



**An Amorous Thing**  
Kody Boye

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## New Section

### *Foreword*

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## **New Section**

An Amorous Thing  
a short story collection by Kody Boye

## New Section

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## **New Section**

For Mike,  
He knows why.

## New Section

### Gloria and the Beast

Jacob stood on the side of the road, right next to the stinking corpse of a 'cute little doggie' a woman had hit earlier that morning. But unbeknownst to her, what she hadn't hit was a 'cute little dog,' no matter what stretch of imagination and no matter how much she wanted to believe otherwise.

What the woman had hit was the Beast of Turner, Maine.

One of those places you knew because of some kind of oddball legend, Turner, Maine had become known for its beast. Like Point Pleasant, West Virginia was known for its Mothman, the town had become plagued with reports of an undiscovered, monstrous animal that stalked the town at night, killing dogs in brutal, unimaginable ways. But, as far as Jacob could see, he didn't have a problem anymore.

*Thank God.*

Two men stooped to examine the animal. They were biologists; that was already obvious. They groped and poked the thing like children would some kind of candy (or each other, for that matter.) The thing's huge dew claws curved up behind its legs, right until it hit the back of the knee and its black eyes stared lazily at the men.

If it were alive, Jacob could imagine it saying, 'Don't touch me, you idiots.'

"Do I really need to be out here?" he asked, turning to the police officer. "I mean, you guys have obviously got it under control."

Jacob worked for the local police department. He was what you would call a 'running assistant,' someone who had no law training at all, but did things like answer phones, make deliveries (commonly doughnuts and coffee from *Sally's*,) and, occasionally, go out and meet with the biologists who were supposed to pick the suspicious rotting corpse off the side of the road.

"Why did the chief send you out here anyway, Kirks?"

"He wanted me to tell the biologists to get the corpse off the road and not make a big scene."

"Well, they're obviously having fun with it where it is," the officer chuckled, nudging Jacob's ribs with his elbow. "Let the boys play, won't you?"

"We can't move it until we have video and photographic evidence," one of the biologists muttered.

"We want to keep the corpse as perfect as possible."

"Too late there," Jacob muttered.

The officer chuckled, raising his hand to mask it as a cough.

The dog-thing had a nasty gouge in its side, so no matter *what* the biologists did, they'd be bringing a damaged specimen back to the lab.

"Hey, Kirks, can I ask you something?"

"What is it?" Jacob asked, following the officer away from the scene.

"You think they got the beast?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"You're the guy who's been keeping up with all of it, right?"

Jacob sadly, but surely, nodded.

"Yeah."

"Nothin' to be ashamed of. Hell, people do stranger things than that."

"The chief wanted me to research some of it to see if I could find something out. It turned into a little hobby."

"Well, it looks like you don't have a hobby anymore," the officer frowned, looking over his shoulder. "Probably a burden off your shoulders though."

Jacob shrugged.

"Can you keep things covered here?" he asked. "I'd like to get home before my boy gets home from school."

"How old is your son, Jake?"

"Fifteen, sixteen at the end of this month."

"Cool. Doin' anything special?"

"I want to take him up to the cabin, if he wants to. You know, up near the lake?"

"Ah, yeah. That's a cool place up there. You own a cabin?"

"Yeah. Me and Gloria did. I haven't been up there for a few years. Since she... well... since she passed."

The officer patted his shoulder.

"I'll keep things under tabs here. Get home, see your kid."

"All right. Thanks."

"Have a good day, Jake."

"You too."

Jacob crawled into his car and drove away.

In the rearview mirror, he saw the biologists return to the truck to get a stretcher.

Maybe his troubles with the thing were finally over.

When he got home, he ended up falling asleep. He woke up soon after though, when he heard the bus pulling up to the house. He quickly roused himself from sleep, ran his hands over his face, and stood to greet his son.

When Carter came into the house, Jacob lifted his hand and gave him a friendly smile. At fifteen, his son was starting to grow into his looks. The fat in his cheeks was all but gone and his muscles were filling out.

"Hey, Dad," he said, high-fiving him.

"How was school?"

"It was fine. Nothing special, really."

Jacob nodded. Even though Carter generally liked school, he himself wasn't well liked. Jacob could never figure out why, and never could Carter. The kids just decided to pick on him for some reason.

"Are you sure everything went ok today at school?"

"Yeah. Everything went fine."

"You'd tell me if something was wrong, wouldn't you?"

"Yes."

*No, Carter thought, but smiled anyway. Who expects their teenage son to tell them they had a bad day at school?*

He sure didn't. Any parent who *did* had their head in the wrong place.

"You want something to eat?"

"I guess," Carter shrugged.

Jacob gestured his son into the kitchen. When he got to the fridge, he pulled sandwich stuff out and started making one for both him and his son. Carter kept his eyes to his hands, for the most part. Although his fatherly instinct was working on overdrive, Jacob kept telling himself to mind his own business.

*Your son isn't going to like it if you keep pressuring him to answer questions he obviously doesn't want to answer. Just make the sandwich and shut the fuck up.*

When Jacob finished, he set the roast beef and ham sandwich in front of his son. He made his own, watching Carter eat out of the top of his vision.

"You want some chips?"

"I'll get them."

Jacob finished his sandwich. He took a bite, then put everything away. By the time he cleaned everything up, his son had grabbed a bag of chips and set it on the counter.

"How was work, Dad?"

"Same old, same old," Jacob said. "They think they got the Beast though."

"Really? They really think they got it?"

"Yeah, but it's dead."

Carter frowned. One side of his lip curled in question.

"Some woman hit it earlier today. Apparently the stupid thing got caught in her headlights and couldn't get away."

"That sucks," Carter muttered.

"It was killing dogs, son."

"Yeah, but that's because people were stupid enough to leave their pets chained out in front without a fence or anything."

The boy did have a point. Jacob finished his sandwich. He waited for his son before he took his plate to the sink.

"Anything interesting happen at school today?" Jacob asked, deciding to try and revive the conversation that fell victim to insecurity no more than a few minutes before.

"No."

"How did you do on your English test?"

"I got a B."

"That's great!"

Jacob reached across the counter, patting his son's shoulder. Carter smiled. It thrilled Jacob beyond all belief to see his son smile, especially after coming home from school.

"I'm proud of you, Carter."

"Thanks, Dad."

"You don't need to thank me."

"I'm gonna go in the living room, ok?"

"Yeah, go ahead."

Carter smiled and went to play his game.

Jacob wasn't feeling all that lonely anymore. Since his son and turned into a teenager two years ago, he'd tried to weaken Gloria's ghost in his life. And, for the most part, it had worked. The constant reminder that his wife had passed when his son was only seven years old was still there, but not *constantly*, like it used to be.

He sat in his bedroom, at the desk he worked at. Articles about 'The Beast' lay rampant across its surface, almost covering the whole work area. In one corner was a picture of Gloria, while in the other was a picture of him and his son. The picture had been taken recently, only three months before. It showed him and his son down by the community center, arms slung around one another's shoulder in front of the police department building.

Jacob loved that picture.

From all the way downstairs, the sounds of Carter's game were distant, yet it reminded him that his son was still there. He lived for that boy, had lived for him since Gloria had passed with breast cancer. There'd been a time in his life when he had wanted to end everything, but Carter had kept him rooted.

It was hard to believe that Carter had grown up so well, considering that Jacob had raised him himself. But whenever he thought about it, he thought about how good of a job he had done and how happy his son was with his life.

*You're a good dad*, he thought, and couldn't help but smile. *You take better care of that boy than a pair of parents do.*

He thought he did a pretty good job.

He took a few deep breaths before walking out of his room. He closed the door behind him, as he always did. It was a nervous habit he had picked up from his son. He didn't know where Carter got that habit from, but for the most part, he didn't care. Not much went past his initial parent-radar with his son. He didn't have anything to worry about with a boy like Carter, other than normal teenage insecurities.

"Carter," Jacob said, passing into the living room. "You ok?"

"Yeah, I'm ok. Why?"

"Just making sure."

The kid shrugged before going back to blowing people up.

Jacob settled into a recliner. He brought the leg rest up and tilted back, closing his eyes. It had been a long day. All he felt like doing was relaxing.

"Are *you* ok, Dad?"

"I'm just tired, that's all. The boss had me do a lot of running around. Don't worry, I'm fine."

"All right."

Carter turned the TV down before returning to his game.

Jacob smiled.

He woke up when Carter shook him awake, saying he had bought the two of them a pizza.

"You didn't have to do that," Jacob said, sitting upright in the recliner. "I'll give you the money."

"It's ok, Dad. Come on; let's eat."

Jacob followed his son into the living room. He had ordered a Canadian bacon and already had plates, salt and pepper out.

"How long ago did the pizza get here?"

"Uh... three minutes, pretty much."

Jacob sat down, taking a piece of the pizza for himself. Carter got himself his own piece and sat down across from his father. For the first minute or so, they prepared dinner—spicing their pizza with salt and pepper, pouring soda, and taking the breadsticks and sauce out of their cartons. After they were fully done, Jacob looked up at his son.

"Your birthday's coming up pretty soon," he smiled. "What do you think about that?"

"I don't know," Carter shrugged.

"I was thinking," Jacob began, "that since your birthday's over the spring break, we could go up to the lake."

"The cabin?" Carter asked.

"Yeah. I figured it'll be something to do. Besides, it'll be like old times, when we used to go up there."

Of course, they hadn't gone to the cabin since Gloria had passed, so 'old times' were pretty much 'forgotten times.' He couldn't remember much of the 'old times,' except him and Gloria enjoying the sunsets and Carter running around near the lake, chasing minnows.

"What do you think about that?" Jacob asked. "Would you like going up there?"

"I... I guess." Carter nibbled at his pizza.

"We don't have to if you don't want to, son."

"I know, Dad. I think it'd be cool, just you and me up on the lake."

"We can go out on the boat too, do some fishing, look at all the rich people's houses. It'll be fun."

"Yeah," Carter smiled. "It will."

Jacob stood in the bedroom, packing his things into a suitcase. Among these things were clothes, his cell phone, his laptop and external battery, and an old picture of him and Gloria. It was their last picture together, near her death. She'd asked to go to the cabin one last time.

He couldn't help but shed a tear when he stared at that picture. There was Gloria, flat-chested and short-haired post-breast-removal surgery, leaning against his chest with his arms wrapped around her waist. They were sitting in a 'seat' that had naturally been formed by a strange tree on their path down by the cabin. They named that path that Dog's Trail, because there used to be a collie that followed them whenever they went down that simple path.

*Gloria...*

Nine years. Nine years without her presence, nine years without her love... nine years without his wife.

His son's knock on the door was like a God knocking on His chapel, telling His worshipers that what they were doing wasn't needed. Although he knew that his wife was long gone, and that he could still mourn, he knew it would only bring unnecessary questions from Carter.

"Yeah!" he said, wiping the tear off his face. "Come in!"

Carter pushed the door open. As he usually did when his father's door wasn't open, he slid his head through the door, looking at him.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, come on."

He gestured to the spot on the bed. When his son settled down next to him, Jacob couldn't help but slide an arm around the boy's shoulder.

"What's up, buddy?"

"How long were we going to stay up there?"

"A week, I guess. I mean, we could go up there, then come back home. There's no electricity up at the cabin, so we'd be bringing the fancy temperature cooler and eating hotdogs and hamburgers the whole time."

"That's ok."

"So if you came to ask how many clothes to pack, I'd pack at least three or four pairs, just in case we get wet out on the boat."

Carter nodded. He was about to stand before he stopped.

"Something wrong?" Jacob frowned.

"No." Carter shook his head. He looked over his shoulder. "Love you, Dad."

Jacob smiled.

"Love you too."

Carter closed the door behind him.

Early the next morning—before the crack of dawn—Jacob loaded his son and their possessions into the van.

By mid-afternoon, it was pouring rain.

Their destination was a small lake called Parish. Parish Lake wasn't exactly that big, but it wasn't exactly that small either. A few million/billionaires lived on the lake—with their big log cabins or fancy urban-construction-look houses—but, mostly, it was a quiet area.

Carter was playing with a portable Playstation while Jacob maneuvered them through the hazardous rain. The radio kept saying 'residents should seek shelter,' but how could they seek shelter when they were in a car?

*Keep driving. You can still see.*

Even though the front window was never free of water, and even if fog covered the ground, he had no trouble seeing the road ahead.

He could continue driving.

"Carter," he said, taking a glance at his son. "You ok?"

"Yeah. The rain's too loud though."

Jacob nodded. The rain was annoying, but there wasn't much he could do about it. He'd thought about turning the radio up, but he was respecting Carter's lack of earpieces. He wanted his son to hear the little noises his game was making, even *if* they were just little bings and booms.

When he returned his attention to the road, something ran out in front of him.

"FUCK!"

He slammed on the breaks. The car went into a spin. He steered into it, grimacing, praying that it wouldn't flip and kill both him and his son. Carter's portable flew into the backseat and landed on the floor.

After five complete spins, they came to a complete stop.

Amazingly, the van was still on the road.

"What the hell, Dad?"

"What the hell is right," Jacob said, taking slow, deep breaths. "That's why I tell you to wear your seatbelt."

"Why did you slam on the breaks?"

"Because something ran out in front of me."

"What was the *something*?"

Carter unbuckled his seatbelt and crawled into the back seat. From there, he let out a sigh of relief.

"It didn't break my PSP."

"That's good."

"Or shut my game off," he added, rolling his eyes. "I think you need to get off at the next rest stop and stop driving, at least until the rain lets up."

"Yeah," Jacob nodded. "Good idea."

He pulled the van back onto his side of the road and continued down on it, this time at a slower pace.

Had he really saw the thing that had died on the road a few days ago, or had he just been imagining things?

At the rest stop, Jacob and his son lay huddled under a sleeping bag. Carter had, naturally, drawn close to his father. Jacob draped an arm over his son's shoulders, setting his hand on Carter's back.

So far, he hadn't said anything to his son. He hadn't said anything after he told Carter that everything would be all right and to try and get some sleep.

Carter shifted, drawing closer. Father and son were so close that their chests were almost touching. Jacob sighed, taking a few deep breaths. He hated putting his son out here in the van—and in the rain, no doubt—but it was what he had to do.

*He doesn't care. My son's a good kid.*

"Son," he said.

"What?"

"You still awake?"

"That's kind of a stupid question."

Jacob chuckled, rolling over on his back.

"I'm sorry I got you stuck out here."

"You didn't get us stuck; the rain did."

He sat up, rubbing his arms. He'd taken his T-shirt off because he could never get comfortable in them, even if it was just a simple undershirt. Carter still had his shirt on though.

"We'll get going after the rain stops."

"Did the radio say when it would clear up?"

"No." He let out a breath he had been holding. "Oh well though. We're lucky we didn't go off the road."

"Yeah, and that nothing was broken."

"You know I would've bought you another Playstation thing if it got broken."

"I don't really care about the PSP, Dad. I'm just glad we didn't get hurt."

"That's why I tell you to wear your seatbelt when you drive."

"I always wear my seatbelt."

"That's why we didn't fly out the window."

Carter smiled, slapping his dad's arm. Jacob returned the slap and wrapped his arms around his kid.

"We're gonna have fun," he whispered. "Don't you worry."

The rain stopped at midnight. When it did, Jacob found himself awake with nothing to do other than just sleep. He crawled out of the very back of the van—where all but the front seats were down, since it was just him and his son—and started driving.

The road was dark and carless, as he had figured it would be. Light mist traced the roads, but parted for his van. It was like his vehicle was a bullet, parting through the flesh of an enemy; or a scalpel cutting through a freshly-deceased corpse.

Carter was still asleep in the back. Jacob had thought about waking his son up to have him move up into the passenger seat, so he could at least be buckled, but didn't. Instead, he went slower. He could get away with it, since no one was on the road.

*We'll be at the cabin soon.*

At the speed he was going, it'd only be an hour-and-a-half, two at the tops. They'd be pulling into the cabin soon enough.

He couldn't stop thinking about the thing that had run out in front of him on the road. It was small enough to be *it*, but it just *couldn't* be. The beast was dead; he'd seen it himself.

*Duh, Jake; there needs to be more than just one of them to stay alive.*

People were so stupid sometimes. How could anyone expect there to be just one monster in any kind of situation? If there was just *one* monster, how was it still being sighted? One animal couldn't be seen so much. Nature had her way of eliminating the last of a kind. Sometimes an animal would starve, and other times a stronger species would eat it. So, in the long run, more than one of the monsters existed.

*Just concentrate on the road. If something's still out there, oh well; it's not my problem.*

It wasn't his problem, not anymore. Because unless the 'beast' was seen again, he didn't need to run around like a chicken with his head cut off looking at dead animal bodies.

When he pulled up to the cabin, he went up onto the front porch and unlocked the door. He stepped inside and looked around to make sure

everything was the same before he walked back out and opened the van's rear door.

Carter was still sleeping, wrapped up in the sleeping bag. Jacob reached inside and tapped his son's shoulder.

"Dad?" he yawned. "What..."

"We're at the cabin, son. Get up—let's get inside."

Without another word, Carter slid out of the van, took a moment to gain his composure, and followed him up to the cabin.

*Good boy, son.*

Almost immediately when they entered the house, Carter collapsed on the couch and fell back asleep, leaving Jacob to grab their suitcases and drag them into the kitchen. Afterward, he locked the door with the first recognition that they were now safe and inside four walls.

He leaned against the wall. He wasn't the least tired, since he had slept a good four hours in the van, but he didn't have anything to do. Since there was no electricity, he couldn't watch TV, and since there was no light, he couldn't read. Not that he had brought any books, but there were probably a few laying around somewhere.

"I should just try and get back to sleep. There's nothing to do anyway."

Carter's birthday wasn't until Friday, which was still three days off.

Birthday plans could begin tomorrow.

Jacob woke up later in the afternoon. Carter was lying on the couch, playing his PSP. His skinny frame was even more obvious without his shirt.

"Hey," Jacob grinned. "You sleep ok?"

"Yeah, I did."

Jacob sat up and ran his hands through his hair, taking another glance at his kid. Carter had gone back to playing his game.

"What time did you get up?" he asked.

"I don't know. There's no clock in here."

"How long have you been up?"

"I don't know. A little while, but not too long."

"All right," he chuckled, standing. "Can you wait a little while to eat?"

"Yeah."

"All right. Don't wander off on me."

He ruffled his son's hair before he walked into the nearby bathroom. He didn't have the water running, since they hadn't been up here in

years, but it was always good to take a good luck at yourself when you woke up in the morning.

As usual, his face was covered in dark stubble. At the age of thirty-seven, he'd managed to avoid any gray hairs, at least for the time being. Not that he particularly cared—he didn't have anyone to impress.

"Not since Gloria."

His dead wife's name summoned her presence. He could feel her standing behind him, her hand on his lower back. She'd always had soft skin. He could feel her short hair on his shoulder, her lips at the back of his neck.

It was said that in places of great memory, of great happiness, spiritual connections could be made to the passed-on. It was like when you went to a graveyard. You knew what was there—all the bodies of the long dead—but it wasn't just the physical knowledge that was there. The air in a cemetery always felt different. It was filled with bits of static. Sometimes the area you were standing in was clearer than others, while other times, one particular area would make the hairs on your arms and neck stand up. It felt like that here at the cabin.

Gloria was here; maybe not in person, but in spirit.

There was something he wanted to do, after Carter's birthday came around. The attic still had boxes in it. After Gloria's passing, he had all but forgotten them. Carter's birthday and the idea of celebrating his sweet sixteen had restored the memories. His wife still had stuff in those boxes.

He'd been missing a scrapbook for the past nine years.

It was here, in this house.

When he looked up at the medicine cabinet, he saw a brief glimpse of his wife's face.

*Oh, Gloria.*

She was still here... still here since the day she passed.

Jacob and Carter wandered around the property. Carter kept kicking the smaller rocks, watching them bounce along the dirt, while Jacob watched his son's childish game with a smile. It felt good, to be up here at the cabin again. It felt *really* good.

*I shouldn't've waited this long to bring my son up here.*

Too many years had been spent away from this place, too many years that could've been filled with great memories. Nothing could be done though; what was in the past was in the past. At least Carter would

have the memory of knowing that he spent his sixteenth birthday up by the lake.

"Hey, Dad!" Carter called.

Jacob looked up. He'd stopped walking and had fallen at least ten feet back from his son.

"Sorry," he said, jogging up to his boy.

"You ok?"

"I was just thinking about how we're finally back."

"Yeah. I like it up here."

"We'll be sure to come up more often."

It was always fun to spend Christmas up at the cabin. Even Gloria would be happy with the winter wonderland Parish Lake was in early November. The beauty of the area could captivate any stranger who visited.

"Cool," Carter smiled.

Carter turned and continued down the path, kicking rocks in their wake. The path wasn't the Dog's Trail, thankfully. Jacob didn't think he would be able to walk down there, at least not this time. If his son wandered down that path, he'd merely tell him not to go down there.

Carter never questioned what he said; there was no need to, really. Their bond was stronger than that of the normal father and son, so there was rarely any kind of argument or question in whatever the other said.

Jacob slipped his thumbs into his pockets, following his son at a leisurely pace. They continued down the path until they came to the neighbor's dock. The old man wouldn't care if they were there.

*If the old man's still here, anyway.*

A sigh escaped his lips.

"That's what you get for taking so long to come back up here," he murmured.

"Come on, Dad!"

A big explosion of water came out of the water when Carter jumped in, fully clothed.

"Coming!" he called, stripping his shirt off as he ran for the dock.

After a dip in the lake, Jacob pulled himself up onto the dock. Carter was still swimming, casually lying on his back as if he didn't have a care in the world. Even though Jacob had jumped in with his jeans on, he had boxers underneath, so it wasn't all bad.

People around the Parish Lake area didn't really care. They were good neighbors, really. Even the rich people weren't the stuck-up snobs that most people expected. And besides; the area was wooded enough.

"Come on, Carter!" Jacob called. "Let's go back to the house."

"Aww! Come on, Dad!"

"We'll go down to the beach. I don't think the old man here would appreciate us swimming off his dock."

Carter shrugged. He swam up to the loading ramp and climbed up it. Together, they walked back to the house, leaving their wet clothes in a laundry basket near the door.

"See? That was fun."

"Yeah, it was."

Jacob slid an arm around his son's back.

"Only two more days until your birthday," Jacob grinned.

Carter merely smiled, slipping out of his father's grip.

"I'm gonna go put some dry stuff on."

When Carter slipped out of the room, Jacob sighed.

It'd be a good day.

"Come on, Dad. What are we doing?"

"Not a whole lot," he said. "Don't take that blindfold off."

"I'm not going to."

Jacob took a hold of his son's shoulders, holding him in place.

"All right," he whispered, leaning in close to his son's ear. "Take it off."

When Carter took his blindfold off, he could only stare. In front of them—in the driveway—was a brand new Jaguar Sedan, a car his son had been drooling over one day when Jacob had taken the van in to get fixed.

"Dad..."

"Happy birthday, kid."

"I can't take this."

"Yes you can. Besides, I already bought it."

He handed Carter the key, following his son up to the car. It had a dark red color with a black leather interior. Jacob had found himself wanting the vehicle when he had been looking at it, but knew Carter wanted one more than anything. Besides; he couldn't afford to get two cars at a time.

"How much..."

"Don't worry about the price."

“But...”

“Don’t worry about it, Carter. Just get inside, see how you like it.”

Carter slid into the driver’s seat. Jacob opened the passenger door and peeked in. At least the interior was nice. But, then again, this had been sitting in the back room, where no one could get into the vehicles. The one that had been in the showroom had scuffs in the leather. That was a definite *no no*.

“You like it?” he asked.

“I love it, Dad.”

Jacob planted himself down beside his son, running a hand over the dash.

“I wasn’t sure if you would.”

“You kidding? I couldn’t stop looking at it the day we went in to get the van fixed.” Carter smiled, running his hands over the seat and wheel. After he glanced at his father, he frowned. “What’s wrong, Dad?”

“Nothing,” he said. “Just thinking.”

Carter didn’t say anything. Instead, he reached over and set his hand on Jacob’s knee.

“I love you, Dad.”

Jacob looked up at his son.

“I love you too.”

He’d had his two friends bring the car up before Carter got up, along with a small cake. After they celebrated—cake, a few extra presents, and candles in all—Carter sat on the couch to play one of his new PSP games. Jacob ventured upstairs.

The attic came down from the second floor. A cord hung from the ceiling. All he had to do was pull that cord and the ladder would slide down, giving him easy access into the bird’s nest of the cabin.

The attic had a bedroom setup—complete with battery-operated fans—but it wasn’t a favorable part of the house. Since it was too hot in summer and too cold in the winter, the attic wasn’t a very human-oriented area. If the temperature was controlled, it wasn’t *bad*, but it wasn’t as great as the second and first floor. In the rain season though, the attic was a great place to sleep.

As Jacob ascended, he was greeted by the large, fifteen by fifteen foot room. While this was the only part of the attic that was open and inhabitable, it was still a nice space.

In the corner were the drawers that Gloria had kept her old scrapbooks in.

*Do I do this now, while my kid's awake?*

It was getting dark.

Soon enough, he wouldn't have any light to guide his eyes.

*There are flashlights around here, you know?*

Yes, there were flashlights.

He'd wait until his son was asleep and sound.

Maybe then he wouldn't be as nervous about the whole thing.

He went back down the ladder, pushed it into the ceiling, and closed the trapdoor.

Later... he'd go back up later.

After Carter fell asleep on the couch, Jacob grabbed the flashlight and went upstairs. He pulled the attic ladder down and climbed up, opening the trapdoor.

Once he was in the top of the house, he turned the light on. It cut a path through the darkness to whatever he might find.

*Why do I think I'll find something bad?*

He didn't necessarily *think* it, but something told him he'd find more than he expected. Maybe it was because he had seen Gloria in the mirror earlier. Maybe she was trying to tell him something in spirit, but wasn't able to because ghosts didn't have voices.

"Ghosts don't have voices," he whispered.

Crossing the room, he stood in front of the dressers. He set the flashlight on the bed—where he would be able to see what he was doing—and began his task.

The first scrapbook he found contained pictures of when they had first started dating, back when they were teenagers. One picture he stopped and looked at was one of them on the Ferris wheel. Gloria had her head resting on his chest, while he had one arm around her. He held one of her hands with his free one.

*It's stuff like this that I need to remember.*

When he was done with that book, he picked up another one. This one was all from their wedding. Hundreds of scrapbooked pictures—from the cake, to the ceremony, to the individual people who were there—adorned the white, leather-bound book. A red rose was embossed into the leather, along with *Gloria and Jacob – Our Wedding* right above it.

"Oh, God."

A tear slipped out of his eye. It wasn't easy, seeing pictures like this.

He put it down on the bed, next to their early-relationship album.

This one was of Gloria's pregnancy and Carter's birth. He took in each picture with a sense of pride flowing through his chest as he looked at the swell of her belly. It was from their love that Carter had been born.

When he came to the pictures of them holding their son, he got a little better. He wasn't crying as much as he had been before. His son had always been his root of happiness and would continue to be until the day he died.

When he put this book away, he came to one final one. It was buried in the back, under a few other photo albums that he didn't care to look at. They were all creative pictures of the lake, their house, Gloria's garden, and other things. This album was tan in color, either from old age or from something else entirely.

*What in the hell...*

He hadn't seen anything like it before. When he reached in to grab it, that same feeling of dread started to come back.

*This is it, he thought, swallowing a lump in his throat. This is what you were having feelings about earlier. This is the thing that's going to show you something you've never seen before.*

Just before he could reach in and grab the album, his son called him.

"I'm coming!" Jacob yelled, grabbing the albums that were strewn across the bed.

After settling them back into the dresser, he closed the door and walked back down the stairs.

Thank God for Carter's odd sleeping habits.

Whatever was in the album could wait.

The following morning, Carter went canoeing with a group of neighbor boys. Jacob sat at the table, eating a hamburger he himself had grilled and a few chips. He couldn't get the thought of the scrapbook out of his mind. What was in it? Why had it made him feel so afraid? When had it gotten there?

*Gloria...*

His wife had hid something else from him, something other than pain. She had changed near the end of life—with her breasts gone and her hair short—but she hadn't become a different person. Whatever had changed inside her, he didn't know. All he knew was that whatever was in that book was something she had been hiding from him.

*I'm going to go up there, he thought, closing his eyes. I'm going to find out what my wife was hiding from me.*

When he finished eating, he returned to the attic. This time, though, he pulled the trapdoor and the ladder up into the attic—with him in it. He had left a note for his son, saying that he had run into the nearby town to get some stuff.

It was a lie.

His car was only hidden in a clump of trees down the road.

He needed to do this—alone, by himself.

He needed to learn Gloria's secret.

He opened the dresser drawer and pulled all the scrapbooks and photo albums out. He arranged them on the bed until, finally, he came back to the tan-colored book.

When he brought it to the surface, he stared at the title.

It simply read—in Gloria's stylish handwriting—*Gloria and the Beast*.

Was this a photo book of her battle with cancer?

No, he thought. *This isn't.*

When he opened the first page, he came to a letter.

*Dear Jacob...*

"Dear Jacob," he whispered.

*By the time you'll have read this, I will have died from cancer.*

*I know I hid some things from you, but some things people keep to themselves, you know? It's like how your mother used to keep her pennies in a jar, just her pennies. She never did cash them in, even when she went bankrupt and had to sell her house. But she kept that jar and filled it with pennies, every single time she got change. I know you have that thing of change up in the attic somewhere, probably near where you found this.*

*But that doesn't matter. Nothing matters, except what you're about to see in this book. Turn the page, dear husband. You'll see the thing that was and probably still is haunting you.*

The text ended there.

Upon his dead wife's request, he turned the page.

He was greeted by a picture of the dog-creature that had been struck dead a week ago.

*I found him lying on the side of the road when he was just a puppy. This picture of him is from when he was around a year old, I believe. I don't know*

*what he is, other than the fact that he's some kind of dog/wolf thing, but that doesn't matter.*

He stared at the picture. The animal was exactly the same as what he had seen on the road. Small—about two or three feet off the ground—with a short snout and dew claws that went back to the knees. It even had a stubbed tail. The animal by the road had been torn apart, so Jacob hadn't been sure if its bloodied tail had also been massacred in the accident.

When he turned the page, a picture of Gloria holding the animal stood out in full glory.

*He was better here. He had gotten into a fight with another animal, or something, because he had a huge gash in his leg. But I bandaged him up. He came to like me, I guess. I don't know why he liked me. I mean, he's a wild animal, but I have no trouble with him.*

He turned the page.

*He found a mate, Gloria's handwriting began. And even though she never personally came to me, her pups did. Beast (what I named him) brought the pups to me one day. I never did find out what happened to his mate, but his pups were fine.*

He had been trying to place *where* Gloria had taken these pictures. When he looked at the wall in one, he realized that the pictures were of the old warehouse that had come with the cabin. It had, originally, been home to farm animals, but the previous owner had cleaned it up so much that it looked like the horse and pig stalls were just compartments.

In one picture, a litter of six pups grouped around the father, the animal that Gloria had named Beast. He stared at the picture, captivated by the image of a father playing shepherd to his children.

So, it was true; there was more than just one. The 'Beast of Turner' wasn't a mutant, or some kind of deformed runaway pup. It was a species of canine, one that had not been discovered by modern mankind.

The final page was met with a few more pictures of the pups, all crowded around Gloria.

One note was left.

*I know this isn't the best way to say goodbye, but it's the only way I really can. I did it in here because I knew you would find it, eventually. I know I've said goodnight to you, while you were sleeping, but I had to say it again.*

*Tell Carter that I love him, and that his mother tried to do the best she could, even though she was sick, Jacob. Tell him that, even though he was so young, that every single day of my life, I loved him more than love itself. I loved him because we loved him, Jacob. I loved him because our love made him, and because that love made him, I loved him more than love could ever love.*

*I want to say goodbye, Jacob. I know I was never able to do it while I was alive, but now, even while you're reading this, I know you're grateful for this last note. I know that you'll either take the scrapbook home, or leave it in the cabin. I don't care what you do with this after you read this. Leave it in the cabin, lock it in the shelf, slide it under the floorboard and let it be forgotten. I know that, one day, you'll read this—whether you're thirty-eight or forty-nine, or whether you find it before the day before you die. Just like I am when I'm writing this, I know that, one day, you'll read this and remember all the good times we had together. You'll remember all the things that made us us.*

*I love you, Jacob.*

*I'll be waiting,*

*Gloria.*

It was from the night she died... the night she had last told him and Carter she loved them.

Jacob closed the book, as well as his eyes.

The tears that came couldn't be stopped.

He sobered himself up later, after he calmed down. Carter called his cell and asked if he could stay at the neighbor boy's house for the night. Jacob said he could. Then, when Carter asked if something was wrong, Jacob said no, that everything was all right.

Like a bad cliché, a storm came in with the wind. It brought rain and darkness, darkness that did not dissuade Jacob from donning a yellow raincoat and taking the Dog's Trail.

The warehouse/animal-stall was at the curve in the road, hidden off the side of the road. A long time ago—before the previous owner had planted tree seeds in his youth—the wooded area had once been open.

Now, though, trees towered in this area, making it look as though nature had always claimed this place.

He didn't know if he was crying or not. It was funny, how people couldn't know they were crying in the rain, but it didn't really matter, not now. All he knew was that he had to look at one final thing.

*The warehouse.*

If anything, he would take one last look.

When he came to the bend in the road, he stepped into the warehouse. He leaned against the wall. Gloria was here too, in this small building. The part of her that hadn't stayed at the house had come here, right before she passed.

"If you're here," he said, voice so low that he could barely hear it, "come out. I'm not going to hurt you."

A creak in the wood startled him.

He lost balance and went over.

His head connected with the windowsill.

*God.*

He had just imagined the noise; nothing more.

When he heard the tiny click-clacks of something walking into the warehouse, he stood.

There—in the entryway—stood one of the animals.

*Beast.*

Looking at the animal, he couldn't see what his wife had saw in it, nor could he understand how she had felt when looking at the animal. Seeing something so strange—something so new—was an entirely different experience altogether. Like seeing a mountain that looked so high or swimming in a lake or ocean that was filled with things you had never imagined, looking at this animal made him feel something he had never felt before. A touch, a kiss, a stroke of the hand or a part of the hair—looking at this animal made him feel like his wife had come back home.

The creature's low growl brought a troubled sigh from his lips.

"It's ok," he said, closing the stall door. "I'm not here to hurt you."

The creature growled again. It took him a moment to realize that he was standing in its home.

"Oh," he said.

Opening the stall, he slid out, giving way for the canine. With a curl of its lip, it eased itself toward the compartment and disappeared inside.

With a final frown, Jacob turned and walked out the door.

When he entered in the rain, he saw Gloria standing in the road.

"Gloria?" he asked.

His wife only smiled.

"Take care of them, Jacob," she said, transparent form flickering in and out from the rain. "They're part of us too."

When she disappeared, Jacob closed his eyes and began walking back up the Dog's Trail. He realized why Gloria had named this path that strange name and why she had always enjoyed coming up here during the spring and autumn months. He realized that now, after so many years, they had been waiting for him to come back; to take care of them, to bring Gloria back home.

He realized that his wife could finally rest in peace.

The realization brought him to his knees.

With a long, low wail, he cried for Gloria for the first time in ten years.

He cried for a long, long time.

The rain continued on.

The wind whistled.

A monster moaned its sorrow.

## New Section

### The Miracle in Idaho

"Our cat's dead," he says.

Life can change in an instant. Regardless of who you are, what you wear or how you eat, any and everything can happen. In the distance, a plane plummets from the sky, then crashes directly into your house; on the coast, the ground below you is quaking, then sends your million-dollar Californian home into the sea; and in the air inside your house, nitrogen is building, threatening to ignite and destroy you and everything you've owned in the blink of an eye.

I raise my head, part in shock, part in panic.

*Our cat? I think. Dead?*

My father holds his flannel to his shirt, a figure obviously enshrouded in its maroon-and-black-tiled fabric.

"What happened!" I cry.

"I found her out in the driveway. I've been doing CPR on her, but she isn't moving. I'm not sure if she's alive."

My cat—my calico—can't be dead. She's never gone out in the highway, never so much has dared to cross the property line that separates our home from the city since we've adopted her five years ago. But here she is, dead, lying in my father's arm with blood coming out of her nose and her eyes misaligned inside her skull.

*"Kah-Kalli?"*

I run my hand over her, feeling the fur under my hand. My dad says she was warm when he dropped my brother off from school, that he told him that he wasn't sure if it was our cat or not. He says that he turned around and came and got her, then came home.

He's been forming CPR on her for ten minutes, he says.

In my head, something explodes; igniting, exciting, intoxicating.

Something inside my head has just stopped working.

"It's ok," he said. "She's all right."

Then, like a trigger to a gun, I lose it.

*My mother says she's been trying to bring a cat up to the deck for the past three days. She says she's a calico. When I ask what that is, she says it's a multi-colored cat. She has black, brown, tan, white, grey, orange, and silver on her—seven colors in all.*

*Seven's always been my lucky number.*

She might be purebred, Mom says.

*Why should I care whether or not a cat is pure? Why should I care about the way someone's meticulously manipulated nature to create a perfect specimen, and why should I care whether or not this cat has been touched by human hands?*

Grandma said she's been in the breadbox all winter.

All winter? *I ask.*

Yes. All winter.

Why are you trying to get her up here?

She's tame. She's not afraid of people.

*I smile.*

A cat, *I think.* We're going to have our own cat.

My dad says it isn't his fault, that he can't help it; that he'd do anything he could to change it back.

I don't care.

My cat is dead. Nothing else matters.

Enraged, infuriated, distraught beyond normal, sane means, I take a loose kickstand between my fingers and throw it as far as I can, intending to hear it slam into the nearby shed. When it doesn't, I snap. Blood pounds in my head, tears course down my face, my nose clogs and my arms shake as I grab a plastic chair and throw it into a yard, then dump a whole bucket of crushed cans over.

"Knock it the hell off!" my dad screams.

*"You knock it off!"*

I storm toward the house.

Inside, a creature awakens.

She tries to scream.

Instead, I gasp.

"I can't help it," my dad says, reaching for me. "She's ok now, she's with Lacey, she..."

I say nothing.

I go inside.

When my dad tries to pursue, I slam the door over and over.

While my dad continues to scream, and while I begin wailing like a creature from another plane, my mind erupts into a blur of emotion. The cat I have grown up with since I became a teenager is dead, struck by a car after she has run out in the road.

*But how?*

I don't know. I don't know anything anymore. It's too complicated, the scope of nature.

*My cat didn't deserve to die. Nobody's cat deserves to die.*

Somehow, I'm able to control my emotions and calm myself down—if only for a brief moment—when I see my cousin running toward the house.

"What's the matter?" she cries.

"Our cat's dead," my dad says, "and he's locked the door."

I throw myself at the door, attempting to unlock it.

I'm unable to.

"I can't open the door," I say, the creature inside wanting to scream.

"What?" my cousin asks.

"The deadbolt," I repeat. "It's stuck."

*My mother has coaxed the cat onto the deck.*

*I am there to see the whole thing.*

*Home from school on a day when I am sick, I walk outside just in time to see my mother reach down to stroke her fur. Black, white, orange, tan; she is a beautiful creature, the calico that will soon become ours. She sports a mask of color; her face half black, half tan, divided by black.*

*She is beautiful.*

*She will be our cat*

*Is she, I start to ask.*

*Yes, my mother says. She's ours.*

"Go open the shop door," my cousin says. "I can't get the door open."

An automaton to natural command, I turn and make my way toward the extension of the house, trying desperately to make it outside. But, when I open the door to the originally-intended-for-ceramics room and begin to descend the stairs, my cousin speaks. I cannot hear her, but I know that she has, somehow, opened the door.

I turn.

As I know, the door is open—wide open.

Smokey, the kitten... they could get out.

"Did you see the other cats come out?" I ask, running to the door.

"No," my cousin says, shaking her head.

While my dad holds our beloved cat in his arms, trying desperately not to cry, my cousin wraps her arm around my shoulder and says she's sorry, that life isn't fair.

"I'm taking her to the vet," my father says. "I don't think she's dead."

I hesitate.

Dad looks up at me.

"Are you coming?" he asks.

I shake my head.

He says nothing as he makes his way toward the car, sets her in the passenger seat, and takes off.

*Lacey didn't like Kalli when she first came into our lives. She used to chase her off the deck and run her nearly all the way off the property, into the nearby ditches that surrounded the house. She'd always been trained to chase cats off the property, not deal with them as they wandered on the deck.*

*Over the course of a month-and-a-half, we trained Lacey to accept Kalli as her sister.*

*Sitting on the deck as a family, drinking pop, eating sandwiches, and talking about summer and how it would soon be coming, we got to see the first time Kalli showed affection to her animal sister.*

*With a simple touch of the nose, Kalli purred, brushed up against Lacey, and walked past her.*

*All our hard work had paid off.*

*After all this time, they were finally friends.*

"Do you need me to stay here while he's gone?" my cousin asks.

"No," I say, wiping snot from my lip. "It's all right."

"All right. You come over if you need anything, ok?"

"Ok."

Just as I head toward the front door—broken, deadbolt jutting from its prison—I watch my cousin disappear from view.

Then, with fear plaguing my heart, I reach for the phone, call my mom, and wait for the school she works at to patch me into the teacher's office.

"Hello?" she says.

"Mom," I stammer. "Kalli's dead. She got hit by a car."

My mother says nothing.

Then, slowly, she says, "Honey, I can't leave work."

A second bullet goes off.

I hurl the phone at the floor with all my might.

The battery comes out, the cap flies off.

I turn, grab a flashlight, and slam it into the cupboard.

The top breaks off, the batteries come out. One is leaking acid.

Troubled, I grab both batteries and throw them in the garbage, then go off in search of the cats.

Neither of them have claws.

Smokey and Little Bit can't be outside.

I can't lose more than one cat today. I just can't.

Look at her, *I say, garbed in pants, gloves and earmuffs.* She's going to jump in the snow.

*Kalli looks at the snow, unsure what to think. She knows what it is—because she lived in a breadbox for a whole winter—but she's not sure what to do. It's funny, how a cat can be unsure of something so natural, so simple.*

*Out of nowhere, she jumps.*

*She sinks three feet.*

*My brother and I burst into laughter. So does my mother, who stands nearby with a cigarette in hand.*

*Better go save her, my mother says.*

*My brother and I are quick to comply.*

*Together, and in a way only brothers can, we lift her out of the snow, laughing as she jumps out of our grasp and into the frozen wasteland.*

The kitten is under the bed, eyes wide and afraid.

"It's ok, baby," I say, reaching under the bed.

She meows, but does nothing more than that as I pull her into my arms. Little Bit has always meowed when you picked her up. My mother thinks it's because she was afraid of being outside; my dad thinks it's because someone was mean to her, but something about the way she meows now scares me.

Are animals capable of knowing when a sibling has died? Are they able to feel the absence of a presence, just like a supposedly-colorblind dog can see when a woman dyes her hair?

I do not know, but I do not care. I simply push the kitten into her carrier, lock it up, then go in search of Smokey.

Smokey is notorious for running out the door when it's open. She's been fixed on the outside world since she was a kitten. Rescued from a tree that endured a torrential drench of rain for more than two days, she used to sit in the window and watch the squirrels playing on the railing or birds bathing in the fishpond. Anytime she sees one, she meows—a funny sound even by cat standards. It's more a squeak, a noise you'd expect a mouse to make.

She is my primary goal after I secure Little Bit in her carrier.

Like any good soldier would do, I go in search.

In the basement, in the shop, under the small of the stairs and behind every single door; I look anywhere I can. My mind goes back to my cousin and the way she opened the door, and how, despite her better judgment, she left it open long enough for a cat to escape out of.

*Smokey.*

Her name is a diamond in my mind—smoky, but with eyes of green. They glitter in the sun and reflect light when you take a picture the wrong way. Sometimes, her eyes even look like moons; round, cheesy moons.

She can't be outside. She can't be.

The sound of the SUV fills my ears.

