

HALF AND HALF

A Thesis in  
Creative Writing and Media Arts

Presented to the Faculty of the University  
of Missouri-Kansas City in partial fulfillment of  
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Master of Fine Arts

by  
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## HALF AND HALF

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University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2017

### ABSTRACT

This thesis is a collection of short stories that I wrote and rewrote between my time as an undergraduate at Knox College and my time as a graduate student at UMKC. These stories were picked over other fictional works because I believe they present the best display of my skills as a writer. Each story is meant to examine the human reaction in various situations, whether in real life or with a dash of something magical, and how they deal with what happens. The goal of this thesis was to collect all the experiences of the characters to deliver a range of moments the reader can identify with.

The thesis is actually split in two regarding the type of stories in it. On one hand, you have literary fiction that examines the lives of regular adults and how they interact with the world. On the other hand, we have more ‘young adult’ fiction that touches on the going-ons of young people. The young adult may not be as ‘mature’ as the literary fiction, but regardless of the genre both sets of characters face real life problems that may not have the happiest solutions. As such, there is a sense of worry about what comes next throughout each piece. Yet to counter the fear is their want for things to be all right and how they work to achieve such peace. This collection is about that while pain and hardships are inevitable, you do have the ability to change and endure.

Approval Page

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “Half and Half,” presented by Colleen E. Boyd, Candidate for the Master of Fine Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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## Critical Introduction

I've always been an overachiever when it comes to work. From homework assignments to personal goals, if there's something I can get done way before it's due, I tackle it like a quarterback. As such, when it came to grad school and this thesis, I'd already determined and promised myself to work hard and graduate in under three years. Of course, little did I know the challenge getting all these stories together would present.

At the very beginning, this thesis might've actually been a whole novel. Before my first meeting with my thesis advisor Michael Pritchett, I already had a manuscript in mind that I could edit and turn in no problem. So while I wouldn't say it was a shock, it was jarring to my plans when Professor Pritchett recommended sticking with short stories instead of one long one. That did worry me a little — at the time I maybe had a third of the amount of pages I needed, but since this meeting was at the end of the spring 2017 semester I figured I had plenty of time to write new material and edit the work I did have.

The summer of 2017 will henceforth be known (to me at least) as the summer of the laptop considering how glued I was to it. Every day a portion of my time was spent staring at the computer screen and running my fingers over the keyboard with an intensity even my overachiever ways weren't familiar with. By the end of summer, I ultimately perfected the stories I had on hand at the time and gained enough pages to go over the hundred page mark.

The start of fall quarter, however, was another big shocker for me and how much work needed to get done. I actually spent a good chunk of September working on a fifty page story that's not even included in this final draft. I'm not too proud to admit I panicked when I realized at the end of the month that not only said story wasn't likely going to end up in my thesis, but there was this time crunch I'd put myself in trying to reach the rest of my page

count. I think part of the reason I got stuck was a lack of story ideas. I like to think of myself as an imaginative person, but for everyone, even creative people, the imagination is fickle and doesn't supply you with ideas on demand. Thank God for my Tumblr account and the comics my blog subscriptions showed me, because otherwise about a third of the stories in this thesis wouldn't exist. Between the inspiration and an Internet-blocking app, I churned out six stories in two weeks, four of which passed muster for this collection.

A note about my thesis is how it's 'divided' into two genres. It was Professor Pritchett who pointed out to me how my work goes in either of two directions; it turns into a piece of literary fiction, or it becomes a young adult story. The latter comes from my love of the genre and the fact that that's the genre I've written and published in. The teenage years are so influential for anyone with how one discovers who they are and what they're really capable of, and that maturing of self and emotional discourse has always attracted me given my own complicated relationship with feelings. Not, of course, that the more grownup character from literary fiction don't go through the same thing, just perhaps to a lesser extent; they think they know who they are, but then something amazing happens that challenges their own viewpoint and makes them grow in unexpected ways.

One final surprise my overachiever status didn't completely prepare me for is the amount of rewriting I had to do. It sounds stupid to me as I type this out because I'm a published author — by now I should know what I'm getting into with big writing projects and how much work they demand with editing. I mean, concerning some stories in the collection, my gut instinct was right about how much reworking they did or didn't need. But other pieces like "Everything's Fine" (turns out every *wasn't* fine) got reworked a lot, losing pages and lines I thought were important but turns out I never needed in the first place. But

maybe this is just a way to keep me humble, to remind me not to get a big head over my work and though a piece seems awesome when you first write it down, there's always something you can work on.

For example, my biggest strength I've come to discover about my writing here at UMKC is my ability to 'deepen' my story, to go in and pull it every little important detail that shapes the plot or the character's motivation. According to Professor Pritchett, I deepen my work like few other writers he's worked with. However, such a strength is also my greatest weakness. I feel like, whenever setting a scene or having a character explain themselves, every little detail needs to be touched on so the reader can understand what I'm trying to portray through my story, and in the end I deepen too much, leading to unnecessary lines, scenes, and descriptions. Thanks to my classes at UMKC, not only am I better aware of the strength/weakness, but I'm also gradually improving how I edit myself, deepening yet not going so far a short story turns into a novella. As such, I produced and revised numerous stories of which I'm proud to share with whoever reads them.

"MagicBox" was written during a workshop with Professor Hodgens. The was born watching commercials for Birchbox and Blue Apron; they, along with similar companies, deliver makeup and food respectfully for a monthly fee, and the idea came that if I had a similar box delivered to me, I'd want it to be full of magical products. What I didn't expect, however, was how writing this became a creative exploration into my dealing with anxiety attacks. What started as a thirty page piece lost about ten pages thanks to the removal of unnecessary details, and more changes came in recharacterizing some of the minor characters, adding some more scenes to further develop how the worry doll harms instead of

helps the narrator, and giving a more in depth view to the emotions the main character, Beth, is feeling as she comes to terms with how she deals with interacting with others..

“Crab” came out of a writing class with Whitney Terrell, and is perhaps the most personal story out of the group. At the time I was writing it, my aunt had been diagnosed with the same type of cancer that’s featured in the story. She was never in danger of dying and she’s okay now thanks to chemo and surgery, but nevertheless it was a frightening situation that could’ve been a lot worse. It exposed how truly mortal we all are, and so I explored my feelings about such a fear through a surrogate aunt and niece character. The editing for this piece consisted of cutting unnecessary lines and reworking the big reveal to the niece so the aunt didn’t come off as completely cruel for hiding the truth. Compared to other stories in this collection, this story is a ‘real leap forward’ in my writing abilities according to Professor Pritchett, and seeing how it’s changed compared to my other stories, I’m inclined to agree with him!

“American Goddess” is the second story to come out of my class with Professor Hodgens, and truth be told, I’d had the idea floating around in my head for this story for a while when I started writing it. There are so many ancient, ‘dead’ religions out there that no one practices anymore, so one has to wonder what would happen to those gods and goddesses when no one believes in them anymore? Given the religious ties, it’s not surprising the story is about faith and what to do when your faith is shaken. Like “MagicBox,” “Goddess” lost a substantial amount of pages as I pulled back the amount of dialogue and details, but it also lost one of the gods I’d included as a character along with much of the main character’s rage. Kelsey became sadder instead of angry at what happens to her, and I’m pleased with how her character has developed through revision.

“Everything’s Fine” has the biggest page lost out of any piece in this thesis. Originally called “Times Three”, it was fifty pages long and featured a set of triplets that complemented the main character yet also were the cause of much of her troubles. Thanks to suggestions from Professor Pritchett, numerous scenes were cut, the title was changed, and two of the triplets were changed into minor background friends to the remaining triplet. The core idea remained, though, of a sister going to great lengths to protect her trans sister while battling her self-hate regarding her sibling’s oddness in a still less than accepting world.

“The Way I Live” is a return to the idea of ghosts. Along with “Resurfacing”, this is one of the oldest stories in my thesis, written back when I was an undergraduate at Knox College. And unlike the majority of stories here, this one didn’t suffer a cut, but rather an expansion; the original draft was only six pages long and mainly featured the ghostly main character making a lot of life observations. The new pages, however, take her out into the world and into a hospital where not only does she

“Resurfacing”, as mentioned before, is also a story from my undergraduate and also got a hefty expansion from eight to twenty pages, basically broadening and further exploring basically all the scenes that make up the piece while adding some additional scenes as well. It’s also the only piece in this thesis that’s written in second person. Considering the darkness of the story’s subject matter — incest and sexual assault — I thought second person would be best to get into the main character Ren’s headspace and see what she thinks as she desperately tries to keep her world from falling apart.

The remaining four stories — “Your Number One Hero”, “Princess of Pluto”, “The Wolf”, and “Psyche Observes” — were born out of a mad dash to meet my page quota for this thesis. Funny enough, however, they are the four stories of this collection that ‘came’ to

me the easiest and required the least amount of editing. At most, a handful of lines were cut from each of them while the core story stayed the same. The first three were born from comics I found on Tumblr. “Psyche Observes” came from an experience I had over the summer; at a renaissance fair, a woman dressed up like a fountain statue and moved to music while actual pipes built into her costume shot out water. It was beautiful and moving and made me wonder what would being stuck in one place be like for how one sees other people. All together these four I had the most fun writing and also think them the most promising about getting accepted in a publication somewhere.

All in all, I’ve come pretty far, and I’ve almost reached the mile marker to my time here at UMKC. In truth, I’m scared of what will happen when I’m not surrounded by academia or helpful professors. But no matter what happens, I have my writing. I have my head full of ideas of what to write and what writing is, and a wish to discover more. I have a drive to share my work with others, and a style that is ever being influenced and transforming. It’s going to be hard to end this familiar life and start anew. But as long as I have these, I’m ready to face whatever comes. Not because that’s part of life, but because I want to see where my writing takes me with it.

And I think it’ll take me somewhere pretty good.

MagicBox

I'm standing by the ancient copy machine waiting for it to spit out some papers when my coworker Laura Jean comes in on a cloud of perfume. It's fancy and floral, which suits Laura Jean to a T. She's definitely the classy type, with the shiny high heels and respectable pencil skirts, and the way she's friends with everyone in the office makes me fantasize about spitting in her perky little face. Since she's so nice, though, and I end up feeling guilty afterwards. My loneliness is not her fault.

"Hi, Beth. How are you?"

I can feel the sandpaper crawling up my throat. "I'm ... I'm fine."

"Is the copy machine giving you trouble? I swear everyone in this office has reported it and the higher ups still won't do anything about it." She gives it a soft kick, chuckling kindly. I smile back, or at least attempt to.

"So anyway, we girls are thinking of going out for drinks once work's done. You want to come along?"

I blink. It's the first time she's asked me to do anything. Granted, it's only been a month since I was hired, but it's not like I've given her a reason for the offer.

"Beth?"

Crap. I was spacing out. Now Laura Jean's looking concerned, and I've got nothing to say. I open my mouth, but it only dries out faster.

"Are you okay?"

No, I'm not. My knees are wobbling and I'm close to panting. I squeak out, "Fine."

Laura Jean clearly doesn't believe me, but before she says anything else someone calls out, "Jeany!"

Rita and Annie, some other office ladies, are standing in the doorframe. They're Laura Jean's office buddies, and as far as they're concerned, I'm on drugs. That may have something to do with Rita seeing me gasping for breath in the bathroom during my first day on the job. Mr. Ernstein, the hiring manager and a friend of my mom who got me the job, explained my condition to everyone afterwards, but that hasn't changed how I get the side-eye by some girls, or how Nick from the custodial staff once asked if he could buy some of whatever I was using.

"So...?" Rita asks.

"Hold on." Laura Jean turns to me, her own grin lamp-like. "So do you want to come?"

It takes a good amount of concentration to not let my legs visibly shake. The rest of my brain shoots off various orders at once: *smile! Say you'll go with them! Don't forget to breathe! Do something, stupid!*

"Can't go!" I blurt out. The force of my voice has me backing into the copy machine with a loud *thunk*. In response, it spits out one last page. "Sorry ... I caint — can't go. Busy." I nod my head. "Really busy."

"Oh." Laura Jean is disappointed. "Well, if you ever change your mind ..."

"Thank you," I mumble. I grab the copied papers and force myself out the door. The three start murmuring while I'm still in earshot.

"Did you hear how loud she was breathing? She sounded like she was having a heart attack," Annie whispers. "Is she really okay?"

“She’s just nervous,” Laura Jean reminds them. I don’t hear what comes next because now I’m far away, back in Loneliness Land. No matter how I try, I can’t leave it. At least not the way I am now.

Please, *please*, let that box be there when I get home.

You wouldn’t think one book could change your life. But when I opened a WWII history book I bought secondhand, a newspaper ad for a monthly magic kit fell out. Looking at the marbled black and white ink, I saw how the words “Life Changing!” and “Mystical!” popped out alongside products that promised to banish ache or clean your house. I was cautious when the first box arrived, wrapped in loud orange cardboard with a label that sparkled like a purple disco ball. You see in so many stories how magic makes stuff worse instead of better. But inside were products like InstaClean Room Recovery (“just spray in room before bedtime, and wake up to maid-level cleanliness!”) and Super Power Potion Set (“mix up powers like flight or strength in a snap!”) that were breathtaking to use and even more amazing when they worked: I haven’t had a cleaner kitchen in ages, and it was hard not to put on a ski mask and go save the world with my telekinesis.

Though I’ve only received two boxes so far, I haven’t met a product I haven’t liked. The Super Power Potion Set’s been the best so far, though the Scrupulously Simple Instant Meals could closely win out (“just add water!”). But there’s something out there that’s even better. Which is why when I get home, the first thing I do is jam my feet into my dull green slippers before grabbing my mail keys and hustling down to the lobby. My fingers shake slightly as I stick my key in the lock, but a sigh of relief escapes my mouth seeing the obnoxious orange box.

Back in my apartment I take my time opening the box, slipping some scissor blades into the opening and cutting the tape. Inside and right on top is MagicBox’s monthly promotional letter and a request form if you want a certain spell delivered in your box monthly. I put both aside — I’ll read them later.

I start pulling things out — a piece of funky blue glass on a leather string promising protection, a packet of bird seed that’ll make even pigeons sing like nightingales, a small scroll that promises a one-time disguise. Interesting, but what I want is another box, small enough to fit in the palm of my hand with crimson and green symbols around the sides. The tiny weight of it is a relief, but part of me is still skeptical. Magicbox’s samples do work — I’ve never had such clear skin before their Skin-Shining Serum — but you never quite believe it until you see it. I take the top off and read the card inside.

“Worry Dolls,” I say aloud. “Tell them a problem and they’ll make it go away.”

I pull out a doll. It’s about half the size of my pinky finger, with a pink thread face and a dress made of rags.

“I’m worried about my social life,” I tell it.

Nothing happens in the sense that the doll doesn’t glow or starts floating in midair. It does, however, speak in the type of voice you know only you can hear.

*“Is there more to this worry?”*

“I suffer from social anxiety. I can’t talk to people if they’re not family or close friends. I hate it. I want friends. I want fun. I want to change.”

Maybe it’s just me, but the doll seems to nod its pin-drop head. *“I see. I can help with that.”*

“How?”

*“Simply keep me with you at all times, like in a pocket or your purse. I will tell you what you should say or do if the need arises.”*

“You won’t suddenly stop talking in the middle of the day, will you?”

*“It is as the instructions say,”* says the doll, and this time there’s no mistaking the note of confidence. *“I’ll be with you for as long as your problem persists.”*

I have Sunday off, and I spend it hanging around my apartment, though at one point the worry doll helps me with greeting the pizza guy when he delivers my dinner. I only have to say maybe seven words in total, but the doll coaches me throughout the encounter and even helps me figure out the tip.

As I walk into work on Monday, I give the usual nods to the few people who say, “Hi.”

*“Hold your head high as if wearing an invisible crown,”* the dolls says from her hiding spot in my blazer pocket.

I raise my chin, and out of nowhere I suddenly a rush of — is this confidence? Maybe not, but I don’t feel so shy anymore. Still, part of me is glad I get to my cubical without confronting anyone.

That changes around lunchtime. I’m standing by the microwave in the break room waiting for my chicken parm and spaghetti to warm up when Laura Jean, Rita, and Annie come in, talking about something or other. My body heats up.

Laura Jean gives me a small wave. “Hi, Beth!”

The heat is stealing the air from me. How do I say, “Hi” back?

*“You just do. Say hi.”*

“Hi,” I repeat, the words coming out hoarse.

*“How did Saturday night go?”*

“How did Saturday night go?” This time is better; I’m not too quiet or overly loud.

Rita blinks, but Laura Jean just smiles and says, “It was good! We went to this place on 4th Street called McGrady’s. Ever heard of it?”

*“No, I haven’t.”*

“No, I haven’t.” The normally anxious heat is dying with every word I repeat. I can’t remember the last time that happened.

“Well, they had live music when we went, and it was good stuff.” Laura Jean taps her lips with a finger. “What was that band, Annie? The one with the cute blond front man?”

“I think they were called Head-rush,” says Annie. She moves on to the table and pulls a sandwich out of her bag.

Laura Jean nods and smiles again. “I wish you came with us. It would’ve been fun.”

*“Why don’t I go with you next time?”*

I pause, not repeating the words right off the bat. To go somewhere besides home or work? Words helped calm me down, but now they’re upsetting me all over again. Wasn’t the doll supposed to stop that?

*“I will. Take a deep breath.”*

Somehow I do, ignoring the usual concern from Laura Jean and the weirded-out glancing between Rita and Annie. The microwave dings.

*“Now try again. Why don’t I go with you next time?”*

This time I say it as I pull my lunch out. Annie and Rita look to Laura Jean, who beams bigger than ever.

“Great! I think we’re going to try and make it like a weekly thing with us and some of the girls from IT.”

I don’t need the doll’s prompting to smile, nod, and say, “I’d love to come too. I think I will.”

“What was I thinking?”

It’s Friday, and I’m standing in front of McGrady’s. The worry doll has been coaching me on conversations over the last three days, but now that I’m panicking, it’s obvious I got way too ahead of myself.

*“You can do it.”*

“Can I?” I turn and lean against the window, catching my breath.

*“You can do it. Tell yourself that.”*

“I can do this,” I murmur. I want to believe it. “I can —”

“Beth!”

Laura Jean’s come out of the pub. She’s wearing the same dress suit from the office, but the blazer’s gone, her shirt’s been unbuttoned, and she’s sporting long, dangling earrings.

“Hey!”

“Hey,” I reply weakly, giving a loose wave. “Sorry, I . . . um . . .”

She grabs my hand. Her fingers are long, with nails painted a classy peachy pink, and her palm is smooth. I hope she can’t feel the sweat on mine. “Come on. We’ve already got a table.”

The pub is dark with black walls, a few hanging lights, and dark wooden tables, booths, and chairs. Running along the left wall is the actual bar, where bartenders flitter

about making drinks. At the back is an empty stage filled with speakers and microphone stands.

“Beth’s here, everyone,” Laura Jean announces as we reach a wide corner booth. Annie, Rita, and the IT ladies are squished in. Each one already has a drink.

“Hello,” says an IT girl. She’s tall and skinny like a broom handle with a lavender zip-up over her office blouse. “I’m Kelly. Thanks for joining us.”

*“You can do this. Just smile and nod.”*

I do, hoping my lips aren’t curling too much. My hand goes into my green tote and grasps the worry doll, which melts away the stress storing up in me.

“So how do you like your job Beth?”

Everyone’s eyes are on me, with some looking nervous about what my mouth may eject this time. Maybe it’s their own way of being concerned, but they don’t know anything.

*“Don’t do that. Change their minds. Answer the question.”*

I breathe in and grin at Kelly, who asked the question. “I’ve only been at the company for a month, so it’s kind of hard to say. I wasn’t planning on getting a job in sales.”

“I’m sure you’ll like it. And if you still want a different branch, the bosses are pretty good at switching people around,” Kelly explains.

“I wasn’t aware of that.” The grin I give Kelly is completely genuine.

“Yeah, the office needs to work on showcasing other office opportunities,” says another IT woman. Compared to the rest of us, she’s older, like in her early forties, with mousy hair and bright pink lipstick. Soon the conversation changes over to Pink Lipstick’s relative’s upcoming wedding, and a waiter stops by to get my drink order. I ask for a cider, and I take tiny sips, listening enough that when someone asks me something, the worry doll

coaches me through the answer. Eventually it gets to the point — whether it's because of the worry doll's magic or because it's all me — that I feel comfortable for once, where my smile feels natural and my giggling isn't creepy. Is this what normal is? It's rather addicting.

“Oh, the band's setting up!”

On stage, a bunch of guys in jeans and T-shirts are moving the speakers and microphones around and plugging in various musical instruments. Eventually the band, V-Street, start playing some pop-indie rock song you'd hear on the radio, loud enough that my ears ring and the tables quiver.

“Is this that Head-rush band you mentioned?” I ask.

Laura Jean shakes her head. “No, but I think they're actually better!”

I take another sip of cider and only drink air. Another one would be nice, but somehow all the waiters have either gotten wrapped up with other tables or have mysteriously disappeared.

*“Go get one at the bar. You can do it.”*

“I'm going to get another drink. Anyone want anything?” I ask as I scoot around my seat. The girls chorus, “No,” so I make my way to the bar. The music is louder, and while the regular me would flinch at the booming, the drumbeat and guitars commingle with the confidence in me, making the lyrics potently poetic. I take a seat and watch, beating my hand against the counter along with the tune.

“Good band?”

I look to my left and see a guy on the stool next to me. He's about my age with sandy brown hair and a gentle face. Judging from how he's rolled up the sleeves of his button-up, he's trying to shed his office stuffiness as well.

“Sorry if I startled you,” he apologizes, motioning to the bartender for another of whatever he’s drinking.

I shrug. “You really didn’t. The music’s doing a good job of drowning out everything else.”

He smiles, taking a sip of his beer. “That’s good. Lenny likes it loud.”

“Who’s Lenny?”

He points to the lead guitarist, whose fingers are dancing along the strings. “Lenny there’s a pal of mine. I’m gathering feedback on what V-Street can do for improvement.”

I smile. “So you’re like the manager?”

“More like someone who’s helping make his best friend’s dream come true.” The guy smiles nervously, reaching up and scratching the back of his head.

I myself shrug, amazed at how calm I’m staying. Something like talking with a guy would definitely trigger an attack, and I think a part of me was bracing myself. Is it the doll’s influence, or am I that okay right now?

“I’m Aaron, by the way,” says the guy. “Um, were you planning on getting ...” He drifts off as he gestures to my empty cider bottle. With all my interest in listening to the band, I’ve forgotten the real reason why I came over.

*“My name is Beth, and yes, I am.”*

“My name is Beth, and yes, I am,” I say, smiling at Aaron.

He grins back. “What kind? I’ll buy and we can discuss music,” he offers. In the background, V-Street has just finished a song and have started something faster that makes me consider dancing.

But I don’t, and simply say, “I’d like another cider, please.”

Later that night, as I collapse onto my couch, I kick my feet out of my heels with a small giggle. “That was a rush.”

*“Did you enjoy yourself? Could you talk without fear?”*

“I did, and I could,” I say, and I mean it. After Aaron got me another drink, we’d spent the rest of the evening listening to the band and talking improvements (continue the fast rhythm, lighten up on the drums), only interrupted when a drunk Kelly stumbled over asking how the “date” was. That turned my face red, but Aaron just laughed and said it was going well. And it had, ending with Aaron giving me his phone number and Laura Jean asking me out to lunch on Sunday.

“Is that what being social’s like?” I ask out loud, looking at my purse on the coffee table. “It feels good.”

No response. Pulling the worry doll out of my bag, I examine it. Its cloth body is incredibly frayed despite the fact I’ve barely touched it.

“Are you okay?”

*“Did your worry disappear?”*

I nod. “Yeah, for now. But I’ll need help with lunch with Laura Jean, and talking with Aaron — I can’t begin to tell you how much I hate using the phone ...”

*“Then it’s done.”*

I don’t like those words, and neither does my stomach as it starts bouncy-balling around my gut. “What do you mean?”

*“I made your worry disappear about talking. Thus, my job is done.”*

“For now!” I repeat, then spluttering, “I can’t ... problems like this — they don’t just vanish—you have to keep helping me!”

*“I have.”* The doll’s voice is growing quieter, fading like a tape being eaten up by a recorder. *“I helped you with a worry ... Read the instructions.”*

Throwing the doll onto the coffee table, I scramble over to my room where the yellow box sits benignly on my desk. I pull the lid off and grab the piece of paper. My fingers shake as I unfold it.

“Worry ... Worry Dolls. Tell them a pro-problem ... make it go away ... one doll per pro-problem ... spell ends when worry solved. Use new doll if worry comes back.”

*Use new doll if worry comes back.*

All the panic that I’ve avoided the past few days slides down onto me, freeze-drying my insides and sending my heart spiraling as I huff and puff for air. Everything feels so dry, yet my eyes are so wet.

*“Did you read ... the instructions?”*

Somehow the worry doll has moved onto the floor next to my knees. There’s no way I can talk, so I settle for an unsteady glare as my shoulders rise and fall.

*“If you need to ... use another one of us. I hope we can continue helping your worries.”*

I keep glaring at it. There’s only two more dolls. Enough for two more social situations before it’s back to being the weird girl who’s too loud or too quiet and can’t talk over her slug of a tongue. Nothing has changed enough.

“So what ... do I do?” I huff out.

*“Use us. Order more of ... us. Learn from us. Or don’t use us. That’s your choice. We can help alleviate ... but the rest is up to you.”*

The doll rips itself into a tiny knotted pile of rags on the floorboards. Silence falls as I stare at the bird nest of remains; my panting turning into white noise. I focus on my breathing; when I don’t feel like passing out, I stare at the two remaining. One I’ll need for Laura Jean’s lunch on Sunday. The other one ... I don’t know. Save it for a rainy day? Make plans to go out one more time? I don’t know what decision’s best, so I’ll just focus on the now.

I pinch another doll. “I’m worried about my social skills ...”

Sunday swings around without incident, but even with the doll whispering relief in my mind, I’m nervous as hell. I wasn’t feeling like this at McGrady’s: I was anxious, yes, but not to the point of possible sickness.

*“Take a deep breath. You can do this.”*

Part of me wants to snap at the thing, complain about how its little instructions aren’t going to help in the long run since it’s temporary, but I follow through.

“Beth!” Inside the cutesy little cafe we’re meeting at, Laura Jean puts down her newspaper and waves me over. The interior is so girly with the robin’s egg walls and lacy napkins and fresh flowers, just entering the place seems like I’m messing it up.

“Did you have trouble finding this place? I know Betty’s is a little out of the way, but their breakfast menu is so delicious!” Laura Jean titters as I take my seat.

*“No, I didn’t have any trouble,”* the new doll tells me. I repeat it ad verbatim.

“That’s good.” Laura Jean gestures to my menu. “I personally recommend the starfruit crepes, but all the food’s really good.”

The starfruit crepes actually sound delicious. As I open my mouth to say so, the doll cuts in.

*“Order an omelet.”*

I pause, clicking my mouth shut, and give a confused look towards my bag, knowing the doll will pick up on it.

It does, of course. *“The omelets are the most popular item on the menu. Order one of those.”*

How does it know that? Why is it offering opinions on food choices? I don’t even like eggs! I send another befuddled stare at the hidden doll, but Laura Jean speaks before it says anything else.

“Beth?”

I turn in my seat. Laura Jean and a short, chocolate-haired waitress are looking and waiting for my order. I quickly smile.

“Sorry. I spaced out.” I take a cursory glance at the menu to regather my thoughts.

“I’d like ...”

*“Order the omelet.”*

“The omelet,” I say, then startle. What? Why did I say that?

“Nice choice,” Laura Jean tells me.

The waitress nods. “Most popular item on the menu. What kind would you like?”

Preferably none, but going back on my order would make me look weird. “Cheese, please,” I order. At least that will go a long way disguising the unpleasant eggy taste.

The waitress scribbles that down and leaves. Laura Jean smiles at me. I smile back, ignoring the unease settling around my heart. The suggestion had to be a one-time thing; the doll before hadn't done anything like that.

"Thanks for coming, by the way." Laura Jean takes a neat sip from her water glass, not even leaving behind a lipstick print.

*"Really?"*

"Really?"

"Yeah. I mean, when you started working with us, you were so quiet. I wanted to help you not be so nervous by being your friend."

I blink. Wow. I knew Laura Jean was nice, but I had no idea this was what she had in mind. My heart squeezes, not from nerves, but from joy.

*"Don't forget to say thank you."*

"Thank you," I tell her. She grins again and takes another sip of water. The click of silverware on plates and muttered conversation flow in between our new silence. What do I talk about now?

*"The news."*

Right. Duh. "Anything interesting in the news?"

Laura Jean frowns. "Ugh. Don't get me started on all the crap happening right now."

*"That bad?"*

"That bad?"

"Yeah. It's just — great," Laura Jean grumbles as she pulls a newspaper back out of her bag.

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to upset you."

