

Paranormal Plight: A Collection of Twelve Terrifying Tales

Lia Ison

Reader discretion is advised as Paranormal Plight contains content that might be triggering. Triggers include: mentions of child abuse, sexual assault and abuse, human/child trafficking, depictions of self harm and suicide.

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When Talulah Speaks, Bad Things Happen

TW: Mentions of child abuse

I didn't want to believe it at first, chalked it all up to mere unfortunate coincidence. But, after the events that have taken place over the past few days and having had some time to really think back and dwell on previous incidents, I'm not so sure now.

I think... gosh I sound *crazy!*

I think when my daughter, Talulah, speaks, bad things are bound to happen.

The thing you have to understand about Lulah is that she has always been a quiet child. Like *eerily* quiet.

She never cried as an infant. My OBGYN originally thought she had been a stillborn because she came out so silent. I can still remember the feeling of my breath coming back to me when she eventually started coughing and squirming. But still, Talulah didn't cry.

Other than that, she developed normally. I eventually figured out her mannerisms and knew how to tell what she needed. She'd lie down on her back and stay still when she needed a diaper change. She would do the opposite when she was hungry and lay flat on her stomach. When she was happy she would smile, if we were lucky we'd even get a giggle or a laugh. If she were sad she'd just frown. Like any normal kid she also threw tantrums. She'd stomp, smack, and grunt angrily when she wasn't getting her way.

Eventually, her pediatrician recommended we take her to a pediatric psychiatrist and get her tested for an autism diagnosis when eighteen months came and went and she hadn't started talking or babbling like a normal kid. All the tests came back negative. The psychiatrist suggested that Talulah could be mute and that she might develop and start talking at her own pace.

We kept bringing her in as she grew older, especially as she got closer to the age where she could go to school. With the help of her psychiatrist, we hired someone to help teach us ASL as a family. The hope was that Talulah would be able to communicate with others in at least some capacity other than pointing at things she wanted and making faces.

The ASL didn't really take, but around three years old, if she really needed to tell us something, she would write in a notebook and show it to us. Sure, it was tough to read at first and got expensive after a while, but anything was better than her just pointing at random things and trying to guess what she was telling me.

The thing is, it turns out my daughter actually can speak. Talulah has spoken on four different occasions in her life, but every time she did, something bizarre or crazy happened right after.

Two of those incidents I was there for, including the very first time she talked.

Incident One- The Karen

Talulah had just turned four. We were at the store doing some grocery shopping. It was back to school season so the store had all the school supplies on display for parents and kids to look at. We had just passed by one of those displays and Lulah had spotted a particular notebook she liked. She tugged at my dress to get me to stop.

She showed me the notebook which had a glittery cover with a pink haired mermaid on it. A big bright smile was plastered on her face as she showed it to me. I looked at the pink compound notebook that sat in the front of the cart, not even halfway used.

"No, Talulah. Not until you finish using this notebook. Only then can you get another one," I had told her, sternly.

She frowned at my answer and then started throwing a fit. First she had crossed her arms and stomped alongside me, with the notebook still in her hands. When I told her to go put it back she started to jump up and down and push and pull on the cart. Then she threw the notebook across the aisle.

This was my last straw. I went to pick it up and started walking back to put it away. Talulah followed me the whole way, still throwing her tantrum. She lost her marbles when I smugly stared her in the eyes and placed the notebook on a shelf she couldn't reach. She started grunting angrily and stomping about, then went to the display and started grabbing and throwing things out of it. Boxes of crayons, pencils, pens, and other notebooks went flying and spilling across the floor.

I lost my cool a little bit, felt my face grow red and warm, and went storming towards her. "Talulah!" I scolded, grabbing her little wrist and marching her back to the cart a few feet away. I put her in time-out, which in this case, was the built-in seat of the cart.

Talulah's spectacle had drawn a slight crowd, so bystanders were whispering about what just happened.

One lady had the nerve to come up to me.

Karen went, "Oh my, what a mother you must be! Personally, my kids would've *never* done something like this in the middle of a store when they were her age. What a naughty child you're raising. I must say, that really reflects on your poor parenting."

I remember feeling my blood start to boil as Karen decided to make that comment. I was most certainly not in the mood and completely appalled that this woman had the audacity to come up and say that shit about my daughter to my face! I was two seconds from socking the lady square in the jaw when Talulah said her first words.

I'll never forget what she looked like when she spoke for the first time. I had gathered her blonde hair into pigtails that day and dressed her in a cute yellow polka-dot summer dress. Her arms were crossed into her tiny chest and she had this angry scowl on her face that only toddlers can still look adorable in.

"You're a meanie!" Were Talulah's first words. After she spoke she stuck her tongue out and blew a raspberry at Karen.

My once boiling blood had gone ice cold. I definitely did not expect to hear Lulah speak that day. I was still angry at her actions, but a sense of joy overcame me from hearing my baby speak.

Karen, with an offended expression, responded with, "And you're a snot nosed brat!" Before taking her cart and storming off.

I quickly gave Talulah a big hug to show her how proud I was of her. Then I made her pick up the things she had thrown on the floor and put them back. When she was done and wrote me an apology, I put the mermaid notebook in the cart. Her eyes lit up with excitement and she gave me a big hug.

When we left the store there had been a big commotion in the parking lot. Lulah was holding onto the notebook like it would wither into dust if she let go. People were staring and gossiping, crowding the lot. There was an ambulance, a few police cars, and a tow truck blocking one of the store entrances. There was a smashed up car loaded onto the back of the tow.

"What's going on?" I had asked the person closest to us.

"Someone just got hit by a car that was going too fast," they responded.

The crowd went into an uproar as we saw the person who was hit loaded into the back of the ambulance. My heart sank when I saw who it was- The Karen that had chewed me out earlier. She had been put in a neck brace and her face was all smashed and bloody. I quickly shielded Talulah's eyes and made my way to the car. I let her play on my phone to distract her while I loaded the trunk.

Later, I found out that Karen had died at the hospital from her injuries. Her skull had been shattered in three separate places and her spine was completely severed from the impact.

I had just thought of it as an unfortunate accident at the time, but now I'm thinking this was the first instance of a long line of terrible occurrences transpiring after Talulah used her voice to speak.

Incident Two- The Bully

I wasn't here for this one, but the outcome wasn't any less disturbing. It was worse than The Karen Incident in all honesty.

