutely nothing, would surprise their father, much less freak him out. In his long life with all five kids, he’s experienced just about everything there is to experience.

Gabriel decides to ask. “Why does it all have to end?”

“I like beginnings.” Chris gets down on his hands and knees and crawls into the fort. “I’m kind of a neat freak. Things get messy.”

“Hmmm.” Gabriel nods, glancing around the incredibly well-organized room. Everything is neat and put away. Everything has its place. The bed is made. There is no dust on the bookshelves. No crumbs on the carpet. Not even a fingerprint on the wall, near the light switch. If not for the toy cars on the floor and the blanket fort, you’d almost think no one actually lived in this little boy’s room. Gabriel wonders if anyone actually does.

“And I think everything has to end at some point. I mean... that just makes sense. Nothing is forever.” He lays down on his sleeping bag. “Well... almost nothing.”

Gabriel leans down and monkey walks into the blanket fort, and sits on his sleeping bag. It brings back a flood of memories. “Wait.” He remembers the blue sleeping bag with the red and white robots covering it from all the sleepovers he, Sam, and Mikey had before Chris came along. “This is Michael’s. Not mine. Mine had race cars.”

Chris stares for a second. “Ha.” He laughs out loud. “That’s right. My bad. I messed up.” He slowly shakes his head, causing his long bangs to fall into his eyes. “I’m sure he won’t mind.”

Gabriel scrunches his eyebrows, with a confused smile on his face. He’s reminded of his brother’s cold. Or the time he skinned both knees falling off his skateboard. The time he chipped a tooth on the kitchen counter. And all the other minor imperfections he allows himself.

“It’s probably because Michael was the one that usually did the sleepover thing with me. He would stop by just to hang out. Me and him.” Chris tilts his head to the side. “It was nice.”

They hear their father enter the room and clear his throat.

“Hey boys.” I walked past and saw that you had the ole blanket fort setup and thought you could use these.” He leans down, pulling back the makeshift flap of the fort. He extends his arm, holding out two flashlights. The old fashioned kind. Big and metal with a long aluminum handle.

And for the first time in his long life, Gabriel sees it. His mouth opens, but he says nothing. His head spins to his little brother for just a second, but then just as quickly returns to their father.

The old man is the age he would’ve been when Gabriel was this age. Gabriel looks down at his own shirt. “Iron Maiden. Eddie.” Again he looks to Chris. “I’m fourteen.”

Chris nods, watching his brother's fun reaction. One last goodbye. One last reveal. One last thank you. He does this nearly every time, but it never loses its magic.

"Took me some searching to find where I'd put them, and then one of them needed batteries... which I also had a hard time finding." The old man chuckles, running a hand through a head of brown hair just becoming streaked with the grays of middle age.

Gabriel just watches, enjoying every second, listening to every word his father says. He's missed him more than he realizes. And he barely remembers him this young. But he does remember. Though he never realized. He was never allowed to see it.

"Plus, I had the tv remote in my hand while I was digging through drawers in the kitchen, and misplaced that somewhere too." He purses his lips and shakes his head. "Now I'm stuck watching an old cartoon marathon that's running." The old man smiles brightly and turns both flashlights on simultaneously, temporarily blinding both boys before adjusting where they are pointing.

"Duck and Squirrel. I was watching it earlier." Blocking his eyes with one hand, Chris reaches out with the other, and takes the closest flashlight. "Thanks dad. You're pretty awesome." He buries the lighted end in his pillow.

Doing his best to look away from the light, Gabriel takes the other flashlight and flicks it off, and blinks several times while his eyes adjust to

the dark. He's still completely in awe of his father, just staring as he smiles happily back at the two boys.

The old man pushes himself up to his feet, making a slight groaning sound, putting a hand on his lower back. "Well. Good night boys." He walks towards the door, stops, and looks back. Getting to enjoy his boys, even just the two of them, one last time, means a lot to him. "You boys don't stay up too late... telling your scary stories... okay?" He breathes out heavily, looking down to his youngest son. "You know... I really shouldn't be here. But thank you."

"Good night, dad." Chris lays back on his pillow, taking his flashlight and pointing it at the roof of their little fort. Letting the light dance a little. "Love you."

"Good night..." Gabriel cocks his head to the side, an annoying habit they'd all gotten from their sister. "... dad." His eyes tear up.

Sam smiles even brighter, showing the vibrant blue eyes that he retained well into middle age. The room lights up a bit. And Gabriel can see all the sparkles around his father. It's the first time he's ever noticed how bright they were back then.

"I'll find all of you." He turns, and walks from the room. "One by one... I'll find you. I always do."

And they are back in the pizza place. Chris, Gabriel, and Rae. All adults. All sitting at the big, wooden table.

Chris reaches down and moves her purse to the table top. She looks to her sister who is staring intensely at a small group of college students that have crowded around the table directly next to them. She's doing everything she can to avoid having to look Chris in the eyes. She feels like she's already said her goodbye.

Chris follows her sister's gaze to see the young men and women, loud and obnoxious, digging into their pizza and beer. "I thought it would be nice to just sit together... the three of us... for another minute or two. We could get some pizza and root beers if you'd like?"

Gabriel clears his throat and motions with his head towards Michael's empty chair. When he looks back to his brother, he's now a young man in his early twenties, long blond hair. He imagines this is his brother saying his goodbye from every perspective. Or at least a few of them.

Chris smiles sadly. "Mikey said his goodbye... exactly as you'd expect him to." He chuckles. "And I wouldn't have it any other way."

Rae, her eyes darkened but not quite black, continues watching the party next to them as they enjoy what she's sure will be the last few minutes of their existence. She can just see Chris out of the corner of her eye, but doesn't linger. She doesn't want to cry. And she doesn't want to fight.

Gabriel clears his throat quietly. "I have one last question."

“Nothing happens to them. The ones that deserve to go... go with me.” He pats the front pocket of his jeans. “They go where I go. It’ll be fine. It’s always fine.”