“It’s not you. It’s this idiot in the White House and his idiot cronies.” Laura Jean opens the paper and smooths it out before jabbing at a page. “You know about the new Muslim ban, right?”

“Who doesn’t?” I lean over to skim over the article she’s pointing at.

“Of course the president has a fit about it like the big baby he is. As if he didn’t the protests coming.”

*“I wasn’t aware you were so political.”*

“I wasn’t aware you were so political.” Wait. Was that okay to say, or was that bad like the omelet order?

Laura Jean, however, takes no offense and snaps her wrist as if it’s nothing. “I like keeping up on what’s happening in our nation, even if that means witnessing a total car crash in the making.”

*“But is all of it really that bad?”*

“But is all of it really that bad?” Did I honestly just ...?

I must’ve, seeing Laura Jean’s raised eyebrows. “I didn’t know you were a Republican.”

“I’m—I mean, not everything’s black and white.”

Laura Jean snorts. “It certainly seems like it. Like building an actual wall? That’s too extreme! And yet if there’s a moderate plan out there, no one’s willing to listen.”

*“Because the current government knows best. Illegals have no place in this country.”*

This time nothing stops me from whipping my head towards my bag. Does it want Laura Jean to hate me?

“Beth?”

*“Say that illegals have no place in this country and we have the right to protect ourselves.”*

Two voices in my ears is overwhelming, especially since one of them is supposed to help me and has decided not to. This can't go on. I grab my bag and stand up.

“Beth?”

“Sorry, Laura Jean, I just ... need to use the toilet.”

The bathroom small and blue with only three stalls, one of which I go in, lock the door, and sit on the toilet lid.

“What the hell are you doing?” I ask.

*“I am doing what you wish of me.”*

“By making Laura Jean hate me? If I'd said that thing about immigrants ...”

*“You don't know if she'd hate you.”*

“Yes she would! Why are you telling me to say this stuff?”

*“To debate, one must have different views.”*

“But those aren't my opinions! I agree with Laura Jean.”

*“Which defeats the purpose of debate.”*

“We don't have to debate.”

*“Yes you can. However, I am sensing that the current popular opinion favors these types of thoughts. And since popular equals social, it would be best for you to go along.”*

“Just because something's popular doesn't mean it's right. None of this is right! Why are you acting so different than before?”

*“Since your problem was not solved with the first doll, I am putting in extra effort into solving it this time around. Extra effort requires a different approach, such as taking care to further direct what you say.”*

“And what I feel and think isn’t part of this new approach? You can’t help me express that?”

*“It would not have the same effect.”*

“Again, you don’t know that.” And how can it? It’s not a crystal ball. The realization hurts like a bullet wound, and curling up in a ball suddenly sounds perfect. The fact I’m stuck in a bathroom stall only helps freak me out more.

The door opens. “Beth? You still in here?”

It’s Laura Jean finally coming after me. I straighten my legs, hiding my feet so she doesn’t know what stall I’m in.

*“Tell her you’re here,”* the doll suggests. *“Say you’re sorry you took so long, but there was a phone you had to take.”*

I ignore it, keeping my eyes on Laura Jean’s feet.

*“Tell her you’re here,”* the doll insists. Something other than calmness is in its tone; annoyance. I shake my head and stuff the doll back into my bag. At the same time, Laura Jean finally leaves the bathroom. I push open the stall door and peek out of the bathroom. The cafe is crowded, making it hard to pinpoint Laura Jean.

*“Go back to your table, sit down, and say you had to accept a call,”* the doll orders.

My heart’s picking up speed again; I needed to get going a minute ago. Taking a deep breath, I power walk towards the door out, keeping my eyes on the sunny outside, picturing getting into my car and driving —

“Beth!”

Against my will, I stop and turn. Beth’s back at our table, standing out of her seat.

*“Go back over there!”* Now it’s yelling.

“Beth!” Laura Jean calls after me as I rush out the door. This time, I don’t look back.

I arrived home in one piece, able to drive but unable to ignore the less-than-pleased doll. Somehow, I climbed up and limped down the hall to my apartment, my fingers dragging along the grain of the wallpaper. Which leads to here: me in my bed, cocooned in blankets. I can’t remember how long I’ve been like this.

*“You wouldn’t be if you’d listen to me.”*

The worry doll sits on my nightstand, propped up against my alarm clock. It’s still brightly colored and scathingly sharp.

*“I told you what you needed to do to be sociable and how you needed to speak,”* the doll continues. *“You did nothing I suggested. You denied my help.”*

“Suggestions don’t ... don’t equal have to.”

*“In this case they do. Nothing will change unless you listen to me.”*

“And stuff will if I do?” I uncurl from my blankets and glare at it. “Nothing changed the first time I used you. Nothing is certain!”

*“Which is why we help you get over uncertainty!”*

I’m breathing hard, I’m so angry. Angry at the doll, yes, but also at myself. I thought magic could fix this, but instead I might’ve lost the one person who didn’t find me weird, who maybe understood me because I’ve realized too late this was a learning experience.

So it’s time to end this.

“You’ve helped me enough.”

Even though the table doesn’t shake, the doll falls over as if it has. *“What?”*

“I’ve said ... I’ve said you’ve helped me,” I repeat, only wavering slightly. “Mission complete. Worry’s gone. The spell’s complete.”

*“How?”* the doll asks. *“Your worry can’t be gone so easily after ... disobeying me. What did I ... do?”*

“More than you think.”

It collapses into a pile of scraps like the first, and I dump it in the trashcan. Going back to my bed, my eyes catch the doll box. Before I can decide anything, my cellphone rings. I pick it up, and check the number. To my surprise, it isn’t Laura Jean, calling to see if I’m okay, but Aaron from the bar. The panic and regret are instant. What do I do!?

My eyes again fall on the box and the doll. *I’m worried about how to talk to guys.*

My phone rings for the last time, and before I can think I answer it. “Hello!?”

Damn it! Too loud, too harried.

“Beth?” Aaron asks, his voice soft on the other end. “Did I call at a bad time?”

What to say? Again, I eye the box. As I do so, my mouth opens and out comes a squeaky, “No, not at all.”

“You sure? We can talk later if that’s okay.”

I want to talk now. I need to talk to him now, to take the training wheels off, to learn from the dolls as I should’ve at the start. One small step at a time. I think of the best way for starting any conversation.

*Take a deep breath.*

*Say you can talk now.*

“I ... I can talk now,” I tell him, tripping at the beginning and a little quiet. My body’s jittery, so I stand and walk over to my desk. “Just had, um, a stressful day is all.”

“We all have those days.” Aaron’s voice is smooth. “Sorry to hear about that.”

“It’s over. That’s what might-matters.” The slurred word has my eyes closed tight. I’m falling back into my regular patterns. Crying sounds good right now.

*Don’t cry. Just tell the truth.*

It’s not the doll’s directions I’m hearing; it’s my own instructions. Maybe I did learn something after all.

*Of course you did. You can do this. Do your best.*

“Sorry,” I apologize. “I ... I can’t talk today.”

“We all have those days too,” says Aaron, not bothered at all.

*Ask about the band.*

“And how’s d-the band?”

“Busy. That’s why I didn’t call you straight away. I was looking for another gig for them, and I scored.”

*Say ‘really.’*

“Really?”

“They’re playing this Friday, and if it’s not too out there ... would you like to go?”

My eyes fall again on the worry doll box. No way could I get through such an event in one piece with the noise and the people, at least without some assistance.

*You can do this.*

I snap my mouth shut. It could also mess me up, and I’m not doing that again. My words are finally my own.

*You can do this.*

“I think,” I tell him with a slow smile as I place the box in my desk drawer, “that sounds good.”

Crab

The doorknob is winning.

Walking into the hospital, Liz hadn't suspected for a second that she'd get into a staring contest with an inanimate object. She has so many other ideas of what she'd rather be doing today that it's a miracle she's holding her head straight instead of letting it hang loose like a ripped basketball net one loop away from falling off the hoop. She could be practicing her jump shots for her basketball team's upcoming season. Or studying for her college classes — if she's going to pass Intro to Economics, she needs to get a grip on the basic terms that are still as understandable as Egyptian hieroglyphics. Grocery shopping, a car accident, a frigging earthquake ... Liz would prefer all these events over staring at a doorknob.

She sighs and takes a step back, letting the entire door fill her view. It's nothing special; painted hardwood with a little square window, but as with all doors it's what behind it that matters. It'd be wonderful if she could stay out here in the bright white neutrality of the hallway, but because she's been teeter-tottering on entering ever since she arrived twenty minutes ago, the nurse at the nearby station keeps looking at her like she got lost on her way to the mental health wing. Not to mention her mom will find out about her being a no-show, and the last thing Liz wants is to get yelled at.

With that in mind, Liz approaches the door, but this time there's an audible *click* as she opens it and forces her legs to move.

“Hey, Lizzy!”

Aunt Helen is standing by her bed, smiling as she picks up a book from the nightstand to pack into her pink travel bag. Other than the suitcase, the only other color comes from the fake bouquet of multi-colored tulips on the coffee table and the golden, late morning sunshine blasting through the uncovered windows. It does its best to fill in the blankness — daffodil walls, lemon counters, mustard table and chairs — but instead of being bright and cheerful, the shades are sickly, as if the whole space has yellow fever.

“You ready to go?” Liz asks.

“Just about.” Helen sticks another book into her bag, then zips it up. She slings it over her shoulder, and as she does Liz stares at Helen’s face, which is thinner and paler than the last time the two were together. She refuses to take in the pink knit cap that hides the fact her aunt has no hair, though the missing eyebrows are a painful reminder.

The two leave the room and reach the elevator. As it takes them down to the lobby in a contained cloud of rotten disinfectant and bad elevator music, Helen says, “Thanks for doing this, Liz. It’s a great help.”

“Yeah. Sorry I haven’t been much help before. I’ve been busy with school,” says Liz. At her sides her hands crush into fists. Yes, her college classes are challenging, economics notwithstanding, but the truth is that by the second week of the new semester, she’d settled into a routine and gotten a grip on her course work, so she’s had plenty of time to drive over from San Francisco to Redwood City. A whole month’s worth of possible visits, ignored, left forgotten like a stack of overdue library books. Liz would have kept on ‘forgetting,’ but Aunt Helen herself called three days ago asking if Liz was free to pick her up from her latest trip to the hospital and do some errands since Uncle James would be out of state on business and her cousins would be in school.

And yet, Liz thinks as the elevator reaches the ground floor, this may be the perfect chance; maybe now she can find out what her aunt and her mom are hiding from her. It doesn't take much to remember the phone conversation between Mom and Helen two days before Liz drove out to college.

"I was able to make an emergency appointment," Mom had said, sounding like she was hiding some stress. "I ... yes, I know, but this test is important. No, I'm not going to tell the kids. No point in having them scared over what could be nothing."

Of course, Liz is scared, and has been since then. A wiggly centipede has made its house in her gut, and it rears its ugly head every time Liz wonders what her mom meant. Was she just being careful after learning about her sister's cancer? Is her mom sick as well, or in danger of getting sick? For a second she debates if she should straight up ask her aunt, but as they leave the hospital Liz decides now's not the time.

Soon enough they're climbing into Liz's beat up Ford Taurus. She's at the wheel, and Helen's in the passenger seat, saying something about how Liz needs to take a left turn if she wants to on the highway. Liz listens, but once they're on the road she reaches for the radio. She still hasn't had the chance to get it fixed, so it takes some button banging to find a decent station that isn't on the fritz; it settles on hard rock (not her favorite), but somehow the crooning lyrics fit her feelings.

Unfortunately, the moment Liz takes her hand away Helen's takes her place, turning the volume down to a whisper.

"So how have you been?" Helen asks.

"Fine," says Liz, staring out the front window like any good driver should. Outside the sun's still going strong as it floats in a sky that could be confused with a china bowl.

Skyscrapers fade into a rerun of palm trees and scrubby foliage as she hits the highway, curving around the curves embedded into the hills with vehicular grace.

“Don’t just say ‘fine.’ You sound like your cousins.”

Liz frowns, but not because of the comparison. She hasn’t really bothered thinking about the boys ever since she heard the news. “How are Tommy and Cooper?”

“My boys are good, all things considered.” Helen leans back against her headrest. “I was worried with school starting and if they’d be able to focus with me in the hospital. Your Uncle James has been working overtime trying to make sure they’re doing their homework.”

“Is Tommy liking high school?”

“Oh, he loves it.” Helen digs herself into the leather of the seat until she finds a more comfortable position. “So many friends from middle school came along with him. He’s doing his best with classes, though he still stinks at math; if you weren’t so busy with your own homework, I’d ask you to tutor him.”

Liz can’t help snorting. “I don’t know what good I’d do. I’m still over my head with Intro to Economics.”

“Really?”

“Well, the math part’s fine. It’s the vocab and the theories that aren’t sticking.”

“I’m sure you’ll get it in time.” Helen reaches over and touches Liz’s shoulder, giving it a loving squeeze. Liz remains still, but as her aunt pulls away, she spares a glance at Helen’s hand. Her aunt’s fingers felt skinny and stiff like chopsticks.

“So, what do you we should get think Tommy?”

Liz shrugs. “I don’t know. What do you think we should get him?”

“I wouldn’t ask if I knew, silly.” Helen chuckles. “But you know me. I want it to be something special, unique.”

“Is that why we’re going to Half Moon Bay?”

At first glance, Half Moon Bay, California seems to have stepped out of the 1950s with its main street full of vintage, pastel buildings. Further exploration, however, reveals that the small town is a mecca for oddball art galleries and funky boutiques. Liz remembers how Helen drove the two of them down there during Liz’s 7th grade spring break, and how they spent what seemed like forever in a secondhand clothing shop creating the most ridiculous outfits ever.

“Yes,” says Helen, bringing Liz back to the present. “I’m thinking Odessysea Gifts might have something. If we’re lucky, there may be some art fair going on and we can get some sort of poster.”

“Maybe,” Liz mumbles, nervously rubbing her right shoulder. She’s only told a few people about the tattoo she got a day before her aunt told the family about her sickness; considering what the tattoo represents, she feels like she needs to keep it a secret. She can’t help but smile as she recalls both the horrible timing and her friends’ reactions to the design. They’d tried talking her out of it, saying that if the tattoo artist messed up, Liz would be branded a sex freak.

“Do you want people to think you like sixty-nine? If you’re going with your zodiac sign, make it the actual animal!” her best friend Christie had begged the day before the appointment.

But the artist, a cute redheaded punk with enormous green ear gauges and elaborate sleeve tattoos, had not messed up, and in a few hours Liz had a masterpiece on her shoulder, a colorful crab composed of the cancer zodiac sign.

Liz sighs. She may be driving, but she's going nowhere fast with her investigation. The centipede is on the move again, this time crawling into her brain to shut her up. Liz opens her mouth, then closes it. She needs to say something, anything, to find out what test she and Mom were talking about — like if it's some sort way to see if Mom, and thus Liz and her sisters, have a chance of getting cancer too — and if the reassurances from both mother and aunt that “everything's okay, no one's going to die, the family's okay” aren't just fake.

“Mom said your latest surgery went well.”

Liz considers stuffing the words back into her mouth as soon as she says them, but Helen answers, “Yes. The mastectomy and the reconstruction went well, though my doctors scheduled another surgery to remove my ovaries.”

“I thought you just had breast cancer?” Liz side-eyes the line of Helen's neck down to her chest. A white bandage peeks out from the neckline of Helen's shirt, a silent sign of the surgeries she's gone through on top of the chemo. Her aunt lying on a table, cut open like an animal at some butcher shop ... Liz swallows hard.

“I do, but it's the type of cancer that spreads easily, so everyone's saying I should take precautions.” Outside the scenery breaks, and in the distance Liz spots the beach that marks the beginning of Half Moon Bay.

“It sounds like a lot of unnecessary pain.” Indeed, the idea of getting your genitals carved up makes Liz grimace. Sure, there’s been times she’s hated her period, but something about having your tubes removed just sounds invasive and wrong.

“Better to be safe than sorry,” Helen quotes as she fiddles with her cap, pulling it back to scratch at the smooth, veined marble of her hairless head. “Though I’ll admit I’m not looking forward to the next time they cut me open. Who would?”

“What was that like? The mastectomy?”

“Oh sweetie, believe me, you don’t want the details. It’s a medical procedure that’s bloody and gross, just like any other. Ugh.” Helen shivers. “And I really couldn’t tell you anything since you’re under anesthesia the whole time.”

“But surely there’s, like, some sort of emotional element, right?” Liz asks, digging her nails into her palm.

“No more than when the cancer was first discovered,” Helen says. She peeks over at Liz, eyebrows raised. “What’s with all the questions?”

“Because I care and love you and want to make sure you’re not in pain,” Liz tells her. She thinks it’s the perfect opening for Helen to admit that something’s wrong and Mom’s been lying.

Helen simply smiles one of those smiles that holds so much if one looks past it.

“Thank you, Liz. But it’s okay; I’m feeling fine. You don’t have to worry.”

Liz clenches her jaw, biting at the centipede that’s dancing along the line of her intestines as much as at the stinging words she wants to throw at her lying aunt. But before she can, Helen turns and points out her window. “Oh, get that parking spot!”

It's not the smartest thing in the world to poke a cactus, but Liz does it anyway, brushing past the needles at the jade flesh. In front of her and through the gap in the shelf, Liz watches her aunt pick through a rainbow of blowy blouses and examine the beading that adores the collars. At Helen's feet is the boxed brass collapsible telescope that's going to be cousin Tommy's birthday present.

They hadn't started shopping after parking, but instead popped into the local white-washed general store/bakery, where they'd gotten sandwiches and chocolate chip crescent cookies as they had walked up and down Main Street. They'd made small talk, Helen remarking how her hat collection has grown, and Liz carefully wondering aloud what she would look with no hair. Like the first attempt, it didn't work; Helen had only chuckled and said Liz was always pretty.

And now they're in Odessysea, with its pirate ship interior and stocked with everything from potted plant kits to random antiques. Helen picked out Tommy's present quickly, but is now distracted by the boutique section. Liz frowns as she pricks her finger on a cactus spine, but doesn't flinch. Getting her tattoo hurt more, though she'd argue that Helen's secret-keeping is the true pits, to the point where Liz wonders if knowing the truth will hurt more than not.

“Liz?”

The sound of her name brings Liz back to the present, and she looks up to see Helen peering at her through the shelves, the shirts in one hand, the telescope in the other, and her purse hanging off one shoulder.

“Would you mind holding these while I try these on?” Helen hands Liz the present and shuffles the purse to where Liz can grab it by the handles. “Thanks, Lizzy Bee. This shouldn’t take too long.”

Liz nods. When Helen disappears behind the curtain dressing room door, she has an idea.

She pops the handbag open for her aunt’s smartphone sitting on top. It’s hasn’t blacked out to where the security key would kick in. Feeling somewhat guilty Liz pulls the phone out, scrolls through the apps, and decides the texts would be the best place to start. The conversations between Helen and her mom hold a few interesting details — apparently, Liz is getting her car radio fixed for her birthday — but nothing related to the appointment. Liz checks the call list next; Mom and Helen talk as much as they text, but it’s not like that says much either.

Voicemail is the last option, and Liz growls when she sees there’s very few recorded messages. Only a few are from her mother, and most of them are only six seconds long at tops. But there’s one in the middle, dated only a few days ago, that’s longer than the rest, and Liz swallows hard seeing that. It could be nothing, or it could be everything. Before she can chicken out, Liz presses ‘Play.’

“Hey Helen, it’s me,” says Mom’s recorded voice. “Please call back; I’m sorry for yelling at you. I know I need to tell Liz about the BRCA, but she’s already stressed enough with college and basketball tryouts. Just ... let me figure out how to tell her. I love you, and good luck with your next treatment.”

BRCA? What’s BRCA? Liz doesn’t know, but the fact Mom hid it can only mean bad things. Though the truth was supposed to squish the gut centipede, the creature’s only gotten

bigger, and every step of it feels like a sickening punch. Liz wants to run and hurl, but she's a museum sculpture, staring at the phone's tiny screen. She's still frozen when Helen returns.

"So, I think I'll get this blue one, and ..." She drifts off, and Liz finally tears away from the phone to look at her. Helen's mouth is slightly open and she's gone paler than usual. It doesn't take a detective to know that she knows what Liz has discovered.

"Explain," is all Liz demands.

Helen does not. "What are you doing looking through my phone?"

Liz sticks it back in her purse and holds it out to her. "I'm sorry —"

Helen snatches it back with a frown. "Answer the question, Liz"

"I overheard you and Mom talking about some appointment before college started, and I wanted answers."

"There's nothing to answer!" Helen about snaps, but the flush creeping along her neck proves otherwise. "What your mom does is her business, not yours."

"She's my mom, of course it's my business. I deserve to know if she's sick or not!" Liz almost shouts.

By now they've gained some attention from the other shoppers, who're looking at them as if they both need to get picked up by the police. The cashier at the counter, who's in her thirties and wearing a printed dress and large crystal earrings, has a hard stare, trying to determine if the two of them are going to wreck shop. Liz doesn't care.

"I'm not some child that needs protection!" Liz continues, her fingers tightening around Helen's phone. "I'm eighteen, I can handle bad news!"

"Liz —"

"I'll look it up myself!"

Liz runs out of the store, pulling her own phone out of her pocket and pulling up Safari. Helen appears soon after, but by then Liz has learned enough.

“If it’s genetic, does Mom have cancer, too? Her test had to be to see if she has it.”

Helen’s whole head is red, and her frown deepens.

“It’s been two months since the test, and Mom would’ve told us by now if it was nothing serious...” Liz dry heaves, feeling the taint of bile at the back of her throat. The fact her aunt’s sickness came from family, from blood, from something so tiny yet powerful enough to define a person from birth ... people are so scared of big things like natural disasters and wars and whatnot, they forget that little things can be just as frightening.

“She has it, so there’s a chance I could have it.”

All of Helen pauses, and she glares at her empty hands. There’s some quiet between the two, and Liz can see on Helen’s face how she’s deciding on what to do.

“We think it’s your grandparents,” Helen says at last, as though the words have made a door through the gap in her teeth to come out. “They haven’t taken the test yet, but between your grandpa and your grandma, Grandpa’s most likely the carrier given his family history.”

Liz thinks of Grandpa — big, strong, engineer Grandpa, who lives for football and fishing trips with Tommy and Cooper — and how he’s never been sick as far as Liz remembers. But how could he if he doesn’t have breasts or ovaries to be poisoned? For the flash of a second Liz wonders if he feels guilty for all this, blaming himself for giving his daughters the renegade gene that could make their bodies betray them. But then again, does he know? Mom and Helen kept this from her; why not their father?

“Was Mom ever going to tell me?” Liz demands.

Helen heavily sighs. “She said she would at the end of the year; you were too busy with school.”

“How is waiting protecting me? I could sick right now and not know it!”

“That’s what I told your mother,” says Helen, “even though I understand what she’s going through. God knows I’m still figuring out how to tell the boys without hurting them.”

There’s a sudden clear spot in the haze that’s been forming around Liz’s head. The boys — of course.

“Then that means the boys ...”

“Yes. There’s a good chance Tommy and Cooper have it. Since they’re boys, it’s not a threat, but if they ever have daughters ... Please don’t tell them.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your uncle and I haven’t had a chance to tell them yet. We will eventually, but with my cancer, it’s too early to give them another thing to worry about.”

“You’re no different from Mom, then!” Liz snaps. “They could be sick right now!”

“Liz, the boys won’t get breast cancer—”

Liz practically stamps her foot. “They could get something else! I’m one thing, but not telling your own kids? What kind of mother does that?”

Helen is dangerously crimson. “How dare—”

“Don’t ‘how dare you’ me! I have a right to be mad, not just at you and Mom but for Tommy and Cooper too. Not telling us won’t make the possibility go away!”

“You don’t think I know that?” Helen finally explodes, making Liz jump. “Didn’t I just tell you that I promised your mother I wouldn’t say anything? There’s a reason behind that, Liz, and it’s because she still has to wrap her mind around you going through what I’m

going through. And you know what that's like? Everyone you know and love is sad and scared that you're going to die. I don't want that for any of you kids."

Liz pauses, and now she's the one with wide eyes.

"And you know what's even worse? Chemo kills you as much as it saves you," Helen explains. "It gives you aches and pains that could stay around for the rest of your life."

Liz is quiet, unable to find any words. The centipede had disappeared in the tsunami, but now said storm is rising in her throat, choking the life out of her.

"My body's not my body anymore. Nothing is the same anymore." Helen dabs furiously at her eyes. "I try doing things like I used to — go on walks, meet up with friends — and it helps a little. But nothing completely makes you feel better. So can you blame your mother and me for not wanting to tell you?"

Liz doesn't know the answer. More importantly, she doesn't *want* to know the answer. She was so stupid not seeing how much deeper her aunt's cancer goes. Permanent pain, forever-worrying family; if that's what possibly awaits her ...

She turns and runs, leaving her aunt calling after her.

Liz doesn't stop running until she gets to the beach. She stops, stooping over and grounding her elbows on her knees. Remembering the breathing exercises her basketball coach taught her, she begins the pattern — in through the nose, out through the mouth — and Liz gradually calms down, though a remnant of distress remains. When she's positive she won't throw up, Liz straightens and takes in the view.

It's a Wednesday in September, so there's no one there except for some brightly colored couple walking down the shoreline and a few middle-aged men fishing, their faces

partially hidden by the wide brim of their matching hats. From the sidewalk to the curling ocean, the land's a layered cake; long grass, sun-kissed blonde and waving like loose hair, then dry sand, all lumpy as if it came from the moon. Mixed into the lumps are bits of unidentifiable debris. Taking off her sweatshirt to use as a mat, she takes in the icing on the cake, the chocolate strip of wet sand that disappears and reappears with the foamy waves. Liz glances at the horizon line and imagines the possibility of swimming out to meet it, getting away from her now upside down life and all its problems. She smirks. Good luck with that.

Liz rubs her tattoo again. For a second regrets getting it, but then tells herself to stop being stupid, that there's a difference between the uncontrollable multiplication of white blood cells and an astrological sign and she's letting her jumbled-up emotions get the best of her.

"No one's gonna die," Liz mumbles. "No one's gonna die, and I'm not gonna get sick."

But what if she does? She could get her own ovaries and breasts removed, but then there goes her chance of ever having children. And yet if she does nothing, she could get sick. She'll get skinny and pale and lose all her hair. She'll take up residence in the hospital where doctors and nurses will pump her full of chemicals in the hope that she survives. If she does, she won't be a winner; according to her aunt, her body would never be the same. When both poisons are gone, there will be remaining aches, locked up pains that could stay around for the rest of her life. And that's only what she sees for herself; what about her mom? Or her cousins? It's unlikely they'll get breast cancer, but what if they get some other sort of cancer because of this?

Struggling against a building wall of tears, Liz sighs and runs a hand through her hair as she looks back along the shoreline. As another wave flattens the sand, something moves — a tiny, spider-like jerk — just out of sight. Liz blinks. There it is again, and whatever it is scurries off the wet sand and into the dry desert to her left before stopping again. Curiosity nips at her, so Liz stands up, grabs her sweatshirt, shakes the sand off, and ties it around her waist before creeping over to the mystery thing.

The mystery thing, as it turns out, is a crab. It's no baby, but also no giant; its actual body, limbs not included, is about as wide as her foot. All ten legs are attached, and the crescent moon of its claws hugs its body tight and close. Being a dull beige, it's impressive that Liz even saw it, especially now since it's not moving but for its pincered mouth.

Liz stares at it. She's not the type of girl who freaks out over creepy crawlies, and for all the times she's visited the beach, she's never seen a crab before. She stoops for a closer look, but that startles the crab, and off it scurries back to the tide line and, unfortunately, into the path of a rolling wave. The moment it feels the water, the crab bunches up, a shelly roly-poly, and lets the wave carry it up the sand. The moment it's deposited by the tide, the crab springs back to life and attempts another escape, but it only gets maybe a foot before it's buffeted by another wave. This one's strong enough to flip the poor creature onto its backside for another ride. But it's a trooper. Once it's dropped off again, its legs swim in the air for a simple second before it flips right-side up and carries on. Liz stands up and slowly follows the crab, watching how it gets up again and again as the ocean continues to knock it down.

“You're a strong little guy ...” Liz smiles, but then frowns just as quickly. She forces herself to finish the thought: just like *cancer*. Chemo and treatments try ending it, but it keeps

rising, coming back, persistent and ugly and so, so unsettling in how it suddenly appears and ruins everything.

“You’re aptly named.” Liz glares at the crab, who’s crawled out of the tide line and is taking a break on a mini mountain of dry sand. Angry and frustrated, Liz kicks the crab. Her aim is off and she strikes the ground just to the right of it, sending sand soaring and the crab scuttling right back into another wave. With vacuum cleaner suction the water pulls it in, spinning the animal in the back-stepping foam, hiding the crab in the white froth as the ocean rolls back as far as it can go. Part of her feels satisfaction, but she also feels guilty. What if she just killed it? That’d be horrible. The cancer isn’t the crab’s fault; it shouldn’t have to suffer for something that no one can control. Liz digs her palms into her eyes and groans. Stupid mixed-up emotions. Stupid cancer. Stupid everything.