My mother is home.

She comes through the front door a moment later.

"Kalli's dead," I say, before she even has a chance to speak. I start balling soon after.

A moment later, my dad's Lincoln pulls up.

He waits, hesitates.

Then, faced with the all-too-real realization that my mother is home, he reaches into the passenger seat and pulls Kalli into his arms.

Somehow, I know she is gone.

*Christmas—a wondrous occasion any family should celebrate. Not because of the gifts, and not because of the flashy, expensive paper, but for the joy it brings to everyone involved. Seeing a smile on your child's face as he opens a video game, or the delight on a parent's as they realize they've done the perfect thing. It's something that rarely happens anytime else, something that should be cherished and held close to the heart.*

*On this day, while we're opening presents and enjoying the festivities the holiday offers, Kalli enjoys her first Christmas.*

*As any cat would, she approaches slowly, easing herself toward the paper like a hunter to its prey. Her whiskers—long, approximate to the weight of her body—flicker as another piece of paper comes soaring toward the pile.*

*Look at Kalli, my dad says.*

*Everyone looks up.*

*Something—a flicker of light, or a glint of humor—passes through our cat's eyes before she dives into the paper.*

*Laughing, unable to control ourselves, we gather the leftover paper in our arms and throw it into the pile.*

*It's the first of many, we know. We won't let it go to waste.*

The three of us stand on the deck. Dad holds Kalli close, like he has been, while my mother stands nearby, running her hand through Kalli's fur while trying to clearly see what has happened. It is here that I see the blood in her nose and the way her eyes are askew. Like glass balls in a candy machine, they are out of focus and appear to have been deliberately tossed together by normal means. But despite her eyes being askew and blood coming out of her nose, something else seems wrong. She doesn't seem like our cat. I can't tell whether it's the shock of knowing she's dead, or the fact that she's been hit by a car.

"She didn't suffer," Dad says. "That's what the vets said."

I don't care. My cat's still dead.

As I retreat back into the house, Dad tries to get me to stay, but I say nothing.

Instead, I slam the door.

Rage returns.

The gun in my head prepares for the third round of Russian Roulette.

Not long after the third bullet has been slid into the cartridge, Dad opens the door. Mom comes in soon after.

"You know what?" he asks, voice tense, filled with hurt yet deadly anger. "I can't help it, so knock it off."

"MY CAT JUST DIED!" I screamed.

"I can't help it!" he cried back.

"I don't care you alcoholic, motherfucking asshole."

I turn, prepared to skirt across the distance of the kitchen, but stop as he speaks.

"Turn around."

I do as asked.

"Don't you *ever* call me an alcoholic, motherfucking asshole again." He jabs his finger at a plate of chips. Before he came to the door, with news of Kalli's death, I'd prepared to sprinkle them with cheese, then put them in the oven and make nachos. "I put these chips on your plate."

"Then eat them."

The third bullet ejects.

Chips are its ammunition.

I grab the plate and hurl the chips at my dad.

He does nothing but seethe and scream as I make my way toward the computer. A friend is waiting. She lives thousands of miles away, but knows the pain I've gone through. She knows my cat has died.

"You know what?" my dad asks, only contained by the pressure of my mother's hand on his chest. "You're going to get your ass out here and clean these up, then clean up the mess you made outside."

He heads for the door, slamming it as he exits the house.

My mother tells me that I need to stop, to calm down and control my temper, that there's nothing I can do by yelling and screaming and crying.

My mother—my greatest ally—has turned against me.

Why isn't she crying?

"You heartless bitch!" I scream.

Again, I make my way toward the shop.

Smokey continues to linger on my mind.

No, I think. *She can't be gone.*

*We celebrate Kalli's birthday in April, the same month as mine. We've even taken the habit of celebrating it on the same day as my own, the seventh. April—or as close to it as possible—was the month Kalli came into our family, the month she forever became intertwined with our lives.*

*During the night, she sleeps in an old doghouse, locked away so she will not escape, but with food and water at the front of her pen. It's a beautiful thing, to see a pet resting behind the safety of locks. Nothing can get her while she sleeps inside her home of wood, and nothing can harm when the chill of the wind comes up. There are blankets in that house of hers, put there to make her nights as comfortable as possible.*

*It's a beautiful thing, having a pet.*

*Kalli was the cat we always wanted. And because of someone else's wrongdoing—because of another human's being savage cruelty—she became ours.*

I walk the property, calling Smokey's name, hoping that she hasn't run outside. The property we live on is five acres; mostly surrounded by trees, but also boarded by fields. The fact that she can be anywhere is a claw on my back, a gun at my neck... a car on the road.

As I make my way back toward the house, I hear my parents talking.

Although I can't hear them, I know that my father is talking about me.

"I can't help it!" he says to my mother. "He needs to fucking knock it off."

*He* and *me*—each a different word, each referring to me.

"You need to knock it off," I said.

Before my dad can launch into another tirade, my mother stops him, saying I'm upset.

"Leave him alone," she says.

"I *have* been leaving him alone," he replies.

How, I think, can yelling at someone traumatized over the loss of her cat count as 'being left alone?'

Regardless, I don't care.

Once again, I go back in the house in search of Smokey, the shop my destination.

"Smokey," I say.

The creature returns.

She forces a choking wail from the depths of my chest.

I step in the shop and look in her normal place. She likes to sleep on top of the sheet-covered organ whenever she's in the shop, so when I don't find her there, I look under the desk, which is covered with the plastic of paintball guards.

I sob.

"It's ok," my mother says.

I turn.

She holds Smokey in one arm.

"Where did you find her?" I ask, making my way toward the stairs.

"She came out of the bedroom," my mother says, reaching back to take hold of her back, still-clawed feet when she starts struggling.

"You're scaring her."

I nod, forcing the beast inside to silence.

There is nothing I can do. My cat is gone.

"I have to go back to work," my mother says, leading me into her room, where I found Little Bit and put her in her own carrier. My mother pushes Smokey into hers, securing it the moment she's safely inside.

"I'm sorry," I sob, wrapping my arms around her. "Please, don't leave me."

"I have to go back to work, honey."

"Please, no. I... I might hurt him if you do."

"You better not. He needs to pay the bills." She takes my face between her hands and forces her to look at me. "It's ok. Kalli's in a better place now."

"Don't hate me if I leave," I whisper, bringing my face to hers. "I'll take my cell phone."

"Don't make me worry about that while I'm gone."

"I'm tired of everything."

She says nothing.

She sighs, walks out of the bedroom, and begins to talk to my Dad.

Slowly, I say, "We found Smokey."

When no one answers, I, too, sigh.

"Mom," I continue. "Tell Dad we found Smokey."

She does.

I close my eyes and begin to imagine a life without Kalli.

*The day we introduced Kalli to Smokey, Kalli hissed at her. While Smokey meowed as though crying, and while Kalli continued to hiss, we whispered to Kalli to stop, that this was her new little sister.*

*Our second cat, though not our first, was just as important—both to us and Kalli.*

*With Smokey, Kalli would discover a playmate she never had.*

*She used to have cat friends in the wild, but something ate them—a cougar, maybe, or a badger, forced from the wild to eat whatever they could find.*

*Regardless of past, wild friends, Kalli now has Smokey, a sister for life.*

When Mom leaves to go back to work, I sit at the computer, talking to the friend who lives in Texas. She says I'm incoherent as I try to talk to her and she fears for my mental health. I can't answer the questions she asks. I say my dad got hit by a car, then say she's dead. My friend asks who. I correct myself and say my cat.

Dad comes to sit by me a moment later.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I'm bummed too."

"I'm sorry," I say, trying as hard as I can not to sob. "I couldn't help it."

"You don't have to be sorry about anything, buddy." He pauses. His hand traces my shoulders, resting between the blades. "I saw her on the side of the road when I was taking your brother to school. I said, 'That looks like Kalli,' but I didn't stop. I should've. When I went to pick her up, I was thinking, 'Oh shit, please don't run over her,' because at least three cars went over her, but she didn't get hit. Then, when I pulled over and picked her up, I had blood all over my shirt. That's when I came home. I was doing CPR on her for ten minutes before I came in the house."

A sob escapes his throat.

The sound is painful. My dad never cries.

"I majorly bummed when I seen it was her," he said. "I'm sorry. But you know what, buddy?"

"What?" I ask.

"She's in Heaven now, with Lacey."

*Heaven.*

What a simple word, for a seemingly-simple place.

*Little Bit came into the family next. She followed my cousins home from the local movie store and, somehow, didn't get hit by the oncoming traffic. I remember the exact day she came. August, the time we split wood and hauled it onto the deck—she played around my brother and cousin's heels while they totted axes, bringing them down on earthen children with the strength and klutz of gods.*

*Afraid for her safety, I went out, picked her up, and held her close.*

*She wasn't afraid of people.*

*I smiled when she started purring.*

*Look what I have! I called, holding the kitten up.*

*My mother only nodded.*

*Smiling, I looked down into Little Bit's big, yellow-green eyes and headed toward the deck.*

*Look at her, I said. Isn't she cute?*

*She's very cute, my mother said, but we can't have another cat.*

*I thought otherwise.*

*Extending my arm, I pushed the kitten into my mother's arms.*

*It didn't take long for her to be accepted into the family.*

*Unlike Smokey, Kalli took her in with little question. Originally, with the grey cat, Kalli underwent a huge personality change. She stopped being so friendly for a short time while we enamored over Smokey, happy to have a new member of the family. But unlike the change with Smokey, Kalli didn't seem to care. She simply raised her head, hissed when the kitten came too close, and walked away.*

I say nothing about Heaven, about God, or about anything that may exist in the big, blue sky; because, really, why would God take my cat away? Is his heart really so black as to take away an innocent animal? Does he really wear wings, or are those horns on his head—black, gnarled, twisted with evil and the blood of innocent animals.

Yes. It appears as though he is evil and black-hearted.

Maybe this is why I don't believe in him.

If God exists, what is his purpose for causing so much misery?

Standing, I follow dad into the kitchen. We begin to talk. I reply with short nods or ‘yeahs,’ but don’t really listen. My mind continues to go back to Kalli, who’s lying on the porch table wrapped in my dad’s maroon-and-black tiled flannel.

Then, out of the blue, he says, “Let’s go outside.”

I don’t want to go outside. Before, when he was outside with her, he wanted to show her to Benji. Like when Lacey died, I can’t bear the idea of my dog saying goodbye to yet another one of her siblings. Regardless, though, I nod.

*I can pet her, I think. I can say goodbye.*

Pushing myself forward, I open the door.

I can’t believe what I see.

*Benji came into our lives after Kalli. Not a cat, but most definitely not your normal dog, she used to sneak out of my grandparents’ yard to come play with Lacey when she was still alive. She’d hear her barking at us, the kids, and dig out of the yard. She’d been given to my grandma by my aunt because she figured my grandma would take her, seeing as how she had another small dog.*

*As fate would have it, Benji became ours.*

*Like with Lacey, the adjustment to having another dog nearly traumatized Kalli, but she soon got over it. While Benji would play-bow and chase her across the deck, or follow her up the large olive tree to the side of our property, Kalli would be unwilling to play. Dogs—and cats, for that matter—were not to be trusted, and especially not meant to be friends.*

*Somehow, though, they managed.*

Trauma can often play tricks on the mind. It can make you hear things you want to hear, smell things you want to smell. It can even make you see things you want to see, which is what I think when I see Kalli sitting on the deck, licking her paw and bringing it across her face.

Surely she can’t be alive.

She’s lying dead on the table no more than five feet away.

“Fuck me running,” my dad breathes.

At that moment, there is no question—Kalli is alive.

Wanting to scream, but not wanting to scare away the one thing that has caused me so much heartache for the past hour, I reach down, take my cat into my arms, and hold her to my chest.

“I love you so much,” I sob, bowing my face in her fur.

Kalli purrs.

My heart melts.

It is the happiest moment of my life.

"You should call your cousin," my dad says.

I pick up the phone and dial seven numbers. Dad says I can walk over, but I shake my head. I need to call mom before I can go anywhere.

"Hello?" my cousin asks.

"Ellenor," I say. "Kalli's not dead."

"What?"

"She's not dead. That cat, it... it was a lookalike."

"Oh, thank God." Her voice breathes relief. "I'm so glad she's alive, honey."

"Thank you," I say. "Goodbye."

I look up at Dad.

He smiles.

His face is drenched in tears.

"Can I have Mrs. Longbottom's room?" I ask the secretary who takes my call.

"Yes," she says. "Please hold."

I wait; one minute, then two. My mother picks up a moment later.

"Hello?" she says.

"Mom," I sigh.

"What? What!"

"Kalli's alive."

"I didn't think that was Kalli, honey, but I didn't want to tell you."

*That's why she wasn't crying, I think. That's why she wasn't sad.*

"I'm sorry I said that to you," I said, hoisting Kalli up higher. "Here, listen."

Kalli meows, then hisses as I hoist her up again.

"Thank God," my Mom sighs. "So... are you and your dad ok? You haven't been fighting?"

"No," I say. "We've been fine since you left."

"All right," she says. "Thank you. I love you."

"I love you too."

"Goodbye."

"Should I go up to the high school and tell Kyle that she's all right?"

"No," my dad says. "It's good for him."

*Good how?* I think. How is it right for my brother to suffer, especially in a public place?

I say nothing.  
It'll all be over soon.

The phone rings.

"Hello?" I ask.

"Can I talk to Dad?" Kyle asks.

"Kalli's alive," I say. "It was a lookalike. She came up on the deck a half-hour after you left."

"Ok," he says. "That's good. Thanks. That's all I was calling for. Bye."

"Bye," I say.

He finishes our connection.

I can't help but feel guilty about not going up to the school.

I stand on the porch with my dad, looking at the cat we thought was our own.

I'm still crying.

"It's ok," he laughs, patting my back. "This kitty's ok too."

"I know," I sigh, stroking the cat's fur. "It's not right for an animal to get run over."

"No, it isn't," Dad sighs. "It's a fucked up world, son."

I nod.

"This kitty's part of the family now," he says, looking up at me. "We're going to bury her next to Lacey."

My eyes stray to the yard, where Lacey's buried.

*Two years, I think, and now we almost lost one of our own.*

"Give me a minute," I say.

I open the door, smile at Kalli as I see her drinking milk, and make my way down into the shop, where I head toward the stuffed animal box that has been full since my brother and I have been young. Our Grandma Shirley used to give them to us all the time back when she was still alive.

*It's the least I can do, I think, to help her pass on.*

We did the same thing with Lacey when cancer sealed her fate and mortals healed her pain. I drew a heart for each of us—my brother, my dad, my mom, Kalli, Smokey, Benji and I—on a note that followed Lacey into the afterlife, along with her stuffed squeaktoy and an assortment of milkbones. But unlike Lacey, this cat has not died by euthanasia. It has been hit by a car.

*But she didn't suffer, my dad had said. That's all that matters.*

A miniature jellyfish catches my eye.

*You'll go with her, I think. You'll help her pass on.*

Without a second glance, I take the jellyfish, exit the shop, and make my way through the house.

Dad's kneeling on the deck next to the cat when I walk toward the flannel, holding the jellyfish in my hand.

"Oh," Dad smiles.

"At least she'll have something," I say, crouching down beside the cat.

Lifting its leg, I slide the jellyfish under it, pushing it up against its chest.

Thick with rigor mortis, the cat we thought was ours will soon begin to rot.

"Are we going to bury her?" I ask.

"Yeah," Dad says. "Let's do it."

We dig a hole, cutting roots out of our way and throwing dirt into a pile, while the cats lays to the side, waiting to be put to rest. We look up from our work every so often as if he—or she—will move, but we know it isn't true. The vets pronounced it dead on arrival.

"What're we gonna name her?" Dad asks.

"What?" I ask.

"What're we going to name her," he says. "She's part of the family."

We both stop digging.

Dad takes my shovel and sets it near the monkey bars we no longer use.

Together, we bend down beside the cat, part the folds of my dad's flannel, and look at its face. We both stroke its fur.

"I keep thinking Jasmine," I say, looking up at him. "Is that all right?"

"Jasmine," he says. "Lucky Jasmine Kallie."

I smile.

*Lucky, I think.*

Lucky, that a cat can be picked up off the side of the road and given a burial because it is mistaken for our own, or lucky because we have learned a lesson? That despite everything life throws at us, and despite how life can unexpectedly end in the blink of the eye, we need to be thankful for the things we have—now, in the present, not in the future when that special something we may be gone.

On September fourth, two-thousand-and-nine, Idaho experienced a miracle.

That miracle changed our lives.

## New Section

### Dream

*Innocent things aren't meant to burn.*

*In an alternate reality of a beautiful, abstract world, a swan swam across the surface of what some had once called Heaven, spreading its wings and beginning to take flight. In this beautifully-tragic world of dreams, screams and queens, creatures lived, ate and drank off the imaginations of unconscious minds, in a world where they could live and die in the briefest of moments. One moment one would live, then the next they would die, struck down by the hammer of something so powerful even those who controlled it couldn't comprehend. Magical, some might say, were they to look through the looking glass of a sleeping man's mind, but those who really understood knew the consequences of living in a perfect world.*

*They knew.*

*They just knew.*

*To the south of Heaven stood what some would consider Hell. Horrible, some would say, were they to look through the looking glass of a sleeping man's mind, but those who really understood knew the triumphs of allowing such a sleeping dragon to exist. Breathing fire, pluming smoke, exhibiting its purpose in a violent display of metal—it existed for one reason, and one reason only.*

*They knew.*

*They just knew.*

*Breathing in a sigh of noxious relief, the swan raised its head and stared at the dragon. Alarmed, but not frightened, it pumped its wings and pushed itself back, closer to the string of dying amaranths that dusted Heaven in cherry red and pink.*

*In a place of green that killed all it touched, the swan knew the cherry would be safe.*

*It knew.*

*It just knew.*

Some call dreams the result of cells firing off in the brain in rapid succession. Others call them rapid eye movements, while many believe dreams are something special, something meant to be loved and cherished for all of time. For some, dreams brought nothing more than pain and misery, a constant companion to wake up with you during the day and tuck you in at night.

Just when you thought you were safe, the dreams came and got you.

For men like Kurt Hanson, his dreams were hell.

Roused from sleep by yet another surreal yet terrifying nightmare, Kurt pushed himself into a sitting position and ran his hands over his eyes, trying as hard as he could to still his trembling chest and regulate his uneven breathing.

No matter how hard he tried, nothing seemed to work.

In the back of his mind, a child screamed for the light to be turned on.

Sighing, Kurt closed his eyes.

Grown men shouldn't be afraid of the dark.

*No one should*, he thought, leaning against the headrest. *There's nothing to be afraid of.*

There were no swans in here, no dragons threatening to jump out of his closet and eat him whole. What did he have to be afraid of?

*Nothing—absolutely nothing.*

Defeated, Kurt rolled over, slung his legs over the side of the bed, and stood.

With a shake of his head, he made his way toward the door.

It didn't take too long for him to wander into the hall and make his way into the kitchen, into a place where happiness used to abound and where dreams used to be fulfilled.

*Before the swans... before the medicine...*

*"Before the divorce."*

How something so little could turn into something so big, he didn't know. All he knew was that after he started having the dreams, and after he started leaving the house late at night to go see a psychologist, his wife got suspicious and decided to end the marriage.

In the end, it didn't matter. He didn't need another person to suffer his dreams, especially not a woman he loved so much.

Making his way across the room, Kurt opened the fridge and pulled out the carton of milk. His choice beverage for late nights, he'd often warm it up and take it back to the bedroom with him after calming himself down. Sadly, that usually took a good hour of contemplation or a half-hour of reading, neither of which he could afford to use.

"Gotta get up in the morning," he chuckled, pulling his milk out of the microwave.

As a tenth-grade biology teacher at the local high school, his job afforded him few benefits. With pay scarce and alternative jobs few to none, he couldn't afford to pass up any work, especially in the current state of the economy.

Raising his glass, Kurt set the rim to his lips and drank.  
In the back of his mind, the boy told him to turn on the light.  
He did.

"All right, all right!" he called, raising his voice over the roar of the classroom. "Settle down, guys. You had more than enough time to talk between classes."

Pausing, Kurt waited for the students to stop talking before he turned and began writing on the wall. With chalk in hand, he wrote *Aves: The Classification of Birds*.

"Now," he smiled, "as you all know, my main interest in biology is the study of birds—or, like I've just written, *Aves*. As we all know, all species of animals are listed under the Kingdom Animalia. Now, the kind of animals that would fall into Kingdom Animalia are dogs, cats, pigs, horses, hippos, elephants—basically, anything that isn't a germ, plant or fungus. Now, in the Kingdom Animalia, there are several different subclasses that fall under the kingdom. I've given you the class of animal the bird is—*Aves*—but what I'd like you to tell me is what kingdom birds fall under."

As expected, the class said nothing. Some flipped pages in their biology books, while others simply dazed off into the distance, looking at things Kurt already knew weren't there. This lapse of silence allowed him a look around his class. His eyes quickly fell to Bernice Sinclair, a young Asian woman who'd quickly proven to be intelligent beyond her years.

*Come on, Bernice. You can do it.*

One of the few students who continued through their textbooks, Bernice looked up in time to catch Kurt's wandering eyes. She smiled, but quickly bowed her head back into her book.

"I'll give you a hint," he continued. "It's two words. The first starts with P."

"Phylum Cordata!" Bernice shouted. With a blush, she bowed her head. "Sorry, Mr. Hanson."

"It's all right, Bernice. But yes—you're right. Phylum Cordata is a class of animals that have backbones. *Aves*, like I just said, is the class birds fall in, and Phylum Cordata is the kingdom that birds are in."

"I don't get it though," another boy frowned. "What's the point of knowing what class or what kingdom an animal is in?"

"To split them apart to classify them better," Kurt said, crouching down to pull out a taxidermied woodpecker. "Like animals are placed

into classes, they're further divided into orders. See this woodpecker here? It'd fall under the Piciforme, which is the order of bird that has two front and hind toes for clinging onto vertical surfaces. Follow me so far?"

The enthusiastic 'uh huh' that followed made Kurt laugh.

"It's confusing at first, but it's really easy once you get into it. Basically, it's broken down like this. Now, I hope you were paying attention, because I'm going to break down a bird for you."

Beginning with the Kingdom, Kurt scrawled *Animalia* onto the board. Under that, he wrote *Phylum: Cordata* then *Class: Aves*. He continued all the way down to the Species, until the board resembled a work of scientific art.

Stepping back, Kurt set his hand on his chin to examine his work.

*Kingdom: Animalia*

*Phylum: Cordata*

*Class: Aves*

*Order: Ciconiiformes*

*Family: Accipitridae*

*Genus: Haliaeetus*

*Species: Vocier*

He could hardly believe he'd written that all from memory once he reviewed it a second time.

*You'd think I'd have a better job with as much schooling as I've had.*

"Mr. Hanson?" Bernice asked.

"Yes, Miss. Sinclair?"

"What do you want us to do with this?"

"I'm... not particularly sure," he frowned. "It's a bit of writing—and a lot of work, especially for someone who's never tried to classify birds—but I think it's a good exercise. At least, it was for me."

"You're not going to," a male student began.

"Oh no, Mr. Peters—I'd never give *sophomore high school students* a challenge." Nervous chuckles followed Kurt's statement. "Tell you what—anyone who's willing to give me the bird that I've just classified will get fifty points of extra credit."

"Fifty?" Bernice frowned.

"Yes, Bernice—fifty. It's an awful lot of extra credit to pass up on, especially for those of you who are failing."

*Which is most of you,* he thought, forcing a smile, despite the tension in the air.

“All right everyone, here’s what I want you to do for today’s assignment—and before you start groaning, don’t worry, you’re just reading the chapter on birds in your books.”

Kurt couldn’t help but laugh.

Even if teaching didn’t pay well, at least it could entertain him.

At around five o’clock that night, Kurt collapsed into his leather recliner and nearly fell asleep five minutes later. Tired from grading papers all day and trying to arrange a successful trip to the local raptor exhibit, he couldn’t help but begin to doze off.

When the smell of feathers and dust filled his nose, he shot forward and nearly fell out of his seat.

*Shit.*

Gasping, he took a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair. Even his semiconscious dreams seemed to be filled with birds nowadays. Why, he didn’t know, but he didn’t particularly care. He just wanted them to end.

*They won’t though. You know that.*

“Yeah,” he sighed. “I do.”

The reality of his dreams and the emotions that came with them was all too real. With an anti-anxiety and sleep aid medication he’d been prescribed just before his wife left, no one could say that he suffered in vain. No one—absolutely *no one*—could say that what he experienced wasn’t real, and *no one* could even begin to question the sanity of a man who dreamed of birds and woke in cold sweats because of it.

*Because they are real, he thought, because it is real.*

He went to bed with them every night.

If anyone knew, it was him.

In the midst of black despair, everything or anything could happen. Your heart could give out, your mind could implode, and the muscles in your arms could tighten, all because of a simple need to be understood.

Sometimes, when anxiety took hold, you lost control of orderly thought.

Normally, Kurt would have began his night with the normal routine—eating dinner, flipping through his planner, rearranging upcoming assignments, reading, complete with a glass of milk. Tonight, though, that whole routine had gone out the window and decided to take a swim.

Racing through his heart like a runner on the grandest of playing fields, fear took hold and broke him in two.

The conscious part wanted to go to bed; the semiconscious one wanted to remain awake.

*It'll come back,* the voice of trouble said. *You know it will.*

"No it won't," Kurt whispered. "Not if I don't let it."

*It doesn't matter if you don't want it to—it still will.*

"No. I'm stronger than that."

*Stronger?* the voice laughed. *Since when, Mr. Hanson? Since when have you graded your papers and given yourself an A-plus? Huh? Since when? When was the last time you did that, Kurt? When was the last time you went to bed without a pill? Or, better yet, when was the last time you went to bed with your wife? When was the last time you held her in your arms before she found out what you were doing at night?*

"I wasn't doing anything," he sighed, closing his eyes. "I needed help."

*Help? Help? Since when has a man like you needed help, Kurt? Since when?*

"Since I started dreaming and my life fell apart."

*Then pick up the pieces, old man, and put them back together. It won't be long before whatever's in your dreams starts trying to come to you.*

"That won't happen. Dreams don't come to life."

*Since when?*

"Since forever."

The voice silenced.

Kurt made his way toward the bedroom.

Before he could get to the end of the hall, the little boy inside him asked for the light to be turned on.

"Sir... Sir? Mr. Hanson?"

"Yuh-Yes?" he managed, raising his head. Through bleary, blood-shot eyes, he saw Bernice Sinclaire standing in front of his desk with a paper in hand. "I'm sorry, Bernice."

"It's all right, sir. I... uh... finished the extra credit."

"You did?"

"Yes sir." She passed the paper across the desk. "You classified an African fish eagle."

One part of him couldn't believe it, yet another part of him could. The part that could knew that Bernice Sinclaire hadn't passed up a bit of extra credit in the two years she'd sat in a class, while the part that

couldn't questioned why a student with a perfect GPA would want to buff her grade up past its already-high one-hundred-and-twenty-perfect. Was it because her shy, gentle demeanor forced her to please anyone she met, or did it have something to do with the fact that, out of all the other students, Kurt paid the most attention to her?

*Oh*, he thought.

It all made sense now.

As crazy as it seemed, Bernice had a crush on him.

"Bernice," he smiled, running the edge of his thumb along the Asian girl's fine, exquisite handwriting. "I can't believe you did this."

"Why?"

"Because your grade's already higher than any other student's in the entire school. Keep this up and I'll have to start flunking you." Laughing, he returned his eyes to find Bernice's face lit with a startled expression. Upon this revelation, he couldn't help but laugh again. "Don't worry, Bernice—I'm not going to flunk you. I have no reason to."

"I know, sir." The girl looked down at her feet. Somehow, Kurt resisted the urge to glance over his desk. He would see nothing more than Mary Jane's—he already knew that.

"Was there something else you needed, Bernice?"

"No," she said, beginning to turn. She stopped in the middle of her motion and turned her eyes on Kurt. "Is there something wrong, sir?"

"No," he smiled. "I... I just didn't get enough sleep last night, that's all."

Bernice said nothing.

She returned to her desk without another word.

It unnerved him more than anything to know that even a teenage girl could see the pain in his bloodshot eyes.

On long, lonely drives home from the high school, he thought of his wife and how he lost her because he sought out medical help.

It started out innocent enough.

One night, after waking up for the third time in a row, he forced himself from the drenched, sweaty depths of his bed and decided once and for all that he would be getting help.

That help came in the form of a psychiatrist named Jane Austerson.

Jane gave him more than just pills. She gave him a divorce.

After repeated calls to his home phone when he specifically instructed that all calls should be sent to his cell, Amanda came home one night to find five different messages that hadn't been deleted from the

answering machine. Because of a late night at the school supervising a local science fair, Kurt had forgotten about everything other than the fair and what was in front of him.

When he got home that night, he found a note next to the answering machine.

The words still rang in his mind whenever he thought about that fateful night.

*Have fun with Jane, the note read, because I'm sure as hell not sticking around to wake up alone at night.*

She asked for nothing. Not the house, not his second car—nothing.

In the end, she wanted nothing more than a confession.

She never got one, because Kurt never had anything to confess.

*Nothing you can do now,* he thought, shifting gears and merging into the other lane.

For the most part, he'd let Amanda go over the years. While he still missed her presence—her warmth in bed, her smile in the morning, her touch at night—he didn't blame her for what she did. Amanda had never been one to give in to ideas other than her own. Her parents raised her that way. How could he blame a person for something so deeply-rooted in their conscience?

*Because you were the telling the truth.*

He didn't bother to speak or voice his opinion.

Grown men didn't talk to ghosts of unforgotten past.

*The dragon belched.*

*Spewing forth a mixture of green and brown from the bowels of its stomach, the long, metal-necked creature shifted. Smoke plumed from its nostrils and heat exuded from its surface as the contaminated contents of its stomach ejaculated into the river. The water—once blue, beautiful, and full of wondrous life—sizzled as the bile touched its surface. Parts of the tainted surface even exploded, sending chunks of debris into the air.*

*Frightened, the noble swan spread its wings, trumpeting its call as the surface near the dragon bubbled and changed. Green turned to brown, then slowly turned to black as the mud beneath the surface shifted. Strangled plants that dared to grow near the surface curled in defeat as their leaves turned black and their stalks gave way.*

*In the distance, ghosts with black snouts carried barrels marked with a symbol.*

*A tear spilled down the swan's face.*

*After all this time, they'd finally come back.*

"This here's the great horned owl," the raptor center tour guide said, raising his hand to point out the large, nearly-invisible bird sitting in a nearby tree. "They stand at eighteen to twenty-seven centimeters and can have wingspans anywhere from three to five feet."

"They're also found anywhere from subarctic North America to Central and South America," Kurt added. "Right, Dr. Darian?"

"Yes," Matthew Darian said, readjusting the wide-brimmed hat on his head. "They're not usually found anywhere near El Salvador and near the southwest, but they're highly adaptable to whatever environment they're in. They've been seen nesting in rainforests, in deserts, even highly-mountainous areas. Once they choose an area, they're usually there for life."

"How come they don't move around?" a student asked.

"Well," the doctor said, "many animals are like us, young man. Once they find a place they like, they're not very willing to leave."

"Unless they come," Bernice mumbled.

Almost all eyes turned on the young Asian woman.

"Pardon?" Matthew Darian asked.

"Them," Bernice said. "You know... *them*."

"Who's *them*?" Kurt frowned. "Bernice?"

Bernice said nothing.

Instead, she raised her arm and pointed.

Hidden in the distance behind a dusty hill and a brown, dying patch of deciduous trees, the beginnings of a chemical plant could be seen extending into the sky. Like a volcano, smoke poured from its surface, breathing new life to a world that never wished to experience it.

Smokes, toxins, chemicals—all flew freely from that tower into the sky.

All it took was one path—one mechanism—for them to be freed from the hands that made them.

"Oh," Darian sighed. "I see."

"What?" someone asked.

"What's she talking about?" another added.

"Us," Bernice said. "*Them*."

"What do you..."

"She's talking about encroachment," Kurt said. He, too, couldn't help but sigh. The thought threatened to force images of death and terror into his mind, but he managed to repress them, forcing them into the parts of his mind that he hid from the rest of his world. How he did it, he

didn't know, but he figured the process resembled the healing one; how, when Amanda and Jane entered his mind, he simply blocked them out, shoving them into the closet with the rest of his skeletons.

"Yeah," the biologist said, removing his hat and running a hand through his hair. "I can only imagine how many birds and animals died or lost their homes when they put that damned plant there."

"Many," Bernice nodded. "Too many."

*Too many*, Kurt agreed.

A bird flapped its wings nearby.

It wasn't until he opened his eyes that he realized the air had not been disturbed.

"Mr. Hanson," Bernice said.

"Yes?" Kurt asked.

"Was I wrong?"

"About what?"

"In saying what I said?"

"No, Bernice—you weren't wrong about anything."

Seated at the front of the bouncing, shaking bus, Kurt and his star pupil remained silent as could be. While students in the back of the bus tossed spitballs and notes, and while the few in the middle talked in hush voices, those in the front remained silent, indifferent to the words around them. Maybe it was because of the closeness of the girl who spoke, or maybe it was because the teacher sat nearby. Regardless, it spoke so much of what had happened back at the raptor center.

*Unless they come.*

"Unless they come," Kurt nodded.

"Mr. Hanson?"

"Huh?"

"Did you say something?"

"Nuh-No," he managed. "No, Bernice—I didn't."

Bernice turned to look out the window.

A moment later, Kurt understood why.

No more than a mile away, the chemical plant continued to spew its gasses into the air.

At the foot of the metal monstrosity, what was once a beautiful lake continued to exist. Like a touch of heaven, it extended across the area and disappeared behind a patch of dead trees.

Just before the lake could completely disappear from view, Kurt thought he saw a cluster of dying amaranth growing along the shoreline.

It took all his willpower to make it through the day.

By the time he got home, he was ready to burst.

Faced with the all-too-real reality that his dreams could in fact be real, Kurt paced his kitchen and tugged at his hair, taking deep breaths in order to keep his head earthbound. It seemed that, at any moment, it would simply pop off his shoulders and go into orbit, rotating around the Earth until it finally burned in the atmosphere.

*This can't be happening, he thought, tears tracing the curve of his face. This can't be real.*

The lake, the raptor center, Bernice—nothing seemed right anymore. Fifteen-year-old girls didn't magically know everything about birds, raptor centers didn't stand a few miles away from chemical plants, and radioactive lakes didn't exist in lands so tropical and lush.

*It wasn't lush though, Kurt—it was dead.*

"Dead," he mumbled. "Yes... dead."

Nothing could live in those conditions. Just because he happened to see a patch of amaranths growing along a tainted shoreline didn't mean a swan swam through those lakes, endlessly drifting across a cloud of green. It didn't mean that a dragon breathed its fire and choked its toxin, and it didn't mean that dreams—no matter how surreal or bizarre—could suddenly become real, traced from the board of a magical artist in the sky.

No.

No matter how coincidental the amaranths may seem, they were nothing more than coincidence.

Pushing himself through the cloud of doubt that plagued his heart, Kurt opened the fridge and pulled out a glass of milk.

He'd rather face his dreams where they belonged than in the real world.

*With its head bowed, the swan picked what little grass, twigs, and pieces of mulch it could. Every so often, it would come across a complete stalk of dead greenery that would be useful in constructing a nest, but those times were few to none. What once would have been an expansive nine feet of grass, twigs and other organic nesting matter now consisted of no more than three feet of debris.*

*Though small, the swan would take what it could get, especially in these conditions.*

*Settling down inside its circular construct, the swan bowed its head and continued to watch the water. Alert, yet drowsy, it barely noticed the activity*

*taking place across the lake, mostly because it didn't need to. It'd become accustomed to the metal cats and the lumbering, sleeping dragon, as well as the ghosts that instructed who and what to where. What need did it have to watch them when they did nothing but destroy?*

*Closing its eyes, the swan began to take deep breaths.*

*One, two, three...*

*By the time it reached the fourth, it issued a long, hard cry, hoping someone would call back.*

An avian scream shattered a false reality.

Shooting upright as fast as he could, Kurt reached up and ran his hands over his face, desperately scrambling to remove any and all traces of irradiated water. With moisture running down his face and fear coursing through his veins, he kept at it, scratching and clawing with the utmost abandon. Eyes popping out of his head, skin melting to his cheeks, lips sewing together with needles fitted with acid—it took less than a minute for Kurt to realize he'd been dreaming.

Sighing, he collapsed back into bed.

"God," he sobbed. "I can't deal with this anymore."

If his dreams were affecting him to the point of violence, he'd have to go back to the doctor, back to the woman who ultimately ruined his life.

No.

Regardless, nothing would make him go back to Jane Austerson, not in a million years.

She'd done too much to his life already. He needed no more involvement.

Rolling over, Kurt pushed himself out of bed, then crossed the room until he stood in front of the vanity cabinet.

The bane of his existence sat no more than a foot away.

*Ambien.*

Ambien—his love, his friend, the one and only thing that kept him company in the dark hours of the night. Unlike anything else in his life, it had stuck with him through all the hard times. Through the blood and sweat, through the tears and fears, through the night and into the light—whatever his situation, whatever his location, Ambien was always there, watching over his sleeping mind from the vanity mirror.

*All good things must come to an end, the devil in his backyard said. All good things must come to an end.*

"Yes," Kurt sighed. "They do."

Reaching forward, Kurt grabbed the bottle and made his way into the bathroom.

Once inside, he popped the lid off the toilet and dumped the pills down the drain.

His problem was gone.

Hopefully, another wouldn't come.

Saturday mornings took the least of his effort. With no school and without any last-minute planning to do, Kurt laid in bed for most of the morning, repeatedly hitting the snooze button on his alarm clock until it stopped ringing altogether.

He only woke up because the phone rang.

Without looking, Kurt reached over and grabbed the phone.

"Hello?" he groaned. "Do you know what time it is?"

"Um," a female voice said. "Noon?"

"Bernice? Is that you?"

"Yuh-Yes suh-sir, it is."

Kurt sat up and pulled the phone's body onto the bed. He readjusted his position before speaking.

"I'm sorry, Bernice—I didn't know it was so late."

"It's all right, sir. I... I'm the one who should be sorry. I called you."

"You can call anytime you want."

*Shit*, he thought. *I did not just say that.*

He could only imagine how *that* could be taken out of context.

"I mean... if you need anything, don't hesitate to call—I'm always here for a student."

"I know." Bernice paused. A faint clicking—possibly caused by nails or a pen—echoed through the phone and into Kurt's ear.

"Bernice?"

"I don't know how to ask this, Mr. Hanson."

"Then ask however you think it should be asked."

"Can... can you... uh... tuh-take..."

"What're you trying to ask, Bernice?"

"Can you take me out to the lake?"

There—the bombshell, lit right in the middle of the hallway and detonated no more than three feet away. Connected by only a cord and activated by a girl's voice, it rattled the inside of his skull to the point of incomprehension.

"Huh?" he asked.

"I want you to take me out to the lake, sir. You know... where the... where the amaranths were."

*The amaranths.*

"Bernice," he began, lowering his voice, "why are you asking this?"

"I..."

"Don't bullshit me, Bernice—I know what you saw just as well as I did."

"I'm not..."

"Why're you pausing then? Why not come right out and say it?"

"Because I saw something out there!"

"What'd you see out there? Huh, girl? Tell me! *TELL ME!*"

"I SAW IT!"

"*WHAT?*"

"*THE SWAN!*"

If two words could end the world, could end your life, what words would they be? Would they be the words you say on your wedding, or those you said at your grave? Would you say I do, would you say good-bye, would you then long to look at the sky? What would you see, what would you be, what would you wear and how would you share? What would you do, who would you woo, and to who, daresay, would you say boo?

At that moment, Kurt didn't know what to do.

His mind had locked up.

A bird preened its feathers.

An avian screamed.

The sky opened.

A dragon tried to swallow him whole.

"Mr. Hanson?" Bernice whispered.

"Yes, Bernice?"

"Will you take me to the lake?"

He didn't need to be asked twice.

"Why would they do it?" Bernice asked. "Why destroy something beautiful when there are so many other places to build?"

"I don't know," Kurt sighed, sliding up beside her. "I wish I could tell you, Bernice, otherwise I would."

"I do too," she whispered. "Then maybe I'd know why people would want to kill without mercy."

Though he didn't say anything, the answer sat on the tip of Kurt's tongue, waiting to lash out at the girl like a snake to its ill begotten prey.

*When Eve took the apple, he thought, she wasn't thinking about the consequences.*

Had Bernice thought about the consequence to her question? Did she consider that, since the dawn of time, men had killed for reasons so vile—so *inhumane*—it had begged to question whether or not they were really human? Did she consider the reasons why men killed—how, in times of desperation, a man would kill his wife for money, or eat his baby for food? Did she consider that, hundreds of thousands of years ago, men killed for mercy, for honor, for glory? Did she consider that famine could take control of a sane man's mind and cause him to do horrible, unbearable things?

*Did she consider that we're the same way now?*

Kurt highly doubted it.

"Mr. Hanson?"

"Yes, Bernice?"

"Why did you yell at me when I said I saw the swan?"

"You scared me. You said you wanted to go back to the lake and I thought... I thought..."

"You thought what?"

"I thought you might've seen something."

"Something like what?"

*Something like the thing in my dreams... Something like...*

"The swan," he said.

Kurt's blood chilled.

Bernice said nothing. She merely waited for him to continue.

"Bernice," he sighed, running a hand through his hair. "You've got to understand something. Now... before I tell you this, you have to promise to keep this between us, ok? I know you're smart, and I know you wouldn't intentionally try to hurt me, but I could lose my job if someone found out I was being so personal with a student."

"I'm not going to say anything, sir. You can trust me."

"I know," he smiled, "I wouldn't have brought you out here if I thought otherwise."

Turning his eyes up, Kurt scanned the nearby area. From the trees to the rocks, to the tiny, minute details of dead or dying shrubbery, he observed everything, calculating each and every detail. He used this distraction in order to better serve his purpose.

*How does a full-grown man tell a teenage girl that he needs medicine to help get him through the day?*

How does anyone tell anyone anything?

Sighing, Kurt ran a hand over his face. He turned to look at Bernice shortly after.

"Bernice."

"Yeah?"

"I've been taking anxiety medication for the last three months."

Bernice stayed silent. Whether out of indecision or insecurity, Kurt couldn't tell.

"I wouldn't have told you if I didn't think it was necessary," he finished.

"Sir," she sighed, closing her eyes. "That was when your wife..."

"Yes. That was when my wife left."

"And you brought me out here because..."

"You asked me to."

"Because I've..."

"Been dreaming about the swan too."

Again, Bernice went silent. The sparkle that lit her eyes when she turned her head to look at Kurt only confirmed his point.

"You don't have to give me the specifics, Bernice—just tell me what you see."

"Ghosts... dragons... cats with metal teeth... the swan."

"What kind of swan is it?" he asked. "Tell me."

"A trumpeter."

*A trumpeter.*

Once nearly hunted to extinction for their feathers and skins in the sixteen to eighteen-hundreds, the trumpeter swan was well known for its distinctive call. Sounding like a trumpet played by the greatest of players, the birds could grow up to five feet long and live up to twenty or thirty years. They also mated for life, displaying the well-renowned heart-shaped courtship dance that was all-so-famous during the Valentine season.

So, Kurt thought, looking out toward the lake. *If there really is a swan on the lake, why is it here?*

The possibilities began popping into his head almost immediately. What if the creature considered the lake its home—territory destroyed, yet sentimental? Could it be flightless by genetic default or from the affect of radiation? What about its current state of health? Radiation affected animals in different ways. Frogs could have multiple legs, fish could be born transparent, kittens could be born one-eyed—why not birds immune to radiation? If it just so happened that the bird somehow managed to be immune to the chemical, what could that do for human

science? What could a bird—an animal, not in the least bit related to humans—provide the medical world?

*What if it's something else though? What if... what if...*

What if the bird was still mourning?

What if it had lost its mate?