One of the more obnoxious of the college boys notices Rae watching them, and winks, making a disturbing show of his tongue. He’s well on his way to being drunk. He laughs rudely, still staring directly at Rae, comfortable enough with himself to completely ignore the two large men she’s sitting with.

Chris watches, moving his eyes to his sister to gauge her reaction. It’s often a moment like this, at the end, where she shows everyone what she is, and he subsequently shows her everything that he is.

Yes, it’s that time again. And now he’s ready.

Gabriel glances over his shoulder at the party happening behind him. He hadn’t really noticed them. They weren’t part of his narrative.

“Useless. All that power... and you’re useless.” Rae stands and instantly explodes the rude, college boy into a red mist covering everyone nearby except for herself and her two brothers.

Everyone immediately starts screaming and backing away, stumbling, and falling over one another. They start crying. Dropping things. Spilling drinks. Some run for the front door.

And then Rae is sitting again, as if nothing happened. It’s not her doing, and she’s momentarily disoriented.

Everyone is put back in their place as if nothing happened.

Again, the young man notices Rae, and winks suggestively.

When Rae moves to stand again, Chris gently takes her hand, not restraining her, but just reminding her that she's not alone. She has a quick series of flashbacks to all those times holding her brother's hand, giving and receiving a reassuring squeeze, each letting the other know that they are never truly alone. None of them are. They will always have each other.

And as the crude, young man is about to make his obscene comment with his tongue, he's removed.

From the pizza place.

From reality.

From ever having existed.

The lights in the restaurant slowly get brighter.

"Yes." Chris lets go of his sister's hand, and calmly stands up as everyone in the restaurant turns to watch him. "All this power. I could have made him apologize. I could make it so it never happened. Or I could just let it happen... and let you set the example."

And with that, the young man is back. He winks. He sticks out his tongue, rudely flicking it against his teeth, staring directly at the stunning young woman, with the beautiful face, the perfectly straight hair, wearing what he sees as a long, clinging, black dress.

And he instantly explodes into a fine, red mist.

Everyone nearby is covered in blood except for Chris, Gabriel, and Rae.

Gabriel instinctively leans away from the blood as it smears against the air in front of him and falls just inches from his feet.

Even Rae is momentarily startled. This is what she does. But she didn't do this. And she's never seen it from this point of view. But now she sees just how terrifying it can be.

The insanity within her smiles. But it's a nervous, frightened smile.

"I could let them remember you exploding him. Or... in this case, my exploding him." Chris pushes his chair back in, against the table. "Or I could simply have them forget whatever part I want them to forget."

The lights immediately go back low, and the crowded table of young men and women, still covered in more blood than you'd think a human could contain, laugh and joke, drink and eat like nothing out of the ordinary happened. Not even noticing the red floating in their drinks and coating each bite of pizza they take.

"All this power... and I could have them do whatever I want. Every minute. Of every day. Of every year... of every life." Chris glances down to his sister, but says nothing more.

Rae immediately looks away from her brother. She can feel something inside her pushing to be let loose. But she doesn't want to cry. And she doesn't want to fight.

"Chris." Gabriel doesn't want this moment to be their goodbye.

As Chris steps around and away from their table, he pauses for a second, placing a hand on his brother's shoulder. And then as he walks

away, the table ahead, full of beer and pizza dissolves to nothing, and the college kids are gently pushed back by something unseeable as they continue to talk and joke, and have their fun, as if nothing has happened.

Chris calmly walks through the space where the table sat, towards the front of the pizza place, towards the front door. The big table reforms behind him as he passes. And the front door dissolves away as he exits without looking back. He's done crying. It's time to go.

The music stops. The lights instantly go back up.

Everyone in the pizza place stops what they are doing and turns to face Rae and Gabriel. They are all still covered in the red mist. The blood of someone who never existed.

One of the young women smiles weakly, blood on her lips and teeth. "Do what you will, Azrael..."

"... all this power..." The young man standing across from her continues, blood dripping from his chin. "... and I just don't have it in me, I suppose."

Everyone in the pizza place, looking directly at Rae, shrugs in perfect unison.

"I prefer beginnings to endings." A waitress finishes as she sets a blood-soaked pizza on a nearby table. "This is your call, Rae. Kinda your thing."

Rae slowly stands as the lights go completely dark, and the entire building is removed from reality around her and Gabriel.

## 36

With a flash of blinding light, Rae and Gabriel stand in the coffee shop, just inside the door, looking out into the room once full of people enjoying their coffees and cakes.

“Well I don’t know about you... but I was impressed.” Gabriel chuckles.

“Hmmm.” Rae says nothing, glancing out the big window to the empty sidewalk and street.

Gabriel takes a couple steps farther into the shop, just past the couch in front of the window.

The place is lit up, but only contains the fuzzy shadows of people once standing in line, sitting in their seats, sipping their drinks, eating their treats. The people are gone, but some memory of them has been left behind. He even sees the blurry memories of both Nyssa and Tegan sitting on opposite ends of the couch, one reading a book, the other flipping through a magazine. He reaches over and his hand casually passes through Tegan's arm creating a small puff of smoky shadow.

"I mean..." Gabriel looks to his sister. "That was a hell of a goodbye." He chuckles awkwardly. "I had no idea." His natural warmth pushes out, searching the town for either of his brothers. Or maybe even Sam.

Rae walks quickly past her brother to the very middle of the coffee shop. She can feel her brother's warmth. "I told you to stop that." She slowly turns in a full circle, looking around the room. "Where's Mikey?" She immediately turns and walks towards the front door.

"Where are you going?" Gabriel takes one last glance at Nyssa and Tegan, and can't help smile that they are simply enjoying their last few moments doing something so simple.

Rae stops at the front door, dreading opening it to see what's out there. If anything. She looks over her shoulder, an irritated look on her face. "Are you coming? We should find Mikey... make sure he's okay. Or at least... I don't know... just be together. Maybe find dad. The girls." She

looks down at their shadowy memories sitting so comfortably on that silly couch. She actually feels bad that she wasn't there for them.