Liz doesn’t know how long she sits there, but when she pulls her fingers away, she sees the latest wave roll in, unbothered as it has been for the past forever. Big yet slow, the wave leaves behind a thick line of foam, white and bubbling a foot from Liz’s feet. The bubbles start to pop and fizz, breaking the line into dots.

One big bubble shifts and a pair of claws rises up and out. It’s the crab, soaked but alive, stepping out of the remaining foam and stopping by Liz’s toes. Face to face, Liz sees details she didn’t pick up on before: the cream-colored splotches on its sandy shell, the needle-sharp spikes that climb up its legs and in between its claws, the shine of its ink drop eyes.

Somehow, its ugliness is beautiful.

## American Goddess

“That answer’s wrong, you know.”

My hand pauses in the middle of scratching down an answer, and I send a glare over my shoulder at the woman sitting on my bed. “Gee, thanks. I love feeling stupid.”

“You wouldn’t if you put more time into studying,” said the woman, flipping through her enormous leather bound book. The motion makes the chainmail of her armored top crinkle and clank, somehow not catching on the long, flowing white skirt that brushes the floor. Her legs are crossed at the ankle, making her golden sandals shine, and burrowed into the curve of her hip is a helmet decked out with curved wings and a halo of spikes. On top sits a large snowy owl whose feathered brow makes it look perpetually pissed off. It’s like an extra on a film set.

“You really shouldn’t spend so much time online,” she continues, eyes scanning the page. “I mean, I understand there’s so much to do on the Internet like that YouTube website, but too much time alone can affect one’s mental health—”

“Don’t say I’m crazy,” I say to my homework. As soon as that’s said, I close my eyes and sigh. Of all the things to say.

“You’re already aware of that redundancy, but as you wish.” With a thud, she slams her book shut, sets it to the side, and heads over to my small bookshelf. “You have so little to read, my dear. Where is Plato? Shakespeare? Jung?”

“Do I look like a scholar to you?” Spinning in my swivel chair, I give her another glare complemented with tightly crossed arms. “If you’re so bored, go do whatever dead gods do, Athena.”

“Oh no, I’m not bored at all.” Athena finally chooses a book and sits back on the bed, the motion causing her owl to hoot and flutter its wings. “With you I have interesting conversations concerning the modern age, not to mention it’s nice having someone see me after 2,500 years or so.”

“I’m glad you like it.” I turn back to my trig homework. “I myself wish you’d just piss off.”

“Language, Kelsey. If it were the old days and if I were less forgiving, I could make your life miserable for such disrespect.”

“Like poor Arachne?”

“She asked for it, saying she was greater than me in my own art.” There’s finally a hint of emotion in her usually flat, know-it-all voice as she hisses about the upstart human from long ago. “If humans did anything great, it was at our expense, our power. We gave all you humans so much, and some of you were too arrogant to realize it.”

“Not anymore you don’t. And like you ever really did in the first place.”

I sense Athena preparing to protest, so I reach for iPod stand and turn it on and up, letting heavy metal overwhelm whatever lecture she’d deliver. I close my eyes and hum one long note, thinking over review problems for my next math test.

I’m not sure how long this goes on, but when I open my eyes, a new song is playing and someone’s banging on my door.

“Kelsey!” It’s Mom. “Would you please turn that down? Some of us would like to hear ourselves think!”

I do, because Athena’s gone at last, disappeared like she was never here.

“People say they see the dead all the time,” Athena had said two years ago, back when this was all new. It’d been the day after I refused to go to Mass for the first time in my whole life. I took so many naps, thinking I must’ve come down with something but she stayed around no matter how many times I woke up. “Perhaps you have the gift, but in a different form.”

“Seriously? Mediums are jokes,” I’d scoffed, fiddling with my shoelaces. It’d been two weeks after her first appearance, and I was getting ready for school. “And even if ghosts are real, why would I see *you*? You’re some old Greek goddess who no one believes in anymore. You’re ancient history!”

“Which may be why you can see us,” Athena thought out loud, giving me my first real taste of what a smarty-pants snob she was. “We ‘lived’ in the first place because of the faith people put in us. But now we’re just remnants of dead civilizations. And since your faith is now dead, perhaps that’s created a connection—”

It was then I’d thrown my sneaker at her, yelling at her to shut up and not stick her nose into other people’s business. That resulted in my mom making me go to therapy for six months with some old lady shrink who blinked too much and smelled like sweaty beef.

“I’m not crazy,” I’d shouted at her, and I still tell myself the same thing. Because I’m not. It’s just my mind dealing with my dad’s abuse in some oddball way. That has to be it.

It couldn’t be anything else.

The next day, I’m at school heading to my locker. It’s fifth period, lunch has ended, and when I go to my locker to get the books for my next class, I bite back a groan.

“Hail and well met, Kelsey!” Thor bellows, raising his hammer in salutations and almost getting it tangled in his dreadlocked red hair. “Have you finished consuming your midday feast?”

I don’t answer, and instead eyeball my locker. Thor gets the message and moves, allowing me to start shoving books in.

“Don’t ignore me, little warrior. A good soldier knows when to show respect to her commander,” Thor tells me.

I pretend like my phone is ringing, pull it out, and place it to my ear. “What do you want?” I ask, looking directly at Thor while I speak.

“That’s more like it!” he cheers, swinging his hammer around and almost hitting the ceiling. “I’m here to be your sword and shield, for a battle approaches!”

“What battle?”

“Kelsey?”

It’s Kimmie, an old friend of mine. We used to hang out a lot, but after the scandal with Dad we basically drifted apart.

I stick my phone back in my pocket and turn back to my locker, grabbing a textbook. “Kimmie.”

“How are you doing?” Kimmie smiles kindly, adjusting the shoulder strap of her messenger bag. It cuts her baby blue T-shirt in half where it crosses her chest, distorting the words “Christian Society Club.”

“Never show your opponent any fear!” Thor shouts, swinging his hammer again. This time it does hit the ceiling, but since he’s a ghost it just passes through the plaster tiles.

“Fine,” I tell her, not glancing in her direction.

If Kimmie senses any reluctance, she ignores it as she says, “Listen, the CSC is hosting a Bible study after school. You want to come?”

I don’t even have to think it over. “No.”

“There’ll be snacks,” Kimmie singsongs.

“No, Kimmie.” It takes a lot not to slam my locker door and snap at her. Thor is not pleased.

“Where’s your fighting spirit, Kelsey? Don’t be quiet and meek! Fight back! Tell her how you really feel!” he demands.

I ignore him as I stare at Kimmie, whose smile is slipping from her face.

“I got accepted into University of California, and I need scholarships. I’m sorry, Kimmie, but I don’t have time for any unnecessary clubs.”

“I ... I just want to hang out like we used to. Can’t we just do that?”

“The fatal guilt trip!” Thor thunders.

“No.” And I shut my locker door and go before either of them can say anything else.

When I get home from school, Mom’s at the kitchen table talking to my older sister Zoe. They’re smiling and giggling as they fuss over my niece Helena, who sits in her baby carrier chewing on a sticky set of plastic keys.

“Hi Kelsey!” Zoe says as I grab a banana from the fruit basket on the counter. “How was school?”

“It was okay.” I peel the skin and take a bite before moving over to Helena and tickling her tummy. She coos happily.

“Someone’s happy to see you,” Zoe says.

“And I’m happy to see her,” I reply, making a funny face that leaves Helena smiling. Mom points at a piece of paper across the table. “Kelsey, could you hand me that? We’re going over some last-minute changes for Helena’s baptism.”

While I was glad that Zoe and Mom were happy for Helena, I’d done my best to keep a ten-foot pole between me and any event planning. Frowning, I pass Mom the paper.

“Another battle, ay?”

Thor reappears out of nowhere. “Don’t let me down this time! Get angry! Start shouting!”

I just take another bite of my banana.

“Let’s see ... yes we want Father Brandon performing the baptism instead of Father Mike,” Mom says out loud. “And let’s double-check the guest list. Aunt Geri, the cousins, the Murphys ...”

“Is Dad coming?”

Zoe bites her lip and shares a look with Mom. It’s clear what the answer is even before Zoe says, “Yes, he is.”

“That’s gotta hurt!” Thor declares.

I groan, loud and fierce. “Seriously?”

“She’s his first-born grandchild, Kelsey. It’d be wrong to not invite him.”

“What’s wrong is how he treated everyone,” I growl. Anger fires under my skin. This fight has happened before, and it never goes anywhere. It’s like they’re blind.

“By Valhalla, you are the worst warrior I’ve ever supported,” Thor complains.

“He’s your father,” Mom pleads. Unlike Zoe she’s full-on puppy eyes, begging me to stay calm. “What he did was bad—”

“No, really? I didn’t know stealing from a church and child abuse was bad.”

“That’s more like it!” Thor cheers.

“He said that was how his parents raised him, and that was how he was going to raise you,” Mom says, rising from her seat. Helena begins fussing, dangerously close to wailing, and Zoe glares at me.

“And that makes it excusable!?”

“It doesn’t, hon. He just thought our faith put him above everyone else.”

“It’s *your* faith,” I sneer, throwing the empty banana peel onto the table.

“Oooh, a fatal strike!” Thor says at the sadness falling over my mother’s face.

Zoe sighs, still bouncing a noisy Helena. “I guess there’s no better time to tell you that Dom and I want you for the godmother.”

Thor scowls. “That’s a low blow!” he complains.

“What?”

“You love her,” Zoe says, now pleading like Mom. “I swear sometimes you’re better with her than me or Dom.”

“Or me,” Mom chimes in.

I sigh. “Zoe, I ... you know that anything religious ...”

“It’s not truly religious just because it takes place in a church,” Zoe argues.

I consider bluntly telling my sister no, but Helena starts crying and Zoe goes into Mommy mode, cooing at her to quiet her tears. If I keep arguing about this, Helena’s only going to get more upset, and I don’t want that. I need space now.

“Can I think it over?” I ask instead.

“Of course, hon,” Mom says.

I've already made up my mind about not being Helena's grandmother, and I tell myself I'm sticking with it as I steal Mom's car. There's no destination in mind, so I drive around town, looking at places I've known since I was a kid and taking stock of how much has changed since then. In the end, I stop at the one place I never wanted to visit again—St. Matthew's Episcopal Church. Sitting in the car in the parking lot, I look at the angled roof and the brick facade. The arched green door is shut, but it's probably unlocked. Why did I drive out here? More importantly, why aren't I driving away?

"Maybe because you feel guilty about possibly disappointing your sister."

I glance into my rearview mirror. "Just for once, can I please be alone?"

With his long hair and how primly Balder sits, back straight and hands clasped, you'd think the Norse god of love is a girl. "But you are in distress and I wish to relieve your burden."

"How's that working out for you?" I sigh, resting my head on the steering wheel. Neither of us speak for a bit.

"All I want is to move on, live my life. But then stuff like this happens and makes me think I'll never be happy."

"You've had moments of happiness. Look at your college acceptance," Balder points out.

"I know that. Maybe 'happy' is the wrong word." I peek up from my arms and stare at the church's roof. "What a hypocrite he was ... I was so stupid."

"He's your father. What else could you do but trust him?"

I shrug. "Why are Mom and Zoe inviting him? How can they still talk to him?"

“Because they love him. Just like you do deep inside you. It’s hard to stop loving family.”

“This coming from the guy who got killed by his brother.”

Balder chuckles. “Hodr wasn’t to blame. It only shows that even the divine can make mistakes.”

“Gods aren’t supposed to make mistakes.” It suddenly feels wrong sitting here, and before I know it, I’m out of the car and heading towards the church.

“What are you thinking?” Balder asks as he follows, sounding worried.

“She’s thinking of some action, that’s what!”

“Brother, please, not now ...”

“Not now what? It’s good she’s finally doing something!” Thor cheers as I reach the doors.

“But she knows fighting doesn’t solve everything.”

I look around the lobby. It hasn’t changed since my last visit — the light blue walls, the potted plants, the dark wood table where leftover bulletins and other papers are stacked. Through the open double doors I can see the chapel; the only thing that’s changed in there is the repainted ceiling. Everything else, from the windows to the pews to the raised tabernacle, is as it was, like nothing from two years ago rocked the foundation it’s standing on.

“Are you going in?” Balder asks.

Do I want to? I look through the doors some more, then glance at the crucifix hanging above the stairs down to the lower level. Its Jesus doesn’t make eye contact, but instead looks down to where the basement hall and all the church offices are. My feet know where I’m going as they take me down the steps and through the blue hallway to the familiar office

door. I quietly read the little name printed down: Hank Ingram, Treasurer. So that's who replaced Dad. Not that they wouldn't after him stealing church funds.

"Was this your father's office?" Balder asks.

"Aren't you supposed to know everything?"

"I'm the ghost of a god," Balder replies, "and—"

"Silence."

Thor holds up a hand where he's standing near a door back up the hall. Balder and I share a look before creeping over.

"...just wanted to thank you for listening to me," I hear through the door. My lungs freeze. I know that voice.

"Of course, Jacob," says a second voice, older and quieter. "You'll always welcome to come talk to me."

That's Father Brandon. What's he doing talking to Dad?

"We should go," says Balder.

"To be honest, I'm still surprised you'll consider seeing me," says Dad. "After everything I did ..."

Father Brandon sighs, and there's some shifting around before he says, "You've paid back twice what you took and you come in every weekend for confession. I know you're truly sorry. Please know you've earned my forgiveness long ago."

"Thank you, father," says Dad, sounding both relieved and sad. There's some more shuffling. "Do you know Zoe invited me to Helena's baptism?"

"Yes, she mentioned she was going to."

"I couldn't believe it. You don't think it's too soon?"

“If Zoe thought it was too soon she wouldn’t have invited you.”

“You’re right.” There’s another sigh, this time from Dad. “It’ll be my first time seeing Helena in real life. I want to do right by her from now on.”

He had every chance with me and didn’t take it. My lungs go from ice cubes to broiling.

Balder leaves no room for argument as he takes my sleeve and pulls me towards the stairs. “We’ve heard enough.”

“I’ll say. If those aren’t fighting words, I’ll eat my hammer! I must insist you fight this one!”

“Kelsey needs to go and calm down. There’s nothing either of us can do right now other than help Kelsey out.”

“Fighting would be helping her out!”

I miss whatever comes next as I reenter the lobby. In the middle of a hard breath, I lock eyes with the crucifix hanging over the stairs again. Jesus now looks patronizing and pitying. I don’t want that when this is partially his fault in the first place.

“I do not want to talk about this anymore, Thor. Let’s just get Kelsey to the car and —no!”

I fling a plant at the crucifix and bring it down with a large crack.

“Kelsey, stop!” Balder protests.

“YES, KELSEY!” Thor roars. In the next second the same wall’s splattered with dirt from another plant. It’s not enough, so I fling the bulletins, pamphlets, and flyers off the table and into the air like floppy snowflakes. I lose any sense of what my hands touch.

“Throw it at the windows!”

“Thor, stop encouraging her!”

“Please —”

“Kelsey, *stop!*”

The third, new voice throws me back to Earth. There’s dirt, flowers, and pot shards from the plants where I threw them, but throughout the whole lobby are scraps of paper like a hurricane had gone through a printing press.

Standing at the edge of the chaos is Dad and Father Brandon. Father Brandon still looks the same with the combed-back hair and short beard. Dad, however, has magically aged — he’s grayer and wrinklier.

“Oh, Kelsey ...” Balder whispers. Thor stays silent like the proverbial oversized kid with the open cookie jar.

“Kelsey?” Dad takes a step forward.

I stare at the shredded bulletin remains in my hand. How could ... I’m so wrapped up with horror I don’t notice Dad approaching me until he’s seconds from touching my arm.

“No!” I leap back, throwing the shreds in his face. “You don’t get to do that. Make nice with Mom and Zoe, you asshole, but stay away from me!”

And so I run. Over the debris, out the door, across the parking lot. No one’s followed me, not even the divine brotherly duo. Good; I don’t want them, or any god really, witnessing whatever breakdown is heading my way. I stick my keys in and start the car, pausing only when I reach the main street. I can’t go home either, since Dad will call Mom about this. So where do I go? As much as I wanted to run away from Dad and Balder and Thor and Father Brandon, I don’t want to be alone.

After finally turning onto the main street, I grab my cellphone and pull up a number I never got around to deleting.

I drive towards the park until I reach the point where the tarmac curves only scant inches away from a massive maple. Framed by the road and the lakeside beach, it's so picturesque it's cliché, though you can't deny the pretty view. To pass the time I start throwing rocks into the water, and as a particularly big one splashes down I taste salt. I'm crying, and I suddenly can't stop the waterfall.

"Are you all right?"

I don't turn around. "Two days in a row, Athena? I'm flattered."

"Never say that I do not care, though that display of yours was quite entertaining."

I angrily rub an arm over my eyes. "Don't you dare ... don't look down on me."

She sighs deeply. "I'm not. I'm just pointing out that you know why you destroyed that temple's gathering space."

"Then I don't have to explain it to you!" I whirl around and see Athena sitting on the car's roof, petting her snowy owl.

Athena nods. "It is. But what is more obvious is the reason behind your reason."

Kimmie's secondhand Volkswagen comes over the hill and stops next to my car.

"Are you okay Kelsey?" she asks as she hurries over. "Sorry I didn't get your voicemail sooner, I had my phone off during Bible study."

"It's fine." I fiddle with the fat twig I'm holding.

"You said you needed to talk?"

“Tell her no one was injured.” In a second, Athena is now leaning against the maple, her helmet on her head. “She’ll find out eventually, so let her help you. She cares enough.”

She has a point. Dad’s scandal was no secret, yet after the reveal Kimmie hadn’t stared and whispered behind her hand.

“I ... oh Kimmie, I really messed up.”

“What happened?”

“I — I messed up the church hall. Zoe told me after school that not only does she want me to be Helena’s godmother, but she also invited Dad.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. I wanted to tell her I wouldn’t do it.” I grab a rock and chuck it into the lake.

“Can’t or won’t?” Athena asks.

I ignore her as another rock meets the lake’s surface. “I somehow ended up at church afterwards and overheard Dad talking about how, for Helena, he wants ‘to do right by her from now on.’ Why didn’t he do right by me the time I tracked mud in the house when I was six? Or when Zoe got a C in science on her eighth-grade report card? He had every, EVERY, chance to be a father, but he didn’t!” A particularly heavy stone requires both hands to lift and toss. “Maybe he thought he was raising me well, but all he did was fuck me up to the point I can’t believe in anything anymore.”

Kimmie steps forward and slowly takes a seat next to me. “You talking about God or people in general?”

“Does it matter?” I sigh heavily, running both my hands through my tangled hair as I glance back at Athena, who’s still standing by the tree. Some geese paddle around the lake without a care in the world.

“It does matter,” Athena says eventually as she resumes petting her owl. “Maybe one can live without a god, but no one can live without others.”

I run a hand through my hair. “I’m sorry for being snappy at school.”

Kimmie looks at me, biting her lip. “It hurt. It really hurt when we stopped talking. But I don’t blame you. I mean, I shouldn’t have brought up such a touchy subject?”

“You didn’t know. No one really does. That’s probably the problem.”

Kimmie snorts, the corners of her lips jumping up before falling as she asks, “What are going to do then?”

I shift around and yank at my hair again. “I don’t know what to do.”

“About the baptism or your dad?”

“Neither.” I shake my head. “I mean in general. For my own satisfaction. I haven’t really felt overall in a while.”

“Have you tried therapy?” Kimmie asks.

It’s not like I can tell her I have divine shrinks visiting me on a regular basis. “Yeah, but it didn’t do much.”

“Maybe doing nothing is all you can do,” Athena murmurs as she strokes her owl. It’s an interesting theory, so I redirect it to Kimmie. “Would it be bad to do nothing?”

“You mean like just wait and see?” Kimmie taps her long fingers against her leg as she thinks it over before she shakes her head. “I don’t think that’s bad. All anyone can do is have faith in others. That’s a necessity in life.”

“You think so?”

Kimmie shifts in her seat. “I read in one of my brother’s comic books out of interest once, and one of the main characters said a lot of bad stuff that happens isn’t God’s fault. It’s

our fault as people. And I believe he's right. People *do* do bad things to each other, but we also need each other despite that. Even if we're doing nothing."

I think over Kimmie's words for a second, then glance behind at Athena. She's nodding in agreement. When she notices I'm looking at her, all she says is, "Whatever you choose, you need people next to do it with." She then disappears.

I don't say anything, though I wonder if Athena's right. Do I really want to be alone? Would that solve anything? Thinking it all over, I eventually make my decision.

"Kimmie ... could I borrow your brother's comic book?"

Everything's Fine

"This is the third time this month, Ms. Taylor."

Gabby crosses her arms and gazes out the window to the left of Mr. Hanson's balding brown head. Maybe if she glares at it long enough, the glass will implode, scattering the musty principal's office with a burst of crystal.

Mr. Hanson pushes his glasses up his squashed nose. "Ms. Taylor, I don't like seeing you as much as you like seeing me. Please, work with me."

"If you want to work with me *so* badly, why am I here?" Gabby asks, keeping her eyes on the window.

"Because you're fighting in school, Ms. Taylor, and that's against school policy."

"So is bullying."

Mr. Hanson frowns. "Ms. Taylor, I don't want to hear you fighting anymore."

Gabby finally looks at Mr. Hanson. She stares at him, then closes her eyes and sighs. It's not his fault this happened. In fact, part of Gabby respects Mr. Hanson for all he's done; he actually follows through with what he says when anyone else could've been less sympathetic.

"I don't like fighting, Mr. Hanson. But I won't let those guys bully my sister or her friends."

"I'm aware of the problems Mr. Obeil and his friends have caused your sister and her friends, and while their behavior is completely unacceptable, I can't expel them unless it becomes more extreme."

"And this isn't extreme? They pushed them down the stairs, for God's sake!"

Gabby hadn't heard about it until after science, and by then the story was on everyone's lips. It'd occurred in between classes over in the high school block; her sister and the boys were heading to Advanced English when they ran into their usual tormentors. Accounts varied on what exactly went down, but it was clear the three of them took a nosedive down a flight of linoleum steps.

"Not all of them, Ms. Taylor," Mr. Hanson reminds her. "Not all of them."

Right. Of course. When she found the jerks, she witnessed Martin Kilgore, baseball god and co-leader of that rat pack, punch one of his friends. The other three had jumped him, she'd jumped all of them, and now she's sitting here while the bullies are getting patched up at the nurse's office.

"If anything," Mr. Hanson continues, "you should thank Mr. Kilgore for standing up for your sister and her friends."

Gabby scowls. "That's not funny."

It really isn't. She doesn't owe Kilgore anything. Sure, he's never actually filled her sister's locker with tampons or shoved her books out of her arms — that had been all on his friends — but he'd also grinned and laugh every time Obeil or Roethk or Baker wolf-whistled at Danni or mocked her walk. That's worse than actual bullying, and it's uncomfortable in a way that makes Gabby want to ask Kilgore what it's like being a hypocrite, and if she's —

No. Stop. Hit the brakes. She can't consider that, so she refocuses on Mr. Hanson.

"...This whole situation is 'not funny', Ms. Taylor. You almost dislocated Mr. Roethk's jaw, and Mr. Obeil has some serious bruising to his groin."

Before he can continue, there's a knock at the door. Mrs. Pernell, Mr. Hanson's secretary, pokes her head of graying blond curls in. "Mike?"

"Yes Elise?"

"Kelly called. She's sending Mr. Kilgore, Mr. Baker, Mr. Obeil, and Mr. Roethke up from her office."

"What about—?"

"Your sister is fine, Gabby. So are Mr. Peyton and Mr. Fowler," Mrs. Pernell tells her. "Just some minor bumps and bruises. They're lucky, considering what they went through." She gives Mr. Hanson a pointed look as if reminding him who's really at fault.

Mr. Hanson sighs and rubs his forehead. "Tell them to enter my office as soon as they arrive. You," he points at Gabby, "go wait in reception. Don't think you're getting off scot-free, young lady."

"Yes, Mr. Hanson," Gabby grumbles, standing up from her seat.

"Also, Mrs. Wittlinger is here for her appointment," Mrs. Pernell adds.

"Please tell Mrs. Wittlinger I'm sorry and I'll be with her as soon as I can." As Gabby leaves, Mr. Hanson pokes around his desk until he finds a red folder, then shakes his computer mouse, letting the bright white of his computer screen light up his face.

Out in reception, Gabby squints. The room's line of windows allows the early afternoon sun in through the blinds, and it's a drastic difference from the shade of Mr. Hanson's office. Mrs. Pernell settles at her fancy, dark wood desk and says, "Please sit down, Gabby. Mr. Wittlinger, Mr. Hanson will be with you shortly."

"Yes ma'am."

There's a guy sitting on the brown suede sofas that Gabby didn't notice until now. He looks about her age, maybe older, with a straight nose, somewhat pimply face, and dirty blond hair. Not a person who you'd spare a second glance at, which is why after two seconds Gabby pulls out her phone and starts playing *Plants vs. Zombies 2*. Out of the corner of her eye she sees Wittlinger looking at her — he's probably eyeing her injuries and wondering what the hell happened — but she simply plants another Peashooter.

It's quiet until the sound of shuffling feet reaches her ears. That could only be one group. Frowning, Gabby pauses her game, stores her phone, and crosses her arms to brace herself.

The door opens, and in comes the banes of her existence. All four boys are actually no bigger than average and are equally average in looks. Except maybe Kilgore, but only if one likes hook-noses and hard faces. Said face is hidden behind a paper-towel-wrapped, toxic blue ice pack that he's holding to his bruised forehead, but compared to the other three, Kilgore got off lightly; the last one to enter, Obeil, is walking kind of wonky due to the hit to his groin. He, Baker, and Roethk throw Kilgore angry glares, which he's unsuccessfully ignoring.

"Boys," says Mrs. Pernel, clearly unamused with the motley crew. "Mr. Hanson will see you all in his office immediately."

The boys nod and mumble something along the lines of "Yes, ma'am." Roethk glances at Mr. Hanson's door and looks away with a snort. Seeing Gabby, he automatically directs his sneer at her, as do Baker and Obeil once they see her too. Kilgore only glowers at his scuffed sneakers; he won't look up even under the weight of Gabby's own vicious glare.

Five people and one pair of shoes are all caught up in an angry stare off until Obeil snarls, “Crazy bitch.”

“Mr. Obeil!” Mrs. Pernell protests.

“Says the stupid idiot who won’t leave my sister alone!” Gabby snaps, jumping up from her seat and jabbing a finger at him. “What’d she ever do to you!?”

“She’s a freak asking to get beat up, that’s what! Just like her fag friends.”

“ENOUGH!”

Mr. Hanson bangs into the front office, but the one who shouted is Mrs. Pernell. With the way she’s frowning, her lipstick looks a bit like blood.

“That’s enough. All of your behavior is utterly deplorable, and you should be ashamed of yourselves.”

“Hell no!” Roethek sneers. “She should be the one apologizing!”

“Stop it, all of you.” Mr. Hanson finally breaks in, looking back and forth between Gabby and the guys with a mixture of apprehension and frustration. His sight lands on Kilgore, who hasn’t done anything but look at his feet, and Mr. Hanson heaves another giant sigh like deflating bagpipes. “You four, in my office, now.”

Kilgore enters immediately, but the remaining boys throw one last collective glare at Gabby before stomping into Mr. Hanson’s office. He follows them only after giving Gabby an exhausted once-over. The door clicks shut.

“Are you all right, Gabby?” Mrs. Pernell asks.

Gabby nods, and Mrs. Pernell nods back. She resumes typing at her computer. Gabby sits back down.

“You did that?”

It takes a second for Gabby to realize Wittlinger is talking to her. Glancing up from her phone, she sees a glint of something in his eyes that's somehow familiar yet something she can't identify off the top of her head.

"Did what?"

"You beat up those guys?" the guy asks.

"What if I did?" she eventually asks.

"Then you're pretty intense," says Wittlinger. He examines her face, where a stinging red line stretches from her nose to her right ear after one of the boys — Gabby can't remember which one — scratched her. "Wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of your punches."

If the guy's hiding his snideness behind a secondhand compliment, he's doing a lousy job at it. Gabby's BS detector goes off at once, and she's on the defensive.

"You know what? I *did* beat up those guys, and it was easy," Gabby growls. "Got a problem with it?"

Instead of denying or apologizing like most people, Wittlinger surprises her by smiling. "Nope. Not at all. It'd be better for everyone if more girls were like that."

Wittlinger lets out a small chuckle. Mrs. Pernell glances up from her computer screen, but only gives the two a grin before going back to work.

"Your name's Gabby?" Wittlinger asks. "I'm Leslie. I'm a freshman."

"Leslie?"