*Just like me, he chuckled. What if the damn bird lost its wife, just like me.*

"Mr. Hanson?" Bernice asked. "Do you see something?"

"No," he whispered. "I don't."

He only saw in his dreams.

Closing his eyes, Kurt tilted his head back and exhaled. The first smoke in years in hand, he took slow, shallow breaths, exhaling only when he felt the need to release the smoke from his lungs. At this point, the only real connection to the world he seemed to have was the burn.

If he lost the burn, who knew what would happen.

*I don't.*

Taking the longest breath he'd had since he started smoking, Kurt pushed himself forward and set a hand on his knee. Slowly, and with the utmost care, he dangled the smoke just over the edge of the recliner, careful not to singe or burn the leather.

"All right, Kurt old buddy—like it or not, you've got a job to do."

Next on the agenda—procuring a bird cage large enough to hold a trumpeter swan.

"You're looking to catch a swan?" Matthew Darian frowned, carefully bringing a blindfolded peregrine falcon onto his arm.

"Yeah."

"How come?"

"I have reason to believe there's a rogue cob living around the lake."

"You mean Heaven's?"

"Heaven's?" Kurt frowned. "Is that..."

"Yeah—that's the lake all right." Darian grimaced as the falcon tightened its grip. Thankfully, his gloved arm ensured that no damage would be done. "It's pretty much gone to hell over the past few years. We tried to relocate any wildlife we could, but... well, you know how radiation is—there's not much you can do once you're so far gone."

"How many birds from there are here?"

"Oh... I don't know, maybe ten, twelve or so. A lot of them got transferred to other centers or zoos in the area, or were reintroduced into

different parts of the area. I wasn't personally involved with the transferring. I just went out and brought whatever I could in."

"You didn't see any swans?"

"No. Not at all, which makes it even stranger that you think there's a swan still living in the area."

"It's not only me."

"Oh?"

"A student of mine says she saw the swan too."

"When?"

"The other day, when I brought the kids with me."

"Are you sure she wasn't seeing things?"

"Bernice wouldn't 'just be seeing things'—she's the smartest girl in the class. She wouldn't see a trick of the light and say that she saw a bird."

"How do you know?"

"Because she called me at home and said she saw it out on the lake. Added to the fact that she probably knows just as much about birds as I do, I think I've got a pretty solid argument, don't you?"

"Yeah. I do."

Turning, Darian slipped the bird back into its cage and undid the blindfold. Once secured, the falcon hopped onto a low branch and proceeded to watch both men with indifferent, calculating eyes.

"Look," Darian said, sliding his hands into his pockets. "I can lend you a cage, but only under the circumstance that you capture the animal and bring it back here. Anything else and I'm likely to lose my job. We clear?"

"We're clear," Kurt smiled.

"Just one question... are you really going to have a student help you catch a bird that's half her size?"

"I don't know," he shrugged, his mind already made up. "We'll just have to see."

Kurt couldn't help but smirk.

"I don't get it," Bernice said, taking a step back as Kurt lugged the cage out of the back of his truck. "How are we going to get it to go into the cage, much less get close to it?"

"Simple," Kurt grunted. He dropped the cage down near the dead treeline and took a deep breath. "We camouflage it."

"Sir... I hate to be rude, but what makes you think the bird's going to go into an enclosed space like that?"

"Again, simple." This time, Kurt reached into his pocket, withdrew a piece of string, then reached into his other pocket and pulled out a small, ticket-sized object. Orange in color and covered in plastic, he dangled it in front of the girl's face, waiting for her to respond. "Know what this is?"

"Uh..." She paused. Without waiting for Kurt to offer any suggestion, she reached forward, took the tip of the plastic between two fingernails, and held it down so the light could bounce off its surface. "Pheromone."

"I wanted you to guess," he chuckled.

"Sorry," she blushed, relinquishing hold of the tag. "Mr. Hanson... if I may."

"Hmm?"

"What makes you think the swan's male?"

"How big did you say it was?"

"At least five, six feet."

"There's the answer to your question. The females don't get that big—only the males do."

"Oh. Right."

Crouching down, Kurt braced himself on the edge of the cage and prepared to tie the pheromone. With careful, steady fingers, he dangled the tag between the metal slats, then secured it when he felt it was in the right place. In the bottom, left-hand corner, the tag wouldn't be easily seen, especially after he and Bernice began the masking process.

"Ok," Kurt said, pushing himself to his feet. "You ready for the dirty work, Bernice?"

"I... guess," she frowned.

"Good, because we've got a lot of work to do."

Without another word, Kurt turned, opened the bed of the truck, and pulled out a long strip of tarp.

"We're going to cover the cage with this," he explained, "then cover the outside and inside in mud."

"Mud?"

"Mud," Kurt grinned. "Whoever said catching a bird was that easy?"

"Not me," Bernice mumbled, accepting the gloves her teacher offered. "Oh well. It'll all be worth it in the end, right?"

Nodding, Kurt sighed.

They could hope so.

Downwind and more than half a mile away, Bernice and Kurt watched the scene through large, telescope binoculars. Taking turns and switching off every three-to-five minutes, Kurt watched the opposite treeline and the area beyond it, while Bernice surveyed the water, carefully tracing the shoreline with simple but precise movements. Every minute—every *second*—counted, especially when working on a deadline.

*By dark, her father had said. Otherwise, I know who to call.*

'Who to call' would be the local police department.

Kurt could only imagine the kind of hell he'd be in if he got caught with a sixteen-year-old girl on a Sunday afternoon. The 'She's just a student' excuse wouldn't fly over well, not with all the sex scandals going on.

*If the parents decided to sue.*

Knowing Bernice's father's overprotective and daddy's-little-girl nature, he'd sue in a heartbeat, if that. It was surprising enough that Mr. Sinclair had let his daughter go with a man more than three times her age.

*Must not think I can get it up.*

A snort escaped him.

Startled, Bernice jumped.

"Sorry," he chuckled, reaching out to pat her back.

"What was that about?" she giggled.

"Nothing. Just thinking about old times, that's all."

Bernice shrugged and went back to surveying the lake.

*It's moments like these I wish I had a child.*

Though he considered the girl to be a student and nothing more than that, just looking at Bernice forced parental feelings out of hiding and to the tip of his heart. Swimming like startled children in the midst of a shark attack, they fluttered around his heart, warming his chest and forcing a long-dead flower to bloom. His heart—his orchid—exploded, sending forth the energy which, normally, allowed the average man to decide to have children.

Sadly, though, Kurt wasn't the average man. At fifty-three, his charming expression and outgoing demeanor were quickly fading. He'd long stopped dyeing his hair to its normal dark color and trying to hide the laugh lines with a beard. What purpose would it serve, if only to make him feel more secure?

*I'm not out to impress anyone. Not anymore.*

With the love of his life having flown from the coup, there was no reason to dye his hair or shave his legs.

Like a fading memory, he would simply move forward, continuing to help whoever and whatever he could until the day he died.

"That's why we're here," he nodded. "To help the swan."

Taking one final glance at Bernice, Kurt accepted the binoculars and peered through them.

Sometimes, the looking glass could be dark.

Sometimes, all you had to do was rub it off. Then the fog would clear.

"It's not coming," Kurt sighed, shivering as the first drops of autumn rain began to fall. "We have to go."

"But what about the swan?" Bernice frowned. "What happens if it goes in the cage and gets stuck?"

"It's warm enough in there. We made sure of it. Besides, think of it this way—most trapped animals don't have the luxury of a homemade shelter to spend the night in, do they?"

"I guess not," the girl sighed, rising. "Thanks for bringing me out here, Mr. Hanson."

"You don't have to thank me."

"Are we going to come out tomorrow?"

"Yeah. We've got to."

"When?"

"After school. Your parents will be working, right?"

"Like always."

"Good," Kurt said, leading the way to his truck. "Try to meet me in my room after school tomorrow. That way, we can come straight out here without having to dodge around each other."

"Sounds good."

Sliding into the driver's seat, Kurt reached up and secured his seatbelt in place. Once Bernice did the same, he put the truck in gear and surged forward, back onto the dirt road that led toward the chemical plant.

For the next few minutes, neither Kurt nor Bernice said nothing. With the haunting echo of the rain pitter-pattering on the windshield, nothing needed to be said. The sound alone spoke for them.

*What you're doing is wrong, it said. What you're doing is against nature.*

*But so is what they're doing, Kurt thought, trying as hard as he could not to look at the fading megalith in the rearview mirror. What they're doing is more against nature than anything me or a teenage girl could do.*

Did two rights make a wrong? Did two wrongs make a right? How about two rights and two wrongs—what did that make? Did they cancel each other out, or did they simply play their course, settling their karmic disagreement in one right and one wrong? Did those gods care? Did they care whether you took a swan from its natural habitat, and if so, would your debt be removed if you saved one from a slow and painful death?

At that particular moment, Kurt didn't care about right or wrong.

He wanted to do something right.

By God, he would.

*One by one, a bird ate pearls by the shore.*

*Deliberately stepping over the catastrophic remains of rotten flesh and tattered skeletons, the swan bent its head and removed each pearl from the center of the creature's bodies. Oftentimes, it would simply duck its head through the ribcages and pull the pearls out unscathed, content with its reward. Those few times it suffered a wound, the bird would instinctively pull its head back, then dive back in, attacking the bones with its beak until they were all but shattered.*

*In this process, the bird began to bleed.*

*Because it bled, the bird gave life.*

*Starting with the grass, the ground around its feet bloomed in color. First, grass would spring forth from the dead and rotten mulch that littered the ground, followed by the butterflies that lost their wings on a long summer night. Wrought from a needle and thread in the sky, the butterflies' torn membranes would sew back together. Their wings, their eyes, their antennae and their proboscis—all would come together in the blink of an eye, as though death never kissed them and took them to his bed. These things—these beautiful, magnificent things—would start as one, then become some, then become much more.*

*When the blood touched the water, something miraculous happened.*

*A lily bloomed.*

*White in color, with a virginal pink undertone springing forth from the center of its stigma, the flower dangled in place for a single moment before drifting toward the center of the lake. As though menstruating, the color bled throughout the whole flower, tainting it whole until it finally turned a vibrant, bright pink. Once one flower matured, another was born, birthed from the gift of blood and the power of sin. They continued to bloom like this until, finally, the whole of the lake was covered with lilies.*

*As the swan continued along, plucking pearls from the corpses of long-dead animals, its spirit began to wane. Its eyes glossed over, its feathers started to fall and its skin started to rot. Starting with the chest, the skin evaporated away until a beautiful viscus could be seen underneath. Pumping organs, bleeding veins,*

*throbbing muscles and pulsing tendons—all dwelled beneath a surface meant only to reflect, not to be seen. In this act of kindness—in this act of pure, malevolent violence—the swan raised its head.*

*A pearl clasped between its beak, it began to cry.*

*Blood poured from its eyes and ran down the naked remains of its body as it slowly turned to dust. Bones broke free of a musculature structure and collapsed to the ground. Once settled, they'd burn, sizzling like summer on a long, hot day until, finally, they disintegrated completely.*

*When the bones fell until, finally, only the spine, the skull and the legs remained, the swan closed its eyes.*

*Its skull collapsed.*

*The pearl fell.*

*When it hit the water, the world bloomed.*

*All it ever wanted was a home—a beautiful, beautiful home.*

A disturbing prospect rocketed Kurt's mind as he made his way toward Bernice's home, sending his thoughts into overdrive and his functions into failure. Dressed in his Monday's best, he tried not to think about the dream and what it might have meant.

What if—by some odd, bizarre chance—the swan was already dead and gone, torn apart by the chemicals that rested in the water and the grounds surrounding the lake? What if it managed to carry itself into a place he would never find? A hole, a tree, a hollow, a rock—it could be anywhere if it happened to die overnight.

*Don't think about that,* he thought, drumming his fingers along the curve of the steering wheel. *You're not stupid—you wouldn't have set that trap up otherwise.*

Then again, what instinct had he followed? Not logical, because logical instinct didn't govern itself by what a teenage girl said; and not mechanical, because a single part of his life didn't rely on the existence of the swan.

If not logical or mechanical, what instinct had he followed?

*Natural?*

Could he even begin to question natural instinct when he was on an anti-anxiety medication? Could he possibly, *truthfully* allow himself to wander in that direction, led by the hand of a drug that altered his mental state in order to make him feel happy?

No. Not in a million years.

Regardless, he hadn't been the only one to see the swan.

Bernice was the key—the key to the lost, forbidden kingdom he had no chance of entering.

Pulling in alongside an old, beat-up suburban, Kurt disengaged the vehicle and cupped his face into his hands. Although he tried as hard as he could not to cry, he couldn't help but shed a tear or two over the claw tearing away at his chest.

*Get a hold of yourself, Hanson! Not now, not in front of a student!*

Grunting, Kurt hurled his head back, only to slam it into the window that covered the back of the compartment.

"Fuck!" he screamed. "Fucking fucker!"

"Mr. Hanson?"

He jumped and hit his head on the ceiling.

"Oh God!" Bernice cried, running to the driver's side window. "Sir! I-I'm so sorry! I didn't mean..."

"It's not your fault," he groaned, reaching up to rub the back of his head. "Don't worry, Bernice—I'm fine. Just having a little breakdown, that's all."

"Are you ok?"

"Don't worry—I'm fine. Just get in the truck so we can get this over with."

"What's wrong?" the girl frowned. "Why are you upset? Why weren't you waiting for me? What took you so long to get here?"

"No," he sighed, shaking his head. "Just... just get in, Bernice. I'll explain on the way."

The girl did as asked.

Not long after, Kurt started the truck and pulled out of the driveway.

He mowed his way through mid-afternoon traffic. In and out, up and down, left and right and side to side, it seemed that whatever way he went, he ended up stuck again, lost to the roads of the higher, mechanical gods.

"Goddammit," he whispered, grinding his teeth together. "This is just what I need—to be stuck in traffic."

"You could go out the back roads," Bernice offered.

"What?"

"I said you could go out on the back roads."

"Oh... ok."

"You never thought of that?" Bernice laughed.

"Uh... no," Kurt said, returning his attention to the road as the traffic in front of him moved forward. "To tell you the truth, I'm not much of a back-roads driver. I get lost too easily."

"Isn't that what a GPS is for?"

"Let me let you in on a little secret," he chuckled, lowering his voice as though others might hear him. "Teachers don't make near as much money as they should."

"I figured that."

"I couldn't afford a GPS to save my life."

"Better safe than sorry," she shrugged. "I guess you'll be staying on the main roads then?"

"At least until we get out of town. From here to the lake is pretty much a straight shot through."

"All right."

"Bernice... before we get there, I want to tell you something, something that we'll most likely run into with the bird we're trying to rescue. Are you listening?"

"Yes, Mr. Hanson. I'm listening."

"I don't know what's wrong with this bird or why it's staying in a radioactive area, but whatever it is, it can't be good. I'm only telling you this because I'm not sure what we'll run into. For all we know, the bird could be growing extra legs or rotting from the inside out."

"You think we have a chance, Mr. Hanson?"

"A chance at what?"

"Saving it."

*God, I hope so,* he thought, taking one last glance at Bernice.

He didn't know what he'd do if he had to tell her the swan was dead.

Kurt waited for the needle to drop the moment he pulled off the road. Like a constellation set only to appear once every few years or a comet that passed the Earth every other century, disengaging the vehicle and preparing to step out of it felt like the last thing he would ever do.

In a minute, he would be out of the truck and on the ground.

In two, Bernice would be at his side, waiting for him to lead them forward.

In three, they would find out whether or not the swan had wandered into their trap.

*Come on, big guy—you can do this.*

What would stop him, if only himself?

*Nothing. Nothing at all.*

They'd come too far to turn back now.

The only place to go was forward.

"You ready?" Kurt asked, looking up when Bernice appeared beside him.

"I'm ready when you are, sir."

"I'm ready."

*Ready as I'll ever be.*

With the thought fresh in his mind, Kurt gestured Bernice forward and began to lead the way toward the lake, taking extra care to lead them around the juts and dips in the path. Signs of human presence could be seen almost everywhere they looked. Litter blanketed the side of the road, chemical burns smiled from the safety of tree bark, and long-abandoned nests lay in trees, suspended by branches and only moving whenever the wind came up. Kurt imagined what this place might have looked like three or four years ago, before he moved into town and before the government decided to plant their roots.

*It would've looked beautiful, he imagined, with flowers in bloom and grass on the ground.*

Greenery would extend as far as the eye could see. Amaranths would grow along the shoreline as they did now, but in abundance, while squirrels and other rodents would chatter in the trees, chewing nuts and speaking to one another in ways only rodents could. Birds would fly above, deer would graze in the distance, and swans would glide in the water, spreading their wings and bellaring cries of just, for this land was theirs and theirs alone.

Once upon a time, the world dreamed it could never be taken away.

Once upon a time, man evolved from simple, stupid apes and took control of everything.

*We don't deserve to live here. We don't deserve to tear down forests to make our homes. We don't deserve to dump our oils into the seas or pollute our breeze. We don't deserve to crack the ground, fill it up and break it down. We don't deserve to make our marks in the rocks or send our bombs to make our shocks. We don't deserve this—we don't deserve anything, not when we kill without mercy and eat with gluttony.*

In the end, what *did* they deserve? Surely they didn't deserve a home, because if they truly desired a place to live, they would've made room for the ones that came before them, and surely not space, because if they really, *truly* wanted somewhere to go, why not the sky, up in the mile-high? Their towers may grow and their explosions may blow, but

never once had the sky been filled with filth. Never once had the sky been filled with foreign bodies to the point where they couldn't populate it. Long gone were the giant birds of prey and the large whales that played. Long gone were the machines of legends, of dirigibles and steam-powered planes and cranes. Long gone were the shadows of time and the light of past, and long gone were the things of dreams, of physical rainbows and magical play bows. Long gone were the things that inhibited them, the things that, up until the twenty-first century, had restricted them from doing anything they wanted.

Long gone were the guilty inhibitions man had once harbored.

In the day and age they lived in, choices could be made.

Beautiful things didn't need to die.

Nature didn't need to be destroyed.

Homes could be made elsewhere, if only in the sky. Gasses could be natural, energy could be pure, and lives could be saved, if only they tried.

*This is it*, he thought, turning to look at Bernice. *This is where the world ends.*

A man once wrote a poem about how the world would end. In that poem, he talked about heat, cold, the disease of mold. He talked about what they'd do, how they'd be, how they'd see; and in that poem, he tried to warn them about the things they would do, about how they would bring about the end of the human race.

In that poem, Kurt found a meaning.

In that poem, Kurt found hope.

And last but not least, he found a message, a message that everyone with a right mind should have already learned.

"Are you ready?" he whispered.

"I'm ready," Bernice whispered back.

Reaching back, Kurt spread his fingers and took the girl's hand.

Together, they walked forward, into a future that lay upon one simple swan.

Darkness shrouded the inside of the cage, blocking out any wary, unwanted eyes. In the midst of a clouded, darkened place, Kurt couldn't help but feel a sense of dread growing inside him, locking onto his heart and pulsing like a rotten, black tumor. Every few seconds, a pair of tiny spiders would crawl up and down his spine, wreaking havoc on his mind and threatening to send his legs out from under him.

All it would take was one bite for him to pass out.

If nerves could kill, his surely verged on the edge of a heart attack.

"Well," Bernice said, drawing her word out to get Kurt's attention. "Do we just grab the tarp and pull it up or... what?"

"I'm... not sure," he frowned. "Give me a minute."

Of course, he didn't intend on using the minute for decision. He already knew how he and Bernice would be removing the tarp. Just as the girl said, they'd simply dig underground, grab the secret, hidden flap, and pull it up, thus revealing something—or nothing—in all its glory. The fact that he wanted to use the minute as an excuse to waste more time did nothing to bode his confidence.

*It's all right, Kurt. Whether it's something or nothing, at least you tried.*

"At least I tried," he nodded, falling to his knees to begin the dirty task. "At least we tried."

Reaching forward, he buried his hand in the mud.

Kissing, grappling, molesting, the ground wrapped around his fingers and began to make love.

A worm slid across his finger.

A rock scratched his hand.

A particle drank his blood.

The process completed, he tightened his grip on the metal rung of the tarp and pulled it out of the ground.

"Remember what I told you," he said, pushing himself to his feet. "If it's dead..."

"Don't worry," Bernice smiled. "We tried."

*We tried.*

Two words that seemed so little, yet meant so much.

In the last minutes of his normal life, Kurt thought of three things and three things only—his wife, his pills, and Jane Austerson.

When he lashed out and pulled the top of the top with him, he had one thing and one thing only on his mind—the swan.

*The amaranths.*

*The park.*

*The lake.*

*Matthew Darian.*

*Heaven.*

*The dreams.*

*The swan.*

In the blink of an eye, your world can change.

Kurt Hanson's world changed when he turned and looked at the cage.

Inside, curled into a fetal position with its head resting near the front of its body, was the swan.

Bernice cried out in joy.

The bird ruffled its feathers and let out a low honk.

*There it is, he thought, trembling, legs shaking and knees buckling. It's here.*

"There," he whispered, bending down beside the cage. "It's all right. We're not going to hurt you."

The swan brought its head away from its body.

In place of normal, white feathers, mute, tan skin lay under its eyes, crossing its cheeks until it finally faded from its head.

*Tears.*

The swan had been crying, just like it had in his dreams.

Bernice joined him at his side.

"Is this it, Mr. Hanson?" she asked, setting the palm of her hand on the front of the cage. "Is this the swan?"

"Yes, Bernice. This is it. This is the swan."

"How bad is it?" Kurt whispered.

"I'm not sure," Darian sighed, reaching up to wipe a hand over his brow. "For the time being, we'll just have to wait for the blood tests to come back and keep a close eye on it. There's nothing else we can do other than that."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Radiation burns, as you've already pointed out. It also seems to have some feather damage near the proximal and a weakening of the calamus. Its feathers are just barely hanging in there."

"Is it going to be ok?"

"Again, I'm not sure."

Turning, Kurt looked up at the nearby cage the bird rested in. Head to its breast, it slept soundly and without a care in the world.

*Probably for the first time in months, maybe even years.*

"Will you be able to tell how long it's been in the lake?"

"Maybe, maybe not. Depending on how and why the bird was able to live in such drastic conditions, it might be immune to the radiation altogether."

"What about the chemical burns and the weakened feathers?"

"Again, maybe just an uncomfortable side affect. I highly doubt the bird would still be alive if it didn't have some kind of advantage."

"I guess you're right," Kurt sighed.

"What about the girl?" Darian frowned. "What's her deal?"

"She's been helping me catch the thing."

"Why do you need her help?"

"If you haven't noticed, Matthew, I'm nearly fifty-three-years-old."

"That's not what I meant..."

"I know," Kurt laughed, slapping the doctor's shoulder. "She's the one who spotted it. Besides—like I said, it's getting harder for me to move around. She did most of the work when we were disguising the cage."

"A girl who's not afraid to get dirty," Darian nodded, reaching up to rub his chin. "Sounds like a future wildlife specialist to me."

"No kidding."

Bernice looked up from the outside lobby. She smiled when she caught Kurt's eyes, then returned to looking at her magazine.

"What're you going to tell her if the bird dies?" Darian frowned.

"Just what I told her before," Kurt said, crossing his arms and leaning against the wall. "At least we tried."

Darian nodded.

Before he turned to look at the swan, Kurt caught a smile on the man's face.

Over the next few days, Kurt made repeated visits to the raptor center in order to keep an eye on the swan's progress. During these visits, he would accompany Matthew Darian into the observation room, help tend to the ailing creature, and survey the results of the tests and X-rays whenever possible.

"I don't know how it's survived all that time," Darian said, setting a sheet of test results on the nearby table. "It's... just... wow."

"It's *what*, Mat?"

"Unreal is the only word I can think of."

"Why?"

"Well... given the amount of radiation that's in its system, it should be dead at least three times over."

"What the..."

"Don't ask me," Darian shrugged. Sighing, he slid the paper into a manila folder and turned his eyes down. Across its surface, S - 001 was scrawled in neat, if somewhat scratchy handwriting. "Kurt... can I tell you something?"

"You can tell me anything you want to, Mat. You know that."

"I don't think the swan's going to make it much longer."

Kurt stayed silent.

What could he say to such a revelation?

"How do you know?" he finally asked.

"Just... the way it's been acting. It hasn't ate or drank anything since you brought it in a few days ago."

"Why didn't you tell me this?"

"I didn't want you to worry."

"*Didn't want me to worry? Are you fucking nuts?*"

"Kurt..."

"I've spent the past three months *dwelling* on my life and you're telling me *not* to worry?"

"Look," Darian sighed, shaking his head. He grabbed the folder, walked around the table, and opened a file compartment. He slid the folder into its specified, alphabetized block. "I'm sorry, Kurt. I didn't want you to stress on this, so I let it slide. If I'd've known you'd react like this, I would've never kept it a secret."

"It's all right, Mat. Don't... don't worry about it."

Crossing the room, Kurt stooped down beside the cage and set his hand against the glass. Though not awake, the bird sensed his presence and ruffled its feathers, briefly shifting in order to compensate for the disturbance.

Like Dr. Darian had said, the swan had barely touched its food or water.

*Why?* he thought. *Why now, after all we've been through?*

The swan opened its eyes.

It blinked.

A crystal-colored tear slid down its face, perfectly lining with the burned gap of its feathers.

"It's crying," Kurt whispered.

"What?"

"I said it's crying."

"No it's not."

Kurt jumped.

Darian kneeled beside him, watching the swan with curious, intense eyes.

"How long have you been there, Mat?"

"Just as long as you have."

Startled and unsure, Kurt turned his eyes back on the swan.

Like it never even opened its eyes in the first place, the swan continued to sleep.

*Living, Kurt thought.  
Breathing...  
Dreaming.*

That night, he sat at the kitchen table with the single, overhead light bulb on. Dangling from a single strand of wiring, it swung back and forth like a pendulum waiting to seal a Renaissance man's fate. Like that Renaissance man, Kurt's fate—and wellbeing altogether—hung in the balance, suspended by a single piece of string attached to a lit, burning switch.

Any moment now, the string would catch fire.

When the spark reached the trigger, it would explode.

Who knew what would happen after that.

*Nothing's going to happen. Your life doesn't depend on what happens to a swan.*

Maybe not, but it sure felt that way.

Lifting his glass, Kurt took a long, hard swig of milk, then stood and made his way to the sink. There, he ran water through the glass, all the while thinking of the swan and why it wouldn't drink.

*Can it even drink anymore?*

He thought of his dream and how the swan turned to dust. Starting with its skin and ending with its bones, it collapsed from the inside out, eaten alive by something not alive, yet not dead either.

*Chemicals don't live, he thought, and they don't die either.*

To think that everything that happened to the lake had been caused by man was almost unthinkable. An entire ecosystem—an entire *paradise*—gone, all because someone decided to build and dump on it.

*Why?*

Why did they do it? Why, of all things, did people want to cause suffering, especially to creatures that had no comprehension of what was happening?

"Why," he growled. "Why why *WHY?*"

With each word, he slammed his fist on the counter, sending vibrations through the woodwork and pain up his arm. Lacing through his nervous system like a bat out of hell, the nerves connected to his brain in a series of electromagnetic shocks, forcing him to realize his action.

*Stop.*

"I did."

The little boy tugged on his shirtsleeve.

*Mr. Hanson?*

"Yes?"

*It's time for bed.*

Kurt nodded.

Taking the child's hand, he let the boy lead him back to the bedroom.

He didn't forget to turn the light off.

He left it on.

"Bernice?"

"Yes, Mr. Hanson?"

"I want to tell you something. Are you listening?"

"Yes. I'm listening."

"The swan might die."

"What?"

"I said the swan might die."

"I heard you. I mean... why..."

"I don't know. All I know is that it might not last much longer, maybe not past the week. I want you to come to the raptor center with me after school today."

"But my father..."

"Now's your last chance, Bernice. We have to say goodbye... before it's too late."

Bernice wanted to say goodbye.

Trudging through the throng of after-school crowds, she made her way to Kurt's truck and clambered inside without a word. When she offered no greeting, Kurt offered no reply. When he offered no reply, she offered no comment.

He didn't dwell on the silence.

He started the truck and pulled out of the teacher's parking lot.

Through the streets, across the canal, over the bumps and around the ridges, he made his way out of town and toward the raptor center. With the radio on low, nothing could be heard except fading static and voices as they left the vicinity of radio towers.

White noise filled his ears.

A swan skull entered his mind.

He blinked to clear the vision.

*Why is saying goodbye so hard?*

Omniscient gods could answer the question. Goodbye was hard because there was never another hello, never another hug or kiss. Goodbye was hard because you would never see the someone or something you

loved so much again. One minute it was there, the next it was gone, just like that. What happened when grown men wanted to sleep at night but couldn't because the little boys inside them wanted the lights on and teenage girls accepted the world face-forward without question or doubt? Really, what happened? What source of right and wrong skewed itself in order for such a thing to be possible?

*Life? Death? Both?*

Kurt expelled a held-in breath.

Bernice jumped.

"I'm sorry," he said, shifting gears so he could slow down. "I would've never gotten you involved in this if I'd've known this was going to happen."

"How could you have known? It's not your fault."

"Still... I feel guilty."

"I know what it's like to lose people, Mr. Hanson." Bernice paused. She looked down at her hands. What once used to be freshly-manicured fingernails were now only stubs of their former selves. "Do you remember what you told me, sir?"

"What?"

"That, regardless of whatever happened, at least we tried."

"I remember."

"Don't think this is your fault, please. We already know whose fault it is."

Kurt nodded.

He needed no explanation.

"Kurt?" Darian frowned, looking up from his desk. "Miss..."

"Sinclair," the girl finished. "Bernice Sinclair."

"What're you doing here?"

"We're here to say goodbye," Kurt said, draping an arm across Bernice's shoulders. "We figured it would be better to do it now than later."

"You're right. It's better you came now than later."

"What's wrong?" Bernice frowned.

"It's on its final breaths," the doctor sighed.

Neither of them said anything.

Standing, Matthew Darian turned, arched his back, and gestured for them to follow.

The whole while they followed the wildlife biologist, Kurt tried not to think about the swan and how, within a few minutes, it could easily die. He tried not to think about how he would feel, Bernice would feel,

or what Dr. Darian would think when the swan breathed its final breath. Of all these things, he worried about the swan the most.

*Is it suffering?* he dared to ask. *Is it in pain?*

Knowing Matthew Darian, he wouldn't have let the swan suffer. At this point in time, it'd probably be so full of medication that it didn't understand where it was, much less that it was slowly but surely dying.

"This is it," Darian said. "Are you ready?"

"I'm ready," Kurt replied.

Bernice merely nodded.

With a final, reassuring tip of the head, Matthew turned, opened the door, and let them inside.

Resting inside its glass cage and attached to a ventilator, the swan lay on its side, neck stretched out along the length of the floor. A low wheeze could be heard with each rise and fall of the bird's chest. It didn't take a scientist to know it was the machine doing the work for it.

"I'm sorry you had to go through this," Bernice said, resting her head against the glass. "But you know what happens next, don't you?"

The bird blinked. Whether it acknowledged—or heard—Bernice's words was up for debate.

"There's a place in the sky," Bernice continued, "where all the beautiful birds and ugly ducklings go."

*Heaven.*

If not a lake, where?

"I'm glad you got to spend the last of your life around people that cared about you," the girl sighed, closing her eyes as a tear slipped from beneath their folds. "Thank you for reaching out to me. Thank you for letting me believe that anything is possible."

Tears in her eyes, Bernice walked around the examination table and made her way out of the room. She didn't bother to look back at her teacher or the doctor.

"Well, buddy," Kurt said, taking his place in front of the cage. "I guess it's time for us to part ways now."

The swan nodded.

Kurt watched as a tear made its way down its face.

*I don't know who or what you are,* he thought, pressing his hand to the glass. *All I know is that you changed my life.*

"Thank you."

The swan opened its eyes.

*Thank you, Kurt. Thank you for giving me one last chance.*

With one last, final breath, the bird closed its eyes and passed into another world.

He thought he heard wings beating in the distance just as the ventilator went dead.

*In a world of beauty, life and love, the innocent things aren't meant to be burned. They are meant to take flight and never look back, to settle down and never leave again. They are meant to be happy, carefree amongst their kin. Their mothers, their fathers, their daughters and friends—they're meant to look upon one another and see that, for the first time in their life, they really do care. They are meant to see that, despite their differences, despite their trifles, they are meant to be as one.*

*From the ashes of a fallen empire, a creature rose from its depths.*

*Spreading its wings, the newly-christened swan took flight.*

*Behind it, another flew.*

*Together, and with the utmost care in the world, the swans flew into the distance, toward the land of the sparkling sea and the never-ending sun.*

*It didn't matter where they went.*

*They had all the time in the world.*

## New Section

### War is in the Hearts of Men

On an early morning in late March—when it had, surprisingly, not rained or snowed—I rose to a day I could not begin to contemplate. John, the late riser of the two of us, remained in bed, unaware that I had departed to face the day emotionally alone.

As usual, I made my way into the kitchen and started breakfast. Today, eggs, bacon, and moderately-heated toast would greet our plates. It would be no different from normal days.

*Of course.*

Chuckling, I greased the pan, cracked the eggs, and started the oven, sighing when the sharp sizzle of yolk started up. It would only serve testament to how the rest of the day would go.

“Hey.”

I looked up. John stood in the threshold, hands braced against both sides of the wall. His dark hair matted to his face, his nearly-silver eyes watching me from behind a mess of fringe, he waited for me to respond, eyes trailing to the egg.

“Hey,” I smiled.

One thing he’d always been able to do, despite my mood or the condition my day would hold, was make me smile. I’d learned over the years that, if you’re with a good person, and that person can read you without even opening your cover, a man can make you smile with his very presence.

“I didn’t know you were getting up this early.”

“Why not?” I asked, flipping an egg. “Why wouldn’t I get up?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I...”

“It’s your special day, John.”

He said nothing, just like I’d expected him to. Instead of standing there, waiting for me to possibly say something further, he crossed the short distance from the arch that led from the living room to the bar, where he took his place, rubbed his eyes, and waited for breakfast.

*You could at least try to talk to me, I thought, sighing as I turned to replace the eggs with bacon. It’s not like I’m trying to shut you out.*

If anything, I tried to do the opposite. What was the point of having a partner who didn’t talk to you, or couldn’t communicate? John knew I’d talk; he knew I’d listen.

"Here's the eggs," I said, dumping them onto a plate large enough to feed both of us. "Eat as much as you want."

"Thanks, Markus."

I nodded. The bacon—sizzling worse than the eggs—taunted me. Like John, it would burn if I didn't treat it carefully, so I made sure to pay extra attention to it between quick glances at the man who sat at the table, gingerly spearing eggs on the tip of his fork as though they would jump up and bite him.

"You ok this morning?" I decided to ask.

"I'm fine," he said. "Thanks for asking."

"You don't want to talk about this?"

"Please, don't badger me, Markus."

"I'm not badgering you," I said. "I..."

He let his fork fall from his hand, storming off before it could clang against the plate. I swore, turned the oven off, and tossed the underdone bacon into a tray, running out into the hall to find the bathroom door already partially-shut.

*He never shuts the door, I thought, even if we've had a fight.*

Steam rolled from its crack, wafting into the hallway like water from a broken sink. It pooled at my feet when I stepped up to the door, then constricted my ankles when I stood in front of it, like an anaconda waiting to swallow me whole. I entertained myself with this bizarre—if somewhat morbid—fantasy for a few short minutes, then leaned against the door, raising my hand to knock.

"John?" I asked, gently rapping my knuckles against the wood. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah."

I pushed the door open and stepped into the room, grimacing at the heat that rolled from the shower. Like it usually did after a fight or troubling disagreement, it forced droplets of water from under my skin—particularly my eyebrows, which liked to collect moisture, then drop them into my eyes at choice moments.

"I know you're not going to talk to me about this," I sighed, leaning against the wall, "but please, don't shut me out."

"I'm not shutting you out." He parted the shower curtain, watching with me solemn eyes. "You have to understand something, Markus—I'm not doing this because I want to, I'm doing this because I have to."

"You don't have to do anything."

"Yeah, I do."

He stared at me, waiting to see if I would reply, then closed the curtain. I crossed my arms over my chest, fighting off the thought of whether or not to undress and step into the hot water with him. I didn't think it would matter if I did or not, because showering with him wouldn't fix the fight.

"Are you getting in?" John asked, pulling my eyes from the floor.

"Do you want me to?"

"I'd prefer if you were in here than out there."

Sighing, I stepped out of my underwear and slid into the shower. I leaned against the wall—as I usually did—allowing what water didn't hit John to coast down my back and off my tailbone. John set a hand on my shoulder once he felt he could.

"Hey," he said, lifting his other hand and tilting my chin up with two fingers. "Don't bum out on me, please."

"I'm trying not to."

"No you're not. You're going to let this eat and eat at you until you're so depressed you won't even talk to me. I'm not stupid, Mark—I know you."

"I..." I shook my head. "It's not worth it anyway."

I wrapped my arms around his waist and leaned against him, kissing his shoulder. He reached out and ran a bar of soap across his chest and under his arms. He warned me when he put shampoo in his hair, just like he always did.

"I won't be gone for more than an hour, two tops," he said, tilting his head back to let the water wash the shampoo off his face.

"I have to work until three anyway. I won't see you until I get home."

"I forgot."

*Of course*, I thought, but didn't say anything.

I ran my hand down his spine, shivering as I felt the bones connecting one another. I'd always been afraid of human mortality, but especially John's. While hardened by life, his body seemed fragile, held together by only a canvas of skin. While muscle lay beneath the surface—solidifying the structure of his work of art—it would do nothing to stop the things he would eventually face.

"John," I said, setting a hand on his arm.

"Yeah?"

"Don't do anything you'll regret."

"I won't," he whispered. "Don't worry."

He laced our fingers together.

Our rings touched.

We ate breakfast and parted our ways—John for his day, I for mine. From roughly eight in the morning to three in the afternoon, I stocked shelves, ran the register, and dealt with unhappy customers in a local supermarket. The drive itself took about a half hour—depending on the traffic that coagulated the streets from the morning, lunch or night drive—but I enjoyed it.

Despite the reassurance I had that morning after the shower and during breakfast, I spent the first part of the day dwelling on John and the business office he would be at, talking to a man that he didn't know, but he'd remember for the rest of his life. I imagined that man asking him questions—who he was and what he stood for. And John, being his usual, polite self, would say his name was John, and that he stood for the goodwill of the American man. I married him for that reason—or 'joined,' as the legal system liked to point out. I couldn't refer to John as my husband in a legal sense, like at a bank or when filling out an account the both of us planned to use. I'd have to say 'partner,' because if I didn't, I'd be corrected and ashamed with other people present.

That afternoon, after spending most of the morning groveling, being as pleasant as I possibly could, and cleaning the disgusting employee restroom, I worked the register, cashing people's items, asking them how their day had been, and wishing them to have a good afternoon. I took an overpriced, twenty-dollar DVD from an elderly woman, desperately wanting to tell her that she could get it at the video store for at least half the price, but unable to for fear that I would lose my job.

"Thanks," I smiled, accepting the twenty-one odd dollars and change, after tax. "Have a nice day."

"You too," the woman said. She turned to grab her purchase, but stopped. Her eyes lingered from the bag to my face, where she stared at me for a long moment. "Is something wrong, dear?"

"No," I said. "Why?"

"You look troubled."

*Of course I look troubled, miss—the man I love is going to war.*

"I'm all right," I said, pushing her bag forward so she wouldn't have to stretch over the counter to take it. "Thank you for your concern though. I appreciate it."

"Everything will be fine," she said, taking the DVD in hand. "Don't worry."

"I," I began, but paused soon after. "Thank you."

With that, the woman turned and walked away, leaving me to think about life, war, and how John fit in with all of it.

At lunch, I returned home after a ten minute trek and slid into the kitchen, where I reached into the fridge and pulled out sandwich materials. With knife in hand, I cut fresh ham, cheese and tomatoes, then arranged them on a sandwich. This I cut in half before arranging three pickles between it.

*Why not just put them on the sandwich?* John had laughed, when we'd first started dating. *Or, better yet, why not eat chips?*

*I don't like chips, I'd said. They're too salty.*

The memory made me smile, and—most importantly—lit a place in my heart that only John could. Before, when I'd dated, lived and slept with other men, that place had never lit, nor had it burned so strong it sometimes hurt. Sometimes during those relationships, I'd questioned *why* I didn't feel those things, the things that the romance writers and the love movies talked about. I'd wondered why I never shivered when his finger traced my back or smiled when he stepped into a room. And even now—standing at the kitchen counter, remembering something that had happened fifteen years ago—I still wondered why it'd taken me so long to realize what I'd felt had been true love.

Lifting one half of the sandwich, I took a bite out of it, then bit the head off a pickle. I rolled the two in my mouth—glad that the vegetable hadn't bittered the taste of the sandwich—and repeated the process until the first half disappeared. I ate the second pickle by itself, then started on the third.

I half expected John to come in the door that very moment, laughing and teasing me like only he could.

*John, I sighed.*

If he left—if he really, truly decided to get on a plane and depart for a desert land far, far away—I didn't know what I would do. Half the time, I depended on him to hold me together; to calm me down after a particularly-frustrating day, or ease my spirits when something troubled me. I ate breakfast, lunch and dinner, showered, went to bed and woke up in the morning with him, then repeated the process the next day. I couldn't imagine a life without him.

*I don't know what I'll do if you leave, I thought, somehow feeling guilty that I ate in his absence. Please, John...*

*Markus...*

*Just listen to me, please!*

*I've already decided—I'm going.*

*You don't have to go though!*

*Yes I do. My father...*

*Your father wouldn't want you to be away from me.*

*My father doesn't know I'm with you.*

*That's my point exactly! What would he think about you leaving if he knew you were with something? Huh? What would he think if he knew you had a man at home—a husband, one you never told him about—that didn't want you to leave? If you enlist, you'll be gone for months, maybe even years.*

*It doesn't matter. I'm going to enlist, and you're not going to stop me.*

I stopped fighting with him after that. Of course, I'd tried to persuade him to stay, but I never actually *fought*. Before, I'd bore claw and tooth, armed to the core with emotions only a husband could have, but the emotional strain it put on the both of us forced me to realize something—fighting, especially about something as complicated as enlisting in the military, would only break the stability, and most likely destroy our relationship in the long run.

With the guilty thought out of my conscience, I finished my sandwich and remaining pickle, then crossed the short distance to the sink. I turned the water on, but snapped my hands back as soon as the scalding liquid bit into my skin.

"John," I chuckled, casting a glance at my reddened hands.

He always had a bit habit of leaving the hot water on after he washed something. He liked to 'kill the germs' before he put anything in the dishwasher, or drank a soda he'd bought from the store. To think that he put so much effort into making sure the both of us were safe, then to enlist in the military and put himself in even more danger.

*Quit.*

I grabbed a dishtowel, dried my hands, and yawned, fighting back a wave of drowsiness that threatened to bring back thoughts of last night. Sleep hadn't come until the knots in John's back had loosened, not until his shoulders had slumped in rest.

A quick glance at the clock brought a grimace to my face. I'd taken five minutes too long for my lunch break.

Turning, I slid my hands into my pockets to make sure I hadn't dumped my keys off somewhere, then left the house.

As always, I locked the door behind me.

There was no reason to let the neighbors in.

The remainder of my shift rolled on smoothly, secured by both the old woman and the fact that I would see John later that night. I left work feeling as though tonight—regardless of how tense it could be—would turn out all right.

Traffic, as usual, jammed the roads, coagulating them with rust and metal. And, much to my displeasure, the streetlights seemed to turn green only once every ten minutes. I could move no more than a few feet before I had to stop to avoid rear-ending the person in front of me.

*It's all right*, I thought, drumming my fingers against the steering wheel.

John would be at home by now, eating a TV or microwaveable dinner he'd heated up himself. Or, maybe, he made dinner for the both of us so I wouldn't have to worry about doing it myself.