Talulah was around seven years old and in the second grade when she started coming home in tears. It took her forever to open up to her father and I about this kid in her class that was targeting and bullying her. It was then that it occurred to me that since she was mute and really shy, she'd be the first one bully's would get their grubby hands on.

The kid's name was Frank Billington. He came from a well off family and acted like he was untouchable, even at such a young age. When my husband, Kevin, and I first learned that Frank was picking on Talulah because of her mutism we were furious. According to Lulah, she had undergone his abuse for about two months before she told us anything. *Two months!*

We got our asses to the school as soon as possible and confronted both the teacher and the principal. The teacher was "oblivious" to any of the bullying and the principal took the teacher's side. It was obvious they were scared of the family's influence.

I sure as hell wasn't, so we demanded to have a parent teacher conference with the little snot ball's parents. Their response? "He just likes her, is all." Then they went into a rant about how their son just shows his affection differently than other little boys.

What their son was, is a little demon with issues.

I heard from some other parents that he'd bullied their kids too and the school just swept everything under the rug. Apparently, the Billington's donated substantial amounts of money to the school district every year. I also heard some gossip that his father regularly beat him and his mother.

So the kid had problems at home, that didn't give him an excuse to pick on my daughter.

The day after our confrontation, Talulah came home with a black eye. I knew who was responsible, even if Lulah wrote that she just tripped and fell. I knew it was bullshit.

I almost drove to that little shits house and punched him in the face like he had done to my daughter, but my husband stopped me. He also stopped me from calling the cops and pressing charges against the kid.

He was of the mentality that Talulah should start being able to handle these kinds of situations on her own, like he did when he got bullied in school. I understood where he was coming from, but our little girl was seven, not a thirteen year old boy. Not to mention that little boy, Frank, assaulted our daughter!

Kevin was pretty upset about that though and wanted to throw hands with the kid's dad for letting his kid think resorting to violence like that was even acceptable in the first place.

Instead, I left a strongly worded voicemail to the school for not calling to notify me when my daughter got jumped and beat up. Kevin and I also started looking at other schools to enroll Talulah in, because obviously this school was not the right fit.

Later that night we got a call at four in the morning from Frank's parents. They were furious and informed us that their little Frankie-poo was in the hospital. He had stabbed his eyes out with a butter knife and chewed his tongue off. They tried blaming it on Talulah, saying that Frank indicated she had said something to him earlier that day which drove him crazy enough to do that to himself.

Kevin and I felt bad for them, we truly did, but we thought they were just blaming our daughter for his own fucked up issues.

We were surprised when we got a visit from a police officer, who informed us that the Billington's were pressing charges against Talulah for causing their eight-year old psychological harm. Talulah denied saying anything to the boy to both us and the officer. Once it was clearly evident to the court system that our daughter was mute, the charges were thrown out. I told the judge they should look into the family, especially the father, instead of wasting their time with us.

Frank didn't end up dying, thankfully, but he was in the hospital for quite some time. He ended up mute, like Talulah, and blind on top of it getting a prosthetic glass eyeball. He got sent away to a school for blind children and Talulah ended up going to a different school the next year. She finished the rest of the school year and was actually pretty sad when she left.

It was after this incident that the first thoughts about it popped into my mind. I doubted myself and even called myself insane. I mean, Talulah even denied saying anything to him. But I found it weird that the day that little boy laid hands on my daughter, he ended up mutilating himself like that, almost dying because of it.

If she did say something, I wonder what it was to cause him to freak the hell out like that.

Incident Three- The Dog

Both Kevin and I were there for this one. This was Kevin's first time hearing our daughter speak.

The first time Lulah spoke and I told him, he tried for days trying to get her to say something else, but she never did. Eventually he gave up. He even tried acting like Karen, but that bit didn't last too long.

It had been a nice day out, so the three of us decided to go on a family outing to the local park and have a picnic. This happened the summer after all those things happened with Frank, so she was about to turn eight.

Lulah and I were laying in the grass, watching the clouds, as Kevin finished packing up our leftovers. We had packed cucumber sandwiches, chips, and brought a couple bottles of water with us. The plan was to go on a long walk after lunch, but our plans got interrupted.

"Hey, get back here!" We had heard from somewhere across the park. The next second, Talulah is screaming bloody murder as a rogue black lab jumped on top of her. He was on her chest, pinning her to the ground.

"Shoo! Go away!" Kevin shouted as he motioned for the dog to get off of her.

"Hercules, down!" The owner yelled at the animal. It just kept growling and snapping its muzzle in Talulah's face.

Kevin started throwing our trash at the dog to try and move its attention away from Talulah. "Sarah, do something!"

I quickly pulled my phone out and frantically called nine-one-one. They transferred me to animal control.

Just as the dog was about to bite Talulah, she yelled, "Bad doggie! Stop it!"

The dog froze. Kevin kicked it off our daughter when the chance presented itself, still stunned at hearing her speak. The thing yelped and the dogs' owner took a step towards it, leash in hand, ready to put it back on the collar. The dog snapped at its owner and bit down on her

hand as she clasped the leash back onto the red collar. After that, the dog suddenly keeled over and just... died.

"Hercules, no!" The woman screamed as she looked at her dead dog. She then looked to Kevin and confronted him, seemingly unaware of the blood dripping down her hand. "Look what you did to my dog! You killed him!"

"He was attacking our daughter!" I yelled back at the lady.

"Your daughter must have provoked him in some way, then! My Hercules would never hurt a fly! His leash accidentally came unhooked and-" she tried to explain herself.

"Yeah, obviously." Kevin muttered under his breath, interrupting the woman.

The lady looked like she was about to say some more when her eyes suddenly rolled to the back of her head. She started foaming at the mouth and seizing. Her body fell to the ground as she kept writhing.

Thank goodness I was still on the phone. I asked for animal control to send EMS to us as well and informed them of the woman and Talulah's possible injuries.

Kevin and I sat there, cuddling with a shaking Talulah, waiting for EMS to arrive. Animal control got to the scene first and picked up the dead dog's corpse. EMS came second and got the woman into an ambulance. They suspected she and the dog had rabies and wanted to get Lulah tested and get her vaccinated as quickly as possible.

Talulah got to spend the night in the hospital after receiving her first dose of the vaccine just to make sure she didn't have a reaction to anything. Physically she came out of the encounter with a few bruises and scratches, mentally though- let's just say she developed a debilitating fear of dogs.