"Mikey'll be fine. He's probably just letting off some steam somewhere. That's what he does."

"And dad?"

"He's..." Gabriel hesitates.

"Fine." Her voice is sharp. Intense. Rae can feel the insanity as she squeezes Danny's father's arm, breaking it, crushing it. "I'll go. You stay here with the twins. It looks like they saved you your spot." Then she sees Michael slam the man's head back, through the hospital wall, killing him. "Do nothing... that's kind of your thing anyway."

"Rae..." Gabriel shakes his head, disappointed in her words. "... that hurts."

She reaches for the handle, but hesitates, holding her hand out in front of her. She stares vacantly out the window, wishing she hadn't said that. "I'll find Mikey and make sure he doesn't do anything stupid. As he usually does."

"I talked to dad." Gabriel lets the words pour out, hoping she'll stop. Stay. Maybe listen.

"When?"

"I don't know... an hour ago. Two days ago. Ten minutes ago." He can feel his own warmth. "He brought us some flashlights for our sleepover."

Rae tilts her head completely to the side, listening, still staring out the window at the empty street. “And?” She immediately makes a harsh, tutting noise with her tongue. “So what happened? What did he say?” The words fire out rapidly, but nothing her brother could say would change what she’s going to do.

“Nothing happened. We had a brief exchange. It was nice.” Gabriel smiles. He tries to revisit the moment, but can’t. Which normally would be unusual. But it did take place in Chris’ room. “And I think everything’s going to be okay.”

“That’s it?” Rae resists looking back. She resists saying goodbye to her brother. She’s had enough goodbyes in this lifetime.

“Yeah...” Gabriel considers telling her about Sam, but decides to keep that for himself. “... that’s it.” Given his sister’s mood, he’s certain it wouldn’t make any difference.

Before her hand actually touches the handle, Rae blows the front door off its hinges and walks out into the empty night.

# 37

In the passing of a thought, Rae stands just off the beach, on the back patio of the home she grew up in. Well, a version of the many homes she remembers growing up in over innumerable lifetimes.

She remembers her recent visit, when she was still working out what had happened to one brother. And now she's here to say goodbye to another brother.

Though it's midday, the sky is completely dark. No moon, no sun, no stars. Nothing. This has recently become the norm, and she doesn't even notice.

With darkness pouring from her eyes, she looks over to the house. The patio. The French doors. The second-floor balcony. “So... you just wanted to say goodbye.” She waits, holding her breath, reaching out, searching. He’s not here. “Hmmm.”

Rae does not appear as she normally does. The barefoot young woman, barely out of her teens, with the long, black dress. Today she’s shown up at her father’s house as Death itself. She’s not in the mood for any of this. She just wants her brother to get on with things, and if this is simply another of his goodbyes, then he’s just standing in the way.

“And that never ends well.” Her own voice, raspy and corrupted by anger and insanity echoes from deep within the darkness of her void.

With a roaring sigh, Death moves up the beach path to the patio. The French doors violently blow off their hinges and deep into living room where they crash against the leather couch and her father’s antique desk.

“Anyone home?” She calls out deep and rough. Guttural. “It’s Azrael.” She grins miserably from far within her void. “Sunshine’s come home for a visit.” She waits.

Nothing.

Moving farther into the living room, she sees a freshly setup chess board on the living room table next to the couch. The white king missing, replaced by that old, silver thimble. She wonders if the white king ever

existed. She sees one of her father's books open, face down on the floor just to the side of the couch.

Then she sees all the memories that never happened.

In a house that doesn't really exist.

That none of them ever really grew up in.

She moves closer, and stops near the huge, oak shelf where her dad keeps some of his favorite books. Wherever there's not a book, wherever there's space to fill, there's a lifetime of framed pictures of the family.

"What a load..." Death exhales long and rough, scanning the assortment of family memories. "... of crap."

She pulls a picture from the shelf. The same picture that caught her attention the last time. Her and Sam. Twelve and eight. She's wearing a small, old-fashioned, black, bowler hat, and has a blank, almost irritated look on her face. Her brother is holding up an armful of brightly colored comic books.

She has no memory of this ever taking place. She doesn't remember the hat, the picture being taken, or why he's so proudly showing off random, children's books.

She does remember her brother. She does remember them growing up. She has a faint recollection of them throwing a red frisbee in a green field while their father becomes deeply immersed in some book

he'd purchased that very morning from the used bookstore just behind the downtown coffee shop.

"Death and the Devil." The darkness holding the picture up casually lets go, dropping it to the floor, breaking the glass and damaging the wooden frame.

The insanity whispers to her as she holds Eddy by the throat, dragging him down the path towards his tent. She's there to watch Eddy die for everything he's done. He's an abuser of the worst kind. He's raped. He's murdered. He's done worse. And he's completely without remorse. He's too stupid.

She's there to kill Eddy for the misery he's caused. Again. And again. And again.

And she smiles.

"It's their lives to live. Not ours." Death repeats her father's mantra as she crushes Eddy's throat and then obliterates him into a bloody mist, scattering him to the wind. "Sorry. My bad."

From her place in the void, Rae realizes she has tears streaming down both cheeks. She uses the sleeve of her dress to wipe them away, not wanting anyone to see.

"Is this all because of me. Because I..." Her voice becomes a raw whisper, and she cocks her head to the side. "... because I break things. Occasionally. People. Awful people."

Suddenly she can feel something approaching from the back of the house. It causes the air in the room, in the entire house to go cold. Very cold. The big window facing the front yard quickly grows a thick layer of frost. From within the void, Rae blows out watching the air in front of her go white and drift gently towards the ground.

“But most are good. Some really good... believe it or not.” Her voice remains deep, monotone. Distant. “All that power... and you do nothing. You don’t remove the evil. Pull the weeds... so the flowers can thrive.” She makes a series of rapid clicking noises with her tongue. “You burn the whole damn garden.” She breathes out heavily. “What a fuckin’ waste.”