"Believe it or not, it actually used to be a boy's name. At least that's what my mom says. What can you do?" Leslie shrugs as he reaches over to shake Gabby's hand. "Anyway, nice to meet you."

“Nice to meet you, too,” says Gabby, and she means it.

“So you’re here for fighting?”

“Yeah.” Gabby nods. “I don’t like it, but they were messing with my sister, so it wasn’t like I could stand there and do nothing.”

If she was younger, Gabby wouldn’t say anything more than that, not wanting more people laughing at Danni, so she stayed silent. But as she grew up, Gabby realized her silence was unproductive, at least according to the psychiatrist her mother took the family to when her sister was her age and everything was at the tipping point.

“Not talking about what’s going on with your sister can make it harder for her to be herself,” Dr. Finch had told her. “She could think you don’t accept her, and that would put more stress on her.”

That was a lie. Like any baby sister, she just wanted Danni to be happy, even if it involves getting into fist fights. It’s certainly not her trying to prove that dark part of her mind wrong, the part she’s ignoring now as she says, “Danni, even before the surgery, rocked a dress and heels.” Gabby shrugs. “I learned how to beat up people bigger than me pretty early on.”

Leslie is instantly surprised, which is understandable. But as she waits for Leslie’s reply, she hopes he doesn’t turn into a jerk. There’s still a lot of downright hateful people out there. Not that Gabby would ever think or say stuff like that.

Leslie, thank God, only says, “That’s really interesting.”

“You’re telling me,” Gabby replies with a huff of relief. “It puts a target on her, though. Those guys pushed her and her friends down the stairs.”

“That’s what they did?” Leslie is horrified. “Are they okay?”

“Yeah. Mainly just some bad bruises and scrapes. But it could’ve been so much worse, you know? It makes me wish they’d stick with the name calling and nasty pranks and pushing and shoving.” Gabby scowls at the memories. She may have been young, but she remembers boys refusing to play with Danni because she preferred dress up and tea parties over tag and Nerf guns. At seven years old, she’d wondered what was so bad about it, but seeing how hurt her Danni got ... that was when she started clamming up, only mentioning she had a sister and not bringing over any possible friends inside her house. “She tried toughing it out, but Mom and Dad found out anyways and took the both of us to therapy. Things are good now, but those guys won’t freaking quit.”

“It’s nice that you’re protecting her.”

“I don’t think my parents will see it like that.” Gabby sighs and leans back in her seat. “I mean, I’m grateful I’m not the school. Mom and Dad have told Mr. Hanson before that they’re always ready to break out the lawyers if someone tries to hurt their baby. But they don’t like it when I fight. I’m gonna be in so much trouble.”

The door to the office swings open, and suddenly Gabby is yanked out of her chair and pulled into a tight hug, her face smushed into a large pair of boobs.

“Gabby! Are you all right?” Danni fusses, running her long, pink-painted fingers through her hair.

Gabby pulls herself out of her embrace and grumbles, “For now. You’re going to kill someone with those someday.”

Danni laughs, slinging her long glossy blonde ponytail over her shoulders. “You’re just jealous I have a pair.”

Gabby rolls her eyes at her theatrics. Part of her can’t believe she looks more like a girl

than she does. Then again, Danni's always been slim, and looking at her now in her hip-hugging red pants and lacy T-shirt, it's easy to think she was born this way.

Gabby looks her over and spots a bruise on Danni's right elbow. "Am I all right? I should be asking you that." She glances past Danni to her friends, Wilson and Chester. "Are you okay too? I heard you guys got pushed while protecting Danni."

"I pulled a muscle," Wilson says, pushing his thick silver glasses up the bridge of his nose. "But otherwise we're good."

Wilson and Chester are both shorter than Danni and monochromatic. Wilson is white as dead coral, and the shade has spread to his white-blond hair and watery blue eyes. By contrast, Chester is a variety of browns — tan skin, dark brown hair, and chocolate eyes. A peachy-cream Band-Aid peeks out from one of his sleeves, and suddenly Gabby's vision is full of bandages and bruises as she sees how they dot everyone's arms.

"Oh sweetie, don't frown. You'll get wrinkles," Danni coos, running her thumb over Gabby's face. "I'm fine. We're all fine, see?"

"Why can't these guys leave you alone?" Gabby growls. "You haven't done anything to them."

Danni musses Gabby's blond pixie cut with sibling affection, pulling her hand away before she can smack it. "You're so cute when you're angry."

Leslie snorts, drawing Danni and the boys' attention. He smiles nervously at the sudden attention and gives a small wave. "Hi. Nice to —"

He doesn't finish before Danni pounces.

"If Gabby dragged you into her fight, I am so sorry you got in trouble," Danni apologizes at once. "But I haven't seen you around. Are you new? What grade are you in?"

“Danni!” Gabby not-too-gracefully pulls her sister away. “Stop it! Yes, Leslie is new, and he’s a freshman, so he’s too young for you, you perv.”

“Just wanted to see what your new friend is like, sis.”

“He’s not gonna wanna be my friend if you keep interrogating him!”

“I don’t mind.” Leslie shrugs and smiles. “Being your friend sounds good to me since I’m starting at a new school and all.”

“You’ll be seeing her an awful lot,” Gabby points out, wanting to make sure he knows what he’s getting into concerning her Danni. She has a habit of basically wedging herself into Gabby’s friends’ lives and dragging them into a world of high end makeup, 80s music, and the latest episode of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. But it’s more than that. It’s being friends with “it.” It’s that people think weirdness is some sort of raging disease that’s contracted by merely breathing her brothers’ air.

Danni huffs, crossing her arms and pressing her breasts up and together. “You say that like it’s a bad thing. I’m fabulous! He should be happy to know me.”

Gabby’s ready to retort, but before she says anything a new voice says, “Leslie?”

Gabby and Leslie peek around Wilson and Chester over to the door. It’s a blond woman, a little younger than Gabby’s mom, wearing denim capris and a perfect white blouse. In her hands is a large red tote.

Leslie stands up. “Mom.”

“I’m sorry I was gone so long. I had some trouble finding the bathroom,” says Mrs. Wittlinger. She pulls an I-Phone from her bag and begins tapping on it. “It’s fifteen past. Is the principal ready to see us yet?”

“My apologies, Mrs. Wittlinger, but I’m afraid Mr. Hanson is still occupied,” Mrs.

Pernell explains.

Mrs. Wittlinger frowns as she approaches the secretary's desk. "Do you know how much longer he'll be? I'm sorry if I'm being pushy, but we just moved here and there's some things I need to finalize."

"He shouldn't be much longer. He's probably wrapping up as we speak."

"Wrapping up expelling them, I hope," Gabby snaps. She can visualize it now, Hanson's old man loafers punting Roethke, Baker, Obeil, and Kilgore out the front door on their sorry asses, and the thought carves a vicious smile onto her lips.

Mrs. Wittlinger is confused, and the more she looks at Danni and all her latent manliness, the more confused she becomes. But the handle to Mr. Hanson's office jiggles, and out comes the man and the jerks; Roethke, Obeil, and Baker's faces are pinched up from being thoroughly yelled at. Kilgore just frowns, but when he spots Danni his eyes narrow into something that isn't a glare. What it is, Gabby can't tell, nor is she in the mood to, so she glares back as hard as she can. The jerks slump out of the admin office single file, sneering at Gabby as they leave.

"Ms. Taylor."

It's Mr. Hanson, looking quite exhausted. For a second Gabby thinks he's talking to her, but instead he asks Danni, "Are you and your friends all right? I'm so terribly sorry this occurred. Please know those boys will be thoroughly punished. I won't have this happening again."

Danni nods. "We're okay. Thank you."

Mr. Hanson then looks at Gabby. "I need you to hang around the office a little longer while I speak to Mrs. and Mr. Wittlinger."

“Fine,” Gabby mutters.

Turning to Mrs. Wittlinger, Mr. Hanson opens the door to his office and holds it open like some old-fashioned gentleman. Mrs. Wittlinger thanks him as she breezes past him. Leslie follows at a slower pace, but when he reaches the door frame, he glances back and gives Gabby a little wave. She returns it, as do Danni and the boys, and he slips inside.

The next day, it’s late afternoon, and Gabby’s in her room doing homework. She frowns at her notebook; she’s supposed to write a short essay about the few latest chapters of Homer’s *Odyssey*, but she’s having trouble remembering the details, especially since she’s worried about Danni and if she’ll be okay without her.

Mr. Hanson’s final verdict is suspension for the rest of the week, followed by a week of detention. The fight happened on a Wednesday, so she’s only missing two days of school, but the injustice of it all sucks. As predicted, Mom and Dad weren’t pleased, and they read Gabby the riot act about how throwing punches doesn’t solve everything before grounding her. At the same time, they thanked her for looking Danni, and Gabby’s mom made an angry phone call to the school’s administration this morning as she was leaving the house for work. Gabby didn’t hear the whole conversation, but she thinks the word ‘lawyer’ was said twice.

To Gabby’s dissatisfaction, the bullies weren’t expelled and were only given a month and a half’s suspension. Part of her wonders if that’ll stop any future bullying. The other part hasn’t stopped wondering why Kilgore defended Danni when he’s never done her any favors before. Alongside that question, the little part of her mind that she wishes didn’t exist keeps shouting out. Yesterday and today, it’s reminded her that this situation wouldn’t exist in the first place if Danni was normal and not a fre—

Nope. Not going there. Everything's fine. It has to be.

There's the tell-tale *bang* of the front door downstairs, followed by some muttered conversation. Gabby's about to go back to her homework when Danni yells up the stairs, "Gabby! Can you come down here please?"

Gabby quirks an eyebrow, but shrugs and heads down the stairs. She stumbles on the last step when she sees who's standing in the foyer. "Leslie? What are you doing here?"

"Aw, you're not happy to see him?" Danni purrs, her glossy red lips plump and teasing as Leslie waves. "Because I told him that you missed him so much, you couldn't stop talking about him at dinner last night."

Leslie chuckles at Gabby's angry sputtering before saying, "I'm here because Danni invited me over for dinner."

Gabby pauses, surprised at the invitation. "You invited Leslie to dinner?"

"Yeah," says Danni.

"Why?"

"Because I want to get to know him," Danni explains. "It's not every day I meet someone who doesn't freak out over me."

Danni's right, of course, and it's a sucky truth. These kind of hardships could easily jade Danni, but the fact she keeps reaching out to people shows otherwise, though that might change if she knew the reason behind Gabby's punches and kicks.

"Does Mom know about Leslie?" Gabby asks as the three head into the kitchen. She heads to a cabinet and pulls out a couple of glasses. "Leslie, you need something to drink?"

Leslie shakes his head as Danni answers, "Yeah, Mom knows, and she's okay with it. She's happy it's someone new." Seeing Leslie's questioning face, Danni explains, "My

friends are mostly people I've known from like kindergarten or whatever. Making new ones can be problematic."

Leslie's face hardens with disgust. "That sucks. You shouldn't be used to that."

"I hope someday I won't have to," says Danni, examining her fingernails. She glances up at Leslie with a smile that's both sad and happy. "Though compared to what it could've been, thank God our generation is so much more enlightened."

Gabby chuckles as her cellphone rings. Pulling it out, she answers it. "Hi, Mom."

"Hi, sweetie!" It constantly surprises Gabby her mother can be so energetic since she works as a pediatric hospitalist and runs around helping injured kids all day. And judging from the muffled sounds in the background — intercoms paging people and an insane amount of foot traffic — things are picking up speed at her end.

"Need something?" Gabby asks.

"Yes. Is Danni home yet? I tried calling her cell but she didn't answer."

"Probably forgot to turn it on once school ended, but she's here. You want to talk to her?"

"Yes please."

Gabby hold her phone out to Danni, who takes it and puts it to her ear. "Hello? Hi, Mom. Sorry, I forgot to turn it back on. I'll remember next time. What is it? Okay. Okay. Is that all, or you need anything else? Okay. Yes, Mom, I'll be home when you get home. Okay. Love you. Bye."

Danni hangs up and gives Gabby her phone back. "Anyone up for a run to Target?"

"What do you mean?" Gabby asks.

"I mean Mom's cooking pork-chops for dinner, and she and Dad are coming home late,

so she wants me to go pick them up.”

“You guys have fun then.” Gabby starts to leave. “Back to my cell for me.”

“Hang on.” Danni grins that sneaky grin she wears that indicates she’s got something up her sleeve. Sometimes it’s good, and sometimes it’s bad — Gabby still shudders when she recalls the ‘surprise’ makeover that left her with barely any eyebrows. “Someone needs to make sure I don’t buy out the whole makeup section.”

“Huh?” Leslie asks, confused.

Danni sends Gabby a wink. “What Mom doesn’t know can’t hurt her.”

Thirteen minutes later, Danni manages to reach the big beige Super Target without an accident (although Chester makes one last attempt to convince Dan to change the station). After pulling into a white-lined parking spot that’s as close to the sliding glass doors as possible, they all climb out, and Gabby fixes Danni with a glare.

“Fifteen minutes,” she says. “That’s how long it should take for Leslie and I to get the pork chops, which is how long you —” she points a finger at her sister, “—have in the makeup department. It’d be best if you’d stay in the car, but there’s no point suggesting something you won’t listen to.”

“Aw, you know me so well,” Dan teases.

“I’m serious.” Gabby glances at her watch. “Your fifteen minutes start now.”

“Can they at least start when we get inside?” Dan whines as the three cross the parking lot to the doors. There’s a soft *whir* as they slide open and greet the group with a puff of cold air. “Because then it’s really twelve.”

Leslie and Danni pause as Gabby grabs a red plastic shopping basket before entering a

second set of sliding doors. The superstore is glowing white everywhere, from the ceiling to the shelves to the floor, and the opposite wall's so far back the customers in that direction look like moving action figures.

“Do you want Mom to come home and find me missing? You'll get in trouble. She'd probably make you take back whatever nail polish you'd just bought.”

Dan scowls. “Over my dead body! I'm doing a pedicure Friday, and I need some new colors.” With a heavy sigh she stares at her feet, and as she does, a realization comes to her face. “I have to go to the bathroom.”

“You couldn't have gone at home?” Gabby asks with exasperation as Danni glances around for the restroom. “If you go, you'll have no time in cosmetics, you know.”

Danni pouts, and her legs turn slightly inwards. “Maybe I can hold it?”

“Well, while you're debating with your bladder, I'm going to the meat department and getting those chops,” Gabby declares. She spins away on her heels and starts off, waving a hand over her shoulder. “See ya.”

She's only taken a few more steps before Leslie hurries to her side and falls in step with her. He glances behind him as they turn a corner towards the meat department. “Looks like Danni's bladder won out. She heading for the bathroom.”

Gabby shakes her head. “That's no surprise. Her bladder is the one original girly thing about her; it's tiny.”

The butcher's busy with another customer, so it takes some time to look over the chops, pick some out, and pay for them. They're floating down the aisle that divides the groceries from the merchandise, and from where Gabby's standing she can make out the makeup section. She doesn't see Danni, so she's probably still in the bathroom.

“I thought it was off, and I said as much, but she didn’t care and took it anyway,” Leslie continues. “Had to pay her a dollar to get it back at the end of class.”

“Yeah, she’s like that. She was around when Danni was a freshman, and she hated her,” Gabby tells him, still keeping an eye out for her fashionable sister. “Though that had more to do with how she’d give Danni the stink eye every time ...”

Gabby drifts off as she spots someone among the bottles and plastic, and it’s not her sister. In fact, he’s the farthest thing from her sister.

Leslie, seeing Gabby scowl, looks to where she’s looking. “What’s wrong ... oh.”

Leslie may have had his headphones on yesterday during the showdown in the office, but his eyes were fine, so he clearly sees Martin Kilgore stocking Neutrogena like she is. Watching him in his red polo is weird and unnatural.

“You know him?” Leslie asks.

“Yeah. He’s part of the group that regularly bullies Danni.” She considers going over and kicking him in the nads, but they’re in public, not to mention he’d later retaliate against Danni. Gabby turns to leave only to finally see her sister. Danni’s popped out around the corner with a basket of makeup and messing around with her phone. Whatever she’s doing is taking up all her attention, and before Gabby can call out and stop her, Danni bumps into Kilgore who’s still stocking foundation. Kilgore looks over, ready to bark at whoever walked in to him to watch where they’re going, but the moment he sees who it is, Kilgore’s ugly face gets even uglier.

“Get away from her!”

Gabby storms over and plants herself between her sister and a scowling Kilgore.

“Leave my sister alone, Kilgore.”

“I didn’t do anything, Taylor,” Kilgore says, staring her straight in the eye. “Maybe I was just seeing if the customer who walked into me was okay and help them find something.”

“Not with that lovely face of yours.”

Kilgore frowns again, but before he can say anything, Gabby feels a hand rest on her shoulder.

“Gabby, we should go, okay?” says Danni, her voice cautious. “Mom needs those chops.”

“You can go if you want to. Go check out. Your makeup isn’t gonna buy itself.”

Danni opens her mouth, but then shuts it with a *click* because she already knows the answer, and Gabby knows it. She also knows it’s easier to squeeze water from a rock than convincing his sister to back off of something, so with a heavy sigh Danni shakes her head and steps back. She looks at Leslie, silently asking him if he wants to tag along, but Leslie silently answers with a no. Danni nods and leaves.

“What do you want, Taylor?” Kilgore asks, sounding annoyed and, strangely, tired, like he’s not looking for a fight.

“I want answers, Kilgore, about what you did,” Gabby demands, her eyes slits.

“I don’t know what you’re—”

“Yes you do!” There’s a Western stare-off, Kilgore with folded eyebrows, Gabby with folded arms, and Leslie off the side watching them both. Neither do anything, but eventually Kilgore says, “You’re so full of it.”

“Excuse me?”

“You go around acting like it’s your job to watch after your sister, fighting like a little

maniac every time someone does something wrong—”

“Like I’m supposed to!” Gabby interrupts him. She notices he used the right pronoun, but doesn’t point it out.

Kilgore continues like she didn’t interject. “You tell yourself you love her no matter what, but you really don’t, do you?”

“What do you know about that?” Leslie asks.

Kilgore ignores him as well. “The point is, you’re fooling yourself. You haven’t wished at least once that your sister was normal? God, you walk around punching people when you’re thinking the same thing! It’s so hypocritical...”

As he drifts off, Kilgore’s face closes up. The alien look is leaking out of his eyes, and for a moment Gabby swears it’s something akin to ... sadness? Though she wishes otherwise, her anger starts leaking away as she sees the way Kilgore’s shoulders are stooped, his hands in fists. It’s a classic tell for someone about to either swing a punch or defend an attack. Something tells her it’s the latter.

He’s worried over nothing. She has something else in mind. “Why did you defend Danni?”

Kilgore’s cheeks go a nasty white. The air between him and Gabby quiets even with the music playing over the loudspeakers. His eyes are darting to everything but her. He clearly doesn’t want to talk about it, and though backing down has never been Gabby’s style, Kilgore has the right not to talk about it. She sighs and turns to leave.

“It was my brother. My older brother,” Kilgore clarifies. He shuffles his feet. “He came out when he was fourteen and started ... dressing not long after.”

Gabby whips back around, her face splattered with shock. Glancing at Leslie, she’s

sees he's just as surprised as she is.

“The parents freaked, and though they said they eventually understood, we both know they didn't. They never did. School was hell. He didn't have many friends and was bullied a lot.”

He swallows deeply, and his eyes scrunch closed like rolled-up window blinds.

“He was my brother. He was the best, and I told him so. But it wasn't enough. In his senior year, he swallowed a whole bottle of pills. I was the one who found him.”

Gabby gasps sharply. Kilgore looks at her, overflowing with anger and grief.

“Transgressors get so much *shit* thrown at them. But Danni has *everything*. She's so damn lucky. I see her, and I think ‘Why couldn't Xander have all this?’ I thought if I ignored your sister, I could ignore what happened with Xander. But pushing her down the stairs brought it all back. That's why I punched Paul.”

If Gabby thought her emotions were mixed up before, she can't even begin identifying how much more messy they are. In a way, he's right. But he doesn't know that Danni doesn't have everything. If she did, Gabby would feel perfectly fine right now and not sick with what she's about to do.

“You know what? You're right. I'm full of myself,” Gabby confesses. The boys stare at her, but she continues. “Everything got so mixed-up when Danni came out. Mom and Dad ... they tried to understand, and there were times when they messed up. They still do. But they love her all the same. I've never stopped loving her either. I tell myself I worry about her running into bigots and that's why I go after whoever bothers her, but that's not true. Not all of it. The whole truth? I get scared and embarrassed, and sometimes ... sometimes I think she's a freak. And I'm scared if Danni finds that out, she'll never forgive me.”

Leslie puts a reassuring hand on her shoulder, which makes it easier to meet Kilgore's stare. He's a cross between surprise and sympathetic.

"I guess we really are the same," he mumbles aloud.

Gabby kicks out a little, scraping the streaky gray linoleum with her toe. Her brow furrows. "What are you going to do now?"

"Don't know. Some things are just things you figure out as they happen to you."

Kilgore bends over and grabs the box of makeup. "What are *you* going to do?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Danni. Are you going to tell her what you told me?"

The very idea curdles Gabby's stomach contents. "I don't know," she whispers.

"If it helps, I'm with Danni in a couple of classes," he tells Gabby. "And she loves to talk about you daily to whoever's gonna listen. Just thought you should know."

That said, Kilgore turns away and leaves. Gabby herself starts heading towards the store entrance, wondering if Danni wouldn't mind hearing the truth if she loves her that much. Leslie must be thinking the same thing because he says, "If Danni's talking about you like that, I don't think she'll hate you."

"How do you know?"

"I don't. You just gotta decide whether you believe in your sister or not." As the entryway comes into view, he motions over to Danni, who's standing by the shopping carts, a white plastic bag around her wrist as she fiddles with her phone. From the way her sister is wiggling, Gabby knows she's nervous.

Leslie pats her on the back. "It's okay to be scared."

"I'm not scared!" Gabby protests. It's a lie; she's terrified. But before she decides on

anything, Danni looks up, sees her, and comes over.

“There you are!” Glancing in the direction Gabby came from, she says, “Did Martin do something? Did he hurt you? You’re crying!”

Gabby shakes her head. Looking over her panicking sister, she smiles. Part of her still considers keeping quiet, but another loudly insists that though everything isn’t fine now, maybe someday everything will be better.

“It’s okay,” she tells Danni. “It’s okay. Kilgore ... Martin didn’t do anything. I just have something to tell you.”

## The Way I Live

When you're a ghost like me, you have opportunities.

You can sneak into that R-rated movie your dumbass parents wouldn't let you see. You can pull the ultimate prank and not get caught. You have time to think about shit and whatnot that you usually wouldn't consider when you were alive because you were too busy doing who knows what. Like death. I never really thought about it before I died. I have all the goddamned time in the world now since I'm not growing any older.

Right now, I'm thinking of all the places where I'd rather be right now.

Because for those who can't see (and you can't, because I'm a ghost. Ha ha.), here's me sitting on what used to be my window seat, trying to ignore the sideways tango that's going on behind me between the girl who now lives in what used to be my room, and her boyfriend, who's not even that cute. He looks like a gorilla, and apparently he grunts like one too.

I cover my ears and close my eyes tight. Think of the weather. The news. Pirates kicking ninja butt. Because I was thinking about who would win that debate when they busted in, groping and groaning and sucking face. I tried to flee the room before it got worst, but the girl kicked the door shut before I could squeeze past.

“Hah!”

Okay, not working. Dead worms. Sumos in dresses. Rotting corpses. Imagine not being here.

And before you suggest phasing through the wall, that doesn't work because ghosts don't have any powers. Nothing. Nada. We can't go through stuff or fly or lift objects with our minds or do whatever you believe ghosts can do. We can't. Believe me, I've tried. But

the sad fact remains that, other than being invisible, ghosts are exactly like their living counterparts.

Saying that, I could pick up one of the girl's stupid stuffed animals, like that ugly pink bear and chuck at the lovely couple. Hell, I could open the door and walk right out. But that would require actually turning around and seeing them 'in action', and I rather keep my vision, thankyouverymuch. The best I can do is cover my ears and try focusing on something other than the muffled grunts and squeals and creaks and their lame-ass 'sweet whisperings.'

Sorry if I sound bitter, but can you really blame me?

At last, things quiet behind me and I dare take a peek over my shoulder. The lovebirds are wrapped up in the blankets, whispering and giggling and generally being barf-inducing. Just like I have any control over their actions, I glare at their flushed faces and mentally yell at them to get up, get dressed, and get the fuck out, or at least get the door open so I can get the fuck out, and may I remind you, young lady, that your mom's going to be home from work in less than ten minutes?

Of course, they don't hear me, so they don't move and continue with the baby love talk.

Like Hell I'm going to endure two brain-bleaching moments in one afternoon. Standing, I stomp over to the door and kick it, making it sound like Mommy got home early and wants to check on how the homework's going. For once in my non-existent life, something goes right. They're out of the bed before I put my leg down, yanking on their clothes and straightening the bed while Gorilla Boy swears in a whisper and the girl yells, "I'm coming, Mom!" She soon does, and the moment she opens the door, I'm gone.

But just because I've escaped the cage doesn't mean I'm out of the zoo. I'm still inside when I want outside, and I can't leave until the mom comes through the foyer. With a sigh, I plop myself ten feet away from the door and stare at it with a paint-peeling intensity.

As I predicted, ten minutes later the car is pulling into the driveway. I get to my feet and shake my legs out as Mom gets out. She locks the Landover, goes up the sidewalk, gets the key out of the false bottom of the flowerpot holding the marigolds ...

With a twist and a creak, she comes in, and I duck under her arm and run out.

After the sex scene fiasco, I wander the city streets, not caring if I bump into someone and freak them out. Seeing their reactions recalls how much I got a kick in scaring the living back when being dead was still new. It'd been fun tripping people up or chucking their trash back at them if they hadn't thrown it away properly, but now it's old and I don't get the same thrill like I used to (not to mention I think I caused some old lady to have a heart attack when I knocked over her trashcans while she was sitting on her stoop). Part of me wishes I still did; it'd be at least something fun in a boring existence

Things get sucky near a park when I run into some dog walkers and their mutts. I try keeping my distance by walking on the grass, but some cream-colored bitch spots me and starts barking. That gets all the other dogs' attention, and they bark up a storm that has their owners confused and yelling to heel. The commotion give one great black beast the chance to stretch out his retractable leash as he chases me down and bites my left ankle. He gets my free foot to his head as a result, and I escape while he's dazed.

"There was a reason I was a cat person," I grumble once I'm out of the park. Leaning down, I rub my ankle with a scowl. Stupid dogs and their ability to detect me. Then again, all

animals can see me, but dogs are the ones that see me as something scary they have to protect their people from. I've lost count of how many bites I've received; you'd think, knowing that I can't get injured but can still feel pain, I'd know better by now.

There's a rumble above me, and out of nowhere it begins pouring rain. As surprised shouts fill the air from surrounding pedestrians, I frown at the sky as it'll sense my displeasure and stop at once. It doesn't, of course, so I stomp over to a nearby produce store and stand under their red and white striped awning with a bunch of other folks not lucky enough to have a raincoat. I bite back a sigh. Another reason being me sucks; I can't get wet, but I can certainly feel like I'm drenched or frozen, depending on the weather. Sure, that doesn't sound bad, and yes, I can go hang under some awning and wait for it to clear up. But unless I want to walk around feeling like I standing in a cold shower, I'm basically trapped there; it's not like I can use an umbrella in public.

"Did you hear about that car crash that happened yesterday?" some greying guy in a business suit asks his partner, who practically a clone of him.

"You mean that thing on the 55?"

"That's it. According to the news it happened because someone's tire blew when they went over the speed limit. Caused a forty car pile-up."

"Jesus," says Gray Clone, and everyone else under the awning murmurs some agreement.

"I think about six people are dead," an Asian bike messenger reports, flipping a wave of wet bangs out of his eyes. "There's supposed to be some more since a handful of people ended up in the hospital in critical condition."

That catches my attention. Critical condition? What if someone dies and becomes a ghost like me? I mean, it's not like I want anyone to die, not do I want them stuck in the boredom that is the life of a spirit. But if someone does stick around, at least we'd have each other. For some reason I've never run into another ghost before — does everyone but me get the chance to pass on? — but with so many seriously injured, my chances just went up.

Ignoring the wet and cold, I leave the storefront, barely noticing how, to the living, certain people are getting pushed around by absolutely nothing.

The rain clears up by the time I reach the hospital, and while that's annoying as hell, it doesn't stand in my way of finding the accident victims. Stepping through the sliding glass doors, I enter the emergency department waiting room. All around me people are hunched over in cheap chairs. One guy holds a hanky to a cut on his forehead. A mother tries calming her crying kid in the corner.