When animal control got back to us, they said the test was negative for the disease and the dog had passed from natural causes. Oddly, the woman on the other hand did have rabies. The doctors couldn't explain how or why, but she did have rabies. She was hospitalized and suffered through the symptoms for a week before a pretty severe seizure took her life.

We got Talulah into counseling pretty soon after, although it was a bit challenging with her only really being able to communicate through writing on a pad.

She couldn't even look at a dog without panicking after that and we stopped going for walks in that park all together.

Kevin was still shocked that Talulah spoke, but he didn't think any of it was related. Kevin thought that the test had been contaminated or switched with another dog and that it did have rabies.

This was the third time something bad happened after Talulah spoke. This time it happened instantly and in front of my eyes. It was getting harder and harder to deny it, but I kept telling myself it wasn't true. That it was impossible! But these things only seemed to happen after Talulah said something.

This last incident, however, is the undeniable proof in the metaphorical pudding I'd been dreading all these years.

Incident Four- The Uncle

I've never liked my brother-in-law, Mark. I wouldn't have invited him to our wedding if I had any say in the matter. Kevin himself was indifferent towards his brother, and Mark was only invited to avoid any unnecessary drama with my mother-in-law. He's just one of those guys that oozes with sleaziness. I only got bad vibes from the guy.

Mark never really visited us anyway, since he was busy spending most of his time running pyramid schemes and day drinking. He only babysat Talulah once before, when she was an infant. Kevin and I desperately needed a night to ourselves and we couldn't get any other babysitter than Mark. I was extremely against it, but Kevin convinced me that Lulah would be fine. Well, when we came back the next morning Talulah was still alive. I felt a huge weight lifted off my chest. I still didn't like the anxiety it gave me with Mark watching our child, so I forbade Kevin from letting him babysit her, or be alone with her in general. When he did visit, one of us was always in the room with her. *Always*. Because a mother knows... *I* always know.

Well, I got called away on an impromptu business trip this past week, so I had to leave Lulah and Kevin for a couple days. I always hated being far away from them for long periods of time, but I couldn't miss it, lest I lose my job.

Kevin works nights so he was able to take Talulah to and from school while our usual babysitter was able to watch her when he had to leave for work. Mind you, Talulah is nine years old now.

Kevin got called in on Saturday night for work and couldn't say no. Our babysitter wasn't available and nobody could watch her under such short notice. Even though I forbade him, Kevin called his brother, desperately in need of a babysitter. Mark agreed and thirty minutes later Kevin was on his way to work while Mark, who was perfectly healthy, was alone with Talulah. My nine-year-old, mute, daughter.

I don't know what she said, but I can guess along the lines of it.

The next morning Kevin got a call from his brother. Mark was distressed and called Kevin to hurry up and pick him up or he was going to call an ambulance. Mark didn't say much other than, "Your daughter is evil!"

When Kevin arrived he found Mark on the living room floor curled into the fetal position with his pants and underwear down, bare ass exposed. Mark groaned, saying a growth the size of a golf ball had taken up space in his prostate. Kevin said it made his knees weak just looking at it. Before they left, Kevin found that Talulah had locked herself in her bedroom. After trying to coax her out and failing, he left her alone and quickly drove his brother to the nearest hospital where they quickly diagnosed Mark with stage four metastatic prostate cancer.

It had spread to his left nut which was swollen and twice the size of his right one. Some imaging showed that the cancer spread to his internal organs and he would be dead within a week. He passed away before they could take him into surgery to remove the cancerous growths.

Kevin called me from the hospital after the diagnosis. I hopped on the next flight out and got to my daughter.

I was with Talulah, comforting her as she cried into my shoulder, when Mark died. Kevin's in shock from his brother passing so suddenly. He's been on autopilot arranging for Mark's body to be flown back to their home state and making funeral arrangements. He's checked up on Talulah too, but he just doesn't seem himself at the moment.

I'm sure he's starting to wonder the same things I have been these past three years.

There's only one reason I can think of that caused Mark's sudden and painful departure from this world. I can't- I can't even type it out, it's too disgusting to bear. I know just from the looks Talulah's been giving me the past few days that this is what happened.

Mark is a pedophile and he tried to molest my daughter. She must've said something to him to get him to stop and that resulted in the cancer suddenly forming and spreading rapidly.

Not that the piece of shit didn't deserve to die a horrible death, but I'm scared of my daughter, and I hate it.

I've been dreading the next time she's going to speak. I'm scared she's going to say something to me because I left for the business trip and I wasn't around to protect her, scared that she's going to say something to Kevin for letting her uncle babysit her in the first place.

I'm scared someone is going to die a horrible death because when Talulah speaks, bad things happen.

**I Woke Up As A Ghost. The Problem Is, My Body Is
Still Alive.**

The expression "dead tired" has a new meaning to me.

Literally. Because I'm dead... *ish?*

I don't really know, but I don't think I have much time left to explain. Gloria really wants her body back.

I work at a restaurant, right? That means I work weird hours. That also means my sleep schedule is nonexistent, and a fucked up sleep schedule leads to nights like last night.

I was too tired to fall asleep if that makes any sense.

It had been a rough shift with customers yelling at me about things that were out of my control and management busting my nonexistent balls left and right. "Valarie, why didn't you do this? Valarie, why didn't you do that?" Type of bullshit.

Managing to fight the urge to walk out every ten minutes, I finished my shift on a rather dull note. After sidework, I didn't end up getting home until after two in the morning.

My mind raced as I laid on the bed in my dark bedroom. Despite the suffocating exhaustion and the fan blowing by my side, providing a wonderful white noise, my mind and body were restless.

"I just want to sleep," I'd cried and mumbled, tossing and turning and flipping my pillow over multiple times. Peace. I craved a nice, peaceful, sleep.

I hadn't had a good night's rest in I don't know how long. Be it night terrors or strange serving dreams, every morning I'd wake up feeling more tired than the last.

Miraculously, after my pitiful pleas, my body granted me the sweet release of sleep. My mind calmed, tense muscles unclenched, and my breathing slowed. I was out like a light in just a couple of minutes.

This morning I woke up surprisingly refreshed. I stretched, yawned, and got out of bed, feeling lighter than usual.

As I finished my routine of cracking the bones in my hands, neck, and lower back, something in my peripheral vision caught my gaze.

I paused in horror. Laying on the bed was... *me*. But I was standing up, not lying in bed. Yet, there my body was.