There’s a moment of silence as Rae waits. From within her void, she turns to her right and stares angrily. She knows her brother can hear her. No matter if he’s here or not. And she knows he’s here. He arrived with the cold. That’s him sulking. She remembers it from when they were kids.

“Fuck!” Her instant rage causes the darkness of the void to pour from her like a black wave, stretching the room, forcing the furniture to the walls. The couch, the broken desk, the chair by the fireplace. An old wheelchair. Everything.

The chessboard, is thrown across the room. The pieces scatter and crumble. The thimble king bounces out to the patio. The heavy shelves are crushed and pulled from the wall. Her father’s books are torn and tossed

in every direction. The false memories of a false childhood scattering to the corners of a room she's not sure she even remembers.

The empty darkness of Death, thick and black, now in a completely out-of-control, raging panic screams as she reaches out, slapping wildly at anything in its path, grabbing and pulling everything it can reach into the void, towards the void herself. Towards the finality of Death. It feels good to finally let go. To have nothing left to care about.

Within a few seconds the room is destroyed and emptied of everything except for Death herself, now a throbbing black mass of insanity staring at the empty wall of empty memories.

A small figure approaches, and stops to stand alone in the broken opening leading in from the patio. Chris casually bends down to retrieve his silver thimble, slipping it over his left-hand, index finger. "Ring ring." He steps from the patio into the living room. "I guess it's time, Azrael."

The voice is small, cold, and empty. Tired and defeated. A child's voice.

"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 her brother's piercing blue eyes looking up at her with the same innocence she remembers from the day their father first brought him home. The same innocence they all shared in the beginning.

When they were all children.

Just growing up.

Creating memories of joy and love.

In this very house that was their home.

Rae can feel every memory of every moment as she simultaneously experiences all of them. Every lifetime. "You told me I never did this. You said you fixed it. It never happened. Things never happened. You gave me the choice. You pulled me back."

She takes a long, ragged, broken breath.

"But you..." She lets go, and his bloodied, broken body drops to the floor with a wet slap. "... you lied to me."

# 38

And then there's nothing. Absolute. Nothing.  
And it remains that way for millennia.

# 39

Until...

“Rae?”

She’s been sitting alone in the nothing for ten thousand lifetimes. Or so it feels. She knows there is nothing. She believes she is the only thing that still exists. Her darkness is gone. Her void is gone. Even her insanity has been left behind.

But she forgot about her friend.

“I think it’s been a half an hour. At least.” Ethan shuffles up at her side. “It’s kind of hard to tell... but it looks like it’s going to be dark soon. So I thought I should come find you.”

Rae looks up to him and gives him a blank look. She assumes, that like everything else, Ethan is only a memory. “One of the good ones.”

“Is everything okay?” Ethan glances around before pulling out a patio chair and sitting across from his friend.

For the first time in this lonely existence, Rae takes a look around, realizing that apparently she has been sitting at her family’s patio table. She puts both hands down, feeling the sides of her chair. Then she reaches up with one hand and feels the edge of the metal band holding the glass top in place on the table. The table is a wonderful memory. She can almost see all her brothers sitting around it as kids, paper plates and root beers in front of them. Ready for another family barbecue.

And suddenly, there they are. Well, two of them. Mikey and Gabe. They’re just small boys. Maybe six and seven. She’s not sure.

She looks over her shoulder, and can almost make out the built-in grill off to the side, just where the sand begins. Her father would be happily tossing veggies and burgers on it, calling out for everyone’s order. Chastising Mikey for asking for more than the others. Not because he was hungrier than the others, but because he was Mikey.

And suddenly, there her father stands. At the grill. Long bamboo tongs in hand. A look of mild concentration on his face.

He turns and smiles, showing her the tomatoes and peppers he's preparing especially for her. She's never been much of a meat eater. She's not sure why. One of her brothers, she no longer remember which, once told her that they thought Death didn't like the idea of killing without good reason. And sustenance wasn't good reason. Especially since they didn't really need to eat.

"So." Ethan crosses one leg over the other, pulling his chair out slightly to make room. He grins happily as he reaches down and uses both hands to massage his foot. "Are you okay? You seem a little down. Did you work everything out with Michael?"

Rae leans to the side a bit, to look under the table to see what her friend is up to. When she sees him rubbing his foot, she finds herself wanting to smile. But she doesn't. She feels like she may have forgotten how. "You had a nice walk?" She realizes that she is in the form most recognizable to her friend. She's unsure how long she's been sitting, wearing this form, the young woman with the dark hair, and the long black dress. She tries to smile, but can't quite get it right. After all this time, it feels wrong.

Ethan uncrosses his legs and recrosses them with the other leg up top. "I did. I really, really did." He sounds like a happy child as he begins to gently massage that foot. They ache wonderfully after his long walk. "Thank you so much."

Rae looks to her left and sees Sam approaching from the beach. He's just a boy too. A few years older than the others. Maybe ten. Again, she's unsure. That would make her fourteen if she were right. But she doesn't feel fourteen. But it's hard to tell after all this time.

Sam walks to the other side of Ethan, and pulls out the chair and sits. He reaches for his root beer and struggles for a few seconds to unscrew the top. Finally popping it loose, he takes several big gulps and sets it neatly next to his empty paper plate.

The boys all sit there quietly. Stoically. Not interacting or even noticing one another. Not really there of course. Just another of Rae's faded memories.

"Oh. Oh. Oh. I almost forgot." Ethan puts both feet back to the stone patio, taking a moment to appreciate the coolness of the tiles. "I ran into your brother downtown... on my walk. In front of that new sandwich place. The one with those wonderful meatball subs."

Rae turns her eyes to Ethan as a nearby patio light, on the side of the house, rapidly flickers several times, and slowly fades back to nothing.

"Gabriel." Ethan looks over his left shoulder, to the wall just to the side of the French doors. Again, the light flickers several times, and goes out with an even, slow burn. "He was looking for you. For you and Michael."