*Not that it matters.*

Releasing my hold on the break when the traffic inched forward, I fumbled for the radio, grimacing as blare of static, electronica and voices exploded out the side speakers. My ears rang for the next half minute before I finally got the radio situated. A man with a deep, pleasant voice spoke to someone else, though I could only catch his tone, not his exact words.

"There's something I don't understand," he said. My ears perked in response.

"What's that?" another man—this one light-voiced—asked.

"We've got these gays, right?" deep voice said. "They want marriage, they want adoption, they want to be able to walk into a hospital and see their partner on their death bed. That's fine—because as far as I'm concerned, people should get those rights, regardless of whether you're black, brown, or the color of the freakin' rainbow—but I don't see why they have to serve in our military."

"They can't, remember? Don't ask, don't tell."

"Yeah, I remember *that*. But there's a big deal going on about that war. War... hell, if you could get out of it by saying you're gay, why not do it?"

"Isn't that like faking a medical condition?" light-voice asked.

"I thought the Pentagon *had* homosexuality listed as a medication condition?"

Both men burst out laughing. I couldn't help but growl and swipe at the tuner. It scraped my hand, spun, and landed on a static channel before it went completely dead.

*Assholes*, I huffed, pushing the car forward another few feet. *Why do you care if a person's gay and wants to go into the army?*

As far as I'd been concerned since the day I could understand the 'don't ask, don't tell' policy, if a gay man—or woman—wanted to serve their country, why couldn't they? Were people so afraid of being flirted with in the locker room or propositioned in the barracks? Any self-respecting gay man wouldn't offer his straight companion a blowjob, and he sure as hell wouldn't try to flirt with him.

"Straight men aren't game," I sighed.

*But it'd sure as hell make the world a whole lot easier if they were.*

Closing my eyes, I thought of John and what he'd gotten himself into.

Would he lie about his background if they want to check his marriage license? And if they did, what would they say when they found Jonathan Alexander Markinson to be 'joined' with Markus Peter Burrows, who'd held a ceremony over the border in order to avoid discrimination?

At that particular moment, I didn't know what he'd do. I simply took a deep breath, lifted my foot off the gas, and continued down the street, stopping every so often in order to avoid hitting the vehicle in front of me.

*All's fair in love and war*, I thought.

What bitter humor we all knew.

Home stood its ground on the outer edges of town, bordered by neighboring houses just like it. During the summer, I maintained a garden to keep in the spirit of things, while John mowed every Sunday, glad for the peace Mass offered. At night, lilies that skirted the edge of the stepping-stone path from the driveway to the door glowed like irradiated mushrooms, brought to earth by some foreign, alien race.

I disengaged the engine, made sure I hadn't forgotten anything important in the passenger seat, and crawled out of the vehicle, locking it with a simple click of the touchpad. From there, I made my way up to the door, where I knocked before entering.

"John?" I asked, closing the door behind me. "You here?"

He didn't respond. Odd, considering his car rested in the driveway right beside mine. I figured that, if he wasn't home, he'd be at one of the neighbor's houses or a friend's, talking about something or other.

After locking the door, I slid my shoes off my feet and stepped into the kitchen, where I immediately went for the fridge to see if he'd made dinner. Sadly, only a few cinnamon rolls remained from a few days back.

*Better than nothing.*

I plucked one off the plate and bit into it, sighing when orange flavoring exploded in my mouth. John always enjoyed sweets, but in moderation. He once said that, as a teenager, he suffered from childhood obesity and had to diet for around three years to get all the weight off. Along the exercise, he said it nearly killed him—both emotionally and physically. I couldn't imagine being fat, but then again, I couldn't imagine John ever being heavier either. He had bulging muscles and a slim, lean torso devoid of any kind of stretch marks.

*Just goes to show you what you should be thankful for,* I thought, sliding a hand under my shirt.

"John!" I called, shoving the last of the cinnamon roll in my mouth. "Are you here?"

"I'm here."

I jumped, startled at his sudden appearance. He slid into a bar stool and rested his elbows on the counter, cupping his hands in his face.

"You ok?" I frowned, turning to wash the grease off my fingers.

"I'll live," he sighed.

Ok. I swallowed a lump in my throat, drying my hands with a dishtowel. *Something happened.*

"Did the interview go ok?" I asked.

"Oh, it went fine," he said, "until the guy who interviewed me pulled out my 'marriage' certificate."

*If you could get out of it by saying you're gay, why not do it?*

"What did he say, John?" I frowned, not sure whether or not to reach out and touch him, or just leave him be.

"He said, 'The United States does not accept gays or lesbians in their military.'"

"Did he say why?"

"No," John growled. "I don't see why you care anyway. You were the one who wanted me to stay here."

"I *wanted* you to. I didn't say you *had* to."

"What's the difference?"

"Me *wanting* you to stay home means that I'd rather you not go to Iraq and get your head blown off. Me saying you didn't *have* to means that I would've supported you no matter *where* you went."

John said nothing. Instead, he chose to bow his face into his hands and take slow, deep breaths. Every part of me willed to reach out to touch him—to tell him that everything would be fine and that he didn't have to worry about anything—but something stopped me. My hand, which had almost passed the top of the cupboard, jolted against my side, subconsciously telling me to leave him be.

"It doesn't matter," he finally said, looking up at me with moisture in his eyes. "I failed Dad."

"You didn't fail *anyone*, John. Don't say that."

"You don't understand, Markus. He... he wanted me to enlist so bad. It... it was his last wish."

*Markus, John said, what seemed like so long ago. Can I talk to you about something?*

*Yeah. Of course you can.*

*Dad's in the hospital. He... his heart disease finally got the best of him. The doctors said he wouldn't live if he had another heart attack. I have to go to Maine, to say goodbye one last time.*

The sight of John crying spurred the memory to mind faster than I could have ever imagined. The image of him standing in the doorway to our bedroom—crying, phone dangling from his hand by only the cord—summoned emotions that I hadn't felt since that fateful night four years ago, when John's life had forever changed. He'd idolized his father since the day he saw him leave in his army uniform the day he turned twelve-years-old. The man's death nearly destroyed him.

"No, John." I leaned forward and took his face in my hands, tilting his head up so we could look one another in the eyes. "His last wish wasn't for you to leave the man you love for a war we're not supposed to fight."

"But Markus... he..."

"What would he have said if he knew you loved someone? What would he say if he knew you loved that man enough to travel thousands of miles to Canada so we would know in our hearts that we really, truly got married? John... your dad knows you tried. Don't you think that's what he'd want to know? That you *tried*?"

I... I don't know." John swallowed the lump in his throat. He released a wail that had to have been festering in his chest for hours, days, maybe even years, then buried his face in my neck and clawed at my shirt, desperate to attach himself to the one and only thing that seemed real in his world. "Yes, Markus. Yes. That... that's all he'd care about."

“You can’t help what they did,” I whispered, running my hands through his hair. “You can’t help they tried to use you as a weapon.”

“But they didn’t,” he said.

“I know,” I sighed, closing my eyes. “And that’s all that matters.”

I rested my face in his hair, took a deep breath, and realized for the first time that war meant more than just bearing arms and traveling to countries where the sand always blew and the sun always seemed to shine.

At that moment, I realized that war could exist in the hearts of men.

John’s war had ended.

I couldn’t ask for anything more than that.

## New Section

### Beautiful Woman

*I see you there, sitting on the porch, with your head hung low, and your mouth wide open. I see you there, kissing a child, your stone-cold lips, and your trembling smile. I see you there, with one eye open, a flicker of a word, and a chapter board. And I see you there, beautiful woman, your mouth cut open. And I see you there, again and again, and again and again, and again and again. I see you there every day, over and over, and over and over again. I know it is because you're beautiful, but truly lost—like a forgotten child, trembling through the frost.*

*Then, one day, beautiful woman, you are gone, and again and again... I don't know where you've gone.*

"Am I beautiful?" she asks.

Marty is unsure how to respond. At seven-years-old, his mother has taught him to always be polite to a person, but she's never mentioned what to say when someone asks you if they're beautiful. Naturally, he's inclined to say yes, that she is very pretty, but isn't sure how to go about it. He's never been asked this question before.

*What do I say?* he thinks. *What I do a say to a lady who's very pretty?*

Should he say yes?

Should he say no?

*What, exactly, should he do?*

Glancing up, the child begins to take in the woman's appearance, from top to bottom. She's wearing tennis shoes much like his own, but black and with white laces. Her pants are brown, but her coat... it's a funny color. He knows the word in the back of his head, though he's not sure how to say it. He *does* know, however, that it starts with a B and ends with an E.

*Bei... Guh.*

Beige is the color of the woman's coat.

Satisfied with himself, Marty smiles and looks up—expecting to see the face of the pretty neighbor he has not yet met—but frowns when he finds she is wearing a mask. Like a doctor on TV, she is wearing a white mask. He thinks she might be sick, but he quickly shakes that off and looks at her eyes.

They're dark.

They're very dark.

Finally, he comes to her hair, which looks as though it's been brushed thousands upon thousands of times. That's how straight it is, and what's more is that it glows, like the earrings his daddy bought his mommy for her birthday.

*She is beautiful.*

Satisfied with his answer, he smiles and nods.

"Yes," he says. "You're *very* beautiful."

Marty expects the woman to smile, just like everyone should when they're told they're beautiful.

His mommy smiles when his daddy says she's beautiful.

Instead of smiling, or her mask moving like he expects, the beautiful woman reaches up and lowers her mask.

Marty screams.

He is unable to run away as the woman lunges forward, pulls a hook from her coat pocket, and cuts his mouth open from ear to ear.

A child has died today.

Erik is tired of hearing it from his mother. She's been going on about it over and over again, as if it's the worst news she's ever heard. Worse than the towers falling, worse than the bridge collapsing, worse than the war exploding—but here, in all of this, she's talking about a *child*.

The original shocked excitement of hearing the little boy's mouth had been cut ear to ear quickly wore off when his mother wouldn't shut up.

"ERIK!" she shrieks. "Where are you *GOING*?"

"Out," he says, as though she hasn't just screamed at him.

"You can't go out! There's a killer on the..."

"I'm a big boy Mom—I can handle myself."

"Erik Daniel James Crawford, you get your sorry little ass back here right now or I'll..."

Erik walks out the door.

He knows it's not an open threat. His mother *never* punishes him. She has no reason to. He gets straight-As in school, is one of the best players on the soccer team, and he hasn't been in trouble for the past year. There's no reason for her to ground him for the next three months over going outside.

*And on the porch, no doubt.*

Sighing, he leans against the porch railing and takes a breath of fresh air. He looks out at the nearby street and imagines how the little boy was killed. First he would have been walking alone, without his parent's

permission and with all the neighbors' windows closed. Next, the killer would have stepped out of an alley, or walked down the street as though nothing was going to happen. And finally, after all the dramatic buildup that would have been tingling in thin air, the man would have rushed forward, grabbed the little boy, and cut his face open.

*But why would someone cut his face open?* Erik frowns. *That won't kill you.*

Unless, of course, you didn't get to a hospital on time—otherwise you'd die from blood loss.

The little boy had been nowhere near a hospital.

Reaching up, Erik feels his face, giving in to the imagination that runs wild in his head. What would it be like to have your face cut open, or to have someone come out of an alley or down the street and do that to you?

Regardless, he doesn't want to know. He'd rather go in and listen to his mother complain than have anything like that happen.

Looking up, Erik smiles as he sees his father's car pull into the driveway.

*Thank God, he thinks. At least he'll be able to put some sense into mom. After all this time, he knows what his father is capable of.*

*"Did you hear?"*

Erik is unable to control his sigh.

*Here we go again.*

"Hear what?" Benjamin Crawford asks, tucking a kerchief into his shirt. He winks at his son before reaching for his sandwich.

"A little boy was murdered today."

"Oh? Who was it?"

"A little boy named Marty."

Erik's father chokes on his sandwich. He takes a moment to regain his composure before speaking.

"Marty Crenshaw?" he asks.

"Oh no." A plate slides from his mother's hands. It shatters a moment later. "Benjamin, the news... their new reporter, she can't speak English. She... I... it can't..."

Erik swallows a lump in his throat.

It isn't until just now that he knows his father's best friend's son has been killed.

"Little Marty?" Erik frowns, spiders crawling through his chest. "Adam's son?"

"No, it couldn't be," Benjamin says, standing. "I would've gotten a call, I would've *heard* something about this, I..."

As if God has heard his father's plea, the phone rings.

Benjamin walks to the phone.

He takes the call, leaves the room, and doesn't return for nearly ten minutes.

When he comes back, his face is pale and his eyes are red.

"Marty's dead," he says, the first tear slipping down his face. "They don't know who did it."

Erik sits with his father in Adam Crenshaw's living room.

Tea—the common drink around the house—sits in fine china in front of them, waiting to be drunk.

So far, no one has made a move to touch theirs.

Not sure how to respond to anything going on around him, Erik remains still, listening to small, whispered chat between his father and his friend. He'd like to say something—anything—to help improve the mood and possibly put the man at ease, but doesn't. He knows he'll just screw something up or make it worse if he opens his mouth.

*Poor Dad*, he thinks, watching the forced composure on his father's face. *Poor Mr. Crenshaw*.

The man's usually-cheerful, bright brown eyes are muddled. Like holes drowned with water, nothing but black fills their surfaces. It's expected though. The pronounced lines around his mouth, the darkness in his eyes, the color drained from his face—all signs of grief, pulled from the deepest and darkest places of the human heart.

"Where was he?" Benjamin asks. "When... when it..."

"Walking to a friend's," Adam says. "Just walking to a friend's."

Nothing more needs to be said. Marty was often seen walking the streets of their small town in Maine, en route to a friend's or to the local candy shop. Normally, everyone looked out for him; some even went so far as to walk out onto their porch and watch the boy as he passed their houses and until he cleared the road. But, for some reason, no one seemed to be around earlier today. No one stepped onto their porch, no one walked out to their mailbox, and no one said hello to the little boy who could.

Erik takes a deep breath.

He tries not to cry.

His tears come anyway.

"It's all right, Erik," Adam says.

"No it's not," Erik says, reaching up to wipe his eyes. "No one should have to go through something like this."

"No," Adam nods, "no one should."

*But it's happened,* Erik thinks.

Standing, he walks to the nearby window, both to distract himself from his emotions and to let the men talk. From here, he can see nearly everything—their garden, their mailbox, the pier that rests at the very end of the road. He wants to see boats pulling in from a long day of adventure. He wants to see the shock on the men's faces when they come to find that someone—especially a child—has been killed.

With his second sigh of the visit, he closes his eyes.

He knows that won't happen.

*Pretty woman, pretty woman, you're from Japan, and surely by surely born from the sand. Like a diamond cross, dirtied from moss, you are corrupt, and you are unpure. Your smile is false, your grin is thick, the swallows in your pride have overwhelmed your grip—upon reality, upon fate, about the emotion of the human race. You are inadequate, you are unsure, you are slowly starting to become pure. You say you'll smile, then stay for a while, but even then, you can't pretend. You like the way the people feel, after you've hurt them, and after they've healed.*

*Piece by piece, you begin to pretend, how you are nothing, but false emends.*

"That didn't go well," Erik says.

"No," his father replies. "It didn't."

Erik's mother is standing in the kitchen, talking to a friend on the phone while Erik and Benjamin try to recover from their trip. While no more than a few tears were shed on their end, it doesn't help that they've just visited a father who's lost his son. Erik's been to few funerals—mainly the ones of his grandparents on his father's end, but nothing more than that. He remembers the way it felt to lose a grandparent; how that, after a while, you don't begin to think about them on a day-to-day basis, but you still remember that they're gone. He can't imagine how it feels to lose a child, someone born of your love, flesh and blood.

"Dad," he says.

"Yes, son?"

"Why would someone want to kill a little boy?"

Benjamin narrows his eyes. In Erik's fifteen-and-a-half-years, he's asked his father many questions—some simple, some complicated—but nothing like this. He knows he may have stepped the line, but some part

of him wants to know *why* someone would want to kill someone like Marty, and *why* someone would want to do it.

"Well, son," Benjamin says, setting his hands on his knees. "People will kill each other for a lot of reasons."

"I know *that*, Dad. I was asking why someone would want to kill *Marty*."

"There's no easy way to answer your question, Erik. Maybe whoever killed Marty was sick..."

"Sick?"

"Sick." Benjamin taps his head for emphasis. Erik 'ohs,' nods, and gestures for his father to continue. "Honestly, if you want to know my opinion, I think anyone who kills another person is sick. Some doctors say that the people who kill without meaning to—like someone who gets charged for manslaughter, for example—do it because the part of their brain that tells them what's right and wrong stops working for a second."

"So it's not their fault then," Erik says.

Benjamin doesn't immediately reply.

There is no right or wrong answer to that question. That is already obvious.

"But some people," his father continues, leaning forward so their faces are only a foot apart, "aren't able to tell what's right or wrong, or what's real or imagined. Some people are born that way, and some get like that because of things that have happened to them in the past. But you want to know what I think, son?"

"What?"

"That some people don't have that part of their brain," Benjamin says, closing his eyes. "That they never have, and they never will, no matter what they do."

That night, after his parents have went to bed, Erik lays awake pondering what his father said earlier. While he does this, he places his hands behind his head and stares at the ceiling, tracing the uneven lines of paint back and forth across the room.

*That some people don't have, he thinks, and never will.*

The thought chills him to no end.

Even on a warm, summer evening, the idea that a person can be born to kill chills even the bravest of souls.

Throwing his legs over his bed, Erik rubs his eyes and looks out his window. Here, so far away from the road, a person would have to cross

onto their lawn and step over his mother's rock garden to get anywhere near it. He's never pulled the curtains over it, but he's always kept it locked.

His mother once told him when he was four that strangers could come up to your window and get inside if you left it open.

She's never mentioned anything about anyone looking in.

*Hello hello, you are a doe, a maiden of your grandest kind—imaginary, binary, a place in books and legends whole. Hello hello, you are so fine, give you a dime, I'll make you mine; and then you'll say that you can't go, that you're too beautiful of a soul. And then I'll say, Hello, good day, and then turn and be on your way. But while I'm gone, you'll have your fun, pull your scissors, the twisted sisters. Burn your soul, cool your axe, no one will ever be able to relax.*

"You're not walking to school today, Erik."

The boy says nothing.

He's more than willing to let his father drive him.

"I know," he says, slugging his pack over his shoulders. "Don't worry, Dad—I don't care."

"Good," Benjamin nods, sipping his fourth cup of coffee. "Are you almost ready to go?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"I have to go to the bathroom."

"All right."

Smiling, Benjamin slips out of the kitchen and into the living room, where he leaves Erik to adjust to the slowly-rising light of the morning sun as he makes his way toward the bathroom.

*That's all right, he thinks. At least I won't have to walk.*

He usually sits on the couch and watches TV for another half-hour, then makes the nearly mile-long trip to school. As far as he sees it, morning TV is no big loss.

"All right," his father says, clapping his shoulders. He laughs when Erik jumps. "Scare ya there, son?"

"Yuh-Yeah," he smiled. "You did."

In the back of his mind, a faceless man traces his face from ear to ear.

He's more than ready to leave.

The principal is standing at the front door when Erik steps out of his father's car. Frowning, Erik turns to say goodbye, only pausing to tell his dad that nothing's wrong when he notices his frown.

"I'm ok," he says, forcing a smile, despite the fingers sliding down his back. "I was just wondering why Mr. Barniff was standing outside the door."

"Just a precaution," Benjamin smiles, patting his son's hand. "Have a good day at school, buddy."

"I will. Thanks Dad—love you."

"Love you too. Bye."

Waving, Erik turns and approaches the principal, only stopping to look over his shoulder and make sure his father has truly left before turning to face the man.

"Sir," he says. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes sir, mister..."

"Crawford," Erik finishes. "Erik Crawford."

"Ah. I thought I'd recognized the man dropping you off."

He nods. It's no secret that his father's a well-known and respected real-estate agent in their small town.

"There's nothing to worry about, Erik. We're just making sure that everyone gets in safe and sound."

"All right. Thank you, Mr. Barniff."

"You have a good day today, all right?"

"I will," he says, "thank you..."

He doesn't finish.

His voice is lost in a pool of whispers, laughs and giggles.

The process is repeated as he leaves. Teachers—at least three—stand on the long, concrete path that connects the jagged U of the road. All men, he realizes. They wouldn't leave a female teacher in a vulnerable position, especially not with a killer on the loose.

"You hear?" his father asks, leaning over to open the passenger seat, as he always does.

"Hear what?" Erik frowns.

"Curfew at six."

"Tonight?"

"Uh huh. Six at night 'till seven in the morning. Anyone caught out past then'll get taken in for questioning."

"Shit."

"I know," Benjamin laughs. "Watch what you say. Your mother'll lay an egg if she hears you talking like that."

"Sorry, Dad."

"Nothing to be sorry about. I honestly don't care—it's her you'll hear it from."

Nodding, Erik pulls his seatbelt over his chest and waits for his father to pull out of the parking lot. He expected him to be a little late—at least by ten minutes, maybe even twenty. Apparently though, Benjamin Crawford has left his illustrious offices early to pick up his son.

*Figures. Mom wouldn't even begin to let Dad think about letting me take the bus.*

"Thanks for picking me up, Dad."

"No need to thank me, Erik. I'm more than happy to come get you."

"I thought you worked until four?"

"I do. Dropping an hour off my schedule isn't going to hurt business any."

Erik shrugs.

"That is," Benjamin continues. "if I still have any."

"What?"

"The word's spread, son—our town's got a killer on the loose, and no one's going to move somewhere where they might get killed."

"You mean..."

"Yeah." Benjamin takes a deep breath. "Five clients I was supposed to meet today cancelled. They're looking elsewhere."

Erik swallows a lump in his throat.

Nothing good will come from this.

His parents have been fighting all day. His mother's been saying, *He shouldn't be going to school*, while his father's been adamantly replying, *Yes he should*. Earlier, it got to the point where Erik had to flee to his soundproof room to escape the noise, less he go nuts from the sound of their harsh voices.

Waking to the sound of silence, Erik sits up and opens his eyes to find the room dark. Confused, he blinks, wondering how he got here. This confusion lasts for about a minute before he realizes that, earlier, he succumbed to a nap after lying down to drown his thoughts away.

Pressure weighs on his bladder.

He needs to pee.

Rising, he gives himself a moment to gain his composure, then crosses the room and slides out the door.

In the hallway, he listens for the sound of his parent's voices, or the buzz of the TV.

He hears neither.

Thinking they have went to bed early, he gives into his body's inhibitions and dashes for the bathroom, quick to empty his bladder and flush the toilet, but dreading the sound it will make. The sound—not loud, but not quiet either—will wake his father, whose light sleeping and troubled conscience will seek him out at this ungodly hour of the night.

*Oh well, he thinks. What's the worst that could happen?*

He flushes the toilet, then waits—one minute, two, three, then four.

The sound of his father's footsteps do not come.

Relief coursing through his system like adrenaline to a drug-induced high, he exits the bathroom, glances down the hall to make sure neither of his parents have risen, then heads toward his room.

Just before he enters the bedroom, a figure slides away from the window.

Erik's heart drops.

*Oh God.*

His first and only instinct is to scream for his father.

"Are you sure you saw something?" Benjamin asks, taking hold of his son's trembling shoulders. "Erik—*Erik!*"

"I saw someone," Erik nods. "I wasn't seeing things, Dad. I'd already been up for five minutes."

"Are you sure your eyes weren't playing tricks on you? You weren't just seeing light reflecting off anything?"

He shakes his head.

"Dammit," Benjamin swears, running a hand through his hair.

"You're all right though," his mother says, "right?"

"Yeah Mom. I'm fine."

"Thank God."

After his mother kisses his face more times than he can bear, Erik pulls away and follows his father into the living room. His mother—most likely as traumatized as he is—remains in the hallway. Erik isn't sure whether or not she's already retreated to her and his father's room.

"Dad," he says, "it's ok. Don't worry—I'm fine."

"I know. You just scared the hell out of me, son."

"I didn't know what else to do. I mean, I know I shouldn't have yelled, but..." Erik sighs. Despite seeing someone who could have possibly be the one who killed Marty Crenshaw, the guilt of screaming still remains. A man—or, better yet, an almost sixteen-year-old boy—doesn't

scream when something startles him. He may yell in surprise, but he does not scream, not even when he sees a killer.

"Erik," Benjamin sighs, wrapping an arm around his son's shoulders. "Scream or no scream, at least you got me up. I'd rather hear you yell than come and wake me up to tell me there's someone standing outside your window."

"Thanks Dad."

"No problem, son."

Erik waits, expecting his father to say something more. When he doesn't, he slides out of his father's grip and looks at the living room windows. Like his own room, their drapes aren't drawn.

"Dad," he whispers.

"Yes, Erik?"

"Can we close the curtains tonight?"

"Yes," Benjamin says. "We can."

A police officer arrives at six the following morning, sporting a casual, undercover attire and a calm, reassuring grin. When Erik answers the door—dressed in boxers and an undershirt—he blushes, surprised at the man's presence.

"Excuse me, sir," he says, looking down at himself. "I didn't know you would be..."

"It's all right, son. It's Saturday—a boy deserves to walk around in his underwear."

Erik smiles, not the least bit humbled by the man's words.

"Your father called last night and said his son saw someone outside his bedroom window. I assume that was you?"

"Yes sir—it was."

"What's your name?"

"Erik. Erik Crawford."

"Ah," the officer smiles, extending his hand. "I figured I recognized this place. Sorry I didn't introduce myself earlier. I'm Officer Rudy Daniels."

"It's nice to meet you, sir."

"Pleasure's all mine."

Stepping aside so the officer can enter, Erik closes the door and calls for his father. Benjamin arrives in the same attire, sans shirt.

"Oh, hello," Benjamin smiles, but cocks unimpressed eyes at his son. "I'm sorry—I didn't know someone was here."

"It's all right. You're Mr. Crawford, I assume?"

"Yes sir."

"Officer Rudy Daniels. I'm here to take a statement from your son and walk around the property."

"All right. Do you need me to..."

"Actually, Erik's the only one I need to speak to, since he's the one who saw the lurker."

"Ah... All right then. Would you like some coffee?"

"It's not necessary, but if you'd like, I'll have a cup after your son has shown me his room."

"Ok. Thank you, officer."

"No need to."

Taking his cue—both by the officer and his father's wandering eye—Erik leads the policeman down the hall and to his room, which he hasn't bothered to step into more than once this morning. He slept in the living room with his father last night, both out of safety and the overwhelming fear of waking up and seeing the person again.

"You don't have curtains?" Rudy Daniels frowns.

"No, sir. My mom used to tell me not to open it when I was a kid. She never mentioned anything about putting curtains in here."

Rudy marks this down. His pen speaks silent words on voluble paper.

"What time did you see the person, Erik?"

"At around midnight, I think."

"Was it a man or a woman?"

"I... I couldn't tell," he frowned. "It looked like a man, but I didn't get a good look. Whoever it was slid away from the window before I could look at them."

"Anything you remember?"

*Brown against his bedroom window.*

"They had brown on," he mumbled. "It looked like a coat."

"Long, short hair? Height?"

"Long, past the shoulders; maybe my height."

"So... five-foot-eight?"

Nodding, Erik approaches the window, but stops short.

Something about the closeness of being where a possible killer stood bothers him.

"Did you need me to go outside with you?" he asks. "Because if you need me to show you where they were, I can..."

"There's no need to," Rudy smiles. "Besides—the crime scene investigators are coming to see if they can get anything off the scene. None of you went out in the garden, did you?"

"No."

"Then we should be set to go." Rudy extends his hand. "It's been great talking with you, Erik. Thanks for all your help."

"No problem," he says.

As he watches the officer leave the room, he can't help but feel like he could've done something more.

"What'd he say when he walked out of my room?" Erik asks.

"Nothing," Benjamin says. "I gave him a cup of coffee, walked him around the house, and talked about what happened while the crime scene investigators came and took a look at the area. Why? Did something happen?"

"No. Nothing happened."

"All right. Just making sure." Benjamin stands to get another cup of coffee, but stops. He swears under his breath and turns to his son.

"What's wrong, Dad?"

"We're out of coffee."

"Oh."

Frowning, Erik starts to sit at the table, but stops, crossing the room to stand by his father's side.

"You don't work today," the boy mumbles. "Do you really need it?"

"No, but it's nice to start off the day with a little caffeine, you know?"

"I guess."

Benjamin chuckles and slaps an arm around his son's shoulder.

"Nothing to worry about, Erik. Hey—you want to go do something today?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. The mall, grocery shopping, a walk—something simple like that."

"Would you really want to go for a walk with someone hanging around the house? What about Mom?"

"I think she mentioned something about going to a friend's house. You don't remember?"

*No.*

He doesn't bother to think about what he might have done had he been alone and someone tried to break into the house. Instead, he nods, forces a smile, and says, "Sure—let's go do something."

"Honey!" Benjamin calls. "We're going for a walk!"

"Who?"

"Erik and I."

"All right," she says. She steps into the room, slides her shoes on, and slings her purse over her shoulder. "I was going to go to Connie's anyway."

"Sounds good." Benjamin turns, sets a hand on Erik's shoulder, and smiles. "Ready, buddy?"

*Ready as I'll ever be*, Erik thinks, sliding his jacket and preparing to follow his father out the door.

The neighborhood is empty. Like a ghost town in the middle of a desert, the only thing that seems to move is the wind and the trees that border the road. The feeling of isolation is enough to force Erik closer to his father.

"You ok?" Benjamin asks.

"I'm fine," Erik says, sliding his hands into his pockets. "Just the wind, that's all."

The wind would be a good-enough excuse. He doesn't need his father to think that he'd *intentionally* moved over to be closer to him.

*Not that it would matter. Dad wouldn't care.*

If anything, his father would only smile and set an arm over his shoulder.

"It's a nice day, isn't it?" Benjamin asks, turning to look at his son.

"It's ok," Erik shrugs.

"What do you mean 'it's ok?' It's beautiful."

"There isn't anyone out here, Dad."

"Oh." Benjamin frowns. He stops in midstride to look up the road, shoving his hands in his pockets in the process. "You're right."

In the moments following the awkward realization, Erik steps forward, reaching for his father's arm, but stopping before he can fully touch it.

He sees a figure approaching from the end of the street.

"Erik..."

"Shh," he whispers. "Be quiet, Dad."

Benjamin does as asked.

As the figure approaches, Erik can't help but feel an overwhelming sense of dread. The weight of the world is on his shoulders, as it was when Atlas first carried it. Stones are tied to his feet, sand is thrown in his eyes, and water is filling his ears with each and every passing moment.

In the back of his mind, he sees a brown-colored coat pressed against his window. But in front of his eyes—in front of his cold, blue eyes—he sees the figure that dared to step up to the side of the house last night, the figure that dared to look inside and turn his life upside down.

He sees a woman with long, black hair and a shining, white mask.

"Dad?"

"What is it, Erik?"

"That's her."

"What?"

"That's her."

"Who's her, Erik? What're you talking about?"

"She's the one who was looking through my window."

*She's the one who killed Marty.*

As forbidden as his thought is, he can do nothing to restrain it as it makes its way out of its case. Marty, walking down the street with a bag of change in his hand; a woman, beautiful, with an Asian face and a white mask; and a hook, long, sharp and curved, slicing through a child's face—all are forbidden, all are secret, but all are true.

How he knows the child's demise, he does not know. All he knows is that Marty's killer is making her way down the street, mask and hidden, curved hook in toe.

"We've gotta go, Dad."

"What're you talking about, Erik?"

"We've gotta go! Now!"

"Erik..."

"She did it!" he cries, grabbing his father's arms. "She killed Marty!"

"Get a hold of yourself, Erik. Just because you think you see someone who might have looked in your window doesn't mean..."

Erik doesn't listen.

With one mighty tug, he pulls his father a foot down the street.

"Erik!" Benjamin cries, half in surprise, half in anger. "Let go of me!"

"NO!"

"Boy, you let go of me right now or I'll..."

He can no longer hear his father. Sound is distorted as the woman comes closer, face mute of expression and hands limply at her side as she

takes each individual step. She doesn't step on the cracks, nor does she stop and carve a symbol in the air when a black cat passes by. She is not superstitious, nor is she afraid of the screaming man and his son before her.

She is mute.

She is silent.

She is unreal.

In but a moment-and-a-half, she will be no more than a foot away from Erik and his father.

"Erik," Benjamin whispers. The boy blinks. How long has he been unable to hear anything? "Let me go. Now."

"Dad..."

"Now."

*You can run, you know? If you run, he'll have to come after you. You know he will. You know he won't just stand there as his son's running off at a million miles per hour. You know what you have to do, Erik. You know that you have to run.*

"No."

"What'd you say?" the man growls. "What'd you just tell me, boy?"

"Let's go home, Dad. I-I-I don't want to go for a walk anymore."

"We're already half a block away. Why don't we just keep going and..."

Benjamin stops speaking.

The woman has stepped in front of them, silencing a tongue which has not been removed.

*No...*

"Please, excuse us," Benjamin says, ripping his arm away from Erik's grip. "My son and I were having a slight disagreement. He doesn't normally act like this in public."

"Am I beautiful?" she asks.

Taken aback, Benjamin frowns.

Erik stares at his father.

*She killed him, he wants to say. She did it, Dad. She...*

"I'm sorry," Benjamin sighs, taking a step back. "I'm in no position to answer that question. I'm a married man."

"Come on Dad—let's go."

"Erik, would you give me one goddamn..."

A flicker of movement distracts Benjamin from finishing.

Erik turns in time to see the woman's eyes widening, pupils dilating like a deer trapped in a pair of headlights.

"Miss, I'm sorry about my son. He's not usually like this. He's a well-behaved boy. He's just a little nervous about being outside when there's been a killer going..."

Her hand shoots in her pocket.

A hook is out the next minute.

Rushing forward, Erik barely has time to push his father out of harm's way before the woman can lash out. Hook in hand, she slashes at his father's face, barely missing his mouth by an inch.

"ERIK! RUN!" Benjamin screams.

"I'M NOT LEAVING WITHOUT YOU!"

"GET OUT OF HERE BEFORE SHE..."

The mask comes free of the woman's mouth as she attempts another slash at Benjamin's head.

Like Marty, her face is open, mouth exposed in a disfigured ear-to-ear grin.

Erik can do nothing but stare as the woman eases toward him.

"Am I beautiful?" she asks, bringing the hook back for another slash. "Am I beautiful?"

"Don't say anything," Benjamin whispers, easing toward Erik as slowly, but carefully as possible. "Don't answer anything she says, Erik."

"I'm not, Dad."

"Just follow me, son. Don't turn around, don't run away—just keep... backing... up."

Slowly—as to not run into his father or trip over a crack or break in the concrete—Erik begins to take his first few steps backward, all the while watching the woman advance on him. The simplicity of such an act frightened him. How could someone, especially a killer, move so slowly, so *purposely*? And how, despite each tenacious motion, has she never lost grip of her footing, or the sight of Erik's frightened eyes.

*Because she wants me...*

"To say something."

"Erik," Benjamin warns. "Don't say a single thing."

"I'm... not."

*But what is she?* he wonders. *She can't be human.*

How could something so haunting be human, or could have ever *been* human?

He doesn't know, but now, he doesn't care.

"Am I beautiful?" she asks.

"I don't know," he whispers, closing his eyes.

Seconds, moments, minutes—all pass within what seems like a blink of the eye.

When he opens them, the slit-mouthed woman is nowhere to be seen.

“Dad? Are you there?”

A hand touches his shoulder.

He jumps.

“Yes,” Benjamin breathes, pulling Erik against his chest. “I’m fine, son.”

“Where did she go?”

“I don’t know, but I’m not sticking around to find out.”

*No kidding*, Erik thinks.

Taking his father’s cue, Erik begins down the street, just as a voice in his head begins to whisper.

*Am I beautiful?* it says, dangling a hook in front of his face. *Am I beautiful?*

## New Section

### The Girl with the Origami Swan

There are some that say there is a natural beacon that speaks to us—a divine source in the sky. Others believe that talent can only be artificially wrought by a set series of equations or events that happen in an exact place at an exact time.

For one little girl, this talent—neither naturally taught, and with no chance of being supernaturally given—would test the boundaries of what she, her parents, and everyone around her thought.

Anna Marques, a seven-year-old who attended the local primary school, could make origami swans. The sad and mysterious fact was, no one had taught her this peculiar talent, nor had it been directly influenced by any media at home. The family owned no books, not a single television set, or a radio for which instructions could be heard, while the local school—though as prestigious and well-thought-of as could be—did not teach the children how to make such things. Anna's teacher had said so herself, right after she'd called to ask her mother where Anna had learned origami.

In the end, the Marques had but one explanation—that despite their disdain for anything supernatural, and despite their nonbelief in things or forces higher than them, God had given the little girl her talent.

They would soon learn that folding a piece of paper wasn't all that Anna could do.

Over the next few years, the Marques began to notice that not all of Anna's creations would remain in the places they put them. Oftentimes her mother would set a freshly-made swan on the china cabinet only to find the creation gone the next time she turned around. At first, she thought nothing of it, believing it to only be Anna taking the creations that rightfully belonged to her. But, soon enough, she began to realize that the little girl made too many swans for them to simply be hidden.

Anna's mother began to wonder whether or not her daughter's swans meant more than met the eye.

At sixteen, Anna entered puberty, a bizarre and painful period for any teenage girl, especially for a late bloomer such as Anna. First came the breasts, then came the blood, then came the ravish to make boys come. But not Anna, not with Sincere's little girl. Hit with all three at once, Anna's body wreaked havoc on every bit of her. At times her eyes

would dilate as though a rabbit had been caught in the headlights of a car and her limbs would cease in violent struggles, as though a demon inhabited her body. She would go into fits and rage, screaming at the top of her lungs and hurling things across the room with seemingly-supernatural strength. The violent, painful outbreaks eventually got to the point where Sincere, fearful for her daughter's life, rushed her to the hospital and into the emergency room.

Each and every time, they told her the same thing—Anna, a normal teenage girl, had entered puberty, and that the violent muscle spasms in her arms were caused by nothing more than stress.

They sent Sincere home with a bottle of muscle relaxers and bid her a good day.

Sincere knew better than to believe such things.

Her daughter may have entered puberty, but not the kind she herself had gone through.

At home, three days after Anna's seventeenth birthday, Sincere looked up to find her daughter reading a book at the kitchen table. On its white, sweat-lined pages, a woman stood in full nudity, the inside of her body charted out with red, white, and purple. Anna's eyes darted over the diagram, engaging each and every part of it with full attention.

"Anna," Sincere said, taking a step forward. "Would you like something to eat?"

Surprised, the girl looked up and tilted her book away from her mother's eyes.

"Yes Mom," she whispered.

Nothing above a whisper had come out of Anna's mouth since her sixteenth birthday, and, Sincere suspected, nothing ever would.

Watching her daughter with alarmed, if somewhat-calm eyes, Sincere turned and walked to the fridge, where she opened the bulbous contraption and retrieved butter and jam. She pulled a piece of bread from the side, slathered it in butter, then pulled another piece out and smoothed a copious amount of jam over the surface.

Once finished, she set the sandwich on a plate and spun to face her daughter.

Anna was nowhere to be seen.

"Anna?" she asked. "Where are you?"

When no response came, Sincere stepped forward, set the sandwich on the table, and made her way into the living room.

She found nothing but a single swan inside, sitting on the middle of the glass coffee table.

"Hmm," she mused, plucking the creature from its surface.

She'd found that, once in a great while, Anna would leave a room without saying a word and disappear to make swans in some random part of the house. Whether this be her bedroom, the basement, or the attic upstairs, Sincere did not know. The place changed each and every time.

"Anna!" she called. "Where are..."

A flicker of movement crossed her wrist.

Instinctively, she jerked the appendage back.

The swan soared, then came to land on the carpet below her.

"What in the world?" she breathed, looking for any trace of the insect that had just crossed her hand.

Frowning, Sincere crouched, picked up the swan, and set it back on the table.

For a moment, she simply stood there, perturbed at what had just happened. Then she turned, looked at the swan, and felt something touch her body.

She found Anna in the garden, accompanied by a rabbit, a turtle, and an arrangement of teacups set on a small rock.

"There you are," Sincere smiled. "I was looking for you."

"You were?"

Anna turned her head up, surprise lighting the surface of her bright green eyes.

"I was," she nodded. "I've made you a sandwich, if you're ready for it."

"Maybe in a minute," the girl said. "We're having tea."

"You are?"

"Uh huh."

Not sure what to say, Sincere returned her eyes to the rock Anna's origami creations sat on. The rabbit, the turtle, and the cups from which they imaginarily drank out of had all been folded and birthed in green paper, the special kind Anna's grandmother bought at the craft store. Sincere still couldn't imagine where her daughter had ever learned to make the things. The turtle and the rabbit were understandable. A simple textbook—which Anna could have easily procured at school—would have taught her how to make them. The cups, though...

something about their size bothered her. Anna's fingers, while not large, could not have possibly made them.

"Well, you've done a great job," Sincere smiled, setting a hand on her daughter's back. "Come inside when you're ready, honey."

"I will. Just wait until tea's done."

"I will," Sincere said, with nothing else to say. "Don't worry, honey—I will."

At noon, after tea ended and Anna ate her sandwich, Sincere began her daily chores. Cleaning the counters, wiping the sinks, sweeping the floor and vacuuming the living room—all part of her day, all part of the routine she set into after she married her husband. He didn't ask for much, other than a clean house and a good dinner at night, so she felt she couldn't complain about all the work she had to do in order to keep the house almost spotless.

*Because he doesn't want any more than that.*

She stopped caring about sex around last year, when he stopped asking for it. At first she got suspicious, then stopped caring. Who was she to question a man's virility? Jacob *was* almost fifty, after all.

*You shouldn't have married him, her mother said. He's too old for you, Sincere. He's old enough to be your uncle.*

"I know," she whispered. "I know."

The front door opened. Startled, Sincere brought the broom to her chest to find her husband standing in the doorway, graying hair wind-blown and glasses askew.

"The wind's blowing like hell out there," Jacob laughed, sliding his arms out of his coat. "It won't be long before it starts raining."

"So soon?" she frowned.

"What?"

"Anna was just outside, she..."

A clap of thunder exploded overhead. The light dimmed and lightning flashed a moment later.

"It doesn't take long for them to blow in once they get started," Jacob said, brushing up against her as he made his way into the living room. He paused in midstride, sliding an arm across her chest and setting his hand on her opposite shoulder. "Has she been well?"

"Anna? She's been fine. Why are you..."

"Did she have tea today?"

"Jacob, I don't think that really matt..."

Jacob walked into the living room before she could finish.

Sighing, Sincere closed her eyes and went back to sweeping.

If anything, she wanted him to leave her daughter alone, to her strange, childish habit that caused no harm.

She woke in the midst of a storm. Harsh, cruel, forcing the old tree to scratch the window with its long, jagged branch, it shook the windows in their panes and made the ceiling crackle with each patter of rain. Amazing, how such an old house could withstand such a violent storm, and frightening, how something she couldn't control could destroy them in a moment's house.

*It's a strong house*, she thought, drawing the blankets around her.

Jacob shifted, settling his back against hers. He mumbled something in his sleep, but didn't wake or turn over.

"It's all right," she whispered. "It's just the storm."

Across the room, on the vanity mirror, an origami swan crafted from blue paper winked at her as lightning lit up the outside world.

*Where did that come from?*

Rising, she pushed her legs over the bed and crept toward the vanity mirror, extending her arm to take the swan in her hand.

Before she could get there, a crack of thunder knocked her off her feet.

Out of the corner of her eye, the swan went flying.

She thought she saw its wings flapping before she ran and threw herself into the bed.

*No. There's nothing wrong Anna. There isn't. She's just a normal, teenage girl, just a normal...*

"You ok?"

She jumped. Jacob laughed and set a hand on her shoulder.

"I'm fine," she said, taking a deep breath. "You scared me."

"Sorry. I was just going to say I woke Anna up. She'll be down in a minute."

"You don't have to work today?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Company holiday. Something about the boss giving the employees the day off."