I needed a mirror. Luckily, there was one in the corner of my room. When I got there, my dark brown complexion appeared to be paler than usual and just a pinch translucent. My eyes were sunken in too. "Ghost" was the first word that came to mind.

"This is not what I meant!" I groaned, panicking. (Can ghosts even panic?!) Frantically, I started pacing around my small room, asking myself the appropriate questions. *How did this happen? How did I die?!*

Did I really croak? Was it a heart attack? It had to have been a heart attack! I knew I needed to lay off all those damn energy drinks and espresso shots!

I couldn't be dead. I was so young, so full of life. Was this astral projection, maybe? I looked deeper into the mirror, analyzing my ghastly reflection... Nah, I was definitely dead.

And of course, of all days, I had to go and die on my one day off! What would my coworkers think?! Would they cry for me? Come to my funeral? Steal my tips?

My alarm clock went off, causing me to jump. I almost had *another* heart attack. I walked over to the machine and pressed the button to turn the blaring sound off. Apparently my hand was incorporeal because the tip of my finger slipped through the atoms and into the middle of my alarm clock. Strangely, I didn't feel anything.

I could stand on solid ground but couldn't physically touch anything: *noted*.

Just my luck. I died and would have to listen to the incessant beeps of my annoying alarm clock for the rest of eternity.

I went back to the mirror to spiral. *Could this day get any worse?*

Suddenly, a click came from across the room. The alarm clock shut off right after. I paused, then turned around, feeling my third heart attack coming on.

A tired groan came from the bed. The lump under my black satin sheets started to stir. My jaw almost hit the floor when my body sat up, stretching and yawning... like a normal person. Who was alive!

A startled shriek left my mouth, which my body apparently didn't hear. Instead, she got up and started cracking her bones just like I had. The usual routine.

"Hello?" I asked, cautiously walking up to my body as she got ready to crack her elbows. My body didn't seem to hear me, continuing with her normal bodily adjustments un-phased. This was all so bizarre.

My body looked, well, like my body. Dark golden skin, long black wavy curls, my soulful blue eyes... except they didn't have their usual sparkle because I wasn't in there. I tried to poke her but that went about as well as you'd expect for being a ghost.

She let out a breath when she was done stretching, pivoting on her foot towards the closed bedroom door. I followed suit. "Hello? Anybody in there?!" I asked again, louder this time. My words still fell on deaf ears.

My body opened the door and closed it before I could follow her out. A frustrated grunt escaped from me. This was going to get annoying, fast. I went to hit the door and release some of my pent up aggression, but I accidentally stumbled through it instead. *Also noted*.

So that's how most of this morning went. I followed my body around and watched as she did what I would do. She spent a good portion of the morning scrolling through my phone, checking up on my social media accounts and laughing at funny compilation videos of cat memes. Around noon, my body dragged itself out of bed and started doing some light cleaning. She made the bed, picked up stray pieces of laundry bringing them down to the laundry room, and even tidied up my kitchen. When that was done, my body took a nice, long, shower.

Meanwhile, I kept yelling and screaming to try and get her attention. If I were in my body my throat would be bloody and raw, my voice hoarse and barely above a whisper. But, as a ghost, you don't really feel anything. I couldn't feel temperature or the things I was touching. Couldn't feel pain either. Just raw emotions apparently.

I even tried to write a message on the steamed up mirror in the bathroom, but it just fogged up instantly. She'd been taking a really *hot* shower.

When she was done, my body got ready and left the house abruptly. I had planned on doing a bit of grocery shopping today so I assumed that's what she was up to. With the house all to myself, it was time to experiment.

First things first, I couldn't fly or float no matter how hard I tried. Interestingly enough, if not thinking too hard about it, I could sink through the floor. If I concentrated or got angry enough I could also touch things. I barely managed to open a door and get a glass of water (couldn't drink it though) all in the time it took for my body to get back.

Spoiler alert: she didn't just go grocery shopping. No, my body came home with some of my friends and coworkers in tow.

This was the first deviation in what I had planned for the day. While I was known for having a good time, my plan for the day was to catch up on some much needed sleep and just chill all day. I wanted to have as little social interaction as possible, not throw a whole ass party.

My coworkers Jennifer and Alex, and my friends Nicole and Linda helped bring groceries in while my body got the drinks pouring.

"It sure is cold in here," Jen said after I tried to touch her. Someone needed to know it wasn't me in there. But, even with all the progress I'd made earlier, my hand still fell through her.

My body made a joke about the margarita she was making warming Jen up in no time. The rest of the girls laughed as they finished prepping snacks to have with their drinks.

In response, I grabbed a pillow off the couch and chucked it.

"Whoops," my body chuckled nervously, fixing to go grab it. My friends just stared at the pillow awkwardly. Clearly it hadn't fallen across the room on its own.

For the first time that day, I had grabbed somebody's attention. It felt good, so I kept doing it.

I tipped Nicole's glass over onto her shirt. She wasn't quite happy about that, but my body chalked it up to her being clumsy. Nicole shrugged it off as a random muscle twitch and cleaned herself off.

Darn.

After shouting at them some more, I started playing with the lightbulbs that hung over my kitchen counters. The lights would flicker when my hand would phase through the bulbs. It was absolutely mesmerizing, like a moth drawn to a flame. In this case, a ghost drawn to a light bulb.

My body was starting to look real annoyed at that point. When my friends asked about the lights, she claimed it was just faulty wiring and urged everyone to try the new dip she'd bought to ease their minds.

Honestly? The more I messed with them, the more powerful I felt. Being a ghost was starting to be fun, but it was utterly exhausting.

How had nobody realized it was me behind the strange happenings around them? I was doing very Valarie things for peat-sake! I managed to spritz some of my perfume in the living room, turned the tv on to my favorite show, I even slammed my bedroom door just for the fun of it.

But for every little thing I did, my body always had the perfect excuse. She had sprayed some perfume to freshen up the air. She wanted to turn the tv on for background noise as they chatted. A stray draft and faulty hinges were responsible for the door slamming upstairs. And to my dismay, the girls seemed to buy these excuses: hook, line, and sinker.

In a fit of rage, I flung a shot glass off the counter. Alcohol misted my cabinets as the glass shattered into a million pieces. I was starting to think of doing some real *Paranormal Activity* type shit and open all my cupboards and just start throwing things.

The girls started whispering amongst themselves then. Hope swelled through my ghostly chest. It looked like they were starting to catch on. Maybe this nightmare of mine would finally come to an end!