I make a right turn through more doors into a white, sterile hallway and start towards the ICU. I know where I'm going; this isn't my first time at this hospital. Whenever I'm feeling lonely I pop by to see if anyone dies and sticks around instead of going wherever dead people go. Morbid, I know, but it helps with the isolation. Seeing the living pass on, it's not a fad like spooking people is. How can it be when in their last moments, they see me? Most people don't say anything, simply staring with their eyes bugged out. Some start crying, knowing it's really the end. But others nod and smile, knowing that if I'm here, then there's some type of world beyond and not a total erasure of existence. It's enough to make up for the disappointment that is my current friendless existence.

After an elevator ride and a couple of corner turns, I entered the ICU. Fancy beds and equipment lined the beige walls in nice, neat lines. The same can't be said for the patients lying in the beds. Each wears the same robin's egg hospital gown and lots of bandages; a few people are completely mummified. Most of them are asleep, and doctors come and go regularly, checking vital signs and replacing dressings. The slow beat of multiple heart monitors indicate everyone's still alive. It's a good thing, but I can't help but frown in disappointment.

“Where am I?”

Next to me is a young teenager, barely out of her preteens. Her hair is princess hair, long and blond, and she also wears a hospital gown. What's less appealing is the bleeding wound on her neck. Where did she come from?

As if hearing me think, she turns and looks at me. Not *through* me, but *at* me. I'm so surprised I almost miss her asking, “Do you know where I am?”

“You can see me?”

Her nose scrunches up. “Yeah? Why wouldn't I?”

“Because I'm a ghost.”

That makes her eyes widen. She glances everywhere, finally realizing that despite the amount of people in the room, no one's noticing her.

“I'm ... dead?”

Her voice trembles, and a rush of pity flows through me. To ease her into the idea, I ask, “What's the last thing you remember?”

“Um, my parents and I were at the airport, and I needed to go to the bathroom. There were these construction guys hanging some sign in the terminal, and when I was walking under one side dropped. I think it hit some pillar and shattered over me.”

I winch hard. “Ouch.”

She raises a hand to her neck and touches the wound. She’s one second away from crying. “I remember some of the ambulance ride and some doctor telling me to stay with him, but then it’s all black.” Her shoulders shudder. “I really am dead, aren’t I?”

Before I can answer, she clenches her chest and moans. Suddenly she flickers out of sight like a startled dragonfly, and for a second I’m left looking around frantically to see where she went. She pops back soon enough, gasping for unnecessary air.

“What happened?” I asked. “Where—”

“There was this pain in my chest, and all of a sudden I’m back in my body,” the girl explains. “At least, I think it’s my body; I felt very heavy but, like, could move if I wanted to.”

My heart doesn’t break, but it does crack. “You’re having an out-of-body experience. You’re not dead, but you’re towing the line.”

“I don’t wanna die!” the girl shouts. “I wanna live! I—”

She cuts out again, and this time she doesn’t return. Good for her, but there goes a chance at finally having someone to talk to. I run a hand down my face as I lean against a blank length of wall. Does it make the universe happy, messing around with my hopes and dreams?

“Who are you?”

I look to my left, where one of the burn patients has woken up and is looking at me. He's in his thirties, with light brown hair sticking up between the bandages wrapped around his head. More cover both his arms from fingertip to shoulder.

"Who are you?" he asks again. He frowns as he looks me over. "You're not a nurse."

How do I tell him that I'm a ghost and if he can see me that means he's dying? Maybe I don't. I keep quiet.

Not that it matters, because from the way his face stretches, I know he's figure it out. "You're dead."

I nod.

"Which means ..." Bandage Head scowls fiercely and scoots back against the headboard. "No. No, no, no! You're not taking me!"

"I'm not—"

"I got a life, okay!? I got a job and a lady I love like crazy, and I'm not leaving that behind because someone was a fucking idiot!"

"I'm a regular ghost!" I shout back. My voice breaks from not having yelled in a while, but the pain is good. "You'll take yourself away if you die unless you end up staying around!"

That gives him pause, though his visible face is red. "What?"

"You heard me," I snap back. "But do you really think all this yelling is doing you any good?"

In response, he gags and slumps over. His heart monitor starts beeping wildly. I frantically glance around for a nurse, but of all times for them to disappear, they're gone. They probably have something on them that'll report this guy's dying, but will they come in

time? Standing by his bed, watching his body shake, I wonder that if he'll become a ghost when he dies. The universe can't screw me over twice in a row, can they? Then again, what are the chances he'll pass over? His head jerks to the side, and I realize what I'm doing. Running around his bed, I push buttons and turn knobs on the monitor, then kick it over with a crash.

“What's that noise?” a bleary voice responds from across the room.

The answer is a group of nurses finally running into the room and over to Bandage Head's bed.

“How did the heart monitor fall over?”

“Mr. Fawkes' suffering respiratory failure!”

“Someone bring a mechanical ventilator!”

As everyone fusses and does nurse stuff, there's a haze in the air to my side, and the newly identified Mr. Fawkes appears next to me, confused as the kid was.

“What—who—” He sees me and scowls all over again. “You!”

“This isn't my fault,” I tell him crossing my arms and keeping my eyes on Mr. Fawkes' body. “It's life. Shit happens.”

Mr. Fawkes looks over the activity around his body and winces when a redheaded nurse starts doing chest compressions. “I can't believe this is happening.”

“I'm sorry,” I say. “Dying isn't ever fun. I've seen it around who knows how many times and it never gets easy.”

“Am ... will I stay around like you?”

“I don't know. You mention your family, so that might be some incentive. But as far I can tell, it's completely random. I sure don't know why I'm still hanging around.”

He side-eyes me, then looks away quickly. “How did you ...”

“How did I die? What, the complete and utter wreck that’s my face doesn’t tell you? Though I think it gives me a glamorous ‘Queen of the Zombies’ look, don’t you think?”

Mr. Fawkes shrugs his shoulders.

“Car accident,” I tell him. “Kinda like yours. Was driving home after some shopping, minding my own business, when some ‘fucking idiot’ smashed right into the front of my car. He died too, but he passed over. I’m still here. There really is no justice in this universe.”

“So no point in asking what the afterlife’s like?”

“Dude, I don’t even know if there’s an afterlife. We could all just disappear and be done with it.”

Mr. Fawkes’ scowl returns. “Thanks for the vote of confidence. I feel so much better now.”

“You want me to lie and say otherwise?”

He slumps where he stands. “I just don’t want to be scared.”

“I think it’d be weirder if you weren’t.”

The nurses’ voices raise, and one of them yells, “Grab a defibrillator! Now his heart’s seizing!”

We watch said machine get rolled in, and with each use of the paddles we wince. It doesn’t work, and when I glance away for a second I notice how his hand is disappearing.

“Um, Mr. Fawkes?”

“Wha — no!” He waves his arm as if it’ll make his hand reattach, but no can do. “No! I don’t want to die!”

In desperation, Mr. Fawkes charges forward towards his body. With the jumble of people all around, no one thinks twice about some extra shoving or notices the mysterious handprints coming down on the patient's chest.

"Come on! Let me in!" Mr. Fawkes yells. He pushes on his body like it's a sponge for his soul, but there's no absorption. He turns to me. "Please tell me I can get back into my body. Please!"

"It's random," I tell him, hating the way hopelessness grows across his face. "Sometimes you do, sometimes you don't. If you don't, it just means it's time."

"No, no, no!" He punches his chest again.

"You can see your girlfriend and your coworkers," I offer him. "It's not really the end if you die."

"They won't see me!" Straightening up from the bed, he looks half-mad with grief. "They won't know any better, and that's if I stay around."

"I'll be here."

"And what's that worth?" His snarl drops when he sees my hurt expression. "I didn't mean—"

And then a sound fills the air, all too familiar yet sad and hopeful (for me, at least); a flatline. That kicks the nurses into overtime administering medicine, more chest compressions, and mouth to mouth. But it won't do any good. I know because with one sad glance backwards, Mr. Fawkes vanishes.

A minute later, the nurses come to the same conclusion. One covers the body, another turns off the heart monitor, a third declares time of death and writes on the clipboard at the end of the bed while asking someone to fetch the head doctor, and the rest go around and

check the other patients, some of who witnessed the death and are now panicking themselves. I move out of the way and wait for Mr. Fawkes' reappearance. Is someone or something gonna kick him back to Earth? Maybe. But it takes fifteen minutes and the rolling away of Mr. Fawkes body for me to accept the truth; he's passed on, and indeed the universe has screwed over twice in a row.

Just my luck.

I can feel my mood sour faster than old cheese, and throwing a temper tantrum would feel good right about. But I don't, because there's hurt people around. Instead, I leave the ICU, go to the stairs, and escape up to the roof. Though the rain's stop, it's still gray out, dulling the tiled floor and circling metal guardrail. Cigarette butts and other bits of trash are scattered about, and in a burst of furious energy I run around, scooping up handfuls of trash (it's not like there's a point to worrying about germs) and chucking them off the roof. Down below I hear some muffled, surprised yelps, and I feel some satisfaction. That fades the moment I run out of garbage, and with a tired sigh I climb over the guardrail and sit on the edge, kicking my feet back and forth as I watch life happen down below.

You'd think being dead, there wouldn't be anything to stress about. Considering the day I've just had, you'd be wrong. I get so overwhelmed so often, whether I'm out, at the house, or even here at the hospital, the one place that's supposed to make me feel better. I tell myself it's because of the isolation; everyone knows being alone too long can make you loopy. Or maybe it's the boredom, since it's hard doing anything that doesn't involve picking something up. And it is partly because of those two that I'm so unhappy. The other part I try denying is the memories with remembering the life. The best and the worst is recalling my Mom and Dad and my little brother, and how I screwed up my relationships with them and

didn't take advantage of what I had. Once the teen years hit, I was out the door, never really around when I wasn't called for, and we got so distant to the point of it was like living with strangers. After I died, instead of staying around and trying to comfort the family, I still stayed out a lot. Probably because of that, I never heard about the moving plans. It happened so suddenly, so quickly, and they got away so fast; I didn't have time to sneak into the car. I ended up watching my family leave with no a clue where they were going.

Even though I don't know where they went, I have all the time I need to find them again. But that means leaving both the house and the hospital. I don't think I'd be able to stay away. Correction: I *can't* stay away. I don't want to lose the last bit of my family I have, not when I don't know if I'll ever find them. I can't let these memories go. And the hospital ... I sneak a peek over at the door back into the building wistfully. This is where I'm seen, acknowledged, if only for a second. It keeps me sane as much as it hurts me, seeing others move on, and I can't lose that either, maybe even more so than the old life. Past and present — both are 500 pound dumbbells tied to my hands so I can never drop them. Until I let go, until I can hope that my family's okay, until my existence is truly acknowledged, I truly can't move forward.

I stay up on the roof until it's dark out. According to the digital clock on the nearby skyscraper, it's nearly midnight. Grumbling under my breath, I stand up, return to the roof, and reenter the hospital. It's only calmed down a little since this afternoon, and it takes some dodging and shimmying to avoid everyone. I start heading home once I'm outside, even though it's too late for me to get inside the house. Usually I go in with the dad, who's a

lawyer and comes home late, but I lost track of the time. So now I'll have to sit on the shitty porch and wait until morning when they all leave so I can arrive.

Still lost in my dark, depressing thoughts, I march off, cutting through the alleyways that no one else would dare go through. Nothing out of the ordinary with the dumpsters and garbage cans and trash bags and dead body —

Wait. What?

I stop and look back. I'm not delusional. There is indeed a body collapsed against the wall, its head down and legs spread eagle. A murder? I step closer for a better look.

It's an old guy, maybe mid-seventies, with a ratty gray beard. Judging by the worn clothes and the bad stench wafting off him, he's been homeless for a pretty long time.

There's blood dripping from his mouth that, to my surprise, is open and gasping for air.

He's not dead yet, but fast approaching. Everyone knows coughing up blood is bad. And with his hands shaking the way they are, it's like he's having a seizure. I glance to my left, then to my right, and see no one. No one's here to witness this poor dude's death, except for someone who's already gone through it.

Considering I've lost two possible ghost friends today, I don't bother hoping he'll stay around. I instead feel sorry for him. This isn't the way to go, alone and sick. No person should have to die like this. Not that my death was a beauty. But at least for the few moments leading up to it, I'd been happy, singing along with the car's radio and deciding when to wear the new clothes I'd bought. Not like this guy.

There's a wheeze, and I jump as the homeless man lifts his head to rest it against the brick. His face is like a crumpled brown paper bag, and his eyes are foggy and unfocused as he looks ahead at nothing. Slowly his vision begins to roll skyward, and our eyes meet. We

stare at each other, and just for a split second, his eyes light up with recognition. I inhale sharply.

He's seeing me. Not scared like the girl or angry like Mr. Fawkes. He is *happy* seeing me, at peace with what's coming.

Sooner than I would've wished, the moment is broken. He moves his gaze to the sky, and exhales softly. His fingers stop moving.

He's dead.

But there's a hint of a smile on his face, one that wasn't there before.

My eyes feeling hot, I again look around the alleyway for his doppelgänger. His shadow. His ghost. There's still no one. I'm still alone.

He didn't stay. He got to go.

At first I glare at the body, envious of him, but it doesn't last. How can I be mad when he saw me and was happy about it? Gazing at his face, I smile. I guess when you have nothing to lose, there's nothing keeping you back. Not like me. But maybe someday, I'll be like him and leave. His passing gives me hope for my own.

"Thanks, dude," I tell the body before looking skyward. "Wherever you are, I hope you got everything you need."

And I turn and go, leaving the guy with his peace so I can someday find my own.

## Resurfacing

You wake up.

Considering what occurred a week ago, this isn't surprising. Ever since you found out about your father's upcoming parole, you've been unable to sleep without nightmares plaguing you. They're so bad, they could qualify as horror movies, where everything is so detailed that when you awaken, it takes time to remember you're in your dorm room.

The nightmares have no make-believe creatures. Just one big, terrifying, all too real monster from your past that you thought was gone for good. In each nightmare you watch as he stands over your friends, kicking and punching and *touching* them like modeling clay until they're all dead. You can't do anything but watch. The dreams are all different, but that's one part that never changes.

You never die. You wish you would, because you know you could handle it. Just like you handled it all those years ago before he was finally locked up. But your wish goes unheard as you watch what you can't handle.

You never know which friend will die, or if they all go together. But one dies more than the others, and those dreams are the ones that make you wake up sobbing, cursing that email you wished you never received.

You're at the kitchen table. It's seven in the morning. There's a steaming cup of coffee next to you as you type away at your laptop, looking through Google for possible cures. You thought the nightmares would go away on their own, but after two weeks, it's clear you need to take control of this.

You're skimming an article about anticipatory awakening when you hear someone enter the kitchen. A single side glance confirms it's your suite-mate Brian. Like you, he's a sophomore. Unlike you, he's studying medicine for veterinary school thanks to a track scholarship. There'd been a moment of panic when you found out at the start of the year you'd be rooming with him and two other boys, but they'll all pretty decent guys who know how to obey a bathroom schedule, and there's another girl in your suite, Stacy, which prevents you from being surrounded by too much testosterone.

"What are you doing up, Ren?" Brian asks, scratching at his neck as he heads towards the fridge.

"Research," you say.

"For a paper?"

"Yes." Like you'll tell him what it's really about.

"Cool." He grabs the milk and starts rooting around in one of the cabinets. He yawns loudly. "God, I don't understand how you can get up this early all the time."

"It's not that early. And you're up now."

"Only because it's my turn to make breakfast." Brian pulls out a box of pancake mix and a bowl, then sets a pan on the stove and turns it on. "How many you feel like today?"

You take a sip of your coffee. "I'm not hungry right now."

"Later then?"

You don't answer, so Brian shrugs and goes back to making the batter. He's used to your taciturn nature by now that he knows you're not being rude; this is just your way of saying you don't want to talk anymore. Soon enough he has others to talk to as Stacy, Robert, and Calvin all come down, ready for their classes. They discuss upcoming events on campus

and bitch about homework, and you sit there listening as you go back to researching. You click on one promising link, but scowl as you scan it. ‘Addressing stress’ your ass.

Like hell you’ll try talking to the source of it all.

You stick with the natural remedies; yoga, diet, herbs, the works. But the cures don’t work. You learn that the hard way.

“Ren? Ren!”

You fly away, hitting something hard with your forehead. You curse as you rub the injury, and between that and the fact you’re still drowsy, it takes a moment for you to realize your suite-mates are all crowded in your room. Calvin’s rubbing his own forehead; he must’ve been the one you hit.

“Are you okay, Ren?” asks Robert.

You don’t know. You’re panting like a blown warhorse, and your skin feels like the backside of a sticky note. “What ... huh ...?”

“You were screaming in your sleep,” Stacy explains. She’s standing in the doorway, her hands wringing the lavender terry cloth of your robe. “You woke us all up, and when we came in you were thrashing around in your sheets.”

“Damn, you have a hard head,” Calvin groans. “Should’ve gotten out of the way faster.”

“I’m sorry,” you apologize. The longer you’re awake, the more your breathing evens out and the more you remember your dream. You shake your head, wanting to dislodge the scraps.

“It’s okay, but what about you? Were you getting murdered or something, because that’s what it sounded like.”

*It was you all actually*, you think but don’t say. You obviously can’t tell them what the dream’s about, because if they know that, they’re one step closer to finding out how damaged you are. You shake your head. “I don’t remember.”

“You can’t remember a nightmare that made you scream yourself awake?” Brian asks, finally speaking. “Is that even possible?”

You look him in the eye. “I just remember a lot of blackness. That’s it. And quite frankly it sounds like I wouldn’t want to remember the rest either.”

Robert nods. “Good choice.” He smothers a yawn with a hand, then takes a peek at your alarm clock. “Well, if you’re okay, Ren, I’m going back to bed.”

“I am.” You purposely tilt your head towards your bedroom door. “You all go back to sleep. I’ll be fine.”

“If you’re sure,” says Brian. Your friends leave, Calvin still rubbing his forehead and grumbling about getting an ice pack. When everything’s settled down and you sense everyone’s back in their rooms, you wiggle around in your sheets and lie back down.

You don’t sleep for the rest of the night.

Since home remedies failed, it’s onto the medication. You go for the over-the-counter stuff first, but ZzzQuil doesn’t provide the deep, dreamless sleep it advertises. This means taking the next step to prescription drugs, which you wanted to avoid. Making an appointment and getting the authorization for some imipramine is easy. It’s talking to your mother about the visit that’s hard.

“So much for doctor/patient privilege,” you growl into the phone. You were heading to the library after picking up your prescription when you got the call, and are now stuck sitting on a bench in front of the great stone building. If only you’d gotten inside five seconds faster.

“You used the credit card I gave you for emergencies and it showed up on the bill,” Mom explains. As you mentally berate yourself for making such a stupid mistake, you almost miss Mom’s next words.

“I looked up the medication. I know it’s used in treating night terrors.”

You rub a hand over your eyes, feeling the small but ingrained bags beneath them.

“I’m fine.”

“Honey —”

“It’s just some on and off nightmares about before. Nothing I can’t handle.”

There’s a pause on the other end. “He’s never going to hurt you again, Renée.”

The scowl that twists your face would send Leatherface running. “He wasn’t supposed to hurt me in the first place.”

Mom sighs. “Just promise me you’ll call if you have any more problems. Please, sweetie?”

The problem is your problems extend far beyond just the parole, and Mom can’t understand that as much as she wishes she could. Few can. But you nod and promise her, at least for her peace of mind, and hang up.

That night you take some imipramine before bed, and thank God it works. You sleep through the night, remembering nothing but a deep darkness when you wake up. It's the first time you've felt rested in a while, and it's noticeable to all of your friends.

"Sleep well?" Brian asks the same day. You're both heading to your shared biology class, tromping through the snow that covered campus last night, and he's been sneaking glances at you every once in a while. Any other time you would've told him to knock it off, but this time you allow it. It certifies how something's going right for once.

"Yes," you reply.

"Good for you," says Brian. He smiles that grin of his that shows all his teeth, meaning he's happy you're happy. It sets your heartbeat off, but you quash it and look away. You don't have time for emotions, especially those that won't be returned. Who would if you told them what your father did to you?

You should've known it wasn't good enough to last.

A few days into your treatment, you're all together having dinner when your hand suddenly starts shaking. You watch it, horrified, and try clenching your arm muscles to stop it, but it keeps trembling, eventually knocking your fork from your hand. It hits your plate loud enough to draw everyone's attention to your out-of-control limb.

"Ren, are you epileptic?" Stacy asks, looking at your fingers like they might come alive and strangle her.

"No," you say. Automatically you stick your hand in between your butt and your seat, but you still feel some quaking through your jeans.

“Then what was that?” Robert asks. Brian’s fork is still halfway up to his mouth and he looks at where your hand disappeared.

“Nothing,” you say, though you know that won’t satisfy anyone.

“That’s not nothing,” says Calvin, and since he’s sitting next to you, he’s the one that pulls your arm out and looks it over. Like Brian, he’s a med student, but is studying human medicine, not animal. He runs a thumb over your quivering knuckles. “Did you injure your hand somehow?”

“No,” you repeat, and attempt pulling your hand from his grasp. He doesn’t allow it.

“Then what’s going on?”

“Please don’t say nothing, Ren,” Brian interjects. “We know that’s not true.”

Damn it. You didn’t need a guilt trip. You still consider keeping your mouth shut, but there’s already enough lies between you and your friends, and anymore would be too much.

So you half lie. “I’m on some new medication to help me sleep, and this is just a side effect.”

“Pretty strong side effect,” Calvin notes. “Is that nightmare back?”

This time you do lie. “No. I’ve had trouble sleeping for a long time, and college is kind of exacerbating it.”

“Indeed. I’ve never had an all-nighter before coming here,” says Stacy, and you could name a continent after her for changing the subject.

Not that it really does as Calvin gives your hand a pat before letting go. “Get some new medication, Ren. Even if it’s working for you, if this is just one side effect, it’s not worth it.”

*But it is*, you think as you look at yourself in the bathroom mirror that night. Not seeing your friends bleeding out, not feeling completely helpless, not standing in his shadow anymore ... that's true freedom, and you're not giving that away for the world. So you ignore Calvin's suggestion and continue taking your medication, even as more side effects — dry mouth, headaches, and constipation — take hold. The pain is worth the peace.

Sadly, the peace doesn't last. The imipramine works only for a week before the nightmares return, sending you falling from your bed in a hot and sweaty mess. When you realize what's happened, you tell yourself it's just one night, that the medicine is still new and it's a single slip up. Three nights of sleepless terror later, you know otherwise, and in the privacy of your room you hide your tears and bang your hands against the floor.

When you're all cried out, you think you could make another doctor's appointment and try some other medication. But what if the next medicine doesn't work? You're already using something doctors only prescribe in severe cases; what else is left? Like an old friend, your knees are waiting as you curl into a ball and hide your face in their peaks. You're scared on a whole new level. The nightmares are too strong with how they break through your medicinal defense. They shouldn't be this powerful, and it's unnatural that they are. Looking to your side, you see your cellphone, and for a second you have a horrible idea. Call him. Call the jail and demand that he stop whatever spell he's put on you. In the same second, however, your phone hits the opposite wall and you bury yourself in fear. You shouldn't be scared, because when he's freed, he has restraining orders and a thousand miles to get through to get to you. But nothing you tell yourself can stop a new wave of tears that keeps you up all night. When you raise your head and see the early sun through your window, you

realize you don't want to dream. You don't want to suffer anymore from your darkest secret, or even worse, lose your friends. You don't know what else to do other than to not sleep.

That's why when you have breakfast that morning, you sneak a can of Stacy's caffeinated tea and down the whole thing. Your body wants sleep, but your will is stronger, and you spend the day running around on honey-flavored fumes. You make sure to buy your own pack of cans at the student store, and you have another one during dinner. Between the caffeine and your determination you pull an all-nighter spent getting ahead on homework and watching YouTube videos. The next morning features the return of the encroaching eye bags, but you didn't see your friends' hearts get ripped from their chests, and that's what matters.

Of course, you know this can't last forever, you think as you drink another can alongside your bowl of cereal. The body needs sleep, and you can only stay up so long before your body can't take it anymore. But maybe this is what you need; go a number of days without sleep, and then you'll be so tired, you'll sleep deeply enough that you don't dream.

With that and the caffeine in mind, you start pulling all-nighters. There are drawbacks. The chemical makes you jumpy, your stomach hurts, and you have to pee all the time. Worst of all, you can't concentrate on your homework. This shows during your midterms; you're so nervous and tired you can't focus, and in the end you know you've put down a lot of wrong answers.

On top of that, your friends have noticed. When you get back to the suite after your last midterm, Robert, who's in the same class, says, "I saw you struggling with the test. Is everything okay?"

You can't tell him. You can't tell any of them lest they find the skeleton that's dancing the can-can in your closet, kicking the door with each step.

“I don’t feel good,” you tell him another partial lie. “I think I’m catching the flu or something, and it’s been messing with my studying.”

“It’s that time of the year,” Robert agrees, looking at the snow outside the window.

“You been taking medicine?” Calvin asks, always ready to play doctor. “Cause no offense, Ren, but none of us want to get sick right now.”

You nod. “Yeah, but I think I’m going to go quarantine myself until whatever this is passes.”

Calvin and your three other suite-mates/friends accept your excuse, though Brian’s expression tells you he doesn’t believe squat. You look away and spend the rest of the day hidden away in your room studying furiously. That night you sneak down to the kitchenette while everyone’s asleep for your nightly caffeine fix.

You’ve been feeling drowsy despite all the tea, so you prepare some instant coffee and pour it into one of Calvin’s giant ‘all night study session’ mugs. One look at the stairs and you groan; you’re too tired to climb up the steps. You settle on the sofa, promising yourself that you’ll get back up to your room before the others wake up. To entertain yourself, you drink your coffee and read one of Stacy’s fashion magazines, but soon the words blur into gibberish. As you stare at the dregs at the bottom of Calvin’s mug, you wonder if it’s possible to relax without falling asleep. It’s with a shot. On goes the TV to some late night action movie (you make sure the volume’s high enough to keep you awake and not disturb anyone else) and you close your eyes to the sound of explosions.

But three seconds later, you fall asleep again. This dream is horrible; what’s real and not has become twisted, and the monster isn’t just using his fists, but also flamethrowers and

knives and other painful things. You're sobbing so hard, but you can't move. When you finally do, you feel something wet and sticky and it's his blood ...

Something warm touches your face, not wet but soft, and you wake up instantly to see a worried Brian standing in front of you, clearly not dead. The 'blood' was just your leftover coffee that you spilled while flailing around. A different movie is playing on TV.

"Renée?" Brian asks. "What are you doing down here? I thought you were sick." His voice is quiet, but he's looking at you so seriously that you suddenly wish you could cave in and tell him everything.

You lie instead. "I was feeling better, but the flu meds were keeping me up, so I thought I'd watch a movie. I must've fallen asleep."

"You were crying," he states. In the little light you have you can't help but acknowledge how handsome and mature he's gotten since you met as freshmen two years ago. He still acts childish sometimes, but he can be serious, and Brian wouldn't be Brian without his lame jokes anyway. You can't help thinking these things despite the bad timing, and that frightens you. You shove the thoughts away to be dealt with later.

"How did you hear me?" you ask him, hoping to divert his attention.

"I had to take a dump," he tells you. "Now really, what's wrong?"

"I told you, I —"

"You're sick and couldn't sleep." Brian crosses his arms over his chest, but his face pleads for the truth. "Why do I only believe half of that? Yeah, you're sick, anyone can tell looking at you, but it's not because of the flu. Did the nightmares return?"

When he gives you that insistent look, you waver a bit; it's hard to keep it all inside away from that stupidly effective puppy dog face. So you give him a watered down truth.

“Yes. My mom sent me an email concerning ... a family member of mine. He’s ... sick, and it has me worried.”

“Is it bad?”

You think of the nightmares, how they grossly parody real life, and nod insistently.

“Yeah. That’s why I can’t sleep. But that’s all. I got new medication, so I’m sure they’ll go away soon.”

He looks wary, but decides to drop it. You secretly breathe in relief.

“You still need to sleep,” he says.

“So do you.”

He shrugs. “I think I’ll watch a movie.”

“I’ll watch it with you,” you tell him. With the coffee gone, a movie and another person are the two things most likely to keep you awake.

He almost protests, but then he shrugs again and hops off the couch, and you regret saying anything because now he’ll worry when he doesn’t have to.

Oddly, he doesn’t pick another televised action flick. Rather he goes through his DVD collection and chooses an old black and white movie that you didn’t know he had.

“This always makes me sleepy,” he says, sitting on the other end of the sofa after popping the disk into the player.

Unsure of what to say, you just nod and start watching the film. As grayscale actors in period costumes move across elaborate sets, you snuggle down into the couch cushions and let the story unfold. Every once in a while you side peek at Brian, who’s just as engrossed and even mouthing some of the lines. It makes you consider scooting the distance between

you shut, but you don't. The feeling behind the idea is enough. Without anything bright or loud, you're quickly lulled off to sleep.

But this time you don't dream at all.

You wake up when you hear pots crashing in the kitchenette, and you see that it's morning and Calvin's cooking breakfast and for some reason unknown you've slept some six hours without a single dream disturbing you. You feel more awake, but you could still use more rest. You're afraid, though, to try again. Was this some mind trick?