Rae glances over to Gabe and Mikey as she watches the shadowy figure of their father approach from the grill. He puts a cheeseburger on

both boy's plates and two pickles cut lengthwise. She sees him say something and smile. But she hears nothing. Then he walks around the table and places a cheeseburger and a pickle on the plate in front of Sam. Again, he says something completely silent, and gives his son an encouraging wink. He's blurry and hard to make out. It's as if she can't remember what he looked like so the memory is roughly drawn.

This should make her sad. But it doesn't.

"I don't think it was super important or anything," Ethan glances to where his friend is looking, and sees the empty chairs, all neatly pushed in around the small table. "He walked with me for a bit. Just hung out. We talked some. It was nice. He said my time had come... to make the most of it. And he was sorry I had to wait so long." Ethan pushes his eyebrows together, giving it some thought. "He's a really nice guy. Warm... friendly."

"Ethan..." Rae looks over her shoulder as her father goes back to the grill. He's getting even harder to see. He's now faded as well as blurry. They're all getting harder to see, except for Ethan. "If you had all the power in the world... what would you do with it? If you could do anything. No limits."

The patio light flickers brightly. Just once.

"Does that crazy thing come on as it gets dark, or it just broken?" Ethan stands, taking a few steps over to the light, and taps the bulb with his finger a couple times. It flickers dimly, struggling to light up, but immediately fades to an ashy grey.

“If you could change the world. Make it so nothing bad ever happens. Nothing at all.” Rae’s voice is soft, monotone, as if she’s just talking out loud to herself. “You would, right?”

Ethan sits back down, looking across at his friend, wondering what he can do to bring her out of this mood. He wonders what happened with Michael. If he’d given her some bad news or something. But he doesn’t feel it’s his place to ask. “I guess. Why not. If I could do some good... of course.” He puts up a hand and crisply snaps his fingers. “Yeah. I’d snap my fingers and fix everything.”

“Everything.” Rae’s voice goes even softer, barely audible. She’s just thinking out loud.

“It would be tough though. I mean...” He reaches up to his head, lightly scratching his fuzzy curls. “What exactly needs fixing? And if you fix one thing, are you breaking something else. Good can come from bad... and all that nonsense. Where do you draw the line? Who gets to decide what’s good, what’s bad?” He reaches down to rub his ankle. And smiles broadly, still feeling the joy of having his feet back. “If you fix something and it breaks something else... do you then fix that? And so on. Where do you stop?”

Rae looks towards where the beach should be. She listens for the tide. But there’s nothing. She looks over to her brothers. All three of them. They haven’t touched their burgers. They just sit there, with their arms down, their hands at their sides. They aren’t completely stiff though. Their

heads move a bit, there eyes looking around into the darkness as if searching for something, expecting something to happen.

“I mean... that’s the argument right? If you’re the one moving all the pieces... does it really even matter that they’re perfectly capable of moving themselves? Why should they bother? It’s like playing chess against yourself.” Again Ethan glances to where his friend is looking, the empty chairs. Night has finally arrived. “Overcast today. Can’t even see the moon or stars. Could barely see the sun all day. Though it was really nice out.” His smile beams through the darkness. “It was a good day for a walk.”

“Yeah.” Rae looks back to Ethan, still with a vacant stare. “That was always my dad’s argument.”

“Your dad’s a smart guy.” Ethan leans forward slightly, looking his friend directly in the eyes. “I mean... from all the stories you told... he always struck me as thoughtful. Down to earth. Fairly normal, considering.”

On cue, the nearly gone, fuzzy shadow of her father walks over and places a nice pile of grilled veggies on her plate.

“They do some pretty horrible things. People.” She looks to the shadow of her father as he places a cheeseburger and pickle combo on the paper plate now sitting in front of Ethan, just to the side of a bottle of root beer. “Unimaginable things.”

“Mmmm.” Ethan nods ever so slightly, looking over the mouthwatering meal in front of him.

“My father would say ‘it’s their lives to live, not ours’.” She can almost make out her father’s face through the faded blur as he then adds a small pickle to her plate and walks back to the grill. “Ethan.” She looks back to her friend who is sizing up his meal. “My brother can do anything. The youngest. But he does nothing.” She cocks her head to the side, purely from habit. “Well... almost nothing.”

Ethan takes a big bite of his burger. “Hmmm. Oh my God. This is so good. I dare say better than Mickey D’s.” He chuckles with a mouth full of food. “Your brother. What was his name again?” Ethan scrunches his eyebrows, trying to remember the stories she’d told him.

“Chris.”

“Ah yes. Chris. The baby.” Ethan nods, chewing and swallowing. “I’ll bet he does a lot more than you’re aware of.” He looks off to the right, to the empty grill. “My compliments to the chef. Absolutely delicious.”

Rae considers. For a few seconds she sits completely alone. The memory of her friend forgotten. And just gives the possibility some thought. “Yeah. Probably. I guess.” She notices another empty chair at the end of the table, closest to the house, to the French doors. There’s a paper plate and unopened root beer sitting there. But no Chris. “He’s dead now. I killed him.” She says it so matter of fact.

“Oh. Sorry to hear that.” Ethan takes another bite of his cheeseburger, briefly closing his eyes and shaking his head in delight. Then he picks up the pickle. “But he did sound like a bit of a rascal.”

Rae looks back to her friend, almost amused by his complete lack of reaction. She watches as he finishes another bite of his cheeseburger and immediately goes to work on the second half of the pickle.

When she looks over to her brothers. They are gone. There are no plates. No root beers. Nothing. The chairs are neatly pushed up against the table. She looks over to the grill. It’s empty. Cold. Unused. Her father is no longer. She knows that there is nothing. She knows there is only her. The chairs and table aren’t real. Her family being here, was not real. It was all wishful thinking. It was a millennium of thinking pushed into a few minutes of what was, or what could have been.

“Rae?” Ethan searches for a napkin, and finding nothing, wipes his pickle-juice fingers on his pants. “Ugg.” He makes a face, half smile, half mild disgust.