But before I could do anything else, Valarie 2 excused herself, telling the girl's, "Sorry, guys, I need a minute to myself. I'm waiting for some more guests to show up and I just want to check up on them."

My friends just gave some non-committal noises as they kept drinking, lying to themselves that everything was fine. It wasn't. I was done playing around. To everyone else, it looked like my barstool moved by itself, but in reality I kicked it as I stormed out of the kitchen, following my body out of the living room.

"I seriously need you guys to get here already," my body mumbled to herself as she reached my mud room.

Taking the opportunity with just the two of us alone in the room, I got real close and stared into her eyes. They weren't mine anymore. Those eyes belonged to something dark and evil.

"Who are you!?" I cried, seething at the imposter.

She looked me right in the eyes and gave me a sinister smile.

"I'm Valarie Nuñez," my body discreetly whispered before opening the front door. She then gave my shoulder a harsh push, which surprisingly connected. Stunned, I stumbled back, tripping out of the doorway and onto my porch. "and I will no longer be just a lowly Obsesser. Soon, neither will my friends. Now get out of my house! "

The next thing I know, my front door was being slammed in my face. Barely comprehending her words, my eyes went wide as I came to a realization. "So you knew I was here the whole time? You bitch!"

Losing my composure, I let out a guttural scream as I stomped my foot in frustration. This caused my house's foundation to shake. The lights flickered and rattled as well. Scared yelps belonging to my friends came from inside. *That was new.*

I tried to phase through the door, but I wasn't able to. My head banged against the wood, causing it to shake. More startled screams came from inside. I heard that *thing* start to make up excuses to try and comfort them.

Body slamming myself into the wall and windows didn't work either. It was like a barrier had been put up, keeping me from getting back into my own home.

Giving up due to sheer exhaustion, I sat and cried on the sidewalk. I realized then that I don't think I'm dead. But *something* is in my body. I needed to find out what so I can get my life back.

I *want* to keep working at my shitty serving job. I *want* to spend my days scrolling through social media and laughing at cat memes. I, the real Valarie Nuñez, *want* to live.

Picking myself up off the ground, and filled with a new sense of determination, I went on an evening stroll around town trying to think of possible remedies for my little problem.

This is when I met Gloryia. Or, for lack of a better term, accidentally possessed her. Because, yeah, that's apparently something I can do.

Now, I didn't do it on purpose. Gloryia just caught me at a bad time. We accidentally bumped into each other while I was angrily stewing in my thoughts. Instead of walking through the older Russian lady like everyone else, I kinda just latched on? I dunno, but being a ghost is really confusing. And yet, I do have to admit it *has* been nice being corporeal again.

I'm currently back at her place. A cool thing about possession is being able to tap into muscle memory and getting a free place to stay for the night. The only downside is that Gloryia's been yelling Russian profanities in my ear since taking over. But, as time goes on, it's getting easier to tune her out (I promise I'm going to give her body back, I just need to finish this first).

Her apartment is nice and cozy though. This place seriously reminds me of my abuela's too, but with a more Slavic atmosphere to it. Gloryia even has a nostalgic old McIntosh that I'm using right now to type all this all out.

Using it, I went down a rabbit hole of research, trying to figure out what the hell was wrong with me. After a couple hours of watching obviously fake ghost YouTube videos and doom scrolling on Wikipedia and the Google search engine, I still hadn't come up with anything plausible.

Then I remembered something it said after kicking me out. I think it called itself obscure or an Obsesser or something? But the only thing I found on that was a brief comment in the depths of a lost thread on the r/Paranormal subreddit on Reddit: *An Obsesser sucks on your life force until it is weak enough to pull your soul out of the body and inhabit it, taking over your life.*

So yeah, that's totally not ominous and something I wanted to hear, but it's honestly the most conceivable answer I've gotten so far.

Anyway, that comment gave me the idea to share my experience on the Reddit platform, so yeah, that's what my hellish supernatural experience has been so far. But the whole reason I'm even posting this to the internet is because I need someone to know that I'm still here. That I'm a ghost. And that Obsesser or whatever it is that's in my body, is not *me*.

She Knocks

I've been a detective for a long, *long* time. Probably longer than some of you have been alive. Working in this particular field of work I've come across a lot of the gruesome, disturbing, and horrific things God's Rejects have done to other innocent people. But in this case... I've never seen anything like it. I'm honestly at my wits end here and don't know what to believe anymore.

So I've turned here. I'm sure many of you are experts when it comes to this stuff, so I want your honest opinions on this one.

For some context: a young woman (five foot three, blonde hair, blue eyes) was brought into the station disheveled and covered in blood and dust. Officers had picked her up after some neighbors called with some noise complaints. When they entered the residence she was crouched on the ground next to the dead body of her fiancé, writing in a journal. A bloody hammer laid on the ground next to her.

Standard murder case, the crime junkies might be thinking, but it is so much more than that. And if my Sergeant ever found out I stole police evidence and posted it to social media I'd lose my job immediately. After taking this case though, I couldn't care less. I'm getting up there in age anyway and this old fart would rather like to retire after this particular case.

Anyway, I'll just let the evidence tell you. Below are entries from a leather bound journal that was collected from the scene of the crime. The one the woman was found writing in. It seems it was being used as some sort of diary/dream journal.

Entry #1

1/13/23

Hello Journal! My name is Lorelei Wilson and my fiancé George and I are going to buy our first house together! I'm keeping this as a log of our journey; from buying the house, to renovating, and hopefully to documenting building a nursery! Gosh, I feel like I'm thirteen again writing in my diary about my latest boy crush! Spoiler alert: it's George!

Honey if you ever read this, I love you and can't wait to take the next step with you!

Entry #2

1/24/23

I'm happy to announce that after almost two weeks of looking at houses on Zillow, going to a few open houses, and some other house tours, I think we've finally found the one! 8374

Maplewood Drive for only one hundred-thousand! I was surprised how cheap they were selling the place considering how beautiful the property is. Two story, four bedroom, two bath with marvelous wood flooring. The outside interior is a nice pearl white with a blue door that makes it pop! My favorite is the stereotypical white picket fence though, ha! There's also a study on the first floor so I'm thinking of turning that into our office.

Not only is the house itself beautiful but it has this intense aura about it, like it's drawing me in somehow. It's one of the reasons why it's my first choice at the moment. I think we're even going to put in an offer later today!!