Something snores nearby. You realize that sometime in the night your body followed your unspoken command and you're now sitting next to Brian with your head on his shoulder and your hand dangerously close to his. You leap up and away with a jerk, and he falls onto the cushions with a soft *plop*. Brian starts stirring, but with a smack of his lips he settles down. Good. You couldn't take it if he woke up. It's bad enough Calvin's observing the two of you like a romantic comedy waiting to happen. Thankfully, all he says when you enter the kitchen is, "Good morning, Ren."

"Morning." You eye the coffee maker hungrily as it hisses. "May I please have some of that?"

"The coffee? I thought you hated coffee. You said it's always bitter no matter how much stuff you add."

"I do, but I need the caffeine. Please?"

Calvin looks at you strangely, but he nods and gives you a mug and the coffee creamer before going to wake up Brian. You hear him ribbing him as you escape upstairs, but

Brian can take care of himself. As long as Calvin leaves you alone, that's what matters. You already have too many messes on top of your shoulders.

Like the voice in your head telling you you're losing it.

Like your mind being invaded.

Like your slipping grades.

Like your life turning completely upside down.

But like everything else, you can't tell anyone else what's going on, and you certainly can't mention how serious it's getting.

“We need to talk, Ren.”

You stop on your way to the showers as Robert pops out of his room behind. You already know what he wants to talk about. It's been a week since your impromptu sleepover with Brian, and since then your sleep schedule's gone back to nonexistent. Coffee has gone the way of tea, and now you're downing sickly sweet energy drinks so your eyes stay open. All the sugar and caffeine can't hide how your fatigued body is wasting away. The blind couldn't ignore that.

“What?” You ask without looking back at him.

“You know what,” Robert replies. “You don't join us for meals and the only food of yours in the fridge that you touch are those awful energy drinks. You look like a streetlight, you're so skinny.”

“It sounds like your English degree is paying off.”

Robert frowns. “I'm serious, Ren. What's wrong? Is there anything I can do to help?”

You shake your head. “No. If you want to know more, ask Brian, but I don’t need help. It’s my problem and I’m dealing with it.”

“It doesn’t —”

You finally look at him, turning around so fast your hair whips your face. “I said I don’t need help! And if you keep bugging me about this, I’ll go to the housing office and see if anyone needs a new roommate!”

That shuts Robert up, and you hurry on to the bathroom. But as hot water streams through your hair and down your back, you find yourself seated on the cold tile with your arms around your legs. How much longer can you last? Your body is dying, your mind is frying, and you’re slowly losing your friends. Ironic, considering you thought you’d keep them if you didn’t say anything. What more can you do?

An idea comes to mind — a horrible, awful idea based on the one thing you never wanted to do. However, you refuse to lose your friends, so later that night you swallow your nausea as you type the number into the phone. The dread grows as you talk your way through multiple people, and the moment you hear his voice your fear crescendos.

“Ren.”

You swallow hard. “Dad.”

Neither of you talk for a minute. Then Dad sighs. You can’t tell if it’s tired or relieved. “I never thought I’d hear you again. How are you?”

“I was fine until I heard about the parole.”

Dad sighs; this time it’s definitely tired.

“Say no,” you demand. “Say no, say you’ll serve out your full sentence.”

“Ren, it’s not that easy,” says Dad. “It’s already been decided.”

“Then do something so they take it away!” you shout. Fear has mostly given way to anger — anger at the situation, anger at the fact it even happened in the first place, anger at your dad for what he did. “Get found with drugs. Make the wardens mad. Pick a fight with an inmate. Better yet, get shivved by an inmate. God knows your death would do the world a favor!”

“Ren —”

“My life is falling apart all over again because of you! I can’t go one night without some nightmare about what you did to me. The only reason I’m calling you is because I hope they go away after facing my fears or some dumb shit.” You shake your head dislodging the tears stored up in your eyes. “But maybe this was a stupid idea, talking to someone who still doesn’t know the meaning of being a father.”

“I’m sorry —”

“Shut up and go die,” you snap, and you end the call. Getting under your bedsheets, you let yourself cry for everything you’ve lost, though part of you hopes that, despite what you said, confronting your father does make the night terrors disappear.

It doesn’t. That night is rife with horrors and wakefulness, and when morning comes you continue your daily energy drink consumption chug another can of liquid energy. A few days later, your body is approaching skeletal and you can’t even take notes because you’re too weak to hold a pen. Your friends are more worried than before. A few times Stacy looks like she wants to say something or take your beverage away, but Robert stops her each time. Your threat about moving out if anyone tries to help still hangs in the air, and you guess they

figure it's better not doing anything to keep an eye on you over wondering how you're doing somewhere else.

But the memo doesn't stick with Brian, because two months after all this started he finally decides enough is enough.

"Ren, you can't go on like this," he says one evening. You were perfectly fine sipping your drink in the kitchen, but that was before Brian entered. "I know you're not sleeping. You can tell me you're okay, but that's bullshit and you know it. Look at you! All this crap is just making your body worse." And like that, he snatches your large Monster away.

You get angry because he has no right to take that away and no idea what's happening to you. "Give it back," you demand.

He shakes his head. "Not until you tell me what's wrong."

"Give it back now!"

"No!"

You don't register what you do until you hear breaking glass. As if controlled by someone else, you'd grabbed the nearest glass drying by the kitchen sink and flung it at Brian's head. Thankfully he ducked, but for the first time since meeting him he looks scared of you.

You're scared too; you've never done anything like that before. "Sorry," you mumble before hurrying to your room. You curl up on your bed and try not to cry, but because you're so emotionally overwhelmed and tired, you do cry, and end up using up all the precious little energy you have and slipping into sleep, your eyelids falling like guillotines.

If there's a Hell, it's this nightmare. Everything is burning and bloody and distorted and you want to die. Anything to get away from hearing your friends screams as they're horribly tortured. The monster's now a full-fledged demon that rips them to pieces, and when he gets to a certain guy, he hurts him with the most terrifying horrors imaginable. You watch this over and over on rewind, unable to wake, help, or do anything.

Then, for the first time ever, he notices you, and with his sick grin widening he reaches for you. His touch is cold on your forehead, but it finally lets you unfreeze.

“NO!”

There's a flash of light, and you zoom upright, awake and crying. You're not in your dorm room, but rather some hospital room with mint green walls and generic furniture. Something moves to your left. It's Brian, who's looking worse than he ever has with matted hair and his own set of eye bags. Wordlessly he offers you water, which you drink plenty of because you're incredibly dehydrated.

When you're done, you look at Brian, who's watching you emotionlessly. This creeps you out, so you ask, “Are you okay?” because you can't stand the silence.

“How can you even ask me that?” he replies, and you're shocked when he scowls. “No, Ren, I'm not okay. How can I when I've been watching you scream and cry for two days? Because that's how long it was. We couldn't wake you. The doctor tried everything. It was like you were in a coma.”

He shudders. “The others were here, but they left. They couldn't handle it. Your screams ... I'm supposed to call them and the doc when you wake up.” He moves to stand, but your hand on his shoulder stops him.

“They left.”

He nods.

“But you stayed.” He nods again.

“Why didn't you tell us it was this bad?” he asks. “We would've helped. We were so afraid. You can't do this to us again.” He looks so sad, you want to comfort him, but he speaks again before you can.

“What was so bad about the dreams that you couldn't tell us?”

You open your mouth to lie, but you can't. The words won't come no matter how hard you think them, yet the truth is already sliding around on your tongue waiting to come out. A second later you realize why: you're tired. Tired of lying, tired of being scared, tired of not believing people will abandon you once they know the truth. You don't deserve that.

“The dreams were about my dad hurting you guys. He tortures you all in so many ways. There's always blood and fire and you all die. Especially you. And I can't stop it.”

You stare hard at your hands; it's the only way you can do this. “Dad was ... abusive. I remember him hitting my mom or me, whoever was convenient. Me getting beaten wasn't enough for Mom to leave or call the cops. She only did that after ... after he molested me.”

Your hands shake, and you grab your wrists for support.

“Dad was arrested and jailed, but now he's been given parole. There's a restraining order, but I'm so scared he'll come here and hurt me or you guys. Because you're my first real friends and I don't want to lose you.”

Everything's quiet when you finish speaking. You're frightened about Brian's reaction, and when he gently takes your chin and turns your eyes his direction, you expect disgust. Instead the utter mercy and loyalty building up in his expression is the best thing you've ever seen. It's so beautiful it makes you want to cry.

Brian closes his eyes and moves his hand from your chin to your own hand and grasps it. He doesn't talk for a long time, and when he does, he asks, off all questions, "Why were they worse when they were about me?"

You consider lying, but after all this, you can't.

"Because I like you."

You're still afraid. You know that it'll take time to recover from this whole experience. You don't know what will happen with your dad going forward. Yet despite the worries, you feel the nightmare's control starting to loosen in knowing Brian and your friends won't leave you and will help you get through this.

So when Brian leans in and hugs you tight, you let him.

## Psyche Observes

My first memory is of hands.

They were small, almost dainty, with long instrument-playing fingers that, nevertheless, worked like they were bigger and harder than they appeared. There was a distinct whisper of fingers dancing over my one and a half arms as further dimension and details were carved out. For a time that was all I knew of my sculptor given my lack of eyes, but her touch told me much about her; how she deeply cared for her work — for me — and as such went over the tiniest folds in my gown to the lines of my sandals and toes with repetitive precision.

One of the earliest and greatest moments of my existence was her creation of my head. First came my eyes, then my ears. My creator, an older woman with braided white hair and worn jeans was as I expected. She commanded her workshop with grace and ease while her drive infected her coworkers with a need to follow and please her. Yet she was also more. From time to time I could see her stare at the gold ring she wore on a chain around her neck, and sometimes she would converse with me over how much she missed her husband.

“Donny was a real gem,” she told me one night near my completion. She stood above my completed form on a ladder and carved out the resplendent curls that were my hair. I would have tilted my head back if I could, but my demure gaze forward would have to do. “He supported me when I started taking commissions and putting the old studio art degree to use. Said I didn’t need a museum to house my work. ‘The world is your display hall,’ he told me.”

I heard her sigh behind me, her hand trembling slightly as she uncovered another strand. “We never had any children. Just wasn’t meant to, I suppose. Probably could’ve adopted or fostered, but we got wrapped up too quickly in ourselves to think of that. But when I got the call about you, a new fountain with a lovely lady on display. I couldn’t help but think ...” Here her voice caught, and it took some time before she spoke again, “I couldn’t help but think of you as a daughter.”

She never made me a heart (rather she left my chest hollow for room for the water spout), but I could conceive what a heartbeat was and how, if I had one at that moment, mine would’ve thudded out a song of love for her. The feeling stayed throughout my finalization and assembly, setting me in a fine white basin high above the maddening crowd and running pipes through my body like veins. My creator cried at the unveiling ceremony, her tears as sure as the water that streamed out of my fingers and from the crown of my head. Later on she would come visit occasionally, sitting at the base reading a book or drawing her next project. She never said a word then, but I remembered and knew what she thought of me, the pale Greek maiden with demure eyes and arms positioned as if to embrace the world. It’s what I’ve kept to myself ever since she stopped showing up.

And it’s what I’ve seen in the people that congregate around my tiny continent in this world.

A boy old enough to be on his own, but still young enough for strangers to keep an eye on him, sits on one of the benches encircling my bottom basin. He’s twisted around, so instead of looking forward, he’s peering into the bubbly water waiting to stream through my body once again. Occasionally he sticks his finger in and pushes at one of the coins that

passersby occasionally throw in. The cleaning and maintenance crew in charge of my welfare, who belong to one of the buildings surrounding my courtyard, does not like when people do that, and they grumble under their breath about how easily a single dime could get into the pipes or filtration and break me. I myself do not mind; there is a beauty in seeing a tiny girl or an elderly man wish for what they want and how the words themselves bring a smile to their faces. Let people do what gives them peace.

“Danny!”

The boy sits up and turns around. He watches as an elegant lady in a trim navy skirt suit and yellow flats comes over to him. Up close I see how her face is made up with pearly pinks, yet a paleness and skinniness comes through the makeup that can't be ignored.

“Danny!” the woman calls again. The boy's name is followed by some heavy breathing and coughing, which has Danny up from the bench and over by the lady in an instant.

“You okay, Mom?” Danny asks. He loops an arm through hers and takes her back over to the bench.

She perches on the end and nods her head. “Yes, dear. I'm fine.”

From the hunch of her back I know she's lying. And from the furrowed brow on Danny's face, he knows she's lying as well. All he says, however, is, “How was work?”

“It was good! Remember the Johnson case?”

The boy nods.

“Well, it turns out there are such things as happy endings. The sisters do get to keep their inheritance after all and not the aunt. Turns out she was deliberately sabotaging the will for a chance to get their inheritances.”

“So now the sisters get their money?”

“Yes. They followed through with the last requests and fulfilled the will.” Danny’s mother gives him a side hug, but sighs tiredly into his hair.

“You okay?” Danny asks.

“The whole situation was weird,” the mother confesses. “Weird and sad. The aunt wanted to take in Ms. Johnson and her sisters back when their parents died, but when the grandmother did instead it created this whole rift between the family. The aunt was so bitter she even turned her own daughter against her nieces.”

“Really?”

“Really.” There’s a moment of quiet before Danny’s mother pulls her face out of his hair and replaces it with her hand, carding her fingers through it. “I’m glad I have my job, but sometimes it gets old seeing people squabble over money when there’s so many other, more important things to love.”

Danny nods. “It stinks when family hurts family.”

His words carry a hidden weight and meaning that truly isn’t hidden at all, given how his mother freezes in her seat, her stance rigid. His words easily invite a fight, and I wonder if the invitation will be accepted. But eventually the mother relaxes.

“It does stink,” is all she said. They sit there a little longer, making small talk before the mother checks her watch and says it’s time to go. The two rise up, prompting another coughing fit for the mother that’s rougher than the first one. As Danny leads her away, I catch the look in his eyes, the slope of his brow. It’s the same face my creator made when she remembered her husband.

I hope Danny doesn’t reach the same point of sadness as well.

A group of teenage girls laugh loudly at some joke, their arms loaded with shopping bags. When they take a break on a bench at my basin, one girl foolishly balances a bag on my rim as she digs around in her purse. For a second the bag stays in place, the product inside bending to fit the curve, but the weight is unbalanced and soon the whole bag plops into the water. The girl shrieks and snatches it out while her friends laugh, and it turns out that the sweaters inside the bag did get wet. She curses loudly, whining about how you can't get cashmere wet, then glares up at me and curses me out too. If my face could move, I'd glare back and snap off something that would leave her ears bleeding.

From around behind me comes a young man, mid-twenties, dressed in a basic gray business suit with a leather messenger bag hanging over his shoulders. He stops and glances around nervously; clearly he is waiting for someone. When that someone doesn't show, he takes a seat and pulls a brown lunch sack out of his bag. He starts eating the sandwich inside, occasionally looking around. I puzzle over his behavior, though I've seen the display many times over. His youth and his clothes all point to a new hire, a new job in which this young man is entering the working world and has no idea what to do.

"Clayton!"

The now named Clayton looks up so fast he chokes on his mouthful of sandwich. He coughs and sputters as another young man in a similar suit but with rich dark skin comes over. "You okay? I didn't mean to scare you."

"I'm — I'm fine," Clayton stutters. He coughs again and pulls a refillable yellow water bottle out of his bag and takes a drink. "Just so-some food down the wrong pipe."

“I hate it when that happens.” The African American sits next to his friend and pulls out his own lunch, a chicken Caesar salad in a Styrofoam box. He opens it and starts digging around with a plastic fork, unaware of how his companion keeps peeking at him.

Eventually Clayton asks, “How-how’s your day been so far, Tariq?”

“It’s been okay,” Tariq replies.

“Just okay?”

“Not like anything bad has happened,” he explains, taking a bite of lettuce and chicken. He chews and swallows before speaking again. “Just that I’m, like, still in the process of getting used to the job, you know?”

Clayton nods furiously. “Yeah. I know what you mean. I still stumble over my-my tongue when I take sale calls. I’m worried what Mr. Weissly wil-will say about that.”

“It’s kind of weird, you being placed on the call team. I’ve seen your ad ideas when the team’s brainstorming, and they look so professional.” Tariq wipes some dressing off his upper lip with the back of his hand. “If you said something, I bet Weissly would change you over. You got the talent for it.”

Clayton goes a ripe cherry red and, seeing that, I grasp the situation. Clayton is nervous about his job, yes, but he’s also nervous about his coworker sitting next to him. He likes him! Water shoots out of my hair and hands. Clayton jumps and turns in his seat.

“What was that?”

“Just the fountain. Weissly says it does that sometimes.” Tariq eyes me carefully, then shrugs and goes back to his salad. Clayton also gives me a look over like he thinks I’ll explode and shoot water everywhere, but then he focuses back on Tariq. The two men talk, or at least Tariq talks. Clayton mostly hums and nods, hanging on to whatever words comes

out of his beloved's mouth. At random points in the conversation he glances at Tariq's hand holding the Styrofoam box, and his fingers curve like they've followed through with what their owner wants and are holding his beloved's hand. My silent support means little; for the rest of lunch the shy young man does little more than check Tariq out of the corner of his eye when his friend isn't looking. Part of me wonders if Tariq will notice.

"That hit the spot." Tariq crumples up the paper napkin he used and drops it into the salad box before closing it. "How was your sandwich?"

"It was good," Clayton mumbles.

"It looked good. You make it yourself?"

Clayton shrugs. "Yeah, but it's nothing special. Anyone can make a sandwich."

Tariq laughs. "I just don't have the patience for any type of cooking no matter what little time it takes."

Clayton eyes the salad container. "Um, well, I—I could ...I could make you a lunch and bring it."

It's clear Tariq didn't catch anything when he cocks his head and asks, "Did you say something, Clayton, or am I hearing things?"

He furiously shakes his head. "Nope. I didn't say anything!"

Tariq squints at him but doesn't say anything. A glance at his watch has him announcing that their lunch break's almost up. The two men rise and leave, and as they go Clayton gives Tariq one last secret glance before he hangs his head and sighs. Nothing would please me more than to go over and give him a pat on the back.

Curse these carved feet.

A glamorous woman talks on her phone. Looking at her, you think she's a movie star or a model: her hair is perfectly in place, her makeup is flawless, and her wardrobe, from her cheetah-print stilettos up to the tailored white pantsuit to the wide-framed sunglasses perched on her head, is a photo shoot out of *Vogue*. The one difference is she's holding a toddler in her free arm. He looks about three years old and is dressed as fashionably as his mother with black shorts and a white button down. As they pass by the mother stops, pauses, then takes a seat as her conversation turns into an argument. Placing her child next to her, she pulls a toy car out of the large tote she has and offers it to the boy without even looking. He takes it but instead of playing with it puts it on the bench and stands up, climbing over the basin and standing in the water. The mother, so busy on the phone, doesn't notice any of this, especially when her son wrestles his shorts open and starts urinating. Passersby either laugh or stare, horrified, but one brave soul tells the mother what's going on. When she sees what's happening, her face goes burgundy and she starts yelling at the boy. Yanking him out of the fountain and jerking his shorts back up, she scolds him over his own crying. She storms off, her wailing son at her hips. I can't find it in myself to feel any sympathy for him.

I hear him before I see him; a rough voice that can't carry a tune but doesn't care at all. It's a made-up ditty that's either very soft or very loud, and some people walking by stare to my left with wrinkled brows. The singer soon appears. He's old with salt-and-pepper stubble and dirty clothes consisting of blue jeans, boots, a flannel shirt, and a long olive coat with mud on the hem. Homeless, obviously, and I can't help but feel sorry for his situation. When so many objects like myself have a place in the world compared to the number of people who don't, you have to wonder.

The homeless man passes under the shadow I'm casting, then pauses. He backs up until he's again standing in my silhouette and looks up at me. He takes me in, running his eyes over the folds of my dress and the curls of my hair, and smiles.

"Well aren't you a sight for sore eyes," he declares.

I, of course, say nothing, though I'm curious about where this will go. Many people have looked at me and some said to another how the fountain with the Greek girl on top is absolutely lovely, but this is the first time someone's ever talked to me directly.

"And what is your name, beautiful one?" the homeless man asks, coming closer.

"Aphrodite? Athena? Hera? You could be any of them."

His rambling has gotten the attention of some sitting on a few of the benches, and they're eyeing him like he's speaking in tongues and may erupt into flames. But it's like he doesn't see them.

"You know the story of Paris," the homeless guy continues. "How this basic shepherd boy suddenly becomes the judge of who's the prettiest of the three. They all offer something; Hera power, Athena wisdom, and Aphrodite love, and Paris chooses love. But he chose wrong. Helen was already married and in love with her husband, and that didn't matter to either the man or the goddess. Love wasn't sacred to either of them, and look what happened because of their profanity."

He slouches forward and sits on a bench, draping his arm over the back and letting his hands hang into the basin. A young couple sitting nearby get up and leave, throwing the poor man disgusted looks. He doesn't notice.

"I'd rather you were Psyche," he tells me, tilting his head back until he's staring at me upside-down. "Now she knew love. Cupid fell in love with her and treated her like she

deserved even with Aphrodite on his case. Of course there was the time she saw him when she wasn't supposed to, but that wasn't completely her fault. Cupid installed doubt in her. It's actually a nice metaphor for how you need trust in a relationship, you know?"

I do know, given the number of couples I've seen break up in front of me. There is always a variation of tears and fighting, but it never stops being heartbreaking. Part of the reason is because, in an odd way, it reminds me of my creator and her own successful relationship and how that's something everyone deserves.

"Once she realizes though, Psyche does everything to get him back," the homeless man continues. He smiles, showing a mouthful of yellow but unbroken teeth. "Walks right into the devil's lair — 'because I mean what better way to describe Aphrodite? — and asks to see him. She always keeps that wish in mind no matter what the bitch throws at her, and even when she's close to giving up she keeps going anyway because she knows love's worth it."

He sits up and turns more towards me, his eyes alight. "Yeah, that's who you are! You're Psyche 'because you look like the face of love."

Not even my own creator has said such beautiful words to me. Part of me wonders why he's saying this and what happened that makes him serenade a statue, but a bigger, blooming empathy is pervading every inch of stone to where the water in my pipes is warm like a comforting bath.

"Hey! You!"

The homeless man glances over his shoulder and gasps. Two security guards from one of the buildings are striding towards him, and while they don't look hostile, the fact

they're present means someone reported the poor man. He pops up from the bench and runs away, but not before shouting back at me, "See you later, Psyche! Keep loving us!"

Danny and his mother have returned. Not that I haven't seen them; with the mother working nearby, their daily schedule consists of him stopping by after school so they can go home together. But it has been some time since they last sat under me, and the difference that has overtaken the mother is shocking. She's now visibly ill: her skin is white, her face is skeletal, and the cap she's wearing can't hide her hairless head. Her clothes are no longer skirts and blazers, but yoga pants and a thick sweatshirt and coat even though it's not too chilly out. Sitting side by side on a bench, they lean against each other like they're the only support they have during this silent but deadly storm.

They haven't spoken in a long time, but eventually Danny asks, "What's gonna happen now?"

His mother sighs, rubbing the arm she has around Danny's shoulder. "Well, today I put in my resignation form for work, but we have enough to cover the medical bills and any other extra costs. Your grandma will be flying in to stay with us as long as she needs to."

"And then?"

"And then," his mother shifts in her seat, looking pained by the motion, "and then she'll take you with her when it's all said and done."

Danny sniffs, rubbing furiously at his eyes. "I don't want you to go."

"I don't want to go either."

"Are you sure the doctors can't do anything more?"

“It’s terminal, sweetheart. All I can do is live the best and most I can with what I have left.”

At that, Danny buries his head into his mother’s shoulder and starts shaking. His mother hugs him tight and cries along with him, slightly rocking back and forth. Even I, with the spout in my hair continuously running water over my face, sense a bitterness to the drops that drip into my eyes before sliding down my stone skin. It’s such a private moment, I wish I could turn away and leave them be, but of course I can’t, and guilt creeps in. There is a similarity, however, that I cannot deny between them and my creator, how they both cry over love but hold onto it as tight as a life raft in the midst of a hurricane. It’s beautiful and sad and strong, and when Danny pulls his face out of his mother’s shoulder I can see how he’s preparing for the upcoming turmoil. He’s not happy about it obviously, but he is taking it the best he can.

With this type of news, that’s the best he can do.

A happier note appears some time later when Tariq and Clayton take their lunch on my bench again. They have **done** that many times since Clayton first began working around here and seeing their friendship blossom is a highlight. The only downside is Clayton remains incredibly shy about confessing his feelings towards his friend, though I can’t blame him for it. Whispers and cruel words have floated over the water enough times that I know not all love is appreciated, which I find rather ridiculous.

“How have, um, the cooking lessons been going?” Clayton asks. Today his suit is fancy, navy blue with a strong cut to the shoulders. His lunch is a vibrant red curry with chunks of meat and scoops of rice mixed in.

“You know, they’re not that bad,” Tariq replies, looking polished as always. He gestures with the sandwich he’s holding. It’s burnt black along the edges but otherwise looks okay. “Managed to make this grilled cheese without setting the smoke alarm off.”

Clayton chuckles. “Yeah, do-don’t do that.”

Tariq nods before motioning towards Clayton’s meal. “What’s that you got there? Looks like curry.”

“It is. Spicy tomato with grilled lamb over spinach-fried rice.”

“Damn.” Tariq lets out a slow whistle. “Remind me why you don’t want to be a professional chef?”

“It’s just a ho-hobby,” Clayton replies. “I enjoy it, but I al-also like this job, especially now that Weissly has, uh, put me on the team.”

Tariq almost spits up his sandwich. “No shit! When’d that happen?”

“Just before we met up.”

“That’s great, man. Told you you’d be great in that section, and here we are.” He tosses the remains of his sandwich and pulls out his phone. “We gotta celebrate this, Clayton. Let’s hit Gilly’s after work.”

“Act-actually, um,” Clayton starts saying. He mumbles something under his breath, sets down his curry, and blurts out, “Would-would you like to-to go to dinner with me?”

Tariq raises a brow at Clayton’s behavior but takes it in stride. “Sure. We can go with Payton, Freddie, Alejandro —”

“No! No,” says Clayton, his face red enough to burst. Is he — “I mean ... I mean just the two of us.”

The both of us watch as Tariq's eyes widen and his dark cheeks go darker. The longer he's quiet, the more Clayton shakes and the more I wish I could hug him. But when I think the worst will happen, Tariq's gaze softens and a smile like a curve of the moon lights up his face. "Of course."

Clayton almost misses the reply, but he doesn't, and it's clear he can't believe this is going so well for him. "O-okay then. Um, I know this excellent Thai place ..."

They talk quietly after that, making dinner plans much like my creator would do with her husband over the phone. I'm so proud of Clayton I let my pipes squeak with joy, startling both men. And when lunch is over and they leave, Clayton boldly brushes his hand against Tariq's, who takes hold of it with a simple smile.

Night comes as quietly as it can in the city. So many people are out going to dinners or shows or clubs; it's less formal than the day and has a current of excitement not even the tourists show. But as the evening goes on, the flow can't keep up with the demand for sleep, and gradually pedestrians disappear until the only company I have are the golden lights built into my basin that shine upon me. The world is a stage and I am a one person play.

"Good evening, Psyche."

It's the homeless man from before. Since his first visit he's come around a few times and talks to me. He tells me about his day and his life, showing there's a hint of a sharp mind beneath whatever he suffers from. As much as I like listening to him, he's always chased off by security before too long. He has never come around at night before, so perhaps he's changed his strategy.

“You’re looking beautiful tonight,” the homeless man says, staring at the lights before looking up into my face. “The lights reveal yourself.”

I’d blush if I could.

“Today was hard, Psyche,” says the homeless man, taking a seat. “Found a nice little corner to sit and beg at; there was an overhang and it was near a warm grate. But I didn’t get to stay long before some store owner came and started hassling me and saying he would call the police on me. I moved on but couldn’t find any other place to stay in, and some kids tried beating me up on their way home from school.” He gestures to a bruise shadowing his cheek bone, then tiredly exhales. “I didn’t ask for this, Psyche. I didn’t ask to be on the streets living hand to mouth, being looked at like I’m living crap. ‘Because I’m not. I’m a human being, and I swear you’re the only one who realizes that.”

How strong stone is; what gives me strength also weighs me down. What good is listening to everyone’s problems if I can’t offer help?

“Hey!”

The homeless man spins around and we both watch a security guard approach. He’s younger than my admirer, in his forties, with white blond hair and an unreadable face. Normally he’s one of the day guards who usually chases the homeless man away. It seems he has the night shift for once.

Another oddity occurs when, instead of running away, the homeless man stands his ground. “I don’t want any trouble,” he says. “I never have.”

The guard stares at him. “Why do you keep coming around here?”