“If you could...” Rae wonders if Ethan is just another memory, or if he’s as real as he ever was. If he ever was. Perhaps he was simply forgotten about while out on his walk somehow. Allowed to stay with her after everything had gone, because come this moment, she would need a friend. Someone to talk to. “If someone said to you... you can go back and do it all over again... would you? Would you lose your feet again?”

“No.” His answer is immediate, and his voice firm. Showing a hint of anger. “I would not.” He forces himself not to remember the cold, the heat, the pain, the accident itself. The decades of suffering. The sleeplessness. The hunger. The loneliness. The abuse. “But I can only speak for myself.” As his eyes become wet, he decides to give his friend the warmest smile he can manage. And he takes the final bite of his pickle. Crunching and chewing happily over the painful memories. “Mmmm. Good and sour.”

The darkness of night now fully upon them, the porch light flickers on and off numerous times, trying to do the job it was put in place for, but then simply goes dark. And then after a few seconds, flickers violently, starting the process over.

Ethan breathes out once, quickly, and rises to his feet. He walks over to the light and flicks the bulb several times with the nail of his index finger. He tries tightening it. It flickers once brightly, and goes out, making the night look even darker than it already was.

Rae watches, realizing that Ethan sees things she’s unable to see. He sees the night. The clouds. The remaining stars that existed when he left for his walk. He sees things as they were. “Ethan. Can you hear the tide right now... as it comes and goes?”

He turns to his friend, and bulges his eyes in mock exasperation, using his head to motion to the broken light. “Well. I tried.” And then he shows that beaming smile again. “Yes. I hear the tide. It’s... reassuring.

Calming. Coming and going. I envy you for growing up here. This house. I'll bet it was good times." He walks nearer the table, but doesn't pull out a chair to sit down.

"Yeah." Rae's voice is still soft and monotone, now almost sounding tired as she looks over to the house. She sees the stairs going up to the balcony outside her father's bedroom. "But like everyone... we had our ups and downs." She cocks her head to the side. "Probably more ups and less downs than most people... I suppose."

The patio bulb starts flickering wildly, out of control.

"And this was only one of a billion places I grew up." She half smiles. "And I suppose I never really grew up here at all, really. I'm pretty sure none of this exists... ever existed. I'm not sure you and I exist... or ever have."

"Your brother. The youngest." Ethan nods slowly, and makes a huffing noise as he turns and quickly steps over to the wall, near the French doors. He stops in front of the flickering light, not looking back at his friend. "But I think... given the chance... most people would choose to do it all over. Do it again. If they could. Probably make some changes. Fix some things. Do some things a bit different." Ethan taps the bulb several times. "But still keep a lot of the things just as they were. At least the good parts."

He tries tightening the bulb, and even loosens the bulb all the way, pulls it free, and wipes the threaded area on his pant leg. Then he retightens it in its socket. To no effect.

“And for those that suffer... for those that are hurt... harmed...” Ethan turns towards his friend, his face suddenly hard and serious. His voice deeper, changed. “Fix it, Rae. With all that power... just fix it. Draw no lines. You and your family... just fix it. If you can’t do it yourself... convince your brother. The rascal. Tell him to fix it before it happens. It doesn’t matter if it’s the smart thing or not... just do it. And if it breaks something else... fix that too.”

And the bulb flickers brightly, and slowly dims to a burnt-out grey, before immediately brightening to the point where Ethan is forced to step back from the overpowering heat and light.

Even Rae has to quickly close her eyes and look away.

“And find me, Rae.” Ethan’s voice comes from somewhere far in the distance. No longer on the stone patio. Somewhere else. Walking. In a green field. Under a bright sun. Surrounded by butterflies and birds. Families enjoying their time together. “Find me.” He’s tossing a baseball back and forth with someone.

If she could see through the light, to wherever her friend had gone, she’d see a happy, sad smile.

“Cuz I’d like to continue our friendship.” His voice cracks and fades in the distance.

The patio bulb flickers violently one last time. In the blink of an eye, going from painfully bright, to a cold darkness, and finally to the completely new.

And Rae smells flowers. Fresh flowers. Like those in her father's garden.

Her mind is at ease.

And she knows.

# 40

The small group forms a half circle of six boys and seven girls, all between ten and fourteen years old. At the top of the circle, facing the children, is a middle-aged woman with bright eyes, mocha skin, and a big red bow in her hair. It's Saturday, and she's been telling them another of her short stories. It's not always the same small group of children, but there are a few who haven't missed even one weekend story.

"Is this something you should be telling children?" Maria, at fourteen is the eldest of the group, and hasn't missed even one of the stories. She's a little upset at where the story has gone, again, and gives the

storyteller a disappointed look. “I know I keep bringing this up... but that was a whole lot of cursing. Especially towards the end.”

The children’s families are all around them in this giant field of green. They tend to come almost every weekend to play, and picnic, and have some family time. That’s small-town life. And when the woman is here telling her stories, the children gather and listen while they wait for the burgers, hot dogs, and brats to grill.

“Sometimes they scare me.” A small, dark-haired girl of ten, Katey, chimes in. “Especially Rae. But Michael too.” She raises her eyebrows slightly. “I like Gabriel though. He seems super nice.”

“Yeah, definitely Rae and Michael though.” Maria leans in and gives the younger girl a one-armed hug. Most of these kids have grown up around one another. Again, small-town life. “Scary. And a little too intense for me.”

“Yeah...” One of the younger boys pushes his head up to look around at the others. His voice is loud. “... I’m gonna have nightmares.” A beaming smile on his face says otherwise. He laughs loudly.

Katey gives the boy an angry look. She wonders if she tried hard enough, could she explode him like Rae does. But she decides she wouldn’t, even if she could.

The storyteller reaches out to the left and right and gives the two closest children a gentle squeeze on their arms. “They don’t mean to be scary. Rae’s nature is to be caring. Protective.” She smiles warmly, looking

over the entire group, catching everyone's eyes one by one. "And Michael's a good guy. He's just..." She hesitates, considering.

"Scary." Maria repeats her earlier opinion. "And intense."

A few of the children giggle.