I wonder why the address seems so familiar to me though...

Entry #3

1/31/23

Okay I'm even more excited about buying this house now!!! Not only did our offer get accepted, but after I did some research, I figured out why the house's address seemed so familiar to me! Turns out this is the house where Harriet Yarnsivick mysteriously disappeared into thin air five years ago. Oh George and I remember watching the news updates on the case when it was first sensationalized, but eventually the case went cold and I guess everyone forgot about it. How sad, I hope she's okay if she's still alive.

There was a lot of controversy surrounding the case too. Nobody knew how a girl could just up and disappear like that. All her belongings, purse, phone, and even shoes were still at the house. Police say there weren't any signs of forced entry or anything either. Harriet lived with three other housemates and they were all questioned, but none of them had a motive and were all at a house party that night with many corroborating witnesses. The house was spick and span clean, just how the other roommates had left it.

This case is so interesting! I might update my true crime blog and document living in this house! (Lord knows I've been neglecting updating it!)

I've always loved things like this, and Nancy Drew was my role model as a little girl. Who knows, maybe I'll find clue's the investigators missed and even solve the mystery!

Entry #4

2/3/23

IT'S MOVE IN DAY!!!

George thinks he's quite funny. I had mentioned when we had arrived in the moving truck how perfect the house looked, how it stood proud and strong on its foundations. He said it was morbid then proceeded to ask why he was marrying me again. I gave him a good nudge in the shoulder for that last remark! He knows very well that he likes the house just as much as I do, and found its history interesting, Hell he co-signed the lease!

Anyway we're both super excited about living here and also super tired and exhausted from moving. On the plus side we had pizza for dinner! Ate on the floor surrounded by boxes and everything. Can't wait for when we get the internet and cable in a few days.

Entry #5

2/4/23

I never really have been good at sleeping in unfamiliar spaces. I think my body is still adjusting to the move and my residual excitement and giddiness didn't help either. Man, I couldn't sleep a wink last night! Other than that, things have been fine. George got called into work today so I stayed home and started unpacking. The kitchen feels more like a kitchen with dishes in the cabinets and a proper dining table. After a short nap I'll go to the store and stock up on food.

Entry #6

2/6/23

George is mad at me. I might've snapped at him a little about the placement of the tv in the living room earlier. I get cranky when I'm tired and I haven't been sleeping the best at night. But it's okay because I'm mad at George too. The other night I could've sworn I heard someone knocking. I couldn't pinpoint the location where it was coming from but the small, quiet, and

repetitious knocks were there. I'm a light sleeper so I wasn't able to go back to sleep until the knocking ended at around four in the morning.

I brought it up to George in the morning, and since he's a heavy sleeper and didn't hear anything, he doesn't believe me.

Anyway, I finished setting up the study this morning. I found a picture of Harriet and her roommates stuck between some bookshelves so that was a cool find. She looked happy. There was a draft coming from somewhere in there though. I'll have to fix it and put that on my to-do list.

Entry #7

2/9/23

Taking some advice from my friend Chelsea, I'm going to start dream journaling, and this just so happened to be the only available journal I had. I'm too tired to drive to the store and get another one.

I've been able to get more sleep than I have in the past few days but not too much more. Every night until four am I'm lying awake in my bed, eyes wide open, as the knocks emanate through the house. George says he still hasn't heard anything, but I know they're there. Taunting me in their steady, continuous drumming. Maybe one of these days when I'm not as terrified, I'll go and find where the knocks are coming from.

But when I am sleeping, I'm having these crazy and vivid dreams. I'd never vividly dreamed before this so the first time it happened last night it felt super real.

I can't quite remember where I was but the space felt familiar. I remember feeling frantic, panicked, and scared. I had locked myself away somewhere, but I knew danger was right around the corner. Then all of a sudden this giant shadowy silhouette appeared and it lunged at me with a weapon, I think it was a hammer but I'm not sure. When it made contact with my head I woke up. I was covered in sweat and dazed. George woke up and comforted me when he saw the state I was in. I was a little less mad at him after that.

Maybe these dreams are caused by my sleep exhaustion.

Entry #8

2/10/23

If I'm not going to be getting much sleep, I might as well do something productive with that time. I've gone into a rabbit hole with the Yarnsivick case, doing research for my blog.

So Harriet had three other roommates, Joanne Harris, her brother David Harris, and another guy named Antonio Frump. Joanne and Antonio were an item and Harriet knew them all because she was Joanne's good friend from college.

A bunch of interviews from people that knew Harriet suspected that she and David were romantically involved and claimed David was responsible for her disappearance. According to police though, his alibi checked out and there was no way he could've been there. There isn't an estimated time of disappearance either. She really did just vanish out of thin air.

Since there was no other information about the case available online I turned to social media.

At some point I had fallen asleep while scrolling and I had the same vivid dream from the other night. This time it was more intense, I could feel the hatred and anger coming off the shadow figure. It was angry, determined, desperate. I could make out my surroundings now and realized why it was so familiar.

It was the study.

Entry #9

2/14/23

This dream was different from the other one that's been playing on repeat the past few nights. It was like a movie. I think I've been digging too much into this case because it's infecting my mind. In the dream I was Harriet. I was at a house party just chilling along with Jo and then her brother, David, entered the room. I think it was the first time I had seen him because it felt like my heart started racing and he looked cute, but unfamiliar. He was charming, funny. Knew how to make me laugh. I had an overall good time.

The dream ended after he handed me a red solo cup full of some liquid.

After I woke up I started digging through my notes. Surely enough Jo and Harriet had met at a house party, but I didn't find anything about David being there.

Ah shit, I forgot it was Valentine's Day! George came home pissed while I was researching. He slammed the front door, threw a pretty bouquet of flowers at my feet, and then angrily grumbled up the stairs to our bedroom. I had accidentally stood him up. Oh, I forgot I was supposed to meet up with him for dinner after his shift ended! I was too busy digging through old notes that I didn't check my phone to see his texts or calls.

Losing all this sleep has made me super forgetful.

Entry #10

2/16/23

Okay, either I'm fucking losing it or the knocking has started during the day time too. It feels like whatever is in the walls is surrounding me. Knocking twenty-four-seven, trying to get out. My head is pounding. I begged George to believe me, to call an exterminator to check for mice, anything, but he won't. He hasn't been home or awake, so he hasn't heard the knocking. Even when I hear it, he doesn't.