Sincere shrugged. She cracked an egg on the side of the pan, grimacing as it hissed and sizzled.

"Is something wrong?" Jacob asked, wrapping his arms around her waist.

"No."

"You seem a little slow this morning."

"I couldn't sleep."

"The storm keep you up?"

No, she thought, but nodded anyway.

1. What kept her up wasn't the storm, but the swan that got away just as thunder struck. It couldn't have flown, it just *couldn't*. She had to have been seeing things. Paper swans didn't fly, especially not when you tried to catch them.

"Sincere?"

"What?"

"Move."

She did as asked.

Jacob flipped the egg just before it could burn.

"Let me make breakfast," he said, glancing up from the morning's breakfast. "Go sit down. Read a book, watch TV—let yourself wake up."

"Jacob..."

"Morning Mother."

She jumped out of her skin for the second time that morning. It didn't help that her daughter had just walked into the room.

"Good morning," she said.

"Is something wrong?" Anna asked.

"No," Sincere said. "Nothing's wrong, honey."

She started into the living room, but stopped, reaching out to touch her daughter's shoulder.

When she couldn't, she knew something was wrong.

While Anna went to school and Jacob tapped away at the keyboard in the upstairs office, Sincere walked into her daughter's room and faced down an army of origami. Swans, frogs, bunny rabbits and unicorns adorned each and every object in the room. Over Anna's bed, on her TV, on spare books that Anna hadn't and probably would never read—anywhere something could sit, an origami creation did.

Taking a deep breath, Sincere reached out to touch what looked like an elephant extending its trunk in friendly greeting.

*What are you?* she thought, touching the top of its head. *Can you move?*

No. Origami animals couldn't move. Not like the swan did in her bedroom last night, and especially not like a normal, breathing thing.

*Get a hold of yourself! There's nothing wrong with Anna!*

What about puberty though? What about the muscle spasms that threatened to send Anna into an epileptic fit? Where did those come from? And how, of all things, had Anna learned origami?

*Something she saw on TV, in a book—something!*

A little girl didn't just see something and make it out of paper, did she?

No. Little girls couldn't make swans out of origami, not unless someone showed them.

*Or something.*

Sincere stopped.

Something flickered in the background.

She turned just in time to find that every single piece of origami had turned to face her.

"No," she whispered, backing toward the door. "It can't..."

She couldn't finish.

Something caught her foot and sent her to the floor.

"Sincere... *Sincere*... Honey? Are you all right?"

"Jah...Jacob?" she asked. "Is that you?"

"Yes, honey. Open your eyes."

Slowly, and with all the strength she could manage, she opened her eyes, then closed them almost as immediately when the overhead lights blinded her. After a moment, she forced them open again and waited for them to adjust before focusing on her husband.

"What... what happened?"

"You tripped over this," Jacob said. He lifted a swan almost as big as his head.

"Where did that come from?"

"I don't know, but quite frankly, I don't care. As far as I'm concerned, it can all go the moment she walks through the door."

"Jacob..."

"Don't *Jacob* me, Sincere. These stupid pieces of paper could've killed you!"

"But how did I trip over it? It's just a piece of paper."

"*Just* a piece of paper?" Jacob laughed. "You've got to be kidding me. It's as big as my head."

"How did she make it though? We don't have paper that..."

"Again, I don't care. It's going the moment she gets home."

Preferring not to argue, Sincere lifted a hand and accepted Jacob's grasp. Once on her feet, she reached back, felt the back of her head, and sighed when she found nothing but a small bump.

"You feel all right?" her husband frowned.

"I'm fine," she said. "Don't worry—it's just a bump."

"All right. Go lay on the couch. If you need anything, I'll be in the kitchen, working on some papers."

"Ah... Ok."

Jacob didn't wait for her to start for the living room. He ushered her himself.

She heard them fighting over the sound of her throbbing head. Words like, *They have to go* and, *No, Daddy* flew back and forth. Eventually, the fight escalated to a screaming pitch. A door slammed, a voice echoed, and a screech sent Sincere to her feet.

"What's wrong?" she asked, hurling herself toward Jacob. "Jacob, what'd you..."

"She wouldn't throw them away," he said. "So I did."

Crushed and torn inside a garbage bin were the remains of Anna's creations. Elephants, squirrels, rabbits, unicorns, crabs, donkeys, horses and elephants—all seemed to cry out at her. Sincere thought she seen some moving—a wing fluttering here, a trunk moving there—but took it as a result of her head.

*I hit it too hard*, she thought, paper animals moving across her vision. *I had to have hit the wall, or fallen into something. I couldn't have...*

"NO!"

Anna stood in the threshold.

Wild, beautiful, eyes raging and mouth in a snarl, she balled a hand into a fist and reached behind her back.

"Go to your room," Jacob growled. "I'm done with you for the day."

"YOU CAN'T THROW THEM AWAY!"

"We've already had this discussion, Anna. It's one thing to have them strewn across the house, but another when people start tripping over them. Now, I'm going to ask you nicely one more time—go to your room and *stay* in your room. If you don't, you're going to wish you never started making these stupid little..."

Jacob didn't finish.

A swan flew out of Anna's extended hand.

Living, breathing, flying, it flew toward Jacob's face and struck him in the eye. Screaming, he threw the garbage bin into the wall, shattering a collection of family photographs on the far wall. Remnants of other animals crawled or limped toward Anna, animated by strings laid forth by a magical puppeteer.

*It can't...*

Anna laughed.

Jacob screamed as blood gushed from his eye.

"NO!" Sincere screamed, hurling herself toward her daughter.

A unicorn, as large and stocky as a normal barnyard animal, walked out of the hall. A silver knife gleamed from its forehead.

"Go away Mother," she said, raising a hand. A group of seven swans flew from the debris of Jacob's rampage, all in various states of destruction. "I won't hurt you if you leave me alone."

"Call them off him, Anna! You can't do this!"

"He hurt them," she whispered, looking up at her horse. "And now... now... I'm going to hurt you."

"Nuh-No, Anna. Don't do this. *Please!* I didn't hurt them."

"Yes you did. You hurt Charlie."

*Charlie?*

The swan, the one she'd tripped over, the one that Jacob tore from piece to piece.

"Anna," she whispered. "Please."

A unicorn barreled toward her.

Its horn pierced Sincere's heart.

There are some that believe magic exists.

For others, it's more than just a belief.

## New Section

Caroline

A beautiful bell, suspended by a thick strand of string, swayed and chimed in the breeze. It had a soft independence about it, despite the dead and withered tree branch it hung from. It had a magnificence that seemed untouched by mortal means.

Perhaps it was divine, a God-given item that some higher entity had crafted in Christ's time, because all the Gods had disappeared or had hidden themselves away from the cruel, harsh world that would become the twenty-first century.

A man in a long coat stood at the end of the broken churchyard with his hands in his pockets, shivering in the biting-cold. He listened to the bell softly chime. Unlike some of the men who congregated in the churchyard, he did not believe the bell was evil.

*It's evil, Carter; it may look like a beautiful ornament, but it's evil.*

It *did* look like a beautiful ornament, which was half the reason he wasn't worried. It was pure white. A small bronze butterfly—wings spread—embraced the base of the bell.

The other reason he wasn't afraid... the calling. He *felt* the bell calling him. The female voice sung whenever he came here, to the broken remnants of a churchyard that hadn't been fit for services for god knows how long. The voice brought comfort to his dull and painful life.

It was simple. He longed for a better job, a better home for he and his wife, but most of all, he longed for a son. The latter wish was not likely to come true. He'd had an accident in childhood that had rendered him incapable.

*Carter.*

The whisper sent shivers down his spine. For a moment, he thought it was Donna calling to him. The voice sounded like hers had sounded back in their college days, when she would call and wave to him from the football field as he sat in the bleachers

He shivered again, pulling the coat tightly around his body. He wanted to draw heat from it, as the snow had started to fall.

*Carter.*

"Where are you?" he asked, turning in a complete circle, searching for the source of the voice. "Tell me who you are."

*Come to me, Carter.*

"Who are you?" he asked, finally having enough of the place. "I don't understand, where are you and what do you want from me?"

As if something *was* responding to him, the wind came up. The small bell chimed only once before settling back into position.

For a moment he thought the earlier voice had actually come from the bell.

*I need to be getting home*, he thought, looking down at his watch. *I've been here for a half hour. Donna will be wondering where I am.*

He turned to walk to his car, but before taking a single step, he turned and looked at the bell.

It chimed a soft goodbye.

"Carter, I was getting worried. Where were you?"

"I got caught up in traffic," he said, setting the tub of chicken on the cupboard and brushing a few snowflakes off the sleeves of his jacket. "Sorry, babe."

He kissed her cheek. As she grabbed plates and set up the meal, he slid out of his coat. Naturally, she put a few more pieces of chicken on his plate than she did on her own. Donna *knew* him.

Carter liked his wife, loved her with his whole heart, but he wished he could give her more. His job as a deliveryman didn't do much good when he wanted to give his wife a better house and life.

An apartment complex *was not* where a husband and wife should be living.

"Carter, is something wrong?"

He blinked. For the first time since drifting into the daydream, he looked into her eyes.

"What?"

"I asked if something was wrong."

"No, nothing's wrong. Why?"

"You were staring at me."

He gave her a small smile.

She said nothing more than, 'I love you' after the act.

He lay next to his wife, thinking about his life. The strange peacefulness of the church kept coming back to him. He had been going there for about two weeks. He had went out there with Steve, his photographer friend, after he said he wanted to get some pictures of the old, abandoned church that lay on the outskirts of the big city. Of course, he hadn't noticed the bell at that point (and Steve hadn't said anything

about it,) but the peaceful feeling that the church provided made him want to stay forever.

It wasn't long before Carter started to go there regularly, often telling his wife he was stuck in traffic.

*I'm lying to her*, he thought. The bed moved when Donna rolled over, briefly distracting him from his thoughts. *I'm lying to her and I feel so bad about it.*

He was trying hard to get a promotion, but it seemed that wasn't going to happen. He'd probably end up changing jobs or—better yet—getting a new one. His current schedule only had him working part time, after all. 4:00 p.m. until 9:00 p.m.

*I'll do that*, he finally decided. *I'll do just that.*

When he began to drift toward sleep, he heard a soft chime in the back of his mind. He wasn't sure if this chime was part of his imagination or because he was so close to sleep, but he ignored it, rolling over and adjusting the covers.

*Carter*

This time, he was sure it was only his imagination.

Shortly before the darkness of sleep engulfed him, he saw the small, white bell in his mind.

*Come to me, Carter, for I will make all of your dreams and wishes come true.*

"Carter, who were you talking to?"

He woke to see Donna putting on her makeup, lips puckered so she could apply lipstick.

"What?" he grunted, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "I was talking to somebody?"

"Yeah, some woman named Caroline."

He frowned and tried to remember, but couldn't.

"I wasn't trying to, Donna, I..."

"No, I understand; I do that sometimes too."

Normally, he might've said something—something along the lines of a husband and wife kind of joke—but it bothered him that he had said the name Caroline in his sleep.

*Caroline, who could that...*

The memory of the chime came back to him; the soft jingling the bell had made just before he'd left the churchyard.

"Carter?"

"I'm sorry?" he asked. "Did you say something?"

"No, I was just wondering why you were staring off into blank space. You look awfully pale. Are you not feeling well?"

"I feel fine," he said. "Maybe it's just the lighting."

"All the lights are on, dear."

He blinked at her words and looked around. As she had said, all the lights were on.

"You must be sick. Why don't you go back to bed?"

"Donna, are you sure? I was going to go find another job today."

She frowned

"Another job?"

"I want something better for the two of us, I..."

"Carter, please don't worry about that right now. You're obviously not feeling well, so why don't you get some more sleep. If you feel better later you can go to work. Besides, you probably don't want to stay up and feel miserable, right?"

He gave a small nod and spread himself out on the bed, as his wife had asked. She gave him a quick peck on the cheek before standing upright.

"Well, I'm off. I'll be back around noon, unless the book club starts late again."

He watched her walk out of the room, sighing as he rolled over and closed his eyes.

*Carter... Oh Carter, please come back to me. I can't stand to see you suffer so. Come to me, I will make everything better, Carter.*

Before he fell asleep, he saw the heavenly outline of a young child.

He knew that this was the son he could never have.

"Cater, you're not going to work today," she said, setting a cup of warm cocoa before him. "You don't look any better than you did this morning."

"Donna, I don't want to argue with you, but..."

"Then don't argue with me. Stay home with me tonight, Carter. I'd really like it if you did."

"I will," he said with a smile. "I will."

*Come to me, Carter, come to me. I will relieve all of your worries. Come to me, Carter. I shall take away all of your pain. Come to me, Carter. I will give you the child you've always wanted...*

He had told her that he was going to the convenience store to pick up a case of beer, but he never made it to the convenience store. He drove right past it and headed for the outskirts of town.

Caroline was calling to him.

Donna was wondering where he was; he knew that. Even if he stayed out all night, she would be unable to do much. The police certainly wouldn't intervene.

*You'll have to wait forty-eight hours to file missing persons, ma'am. Your husband will be fine. He probably just went out to visit a buddy and lost track of time. Just wait, you'll be getting a phone call in a few minutes. That'll be him on the other line, telling you that he's been drinking and he doesn't want to drive home. He'll tell you he loves you and to have a good night, that he'll be home in the morning.*

When the church came into view, he parked alongside it and sat in the car, waiting until he was ready to get out. The dashboard lights lit up his face, while outside the snow fell, the world lit only by moonlight.

*Do you really want to go out there? What will Donna think if the 'freedom' isn't what you think it is? What if the freedom is something else, like getting whisked away into another world, or maybe it kills you. I bet that bell could shatter you into a thousand pieces without even thinking about it.*

He shook his head and got out of the car, making his way through the snow. Though the thin layer of snow that covered the area wasn't much, it did a nice job of covering up the small holes that littered the ground. A nice step into one of them would surely send him flying over the edge, maybe even onto a sharp stick.

1. Carefully, he made his way down the side of the hill until he was standing before it.

Now that the bell was so near, he felt an unusual desire to touch it. The feeling was almost erotic. His blood boiled, his mind roared, his fingertips itched. One part of him said touch the bell, while the other told him no.

*It's evil, Carter.*

As a churchgoing man, he usually trusted what the father had to say. But the man didn't know how he felt. He didn't know what he wanted, didn't know that the bell could offer, he...

*Touch me, Carter. I've waited for you for so long.*

He touched her—Caroline.

Thousands of emotions flooded through him, emotions he had never felt in his life. He knew *all* emotions, knew *all* that was going on in the

world. His brain overloaded. He cried out in pain. The inside of his skull burned.

Before he fell into the cold snow, he heard the bell's chime.

*Your touch, Carter. Oh! Your touch! I can't bear to be without it! I can't! Come with me, Carter! I will keep my promise! I will keep your worries away! And I will make sure that you are happy, always with me! Forever, Carter! FOREVER!*

He felt as if he were having a heart attack. His hands flew up and clawed at his clothes. It was getting harder to breathe. The air wasn't there; the oxygen had turned into some vile pollutant, an acid. His lungs shriveled against it.

"Donna..." he gasped.

The last thing he heard before life passed from his body was the chime of the bell. It chimed until the next day, chimed until a local sorority found his body.

"Katie, look! It's the guy from the news!"

"What guy from the news?"

"The guy that went missing last night!"

"Oh God. Help! Somebody call the police!"

She had cried so much, and she had cried after she had learned that she had a miscarriage with *Carter's* child. He had told her so many times that he couldn't have a child, but when the doctor's had said that she had been pregnant, it had been the biggest shock in the world.

In the end, he had given her everything he had wanted to. His insurance policy had paid off all the bills they had and bought a new house, just like he would've wanted.

"I have everything he wanted me to have," she said, then touched her lower stomach. "And now, he has the son that he always wanted."

And although the bell was no longer there, having disappeared forever a few days later, the chime could still be heard on long, winter nights. And in the spring, a bronze butterfly could be seen flying around the same area.

Once in a great moon, one name was whispered on the wind.

That name was Donna.

## New Section

### Jossiah's Bones

The man hung from a construct of evil. Arms and legs spread eagle, suspended in midair by thick chains that entered his wrists and ankles, his chest lay open, flesh pulled back like an exposed butterfly ready to meet the world for the first time.

Jossiah Harpman was the result of a madman's desire to learn how to grow bones, while they were still inside the human body. And because of this madness, Dr. Mauk Poperae had kidnapped him to test out his cruel experiment.

He couldn't remember how long he'd been in this dull, dank dungeon that the doctor called his 'lab,' but it didn't really matter. What mattered was that, after all this time, he had not been released, his wounds—though checked—had not been managed, and he'd been forced to live in a state that he considered not dead, but *undead*.

*A zombie*, he thought, looking up at the instruments of torture that lay on a nearby table. *That's what I am. A zombie.*

How he stayed alive, he didn't now. Dr. Poperae had told him not to worry about that because he 'kept close eyes' on his condition. He regularly injected something into both veins on his arms, something that—supposedly, the doctor said—grew bones.

1. Doctor Poperae had not come in today, and he probably wouldn't until much, much later. Although Jossiah could not see the clock, cast in the shadow of a strange but otherwise-meaningless stone artifact that lay on the wall, he knew the time had not come. The doctor said he came in 'early, but not early enough to make anyone suspicious.'

That also bothered him.

No one knew he was being experimented on.

No one knew what Doctor Pompearae did in his spare time.

And no one—not a single, living soul—knew about the bone-growing experiment a madman carried out in his lab.

No one knew about the way Doctor Pompearae grew Jossiah's bones.

At a time Jossiah couldn't judge, the door opened. A small, short man with graying hair and a handlebar mustache walked down the stairs, opening his arms as though ready to embrace his captive.

“Jossiah!” he beamed, cheeks rising to make move for a grin. “How are you, my boy?”

As normal, he didn’t respond. The doctor took pleasure in having him answer such questions. Most days, he would just stand there—arms open and face lit in a decisive grin—until he answered.

“I...” he stopped, then breathed. “Fine.”

He tilted his head back and closed his eyes. If he looked down, he would be able to see his chest. He’d see his lungs expand with each and every breath and his heart throb with each and every beat. That first fateful time he had looked down and saw his chest—opened like the butterfly that he so often thought about—he had screamed so hard that his whole body had hurt.

“That’s quite good,” Poperae said, grabbing a nearby clipboard and scribbling something down. Notes, Jossiah knew, fresh with details about the patient’s health. “Are you feeling well?”

“No.”

Single-worded answers. Most of the time, they were the only way he could manage to talk. For some reason—whether it be from his chest laying open or as the result of the shots the doctor administered—he couldn’t speak in full, concrete sentences. He could think just fine, but not speak.

“Does anything hurt?”

He responded with a second no.

“Are you sure?” the doctor asked. “Because if you have *any* kind of pain, you *must* tell me.”

A shake of the head answered Poperae’s third question.

“You’ve got no lesions,” the man said, obviously referring to inside his body, not *outside* it. “And I see nothing of particular concern.”

Jossiah opened his eyes to see Poperae sliding a pair of rubber gloves over his long, thin-fingered hands.

“I’m just going to examine your bones,” he said, reaching forward.

The man’s hands slid into his chest, expertly moving around his lungs, heart, and other internal organs. When Poperae touched his back, Jossiah grimaced. It felt strange, being touched that way. He could even go as far as to say he was being molested by the mad doctor, except in a more inhumane way.

“There.”

Poperae’s fingers rubbed over the stubs of bone that were just beginning to grow from his spine.

"They're starting to grow," the man smiled. "This is quite good. Pretty soon, I'll be able to prepare a paper that will just *convince* the scientific department that I've found a way to grow bone from human cadavers."

Though Jossiah didn't speak, he pondered on the idea of the doctor writing a paper and claiming that he was a human cadaver. Whatever he was doing to keep him alive—because there sure wasn't any blood inside his body—he didn't know. In a way, he still felt that the injections in his arms kept him alive. At least once a week, the doctor would grab a needle and slide it into the base of his spine and inject something there. Then, when the medicine started to take effect, he would sleep for days in the worst medically-induced coma he had ever experienced.

"I think it's time for another shot," the doctor said, sliding dampened but not bloody gloves off his hands.

"No."

Jossiah's single word came up his throat in a croak. He stared at the doctor, watching him, waiting to see how he would respond.

"No?" Poperae asked. "Why not?"

"I..." he breathed, "cannot... keep... doing... this."

"And why not?"

In a slow and laborious process, Jossiah said, 'You can't keep me here. I have a life. Please, grow back my bones and let me go. I won't tell anyone what happened, I'll let you publish your research. Please. After my ribs are back in place, sew me up and let me go.'

When he finished—out of breath and throat burning from effort—Poperae watched him, eyes sparkling with interest. Jossiah didn't trust the look that lay behind the horn-rimmed spectacles. Those cold, black eyes could watch him for days on end without any change in tone. Jossiah knew this, because there had been a day when the doctor had studied him for what seemed like hours, scratching on a clipboard without even looking down. Did he know what he was writing when he set his ballpoint pen to the paper? Did he know where the exact locations of his notes were placed, or did he write without conscious thought, preferring to have the notes wherever he could or not at all?

"Please," he said. "Stop."

"You're much too important, Jossiah. You've produced astounding results. My previous patients never made it past the first procedure."

He shook his head.

*No.*

"You've produced *twelve sets* of rib bones for me. You know how many bones that is in total? *Two-hundred-and-eighty-eight*. I can't just let you go now. You're *much* too valuable."

But it hurts, he mouthed.

"Do you think I care?"

This time, it was Jossiah's turn to stare.

"I'm making *money* off of your bones. Do you know what you can do with bone marrow? They think it can *cure cancer and AIDs*. The Chinese say they can be used for medicine. And, maybe someday—with the help of *my* research—they may be able to be used for *bone transplants*. Imagine it, Jossiah! Imagine having *your* bones saving *countless lives*. Does that not make you happy, knowing that you are helping?"

Show me who my bones are saving, he said, and I'll believe you.

"Not yet," the man said. "I'm sorry, Jossiah. Everything's just... not ready."

The man turned, settling down at his desk. Complete with a computer, printer, and all the research manuals he could need, Doctor Popenae could look up at him anytime he desired and observe anything he may or may not see.

The idea left Jossiah with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

"Jossiah... open your eyes."

Popenae's face appeared as soon as Jossiah's lids parted.

"Good," the man smiled. "I want to administer the shot."

Jossiah shook his head.

"I assume you don't want to speak?" the man asked.

He nodded.

"That's fine with me," Popenae said, turning and grabbing a nearby needle. "But, in all actuality, you can't stop me from giving you the growth serum. You know perfectly well that the chains go through the bones in your wrists and ankles. If I decide to let you go, I'll have to cut them apart and surgically remove them from your body. But, really, that doesn't matter right now. What matters is that you're held in place."

"I'll... thrash." He gasped, inhaling a few breaths. His throat burned.

"I don't care. In the end, it'll only cause you more discomfort."

Popenae walked around the manmade structure that held Jossiah in place, setting a hand at the base of his back.

"All right," he said. "Don't move."

The needle—though thin—was enough to make Jossiah scream. When it slid into his spine, warmth sprouted near the area and travelled up the stem of his body before it hit his brain. There, something happened. Jossiah felt as though he had just worked a long, hard day, or had exercised for far too long at the local gym. In response to this sudden pressure in the middle of his forehead, he shut his eyes, ever so slowly falling into a state of drowsiness that he wouldn't be able to fight.

"Sleep well, Mr. Harpman," Poperae said, stroking his back.

With that, Jossiah closed his eyes and fell asleep.

He thought of bones and needles just before he could fully fade away.

*"Ronda! Ronda! Wait!"*

*His date—Ronda Cranberry—ran ahead in three-inch heels. How she accomplished such a feat was beyond Jossiah's knowledge, but he didn't particular care. He had just said something stupid—something along the lines of her asking if her skirt made her hips look fat, to which he'd replied with an 'uh huh.' His distraction had been a 2007 Hybrid they'd been broadcasting on TV.*

*"Ronda!" he cried. "Come back!"*

*He gave chase, pushing people aside when necessary and grabbing nearby items when he felt he would slip. How ironic for the rain to start just when his date decided to run off on him.*

*She turned around the corner. Jossiah increased his speed, jumping over a box of items a man prepared to push into a nearby store. Though he heard no end to his action, he rounded the corner without another word.*

*Ronda was nowhere to be seen.*

*"Aw, fuck!" he swore, kicking a nearby trashcan. Garbage spewed onto the street. He increased his pace—not to a run, but to a fast walk—to avoid being charged with littering. "The fucking bitch!"*

*Of course, his reaction to a date running off was always to call her a bitch. Obviously, Ronda had been the one to ask the question while he'd been distracted, so he could blame her with little to no trouble. He grabbed his hair, tugging at it. He needed to find her. He'd picked her up and driven her to the restaurant, had sat with her under a booth while waiting for her to text a friend, had waited for a cab to take them the next street over so they wouldn't have to get soaked. How big of an ass would he be if he left her stranded in the rain?*

*I'm not going to do that, he thought, shoving his fingers into his armpits. I'm not that kind of guy.*

*He kept going, glancing into buildings to see if Ronda had went inside to escape the rain. After a while though, he realized she wouldn't be in one of the buildings—unless, of course, she didn't mind going into sports stores or gyms.*

*"Come on, Ronda!" he called, raising his voice as high as he could. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to say that!"*

*He stopped short.*

*Had that been her fleeing into the alley?*

*No, it couldn't have been her.*

*Why, of all places, would she go in an alley? There wouldn't be any protection there—at least, not unless there was some kind of outcropping, which he didn't think there was.*

*Instead of just standing there, he took a few steps forward and looked down the alley.*

*Nope. No one had run down there.*

*"Ok," he thought, pushing his hands into his pockets. "I just gotta..."*

*His fingers slid over his cell phone.*

*"Shit. I hope it's not broken."*

*He walked under a nearby business' door jut and slid it out of his pocket. It showed that he had a text message—from Ronda, no less.*

*I gt a ride hm. Leav me alon u ass.*

*"What the fuck ever," he said, shoving the phone back into his pocket. I don't need her either."*

*He walked out from under the jut and down the street, where he intended on getting in his car and going home.*

*"Wake up, Jossiah. Wake up."*

*Doctor Popaerae stood in front of him the moment he opened his eyes. Jarred from the sudden vision of his date with Ronda, he recoiled, crying out when the chains prevented him from moving.*

*"It's just me," the man smiled, reaching out to brush some sweat away from Jossiah's eyes. "It's Popaearae."*

*"Fuck," he breathed, "you."*

*"That's not very nice, now is it, Mr. Harpman?"*

*He said nothing.*

*"Now, now," Popaerae said, reaching out to touch his shoulder. "There's no need to do this to me. It's time to clean you out."*

*Please, he mouthed. Just kill me.*

*"Ah." The doctor reached out to brush Jossiah's hair out of his eyes. "So you're not talking anymore."*

*It hurts.*

"It doesn't hurt, Jossiah. Your esophagus is just raw from the exposure to air."

Kill me, you bastard.

The next thing he knew, Popearae slapped him with his open palm.

"The first time may be cute, but the second time isn't."

Wanting to rub his stinging cheek but unable to do so, he watched the doctor turn and walk into another room—where, he knew, the man kept his sponges and sterilized water. It didn't take long for Popearae to return with a bucket and a light cloth.

"You know what I'm doing," the man said, dipping the cloth in water. "It's just to make sure your organs are hydrated."

How are you doing this?

"With the shots, of course."

But those grow my bones.

"Yes, Jossiah, but they also keep you alive."

The doctor slid his hand into the open cavity of Jossiah's chest. Then, bracing the organ with his other hand, Popearae dabbed his heart with slow, gentle pads. The simple awareness of feeling his heart pulsing against the man's hand forced tears from his eyes.

"There's no need to cry. I'm not hurting you."

Yes you are.

"I've taken care of you for this long, haven't I?"

Jossiah said nothing.

As Popearae continued to clean his beating heart, Jossiah closed his eyes, hoping that, somehow, he could will himself to die.

*"Damn that bitch."*

*He stopped walking and slid up against a nearby wall. Protected from the rain under a slanted roof, he waited for the urge to walk to come back. For some reason, he couldn't bear to continue walking back to the car.*

*Yeah, I'm an asshole.*

*Regardless, he was a cold and wet asshole, one that wanted to go home and forget about the whole night.*

*"This really fucking sucks."*

*"I'm guessing your girl ran out on you, son?"*

*An older man—possibly no older than his mid-forties, with a head of silver-grey hair and a handlebar mustache—stood in front of him, umbrella poised over his head. The rain slid out and around him in a circular shape that made him look like a dark angel whose body water dare not touch.*

*Oh...kay, he thought, but merely nodded.*

*"Yeah. My girl ran off on me."*

*"It's a shame. You look like a nice young man."*

*"Thanks?"*

*Smiling, the older man slid his hand out of his pocket.*

*"My name is Mauk Popearae, son." The man extended his hand. Before Jossiah could reach out and grip is, Popearae added, "Would you like to have coffee with me? It's colder than hell out here."*

*"No," he said, but shook the man's hand anyway. "I mean, I don't want to have coffee. I need to get going."*

*"Where's your car?"*

*"It's not too far away." He pushed himself away from the wall. "Thank you for your offer, sir. Have a nice night."*

*"You too, son."*

*When he was sure that Popearae had disappeared into the building, Jossiah increased the pace of his walk to a jog. While not one to be afraid of an overly-friendly stranger, he didn't want to get involved with one either.*

*He's just a short old man.*

*Still, short old men normally didn't offer to buy coffee for a twenty-year-old man.*

*Perv.*

*With a snort, he continued jogging down the street, catching odd glances from both people sitting behind the safety of glass windows and his fellow, umbrella-toting passerbys. He stopped at the end of the block and turned, looking up and down the street before crossing.*

*Just as he reached the halfway mark, a silver car rolled by, as if making a move to parallel park alongside the street. He gave the car little notice until the passenger window rolled down and Popearae's face came into view.*

*"Are you sure, lad?"*

*"Leave me alone!" he cried, easing away from the street, closer to where the buildings stood. "I already said I didn't want a ride."*

*"Hey, I'm only offering." Popearae raised his hands.*

*"Yeah, but I don't want any help."*

*He turned and continued walking back to his car.*

The next time Jossiah opened his eyes, he started to wonder how he had truly ended up in this underground laboratory. The last thing he could remember was telling Popearae that he didn't want a ride. He couldn't even remember turning and continuing down the street.

*Did he give something to me?*

Had the old man somehow followed him and Ronda to the restaurant, then slipped something into his drink? Was that why he had accidentally called Ronda fat when he had been too busy watching the car commercial on the television sets across from them?

"Sir," he croaked.

"I'm here."

Rising from his place at the desk, Popearae crossed the room and stood before him. For a long moment, the man stood there frowning, as if he had found something wrong. Then, slowly, he reached out and set a hand on Jossiah's arm.

"What's wrong?"

I don't feel good.

"You don't feel good?" the man breathed. "What's wrong?"

My stomach...

"What's wrong with you, Jossiah? Tell me!"

It hurts, like I haven't eaten anything.

"Dammit!" the doctor screamed, hurling himself in a circle and throwing his hands in the air. "Damn *fucking* it!"

"What..."

"The medicine isn't keeping you fed anymore!" Popearae roared, holding a fist up in the air. Blood fled from the knuckles, bleaching them white. Anger coursed through the madman's veins, so much so that his face turned beat red and his eyes sparkled with hurt. "I can't *do* anything about it unless I get you off that... that *construct*."

You... you'll let me go?

"Oh, no. I can't let you go, not now. You're *far* too important."

Please...

"Don't *please* me!"

With a final scream of anger, the man threw himself across the room, toward his table of instruments. There, he picked up the needle he used to inject the bone-growing serum into Jossiah's spine, swiping a bottle of clear liquid and driving the needle into it.

"You gotta get down," the man laughed, tilting his head back to reveal manic eyes and a terrified grin. "You need to lie somewhere where you can get better. That's the only way I'm going to keep you alive."

*Keep on laughing, fucker*, he thought, not even bothering to fight the tears that coursed down his face. *It'll be a sad, sad day when I leave the fucking planet and your ass in jail for illegal human experimentation.*

He'd since stopped caring about whether or not he would live or die. It had been a long time since he'd stopped keeping track of time, and it

had been an even longer time since he'd stopped counting the days he'd been chained up like this.

So long...

Now, though, maybe it would finally end.

Sliding around the metal construct like a thief in a market, the doctor slid the needle into Jossiah's spine.

He barely felt it.

All he felt was the moment he slipped into a deep slumber.

*Violent junipers grew along the eastern field near his small apartment. The Juniper Falls apartment building sat atop a large hill and looked out over the Hollywood hills. How he managed to live there was a surprise to him, but he contributed it to the money his parents sent him and the earnings he got from working at two different fast food stores.*

*Ronda stood in the nearby bathroom, half-naked in only her underwear. Jossiah, somehow, managed to keep his eyes away from her body and out at the country. From his apartment, he could just barely see the road and the cars travelling along it.*

*"Hey, Jossiah," Ronda said. "Do you know a small old man that lives around here?"*

*"Uh... no." He turned to face her, eyes gaining a will of their own and traveling along the length of her back. "Why?"*

*"Because he was snooping around your apartment before I got here. When he saw me, he looked at your apartment number and made off like he'd been looking for someone else's place."*

*No old men lived around here—at least, not as far as he could remember. The only neighbor he had any real contact with was his friend Marcus, who lived in the flat above him.*

*"No," he said. "I don't know anyone."*

*"Don't you find it creepy though?"*

*"No... I don't."*

*His girlfriend slid into a skirt and ran her hands through her long, straight hair.*

*"You think I should get a perm?"*

*"No, I like your hair straight," he muttered, easing into the bathroom. "Why do you think the old man is creepy though?"*

*"Because he was snooping around your place. He was looking at your apartment number when I got here. Who knows what else he could've been doing before that."*

*"He wouldn't have seen much. Well, except me in my underwear. That's it."*

*"That doesn't bother you?"*

*"Maybe this old man's a perv who likes looking at hot twenty-year-old guys."*

*"Jossiah," Ronda giggled, squirming under his tickling fingers. "Stop that!"*

*"What? Tickling you, or saying I'm hot?"*

*"Both."*

*He laughed and pulled his hands away from her.*

*"Anyway," Ronda said. "Come on. Let's go."*

*"I thought you were going to wear a shirt."*

*"Wouldn't you love if I didn't." She smacked the back of his head, running a nail through the thin stubble on his cheek. "I'm going, I'm going, don't worry."*

*Grabbing her blouse, Ronda slid it up onto her arms and buttoned it up, showing just a small bit of cleavage.*

*How beautiful things only seemed to last for so long.*

Metal burned his entire back.

Moaning from the original realization, Jossiah opened his eyes and looked around. He'd been placed in a different room, one with white tile and blue counters. It took him a moment to realize that his chest had been stitched up.

*What the...*

When he reached up to finger the skin, a throbbing pain started up in his wrists. They, too, had been stitched, hiding any trace of the rings that had once went through them.

*He let me go.*

Taking another glance around the room just to see if Popearae might be sitting at a nearby desk, he tried to sit up, but stopped when an immense pain flared up in his upper body. The scream that followed bounced off the tiles, echoing at least three times before the sound dissipated.

*The bastard. I can't move.*

The doctor, while mad, was not stupid. But, really, who would be stupid enough to leave a valuable test subject in the position to run?

*Not me, and definitely not Popearae.*

"Sir!" he called, chastising himself for even beginning to think of asking the man for help. "Are... are you... there?"

The plea left him out of breath, but at least he could lay there and rest. For the first time in—weeks, months, maybe even a year—he finally had something solid under his body.

*Just lay there. It's not like he's going to come rushing in.*

But, regardless, the doctor *did* run into the room.

"What?" Popearae asked. No emotion lay in his voice. Apparently, his manic episode had passed with time.

"What," Jossiah started, then stopped. His throat burned, so he continued by mouthing, What's wrong with me?

"Your bones still haven't grown. But don't worry—as long as you lay there, you'll be all right."

Are you making them grow faster?

"In a way, yes. I ran an IV in you earlier, but if your stomach keeps acting up, I might have to do it again."

Where am I?

"Do you think I'd tell you?" Popearae laughed, slapping his thigh and leaning against the wall. "Let's just say we're in a nice, secluded place, with no one else around but me."

Jossiah looked up at the tiles in the wall. Littered with cracks and slightly discolored, the building had to be old. Maybe Popearae's lab lay on the outskirts of town, near where the old hospital used to be.

*Unless we're in the old hospital.*

The thought made him swallow. If they were in the basement of the old hospital, that meant they were right under the unstable structure of the building. Roots, bugs and water damage caused over a bad winter had made the building unstable and, technically, unsafe. It'd become a favorite hangout for the druggies, teens, and the pedophiles who preyed upon them in the last few years, a place where lost or troubled souls could come and escape the world in themselves or each other.

Keeping his idea to himself, he turned his eyes back on Popearae. He smiled, knowing that he had just one-upped the doctor after all this time.

"I'm guessing you're pleased with your current situation. Correct?"

Yes sir, he said.

*Oh yes I am.*

Over the next little while, Jossiah remained on the table, while Popearae stayed distant. He'd come in twice a day, helping him relieve himself and feeding him through the IV, then disappear for the rest of the day. The lights would remain on, constantly reminding him of his current situation.

He planned on waiting the whole thing out, because if he could wait, he could escape.

So far, he'd been perfectly fine with waiting. There wasn't anything up there in the real world he much cared about anyway.

*Except Ronda, but she ran off on me.*

Would his girlfriend be looking for him? *Had* she went looking for him after he didn't call to apologize, or after he didn't meet her for their usual morning coffee before work? Though he couldn't be sure, he figured that his girlfriend's heart of gold would lead her to find him, regardless of what had taken place on the night of their last date.

Glancing around the room, his eyes came to rest on the IV tube that, basically, gave him life. The gold-yellow liquid snaked down the tube and into his hand, where it channeled to the rest of his body. Without that liquid, he knew, he would be dead, but that wouldn't really matter.

*I've got to hold on, if only for Ronda.*

If he ever got out of here, he *knew* he would ask her to marry him.

After all the hell he—and, possibly, she—had gone through, they deserved a little happiness.

"The bones are coming in quite well."

Hands poised on each side of his chest, Popearae traced the lengthening bones from underarm to nipple. Jossiah—watching the doctor with careful eyes—lay and waited.

Is something wrong? he mouthed.

"Not at all, son. It seems as though your bones are coming in well."

You don't know?

"I can only go by what I can feel. Before, when your chest was open, I could examine the growth. This, though..."

"I'll," he began, but stopped before he could finish.

"There's no need to speak. Tap my arm if you want to say something."

Of course, he wouldn't—why touch the man who turned his life into a living, scientific nightmare?

*I won't*, he thought, but nodded to reassure the man that he had heard.

"Good."

Turning, Popearae scratched a few notes on one of his several clipboards, then grabbed an intravenous drip and switched it out with Jossiah's current one.

"All right. That leaves my work done for the day."

Are you leaving? he asked, managing to fake a frown.

“Yes. Why? Did you need something?”

He shook his head.

“Ok, Mr. Harpman—you be good while I’m gone, and stay out of trouble. You hear?”

Once again, he nodded.

Popearae turned and left him to his meaningless existence.

He dreamed of Ronda and of how they’d met. At college a year or so back—before Jossiah had stopped going after he found he couldn’t afford it—they’d met at a party the head fraternity had been throwing. Though he couldn’t remember its name, he could remember the way he met his girlfriend. Clad in a sexy black dress and in red heels that seem to bleed essence, she’d been speaking to a few of her girlfriends. Jossiah—unsure of how to approach a girl who seemed so confident and sure of herself—had stepped up to the plate with a little more than a hi.

Just before his vision could continue, a chill crept over his chest and settled in at the stitching, touching him in a way he never thought a person could be touched.

He opened his eyes to pitch black darkness.

*What in the...*

Popearae *never* turned the lights off...

*Unless they found out what he was doing and turned him in.*

If that really was the case, where would it leave him? Here, in the dark, he had no way to move, much less feed himself with the IV bags. If they only took the doctor in for trespassing or snooping around the property, how would they find him?

“They... will,” he gasped.

Using all the will he could muster, he fought an approaching panic attack that threatened to destroy the little bit of human sanity he had managed to build over the last few weeks. This, here, was it. He *had* to be found, now that he was closer than ever.

*What... what does that mean though? If I get out and my bones are only half-grown...*

Could doctors somehow regrow them for him, or make artificial ones out of metal wiring? Would, after all this time, his chest be a birdcage of his mortal self, sealing together a butterfly that had once been revealed to the world?

No.

It couldn’t be.

Popearae *couldn't* get caught... right?

*He's human. He can get caught.*

After all this time, how could he even *begin* to consider the old man human, much less anything close to that? His cruel, savage nature set him aside from the average person, the *norm* of society. What man would kidnap someone just to strip them of their bones, sell them to the Chinese, and make money off them?

"Popearae!" he called, forcing the word as hard as he could. "Sir!"

What was he thinking? Even if the man *was* here, how would he come to the rescue in the dark?

*He won't*, he thought, closing his eyes, balling his hands into fists. *He won't...*

Closing his eyes, he tried to fill the darkness with light.

If he couldn't, he didn't know what he would do.

"Damn you, Popearae!" he screamed. "Damn you fucking..."

Before he could fully finish, he started coughing. It took him several minutes to try and get it under control, but even after he did, he started sobbing more than he had in the past little while.

The IV bag had stopped feeding him. The tight pain in his stomach had recently started up, which made him question how long he'd actually been in the dark. It had to have been days, because he couldn't have gotten hungry in just a few hours, could he?

*I'm sick and malnourished. Of course I could be hungry in a few hours.*

Looking around the already-dark space, he decided to try something that could potentially do more harm than good. Slowly, he pushed himself into a sitting position, doing his best to ignore the pain in his chest. The excruciating fireball only seemed to get hotter and hotter until it finally exploded in a torrential firestorm when he sat fully up.

*Oh, fuck yes*, he thought, crying, but still happier than hell.

If he could sit up, he might be able to walk.

Easing his legs over the side of the metal table, he touched ground and tested the amount of weight his healing ankles could support. With hardly any pain at all, he reached down, felt along his hand, then pulled the thin layer of plastic away from the IV before sliding it out.

The little bit of blood that came shocked him into reality.

*This is really it. You can get out of here.*

*If*, he reminded himself, his body held him.

Slowly, he eased down off the table and gripped it with a steady hand, careful not to step away from it too quickly. If he fell, he'd have no

way to judge his direction and might run into something he might not want to.

*If I don't want to?* He laughed at the thought. *I'm going to run into things.*

Hopefully, those things he ran into wouldn't hurt him any.

After making sure he could take a few steps without his legs caving in on him, he took his first few steps forward, releasing his grip on the table and reaching out in front of him. Blind as a beggar, he felt for a wall, a counter, *anything* that might help him judge where he was.

His hand came to rest on a smooth surface.

"Wall," he whispered, tracing one of the bleach-white tiles with his fingers. A perfect square, just as he'd thought. "Now we're getting somewhere."

The storage room—while large—had only one way in. The large, square arch that opened up into the empty space where Poperae kept his construct would be easy to find, considering he'd slid off the table at his right side.

*Now we go left.*

Fingers tracing the wall, he made his way left, hoping that the room didn't hold a surprise drop-off that would send him to his knees. With his ribs only half-developed, he couldn't afford any kind of accidental collision.

He knew that if he ran into something, his ribs would not be there to absorb the blow.

His heart or lungs could easily explode.

With sweat coursing down his face, open air greeted his hand as he tried to ease it further along. While still gripping the wall, he stepped forward and—finding no sudden drop—took another step, then shifted out onto the outside wall.