"And they say a lot of bad words." Another boy calls out, causing everyone to laugh more.

"I think he's like a superhero." A small boy looks to his lap shyly.

"Like Batman, but way tougher. Way way tougher."

Some of the boys and a couple of the girls show their excitement, nodding vigorously and throwing fake superhero punches in the air.

"And Rae's like a super villain or something. Or maybe the Punisher." The small boy, encouraged by everyone's reaction, smiles wide.

"Do you know them? All of them." Another of the younger girls says aloud as she picks at the grass absentmindedly. "I mean... I know you met Rae at the picnic table a bunch of times. At the top of the hill. I remember those parts." She nods towards the hill. And everyone looks past the storyteller, up near the top of the hill, where a middle-aged man is sitting alone, reading a book. "What about the others?"

The youngest boy of the small group, a ginger named Jaime, recognizes the man on the hill. "That's him. Right?" Jaime saw him come over the slope a while ago with two kids playing with a frisbee. They ran down the hill while he sat down right at the top, looking at something in his hands. Probably a magazine or book. It's hard to tell from this distance.

“Sam?” The storyteller looks to her left, up the hill, using a hand to block the sun from her eyes. “Oh yeah. That’s him.”

“I thought he was dead.” One of the boys sounds disappointed, as if he were tricked. “I mean... that’s what you told us.”

“I said he was gone, Johnny. His body was dead... left behind.” The storyteller raises her eyebrows, looking the boy right in the eyes. “Remember?”

Johnny scratches his head. “I guess I missed that part.” He gives her a confused look that quickly breaks into a toothy smile.

Most of the children look to her, and then back up the hill at the man reading his book or magazine.

“Well he’s not gone anymore.” Jaimie leans back on his hands. “He’s right there. That’s not very gone, if you ask me.” He glances around proudly at all the other kids.

Some of the children giggle or outright laugh.

And then they get quiet, and wait for the answer. They’re sure it’s still part of the story. That all of this is just a continuation of the story she was telling.

The storyteller shakes her head. “Gone from there. Now he’s here. His little brother sent him ahead... to get things started.” She makes a tutting noise with her tongue, and raises an eyebrow, giving the group a motherly look. “I think some of us need to pay better attention.” She smiles warmly.

As the children absorb what she's telling them, a few of them look back up the hill to see a tall, younger man with longish, blond hair walk up behind Sam, and then sit down beside him. After a minute, he sees them, and gives them a friendly wave.

"So." Another boy, one of the older ones, swats at a fly getting close to his face. "These stories are all real then. I mean... there's Sam. Right there. That's probably one of his brothers sitting with him. I assume the others are around here somewhere."

"Rae too." The little dark-haired girl, Katey, sits up a little straighter and looks around. "One of us might actually be Chris."

A few of the children giggle, looking more closely at one another.

"Hmmm." The storyteller chuckles, reaching up with both hands to tighten the red bow in her hair. "Would the stories be any less interesting if they were just stories... just things I made up... you know... to entertain you while you waited for the barbecues and games?" She uses a finger to tap the side of her head twice. "If it were all just up in here?"

"But..."

"Christopher John." A firm, parental voice comes from the living room below.

Sitting on the floor in his room, the seven-year-old gathers up his collection of friends made from various shades of construction paper, white glue, tape, and numerous markers. "One second." He stands up and

gently folds them as one and tucks them into the front pocket of his jeans, doing his best not to crumple them too much.

Pleased with his progress, he happily pats his overstuffed pocket a couple times lightly.

“Chris. Please.” The voice is still firm, but with much of the edge left behind for a gentler touch. She knows her youngest has been having a particularly difficult time today. Even if he won’t admit it. “Come out into the hall... so I can see you.”

Chris sighs and pulls his long, brown hair back behind his ears. He puts on his best smile, and slowly shuffles with stocking feet out into the hallway. He looks down between the spindles of the bannister, seeing his mom standing there with her hands on her hips.

“Chris.” She purses her thick lips and shakes her head slowly causing the big, red bow in her hair to gently bobble back and forth. “I thought I asked you to come down and set the table. For dinner.” Seeing his small face looking so sad, she gives him a loving smile. “Didn’t I?”

“Yeah.” Chris shuffles his feet, looking down into the living room. “I guess...” His voice trails off as he remembers what just happened in the living room. Rae had been so angry this time. Maybe things went too far. He’ll have to remember that.

“You guess?” His mother tilts her head to the side, just the way everyone in this family seems to do at one time or another. “Oh, sweetheart. Are you sure you’re feeling okay?”

“I guess I just forgot.” He lets the blue of his eyes shine just a bit.  
“I’ll be down in a second.”

“You forgot?” She shakes her head some more, but keeps the warm smile. “Honey. When you say you’re going to do something... when you tell someone you’re going to do something... you do it. No excuses.”

“I know.” He shuffles his stocking feet some more on the carpet.  
“I’ll be right down. I’ll do it right away.”

“Honey, it’s too late now. Your sister already took care of it.”

“Rae.” Chris mumbles. He’s glad she decided to come along again.  
He’d miss her.

“But you can do something else for me.” She bends down and picks up one of his father’s books laying open, face down at the side of the couch. She reaches over and places it on his desk. “You can go out back and tell your father and brothers that dinner is ready. Pork chops. Baked beans. Those little, golden potatoes everyone likes so much. They should go wash their hands and come to the table. You too.”

“Brown sugar on the beans?” Chris has always thought about having a mother, but he rarely does.

His mother raises her eyebrows and nods.

He doesn’t have a role for her. The only reason he has a father is that it’s a convenient and weirdly fun way of showing the growth of his eldest brother. It’s his way of rewarding him for the difficult role he was given. “Okay. I’ll do it right now.”

“And hey. When you see your sister... tell her thank you for stepping in and helping you out like she did.” One last, warm, parental smile. “She didn’t have to. No one asked. It was her choice.”

Chris continues to look down through the spindles. He watches as his mother completes her small part in this story. Again becoming unnecessary, she walks away, and slowly disappears before ever reaching the kitchen.