I wish George would get over Valentine's Day and just help me. He's made me sleep on the couch for the past few days.

Researching and updating my blog is all that comforts me.

Entry #11

2/18/23

We had sex. SO MUCH SEX! We fuck like bunnies, David and I. In my dreams I mean...

But he's so sweet and handsome though. He takes me out on dates, plays with my hair, he's just a genuine guy. And Joanne. My dear, sweet, Joanne. She's so supportive of our relationship and happy for me and her brother. It's like we're soulmates.

Jeez these dreams feel so real, like I'm actually her.

Sometimes I like to think I am Harriet.

But the only thing that tethers me is the rumors of David and her being an item. There's no proof. David, Joanne, and Antonio all denied them being in a relationship to the press and to the police.

Fuck I'm so horny. Maybe David and I can have a little fun later when he comes home from work.

Oops! Silly little me, I meant George. Maybe I'm actually starting to lose my marbles.

Entry #12

2/19/23

George has officially lost it! He's having me involuntarily committed! All because he came home to a mess in the study today!

So, I might've had a dream where David showed a notebook of poems he had written to Harriet. I woke up and remembered seeing it somewhere in the study. After I didn't find it in the book shelves I kinda went haywire and tore up the office a little bit. But I SWEAR I had seen that notebook before. I really do need to find the source of that draft, it's freezing in there!

He says this was his last straw. "I'm sleep deprived and delusional!" Me? Delusional?!? He's the crazy one if he can't hear the incessant knocks that comes from the fucking walls everyday! Me, crazy! Guess that's why he's sending me to the nut house.

I'm seriously reconsidering our engagement.

David would've made a better husband than George anyway.

I'm sneaking my journal in with me >:)

Entry #13

2/20/23

David is an abusive asshole and I wish I never fell in love with him! The red flags were there this whole time! He was super possessive of me everywhere we went, he wouldn't let me talk to other boys, and he accused me of cheating on him every other week! Now he's finally done it. He's hit me!

I've turned into his personal punching bag the past few days. I'm scared and terrified of setting him off again. And Jo! She just stands by and lets it happen. I've begged her to help me but she won't, claiming that he's her brother and she'd never do anything to ruin his reputation. Some fucking friend.

I've started looking for other places to live. I'm going to do it. I'm going to leave David once and for all.

Entry #14

2/21/23

I've been released from my seventy two hour hold. They haven't found anything wrong with me and I just slept for most of the time. I feel much better now. My head isn't swimming anymore and I'm not tired. I think I slept for a good twentyish hours while in there. George was so happy to see me, and I him. We had a nice long hug when he came to pick me up.

I think things are going to get better from here on out.

Entry #15

2/22/23

IT'S SO LOUD! The knocking. Knock, knock, knock, knock, knock, knock, KNOCK, KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK! MAKE IT STOP!

Ever since I got back yesterday it's been constant non-stop knocking. I have a headache. Eventually I passed out due to the pain.

David did it. He killed me. He found out I was planning on leaving him and he freaked. I was going to make my escape when they were at the house party. He somehow found out and left the party to come confront me. When he cornered me... he tried to rape me. I eventually got away and hid in the study. He smashed my phone so I couldn't call for help or do anything. He smashed the doorknob off with a hammer. When he realized I wouldn't go back to him he killed me! Bashed my skull in with the hammer! You want to know the worst part? I was still alive when he stuffed me in that wall. I watched as he replaced the broken door knob. Screamed in horror as he moved the bookshelf in front of the small hole he had created. I cried and cried but nobody heard me. Eventually I passed out from exhaustion and suffocated.

I know where the banging is coming from. I have one of George's hammers, and I grabbed it from his tool bag. I'm headed for the study.

I'm ending it, once and for all.

It feels like a jackhammer is drilling into my ears. The knocking is the loudest in the study. I'm just so over it! My head is pounding! I'm tired, exhausted! I just want it to STOP!

I was scared! David came downstairs when he heard me smashing the bookcases in the study. He yelled at me, screamed! I was so scared he was going to hit me. Kill me again. I hate David! I hate him with a burning passion!

Everything rose to a crescendo around me! The knocking was so loud it felt like my brain was about to explode. David was screaming in my ear, grabbing me, trying to hurt me! I just wanted everything to stop. I wanted him to stop hurting me!

I hit him in the head with my hammer. Then I hit him again and again until his brains turned to mush. I just have to laugh. I finally got revenge on David. Did what that fucker did to me. He's quiet now. Quiet is good.

Then I went back to hitting the wall. With every hit the knocking diminished. Finally it was quiet when the bookshelf was destroyed. It was peaceful.

There was a small hole in the wall that was hidden behind the bookshelf.

I found her. I found Harriet.

There's flashing red and blue lights outside. Good. They'll be able to help.

I really don't know if this journal will be enough evidence to convict David Harris for the murder or Harriet Yarnsivick. These are more like the ramblings of a madwoman than a credible confession. I don't know if the prosecution will see this as admissible in court.

As for Lorelei Wilson, she's being charged for the murder of her fiancé George Finch. They found him with his head bashed in. Brain matter and skull fragments everywhere. Poor guy. They found Lorelei frantically mumbling and scribbling in the journal when they entered the scene. In the wall they found the skeletal remains of Ms. Yarnsivick. Her skull had been bashed in.

It appears her assailant killed her, moved the bookshelf and created a makeshift grave in the wall where they stuffed her body and moved the bookshelf back.

I have no clue how investigators didn't smell the decomposition, or notice that the bookshelf had been moved, but the tenants quickly moved out after the girl's disappearance and the house was left vacant for five years. Nobody complained of a rotting smell in all that time.

Again, I really don't know what to believe here. It seems like Ms. Yarnsivick's ghost haunted Ms. Wilson and drove her insane until she discovered her remains. But that's crazy, ghosts don't exist!

Right?

Anyway, I better finish up here, it seems like someone is knocking at my door.

**There's Something Off About The Bed & Breakfast I
Run, So I Created A List Of Rules To Keep My Guests
Safe**

Just for some background information, I purchased Harlow Manor using the hefty inheritance money I got from my grandfather after he passed.

"Austin," he had said, lying there on his deathbed, decaying in front of me, "I want you to open up a bed & breakfast."

It was a dark time in my life and I guess he figured a bed & breakfast was just the thing to get me out of my funk. So, I did what any good grandson would do, and fulfilled my grandfather's last dying wish.