“For my lady.” He points up at me. “Her name is Psyche, and she’s the most loving being I’ve ever seen in my whole life.”

“She’s a statue.”

“A statue with love in her eyes. You can’t say the same for some people these days.”

The guard’s face breaks with a frown, but he comes over and stands next to the homeless man and looks at me.

“She doesn’t judge,” the homeless man continues. “And if she could speak she’d offer words of comfort. I know she would. It’s carved into her like the stone she’s made of.”

The guard keeps staring, and my admirer falls silent and rejoins him. There’s a moment of quiet before the guard says, “You know, I’ve worked here for almost ten years and I’ve never really looked at this fountain before.”

“You see it then? How she carries love in her from whoever made her? Just look upon her and you feel loved too.” He shivers from either excitement or the brisk breeze blowing about.

The guard looks at him, then at me. A decision plays across his face before he speaks again. “Come with me.”

The homeless man pales. “Please don’t call the cops. I’ll —”

“I’m not calling the cops,” says the guard. He sighs and scratches the back of his head. “Probably breaking some rules doing this, but you can come hang around with me at the front desk until my shift’s over.”

“You sure? I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

The guard slightly smiles at that. “As long as you don’t do anything illegal, I think we’ll be okay. You won’t do anything illegal, will you?”

“No sir.” The homeless man shakes his head. “If anything I’ll probably plop down and sleep.”

The guard nods and leaves, the homeless man trailing behind him. As they leave, the guard says, "My name's Ike, by the way. What's yours?"

"Pyg Maloney," says the homeless man. The guard arches an eyebrow but doesn't say anything, and at the last moment Pyg turns around and waves at me.

"Good night, Psyche!" he calls out. "Thank you for this! I love you!"

For all my wishes that I could help him, it turns out a simple look gives him what my creator felt for me.

Princess of Pluto

“Daddy, I’m home!”

Mr. Bierbaum didn’t look up from his computer screen. “In the study.”

There was the sound of little feet, and a mess of chestnut curls flashed into view as Janie ran into the room, radiating eight-year-old energy with every step. “Hi, Daddy!”

“Hi sweetie.” He pushed his wheelie chair backwards and swiveled around in time to catch her in his arms. “How was school?”

“Really, really good. Math was fun; we added and subtracted really big numbers, and Ms. Walker said we’re gonna start multipic — multiplee —”

“Multiplication?”

“Yeah, that! We’re gonna start learning that soon. And I played on the swings at recess. Carol pushed me.”

“That was nice of her.”

Janie nodded into his shoulder before letting go and pulling her backpack off her shoulders. “And — and Show and Tell was cool. Nolan brought in these really shiny crystallly rocks he found, though he said we’d have to pay five bucks if we wanted to hold them.”

Mr. Bierbaum gasped, turning back to the computer. “That’s highway robbery!”

His daughter giggled as she pulled out a bunch of papers and a glass jar. It was full of grayish liquid. “My presentation went nice too.”

“Did it?”

“Yeah! I showed them the drawings of our castle on Pluto and what the ice mermaids looked like. I also told them about that time we went to Mars on vacation when we hit that asteroid and my crown melted and we had to wear those shield thingys to protect ourselves.”

“Force field generators.”

“Yeah, that. I wanted to show them my space rock collection, but then school ended and we had to get on the bus.” Janie held out a baggie full of tan and black rocks and shook it. “I’ll just take them in next Show and Tell.”

“Did your classmates like it?”

“Yeah, they laughed a lot.”

Mr. Bierbaum’s fingers paused on the keyboard.

“Nolan asked if the asteroid hit me on the head and I lost my mind, but I told him we only lost the pictures and some of our luggage.”

The words on the screen blurred, he stared at them so hard. “I see.”

Janie pulled down one of her drawings and looked at the scraggy lines that depicted the pointed towers of their castle on Pluto. She sighed. “I miss Mom.”

“Me too.” Mr. Bierbaum looked at his little girl, then out the study window. The mid-afternoon sunshine sparkled across the mailbox at the end of their driveway. The red flag was raised.

“Hey, why don’t you check the mail and see if Mommy sent you anything?” he suggested. “It’s been some time since you sent your last letter. Even if she’s busy being queen, she must’ve sent something back by now.”

That pepped Janie up like a joy grenade. “Great idea, Daddy!”

“Don’t forget the other mail, too!” Mr. Bierbaum called out as Janie rushed away. The door shut hard, and in the silence his eyes fell onto the family picture on his desk. He smiled softly. It was the three of them at Janie’s third birthday party. Amid the flurry of wrapping paper and squealing kids from Janie’s daycare, the three of them had found time for a picture. Colorful party hats sat crooked on each of their heads, and Janie’s smiling lips had chocolate icing smeared around them.

That was Janie’s last birthday before her mother went back to space.

“Daddy!” Janie reentered the housing, slamming the door shut as she torpedoed in. “Daddy, daddy, daddy!”

“Yes, yes, yes, yes?” Mr. Bierbaum responded.

She jumped for joy in the study’s doorway. In her hands was a clear tube with a silver stopper on each end. Inside he could make out a letter and a sparkly blue pendent.

“You were right, Daddy! A letter did come, and it’s got a present too!”

“Well, good. Mind if I read it?”

Janie hugged the package to her chest. “No! It’s my letter. You can wait for your own.”

Mr. Bierbaum chuckled. “All right, fair enough. You go read that and then start your homework, okay? Call me if you need any help.”

“Okay!” Janie agreed. She dashed forward and scooped up her show and tell, carefully handling the jar. As she ran out and up the stairs, she called out, “Oh, and Ms. Walker told me she wants to talk to you again!”

Mr. Bierbaum sighed. He already knew what type of conversation the teacher had in mind. The clock on his computer said 2:48; if he called now he might reach her. He picked up his cellphone and called her school.

“This is Eagle Valley Elementary. How may I assist you?”

“Hello. I’d like to talk to Ms. Walker if she’s still available, please.”

“Wait just a moment, please.”

There was the buzz of background noise, then a click. “Hello, this is Ms. Walker.”

“Hello, Kelly. It’s Anthony.”

“Mr. Bierbaum.”

There was a moment of silence before he continued. “Janie said you wanted to talk to me again.”

There was a sigh on the other end of the line. “She presented drawings of herself as the princess of Pluto during today’s Show and Tell.”

“Yes, she did. She told me it went well except for someone worrying about whether or not she’d suffered brain damage.”

“I told Mr. Taratti to stop.”

Mr. Bierbaum pinched his brow. “Just like you told him to stop the last how many times?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Bierbaum, but as long as it’s just words the best I can do is take away his recess,” Ms. Walker said. “But going back to Janie, her behavior is ... worrisome.”

“Kelly —”

“She’s a bright, smart girl, Anthony. I’m just concerned how this will affect how she makes friends later on.”

“She has friends. Just now she told me how she played with Carol on the swings at recess today.”

“There’s a difference between a friend and someone who lets you tag along.” Ms. Walker sighed again. “Look, I’m not trying to tell you how to be a parent . . .”

“You’re not. If anything, you’ve been the most understanding so far.” Mr. Bierbaum looked at the birthday photo again, taking in his wife’s beaming face. “I’ll try to think of something, but I’m not concerned. As long as she’s happy and no one’s getting hurt, it’s okay. She’ll figure things out eventually.”

The two adults chatted some more — at one point Ms. Walker asked if he’d like being a parental attendant for the grade’s upcoming field trip to their local nature center, which he accepted — before hanging up. As he did so, Janie called out from upstairs.

“Daddy! I need help with language arts!”

“Coming!”

Contrary to what the newspaper and his weather app had said, the day of the field trip dawned brilliant and sunny, though there was a remaining hint of winter air to the breeze. Janie was ecstatic the whole morning, saying through mouthfuls of cereal and his poor attempts at braiding her hair that she couldn’t wait to find some pretty Earth plant to send her mother along with her next letter. Her happiness had been so contagious, Mr. Bierbaum had said yes to his daughter’s invitation to sing along in the car for once, and for the entire ride to school daughter and father sang “Space Man” too many times to count.

After another ride, this time on a chatter-filled bus, they’d arrived at the park. For the whole morning the kids sat in the greeting center and listened to the park rangers talk about

the park's history, what it was like being a ranger, and the importance of the park's ecosystem. And now here they were, surrounded by acres of trees just only putting on their new green clothes.

Mr. Bierbaum sniffed the clean air. It was decided the group would take a little hike to one of the park's best clearings for lunch, and he was in the back of the pack, watching the backsides of Janie's classmates in case there was any trouble. Speaking of his daughter, he could see her up near the front, walking with Carol and her friends. He could also see Nolan Taratti talking with a skinny boy with blond hair and glasses, and the two of them kept throwing random looks in Janie's direction. His lips flattened together, and he silently hoped that the boy wouldn't try anything with him present.

They reached on the hardest part of the hike: a steep slope that rose out of the level ground and wrapped to the left. Thankfully it was a wide incline, and there were thick wooden railings and board-bound dirt steps lining the whole way up. Up at the top there was a little lookout point and a tan sign talking about the parks' birds. Ms. Walker, along with the two other teachers from Janie's grade, took this as another learning opportunity and began lecturing the students as they reached the top. Of course, not every kid listened.

"Seriously?" That was Carol, who was looking at Janie, who was looking at the pendant her mother gave her. "It's a crystal from Pluto?"

Janie nodded. "Yep. Mommy said it's very valuable."

"Does it do anything?" one of Carol's friends asked, her auburn pigtails flung over her shoulders.

"Yeah! It's a personal navigation system."

"What's that?"

“It’s what they used to call Google Maps,” Janie explained, and Mr. Bierbaum chuckled from his position on the steps. His daughter took the necklace off and held it up to the sky, letting the sun skip across the smooth surface. “You either wear it or hang it in your space ship and tell it where you wanna go, and then it leads you to it. Mommy says it’s very helpful for, for flying through space and you can’t see where you’re goin’ ‘cause there’s asteroids in the way or the stars are shining in your eyes even with sunglasses on.”

The girls nodded, happily accepting the answer. Janie moved to put the pendant back on. Before she did, it was snatched from her hands.

“So you can fly now?” Nolan asked.

Mr. Bierbaum frowned. The dad part of him considered going right up and telling the boy off, but the reasonable part told him it wouldn’t do anyone any good if he did. Maybe nothing bad would happen after all.

“Um, I always could,” said Janie. “And hi Nolan. Kerry.”

“You really think this is some magic rock?” Nolan’s friend asked, pushing his glasses up his nose.

“Hey, I wonder if you can talk to Uranus on this thing!” Nolan teased.

“Pluto!”

“Earth to Uranus!” Nolan continued, holding the necklace up to his mouth and cupping his free hand around his lips. “Come in Uranus! We got your alien here!”

Nolan’s loud jeering caught the attention of all the kids, the teachers, and the other parents who’d volunteered. Looking back on it, it was understandable that the kids only watched. Maybe it was even reasonable that the other parents simply whispered about how glad they were that their kid wasn’t so weird or mean. What wasn’t okay was how Ms.

Walker and the rest of the teachers simply stood there. Maybe they were like him and waited to see if Nolan stopped on his own accord, but Mr. Bierbaum already knew he wouldn't. Frowning darkly, the concerned father hurried up the steps, though he was slowed by the students still standing in the way.

“Please give it back, Nolan!” Janie asked, polite even when being bullied. “My mommy gave me that. It's important!”

She reached out for it, but Nolan pulled away and squirreled himself onto the lookout deck. Below the rough wall of the incline descended to the forest floor, covered with new plant life and the remains of last falls' leaves.

“You mean the Queen?” The boy held the necklace over the railing. His grin was mean. “If she's so powerful let her Pluto highness come and get it!”

“Uranus! ... I mean ...”

Some of the students couldn't help but laugh at Janie's slip-up, though the sound finally sent Ms. Walker into action.

“Nolan Taratti, stop that at once!” she scolded, carefully yet quickly pushing her way through her students. “If you don't apologize and give Janie her necklace back right now, I'm sending you to the principal's office when we get back.”

Mr. Bierbaum paused from where he now stood a couple yards away. Ms. Walker may have taken her time reacting, but she'd closed in faster than he could and would look better doing it. That didn't matter to Nolan, who with barely a glance at either his teacher or Janie swung his arm back and threw the pendant through the air. It scored the sky, blue on blue in a quick arch, before landing in the branches of a tree right across from the landing. The chain wrapped fast around the twig.

“Nolan, what did I tell you?” Ms. Walker chastised him. Mr. Bierbaum sighed. From where he stood he couldn’t see his daughter’s face, but if she was crying Nolan’s parents wouldn’t just get a call from their son’s principal.

“What? It’s just some boring old necklace,” Nolan said. He looked at Janie, wearing a smug smile and gesturing towards the piece of jewelry with his hand. “Besides, getting it back isn’t a problem for someone who can fly, right?”

Janie didn’t protest or get angry. She did, however, leap onto the railing and jump into the air, reaching towards the necklace with all her determination. It was so sudden, so unpredicted, that no one could stop her, least of all a horrified Mr. Bierbaum.

“JANIE!”

He extended his arm as if he could reach her from his position while Ms. Walker practically threw her own self over the railing, grabbing at his girl. There was a moment of stillness where Janie almost floated in the air, an astronaut on her first mission to somewhere new and amazing. And then she looked down. Gravity got its grasp on Janie and pulled her down. Without any cry or scream, the princess of Pluto fell to Earth.

*Crunch.*

Mr. Bierbaum plucked at his beard. “I’ll be completely gray before you even enter double digits, sweetheart.”

“You’d still look really nice!” said a bedridden but smiling Janie.

Recalling everything from when Janie tried flying to now was difficult. He did remember he and Ms. Walker dashing down and over to Janie’s body and the overwhelming relief he’d felt on discovering his daughter alive. Everything else was a fast forwarding of

shouting, ambulances, and hospital halls. It all slowed down only when a doctor looked Janie over and said she'd be okay. Under the circumstances, the girl got lucky, only breaking her right arm and straining her neck. There were no signs of a concussion, but her doctor said they wanted to keep her overnight just in case.

“That’s not the point, Janie,” he said gently. “The point is you can’t fly.”

Janie’s grin dropped, and she pouted guiltily. “I know. I forgot Earth has seventeen times more gravity than Pluto does.”

Mr. Bierbaum would’ve hit himself if Janie wasn’t in the room. This was partly his fault; over-embellishing the details of his daughter’s fantasy had been harmless when she was young, but now she was old enough to follow through on such claims. Maybe Ms. Walker was right.

“We’re never gonna see Mommy again, are we?”

That jolted Mr. Bierbaum out of his head. He watched as Janie turned her head towards the windows and took in the sky. Her smile was back, but this time it was sad.

He paused for a moment, then sighed. “No, sweetie. Mommy’s not coming home.”

There was a moment of silence before Janie twisted in her seat, grabbing the notepad and pen she’d been doodling with when he first came in. She stared at him imploringly.

“Is it okay, though? That I keep writing letters to Pluto?”

Mr. Bierbaum felt his mouth part as he stared at his daughter. The light coming from the window shifted, and he saw how luminous her eyes were, like a thousand stars. He couldn’t help himself, and smiled so wide not even his beard could hide it.

“Yeah. Writing’s good. Flying, not so much.”

Janie laughed, wiping a stray tear from her cheek. “Okay. I wonder what Mommy’s going to think about me trying to fly. I hope she’s not disappointed I didn’t get her a nice plant, though.”

“How about I visit the hospital gift shop and get you a bouquet? It won’t be from the forest, but she’ll like whatever flower you’ll pick out of it.”

“Sounds good to me.”

He left his daughter scribbling away on her notepad as he left the room. Feeling a bit better about the whole situation, Mr. Bierbaum walked through the halls, calmly making way for other visitors and medical personnel until he reached the elevator. One ride down had him on the ground floor, and as he stepped through the sliding glass doors that separated the actual hospital wing from the front lobby he spotted some kids from Janie’s class sitting around. Right; sometime while he waited for news on Janie’s condition, Ms. Walker showed up and told him the whole grade was going home early and the students’ parents would pick them up from here. A quick peek around showed him that Carol was gone, but Kerry was still here. He didn’t see Nolan anywhere.

There was a small *ding* as he entered the lavender-painted gift shop. Mr. Bierbaum didn’t waste any time and headed for the florals, taking in each little handheld rainbow. He eventually chose one with plenty of indigo flowers (Janie’s favorite), and also grabbed a couple of chocolate chip granola bars.

“You okay, sir?” the teenage girl running the register asked. A bad case of acne stippled her right cheek.

“Yes. Just getting some things for my daughter. She fell out of a tree.”

“Oh my ... I hope she’s okay.” It was probably something she’d said plenty of times before, but her concern sounded genuine.

He nodded in thanks, took the flowers and the bag with the bars in it, and left. As he approached the sliding door he finally spotted Nolan, who was smooshed against the glass door as he looked through it. The sound of Mr. Bierbaum’s feet drew the boy back, and Nolan glanced at him as the doors slid open. Mr. Bierbaum couldn’t deny the tiny surge of smugness seeing the boy’s nervous grimace, but he said nothing. Neither of them said anything, only looking at each other while the sliding door stood open.

There were so many things Mr. Bierbaum considered saying in that moment. As it stood, he found himself pitying the kid more than anything. To keep his current attitude throughout his life would bring nothing but trouble, and hopefully his parents realized that after this whole mess. Closing his eyes, Mr. Bierbaum shook his head and sighed before reentering the hospital wing.

“It ... it wasn’t my fault!”

Mr. Bierbaum paused and looked over his shoulder at Nolan. The boy took a fearful step back but again repeated, “It’s not my fault!”

“She jumped because you threw her personal navigation device into a tree,” Mr. Bierbaum reminded him.

“She didn’t have to! She’s crazy,” Nolan cried out, not caring he’d insulted his classmate in front of her father. He scowled fiercely. “She thinks she’s from Pluto! Who thinks they’re from Pluto!?”

Mr. Bierbaum stared at the boy, taking in every part of him. He didn’t shout or get angry. He did, however, ask him the same question he’d asked so many other Nolans before.

“Why does that matter?”

The boy’s face fell; clearly he hadn’t expected that reply. Mr. Bierbaum waited a bit, watching the question sink into Nolan’s head, before turning away and heading back towards his daughter’s room.

She needed a flower for her mother after all.

Mr. Bierbaum squirmed slightly in his car seat. He wasn’t used to sitting here in the carpool lane at Janie’s school — she’s taken the bus ever since she could — but after Janie’s short stay at the hospital he’d decided driving his daughter to and from school until she was better was best, both for her safety and his peace of mind. That was two weeks ago, and by now all Janie’s minor bumps, bruises, and scrapes were almost gone, though the troublesome neck brace remained. She hated wearing that, but she loved her neon blue cast, and promptly decorated it with glitter marker doodles.

The white Ford Explorer in front moved forward, and Mr. Bierbaum followed, gaining a viewpoint of the school’s playground. There, students from all grades sat around or played until their parents came and picked them up. He squinted, glancing around, but didn’t see Janie anywhere.

That changed a second later when she exited the school with Ms. Walker. Her teacher gave her a smile and a pat on the shoulders before returning inside. Mr. Bierbaum waited for Janie to spot him, but instead she found Carol and her pigtailed friend who sat on the swings. She went over to them at once and said something, but instead of greeting her Carol shouted something, her face scrunching up with dismay. Mr. Bierbaum’s heart dropped as the girl with pigtails reacted the same way. Soon after both of them scurried away.

Once again, Ms. Walker had been right. Those girls may have played with Janie, but they weren't her friends. From what he could see, Janie looked heartbroken, though she quickly shook her head and put a smile on.

Mr. Bierbaum raised a furry eyebrow as Nolan Taratti stepped out from the corner of the school. He couldn't make out the boy's face from this distance, but it was more than likely he'd seen what happened. Nolan looked at Janie, then looked the way the girls had left, and then back at Janie again before marching over and putting his hand in her face. For a second Mr. Bierbaum thought he'd punched her, but something shimmered in his hand. It was the necklace. How'd he get it back? Surely he hadn't climbed that giant tree by himself. None of this was on Janie's mind as she jumped for joy and even gave Nolan a one-armed hug, who accepted it with a blush. The two talked some more before Nolan left and Janie finally spotted the car.

"So what was that with Nolan?" Mr. Bierbaum asked carefully as Janie hopped into the back seat.

"He said he was sorry about the park. One of the rangers somehow got Mommy's necklace down and gave it to him, and he gave it back to me."

"I see."

"He also asked if I liked video games and movies and said I can come play over at his house when my arm's better."

Mr. Bierbaum paused and looked at Janie in the rearview mirror. "Did you say yes?"

"Yes. I know he teased me a lot and you don't really like him, Daddy, but he's really, really sorry. I know it."

Mr. Bierbaum stayed silent. His mind went back to the scene he'd just witnessed in the playground.

“Is that okay, to be friends with him? Is it something Mommy would do?”

At that Mr. Bierbaum smiled slightly. He recalled his wife's friendly smile in the birthday picture, and when he saw Janie waiting for an answer, he nodded.

“Yes it is, sweetheart. She would definitely do that.”

Your Number One Hero

“Are you going?”

Kyle paused, his fingers spread out over his Xbox controller. On screen his avatar froze, and rival players started taking pot shots.

“Going to what?”

“Don’t play dumb with me.” He could practically hear Pauline rolling her eyes on her end of their phone call. “You know it’s Izzy’s wedding today. Remember her? The girl who lived next door to us since you were in diapers?”

Like mother, like son, Kyle rolled his eyes so far back he’d probably see his brain if he concentrated hard enough. “Yes, Ma. I remember Izzy.”

There was a pause meant for an answer. When it wasn’t filled, his mother prompted, “Well?”

“Well what?”

“Well are you coming? I know you got an invitation.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because I have better things to do than go to some nerdy crybaby’s wedding.”

“Kyle!”

“She is! She cries at everything!”

“And she’ll be bawling when she sees her oldest friend isn’t present on the most important day of her life!” Pauline snorted. “Then again, that’s always been a little talent of yours, hasn’t it?”

“Ma!”

“What? You’ve been picking on her ever since the third grade! You’re lucky her father didn’t come after you and beat you senseless!”

“No, I had you to do that,” Kyle deadpanned, running a hand through his hair.

“Damn right, and I wouldn’t have had to if you’d just been nice!”

Kyle’s incredibly short temper started fraying. “Shut up!”

“Funny, I thought you would mature with age, but here you are, twenty-three years old and still telling people to shut up whenever they piss you off. How did I get stuck with such a brat?”

“I learned from the best.”

His mother sighed. “Are you coming or not?”

“No!” Kyle jammed the ‘Call End’ hard, cracking his thumbnail. He tossed his phone onto the empty couch cushion next to him and went back to his game, only to discover that his character was dead multiple times over and his team had lost the round.

He collapsed back with a groan. “Fuck.”

Izzy Mendoza. The tiny, freckly girl with the messy hair that’d been his neighbor for the majority of his life. Considering that their moms were best friends, it was no big mystery that they became friends too. He remembered how he was always charging off to the next adventure, enthusiastically declaring they’d play tag or race scooters or go poke around the nearby creek, and that Izzy always agreed, not caring what they did.

“What matters is that we’re doin’ something together. That’s what bein’ friends means!” she always said, rarely without her big, crooked tooth grin. The memory had Kyle wrinkling his nose. Izzy was so damn sweet, believing in stuff like that even when things

were bad. According to his mom she was still the sweetest girl ever. No wonder she'd attracted guys in high school. Now she was going to marry one.

Kyle stood up and went into his bedroom. He'd left his closet door open, and he pushed around pants and shirts until he found the dress coat and slacks from his college graduation. Glancing over it, he kept looking for any stains or tears, but there was none. The side of his head thumped against the doorframe.

What was he thinking? Despite what his mom said on the phone, there was no way Izzy actually *wanted* him in attendance. They'd barely seen each other over the last four years because he'd gotten accepted into an out-of-state school. Besides, who would invite their best friend turned biggest bully to the happiest moment of their life? She or her mother only sent the invitation out of politeness. Then again (and the thought made Kyle snort), Izzy was, once again, too nice to give up on him. No matter how mean he got and barked how he didn't play with weak little babies anymore, she'd come over the next day and ask again anyways. It could be a world record, the amount of patience she'd had trying to reconnect with him despite his abuse. Would she have that same patience towards whoever she was marrying?

"Fuck!" Kyle said again. He eyed his punching bag set up in the opposite corner of his room. Hitting it until the sound of gloves on vinyl composed a song sounded like a good idea. That'd take only up to a thousand punches, right?

Kyle stared at the hook where his boxing gloves hung from and sighed. He reached out and grabbed his suit hanger.

He was walking to the church because he needed the air. That was what he told himself as he ambled down the sidewalk, his hands in his pocket and the leather of his dress

shoes slapping the pavement. It wasn't like it was a bad day for a walk either. The sun was out, and so were a handful of puff-tastic clouds that provided a bit of shade every once in a while. Others had taken advantage of the good weather, with joggers and dog walkers passing him by, throwing a single glance at the well-dressed young man before going on their way.

Of course, Kyle wished he could turn and run away with them. This was a bad idea, and had been from the start. Yet his feet kept moving him forward, curiosity outweighing any potential angst. Besides, he needed to apologize. The thought made him squirm; no matter how in the wrong he was, Kyle never liked saying sorry. But hey, maybe it could be his wedding present for Izzy.

As he passed a florist, something yellow bloomed at the side of his vision. It was a bouquet in the window composed completely of golden flowers, with roses, daffodils, and other floral shit Kyle couldn't name. It was a smiley face without the expression, making whoever looked at it feel better even just a little bit. Kind of like Izzy, Kyle thought.

There was a chime of a door opening and closing, and Kyle realized that he'd somehow entered the shop without knowing it. What the hell? He turned back to the door, but someone called him out before he could leave.

“Hello! Is there anything I can help you with?”

The soft voice of the florist made Kyle wince. He turned towards the checkout, then did a double take. “Ronnie?”

“Hey Kyle.” Rhonda Yukimura waved from behind the glass counter. She'd been a classmate of his and Izzy's, though she hadn't been too close to either of them. “It's been a while, hasn't it?”

“Yeah.” Kyle glanced around, a little bit dazed. “So you took over your old man’s flower shop, huh?”

Ronnie chuckled. “There was no avoiding it. But considering how much I love this place, it’s like a dream come true. And Dad’s impressed by how much my business degree’s helped this place grow.”

“Huh. Where is he anyway? My old lady says he’s usually out front handing out free flowers to tempt people inside.”

“He and Mom are over at St. Ann’s getting everything settled for Izzy Mendoza’s wedding. Did you know she’s getting married today?”

Kyle frowned.

“Wait, of course you would, look at how you’re dressed. Everyone knows you’ve known each other forever,” Ronnie continued on. “I gotta say, Izzy has great taste. She picked out a bunch of awesome flowers for her arrangements. Lots of pinks and yellows. Personally not my favorite colors, but they suit her.”

Of course they suited her. Even in high school when they wore that ugly ass gray and green uniform, Izzy snuck bits of her two favorite colorsdddddddd in with hair-ties and earrings. She’d only stopped when he’d told her she looked like a 1980s streetwalker. Kyle half-heartedly glared at the yellow bouquet. That hadn’t been his best moment.

“You getting something for someone?” Ronnie noticed where he was looking and smiled. “That’s one of our newest designs, but it’s become pretty popular rather quickly. What do you think?”

“Who’s she marrying anyway?”

“Pardon?”

“Who’s Izzy marrying?”

“You don’t know? I thought —”

“Just because she hung around me in school doesn’t mean we kept in contact afterwards,” Kyle said with a careless wave of his hand. “I’m only going because Mother dearest would fucking kill me if I didn’t.”

Ronnie frowned at his profanity but eventually answered. “She’s marrying Shane Tamrick.”

Kyle bit back a growl. Shane fucking Tamrick? That heterochromatic bastard? He’d been a loner in high school, talking to people only when he had to and mainly keeping to himself. Probably because of his family’s wealth, Kyle thought at the time, and every time they’d pass in the hall he’d sneer at the bastard who considered himself better than everyone else. Izzy, however — stupid, nerdy, too kind Izzy — had always been nice to Shane, apologizing for Kyle’s rudeness, and in return Shane developed a soft spot for her. In time he’d joined Izzy’s little group of friends, and no matter how many times Kyle glared at him he didn’t leave.

And now he was marrying her. Fan-fucking-tastic.

“Since when did they get together?” Kyle asked his shoes.

“Sophomore year of college,” Ronnie replied. She stooped behind the counter and came up with a spray bottle full of water. “According to Izzy he was her only friend that didn’t get accepted somewhere out of state, so they kept in contact and the rest is history.”

“Motherfucker,” Kyle muttered under his breath.

Ronnie didn't hear him as she left the register and started misting some plants. "I was at their rehearsal dinner last week, and they looked so happy together. They're such a good couple; their kids are gonna be gorgeous."

He really needed Ronnie to shut up now. "I wanna buy something."

"Huh?"