*Why wasn't I paying attention when I was chained to that goddamn thing?*

He closed his eyes and tried to ignore the taste of salt at his lips. Tears, sweat, whatever it was, reminded him of the outside world—how it was to run along the coast of a pond, or how good it felt to wrap oneself in a blanket and push their face into clean, lavender-smelling laundry. His fear—which had fueled him away from the table and out into the open—could easily turn the tides and do whatever it wanted, if only it chose to destroy what little bit of confidence he had left.

*Come on, Jossiah,* he thought, touching the large room's wall. *Ease to the right. You know the drill. Slow, baby steps. Don't turn around though, otherwise you might confuse your right and lefts.*

Back facing the wall, he eased himself along, extending his right hand first, touching the wall, then easing his right foot over and making sure he wouldn't trip over anything before moving his left side with him. He kept repeating this until he came to the far right wall.

*Good, his conscience coached, the lightheaded angel on his right shoulder. Now, you should be able to walk forward a little ways and come to where some stairs are. Guide yourself along the wall with your right hand while you feel with your left.*

If he remembered correctly, the stairs had been put right up against the wall, allowing for anyone who made their way through the double doors to go either straight, left or right, depending on which area they wanted to be at. Poperae's desk was at his left when he'd been chained to the construct, so that would make his desk right around...

*The right side of the room, he nodded. Right near the stairs.*

The clock would be above the double-doors, so he'd have to listen for ticking. If he heard that, he'd know he was close.

Taking his next few steps forward, he did as his conscience instructed, guiding himself with his right hand while his left felt for the railing.

*It won't be much longer, he thought. It won't...*

The double doors opened.

A single, long bar of light went on above the door.

As quickly as he could, Jossiah eased his way into the thin space between the stairs and the wall, curling up into as small a shape as he could bear. Above, Poperae whistled a tune while he descended the stairs, snapping his fingers.

*Oh God, please don't be coming down the left, please...*

Poperae's tune lessened in pitch.

He had to have gone to his desk. He *always* went to his desk.

*Come on, you motherfucker. Get what you need and go.*

Just then, he realized Poperae had come in for one purpose—to switch his IV tube.

*He was only gone for a day, but the lights, he wasn't... he...*

Now, he knew, was the time to fight or take his flight.

Turning, he eased away from the wall and peeked out around the last few stairs, waiting for the doctor to disappear into the storage room.

At that moment, he gripped the railing and forced himself to run up the stairs.

Ankles protesting the force, they screamed bloody murder, like they'd just been hit with hammers. Fresh tears coursed down his face as he made it up the last stair. Turning, he saw a light come on, then heard

the most horrifying scream of anguish he'd ever had the pleasure to know.

"*JOSSIAH!*" Popearae screamed.

Jossiah gripped one of the double doors and pulled it open.

*Homerun*, he thought.

Slipping out of the building that had held him hostage for God knew how long, he ran up the stairs with speed he couldn't imagine, adrenaline piercing his heart with its thick needle and filling him with strength he could never imagine. At the top of the dirtied stairs, his toes squished into thick, gooey mud, but he took little time enjoying the luxury of actually feeling something other than pain.

In no more than a few moments, Popearae would be up the stairs and chasing after him.

The man's car—hidden behind an open chain-link fence—would not offer an option. Even if he did find the key, where would he go—home, a hospital, a police station?

*Run.*

That single word forced his mind into overdrive.

Taking a deep breath, he sprinted right for the fence.

Something crashed not too far behind.

"*COME BACK HERE!*" Popearae screamed.

Jossiah made his way out of the enclosure and turned, slamming the gate shut and padlocking it behind him. Though he knew it wouldn't slow the doctor down for no more than a few moments, at least it would give him a little more time.

A long, dirt road would serve as his guide while he ran through the woods. Low branches reached out to embrace his skin, tearing gashes in his naked flesh. The wounds—though many—would do no more than bleed, and wouldn't slow him down.

*Oh, no. The woods, the stumps, the logs, the...*

"*YOU CAN'T GET AWAY FROM ME! I KNOW WHERE YOU ARE!*"

*He won't follow me in the woods. He wouldn't dare.*

Though injured and weak, he had the element of surprise. He'd already made it into the woods by himself, and he'd already slowed down Popearae a good deal by locking the gate behind him. If he could just keep going, if he could just keep *moving*, he could make it back to the road and wave someone down for help.

*Would they help me though? A naked, bleeding man who just walked out of the woods?*

Regardless, he had to try.

What seemed like hundreds of miles away, the sound of a gate being bashed into a fence rung strong in his ears.

“I’LL GET YOU, JOSSIAH! YOU WON’T GET AWAY FROM ME!”

No. Popearae *wouldn’t* catch him. He’d make sure of it.

Easing himself along the tree line—but not close enough to be seen by the road—Jossiah watched the ground, pushing his hands out just in case he came into contact with a longer branch. Moonlight illuminated the ground in rough but visible patches, making even the darkest areas visible with just a hue of grey. Rocks the size of children’s hopscotch stones littered the ground, but didn’t give him any real trouble. The only thing that slowed him down were his ankles. While in excruciating pain, the area where the metal rings had exited his feet burned only at the bottom, right near the sole. Though it wasn’t enough to stop him entirely, the pain slowed him down a considerable amount.

Outside the forest, Popearae screamed and cursed things that Jossiah could only imagine were in some other language.

*You’re not going to get me, Popearae. I’m too far gone for you to even begin to find.*

Stopping to take a breath, Jossiah sighed and realized that he was truly free.

Now all he had to do was get back to the road.

Exhausted and near collapsing, Jossiah stumbled out onto the nearby road. He checked to see if Popearae’s car had followed him, then for any oncoming traffic. A mile down, a larger vehicle—probably a truck or SUV—rolled forward at a slow, leisurely pace.

*I gotta get in front of them,* he thought, easing toward the northbound lane. *They won’t stop otherwise.*

With the possibility of Popearae coming out from the road and capturing him more than present, he couldn’t afford to waste any more time. With his arms spread and his head held high, he stepped out onto the road, waving at the approaching vehicle.

“Help!” he sobbed, tears of blood and sweat coursing down his face. “Please, please!”

The vehicle—which had since come to reveal itself as a truck—slowed into a stop. Now, no more than a few feet from rescue, Jossiah waited, watching a man in the driver’s seat talk to his companion before stepping out of the vehicle.

"Sir," a young man, possibly around Jossiah's age, said. "Do you need help?"

"Yes," he cried, stepping forward, hands instinctively curling as he started to breathe fast. "He tuh-tuh-*tried* to kuh-kuh-kill muh-me."

"Who did? Who tried to kill you?"

"*POPEARAE!*" he screamed, grimacing when the man jumped back. "No, please... I... help me. I need help."

The young man came forward and wrapped an arm around Jossiah's lower back. His passenger—a slightly older man with a scruff of orange beard—jumped out of the truck and came around to help.

"What happened?" the scruffy man asked his friend.

"Someone tried to kill him," the younger man said. "Sir," he then added, setting a hand on Jossiah's back. "We're going to help you climb up here, ok? We're going to turn around and take you to a hospital."

"Yes," he sobbed. "Thank you."

With one hand on Jossiah's upper arm and the other around his back, they hoisted him into the backseat. Jossiah's nearly-nonexistent ribs throbbed in pain, forcing a scream out of his body.

"What's wrong?" the younger man cried. "Are you ok?"

"It... it hurts," he sobbed. "*Please...*"

"Get in the truck, Adam," the bearded man said. "I'm driving."

"What are you..."

Before the man named Adam could respond, his friend jumped into the truck. Adam soon joined him.

As the two strangers sped him off to a hospital, hoping to save the man they'd found on the road from a most certain death, Jossiah set his hands on his chest and sobbed.

"Ronda," he said, picturing his girlfriend's face in his mind. "I'm sorry."

In the blink of an eye, his world went dark.

On a warm, summer day in the middle of July, Jossiah opened his eyes to find himself in a clean, white room. Burgundy chairs and couches adorned the one side of the room, while the other had been arranged as an eating area. An octagon table and chairs shaped in the number eight stood no more than a few feet away from him, while a TV broadcasted the news of an eleven-year-old boy who had just won a local singing contest.

"Mr. Harpman?" a man asked. "Are you there?"

"Wha... where am I?"

"You're in the hospital, sir. Two men brought you here a few nights ago."

"Is he... is he gone?"

"Is who gone?"

"Popearae," he said "The man that did this."

"Don't worry. You're safe with us."

A young doctor reached out and set a hand on his shoulder. Jossiah found himself reaching up to set a hand on the man's other arm, but stopped when he discovered a layer of bandage wrapped around his wrist.

"Something tells me you went through major hell with that man," the doctor said. "Your wrists... your ankles... your ribs."

"Are they..."

"I don't know how you managed to survive without them, much less get away from wherever you were being held, but they're fine. We had a metal cage built to fill in what hadn't been removed."

"So I'm ok," he said, more stating than asking.

"You're going to be just fine, sir."

The doctor stepped over to the window, where he closed the blinds a slightest bit.

"Please," Jossiah said. "Open them."

"You want them open?" the man frowned.

"Yes," he said. "I was in a very dark place for a long time."

Complying with his patient's request, the doctor opened the windows to let the sun in. Jossiah caught the flicker of his photo ID, which showed his name to be Peters.

"Dr. Peters," he said. "Where are the men who brought me here?"

"They went home after they brought you here, but not until after they were questioned by police. They'll want to ask you a few questions as well."

"I won't be able to tell them much, other than what the man looks like and what he drives."

"You can't tell them what he did to you?"

"Yes," he said, shaking after he said the word. "I don't want to, but I'll tell them anything they need to know to catch that mad bastard."

Doctor Peters nodded. He stepped away from the window and walked to Jossiah's bedside.

"Do you need me to call someone?" the man asked, setting a hand on his shoulder. "Anyone at all?"

"My girlfriend," he said. "Ronda, Ronda Cranberry."

"Can you give me her number?"

After he recited the number and the doctor scratched it down on a piece of paper, Peters made his way for the door. Then, on second thought, turned and looked back at Jossiah.

"Everything's going to be ok," he said. "No one's going to hurt you anymore."

"Jossiah... Jossiah. Wake up, baby. It's me, Ronda."

The moment he opened his eyes was the moment he pledged never to say another mean thing to her again. The woman he loved leaned over him, a smile shining through the thickest of tears.

"I love you," he said, reaching up to touch her face.

"I love you too," she said, wrapping her arms around him. "I'm so glad you're ok."

"I didn't think I would make it," he said, bowing his head into her hair. He smelled lavender and closed his eyes, breathing in the scent as deeply as he could. "I almost didn't make it."

"The doctor told me what you said and what the men who brought you in told him, but he couldn't tell me anything else. Jossiah... what happened out there?"

"I'll tell you," he said, "but not now. I... I just want to hold you."

Sitting up, he wrapped his arms around his girlfriend and brought her as close as he could.

"Will you marry me?" he whispered.

"Yes," she whispered, in the silence that followed. "I will."

## New Section

### Escape from Her the Bones

*Escape from her the bones, she writes, dipping her finger into an unhealed legion. For she cannot.*

The wall—dull in color from lack of light—is littered with her messages. She does not know where they come from, only that they hold some kind of importance.

Maybe, just maybe, they hold the importance of her condition.

The hollow pit of her chest rises and falls with each breath. If light filled the room, someone could have seen her bones peeking from beneath her flesh, pockmarked with sores like dust to a jagged mountain. And, like her messages, she has no knowledge of how she got this way.

A flicker of what she has come to know as light traces the wall, casting her bloody messages in faint blue. A small creature with shining blue wings and a long, ribbon-like tail stops to rest on a bloody pattern on a wall—a message, whose first letter is *D*.

*Death.*

Pupilless eyes watch the butterfly, taking in each and every detail. The butterfly—having sensed her—turns, balancing itself on the smooth curve of the letter.

*Hello, Clarice, it says. How are you?*

Had she a voice, she would say fine; but since she doesn't, she merely nods—a gesture she has learned from this butterfly.

*I'm glad you are well, the butterfly continues, lifting away from the wall. It glides the length of the room—corner to corner—before it comes to rest at the end of the dirty mattress. Are you ready to go free?*

Free?

She watches the butterfly, waiting for it to continue.

*Free, it repeats, spreading its wings. Six smaller lights adorn each silk surface—one on the top and bottom, then four in the middle, each glowing like diamonds in a grand mine in Africa. They spark, each revealing an image of the outside world—green grass, wet dew, brown earth, blue skies, metal towers, pink flowers.*

Then, for no reason, the vision shifts, showing the other, more sinister things in the world—blood, death, famine, disease, poverty, abuse.

*There are many good things out there, Clarice, the butterfly says, extinguishing the twelve lights, but there are also many bad things.*

She nods, waiting.

*I am giving you a choice—a choice of freedom, or imprisonment. Which will you take?*

A choice?

Has she really been given a choice?

Thinking of the grass, the flowers, the dew and the sky, she watches the butterfly, willing her answer.

*Freedom, Clarice—can you imagine it? All those pink flowers, just waiting for you to pick them. Or that green grass. We can play in fields so large and wide, you can walk forever and never come out the other side. But, freedom... freedom is fickle. Do you know some people don't have their freedom?*

No. She has no knowledge of freedom or what it feels like. How can she know someone else's freedom if she does not know her own?

*Your message spells death*, the butterfly says. It crawls forward, onto her naked body. It stands between her breasts and leans forward, large, blue eyes emitting incandescence she knows only the butterfly holds. *But did you know it also spells life?*

Life?

*Yes, Clarice—you live, despite your trials. But outside, people, die, all because they face no trial. Do you understand?*

She shakes her head.

*People who face trials live*, the butterfly explains, once again spreading its wings. Clarice lifts her hands and shields her face, not wanting to see the butterfly's terrible things. *People who don't have trials die.*

Why?

*Because they are weak. You, though—you are strong. But are you willing to go outside, out into the world of beauty and terror, to experience something you do not know?*

This time she nods, confident with her decision.

Using the wall as her support, she guides herself along. The butterfly—her ever faithful companion—continues to rest on her chest.

*There*, it says. *Do you see it, Clarice?*

A light stronger and brighter than she has ever lain eyes on starts in the corner of the room, then spreads, flowing to one corner, then the other, and finally to the fourth. There, the lights slide down the walls, bringing forth more glow.

*Are you ready, Clarice? Are you ready to see the world?*

Clarice nods.

She is ready.

The butterfly spreads its legs, readying itself for what is to come. It pinches her skin six times—one for each leg—and extends its wings, opening the eyes Clarice has never had.

For a brief moment, the world goes white.

Then, slowly, destruction is revealed.

High above, red flames extend across the sky, edging toward the horizon that lays far in the distance. There, on the tip of what she assumes is the end of the world, stand two buildings; the metal towers which the butterfly has shown her. On those buildings lie two lizards with large, grand wings, embracing the structures like newborn mothers do their children.

*This is the world, Clarice, the butterfly says. This is what you've been hidden from for all this time.*

In the distance, a light appears, then explodes. A gust comes up, pulling the trees from their roots and sending fallen glass into the air. A mushroom blooms in the sky, extending far into the atmosphere. But somehow, none of this affects her. Instead, she watches the fire slowly eating away the darkness that has dominated her life for so long.

*Do you realize now, Clarice? Do you realize the choice you have made?*

Yes.

Clarice raises her hand.

A black sore pulses, radiating rainbows.

She has realized her choice.

The butterfly has helped her escape the bones... because she could not.

## New Section

### The Glass Doe

Ray Andrews noticed someone had left the water running at five-forty-five in the morning, when he woke from a fitful sleep to go to the bathroom. At first, he ignored it, thinking that his wife would soon rise and begin to water her flowers. Then he realized—with utter annoyance and a tinge of malice—that she would, most likely, blame him for it.

*Fuck*, he thought, tangling a hand through his hair. *I don't want to go out there, not at this godforsaken hour of the morning.*

Nauseated—both from a stomach ache and insomnia—he'd rather return to bed than go outside and turn the water off. But, as he already knew, that would not be the case. He *would* be leaving the house, and he *would* be turning the water off, whether he liked it or not.

Flushing the toilet, Ray turned and made his way back into his room, where he pulled his jeans up his legs and a flannel over his shoulders.

*It'll only take a minute*, he thought, pulling the blankets up over his wife's shoulders, then pushing his way out into the hall.

Once in the kitchen, he stopped to make sure he'd unlocked the door before he stepped out. At nearly six in the morning, all he needed was to be locked out of the house. People slept in on Saturday, and didn't take kindly to being woken up by arrogant neighbors.

Outside—in the cool, crisp morning air—Ray shivered and drew his flannel tighter around his body, both regretting and basking in the action. One part of him *hated* the chill, while the other adored it. Two sides to one half, his father—or, more preferably, his wife—would have said. At that moment, both of his halves would rather be in bed, sleeping off an ache that ate at his stomach like raw, uncooked hamburger meat.

*Only one minute, Ray. Don't worry—it's right out back.*

Turning, he crested the lilacs, the bleeding hearts and the daisies, making his way around the side of the house and between the hedges that framed it. His wife always liked the look of hedges framing the house, but she'd never stopped to consider how much work it would be to trim them. She had no reason to care—she wasn't the one that trimmed them every other week.

"Just shut the fuck up already," he groaned, setting a hand on his forehead.

Satisfied that the incessant, nagging part of his wife had left his conscience, Ray squeezed through the last bush and came out the other side,

annoyed but otherwise pleased with himself. This time, he would go through the back door, aided by the key they kept on top of the nearby light.

"All right," he said, quickly locating the source of the flow.

At the west end of his house—where what should have been a backyard sat situated amidst a series of rocks, small shrubs and a fishpond—the pumps that fed water into the hoses protruded just above a flowerbed, where insistent and determined vines climbed the walls like snakes in a rainforest. It seemed like every time he came back here, he had to fight off some kind of plant—whether it be a wayward flower or a tangle of vines. The vines he could get away with; the flowers... not so much.

*Well, there aren't any flowers to accidentally break in half today, so there's nothing to worry about.*

Crouching, Ray reached forward and turned both knobs until the flow of water ceased to spout from their iron rings, pleased with what he had accomplished. If the wife woke, he could simply say that he'd stepped out back for a minute to admire the fishpond and all the hard work they'd put into it.

*I put into it, he thought, shaking his head.*

Ray started to rise, but stopped as a flicker of movement caught his eye. Immediately, he pushed himself against the wall, knowing—but not thinking—of how stupid his action had been.

*Dumbass. Good way to get yourself chomped by the neighbor's dog from hell.*

When he opened his eyes, Ray didn't see a dog, nor did he see a silhouette in the sky or a passing shadow from a normal tree.

What he saw he would not ever begin to forget.

Standing near the fishpond with its head bowed to the water, a deer-like creature made entirely out of the finest, bluest glass drank from its surface, clear tongue lapping at the water before it. Its eyes—also clear, but a tint of green—caught sight of him, but did nothing more than blink with lids the color of its skin.

At first, Ray didn't know what to do, so he simply stood there and watched the impossible creature with a sense of both awe and fright. After a moment, it soon became apparent that what stood before him *did*, in fact, exist, and it drank from his pond just like any other deer or large animal that happened across his backyard. Beneath its nearly-still surface, koi the size of Ray's fist swam back and forth, startled by the anomaly's presence. Ray found himself feeling like the fish at that moment. He

wanted to run back into the house—to scream for Pam to get the gun and to call the animal patrol—but knew that would not be an option.

God had a reason for putting this thing in his backyard.

Whatever that reason was, Ray would not doubt it.

“Heh-Hello,” he managed.

The doe turned its head up, watching him with a bemused expression. The light from the rising sun caught the glass’ surface and reflected it in all directions, nearly blinding him in a kaleidoscope of color. Ray raised his hand—if only to shield his eyes from the early-morning spectacle—and found himself staring at something he hadn’t seen until that moment.

Inside the doe’s blue, glass body, a red heart beat, giving life to a thing that should not exist.

Just as he began to comprehend the doe’s meaning, it turned, jumped over the fence, and disappeared into the woods.

Ray’s heart stopped beating for a moment.

Then he thought of Pam and everything she had gone through in the past six months.

A heart attack, they said—caused by cholesterol, stress, and lack of proper nutrition. What a surprise it had been to find out that his seemingly-healthy wife actually existed in a way that could kill her. The cholesterol had come from genetics—her mother, who’d died the previous year from heart failure. The stress—fickle and apparent as may have seemed—came from a stillborn they’d had earlier that year. A baby boy, the doctors said, just as they pronounced Ray and Pamela’s son a stillborn. And the nutrition... well, who could say that a person would want to actually eat anything after their newborn son had died? Ray himself had lost twenty pounds over the span of a month. Pam hadn’t stopped losing it.

The heart attack had occurred on an Easter Sunday, when Jesus was supposed to have been hung on the cross for his sins. Pam had wandered the kitchen that morning, making breakfast and tidying things that didn’t need to be tidied. Ray witnessed her fall just as he’d stepped out of the living room to get himself a glass of milk.

*Pam!*

The scream—fresh and always lingering in the back of his mind—continued to haunt him daily, just as it had when he threw himself to his knees and pressed a hand to her face. He knew something was wrong, so wrong that, in fact, he’d picked up the phone, dialed 9-1-1,

and screamed into the giving end, *MY WIFE IS HAVING A HEART ATTACK!*

The ambulance pulled into the driveway no more than three minutes after he called, and the paramedics rushed into the house no more than a minute after that. One fell to Pam's side and forced an oxygen mask over her mouth, while two others rushed in with a stretcher. By the time they strapped Pam to the stretcher and rushed in into the ambulance, only seven minutes had passed from time of call to time of rescue.

A simple diagnosis had been given—heart attack. And that simple diagnoses had been enough to force Pam to realize that time meant more than just existing day to day, destroying one's soul piece by piece over a child they had never known.

Ray took on a second job, while Pam stayed home and took care of herself. She took vitamins to supplement her nutrition and stopped eating one-hundred-calorie snack cakes in favor of an apple or an orange. Fruit, they said, and vegetables, would keep Pam strong.

Six months later, everything seemed back to normal.

That is, until just ten minutes ago.

Settling down at the kitchen table, Ray framed his face with his hands and stared at the crumbs from last night's garlic bread, unable to process what had just transpired. He knew that a doe graced his backyard no more than a moment ago, but a glass doe? Could such a thing exist—an animal made out of human material?

*No.*

In his mind—and in the minds of every other normal, sane human being on the face of the earth—there was no such thing as an animal made of glass. Not even an imaginary creature born from the mind of the greatest imagination could begin to exist, not in their universe.

"Slow, deep breaths," he whispered, coaxing himself through the motions. "One... two... three."

Rich, loving oxygen filled his chest and expanded his lungs, filling the rungs and cavities which occupied their surfaces. Each breath felt wonderful, like a miracle on Earth or a tequila at sunrise. He desperately wanted a drink, or at least a cigarette, but he'd quit after Pam's heart attack for fear of his own health.

*The pleasures of the body aren't meant to be taken lightly.*

"No, they're not."

"Ray?"

Her voice alone ceased the storm within his mind.

Pam stood in the threshold, short, blonde hair messed as his most likely was.

"Are you ok?" she frowned, stepping into the kitchen.

"I'm ok," he smiled, forcing a laugh. "Dog scared me."

"You mean the neighbor's dog? Demon?"

"Yeah."

"That dog shouldn't be running loose in this neighborhood," she said, heading toward the phone. "I'm going to give them a call right now and..."

"No!" he cried, jumping to his feet. Pam frowned, started to say something, then stopped, pursing her lips. "Sorry, hon. I mean... no, don't worry about it. It ran back home."

"All right," she shrugged. "If you say so."

She crossed what distance she had just made, reached into the fridge, and pulled out a thing of creamer. She pulled the freshly-made coffee from its automated machine and poured them each a cup. Hers she drank with the slightest amount of sugar, which she measured and poured into her drink.

"You sure you're ok?" Pam frowned, setting his coffee before him.

"Yeah," he smiled. "Just a little shaken up, that's all."

He stood in front of the pond, watching the koi swim under the water with innocence only something like them could have. Occasionally, they'd bob to the surface and watch him with bulging, protruding eyes, but quickly splash to the depths whenever something moved. The slightest bit of wind, a falling leaf, his shadow shifting unconsciously—any and all movement scared them back into the dark depths he'd built for them to disappear into.

If only he could disappear.

Sighing, Ray slid his thumbs into his pockets and continued to stare at the water, willing for the fish to return to ease the absence of company. Despite the fact that his wife stood in the kitchen—more than willing to offer him company in his darkest, most surreal hour—he found he couldn't go. For some reason, just the thought of touching his wife after seeing something out of this world frightened him.

*What was it?*

He didn't need an answer—one was already present.

He'd seen a doe this morning, a doe with shining glass skin and a red, beating heart.

Wind tracing his back, he turned to face the house, but stopped as he saw the water running.

*I turned that off...*

Didn't he?

Then again, who could blame him if he'd somehow managed to forget to turn it off? *Anyone* would be spooked after seeing something that wasn't supposed to exist.

Trudging forward, Ray bent down, grasped the handle, and turned the water spout until it would turn no more.

One final shiver crossed his back.

He didn't need to turn around to know that something had returned.

"Ray?" Pam frowned. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," he mumbled. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, dear—I'm sure."

Stoic as ever, Pam pressed forward, asking the same question again and again. When Ray finally looked up and gave her a dirty look, she shut up and returned to making breakfast.

*Look at you, his conscience taunted. Big, bad bully, being mean to your wife.*

*I'm not being mean to her.*

*Then what are you doing, Ray?*

*I'm upset.*

*Sure you are...*

Growling, Ray stood, walked up behind Pam, and slid his arms around her waist. She jumped upon the initial contact, but soon settled down and melted against him.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, kissing the nape of her neck. "I wasn't feeling good this morning. I'm still not."

"Stomach problems?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe you should go to the doctor, Ray. Your stomach's been bothering you for the past..."

"It runs in the family, Pammy."

"Still... it might be best to get it checked out."

"I guess."

Even though he wouldn't, the words would reassure his wife that everything would be fine.

Kissing her neck one last time, Ray relinquished his hold on his wife's waist and took a few steps back. With his back to the opposite counter, he crossed his arms over his chest and looked out the window, breathing in the cool, spring air that wafted through the partially-cracked window.

"We shouldn't leave the windows open at night," he mumbled.

"It wasn't open overnight."

"It wasn't?"

"No. I opened it when you went outside."

"Oh."

"Are you sure you're all right, Ray?"

"Yeah. I'm sure."

"Go get dressed. By the time you're done, I'll have breakfast made."

"All right," he said, turning toward the threshold.

Before he could step into the living room, he turned, looked at his wife, and whispered, "I love you."

After that, he made his way for the bedroom.

Thoughts of glass animals wrecked his conscience as he made his way to work. Seated in a nineteen-sixty-nine Ford with scratched leather seats and a slowly-dying engine, he did his best to calm his nerves, not wanting to walk into a jewelry store with shaky fingers. Sometimes, given the right circumstance, nervous people would break things—expensive glass vases, bowls, display rings that boasted zirconium and their key to the jewelry world. No one could steal the rings, of course—since he installed leather cable that connected them to their display rack—but the right individual could lose their hold and send it sailing into the counter.

Real diamonds didn't break.

Fake ones did.

Pulling into the jewelry store parking lot, Ray pushed himself out of the truck and mentally prepared himself for the day. Smoothing out his suit sleeves, reaching up to make sure he'd shaved and popping his knuckles, he took a deep breath and made his way into the building.

"Ray!" a coworker, Michael, called. "About time!"

"What?" he frowned.

"You're nearly a half-hour late."

"Shit. You're kidding?"

"I'm not."

Michael lifted a nearby pocket watch. The time clearly showed nine-thirty.

"Sorry, Mike. I had a rough morning."

"Stomach problems?"

"Yeah. I didn't want to get out of bed."

"Maybe you should go to the doctor."

"Pam's been telling me the same thing."

"Well... why don't you?"

"Because I hate going."

"So do I, but it's not going to help your wife any if you wake up and start throwing your guts up."

*No kidding, Einstein.*

Ray made his way up to the counter and slid his way behind the front desk. There, he reached under the counter and pulled out a password-coded case.

"So, what's on the agenda today, Ray?"

"Not a whole lot," he grunted, sliding the case open. "Just fixing this ring here."

"What's wrong with it?"

"The owner wants me to add his children's birth stones in it."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. February, July and October."

"Sounds fun."

"I guess."

"Whatever floats their boats, right?" Michael laughed, slapping his back.

Nodding, Ray forced a smile and slid the ring out. He was just about to turn and make his way into the jeweler's office before something caught his eye.

Nearly oblivious to the naked eye, a small, blue-colored glass doe sat on the corner of the counter, green-colored eyes winking at him.

"Wha-When did that come in?" he stammered.

"That?" Michael frowned. "Some lady custom-ordered it."

"Uh-Oh."

"Something wrong, buddy?"

"Nuh-No," Ray said, encircling the ring in his palm. "Nothing's wrong, Michael."

"All right," Michael shrugged. "You sure you're ok, Ray?"

"Yeah," he managed. "I am."

*If only he knew*, Ray thought, making his way toward the office. *If only he knew*.

That night, he slept with his arm around his wife's waist. Though the closeness comforted him, it did nothing to chase away the vision of a glass animal drinking out of his fishpond. With its long, graceful snout, its gleaming green eyes and its beating red heart, it seemed that, at any moment, it could spring out of his dreams and into his bedroom. It could gawk at his wife with its emerald eyes, puff its crystal snout at the air, then sniff the ground with its whitened nose. It could do any and everything it wanted to, all because some higher force allowed it to exist.

*What is it?* he thought, drawing closer to his wife. *Why is it here?*

Even though it didn't necessarily matter, its presence left an imprint—not only on his property, but his life. Men didn't just see glass animals in their backyards, and Gods didn't make them only to let them frolic in the land of mortals.

The doe had a reason.

What reason that was, Ray didn't know.

He hoped he wouldn't come to find it.

It returned the following morning.

Standing in his front yard as though not a person or a passing car would care, it padded through the arrangement of flowers and sniffed the fresh dew on the ground. Occasionally, its ears would flicker, once again proving its animate behavior.

"What are you doing?" he whispered. "Why are you here?"

The doe raised its head.

Ray froze.

Clear, translucent lids blinked.

"You're not real," he continued, reaching forward to grip the counter in front of him. "You *can't* be."

But if it wasn't real, what was it doing in his front yard, frolicking amongst his wife's flowers and licking dew from fallen leaves?

*You're just imagining things.*

True—he *could* be imagining things, but he didn't think that was the case.

Not sure what to do, Ray made his way out of the kitchen and back to the bedroom.

Hopefully, nothing but sweet dreams would follow.

"Ray?" Pam frowned. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," he yawned. "Why?"

"You slept in."

Looking up, Ray sought out the nearest clock, sighing when he realized that he would, once again, be late if he didn't hurry.

"I'm all right, Pam—don't worry."

"You've either been sleeping in or shaken up these past two mornings. Are you sure nothing's wrong?"

"Yeah—I'm sure. Don't worry, Pam; I'm fine."

Pam said nothing.

Sighing, Ray settled down at the kitchen table and cupped his face into his hands, trying as hard as he could to take slow, even breaths. Anything more than the even one-breath-in, one-breath-out approach would set Pam's red flags off.

After everything that happened in the past six months, she didn't need anything else to worry about.

*Especially not something I'm going through.*

"Ray?"

"Yeah?"

"Breakfast."

Toast, eggs, sausage and muffins—all part of Pam's normal, routine breakfast.

"Thank you," he said, spearing a piece of sausage on his fork.

"Would you go to the doctor for me if you asked me to?"

"Maybe."

"Is it your stomach, honey? Is that's what's been wrong these past two mornings?"

*If only you knew,* he thought, shaking his head.

"No. My stomach's been fine."

"Then what's wrong? Is it work, friends, me..."

"Don't *ever* think you're the cause for any of my problems, Pam."

"I'm just..."

"Worried, I know." He set his fork down and took a deep breath, somehow managing to force a smile in the process. "I'm ok, babe—you've got nothing to worry about with me. If anything, you should be worried about yourself."

"I am, but I'm worried about you too. You're my husband."

"Just like you're my wife," he said. "Just like I worry about you."

Reaching forward, Ray set a hand over his wife's and smiled.

Pam smiled back.

Ray wouldn't know what to do if something took that smile away.

She fell ill a day later.

Stricken with a fever of one-hundred-and-three degrees, Ray was forced to take the day off in order to care for his ailing wife. At first, nothing but pure and utter fear struck his heart, plaguing him with doubts and worries. But after a quick call to the doctor, and after a reassuring conversation that said she would, most likely, be fine unless her temperature increased, he calmed down enough to sit down and think things through.

*Ok, he thought, tangling his hands through his hair and bowing his head between his knees. The doctor said she might go through this in the months after the heart attack.*

Frailty, weakness and anxiety weren't uncommon after a heart attack, nor were fevers and bouts of depression. So far, Pam had managed to elude them, but no one could expect her luck to last forever.

Like a rose with its petals and a clam with its pearl, all things lost eventually. Grand kings fell, high mountains crumbled, and flowing rivers stopped running.

All it took was a matter of time for everything to stop.

Eventually, Pam would too, whether he liked it or not.

In a fit of frustration, Ray threw himself from his chair and into the middle of the living room. This *couldn't* be happening. Not to him, not to his wife, not to the dairyman across the street. People's hearts didn't stop beating, people's minds didn't stop thinking, and people's arms didn't stop rowing, because in the end, everyone had a light to guide them through the darkness.

Life wasn't supposed to be this hard.

Life wasn't supposed to be this complicated.

Life wasn't supposed to be this *painful*.

*"No!"* he sobbed, tugging at his mess of black hair until it hurt. *"This isn't supposed to happen to her! Not her! Not my wife!"*

A flicker of movement caught his eye.

Standing at the window, nearly hidden in the dense shrubbery of his wife's tropical plants, the glass doe pushed its snout at the window until both eyes appeared from behind the leaves.

*No...*

It couldn't have.

Could it?

"Pam," Ray whispered, bending down beside the bed. "Are you all right?"

"Hmm?" she mumbled. "Ray?"

"Yeah, hon—it's me."

"What time is it?"

"Almost noon. Don't worry, I'm doing the chores."

"Why aren't you at work?"

"I wasn't going to leave you at home, especially not after..."

*Not after your heart attack.*

"After what?" she frowned. Eyes cracking to thin slits, she looked around the room until she found him at eye-level. "Ray?"

"After you told me you had a fever."

"Oh," she paused. "Ok."

"Do you need anything? Some soup, something to drink?"

"I'm all right," she whispered, closing her eyes. "Ray?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

"I love you too," he whispered, brushing her hair out of her eyes.

By the time he leaned forward and kissed her forehead, she had already drifted off to sleep.

After three hours passed with nothing more than the sound of his own footsteps, Ray walked into his bedroom to find that his wife had stopped breathing.

"Pam?" he frowned. "Honey?"

The initial, blunt shock forced him in place. He couldn't move, he couldn't breathe, he couldn't *think*—he couldn't do *anything*. His minutes blurred to seconds, then his seconds blurred to nothing.

At one point in time—as a child, or maybe during a harsh, epileptic fit—time seemed impossible; a thing measured not by numbers, but by the color of the sky, or the green or yellow of the grass. When the trees died, when the dog got old, when the pet gerbil turned over and aimed its feet at the sky—all were told in events, not numbers. So when Pam stopped breathing—when she truly, *utterly* stopped breathing—Ray's natural instinct threw his body at the phone and dialed three simple numbers.

"9-1-1," an androgynous voice said. "*What's your emergency?*"

"*My wife's not breathing.*"

"*Have you started CPR?*"

"No."

"How long has she..."

An hourglass turned in his head.

Red liquid spilled forth.

Not sand, not water, not food-colored slush—blood.

In but a fraction of a minute, his wife could be dead, if she wasn't already.

After the phone fell from his grasp and dangled from the window-side counter, Ray's hands slammed one over the other, thumb through thumb, and began pumping life into Pam. One two three, four five six, seven eight nine, ten eleven twelve; one breath here, one breath there, one over that way and another over this way—each and every action supplemented the life-giving act of cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

"*BREATHE!*" he screamed. "*BREATHE, PAM—BREATHE!*"

A sharp inhale broke the horrible silence of a heart attack.

The front door shattered inward.

It only took three minutes and thirty seconds for the EMTs to get to the house.

By the time they pushed their way through the bedroom door, Ray's legs gave out and his world went black.

"Mr. Andrews... Mr. Andrews. Wake up, Mr. Andrews... Mr. Andrews?"

Pam.

He shot upright so fast he nearly hit the doctor standing beside the bed.

"Where is she?" he breathed, lashing for the doctor's arms, crying out when an IV cord tugged at his skin. "Where's my wife?"

"She's fine, sir. She's resting."

"What happened? Why wasn't she breathing? What's wrong with her?"

"Slow down, Mr. Andrews."

"Tell me what happened to my wife right now or I'll..."

"Sir, please—calm down. Your wife's just fine."

"What happened to her? Goddamn it, tell me or I'll..."

"Your wife had a heart attack. We estimate she stopped breathing for three minutes before you began CPR."

Words escaped him. Breath didn't.

"What?" he asked. "No. That's not possible. She *couldn't* have had a heart attack."

"Why not, Mr. Andrews?"

"Because she's been doing so good these past few months. Her exercises, her medicine, her diet—she..."

"Just because someone exercises, eats healthy and takes their medicine doesn't guarantee that they won't have a heart attack, sir. It's quite common for first-time sufferers to have multiple heart attacks, especially when they're having fevers."

"I was told that she'd be all right, goddammit! The doctor said..."

"The doctor most likely assumed that the fever would go down. Mr. Andrews, you have to understand; we're not able to monitor our patient's health unless they're present at the time of the fever. We..."

"Get me out of here," he growled. "I want to see my wife."

"Mr. Andrews..."

"If you don't let me out of here, I'll rip the goddamn IV out myself."

The nurse needed no further encouragement.

Stepping forward, he slid the plastic sealant off Ray's hand and slid the needle out.

Before the nurse could turn to grab a band-aid and a piece of cotton, Ray was already out of bed and making his way toward the front desk.

He'd never seen anything more fragile than a newborn kitten until he saw his wife in a hospital bed. Like some organic, mechanical structure, tubes ran into her arms, mouth and nose. Her hair—grand, sophisticated, cut like tomboy queens—lay strewn behind her head like snakes. At any moment, any part of her could simply come alive. The tubes could shoot from her arms, oxygen could pour from her mouth, and venom could fly from her hair, all because of a tragic event of the human body.

*Fragile, Ray thought, like a newborn animal or a freshly-conceived child.*

The thought forced a tear from his eye.

Pam endured this once before—why again? Why now of all times, when things seemed to be going so well? Why now, when he nearly managed the store; and why now, after Pam had just started getting back to health?

*Why now?*

"Why?" he asked. "Why?"

With tears in his eyes, Ray stepped forward and fell to his wife's said.

"Everything's going to be all right, Mr. Andrews," the male nurse said. "Everything's going to be just fine."

If only Ray could believe that...

If only he could.

Startled awake by the unconscious presence of his wife, Ray opened his eyes to find the room dark and empty. Save for the glow of the holter monitor and the occasional flicker of a passing nurse, nothing and no one existed outside of he and Pam. A barely-awake man, an unconscious woman, a beating heart monitor and a closed window—they and only they could be heard, living, breathing and beeping.

*She's ok, he thought, watching the holter rise and fall with each breath. You did it, Ray—you kept your wife alive.*

What would have happened if he'd been a moment later? Would she have lived, returned home a normal woman, and breathed, ate and slept like everyone else, or would she have died—in mind, body and soul?

The thought—so disturbing and unreal—forced sweat from the back of his neck. It trailed the curve of his spine, then slid under his jeans, tracing his tailbone before it soaked into the denim. Even the moisture didn't seem real, like someone had dangled a wet finger over his collar and let a drop of water fall into his shirt.

*There's no one here, he thought, closing his eyes. There's no one here, Ray.*

Not a doctor, not a nurse—not even a lonely fruit fly stood in the darkness, watching him in his most intimate of moments.

No one except him and Pam lay in the room, shrouded in darkness and bathed in glow.

No one watched them.

*No one.*

For the first time in the past three days, Ray was able to close his eyes.

All was well, if only for the time being.

"Ray?" Pam whispered.

"Yes, honey?"

"What happened?"

How so much could ride on two words, Ray didn't know. He stopped pondering on such hidden meanings a long time ago, after his unborn child died and after a glass deer appeared in his backyard to drink out of his fishpond. Why the sky was blue, why the glass was green, why bluebirds sang and why doorbells rang—what was the point in trying to decipher life's each and every hidden meaning when it got you nowhere?

*There isn't one, he thought, because there doesn't have to be one.*

"Ray?"

Again, his thoughts wandered to how a heart beat inside a woman's chest; how, inside her body, atria and ventricle contract and relax in order to create a rhythmic pattern. Without the heart, there would be no blood, and without the blood, there would be no oxygen supplying the brain, giving life to something that couldn't exist on its own.

"Ray?"

Glass animals danced in the yard behind his house. Deer, elephant, donkey, zebra—like a wild, glass menagerie, they twisted and twirled around trees and shrubs, touching any and everything they could. Grass turned blue, water turned green, and hearts that weren't supposed to exist beat inside their chests, giving life to fantastical, imaginary things sprung forth out of a children's storybook."

"Ray!"

"What?" he asked, startled.

"What happened to me?"

"You..." He paused. Tears broke the surface of his eyes. "No one's been in here yet?"

"No. No one's been in here since I woke up a few minutes ago."

"Honey..."

"I had a heart attack, didn't I?"

He froze.

Instead of his wife's calm, brown eyes, he saw glass, emeralds protruding from the face of a four-legged mammal made of ocean-blue crystal. The image startled him so much that he nearly turned the couch over when he jumped back in surprise.

"What's wrong, Ray? Why won't you talk to me?"

"You had a heart attack," he nodded, clutching the armrest in a death grip. "Oh God, Pam. I'm so sorry."

"What are you..."

"You weren't breathing for three whole minutes. If I wouldn't have come in when I did, you would've... you would've..."

He couldn't say the word.

Four letters was just too much.

Bowing his head, he broke down in tears.

He loved his wife too much to say she could've died.

They went home a few days later.

Blanketed in the serenity of a friendly environment, Pam immediately went to the couch, intent on catching up on past soaps and other TV shows, while Ray wandered down the hall and into the bedroom. There, he collapsed on the bed and stared at the ceiling, taking slow, deep breaths.

*It's all right, he thought. You're home now.*

With Pam on newer, stronger medication, the doctors said such a scare would most likely not happen again. Along with a vitamin regimen—consisting of the basics, along with the essentials—they said her heart would heal.

Maybe she would beat heart disease.

Maybe—just maybe—it would fade with age, like roses in a glass vase.

*Or, he thought, Pam will fade.*

*"Like a rose in a glass vase."*

Closing his eyes, Ray began to count backward from ten, hoping that the routine would work and that all his troubles would go away.

Something in the back of his head told him it wouldn't.

He stopped counting at seven.

*What's the point? You know it won't help, so why do you do it?*

*"Because that's what you do," he whispered. "That's what you do."*

*When you want to go to la-la land.*

No. He definitely didn't want to go there, not when things that weren't supposed to exist were already appearing in his backyard, drinking his water and scaring his fish.

*They haven't been fed for a week, he sighed. Hopefully they're still alive.*

Sitting up, he threw his feet off the bed and stood.

At the door, he grabbed the tube of fish food and took a deep breath.

He didn't need a pond of dead fish.

Things didn't need to get any worse.

To Ray's surprise, his collection of koi managed to survive on their own for a week. The pond—though mostly free of moss, algae, and other water debris—looked the same. Even the occasional leaf that was usually present was nowhere to be seen.

"At least you're alive," he smiled, squatting down to watch them feed. "Thanks for not dying on me, guys."

*You don't know how much it means to me.*

One koi in particular—Ray's favorite, which he named Shadow—swam forward and tipped its head out of the surface. Its sleek,

black surface could barely be seen in the shadow of late afternoon. At times, Ray would come out with only a flashlight at night and catch the koi's eyes in its beam. They would gleam and sparkle, bobbing along the surface for a brief moment before returning under the water.