His kitchen.

In his house.

In the town he called Apple Valley.

On the planet he named Earth.

In this reality he calls Eight.

# Epilogue

“Welcome to Apple Valley, California.” Chris 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. “Hey little brother.” She sits just outside the bright, red 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. “Still doing your welcome wagon thing?”

Chris flashes a bright smile, his big blue eyes nearly hidden by his blond, surfer-cut hair. “I do lots of things.”

“I’m told you probably do a lot more than I’m aware of.” Rae widens her eyes, and raises her eyebrows. She pulls her legs up onto the large stump, sitting with her legs crossed, her long, black dress blowing slightly in the summer breeze.

Chris lays his bike in the grass and sits next to it. “So. You decided to just wait out here by the barn?” He pulls some grass free and tosses it to the wind, watching as it carries down to the barn door.

Rae’s smile fades in an instant. She suddenly looks incredibly sad. Her eyes go glassy, and a gust of wind blows her long, dark hair across her pale face. “Just waiting... I suppose.” She forces a smile back onto her face, unsure of what had just come over her.

Chris sees the doubt in her mind, and considers pulling her back a few moments and eliminating it. But he doesn’t. Instead, he simply pulls more grass free and tosses it to the wind. He’s decided not to fix every single thing. That would get crazy.

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 his morning cup of coffee.

“Mr. Tucker.” Chris looks over to his sister, pushing the hair from his eyes. “I’d say he’s up early, but he’s a farmer... they’re always up early.”

“Mmmm. Hmmm. This is probably mid day for him.” She shakes her head, smiles wide, and rolls her eyes, playing the big sister to perfection. “He’s been up since four.”

Chris shrugs. “Yeah. Milking cows... feeding horses... chickening chickens.”

“Ha.” Rae continues to watch the tall, dark man in the distance. “Chickening chickens.” She shakes her head with a big smile on her face.

Chris climbs to his feet, pulling himself up onto the large stump beside his sister. There’s plenty of room for the two of them. “Dad says this used to be the biggest apple tree in Apple Valley.” He knocks twice on the tree stump. “Were you around... you know... when it got sick and dad brought out the chainsaw?”

Rae shakes her head. “Before my time.” She glances sideways at her brother. “You?”

Chris grins and shrugs. “Does Mr. Tucker know you’re down here? Mrs. Tucker?” He lays back on the large stump, staring up at the sun.

“What do you think?” She looks to her brother. “It’s not like I’m hiding. I was just waiting for you.” Rae watches as the man up by the farmhouse mills about in the yard, coffee cup in hand, and then walks back up the wooden steps to settle on the old porch swing. “We planned to do this... thing... have a little sister brother time.” She smiles even bigger.

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

“Joey.” Chris purses his lips. “And...”

Right on cue, Joey’s little brother walks out of the house, also letting the screen door slam behind him. Their father just shakes his head and takes another sip of his coffee.

“... Jason.” Chris sits with a memory of his sister in another lifetime as she watches another father and his two sons.

The wind blows hard again for a few seconds, causing Rae’s dark hair to completely cover her face. She reaches up and pulls it back behind her ears. “So... you ready to do this or not?” She pats her stomach solidly twice, and 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. The old is just a nagging memory, while the new is right in front of her. The new is all she knows.

“Yeah. Let’s do this. I’ve been pretty excited since I got up.” As Chris leans forward, his shirt catches on a sliver of old bark on the side of the stump. “Oh, man. My shirt.”

“Oh pish.” Rae reaches down and carefully releases the elbow of his shirt from the bark. She tries and fails to push the loose threads back in place. She gives him a defeated, half shrug.

“No worries.” Chris pulls his elbow close to his face, inspecting the small tear. “It was getting old anyway.”

Rae exhales slowly, closing her eyes for a second, enjoying the warm sun, the gentle breeze, the sound of laughter in the distance, the smell of spring flowers all around her.

“I’m pretty sure we’re about to have the best breakfast we’ve ever had.” Chris gestures up towards the house. “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. Tucker pokes her head out. “Ethan. Boys. Breakfast.” Then she looks down towards the barn, and waves to Rae and Chris. “Come on you two. I made enough for everyone.”

“Absolutely sure.” Chris says with a beaming confidence.

Rae takes her little brother’s hand in hers, like she had done thousands of times while they were growing up, and they start their walk up to the house.

As they pass the barn there’s 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. Mr. Tucker will find it later and thank God that no one was injured. He’ll count his blessings that they hadn’t skipped breakfast to get more work done in the barn.

“What was that?” Rae glances over her shoulder to the barn.

“Nothing.” Chris doesn’t look back. “Something I should’ve fixed a lifetime ago.”

Rae uses her shoulder to nudge her brother, noticing that he may have finally matched her five foot height. “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 just a hair smaller.

“You’re pretty grown up for eleven, aren’t you?” She says proudly, watching as the Tucker 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.”

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. Again.

Thank you  
I hope you enjoyed my little story

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Chris smiles sweetly.

They continue to swing silently for a couple minutes.

Then she chuckles to herself. “You guys wanna see what happens when I blink? Or just close my eyes for a few seconds?”

Max nods, bringing his swing to a stop, and setting his toy car in his lap.

Chris closes her eyes.

And the world disappears. There is nothing. No moon, no stone fence, no swing, no backyard, no house, no mom, no Max, and no Annabelle. No reality. Just Chris. For a very long time, she just exists. Alone. She does this every now and then, sometimes losing track of time for extended periods. She sits alone in the nothing. She almost forgets that she doesn’t have to be alone. That she can open her eyes.

She allows her heart to beat once. And hundreds of years pass. Then she opens her eyes and grins knowingly at the two children.

“What was supposed to happen? Nothing happened. Nothing at all.” Annabelle pushes out her bottom lip, confused, as if she was supposed to notice something big. And somehow missed it.

Chris nods. “I know. Nothing. There was nothing at all.” She stares out into the night. “Sometimes... it’s nice.”