"I said I wanna buy something." He'd forgotten what a chatterer she was in school. God, Ronnie should've gotten her ears checked if she had trouble hearing anyone over her Twitter feed of a mouth.

"Oh. Okay then. What would you like?"

"That." He jerked a thumb in the direction of the window. "That yellow one."

"Is it a present for Izzy?"

"Yeah," murmured Kyle. "You could say that."

Five minutes later Kyle finally left with his wallet lighter and the bouquet in hand. He pulled his coat sleeve up and checked his watch. There was still time to get to the church and see Izzy before the wedding started. Hell, maybe he'd have enough time for conducting a special interview with Tamrick about his intentions.

No. That had 'bad idea' stamped all over it. Tamrick sure wouldn't appreciate it and probably get him banned from the ceremony. Yet considering the rumors surrounding Tamrick's dad — how Mr. Tamrick only married his wife because for her money, how he was both emotionally distant and abusive — he had every right in asking whatever he wanted to. Like father, like son, right? The thought had the bouquet's stems crackling in Kyle's tightening grip.

But maybe if Tamrick answered wrong, he could convince Izzy that calling the whole thing off was a good idea. The more he thought about it, the more reasonable it became. Tamrick was just another punk who, like all the boys their age, just thought Izzy was pretty and didn't realize what a nerdy handful of a crybaby she was. That was it; if Izzy couldn't be convinced, maybe Tamrick would be (though he might end up using his fists after all).

Idea in mind, Kyle set off to St. Ann's, and soon stood in the shadow cast by its steeple. Constructed out of smooth beige concrete with an entire grade school stuck in the back, the place had its roots deep in both Kyle's and Izzy's life, though not for an entirely good reason; the teachers hadn't been observant as they should've been and thus let Kyle get away with so much concerning Izzy. He would've thought she'd pick somewhere with less bad memories attached, but maybe she wanted to make newer, better ones instead.

There were pink and yellow flowers decorating the open doors, and inside Kyle could see some people milling around in the gathering space. He took a deep breath and entered.

"There you are!"

Kyle gritted his teeth as his mother swooped down on him. Behind her was Mrs. Mendoza, Izzy's mom. Wearing a rose pink sundress with a lacy white cardigan, she was an almost older carbon copy of her daughter except for her ocean blue eyes.

"I thought you wouldn't show!" Pauline whispered harshly. If they weren't in a church she would've been much louder, so Kyle was grateful for the verbal cock block.

"Hanging up on me with nothing but a 'no,' I raised you better than that."

"Fuc — frigging relax, Ma. I'm here," Kyle growled back.

“Yes you are, and it’s the first smart decision you made all day.” Pauline looked him over. “A second good decision would’ve been to wear a tie, but at least you’re wearing pants without holes in them, so that’s something.”

“He looks fine, Pauline,” Mrs. Mendoza said. She gave him a kind smile and patted his arm. “It’s nice seeing you, Kyle. You look good.”

He felt the tips of his ears grow hot, and he looked away to the flowers he was holding. It was a great mystery to Kyle why Mrs. Mendoza was so nice to him despite the hell he put his daughter through. She always looked sad look whenever she saw him picking on Izzy and had reported his behavior to his mother plenty of times, but she’d never stopped her daughter from re-befriending him. Maybe she saw something in him that proved he wasn’t totally heartless. Who knew with women?

“Are those for Izzy?” Mrs. Mendoza asked, pointing to the bouquet.

Kyle nodded and stuck his hand out. “Yeah. It’s a wedding present. Could you give them to her?”

“You can give them to her yourself.” Mrs. Mendoza pointed to the hall across the welcoming space. “Izzy’s in the fourth room to the left. She’ll be so happy to see you.”

Kyle opened his mouth, prepared to protest, but the looks on both women’s faces — Mrs. Mendoza expectant, his mother threatening — made him nod, then head towards the hall. He shouldn’t be so disgruntled; he could get the privacy needed to tell Izzy she was making a mistake. He kept that in the forefront of his mind as he knocked on her door.

“Coming!”

The handle shifted, and Izzy appeared in the crack. She hadn’t grown much since he last saw her and had to look up to see it was him. Her smile rivaled the sun.

“Kyle!” She stepped through the door and threw her arms around him in a friendly hug. Kyle stiffened, unsure of what was appropriate, but Izzy didn’t notice as she pulled back and looked him over. “You look good. How are you doing?”

“Fine. I’m ... fine.”

“Come on, don’t be afraid to come in.” Izzy gently took his arm and pulled him into her dressing room. Like the hall outside, it was painted beige, with nubby gray blue carpeting. Plenty of bags filled with mountains of beauty products he couldn’t name lined the counter, and bare hangers hung in an open closet. “It’s just me. All the bridesmaids are already out.”

He already knew that, having seen a congregation of giggling girls in matching buttercup yellow. Izzy, however, was wearing slacks and a blouse; her wedding dress still hung it on its hanger. She noticed him staring at it and blushed, the redness swallowing her freckles.

“Um ... how does it look, Kyle?” Izzy nervously toyed with the lace trimming the neckline. “Does it look okay?”

It did, but not compared to her. There were so many bits of her that hadn’t changed over the years. As noticed before, she was still the same height, and her freckles persisted as well — she’d even gained some new ones. Everything else was different. Her hair was the biggest difference, cut to a curly boy-short bob that screamed ‘feminine’ despite the length. She’d lost the tan she’d gotten from running around after him, but the paleness suited her, making her skin look milky smooth.

“It looks nice,” Kyle muttered.

“Thank you.” Izzy blushed harder and looked away, her eyes landing on his hands.

“Are-are those for me?”

Right. The flowers. He held them out to her. “Your present.”

“Thank you.” She examined the blossoms in her hand and sniffed them before gently resting the arrangement on some empty counter space. “I can’t believe it’s finally happening.”

Kyle straightened as she turned back. Her eyes were on her ring, and while the smile she wore wasn’t her biggest, it held something beautiful and simple that he’d never seen on her before. He didn’t like how that made him feel.

“With Shane.”

“Yes.” Izzy met his eyes and sheepishly scratched her cheek. “Um ... I know you and Shane never really got along ...”

That was an understatement. Kyle stopped himself from rolling his eyes.

“But I’m glad you’re here. It means the world that my-my best friend is supporting me on the biggest day of my life.”

“Why?”

Izzy tilted her head. “Why what?”

“Why are you so fucking nice to me?” Kyle shifted on his feet. “I bullied you all throughout school, and yet you still wanted to be my friend. You still do. Why?”

Izzy blinked, then looked down at her hands. She anxiously poked her pointer fingers together.

“Your mom ... when, when you first started teasing me, I went to her and asked if something had happened. She told me that you didn’t mean it, that you liked me and didn’t know how to express it.”

Fucking dammit, Ma. Kyle bit his lip to keep those words inside.

“I believed her,” Izzy continued, “because I liked you too. You were my best friend. So I stayed, and every time you called me a crybaby or told me to leave you alone, I told myself you-you didn’t mean it. And eventually I-I saw what she meant!” Izzy meets his eyes again. “How when I got into real trouble, you were there. You would grumble about it and be mean later, but you were there when it mattered.”

It was the first time Kyle had been silent, both with his mouth and in his head.

Izzy sighed. “I ... remember how we used to play together. You liked Hide and Seek, and I liked drawing with chalk, but we both loved superheroes the best. You called yourself Number One because your power was being ‘number one’ at everything, and I was either the pretty girl you saved or your sidekick. Never the hero.”

“Because guys are supposed to protect girls,” said Kyle.

“Not always. Remember in the third grade when you climbed a tree at recess pretending it was a skyscraper and couldn’t come down?”

How could he forget? He’d put on a brave front, looking back the way he came and sketching an escape route in his mind, but the moment he tried climbing down a branch broke and fell under his foot, leaving him stranded and paralyzed with fear. They’d been playing with a bunch of other boys, and when he cried out for help all of them stood there laughing. Only Izzy ran to find a teacher, who in turn called the fire department who came after him in a cherry picker like he was a damn cat. It was a big stupid thing that had all the

boys calling him a scaredy-cat for weeks, but what was worst was Izzy insisting he'd been so brave. Brave people didn't get stuck in trees.

"Looking back, I didn't mean to embarrass you," said Izzy. "I meant it when I said you were brave. And you still are! Look at you, Mr. Firefighter." She looked him up and down and beamed. "I'm so proud of you, Kyle."

His heart beat so loud it would surprise him if both of them didn't hear it. Kyle himself couldn't stop staring at the girl — woman — in front of him. All this time, she'd treasured him that much.

"Izzy ..."

A firm knock on the door interrupted Kyle. Izzy turned towards it and called out, "Come in!"

Kyle's gut twisted as Shane Tamrick entered the room. He'd changed a lot compared to Izzy: he was taller (taller than him, Kyle noticed), and his strawberry blond hair was now just blond. He still had the creepy two-tone eyes, which once they found Izzy brightened with softness.

"Shane! You can't see me before the wedding starts! It's bad luck," Izzy softly protested.

"You know I don't believe in luck," Shane replied. He looked her over and smiled, pressing a soft kiss into her hair. "I came to check on you. The ceremony's starting in like half an hour. You didn't forget the time, right?"

"N-no." Izzy shook her head. If her smile before had been shining, now aliens could probably see it from outside of the Milky Way. The weighted look from before was back, and this time Shane wore it as well.

Kyle never had a chance.

Snarling, he looked away, clicking his tongue. The sound drew Izzy's attention back to him, as well as Shane's, whose eyes widened upon seeing him. His face fell into careful neutrality. "Hello, Kyle."

"Shane."

"You should go find a seat, Kyle. Your mom's probably got one for you," said Izzy.

"We'll be happy to have you," Tamrick added, though probably more for his almost-wife's benefit than for himself.

Kyle looked between the two of them and shook his head. "No thanks. I got plans. Just came by to see you." He rotated on his feet and went to the door, giving a backwards wave. "Bye."

"You don't want to?" Izzy went after him at once, following him out of the hall and into the now empty lobby. "Are you sure? Do you need a lift —"

"I mean it!" Another backhand wave. "And I'll walk. Fresh air is good for us, crybaby."

"But ..."

"Come on, Izzy. We need to change," Kyle heard Tamrick say. "Kyle will be fine. Maybe he'll come see you at the reception."

He glanced over his shoulder and saw a concerned Izzy throw him one last glance before nodding and taking Tamrick's offered hand. "Okay."

The three split, two heading for the church, one heading out. Outside the sun still shone sunshine yellow, and all the clouds had disappeared. He started off down the sidewalk, his head lost in thinking back to how Izzy smiled at her ring.

“Kyle!”

Someone jerked his arm back, and he spun around to find Izzy had come after him. She opened her mouth but stayed silent, seeing the tears building up in his eyes.

“What the hell are you doing!?” Kyle yelled, jerking his arm back and covering his face.

“I’m sorry! I-I didn’t mean to!” Izzy stuck her hands up, her face frantic. “Are you okay? Why are you crying? Are you sick? Do you —”

“Listen up, you nerdy crybaby!” Kyle shouted, whipping his hand away from his face and glaring at Izzy.

“Kyle —”

“I said listen! From here on out I’m gonna be number one!”

He turned away. Izzy calling after him, but he didn’t look back. His hands in his pockets, his proud head slumped forward, he was a block away when he realized too late that he’d butchered his little statement. Part of him told him to go back and clarify, but he kept moving forward, simply repeating what he meant to himself.

“I’m ... I’m gonna be ... your number one hero.”

## The Wolf

The world was entirely gray. Up above, flat sheets of cloud filled the airspace, keeping the sun tucked in its heavenly bed. Down below, a foot or more of snow packed the ground, speckled gray like it stole some of the sky when it fell. In between, gray matchsticks of trees grew, their branches jagged and naked and, in some cases, dangerously close to breaking off and falling.

The only spot of color wasn't much color at all as a hunter slowly stalked through the trees. He was dressed entirely in brown, from his worn boots to his hooded gas mask, of which the goggles were tinted spring green. The crunch of his boots breaking through the shell of the snow was the only sound, although he had come to realize silence was its own din. He picked up a third noise, like someone constantly sniffing something. Coming upon a large rock, he took shelter behind it before peeking around the side.

Under his mask, the hunter smiled. "There you are."

Nosing around the ground was a beautiful wolf, its coat a brilliant blue black with lighter socked feet. She was smart, too; the hunter had been tracking her for months, and despite his slow advances and careful traps, she always kept escaping his grasp. But today was the day. He could feel it.

Raising his gun, the hunter took careful aim through his scope. Up close she was even lovelier, with dainty yet strong legs and a soft curve to her back. She continued sniffing the ground for anything she could dig up.

"Stand still," the hunter whispered to himself. "Please. It will all be over in a second."

Thankfully she did, and taking a deep breath he took the shot. It struck her directly in the side. Instantly she was off with a howling yelp, and the hunter went after her, his feet quick as they could be.

Her footprints were tiny dots in the snow that grew into dashes. Good. She was dragging her feet. Some more steps, a turn around a large tree trunk, and there she was again, staggering about. She leaned her body against a tree trunk, but it did little good as she slid down the bark and stilled. The hunter sighed, tired but proud of himself.

Those feelings didn't last as a horrible growl sounded off. Looking over his shoulder he saw three other wolves coming towards him. They were disgusting creatures; large as a small pony, with dull fur and sickly yellow eyes that horribly complimented their mangy sores and spit-lined lips.

In a quick bid for attention, he dashed to the left. Perhaps his distraction worked too well, however, as he felt a bruising pair of feet tackle his shoulders. The hunter managed to spin himself as he fell, and with a harsh "Oomph!" his back hit the ground. The wolf was on him instantly, snapping at his face unsuccessfully due to the arm the hunter had between them.

"Stop it!" the hunter cried. "Get off! Go away!"

He felt along his side for his handgun holster. The other two growled as they circled the kill, waiting for the alpha to strike him down.

Unfortunately for them, they'd picked the wrong prey.

"I warned you," the hunter huffed. With his blocking arm he knocked the wolf back, not throwing it off him but making enough space to put his pistol between them. The wolf lunged again.

*Blam! Blam! Blam! Blam!*

Four bullets right into its head and face. Its legs buckled and it collapsed over the hunter's body, pinning him down. He saw one of them, hunched over and growling but standing still, cautious now that its food had fought back. The second one ... where was the second one?

“Gahhh!”

Whipping his head backwards, he finally found the third wolf as it bit into his right shoulder. The hunter sent his arm back, whapping the creature's head with his gun, but the beast held on. Any attempt at shooting would be risky — not only did he have only two bullets left, but he'd also be shooting blind — but as the wolf started dragging him out from under its pack-mate's corpse, there weren't any options left. Cocking his elbow up, he sent the muzzle of his gun back behind him and pulled the trigger.

*Blam! Blam!*

There was a duo of yelps followed by some whimpers. The hunter turned onto his stomach in time to see the two sick wolves run away. The one who'd attacked was bleeding from the right shoulder, but the other one looked unharmed. A quick glance around found his second bullet in a nearby tree. The hunter took as many deep breaths as he could given his mask, and when he was sure those monsters wouldn't come back he rose to his feet. He glanced at the wolf corpse, taking in the bloody sores, and shook his head. Such a waste of life, not just in its death but in its living. Those lesions could be nothing but painful, and it was becoming harder and harder to find healthy animals.

The hunter followed his steps in the snow back to his wolf. A quick look showed no damage, and he lovingly stroked its neck. He carefully lifted it up in his arms like a long lost

love and carried it through the woods. Following the markers he'd left behind, he eventually came upon the hidden road where he'd parked his beat up blue and white truck. Once the wolf was secure in the truck bed, the hunter got into the drivers' seat. He stuck his guns and his bag in the passenger's seat, and out of the bag pulled his car keys, a recording device, and a phone. He pushed the button.

“Day 106 of Wolf Hunt. I've finally caught her. A close look confirms my theories; she is female, about two years old, and in prime condition. No sign of sickness anywhere. Ran into a couple of her sicker relatives. Judging from the severity of the wounds on their bodies, I'd say they're third generation mutants. Maybe fourth. They're lucky, believe it or not; none of them had an extra head or limbs or no skin, not like what I've seen in other species. But they're still in constant pain. What a way to live.”

The hunter stuck his keys in and started the car. Keeping one hand on the wheel, he began turning around, still talking into the recorder.

“Had to kill one of the mutants, and another bit my shoulder. Managed to scare it and its remaining companion off and keep the subject safe. She's a real beauty. Here's hoping she'll be accepted once I get back.”

He clicked the recorder off, then reached for his phone. Outside the bare gray trees ran together like the background of an old cartoon. Pressing a couple of buttons, he held the phone to his ear.

“Hey, sweetheart.”

“Hi, hon!” a sweet voice said back. “Where are you? Are you okay?”

“I'm good. How's Molly and Michael?”

“They’re all right. Just waiting for their daddy to get home from his big trip. Find anything?”

“Oh yes. I think the kids will love it.”

“And will I love it?”

The hunter smiled. “Oh I think you will. Prettiest prize I ever caught. Though it doesn’t compare to you, of course.”

“Flatterer,” his wife laughed. “But seriously, get your butt home. I miss you too much for my own good.”

“Me too. See you and the kids soon.”

“All right. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

The hunter ended the call and stuck his phone in an empty cup holder. A glance in the rearview mirror showed the wolf was still okay. He turned left the first time he could and headed west.

He was maybe a third of the way home when he saw the other car.

The hunter made sticking to the backroads a habit of his whenever he went out and about; not only was he less likely to run into people, but there were no cars stuck in the road he’d have to drive around. Of course, he couldn’t be the only person to come to that conclusion and every once in a while came across another person using the same road. A few times such meetings went okay and ended with him gaining some much needed supplies. Sometimes they simply passed each other, which was all one could ask for in this environment. And other times ... the hunter ran a hand over his unbitten shoulder that he

once pulled some bullets out of. It'd healed up nice, but once in a while it ached horribly and he rather not have a repeat experience.

The hunter pressed the brakes as he came level with the car. It was some sedan, dark green where it wasn't rusting over and missing a couple of hubcaps. No one seemed to be inside or hanging around, but the hunter bent down, hiding all but his eyes under the window and keeping one hand on his gun. Nothing moved.

Some trees to the left rustled, and out walked a person. They were dressed in blue jeans with holes in the knee and a thick puffy coat with the hood pulled up, so he couldn't see whether it was a man or woman. Over the figure's shoulder was a long rifle, and in their hands was a square cage with slimy bars and dripping water.

The figure took a few steps towards a car before realizing there was another vehicle. He threw the cage down and twisted his rifle around his body in a well-practiced move. "Who the hell are you?"

The hunter sighed. It was one of those meetings.

"I don't want no trouble but if you're bringing it, you're going down!" the figure shouted. From the voice the hunter determined he was male. Said man took a couple steps forward, then stopped. He looked over the truck, lowering the muzzle as he did so. "Wait a ... that you, old timer?"

The hunter carefully raised his head just in time to see the man pull back his hood. Dirty blond hair in desperate need of both a trim and a wash mopped above a thin face. The hunter blinked, then sighed again, this time in relief.

"It is you!" The kid smirked, slinging his gun back round over his shoulder. "Hadn't seen you in so long, I thought you kicked the bucket."

“I knew you hadn’t, Rafe,” the hunter replied. He straightened up in his seat and opened the door. “Didn’t recognize your car, though.”

“It’s ‘new.’ The other one crapped out and got junked. I’m officially tougher than a Lexus!”

“Of course you are. It takes a lot to kill a cockroach.”

Rafe cheerfully gave him the middle finger. In the hunter’s simple existence, Rafe was the only person he saw on a regular basis. According to the kid, he and some others lived a day away from the hunter’s place where they’d managed to set up a meat farm with unaffected cows and chickens. He asked the hunter once if he wanted to join, but he’d declined. They still kept up an odd yet welcoming acquaintance.

“So whatcha doing?” Rafe asked, bouncing on the ball of his heels. “Catch something cool?”

The hunter pointed to the bed of his truck, and Rafe took it as permission to approach. He grinned when he saw the wolf. “Well, isn’t he handsome.”

“It’s a she,” the hunter corrected him.

Rafe wolf-whistled. “Then I stand corrected. She’s gorgeous. Whatcha gonna do with her?”

“The same as with all the others.”

“If so, you need anything?” Rafe went back over to his cage and picked it up. He looked inside. “Got a decent amount of good fish in here if you got something to trade.”

The hunter opened the back door of his truck and rummaged around before pulling out a cardboard box. Inside were a bunch of little containers filled with dirt and sprouting green leaves.

“I have some beets,” the hunter said. “Found some seeds in an old hardware store, and they’re growing like crazy.”

“Beets, huh?” Rafe looked the box over, then nodded. “Aight. Can add that to the garden.”

Rafe went to his car and popped the trunk before pulling out his own cardboard box. As he transferred his catch, the hunter noticed a small child curled up asleep on the back seat under a ragged fleece blanket.

“Your sister?”

Rafe saw where he was looking and shook his head. “Nah. My daughter. She’s almost three.”

The hunter frowned. “And you’re, what? Nineteen?”

“*Almost* nineteen.” Rafe handed over the box of fish, his hard eyes meeting the hunter’s lenses. “We have to have them young, you know. With the way the radiation likes picking us off, people will die out if we don’t.”

“No one could stop the war. No one can stop the radiation either.”

Rafe spat on the dirt. “Fuck that. No way I’m giving up. No one else is either. What’s with you oldies and all the doom and gloom? What’s wrong with hope?”

“Nothing’s wrong with hope,” said the hunter.

“I’m worth it. My kid’s worth it. So’s my girl and those I’m living with,” Rafe declared. “And you’re worth it too, old timer. Don’t be so down now.”

The hunter couldn’t help but let out a huff of a laugh. He still didn’t agree with the kid, but who was he to tell him otherwise?

“Thanks for the fish,” said the hunter.

“Thanks for the plants.” Rafe nodded towards the truck bed. “Good luck with that.”

“Good luck with —”

His sentence cut off as Rafe suddenly bent over, coughing fiercely. It was wet and harsh and went on longer than it should have.

“Daddy?”

Both men looked at the car where the girl had woken up. Doll-like hands pressed against the window like she wanted out of her display case.

“It’s okay,” Rafe said to both him and her. “Daddy’s fine. Just choked on air.”

He spat on the ground, gave the hunter a final nod, and got into his car. The hunter watched the sedan drive away until it disappeared down the road. He looked at the spot Rafe had hawked on.

It was tinged red.

There were no more interruptions the rest of the ride home, though the hunter drove slowly. It was a good habit since it gave him time for scouting the land, seeing if there were any healthy creatures passing by. Usually there weren’t; by now most animals knew someone lived in the area and avoided it. The mutated, on the other hand, had no fear within their addled brains and came along the road to see if any prey was stupid enough to take it. Just now, as he drove out of the woods and hit the burnt chocolate plains that lay between the forest and the mountain range, he’d passed some bloody-furred bears. They eyed him hungrily but gave no chase.

“That’s right,” the hunter said out loud. “Stupid enough to drive this, but smart enough to protect myself.”

In the plains, the flat ground gave the truck a boost of speed, which didn't last once he reached the mountains. He curved along long-established yet abandoned roads higher and higher until he reached a railed-in overview point. From here he could see everything he'd travelled through. He followed the gravel paving, breaking away from the paved road and driving through a sort of gulch until a tunnel opening into the mountainside appeared. He entered without hesitation.

“Home sweet home,” the hunter told the unconscious wolf. Up above was a line of lightbulbs, though most of them had gone out ages ago. “I know it doesn't look the best right now, but I promise you it gets better.”

The wolf, of course, didn't respond.

“I spent a long time tracking you,” he continued. “You're smart. That's good, because hopefully that means you'll make the right decision soon.”

Eventually the tunnel ended in a large loading bay. A decrepit checkpoint leaned against the far wall. Atop a platform, another tunnel opened from which — over the running engine — he heard all sorts of growls and snorts. He stopped the car, slung his bag and gun over his shoulder, and carefully carried the wolf out of the truck bed. Like a baby, he rocked the animal as he carried her into the second tunnel, past a bunch of barred cells, until he came to the right one. He gently placed her down, unlocked the grated door, then picked her up again and brought her in.

The cell was decent sized, bare of almost everything except for a pile of rocks up to his hip and a wide stone lean-to with plenty of crawl space. On top of the flat roof of the lean-to stood another wolf. This one was male and not nearly as handsome as the female,

with an unimpressive dust gray coat, but just as healthy. It watched the hunter with clear blue eyes as he placed the female on the floor.

“Easy,” the hunter murmured, keeping the male on the edge of his vision. “Easy. She’s no threat to you now.”

The male wolf looked at his female counterpart. There was no aggression in his stance, and his tail hung low. Those were good signs that nevertheless could change quickly. The hunter pulled out a syringe. He primed it, then stuck it in the female’s shoulder.

“Time to wake up,” he whispered. “I hope you like it here.”

The drug, combined with the time passed between the initial use of the tranquilizer, was fast acting, and soon the she-wolf was waking up. Carefully the hunter took some steps back and stopped in the open doorway. It was the perfect location, whether this meeting went good or bad. Not all animals accepted the partner given to them. Sometimes they simply ignored each other, and he would have to find another member of the opposite sex. Other times, charging in and using the tranq gun was the only way to stop them from killing each other.

The female woke fully and raised her head, looking around the cell. Seeing this, the male came down from his perch and wandered closer. The female licked her nose and rose to her feet. She finally saw the male and stood still, which gave him the confidence to come closer. He circled softly, coming nose to nose with the she wolf. For a moment they silently regarded each other.

Then the female came forward and rubbed the side of her face against the male wolf’s, closing her eyes in trust. The male replied similarly, and soon the two stood side by

side, leaning against the other in an animalistic hug. Under his mask, the hunter smiled. He'd rolled the dice, but gotten two sixes. They were going to be all right.

Speaking of his mask. The hunter ran his fingers along its back, unbuttoning and untying until he slipped it off. Gray eyes hung with deep bags and sat under eyebrows that had more hair than his bald head or bare chin. Sunken cheeks showed some flesh as he grinned at the happy couple. Such reunions never got old. He dug around and pulled out his trusty recorder.

“Day 106 of Wolf Hunt. Returned home with wolf easily with only stop being a talk with Rafe. Put her in the cage with the male wolf, and they have already bonded. I'll continue keeping an eye on them in case anything changes but right now prospects look good. I can proudly declare the hunt is finished. On to the next one.”

He finished his recording, then pulled out the fish Rafe gave him. A few well-practiced slashes with his knife deboned the fish, and he stuck them in between the bars for the happy couple to eat later. That done, it was time to check on the others. Turning away, the hunter went off down the hall, checking each cell that he passed. The bears — not like those from the road, but with chestnut fur and limpid eyes — played with their cubs in the small pool provided. The foxes sat on top of the rocks in their enclosure, keeping an eye on the group of kits roughhousing in the corner while also watching the hunter walk by. The lions were, predictably, laying at rest, though one little lioness chewed on her mother's ear in play. The hunter reminded himself to go check on the food stocks once his patrol was done. The plants in the greenhouse at the top of his base were doing well, but the healthy cattle and fish he was raising for the meat eaters was dwindling. There would be little rest for him; tomorrow would be another trip out to find food, to plumb the river like Rafe and catch

whatever he could. Maybe he could take some more veggies and visit the kid's place for a trade. He still had some old things of Molly's he could give his little girl.

The hall ended at a circular opening that let in a healthy dose of light, overpowering the lightbulbs on the ceiling. Squinting, the hunter stepped through the door onto the small balcony beyond. His smile came back.

The room was enormous, about as big as a football field and at least seven stories tall. Made of gray concrete, the walls arched in, creating a dome for the ceiling that had, in its center, a grated hole big enough to light the entire space. Whoever built this place — the hunter didn't know who, and could only assume the original purpose — probably never predicted that the space would house so many. Deer, rabbits, moose, buffalo, geese — it was a beautiful menagerie that proved there was still beauty even after the end.

He sighed with pleasure as he sat on the railing. Taking out his phone, he pressed the same buttons as before and held it to his ear.

“Hey, sweetheart,” he said without moving his lips.

The hunter listened carefully to the recording, thanking whoever out there that he'd accidentally caught the whole call on his cell. It was, after all, the last time he'd talked with his loving wife before the bombs blew her and their kids off the face of the planet.

“I'll see you all soon enough,” he said once the call ended. He thought back to Rafe's bloody saliva and sighed. The same symptoms affected him as well; he could feel the radiation slowing killing him. His organs would rot until they couldn't work anymore, his skin would slough away, and his bones would weaken until the simple act of standing shattered them. Faced with such an existence, he couldn't blame those who ended it on their terms.

That might've been him if it wasn't for the animals. The hunter looked them over and did what he'd done ever since he started this mission: he hoped. He hoped that when his time drew near, he'd have the strength to open all the cells. It was all he could do since there was no knowledge that they would make it out there. But if they did, they would give this world one more chance.

With the end of man's reign, their time was coming.

## Vita

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