"Hey, Shad. Miss me?"

The fish slid under the water, eyes watching Ray from the safety of darkness.

"I know," he sighed, running a hand over his forehead. "Pam's not doing so good. She had to go to the hospital, but you probably already know that. They had to break the door in, after all."

Laughing, Ray stood, stretched his arms out, and let out a breath of air, silently thanking his neighbor for coming and replacing the door. Good will always did a person good, especially when life usually paid them back.

*Which it always does.*

"Sometimes."

Beautiful agony laced through the veins of every man at least once in his life, regardless of his age, ethnicity or occupation. One moment he could be happy, then the next he could be sad, an emotional rollercoaster controlled by vertigo-afflicted plastic horses on a merry-go-round. It didn't matter who you were, what you were or what you ate—once in your life, a part of you would die, then slowly be reborn.

Ray died once when his child died in the womb.

He died a second time when Pam's heart failed.

He died for the third and, most likely, final time when Pam stopped breathing.

Three strikes, you're out.

Pushing his way not only into the house, but away from good emotions, Ray slipped his shoes off at the back door and made his way into the living room. There, he found Pam lying lengthwise across the couch, feet propped up on a pillow and head resting against the armrest. She smiled when she saw him.

"Hey," she said. "You ok?"

"I'm fine," he said, forcing a smile.

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"I wasn't sure where you went."

"Oh. That." This time, his smile came without force. "I went out to check on the fish."

"Are they ok?"

"Yeah—they're fine. I was sure at least a few of them would have been dead, but Bill must've fed them for me while we were gone."

"Bill's a good guy."

"He sure is."

Ray settled down on the floor beside his wife and took her hand, stroking the length of her long, bony fingers.

*She's so bony.*

"What do you want for dinner tonight?" he asked. "Anything you want, I'll make."

"You don't have to do that, Ray."

"I know I don't *have* to—I *want* to, Pam."

"Still..."

"Still nothing." Ray stood. "What's the one thing you've wanted for a long time? Anything you want, I'll make. If we don't have it, I'll get it."

Though no immediate response came, Ray could see the thought in Pam's eyes. From the way they rolled to the ceiling to the way they blinked every few seconds, contemplation stained their surfaces like blood on a coffee table.

Finally, after a moment of thought, Pam smiled and turned to look at Ray.

"Chicken salad," she said, "with artichokes and garlic bread."

He spent the next hour-and-a-half in the kitchen, preparing the chicken, cutting up the vegetables, and spritzing them with the appropriate sauce. Pam liked Italian, while Ray himself preferred raspberry, but would eat either depending on the situation.

*It doesn't matter what I like,* he thought, lining the edge of the plate with tomatoes. *Tonight's about Pam.*

Having ground the artichokes into dip and arranged the extra on the plate opposite the tomatoes, he stepped back to view his progress. All looked well, but he could do more—he knew that.

"All right," he mumbled, turning toward the fridge. "Let's see what we've got here."

Teas, bottled waters, sodas, wine—all could be served, but what would be best? Wine might not be the best choice so soon after a heart attack, and soda wasn't an option. That left tea and water, neither of which would peak Pam's interest.

*Lemonade. I'll make lemonade.*

Would that go good with a salad though?

*Who cares?*

Pam sure wouldn't, and Ray didn't care about what he drank. As long as he had something cold, he could deal with most anything.

Filling a pitcher with water, he grabbed the lemon at his side, then reached for the squeezer, intent on reaping the fruit for all it was worth.

A flicker of light drew his eyes toward the window.

Nothing but the shadow of a falling leaf greeted him.

Sighing, he gripped the handle with one hand and began to squeeze.

If anything, he could take his aggression on a senseless piece of fruit.

"Ray," Pam breathed. "It's... it's..."

"Dinner," he smiled, sitting the plate before them.

"Why did you make so much, Ray? Lemonade, tomatoes, extra artichokes and sauce? This is too much."

"Nothing is too much when it's for someone as special as you, Pam."

"Ray..."

"Shh. Don't talk—just eat. I didn't make all this food for myself, you know?"

Laughing, Ray winked and settled down beside his wife, lifting his fork and spearing a piece of chicken on its trident tip.

In the nearby window, a low, blue light began to pulse.

Slowly, then quickly, it increased in size, lighting the inside of the dining room for a brief moment.

"Is someone here?" Pam asked.

Ray blinked.

Her head had been turned.

She hadn't seen a single thing.

"No," he whispered, bowing his head into his salad. "There isn't."

He knew better though.

He knew what was outside the window.

This had to end.

Tonight, after Pam fell asleep, Ray would walk to his closet, get his gun, and go outside.

He had a feeling the doe would be waiting for him.

Never in a million years would a man have experienced such a sight were it not for the abstract concept of nature. Twins could be born conjoined, creatures could die young, and entire ecosystems could collapse into themselves all because of human interaction, but nothing could compare to the unimaginable dream that stood in the clearing, watching

Ray with eyes that glowed with the intensity of ten-thousand aurora borealis in the Northern hemisphere. Like a lost child in a supermarket aisle looking for her parent, the doe remained stoic, legs spread and ears arched in confusion.

*Does it know?* Ray thought. *Does it really, really know?*

Could dreams know that they would one day exist? Could they really, *truly* know that one person could say, 'I have a dream' and then one day achieve it? If so, did they understand that they could be destroyed? Did they really, *truly* understand that one person could end them with just a pull of the trigger? Did they understand that, one day, they might be worshipped—that, one day, they might be revered, martyrs that sacrificed themselves for the better of mankind?

Did they?

*Could they?*

Regardless of what dreams thought they could or would accomplish, some dreams weren't meant to exist.

His child, Pam's health... glass animals...

Raising his rifle, Ray peered into the scope and took aim.

Hidden within its blue, misty depths, a red heart beat.

Once upon a time, he had a dream.

That dream died when the doe appeared in his backyard.

Nature deemed fit that survival was meant for the fittest.

Only one of them could win.

Reaching forward, Ray tightened his grip on the stock and set his finger on the trigger.

Life could change in an instant.

In exactly three seconds, Ray's life would be changed for the better.

*All it takes is one*, his father said. *That's all it takes, Ray—just one.*

"Just one," he whispered. "Just one, Dad."

"Ray?" Pam breathed.

He blinked.

"Pam?"

His finger slipped.

The trigger snarled.

The doe exploded.

In the times of kings, queens and golden seams, men used to dream of rain so grand and succulent it would bring them fortune. Like that rain that farmers dreamed would fall from the heavens and shower them with the greatest of crops, fragments of what once used to be a beautiful,

impossible creature cascaded through the air and into the surrounding area, gleaming in the fading light of death.

A scream rang in the air.

Ray turned, startled.

Clutching her chest with a single, gnarled hand, Pam went down.

At first, Ray was unable to believe what he had just seen. It was as though the last fragment of his life had just slipped from his hand and into the sea to be forever lost to the depths. Half of him knew that he could do nothing, while the other half yearned for him to do something—*anything*.

The other half caved in.

Ray ran.

Throwing himself at his wife's side, he took her face in his hands and began to cry.

"Baby?" he whispered, stroking the hair from her face. "Pam? Pam!"

His wife didn't move.

She didn't breathe, she didn't speak, she didn't *blink*.

Nothing Ray could do or say would bring her back.

Pam died the moment she hit the ground.

"NO!" he screamed. "NO!"

It took one minute for him to start CPR.

It took two minutes to start crying.

By the sixth and final minute, he stopped trying to bring her back to life.

Slinging himself back, Ray leaned against the wall and closed his eyes.

He cried.

Nearby, a fragment of the doe continued to glow.

The final piece of its red heart continued to beat.

Then, slowly, it too died.

At that moment, Ray began to realize that some dreams were meant to come true.

## New Section

### Playing God

You know how it is—squashing an ant, swatting a fly, killing a spider or drowning a hornet in RAID. You know what it is; to take a life, to extinguish a flame, to destroy the inner society of a living, breathing thing.

*Playing God.*

You know what it is. You can't deny it. The way it moves, the way it fluctuates, the way it breaths with each and every coming generation. We did it once, we did it twice, and one day, we'll do it again—and again, and again, and again.

It's a condition I'm satisfied, fascinated, and obsessed with.

If I told you my name, you wouldn't believe, but I'll say this—I'm fascinated with God, and all the things it entails.

Today, I watched the fish swimming in my aquarium with a strange, overwhelming need. I thought of God and all the things he'd done to create them. And I, too, thought of the pet store and all the things they'd done to procure them. My fish—as most everyone else's—were born of a mother raised in captivity, as their grandmothers, their great grandmothers, and their great, great grandmothers once were. But, those great, great, great and even greater grandmothers, they'd been torn from their roost—farmers invading a chicken's nest before they could really hatch. But unlike a farmer, and unlike the chicken that the farmer raised, those greater grandmother fish had once swam in fertile waters, eggs laced with the sperm of males. And unlike those farmers, and unlike the chickens they'd raised, those fish had always been free—that is, until human hands took their human nets and trapped an inhuman creature within their twisted, human angles.

The thought—though troubling as it may have been—inspired me to try something, something that, in a normal person's eyes, may have seemed relentless—morbid, even, or maybe horrible. Evil would've been the word on a person's tongue, but since an animal became your property once purchased at a store, you could do whatever you chose to do with it.

Today, I became inspired by God.

And today, I would become one.

Today, I laced the water with poison. Not in an act of evil, but in an act of God.

The fish—indifferent—lapped at it, dogs to a ferryman's blood.

As I watched the aquarium, astonished with the way the water turned from a pristine-blue to an eloquent-green, I realized that what I have done will end their lives, just like God did to the Jews when He decided that Hitler was meant to do his horrible deed. But their lives would never be without purpose. The curiosities of a mortal, sentient man are meant to be answered. We send men into space, hoping to find the things that hide behind our very eyes, while we fire bombs into the air and let them fall into the sea, a living, breathing, *shooting* star to our very Earth.

In my heart, I knew it wouldn't be long.

I started to tick down the time.

Forty-nine, forty-eight, forty-seven, forty-six...

Forty-five, forty-four, forty-three, forty-two...

Forty-one.

Forty.

Today, the fish died.

It's a sad, sad day. Not as sad as, say, Kennedy, or the day Roger got shot, but it's still a sad, sad day.

As I expected—and, sadly, anticipated—the fish have bellied up. Some's eyes have blown out, while others have had their flesh exposed to the muscle. Others, surprisingly, have been stripped of their bones.

Have the fish eaten each other alive?

Stepping forward, I placed my hand to the glass.

It cracked during the night.

"What?" I asked.

Nothing answered.

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath, then turned to gather the supplies needed to clean the tank—first, the suction house, to drain the water into the toilet; then the fish, which—depending on their size—may or may not go through. Then, finally, I began to gather the toys, the rocks, and the plastic plants that have always been made by man. In doing this, I realized that yes, I had become something great, something truly, truly invincible.

I did something I've always dreamed of doing.

I played God.

## New Section

### Uncle

Timothy Artsun, retired from a hard life of work, stands on the balcony that juts out from his two-bedroom apartment, watching the cars and people pass just feet below. At this early hour of the morning, people are rushing to work, stopping at the local coffee shop just across the street and secretly wishing ill to those cars ahead of them who seem to only further jam the already-coagulated streets.

On most ordinary days, Tim would have already left his apartment and walked across the street, where he would've stopped at the nearby cafe and ordered the regular—a toasted cheese and tomato sandwich. As he would've ate, he would've browsed the classified sections, seeking single females who were looking for someone to share their apartment with. But today, he ponders on his life and what exactly it entails.

His habit, as perverted as it may seem, is not without reason. He's been a widower for nearly ten years now. His wife—a beautiful woman once known as Sherry Artsun—died while crossing the street. Ironically enough, she'd been hit while fetching the morning paper.

That same newspaper stand still stands on the corner of the street, decrepit from age and mortally wounded by the local hoodlums' baseball bats. Surprisingly—despite the damage that has been done—it remains blood red, testament to the woman whose blood it once tasted.

*That doesn't matter now, he thinks, rubbing the bridge of his nose. She's gone.*

Sherry has been gone for ten years.

It's time to leave the house and head out into the world.

At the cafe, he reads the paper while waiting for the toasted sandwich, marking entries in the classified section with a red pen. He's surprised to see how many ads are without phone numbers, considering that the women—all eighteen to their late twenties—are looking for homes.

*How many would want to share an apartment with an old man?* he ponders, glancing up when he sees a waitress. He sighs when he realizes she is not approaching with his sandwich.

Turning back to his paper, he examines the classified ads he has circled, then crosses out the ones he deems inappropriate. Single-White-Female (24) Seeks Female, Pregnant Mother of 3, College Student,

Foreign Exchange Asian Woman—all are crossed out, if only out of necessity.

What seems like hours later, a young woman approaches, carrying a single plate with the toasted sandwich.

"Here you are, sir," she says, setting the plate before Tim.

"Thank you," he smiles.

When he looks up, he finds himself looking into the face of a young, attractive woman. Normally, older women with horribly-curly hair or teenage boys with bad acne serve him, not someone as young or beautiful as this girl. Her long, black hair—dyed, badly at that—curls down one shoulder and stops at a prominent breast that bulges out the front of the cafe's uniform.

"Did you need anything else?" the young woman asks.

"Uh... no." He blushes, lifting his pen to tap the paper in hopes that she has not noticed his stares. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," she says, about to turn. The tilt of her body shifts her hair, revealing her nametag for the first time. It reads, Shelby. "Hey... wait a minute. Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"You wouldn't happen to be the man in the classified sections, would you? The man who's renting out his extra room?"

"That would be me," he smiles, offering his hand. "Timothy Artsun at your service, ma'am."

"Oh, thank God," she sighs, taking his hand in both of hers. "I'm Shelby, Shelby Donald. I've been looking for a place to stay for months."

"I'm guessing your search hasn't gone well then?"

"No, not really. It... it's just... well, my mother, she's very overbearing, and... I just want to get out of the house."

"Well, tell you what," he says, reaching over to grab one of the cafe's business cards. "If you'll give me your name and phone number, I'll get an interview scheduled."

"You're a lifesaver," Shelby sighs, accepting the card when Timothy offers it. "Thank you. When can I expect a call?"

"By tonight, at the latest."

"Thank you, Mr. Artsun. I appreciate it."

With one last nod, Shelby turns and darts for the kitchen just as someone begins to yell for her to get back to work.

Timothy looks down, smirks, and slides the card into his breast pocket.

*Yeah, he thinks. She's the one.*

Upon arriving home, Tim sets the card beside the phone and begins the ever-dreadful waiting process. Naturally, he's learned patience throughout his life, but he'd be the first to admit that even he has a hard time waiting to call a very attractive, very young woman.

*Remember, he thinks, just because I've got her number doesn't mean I'm going to accept her.*

Just because a woman is attractive doesn't mean she has a lot of money.

Then again, she could always be working the streets.

He chuckles at his thought and makes his way to the fridge. There, he pulls out a cherry-amber bottle filled with homemade brew from his friend Mat. His friend's alcohol always seems to hit the spot, especially since he's able to professionally brew it at the liquor store across the street.

After settling down in his recliner, he turns the TV on and browses through the guide until he comes across the painting channel. From there, he leans back, tips the bottle to his lips, and sighs as a man begins to sketch the rough lines of a sunrise over a mountain with a lead pencil.

*I need to paint more, he thinks, taking another swig of the cherry-tasting brew. I don't do it enough.*

His will to paint seemed to have died when Sherry passed. He still doesn't know why after all these years, but he's always held hope that it would come back. In his younger days, he'd been quite the painter, even going so far as to display his art at local exhibitions. He'd been praised for his talents. A critic had even gone so far as to write an article about him—Timothy Artsun, a young, 'budding' talent that was 'sure to take the world by storm' in a few years time. Sadly, though, he'd sold most of his paintings in an auction after Sherry's passing, throwing away most any chance of a life at fame and talent-driven luxury. Some work he kept to himself, others he donated to a good cause. Mothers Against Drunk Driving, the city for better safety improvements, the people who came to help him in his time of need—what use did he have for his work if it only sat in closets, rotting away like the rest of him?

As he thinks about his past and how most of his livelihood went to the grave with his dead wife, he remembers Shelby, the girl who wants to move in with him. He thinks about the way he looked at her badly-dyed hair, her well-endowed breasts, how Sherry would have felt had she been alive, and how he would have felt should he have been caught.

*It doesn't matter now. Sherry's gone... forever.*

He tips the bottle, if only in memory of his wife.

Hours later, he opens his eyes as he awakes from a drunken stupor. Amber bottle still in hand, he pushes the recliner's footrest back into its mortal tomb and staggers into the kitchen. There, he sees the Memory Café's business card that Shelby wrote her phone number on.

*I have to call her*, he decides, setting the bottle down.

It seems as though the glass has become a part of himself, as he feels distance when he sets it down on the opposite counter. He stares, mesmerized by the slight amount of liquid that rests on the bottom, but doesn't extend his hand to grasp it. There's no need for alcohol—not even a slight sip—when he calls Shelby.

Picking up the cordless phone, he lifts the business card, squints—cursing himself for not grabbing his glasses before making the trek into the kitchen—and begins to dial the number. A one, a few fives, and a three later, the phone is ringing in his head.

Ten rings later, just as Timothy is ready to hang up the phone, it clicks.

"Hello?" Shelby asks.

"Hello," Timothy says. "This is Tim Artsun, from earlier."

"Oh. Hi, sir. I was wondering when you'd call."

"Sorry, that's my fault. I fell asleep."

"It's ok. I mean, it's not like I've been sitting by the phone waiting for you to call. It's just... I... wait, I mean..."

"It's all right," he laughs, reaching up to scratch the mess of stubble on his chin. He makes a mental note to shave. "I'd love for you to come over and see the apartment. It'll give you a chance to check the place out, and besides—we can get to know each other a little more."

"All right... where do you live again?"

"It's the apartment building right across the street from Memory. I'm on the third floor."

"I didn't know you lived so close," Shelby laughs. "I won't even have to drive to work anymore. I mean, if you decide to let me live with you. Not that I expect you to just pick me or anything, sir, because I would never do that. I..."

"Don't worry," he smiles. "I'll expect you in... a half hour or so?"

"That'll work," the young woman says. "Besides, I need to shower and get ready anyway."

"All right. Thanks, Shelby. See you then."

"Thank you, sir. Goodbye."

He clicks the off button.

"Hey, Mat!" Timothy calls, rapping on the glass door with his fist. "Open up!"

"Who is it?"

"It's Tim!"

Mat—a middle-aged man of thirty with graying hair and too-dark beard shadow—makes his way out of the shadowed depths of the liquor store. He sets a hand over his eyes, glances out the window, and smiles when he sees Tim.

"Don't be a stranger," the man laughs, opening the door to let him in.

"Yeah. I've been a bit of one lately, haven't I?"

"You have," Mat agrees, "but that's all right. What can I do ya for, old man?"

"Ha ha, very funny." Tim smiles and walks to where Mat keeps his wine. He sets a finger on one of the glass bottles and traces its edge, marveling at the smoothness. "Got anything I'd like?"

"I've got any and everything you could possibly imagine. Why? You lookin' to have a party?"

"Something like that."

Mat raises his eyebrows.

"What?" Tim laughs, taking a bottle from its rack.

"Tell me what you've got cooking in that old head of yours."

"I've got someone coming to the apartment tonight."

"Oh? And who might this someone be?"

"A young lady that works next door."

"Hot damn," Tim laughs, bending to clap his knee. He whistles soon after, a habit Tim has come to detest. "You've got a *girl* comin' over?"

"For your information, she's a perfectly-grown woman," he says, lifting the apple-green bottle so he can read its flavor. "I hate the way you call women girls. It makes us old men sound like perverts. And why the hell are you starting to name your drinks after women? 'Snow White?' What's next? One for each dwarf?"

"Oh, that'll come later," Mat grins, slapping an arm around his friend's shoulder. "Tell you what. Since you've got a lady coming over, I'll give you this bottle for free. It's a bit of vodka mixed in with apple extract. Tastes just like juice, but rolls over the tongue like pudding."

"I assume that's a good thing?"

"Hell yes it is!" Mat slaps Tim's back, pushing him toward the door. "Go on—get back home, you crazy old bastard."

"All right, all right," he laughs, raising the bottle in friendly toast. "I'll get going. Thanks again, Mat."

"No problem, buddy."

Tim leaves the store thinking it isn't him who's crazy.

Shelby arrives later that evening, dressed in a short blouse and a skirt. Timothy smiles when he opens the door to her young, unsure face.

"Hello," he says, offering a hand. "It's good to see you, Shelby."

"It's good to see you too, sir."

She grips his hand—not hard, but firm. The confident handshake reminds him of his wife.

*No, he thinks. Don't start thinking about that.*

All he needed was to think about Sherry at a time like this.

"So," he said, making his way into the kitchen. "I suppose I should ask you to elaborate on why you're looking for an apartment."

"My mother," Shelby says, starting to seat herself in one of the bar chairs. She stops when she realizes her action. "May I?"

"You may," he smiles, already pleased with her proper language.

While Shelby settles into her seat—welcoming herself into an environment that may soon be her home—Tim opens the fridge and pulls out the bottle of Snow White.

"You never said why you were looking for an apartment," he repeats, looking up at Shelby as he reaches for the bottle opener.

"Oh... that." She sighs, but soon returns the lost breath to her chest. "I mentioned it earlier in the restaurant, but my mother, she's very overbearing. She thinks I need to get a real job, but as far as I'm concerned, I'm lucky to have the job I've got."

"It's a miracle anyone can get a job in this economy," he agrees, setting the bottle and the opener on the bar in front of Shelby. "Would you like a drink?"

"Oh, no. I couldn't."

"And why not?"

"I... uh... I've never..."

"Ah," he smiles. "Then you're in luck. I've got something with a mild taste."

He doesn't bother to reveal that the alcohol is vodka, nor does he bother to mention that the store which he bought it from is well-known

for its strong drink. He grabs the opener, drives it into the cork, then stops, glancing up at his guest.

"Why don't you open it?" he offers, pushing the bottle forward. "Might as well make your first time memorable."

"Doesn't the cork fly off though?"

"If you're careful."

Shelby smiles, taking hold of the bottle with one hand and the opener in the other. With one firm tug, the cork pops off, while foam erupts from Snow White in a blissful orgasm. The young woman laughs and pushes it away when the foam starts to run down the sides.

"It'll stop in a minute," he says, walking to the cupboards. He has to stand on the very tips of his toes to reach for the cabinet that lies in the corner, where he keeps his wine and champagne glasses. He pulls the two most expensive—and ornate—ones from the center compartment. His and Hers, they had once been, when his wife had still been alive. He shakes the thought from his head and sets them on the bar before closing the cupboards. "Thank you, Shelby."

"For what?"

"Well, for one," he says, allowing her to fill his glass, "pouring us a drink. And for two, coming to visit me this evening."

"I told you I would. Besides—I don't have much choice in the matter if I want to get away from my mother."

"Why does she think you need a real job?"

"She thinks I need to pay off art school as soon as I can."

"So you're a student," he smiles, sipping his drink. "What medium do you specialize in?"

"Painting, mostly."

"Ah. I admire you, ma'am."

"Why?"

"Because an artist who actively pursues his or her talent and continues to improve it is one who cares about their art. It's not often you see someone so dedicated."

"I'm not dedicated—just bored."

They both laugh. Shelby glances at Tim, then reaches for her drink with tentative fingers. They tap the glass as though playing a piano before they still, when the young woman lifts her drink to her lips.

"I'm not just shooting that off the top of my head either, Shelby. I really do admire you. I used to paint once."

"Once?" she frowned. "What happened?"

"My wife. She... uh... she passed."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you, but there's no need to apologize. "

"It's sad when someone loses someone they love. You can't help but feel for them, you know?"

He nods and lifts his glass. He makes no attempt to disguise the length of the drink he takes.

"If you want," Shelby says, "we can paint together. I always carry a set of paints, so all we'd need is a canvas."

"You carry paints in your purse?"

"Some people carry cell phones, other carry Chihuahuas. I just happen to carry paints."

Tim watches her for a moment, trying to discern her purpose. When he finds no ill intent behind her hazel eyes, he nods.

"All right," he says. "Let me go get my canvases. They should be in the back room here."

It's the first time he's painted since Sherry died. Like a fish out of water, he struggles, first attempting to wet his brush, then dip it into a paint. Gradually, with Shelby's gentle coaxing and encouragement, he is able to do the thing he has always wanted to do.

Slowly, and with effort that seems to come out of nowhere, he traces the edges of a far-off mountain, making sure to add its jagged peaks and ledges before moving to the foreground. There, he arranges a field, adding minute details as they come along.

"Do you live nearby?" he asks, looking up at Shelby. She's since pulled her badly-dyed hair back into a ponytail. Grey and Robin's Egg Blue paint speckle her face.

"The next town over," she smiles, reaching up to scratch her chin with the end of her brush. "If you want to know the truth, I'm not just trying to get away from my mother. I've been looking for my uncle as well."

"Your uncle?"

"Uh huh. He said that if I ever needed anything to go to him." She stops to consider what she's said, then sighs, indifferent to the older man she's now confessing to. "Well, so far, I've had very little luck."

"He lives in the area then?"

"I think so... at least, he said he did. It's kinda sad when you don't even know where your own family lives, huh?"

"I suppose so."

He shrugs, glances at her painting—which appears to be a haunted seascape—before returning to his own. He lifts his glass of wine and sips it, just as Shelby has for the past few minutes. A buzz starting at the base of his forehead spreads its gelatinous tendrils, grasping for the deeper parts of his mind. He knows this angel of mercy will soon knock him down—not dead, but out.

“Are you having fun?” Shelby asks, smiling when she catches him looking.

“I... I guess,” he frowns, looking at his painting. “I’m a little rusty, but I think I’m getting there.”

“Rusty?” she laughs. “If that’s rusty, I don’t even know what mine is.”

He glances at her painting, but doesn’t say anything. Hers is beautiful, with its smooth strokes, blues and greys. His, however, seems rough, with its jagged edges and its unintentional splotches of color. He stops to consider how an artist is always wondering, comparing his old work to his new. The new, while better, always seems to lack something the old has, at least until it settles even within the dark expanse of an artist’s oceanic mind. Ideas sift from the bottom, floating to the surface, then spring into action, crawling onto the land to evolve their arms and legs. That idea, once stably planted in the artist’s figurative world, continues to evolve until it becomes sentient and can speak for itself. Maybe that is why he believes he is rusty. Maybe it’s because he believes these strange, new places in his mind cannot be compared to the old, deserted islands that have long since fallen into another man’s hands.

“It’s starting to get to me,” he chuckles.

“What?”

“The alcohol.”

Shelby says nothing. A quick glance at her face shows her insecurity. From her pursed lips to the slight squint of her eyes, it’s obvious his words have had some impact on her sense of calm and home.

“You can stay here tonight,” he says, setting the paintbrush in its cup of water. “I have to get to bed.”

“I can leave, sir.”

“There’s no need to call me sir,” he says, walking toward the hall. “And there’s no need to drink and drive.”

“Which room is it?”

“Second on your right.”

He slides into his bedroom without telling her goodnight.

Soon after, he climbs into bed, wondering why he can't shake the image of tearing Shelby's clothes from her body.

*The alcohol, he thinks. Yeah... that's it.*

He falls asleep with that same thought and image.

The following morning, he wakes to a silent apartment. It's not uncommon—considering he has lived alone for so long—but with a guest in the house, he expects something—the coffee maker running, the TV blaring, the whisper of bare feet across the kitchen linoleum.

He hears none of this.

Instead of dwelling on this perturbing silence, he rolls out of bed and heads for the master bathroom. Once inside, he peers at himself in the mirror. Harsh, grey stubble lines his cheeks and jaw, while his hair lies in disarray, pressed to his scalp on one side, standing on the other. He reaches up to scratch his torso and nearly shivers when he feels the tickle of hair against his fingers.

*It's nothing, he thinks, glancing down at the thin layer of grey that covers his broad chest.*

For a moment, he wonders why he's shivered, but doesn't dwell on it. He turns, parts the shower curtain, and starts the bathtub first, as always. He bends and lets his hand rest under the running water, waiting until it becomes lukewarm before running the shower. It's a habit he's religiously had since his teenage years, after he stepped into a scalding-hot shower without first testing its warmth. Faint blotches still line his arms where the water ate away at the upper layers of his skin.

Reaching down, he slides the waistband of his briefs under his testicles before shrugging them off his legs. Once at the end of one foot, he kicks it into the corner—his official dirty laundry basket—before stepping into the lukewarm water.

With the faint touch of water on his face come the memories of last night. He and Shelby, drinking and painting, talking about her long-lost uncle and how she's been searching for him; his first painting in years, a bleak sunrise against a harsh mountain; and hers, a lonely sea that threatens to swallow any who look at it whole. He breathes in the faint mist that rests in the air and sighs when he feels it dampen his throat. It's been years since he's filled a glass of water and set it on his nightstand. The refreshing dampness is heaven after a long night.

Once finished with his shower, he shaves, brushes his teeth, then walks into his bedroom and dresses before returning to the bathroom to

comb his hair. Afterward, he steps out of the bedroom and into the hall, where he walks into the kitchen.

It isn't until he turns to face the living room that he finds Shelby.

Naked, bloody from the waist down, she lays sprawled along one of the couches, head tilted to one side. He drops the coffee cup in his hand and doesn't even blink when he hears it shatter. All he sees is Shelby, sprawled out along the couch, blood painting her nether region and a thick slime coating her chest.

Without a moment's hesitation, he bounds into the room and to her side, but stops before he can crouch to take her pulse.

Scrawled across her chest in thick, red paint, the word 'uncle' starts on her right breast, the U encapsulating her nipple in an incomplete sphere before the rest of the word continues across her chest. The final letter—E—fully captures her left nipple, which appears to have been gnawed or torn off.

"Oh my God," he breathes.

He thinks of how he should have grabbed the phone and dialed 9-1-1 when he first found her, then remembers the episodic events of trauma that enter a person's mind after a tragic event. When he first heard of Sherry's death, he hadn't been able to believe it. He'd asked the state trooper who'd come to his door if he was sure it was his wife who had been in an accident, and adamantly refused to believe so until the man lifted Sherry's bloody driver's license. He'd collapsed with the truth—had fallen to his knees and stared at the floor, tracing lines of dirt that had been invisible until then—and still hadn't been able to believe what he had heard, not until he saw the body in the dead flesh and blood.

*Sherry*, he whispers, lips tracing the name in silence. *No*.

It isn't Sherry who lies on the couch, brutalized and long since dead—it is a young woman named Shelby, whom he met at the café across the street just yesterday. He'd eaten a cheese-and-tomato sandwich served by her very hands no more than twenty-four hours ago, had painted, spoke, and drank wine with her last night. How could she be dead? And how, by all means, was she covered in blood?

*You know*, he thinks, but doesn't want to believe it.

Uncle—that single word—is written across her chest, the paint long-since dried from time. Her eyes—glazed over in death—stare at the ceiling, while her tongue bloats the inside of her mouth, peeking out from between pale, red lips. Her stomach—once smooth—is bloated, pregnant with her child of decay.

Taking a few steps back, he turns and locates her purse, which sits on the counter near the microwave. He grabs it without hesitation, not bothering to stop and consider what the police will say as he tears through its tiny compartment, coming away with extra brushes, her driver's license, and a portable phonebook.

Then, as if something has struck him with divine intervention, he pulls out a small, hardback journal that has 'Visual Diary' written over the front. Below its title is a picture of Shelby herself, with the words 'My Life in Color' scrawled in gold cursive just beneath it.

*This is*, he thinks, but stops, not sure whether or not to open it. *Yeah. This is it.*

Taking a deep breath, he closes his eyes to gather his nerve before opening the diary.

Inside, as with all diaries, is her information—her name, her age, her hometown, her current address. The latter has been erased, messily at that. The word 'Maple' stands out at the very end, right where he supposes the word 'street' is supposed to be. The next page reveals a picture of Shelby as a young girl—a teenager with bad acne and braces. 'The start of my visual diary' is written off to the side. A bad attempt at a smiley face sits below it. He ignores this and continues through the pages, only briefly glancing at pictures of horses, friends, and what looks to be bra burning, until he comes across the final completed pages.

A woman—captured in rage and surprise—is the centerfold of one page.

'My mother,' the caption reads, 'is a witch.'

Tim shivers, suppressing the urge to reach down and rub the gooseflesh from his arms. He does, however, reach up to scratch an itch that rests below his left eye, the one he's always seemed to have trouble with.

*Your bad eye*, his father whispers, the memory so alive the man's breath is on his ear. *Watch the girls, sonny—you only got one chance to put your pecker in its place.*

"Quit it," he says, reaching up to rub his temple. "It's not... not that."

He looks up at Shelby and wonders. Could he have killed her? Could he have stripped her of her clothes, raped her until she bled, then possibly strangled her before writing his message across her chest?

*Why uncle though?* he thinks, trying as hard as he can to not look at the dead woman in his apartment. *Why...*

It hits him, hard, like a bullet to the brain. He stops moving, breathing, thinking, even moving as the revelation begins to sink in.

Shelby—a girl of about eighteen, nineteen, or possibly twenty—looking for an apartment in the city to find the uncle who said he'd help her through anything.

A woman—accused of witchcraft by her daughter—infuriated on one page of the diary.

*Your sister always had a bad temper,* his father whispers in his head, gripping the back of his hair like he used to when drunk. *Lucky. You don't seem to have that.*

With hesitation he has not felt in years, he turns the page.

A picture of Shelby's mother and a man with graying hair slides out from between the two pages.

'Gotta remember,' the caption reads, 'that uncle's been a wreck since aunt Sherry died.'

The diary slips from his hand, where it lands beside the broken remnants of the coffee cup. The picture—which has revealed itself in the blink of an eye—seems to float, gliding on invisible currents of air as it comes to rest at his feet.

"Shelby," he breathes.

Shelby, who sat in his lap at family reunions; Shelby, who used to show him Picassos when she was five; Shelby, who, after a horrifyingly-violent menstrual cycle, came knocking on the door in the middle of night. She'd been twelve then, and her mother, crazed with religion and attention deficit disorder, had expelled her from the house, claiming the devil had come to take her child into the pits of hell. He'd lived in the country then, almost ten years ago.

*Shelby...*

He'd moved after saying goodbye, his sister barred contact, and he hadn't seen Shelby since her thirteenth birthday.

*How?*

Then, before he could finish the thought, he sees it pinned to the fridge—a note, scrawled in almost-illegible writing.

*Change of prescription,* it reads. Signed, Dr. Greene.

## New Section

### She Who Whispers in my Ear

Everything had been normal, really. He had a beautiful baby boy, he had a wonderful wife, and he had a good life.

But, as life often foretells, something went wrong.

Michael had always had a love/hate relationship with his wife, but for the most part, he'd always concentrated on the love. Who wanted to concentrate on the bad part of a relationship—the part that always made you wonder why you were buying your wife diamond earrings you couldn't afford or why that 'little pink dress' she saw in the mall was worth more than you made in three months of work, including overtime? Why would someone want to worry about that?

So, instead of dreading on it, Michael didn't. He focused on the good—his pride and joy, his baby son. Pal James Michelson—born at seven-oh-two in the evening, weighing six pounds and three ounces—was the one thing that Michael truly loved in his life.

He made a positive effort to spend as much time as he could with his son, but he had to work. Since his wife considered herself too 'delicate' to even begin to lift a finger, he brought the bread home. He worked seven to eight shifts at a local hardware store, where he slaved the day away by cutting boards and making nails. He didn't do it for his wife though; he did it for his baby boy.

When Pal was seven, Michael caught his wife cheating on him for the last and final time. He told her that he wasn't going to let her—a slut who hung around with men who did god knew what—be around his boy, a boy who knew and *needed* nothing of the outside world.

The same day, she took all her jewelry and walked.

That was only the beginning of Michael's nightmare.

Three weeks after his wife left, Michael saw a woman standing in the middle of the road. It was almost midnight, but her figure was heavily illuminated by the street lamps. She wore a one-piece dress that ended in a tattered mess at her upper thighs, wore her dark hair in labyrinths of knots, and bore a costume of pale skin.

Pal was sleeping on the couch, dreaming of things only little boys could dream, while Michael stood at a window and watched the strange figure. She merely stood there beneath the halo of light, swaying to whatever silent tune rode along the road.

*Who is she?*

She couldn't be anyone important, could she? How often did strange women who danced under streetlamps in the middle of the night turn out to be of any importance?

*Probably one of those nutty people from the woods.*

Quite recently, the authorities had released a statement telling local citizens not to go into the forests or walk the wildlife trails. Apparently, a cult had taken the woods as their grounds. A few hikers that had been missing for a couple of days were found with their faces torn off.

*Exactly why I don't take Pal with me on my walks.*

He didn't walk anywhere anymore, really. He usually dropped his son off at a nursery and went to the gym by himself.

Since he'd been thinking about the woods, the cult that was supposedly in them, and whether or not he got enough exercise, he hadn't noticed that the strange woman had stopped swaying back and forth, not until the lamppost started flickering.

*"Go away," he whispered. "Leave us alone."*

The woman stopped moving.

Michael froze.

*She couldn't have heard me, could she? No, she couldn't have. I'm in here, in the house. She's out there.*

Regardless, the woman still stared.

He'd been caught in her bizarre trap.

After one final look, he pulled the curtains across the windows. He made sure the door was locked with both bolt and chain before walking to the couch. There, he bent down and pulled his son into his arms.

*"Daddy?" Pal asked. "What's wrong?"*

*"Nothing, Tiger. We're just going to bed."*

*"In your room?"*

*"Uh huh."*

When Michael entered his room, he closed the door with his foot, setting his son on the bed. After removing his shoes, he pulled the blinds over the windows and crawled into bed next to Pal.

He didn't think he could hold the baby any tighter than he already was.

The following morning, Michael crawled out of bed, showered, dressed, and was ready to leave for work before he remembered that he didn't need to leave. The thought put him at ease. He didn't want to have to drop Pal off at daycare today. All he wanted to do was spend the

day with his boy. Maybe he'd take his son to the zoo. Yeah—that'd be fun.

*At least it'll keep my mind off things.*

No matter what he did, he couldn't shake the image of the strange woman swaying under the lamppost from his mind. He hadn't thought about calling the cops until now. Really, what could a woman do to him, a man who was six-foot-three and weighed a good two-hundred pounds?

*Unless she had a gun.*

It would be a sad, sad day when a woman broke into his home, held him at gunpoint, and demanded money or something similar. Sad because it would not only make him feel like less of a man, but because he would know that he hadn't kept both him and his son safe.

"You're a good dad," he whispered. "You take care of your little boy."

He turned to look at his sleeping son.

There—in that little body—lay his whole life.

If he could be called one thing—if he could be given the grandest title a man could be given—he wanted to be a good dad.

"Look, Daddy! A girfaffe!"

"That's a giraffe, son," Michael laughed.

He gripped his little boy's legs, making sure he wouldn't fall off his shoulders. Not too far away from where Michael stood, the large animal plucked leaves off a huge tree. It actually moved toward the fence and peered at Pal once it took notice of the little boy's ecstatic laughs.

"Girfaffe, girfaffe!" Pal giggled. "Look Daddy! The girfaffe's looking at me!"

"It sure it," Michael laughed.

Thankfully, and to Michael's relief, the animal kept its distance, watching Pal with bulging brown eyes. It ran a long, sloppy tongue across its lips, ducked its head, and scratched it against the post. Michael didn't think it would hurt Pal. Besides—if it got too close for comfort, he would simply move away from the exhibit.

"Wanna go look at the other animals, Tiger?"

"Yeah, Daddy."

Before Michael could walk off, Pal said, "Bye, girfaffe."

"Did you have fun at the zoo, buddy?"

"Yeah, Daddy. It was great! The girfaffe looked at me!"

*I'll be hearing that for the next month, he thought, but smiled.*

Pal squirmed in delight in the passenger seat, holding the stuffed 'girfaffe' Michael bought for him at the gift shop. Somewhere—most likely between the lion's den and the lemur cage—Pal decided that he wanted to take a giraffe home with him. But when Michael explained that Pal couldn't actually take a giraffe home, Pal's eyes got all watery and he started crying. Unlike normal children, Pal didn't bawl—he just got tears, which made the guilt of having a non-bawling, still-crying son sting all the more.

In the end, Michael caved and bought the giraffe.

*I'm such a sucker.*

That didn't matter though. He'd do anything to make his little boy happy.

He stopped at a red light, trying to decide what he would make for dinner. He'd gotten behind on his shopping in the past two weeks.

"Hey, Tiger," he said, looking over at his kid. "Want to go eat somewhere?"

"Where, Daddy?" Pal's eye got big and wide.

"Well... I don't know. Where do you want to go?"

Pal looked down at his giraffe. For a moment, he simply stared at the stuffed animal, then lifted his head to meet his father's eyes.

"Can we go to Happy Burger?"

"Yup," he grinned. "Happy Burger it is."

Pal screeched in joy as Michael merged with traffic.

Michael ate a double cheeseburger with fries, while Pal recently finished one of their 'itty bitty' burgers and a few chicken nuggets. Michael himself hadn't started eating until Pal went into the playpen.

At the table he sat at, he could keep an eye on his little boy. Since the restaurant and the playpen were separated by a short wall and glass, he could watch his son's each and every move.

*At least he's where I can see him.*

The playpen was safe as could be, with see-through tubes and a thin pool of plastic balls. Really, there's wasn't any way to get hurt in the pen; unless, of course, someone tripped, or hit their head on something, or went down the slide the wrong way...

"Your son is fine," he muttered, tearing a piece out of his hamburger.

Pal wouldn't get hurt in the playpen. And even if he did manage to get a little bump or bruise, he could be there in little under a minute. The door was *right there*.

Just when Michael's parental worries started getting to the best of him, Pal ran out of the playroom and slid into the seat opposite his father.

"Hi, Daddy."

"Hey," he smiled. "You almost ready to go, champ?"

"You're still eating though."

"I can finish this at home. I was just asking if you wanted to go home."

"We can go home if you want."

Michael rolled the remaining piece of his hamburger into its paper and set his fries into the bag, along with Pal's few remaining chicken nuggets.

*Thank God we're leaving.*

At home, Michael finished his burger and fries. Pal said he wanted to wait until later to finish his nuggets, so Michael set them in a tub along with a few remaining fries. The boy didn't eat much. Michael could heat up the chicken and the fries and give that to him for dinner.

*I should've thought to get more food at the Happy Burger.*

Oh well. He couldn't do anything about it now.

Out of nowhere, the TV came on.

"Hey, Pal!" he called. "Can you turn that down a little bit?"

"Yeah!"

Thankfully, Pal did as was asked and listened without question.

When he looked out the window, Michael saw someone crossing the street from his house. At first, he thought the woman who had been outside his house last night was the one crossing the street.

He took another look to make sure.

A mother—two children in tow—stepped onto the concrete walkway just opposite his house.

*Not the strange one,* he thought, then walked into the living room to join his son.

They watched TV late into the evening. At six, evening crept upon their neighborhood. By the time the pale grey turned into a dark blue, their fellow neighbors were just starting to come home; and by the time it became completely dark, everyone's lights were on.

Pal had fallen asleep in Michael's arms. Michel thought about moving—to go make dinner or look at a few letters and bills he'd received

earlier in the week—but didn't. His son would surely wake, even with the slightest movement.

*You're such a good kid*, he thought, stroking Pal's brown locks.

Some people said kids were your next eighteen years of worry, while some claimed those years were pure bliss. Others implied those years could tear you apart, while some absolutely hated it—couldn't wait for their kids to get out of their house. But unlike most people, Michael's adoration for his son extended beyond most fathers' expectations. The normal father went to work, brought the bread in, made dinner every few nights and took the kids out while the stay-at-home or part-time-working mom stayed home and relaxed. But Michael, he liked to think of himself as much more than that.

*Super Dad* were the words that came to mind—the dad that did *any* and *everything* he could for his kid. He worked long hours to keep them sheltered, made dinner to keep them fed, and doled attention on his son as if he were a young prince in a foreign, Arabian country. How much better of a dad could he be?

*I'm being the best he can. That's all that matters. At least to me, anyway.*

His wife was paying minimal child support, but that didn't matter. Michael made more than enough money for the two of them. It wasn't like he was spoiling the boy to no end.

*Unlike that whore. Couldn't buy her a diamond necklace without her saying it didn't sparkle or the color wasn't perfect.*

He took a deep breath, expelled it, then tried to calm himself down. He always got worked up when he thought about Tiffany.

*You need to quit dwelling on what she did to you. She's gone; you can't do anything about it now.*

Good words spoken from a good man—his lawyer.

"Mmm hmm," Pal mumbled, shifting in his lap. He opened his eyes and took in the room. "Daddy?"

"Yeah?"

"When did it get dark?"

"While you were sleeping."

Pal rolled over. Michael smiled.

"You ready for dinner, buddy?"

"Ok."

"You want your chicken nuggets and some fries?"

"There's fries, Daddy?"

"I didn't eat all of mine."

"Ok."

Michael waited for Pal to crawl off him before he rose. After walking into the kitchen, he got Pal's nuggets and fries out and heated them up before setting them in front of the boy, who'd followed him into the kitchen without muttering a word.

"They're hot," he warned.

"I know, Daddy."

Michael couldn't help but smirk.

*The 'I know' of the seven-year-old world*, he thought, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Aren't you gonna eat?" Pal asked.

"I will, don't worry."

Pal picked up a fry, blew on it, then stuck it in his mouth.

*Ah*, he thought, leaning against the counter. *To be a dad.*

When he got up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom, Michael saw her standing in the street. Like the previous night, she swayed back and forth, still in that tattered dress and without shoes.

*This is getting out of hand.*

Maybe he *should* call the police this time. *But*, the only thing preventing him was the idea that the woman had friends up in the woods. What if her fellow cult—worshippers, church, whatever—took notice and wanted to do something to him? Of course, they wouldn't go after a big man like himself, but they would go after the next best thing.

*I'll just leave her alone for now.*

She wasn't harming him *or* his son, so he could leave her be, for the time being.

"Better go sleep with Pal tonight," he sighed.

After making his way out of the living room and down the hall, he slipped into his boy's room, crawled into bed, and fell asleep.

"Daddy? Daddy? Wake up, Daddy."

"What is it?" he yawned.

"Why are you sleeping with me?"

Michael opened his eyes. Last night a blur, he somehow managed to remember walking into Pal's bedroom, but not crawling under the covers.

"Guess I just got tired and fell asleep," he smiled.

"That's ok. I just wondered why you were in here."

He nodded, but closed his eyes. He couldn't be sure of how much he slept last night, but he *did* know that it hadn't been a whole lot. Thoughts

of a woman with a tattered dress and a pale complexion had filled his waking thoughts and his sleeping dreams.

*Maybe I'm going nuts.*

Maybe, or maybe someone had really been there, underneath the orange glow of a lamppost. Maybe, just maybe...

"Daddy?"

"Yeah, Tiger?"

"I'm hungry."

He made French toast and sausage for breakfast. Pal would eat the toast, but not the sausage. The sausage was mostly for Michael, but he'd eat a little of the toast as well. Anything to appease Pal.

*At least I don't have to fight tooth and nail with him to eat.*

Pal sat at the table, watching cartoons. Every so often, he'd yip in glee or cry in despair at something. Michael smiled each and every time. He liked the fact that Pal had his limits with his noise. He normally didn't make noise for the heck of it. The only time he really had an outburst or said something was when something excited or scared him.

"Hey, Daddy?"

"Yeah, big guy?"

"Breakfast almost done?"

"Yup. Just a few more minutes."

Michael finished the toast, then rolled the sausage onto a plate.

"All right," he said, setting Pal's plate in front of him. "There you go."

"Where's the syrup?"

"Oh. I'll get it."

Michael opened a nearby cupboard. After scrambling through the different tubes and bottles of fillings, sauces and syrups, he found the maple stuff his son liked.

"Sorry. I forgot you liked maple syrup."

"It's ok, Daddy. Thank you."

As Michael stabbed a piece of sausage and bit the head off, Pal turned the big bottle of syrup down. He could barely hold it steady with his little hands, but he managed, pouring the maple syrup over his toast aplenty.

"Careful," Michael said. "Don't drop it."

"I won't."

When the little boy got the bottle back on the table, he hit the cap with his hands.

Syrup flew across the table and onto Michael's face.

At first, Pal wasn't sure whether to laugh or crawl under the table. But after Michael lifted a finger, wiped some syrup off his face, then stuck it in his mouth, Pal began giggling uncontrollably.

"Tastes good," Michael said, which threw Pal into more giggles. He himself started laughing shortly after.

He lived for those moments.

Usually, after three strikes, the umpire yells 'Strike! You're out!' But, sadly, there was no umpire outside his house, and even more disappointing, the woman was out in the street again, with no umpire to take her off his field.

*Maybe I should just buck up and call the cops,* he thought, running a hand over his face. *This is getting ridiculous.*

"I'll call them," he decided.

If it were only him living in the house, he wouldn't have to worry; he'd just let the woman do her own thing. *But,* he *wasn't* the only one in the house. Pal lived here too, and Michael *would not* let *anything* endanger him.

After backing into the kitchen, Michael called the local police department. He wouldn't call 9-1-1. The woman hadn't posed any danger to him yet, so why get law enforcement worked up over something?

After the receotuibust on the other end addressed herself, Michael told her about the woman and how tonight would be the third night in a row she had been standing outside his house.

"She's *standing* there?" she asked.

"Yes," Michael said. "She's just *standing* out there. I don't know who she is, but she's not one of my neighbors."

"Are you sure of that, sir?"

"I'm sure. She looks like she could be homeless. Her dress is tore up and she isn't wearing any shoes."

"Have you tried to approach her?"

"I'm afraid to. I have my seven-year-old son here with me."

"All right. I'll get someone over there. Can I have an exact address?"

After Michael recited his place of residence, he bade the woman goodnight. He slid the phone into its cradle and walked into the hallway so he could keep an eye on Pal.

*Door's still open,* he nodded. *Don't need to worry about him too much.*

As long as Pal was in plain view, Michael didn't have to worry about anything.

Within a few minutes, a police cruiser pulled into the driveway and approached the house. He went to the door, undid the bolt and chain—as always—and opened it.

“Hello, sir,” the man said. “I’m officer Wills. You said there was a woman standing under the lamppost a few minutes ago?”

“She’s been out there for the past three nights,” Michael said. “You didn’t see anyone?”

“Nope. She’s gone.”

Michael parted the nearby curtains.

Like the officer said, the woman was nowhere to be seen.

“Has she attempted to approach the house or bothered your property in any way?” the officer asked, drawing Michael’s eyes away from the window.

“No.”

“Has she expressed violence?”

“No. She just stands out there and sways back and forth.”

“But she hasn’t attempted to approach the house?”

“Not at all.” Michael sighed, running a hand over his forehead. “If it were just me here, I wouldn’t have called, or be concerned for that matter. I have a seven-year-old son, sir. I don’t want to put him in any unnecessary danger.”

“That’s understandable.” The officer took another look back outside. Apparently, his partner had remained in the cruiser to keep an eye on the area. “Can I come in and take a statement, sir? And could you describe the individual for me?”

“Yes, of course.” Michael opened the door a bit more. “Come in. It’s cold out there.”

Michael set a warm cup of coffee down in front of the officer after he went into the bedroom to put some clothes on. He hadn’t realized it was after midnight until the cup was firmly in front of the man.

“Sorry,” Michael said, sitting in his recliner. “I didn’t realize it was so late.”

“That’s fine,” Officer Wills smiled. He lifted the cup and took a short sip. “I appreciate it.”

“I appreciate you coming out here. I didn’t think it was necessary to call 9-1-1, since there wasn’t any immediate danger.”

“Either way, we’re here to protect you and your son.” Officer Wills set his scratch tablet on the coffee table and pulled a pen out of his pocket. “Can you recount everything you know about this woman? How

often she's been here and at what times, what she wears and what she does. Stuff like that?"

Michael began his story, starting with how he hadn't seen the woman until just a few days ago. He also mentioned his recent divorce. He wasn't exactly sure why, but he did anyway.

"Do you think your wife or the man she was cheating on you with may have something to do with this woman's sudden appearance?"

"Honestly, no, I don't. I don't know much of anything, really, except what I told you."

The officer nodded. He double-checked his notes, got Michael to sign the sheet, and stood.

"Would you like me to send another officer over?"

"I don't want to trouble you or anyone else."

"It wouldn't trouble me or anyone at all. We're here to keep you safe."

"If you think my problem merits someone being here, I'd appreciate someone keeping an eye on the house."

"Oh, I *definitely* think this merits someone being here," the officer said. "You know about the campers we found a month or so back. If this woman's part of that group, who's to say *what* those people would do to you, or your son for that matter."

With a nod, Michael gave the officer his thanks, shook his hand, and watched him walk back out to the cruiser, all the while thinking about what this whole thing was about.

"Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!"

"What is it?" he asked, sitting up. "I'm here, Pal."

"There's a police car in the front of our house!" Pal cried, jumping up and down in glee. "What're they here for? Are they taking you to jail? Did they find a bad guy?"

"No, they're not taking me to jail," Michael smiled. "Someone was walking around our house last night."

"Who was, Daddy?"

"I didn't see who it was; I just saw someone."

Pal shrugged, disappointed with not knowing who had been outside. Michael crawled out of bed, pulled some jeans up his legs, and walked into the bathroom. Pal followed him the whole way.

"Hey, buddy," he said, shooting some body spray under his arms. "Can you go outside and ask the policemen if they'd like to come in for some coffee?"

"Sure, Daddy!"

Pal was out of the house the next minute.

*That's my boy*, he thought, setting the body spray back in the medicine cabinet.

A moment later, he walked out of the bathroom just as two officers came into the house. Officer Wills held Pal in his arms, letting him examine his badge.

"I still have to make the coffee," Michael smiled, reaching back to rub his neck. "Can you guys wait a few minutes?"

"Yeah, that's no trouble," Officer Wills said. "Oh, Mr. Michelson, I didn't introduce you to my partner. This is Officer Daniels."

"Hello, sir," Daniels said, reaching out to shake Michael's hand.

"You want me to set you down, buddy?" Wills asked, readjusting his hold on Pal.

"Yes sir."

The man set Pal down, who—almost immediately—went to his father's side, gripping his pant leg.

"Are you making breakfast, Daddy?"

"Yeah, I'll make breakfast," he said. "Would you gentlemen like to stay?"

"Oh, no," Daniels said. "We couldn't do that."

"We don't want to put you out of your way," Officer Wills added.

"It's the least I could do to repay you for watching over the house," Michael smiled, ruffling Pal's hair. "Come on, buddy; you can help me make breakfast."

Ten minutes later, he had toast, eggs, sausage, and pancakes for Pal arranged across the kitchen counter.

"Thank you," Officer Wills said, which was soon followed by a thanks of Daniels' own.

"You guys don't have to thank me," Michael laughed. "I mean, I appreciate it, but don't worry—I'm more than happy to cook for you."

The officers nodded. Pal cut his pancakes up into small pieces, polite as ever.

*More polite than usual*, he thought, sticking a piece of sausage in his mouth.

He smiled at the thought, but quickly stuck another piece of food in his mouth to disguise it. Pal would ask what he was smiling about, then he'd have to make up some excuse so he wouldn't embarrass the kid.

*That's never fun. I know I didn't like being embarrassed in front of others when I was a kid.*

It didn't matter what age you were; you could be embarrassed by anything, especially if your parents weren't paying attention to what they were saying.

The remainder of the morning rolled on easily enough. When Wills and Daniels were finished with their meal, they stood and walked their plates to the sink.

"Thank you," both said.

"It's no problem," Michael replied, standing. He glanced at his watch. "I have to get to work."

"All right," Wills said. "We'll stick around for a little while, just to see if someone comes around."

"I take Pal to daycare, so you won't have to worry about either of us." Michael smiled, lifting his son into his arms. "Ready to go, buddy?"

"Yeah," Pal said, voice devoid of his usual excitement.

Michael sighed.

*I've gotta work to keep us alive, so... Just take it one step at a time.*

"Hey, Mike; how's it been going?"

Michael looked up from his boards to see his coworker Richard. He liked the guy enough, but didn't consider him a close friend.

"Good," he said, managing a smile. "Haven't been getting much sleep though."

"I heard the police were over at your house last night. What happened?"

"Wait. You heard that from *who*?"

"A few guys were talking about it. One of the officers is his younger brother."

"Must've been someone by the last name of Daniels." Michael rolled his eyes. He finished cutting his board and set it aside. "As to what happened, there's been someone hanging around the house."

"Who was it?"

"I don't know. Some loony woman."

"Why'd you call the cops?" Richard laughed. "A big guy like you could take on three assholes any day."

"I've got a kid you know?" Michael sighed, but shook his head. "She looked like shit, Rich. Her dress was all torn up and she wasn't wearing any shoes. I was afraid that she was part of the cult or whatever up in the

woods. If I was the only one living there, I wouldn't have even bothered calling the cops."

"But you've got a kid," the man nodded, scratching his beard. "I get ya."

Michael looked over his shoulder at the measly amount of work he had done today. The job could wear a person out, but he usually *never* had such a small workload to show for his first five hours of the day.

"My workload is shit," he sighed.

"Hey, don't worry about it." Rich set a hand on his shoulder. "You've got stuff on your mind. Everyone has their off days."

"It's not just the woman and the work. It's my ex, my kid... everything."

Richard didn't say anything at first. Instead, he waited a minute before squeezing Michael's shoulder.

"Me and some of the guys were going to go out and eat lunch. You want to come?"

"I don't know," he sighed. "I just..."

"It'll take your mind of things, hanging around with a few guys your age."

"I just don't want to bother you or your friends."

"Really, it's ok." Rich smiled. "Besides, you need a little break anyway."

When he got home from picking up Pal, he collapsed on the couch; *literally* collapsed. Pal kept grabbing his shirt and asking if he was ok, and he kept saying that he'd be fine. When Pal asked what happened, he said nothing, that he'd just had a long day at work.

While his little boy watched cartoons on their average-sized TV, Michael couldn't help but feel guilty. He *always* made an effort to make sure his little boy had had a good day and that he was happy when he got home. The fact that he did nothing more than lay on the couch didn't boost his self-esteem any.

"Hey, Pal, buddy," he said. "You don't care if I lay here for a few minutes, do you?"

"No, Daddy; it's ok. You can go to sleep."

He couldn't help but smile.

*Such a good kid*, he thought, rolling onto his back.

Now that he just lay there, he couldn't help but think about lunch with Rich and his friends. It'd been enjoyable. He hadn't expected the

guy to be so nice and friendly, nor had he expected Richard's few friends to be so warm and welcoming, more than eager to accept a new guy into their group.

Michael couldn't have asked for a better afternoon.

*I need to get a new job,* he thought, closing his eyes. *I'm spending too much time away from my son.*

Pal was at a crucial stage in his life, one that desired the utmost attention. Michael didn't know how he'd be raising the boy by himself, especially since he worked such long hours. He couldn't leave Pal at a day-care every day until he got old enough to take care of himself. What if, by leaving his son alone so much, he missed some crucial part of the parenting process, one that would forever affect Pal's development and character?

He'd talk to his son about it—tonight, at dinner.

If anyone could tell him how his son felt, it was Pal himself.

That night, he made dinner an occasion. Instead of something small, he made a rather large feast. Considering that he would only be feeding himself and his son, the amount of food would last them for a while.

Pal stared at the food. Whether in awe, suspense, or fright, Michael didn't know. He chuckled. His little boy's eyes kept darting back from the potatoes, to the beef stew, to the grilled cheese sandwiches and the glasses of milk and juice.

*Guess I outdid myself,* he thought, running a hand through his hair.

"Duh-Daddy?" Pal asked. "Who's gonna eat this?"

"Us," Michael smiled.

Pal turned back to the food. His mouth dropped open.

"All of it?"

"No," he laughed. "Not all of it. We'll save some for the rest of the week."

Pal nodded. Michael fixed his son a plate, then made his own before sitting down. The meal started simply enough, with just the two of them eating. Gradually though, Michael came to realize that he'd have to figure out what he was going to tell his son before he disappeared to watch cartoons or play with his toys for the rest of the night.

*Just ask him in a simple way,* he decided, sticking a forkful of potato in his mouth. *Pal's smart; he'll know how to explain what he's feeling.*

"Hey, buddy. Can I ask you something?"

"Yeah," Pal said, taking a bite out of his grilled cheese sandwich. "What is it?"

Michael smiled. He took a deep breath, formed what he would say in his mind, then let the breath out.

"You know I'm gone a lot," he began, "and I know I keep you in daycare for a long time. I know we don't spend enough time together."

"We do, Daddy."

"Not as much as we could, Pal." Michael sipped his orange juice.

"What did you want to ask me, Daddy?"

*Here goes.*

"I wanted to ask you if you wanted me to get another job," he said. "So we could spend some more time together."

Pal didn't know how to answer. Michael didn't expect an immediate response, but he didn't expect such a delayed one either. The questioning smile that had once been on Pal's face was now gone, replaced with pursed lips.

*Now I did it, he sighed. I asked him something he can't answer.*

Maybe his son wasn't as smart as Michael thought he was. Maybe he couldn't understand the question, but tried to for fear that he would look stupid.

"Pal?"

"You don't have to, Daddy," the little boy said. He reached for his soup, but stopped, thinking better.

"I'm asking if you want me to."

"Do *you* want to get a new job?"

He'd never thought of that. He liked his job. It wasn't hard or strenuous, he didn't hate the people, he'd just made a few new friends.

*Maybe the boss will change my hours. It's not too much to ask, considering I've been working there for seven years.*

"Daddy?"

"Yeah?"

"You ok?"

"Yeah. I'm ok."

"You don't have to get another job. It's ok."

Michael nodded.

In the back of his mind, he couldn't help but dwell on the fact that his little boy was fine with their current situation.

Officer Wills and Daniels left after dinner. It had to happen sooner or later—they had more important issues to tend to, and they couldn't stay forever. But when Michael went outside to get some fresh air, he saw

her. No longer standing under the lamppost, but at the end of his driveway, no more than twenty feet of space separated them.

"I don't want you here," he said. "Go away."

The woman said nothing. Like she'd done under the lamppost, she simply stood there, occasionally swaying with the breeze when it moved up.

"I said to go away," he repeated, this time in a louder—and unintentionally deeper—voice. "I'll call the cops again!"

The woman didn't say or do anything.

*Who are you?* he thought, running a hand over his arm. *What do you want from me?*

"If you want food or money, I'll give you some," he said, but immediately regretted his words. Someone could easily come around the side of the house, stick a knife at his kidney, and demand *everything* he had. "Just go away if you don't want anything."

The woman remained silent.

She swayed with the wind.

When Michael crept back into the house, he tried to burn the woman's image from his mind. Maybe *he himself* had summoned her here, just by pure energy. He *had* been thinking about her, and the cops *had* been over here. Maybe he brought her about with one simple image, one simple thought.

*That's a lot of energy,* he thought, running a hand across his face. *That's a lot to happen just because of some stupid whore.*

Everything seemed to be turning upside down. Here, he had just been discussing whether or not he should get a new job with his son; and now, after their wonderful dinner, the woman was outside his house again.

"Pal," he whispered.

His little boy wouldn't have heard him anyway. Pal slept on the couch, nearly curled into a ball. His little body rose and fell with each and every breath, an almost-silent symphony of Michael's only comfort.

*I'll sleep out here, with Pal.*

After settling himself on the floor below on the couch, he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

"Sir?" Michael asked, knocking on the office door before entering. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

He pushed the door open a little. Harold Grove, the boss, looked up from his computer.

"What is it, Michael?" the man asked.

"Do you have a minute?"

Harold nodded. Michael closed the door behind him, not sure whether to sit down or stand up. After a moment, Harold gestured to the chair.

"What do you need, Michael?"

"I've wanted to discuss my work hours, sir."

The boss didn't say anything. He merely waited for Michael to continue.

"I'd like them reduced, if possible."

"Reduced?" Harold asked.

"Yes."

"Why so sudden? Did something happen?"

"I need to spend more time with my boy," he sighed. "I've just realized that a little late."

Harold looked down at his hands. He didn't say anything.

*Now he's thinking, Michael thought, setting his hands on his knees. I wonder if he's going to give it to me or not.*

"How much would you like your hours reduced?" Harold asked.

Michael looked up.

*Did he really just ask me that?*

"How short could I go? I mean, I need to work, but a few hours less would be... Harold, it's just that seven in the morning 'till eight at night."

"I know." Harold nodded. "You're one of the hardest workers here."

"It's my son, sir. I'm afraid being apart from him is going to come back and bite me in the ass if I don't do something about it."

Harold nodded. He pulled out the employee sheet and looked it over.

"How about seven to one?" the man asked. "Will that work?"

Michael nodded.

"Yeah. That works better than anything."

"Well, that means you're done." Harold lifted his watch. "Go get your kid, Michael."

"Yes sir."

Michael stood. He was about to leave, but stopped.

He pushed his hand out for his boss.

"Thank you," he said. "It means a lot."

"I know," Harold said, shaking his hand. "You don't need to tell me."

"Hey, buddy," Michael said, catching Pal when he ran into his arms. "You ready to go home?"

"Yeah!"

"Is everything all right?" the daycare lady asked.

"Better than ever," Michael smiled. "You won't have Pal for as long anymore. I've got my hours reduced."

"Yay!" Pal cried.

Patricia Marsh, owner of the daycare, smiled. Michael couldn't help but squeeze his son tighter.

"Anyway," he said. "Thanks for everything you do for us, Patricia. I appreciate it."

"Don't thank me," she said, shaking his hand. "It's what I do."

Michael bade Pal's sitter a final goodbye before carrying his son out to the car. He got the boy buckled in and slid into his own seat.

"How many hours do you work now?" Pal asked.

"Only five," he smiled. As an afterthought, he added, "From just after breakfast to just after lunch."

"Yay!"

When Michael pulled away from the curb, he turned out onto the main road, heading back into town.

"Daddy?"

"What is it, Pal?"

"We're going home, right?"

"Yeah," he smiled. "We are. Why?"

"I don't know." Pal shrugged. "I thought we were going somewhere else."

*Going somewhere else?* he frowned.

"Where did you think we were going?" Michael asked.

"I don't know."

"Did you want to go somewhere, son?"

"No. I didn't, Daddy."

"Did someone tell you I was taking you somewhere after I came to pick you up?"

"No."

*That's weird.*

Whatever the case, he decided not to dwell on it.

It wouldn't do any good anyway.

Pal went for the living room when they passed through the door, while Michael decided he'd fix something to eat. He slid his shoes off, undid the first few buttons on his shirt, then stepped into the kitchen.

A few bills lay on the small table he and Pal sat at to eat. The windows were open, allowing light to pass into the small space, and the few small knickknacks he had adorned open shelf space. A few pictures of Pal sat on the space above the spice rack. A picture of him holding the child—taken by a professional photographer—sat in the center.

So far, that picture was the only one that remained. The others had been of him, his wife, or of his wife and Pal together.

The woman whom he had loved for several long years had no place in his home, not after what she had done.

"You went too far," he whispered.

His wife had hung out with all sorts of guys—drug users, pimps, guys who sold drugs. In the end, her affair decided who would get custody of Pal.

*Theft, indecent exposure, public intoxication, burglary, assault with a deadly weapon.*

The guy would make *the perfect* stepdad.

"Screw that," he chuckled.

"Daddy?"

He jumped when he heard Pal's voice.

"Yeah, Tiger? What's up?"

"Are you ok?"

"I'm fine," he smiled. "Why?"

"You were talking to someone."

"Just myself," he chuckled, messing with Pal's hair. "Go watch TV. I'm gonna make us some sandwiches."

Pal did as asked.

Michael turned to the fridge, more than ready to stop thinking about his past and concentrate on the present.

The woman had been messing around his house.

Unlike the previous nights, she'd decided to take the extra step and sneak around the property. Michael caught a fleeting glimpse of her disappearing around the corner when he rose to get something to drink.

When he followed her through the house—carefully sneaking along the walls and peering out through the windows—she was gone.

*Again, she didn't try to break in, he thought, but decided to check the windows anyway.*

While the back of the house didn't have as many windows as the front did, there were still a few. The few he worried about lay in the laundry room and his room.

When he passed into the laundry room, he checked the window. No cracks, no scrapes, no cuts; she hadn't tried to come in through there.

*My room is still there though.*

While a minimum of ten to fifteen feet separated the living room from his room, the woman could easily go from one to the other without any effort.

*See?* he thought, stepping out of the laundry room. *This is what you get for buying a house with only a ground floor.*

In the bedroom, he meticulously checked both windows. After five minutes, he was convinced he would find nothing wrong with either.

*Maybe she was just snoopy.*

Maybe, but that didn't give her the right to wander his property at three in the morning.

*"Check on Pal, then go back to bed."*

Exiting his bedroom, he made his way through the halls and into Pal's room.

As he had thought, his son still slept, curled up under the blankets.

"I love you," he whispered, looking up at the window. He set a hand on his son's head, running his fingers through the boy's hair.

He crawled into bed next with his son.

This had to stop.

He had to get his life under control.

Naturally, his first impulse was to call the cops. When he got a hold of Officer Wills, desperately pleading for something to be done, the man merely said that they'd add an extra patrol around the area and that they couldn't do anymore than that.

*They probably don't believe me, he thought, setting the phone in its cradle.*

Events like last night's kept him from work. Knowing that the woman had come right up to the house and wandered the property left him spooked, especially since he knew any of the windows could be easily broken with a rock or stray brick.

About this time, he would've been at work, had the woman's presence not disturbed his daily routine. He dared questioning the idea of taking Pal to daycare, but couldn't, not after the agreement they'd made.

*Are we going somewhere?*

The question hit him like a bullet.

His stomach twisted in knots.

Pal had asked that yesterday, on the drive home. The boy had asked if they were going anywhere, but said nothing upon further questioning, even when Michael asked if someone had told him that.

*Could he have overheard someone else?*

If Pal overheard someone, who had been talking about him?

He reached for the phonebook.

After finding the Marsh Daycare number, he dialed it.

"Hello?" a woman asked. Over the noise in the background, the voice couldn't be distinguished. "This is Patricia Marsh."

"Hi, Patricia," he said. "This is Michael Michelson."

"Oh. Hi, Michael. Is something wrong? You haven't dropped Pal off today."

"I'm not going to work, so he's staying home. I wanted to talk to you about something."

"All right." She paused. Someone had been talking to her. "Let me go into the office. It's quieter in there."

A moment later, the noise disappeared, replaced by pure silence.

"What's wrong, Michael? Did something happen?"

"Yesterday, Pal asked me if we were going anywhere after I picked him up. When I asked if he wanted to go somewhere, he said he didn't, and when I asked if someone had told him he would be going somewhere, he said no. I'm just wondering if someone was there talking about him."

"No... not that I've seen. No one was talking to me about him."

"I only ask because there's been a woman sneaking around my house," he sighed. He set a hand on his forehead. "I called the police, but they never found her."

"Oh, Michael. I'm so sorry."

"It's ok, Patricia. If you hear anything, will you tell me about it?"

"Why yes," she said. "Of course I will. You *know* I'd tell you if I thought something was going on."

"I know," Michael sighed. "Thank you. Have a nice day, Patricia."

After they exchanged goodbyes, he set the phone down, wondering just what he was going to do.

"Daddy?"

He looked up from the bills. Pal looked so happy, so vibrant. Sadly, Michael didn't feel that way. He and his son stood on opposite sides of a long, long spectrum, one side black, the other white.

"What is it?" Michael asked. He couldn't bring himself to force a smile.

"Are you ok?"

"I'm just... tired."

He yawned, running a hand across his face.

"Why are you tired?" Pal asked, the pitch of his voice lowering, now more concerning than questioning.

"I don't know, Bud. Sometimes a guy just gets tired."

"Even when he hasn't been doing anything?"

Michael nodded. The symptom that came over him wasn't a stranger, not one at all. He'd had bouts of depression since Pal was born.

*You need to get out of this mood*, he thought, watching his little boy. *You're going to upset him.*

He should be happy, not depressed or worried. He'd just gotten his hours reduced so he could spend more time with Pal, not so he could sit around and wonder whether or not his property was under scrutiny from unknown eyes.

"Daddy?" Pal asked, stepping forward.

"I'm still here," he said.

"I love you."

*Love.*

That one little word did so much.

The woman stood at the window.

The only thing that separated him and her was a sheet of glass.

*What do you want?* he thought. *Why are you torturing me like this?*

He found a tear sliding down his face as he looked into the woman's black eyes.

*I want you*, she whispered. *I want what's in you.*

"What's in me?" he whispered. "What do you want that's inside me?"

*Your soul.*

The woman's laugh echoed throughout his mind. He stepped back, feeling for anything he could hold onto. The woman's head turned up in a wicked smile.

A moment later, her mouth opened.

Light pierced out from the dark depths of her throat. Something down there sparkled, reflecting light off the window. Small shadows crawled across the outside of the glass like millions of tiny microscopic bugs hungering for the souls of sad mortal men.

"Go away," he whimpered. "I don't want you here."

*Your soul, Michael. I want your soul.*

"You're not getting anything from me!"

The most horrible, high-pitched scream he had ever heard broke through his mind. Like a bird of prey before it dove to catch its prey, the shattered the glass of his frontal lobe. His vision exploded with light, noxious gas flew up into his nose, and blood drenched the inside of his mouth with its horrible, copper taste.

*Your soul!* the woman screeched. *Give it to me!*

Michael dove for the phone.

He hit the wall and knocked the whole thing off its jack. Surprisingly, when he placed the contraption to his ear, it still had a dial tone.

He hit three numbers.

9-1-1.

"9-1-1, what's your emergency?"

"Someone's trying to break into my house!"

"Who is it, sir? Is the burglar armed?"

"I don't know! She just keeps screaming and staring through my window!"

"Sir, you..."

He slammed the phone into place and ran for the hallway.

He had to get to Pal.

*No!* he cried, clutching his head. *Get away from me!*

*Come to me, Michael. I know what you want. I can give you everything your heart desires.*

He threw himself into Pal's half-open bedroom door. He fell into the wall, startling the boy out of his sleep.

"Daddy?" Pal asked. "Daddy? What's wrong, Daddy?"

Michael slammed the door shut. Then, with all his might, he pulled the huge stone table that served as Pal's arts and crafts spot in front of the door.

"It's ok," he said, turning to face the crying boy. "We're safe."

"What's happening?" Pal sobbed. "Daddy?"

"Someone's trying to break in the house," he said, gathering the child into his arms. "Don't worry. We're safe."

Pal climbed into his arms and bawled into his neck.

Despite everything that Michael tried to do, nothing could calm Pal down. And no matter what he could do, he couldn't stop the horrible screams coming from the woman outside.

"It's ok," he whispered, rocking his son back and forth. "I'm here, baby. I'm here."

Michael was roused from his sleep when he heard something in the house caving in. At first, he panicked, but panic soon faded to relief when he realized that it was probably only the police.

"Mr. Michelson!" someone yelled. "Where are you?"

Pal, too, had fallen asleep, curled in Michael's grasp.

Instead of waking him up, Michael tucked him back into bed and pushed the table out of the door. When he exited the room, he saw five policemen standing in the hallway. Among those policemen were officer Wills and Daniels.

"Hey," he said, looking at the men. "What was that sound I..."

His question was answered when his eyes strayed to the door. The hinges were broken off. The door lay lopsided, half against the wall, half on the floor.

"How come you didn't answer?" one officer—a young man with a blonde beard—asked. "We had to break the door down."

"I fell asleep," he said, looking back at the bedroom door. "I pushed a big stone table in front of my son's room."

"So you're all right?" Officer Wills asked.

Michael nodded.

"Thankfully," he said.

"You said a woman was trying to break into your house?" the bearded officer asked. "Is this the same woman you've called in and reported before?"

"Yes," Michael said, rubbing his arms. "I was afraid for me and my son's safety."

"Michael," Daniels said, stepping forward. "There wasn't anyone here."

"She ran off when she heard the sirens. She..."

"Sir." The bearded man set a hand on his arm. "We're not sure if the woman you're seeing is real."

Michael couldn't say anything.

He simply stared.

"What?" he asked. "How can you..."

"Because this is the third time officers have come to the house to find no one on your property."

"Have you looked around the house? Have you..."

"We have forensic analysts looking *all over* the property. There's nothing here that shows someone's been looking through your windows."

"I... I don't..." Michael shook his head, trying to avoid the policemen's eyes. It was bad enough knowing that he had called the men out for a problem he could've taken care of, but being accused of seeing things? That had to be an all-time low, even for him, a man who lost his wife to a bad boy with a motorcycle and leather jacket. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right, sir." The bearded man said, squeezing his arm. "Some people don't become aware of an illness until later in life."

*Illness?*

"Illness?" he frowned. "What are you..."

"You might be seeing things, sir, because you have a mental illness, most likely schizophrenia."

*Schizophrenia?*

"What?"

"I said..."

"No. I *heard* what you said." Michael took a deep breath, trying to keep his temper down. "Do you honestly believe I have a mental disorder?"

"It's possible," the man said. "I personally..."

Michael shook his head.

"Anyway," the officer sighed. "You'll need to have your door fixed—or get a new one. But since you can't do that now, someone will watch the house for the next few hours, until you can get into a hardware store and pick up a new door."

"All right," he said, more than ready to turn and go back in the bedroom.

"Mr. Michelson?"

Michael turned.

"Yes?"

"Can I suggest something?"

Nodding, Michael stood his ground, but remained silent.

"You should see a doctor. If you're seeing things, you could be putting both you and your son at risk."

The only gesture Michael offered was a nod before he turned and walked into his son's room.

Now that the new door stood in place, Michael took a seat at the table and tried to collect his thoughts. He'd dropped Pal off at daycare earlier that day, telling the little boy that he'd be going to work, regardless of what had happened last night. He'd lied, of course, but he needed to take a while to think about what the bearded officer had said.

*You should go to a doctor. If you're seeing things, you could be putting yourself at risk.*

At risk for what? He wasn't a bad father. He took perfectly good care of his kid.

"Dammit!"

He balled his fist, slamming it down on the tabletop. The flare of pain that shot from his hand into his wrist a moment later made him regret his outburst.

*This is what you get, he thought, for letting someone else deal with your problem.*

As he let the anger seep from his body, he nursed his throbbing hand, rubbing the bridge that extended from his wrist to the end of his pinky. It'd stop hurting after a moment, but for the time being, he'd be content with feeling stupid about how he'd intentionally hurt himself.

"It'll stop," he whispered. "It won't take that long."

After a moment, his hand *did* stop throbbing, but it still hurt to move his pinky and ring finger.

*Now you've got a decision to make, Michael boy. You need to decide whether or not you're going to the doctor.*

What would it hurt to go into a doctor's office and get asked a few questions—maybe tell a psychiatrist what he saw in a few Rorschach tests and what he'd been going through for the past few months. It couldn't hurt, right?

*Yeah right. Like I'll spill my soul to some random fuck that wants to put me on some drug. Screw that shit.*

Then and there, he decided that he'd have nothing to do with drugs or any kind of doctor.

The next night, she came to the window.

This time, he didn't run and hide.

What would it hurt, if only to ask what she wanted?

*What will it take to make you leave me alone?* he thought, sacrificing free reign of his body. *Please... I just want you to leave us alone.*

*Give me your soul, she whispered, because if you don't give it to me willingly, I'll beak you apart until you are nothing more than dust.*

*Whatever I give you, he thought, closing his eyes, tightening his grip on the counter. Please, don't hurt my son. He doesn't deserve this.*

*Oh, no. The woman shook her head. I wouldn't hurt him.*

She passed through the wall of his home and took his face in her hands.

As she became one with him, and as she began to take control of his body, mind and soul, Michael prayed. He prayed for his son's safety, his wellbeing, his youth; for good, happy times and a long, healthy life; for a successful future and an aspiring dream. He prayed that, regardless of whatever happened, and regardless of what took root of his body, he would do anything and everything he could for his son, even if that meant giving up his soul.

*I love you, Michael thought, tears coursing down his face. More than anything else in the world, Pal.*

The last of his life faded to nothing.

*Like dust was the last thing he thought.*

## New Section

### An Amorous Thing

He was never loved until the day he died.

Cast into an alley by a dark, handsome woman who bade him no good, the man landed in a tangle of limbs and a fit of agony. Throat torn out, hand extended to stop the bleeding and leg possibly broken, he twisted and turned, clawing with one hand while holding his neck with the other to try and make it out of the alley.

With his life flowing free, it didn't take long for him to die.

After he stopped struggling, he closed his eyes and imaged love and how it could be.

A four-letter word with all the connotations in the world, a man who struggled to crawl out of an alley died without ever experiencing what it was like to be held in the arms of another.

Not long after he stopped moving, the smell of blood brought the dogs in.

Snarling, barking, baring teeth at one another in a violent exhibit of dominance, one dog ripped at his neck while another went for his leg. Soon after, a feast commenced and the brick drank blood for the first time in years. They ripped most of him away, from the flesh of his arms to the clothes on his back, before departing, bellies full and faces covered in masks.

When the dogs left, the bugs came next.

Flies—blow, household, fruit—flew in by the dozens, then the hundreds to bear the fruit of life. They buried their young in the places the dogs would not touch. His eyes, his nose, his ears, his mouth, below his torn fingernails and in the destroyed confines of his genitals and anus—anywhere and everywhere they could, they burrowed, securing places for the next generation.

When something died, that thing's life didn't matter anymore.

When death took hold of something, it wanted life to live.

In the back alley of an old bar long since forgotten by those who cared, a man died and gave way for new life to be born.

*Love*, he sang.

Arm curled to his chest, boneless fingers touched a heart that no longer beat.

Men and women in suits and masks came the following day.

Scouring the area for hints and clues, some dusted walls, while others took pictures and wrote on their clipboards. Few touched him—even fewer wanted to be near him—but those that cared decided to help. They closed his eyes, covered his corpse, and lifted him with the care that a mother would with a child. They tended to his broken, mangled body, cradled it in the arms of a metal beast, and soothed his sorrows as those around him began to sigh.

*Death*, they whispered.

Eyes downturn, mouths in confusion, hurt and sorrow, they began to clean the area as the beast started moving, toward a place of love, life and death.

A woman took a knife and cut him open.

In life, some would have called the act torture, while others would have seen it as a thing of utmost beauty—a bond only few experienced. But in death—but in beautiful, solemn death—the act of cutting a person open could only be described as the truest of loves. One mounting the other, the other lying prone, they would create a rhythm many enjoyed but few ever experienced. Orgasms could be reached and bliss could be obtained, but never once would love be found.

In life, mindless acts of pleasure meant nothing more than pleasure.

In death, mindless acts of torture meant love.

As the woman cut him open, first revealing his chest, his stomach, then his abdominals, she poked and pried, twisted and cut, moved and removed, but never once did she hurt the real, physical him. She took his heart in her hands as though it were a diamond, a priceless artifact not meant to be touched by man, and stroked his fingers as though he were dying, an old man confined to a bed with a worm digging its way through his mind. She did things that others couldn't even begin to imagine.

How, some would ask, could you touch a man's heart, or stroke his dead, skinless fingers? And how, others would claim, would you do this with a simple, even mind?

Regardless, what others thought meant nothing.

She loved him for who he really was—a man, not something dead.

He slept in darkness while waiting for friends to come. In his bed of metal and chill, his hands lay prone, as if numb and comforted by his confines. A sheet covered his body to keep him warm and a nurse stood no more than three feet away, waiting for things and people to arrive.

In this home of death and decay, he felt more welcomed than he ever had in his entire life.

A part of him that could no longer move smiled.

That same part felt warmth.

They did nothing to cover the wounds that ravaged his body, nor did they display him in the utmost authority of funeral. They dressed him in the finest suit and gave him the whitest shoes, but never once did they offer to open his chest for others to see. His body, though mortal, looked nothing as such. He—a cadaver, a corpse—was no longer human in the eyes of normal men. Some saw it while others didn't, but those that did knew a scope of human recognition unlike any other.

When they placed him in a coffin to put him to rest, when they set his hands over where his heart used to beat, they looked down at him, sighed, then closed their eyes.

Even those that didn't know him cried.

He didn't know why.

Rumbles, shakes, quakes—he hardly moved at all, even though his transport shook to and fro. A pillow comforted his head and a mattress secured his body, but nothing assured where he would be going. A part of him knew that he would soon leave the mortal world of love and light, but until then, he would not speak. Only after they buried him would he ever open his mouth.

He felt it when they closed his tomb and when the dirt began to spill. A concrete wall, the dirt that Fall, the things that speak and those that were weak—he, dead, they, alive, ensured that he would not fade for the longest of times. While they did this, and while he began to settle in for the greatest, longest haul, he exhaled a breath of air from lips long since torn off.

*Tomorrow*, he thought.

*Tomorrow*, everything would be better.

It rained.

Chill burrowed deep, but not deep enough.

Outside, silence ruled the world, while inside, darkness ruled his. Warmth surrounded his being as though his body still exuded such a thing. A fickle, funny thing, warmth, but it didn't matter. Comforted

inside his prison, he continued to wait for it to warm, for his barriers to come crashing down.

*Tomorrow.*

Tomorrow, maybe it would be warm.

Two days passed, yet nothing happened.

*Why?*

How would he know? How would he be able to sense when the things caved in and the monsters came in? How could he prepare. How could he defend himself?

*Tomorrow?*

Would it be better tomorrow?

Would it?

Three, four, five, six; seven, eight, nine ten—eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen; days, weeks, months, years.

How long would it take for things to go back to normal?

How long would it take for memories of earth to return?

How long would it be until he felt damp, and how long would it be until he felt dusk?

Eternity—one word that meant everything.

After so long, how could he know anything anymore? The past, the present, the future—what did it mean when he had nothing to experience?

*Nothing.*

It meant nothing.

Did it?

One long, jagged crack.

After so many years, the first crack in the eternal seal appeared. Created by creatures, things, or nature, it appeared on the side of the concrete slab and began to spread—first slowly, then more quickly as things started to change. Floods, quakes, natural movements so far below the earth that he couldn't even begin to feel them—these things moved him in ways he couldn't even begin to understand.

Eventually, things he couldn't understand would begin to free him.

A break so shallow it could hardly be seen opened in the concrete wall.

The first chill began to creep in, followed by the first bit of tiny things he'd only experienced a few times in his life.

Though no more than bones, something wanted to be with him.

How romantic could these things be?

Slowly, things began to love.

He loved them.

They loved him.

In his prison of concrete, wood and dirt, things made their way into the confines of what he once considered his prison. They began to free him—slowly at first, then more quickly. They ate the wood and the earth continued to destroy the metal, thereby exhibiting an act of kindness not displayed to him for years on end. These things, so small and fickle, crossed his bones and lived in his sockets.

His eyes gleamed with kindness, his mouth curled in smiles.

*Finally*, he thought. *After all this time.*

The passage of time proved to be the most important thing of all.

Unlike anything he had ever felt before, the feeling of finally returning to the earth could only be described as surreal. Like a star falling from the sky or the first kiss on a lover's lips, his world faded, existing only as a dream which could not possibly be real. In this new, undiscovered world, he quickly found himself wanting to fade even deeper into it. His conscience yearned for release, his thoughts yearned for freedom, and his body—his poor, dead body—longed to forever be gone; not in the stomachs of animals or in the minds of people, but surely, truly gone.

Would he ever get this? Would he ever have the absolute feeling he longed for?

It didn't matter, not anymore.

With his world slowly fading to black, what was left of the corpse settled down and began to die.

For the first time in his life, something had truly done an amorous thing.

## New Section

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You know who you are.

Breathe with me.

Live with me.

Laugh with me.

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Thank you.

Amorously,

With all my heart,

Kody Boye



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