The twelve room, seven bath Victorian mansion was built in 1901 so there were some repairs to be made, but overall the structural integrity of the building was pretty intact for the one-hundred-something year old piece of architecture.

The countless DIY projects around the manor kept me focused and motivated to finish what I started- something I rarely did back then.

Six months after I first acquired Harlow Manor, my quaint little B&B opened its doors for the first time.

The property itself was only a twenty minute drive from the nearest town and overlooked a large body of water named Carmel lake. Harlow manor was fairly secluded, surrounded by lush woods with a few hiking trails, and had a nice view. The perfect place for a nice weekend getaway.

Everything about Harlow Manor was practically perfect, at least from the outside, however I discovered some of the mansion's quirks during renovations.

In an effort to get to know the Manor a bit more, I did a little digging into its history and found out it was believed to be built on something called a ley line which apparently attracts the supernatural or something. At first, I didn't know what to think, but after seeing the... unique clientele Harlow Manor attracts, and my personal experiences within the mansion, there might be some validity to that statement.

The first few weeks went as well as they could've and I actually got a few five star ratings on Yelp! However, after a few incidents that caused me to go down to a four star rating, I meticulously and thoughtfully created a list of rules that not only kept my patrons safe from things in the manor and other patrons themselves, but kept them comfortable as well.

If you ever want to come visit me at Harlow Manor and stay for a few days please remember to follow these five simple rules:

Rule 1. DO NOT engage with the thing in your closet under ANY circumstances!

This is rule number one for a reason, so if you're going to remember one rule on this list, make sure it's this one.

I don't know what the presence that lurks in the closets is, but I just call it The Thing. My first encounter with it was my first night in Harlow Manor. Obviously since I run a Bed & Breakfast I'm going to live in it, so my room is what used to be the maid's quarters. It's

essentially an apartment within the mansion that has three rooms, an en-suite bathroom, walk-in closet, living room, and kitchenette.

I had finished moving all my boxes and furniture in. I even unpacked all my clothes and had started setting up my office in the next room. I was exhausted from the physical labor of it all and went to lay down, but my body just didn't want to go to sleep yet. I think I was just nervous about sleeping in a new place, but it was in that halfway state in between sleep and consciousness that I heard it.

"Austin~"

My eyes opened and I listened intently. I thought I had heard something, but wasn't sure.

"Austin, come here!" The old gravely voice said again. This time I sat up in bed and scanned my room. The full moon was shining in through my window, illuminating the room enough to where I could make out my surroundings. My eyes landed on the walk-in closet's door that was slightly ajar. I could've sworn the door was closed when I first went to bed.

If it wasn't that The Thing lurking in the closet knew my name that irked me, it was that it sounded just like my grandfather.

"G-grandpa?" I stammered out, clutching my blanket like it would save me.

"Yes!" The voice whispered excitedly. "Austin it's me! Come in here and save me!" It begged.

I felt some sort of compulsion overcome me at that moment. It clouded my judgment. This intense desire to just spring up out of my bed and run into the closet swelled in my chest... and I did. Without any hesitation I got out from under the covers and B-lined for the closet.

I was just about to place my hand on the door knob and open the closet all the way, when my body stopped moving.

Wait a minute...

My grandfather died, I watched him pass away on his deathbed.

"You can't be my grandfather," I said to the thing in my closet, taking a step back. "He's dead."

"No! No I'm not, I'm right here, Austin. I need you to come in here and get me out!"

"If you're really my grandfather, then why can't you come out of the closet?" I questioned.

"I-I'm stuck!" The Thing yelled out in a frustrated yell, a long pause of silence followed. "I'm stuck and I'm *hungry!*" It suddenly shouted. Then desperate growls and rustling erupted from inside my closet. I quickly thrust the closet door closed and made a mad dash for the couch down in the foyer.

The next morning when I inspected my closet, there was nothing in there. Nothing had been touched and it looked just like a normal closet. That night it returned again, but I ignored all the voices of my loved ones threatening to kill and eat me coming from inside the closet by clutching the firmest pillow I owned over my head. The next day I purchased a good pair of earplugs and finally got some good, uninterrupted sleep.

Originally, I thought The Thing was only contained to that closet, but in reality it lurks in any and all closets in the Manor.

It was the second weekend after Harlow Manor opened to the public. A very sweet young lady came in for a weekend getaway all to herself. She was staying in one of the regular guest rooms. It was mid-day when she called down to the front desk I had set up in the back of the foyer, right between the grand staircase.

She had called complaining about the people in the room next to her, saying she could hear them talking through the walls. When I checked my computer system, there was nobody staying in either room next to her on either side. She mumbled something about a long drive after I relayed that information to her and hung up. A few hours went by with nothing happening until she called again, right before 9 PM (refer to Rule 2) just before I headed in for the night. Frantically she explained how she heard the voice of her dead mother whispering to her from her closet and how it kept switching between that and her recently deceased boyfriend.

My heart sank to my stomach as I quickly ran to her room. She was still alive, but very much freaked out when I got there. I upgraded her to one of the family suites on the third floor free of charge and helped move her things up there. Before leaving, I reassured her that it was probably nothing, but warned her to ignore any sounds she thought she heard coming from the closet.

I really hoped she'd heed my warning, but when her checkout time came and went the next morning I had a sneaking suspicion The Thing got to her. It was after that lady's disappearance that the Manor's list of rules started to formulate in my brain.

I also came to the realization that the people who I thought just walked out of their rooms, leaving all their stuff behind, didn't actually walk out.

The Thing in the closet is a pretty persistent bastard, I'll admit, which is why earplugs are now available for purchase for \$3 at the front desk.

Rule 2. All tenants must be in their rooms by 9 PM.

This rule only really applies to my normal and non-nocturnal guests, but it needed to be included on the list.

If you're wondering why the mansion is called Harlow Manor, it's named after the man who had it built. David Harlow was an architect in the early twentieth century. He made sure his house was built to nothing but his exact standards.

David Harlow was said to be a very cruel, cold, and calculated man that nobody wanted to mess with. His intimidating shadow loomed over his family as well. He wanted them to be nothing but perfect, just like his architecture.

One day, his teenage daughter, Priscilla, snapped and murdered her entire family. With. A. Twig. She stabbed it in her family members eyes and then stabbed a smiley face in their abdomens with it.

I make good money when the true crime fanatics come to visit, especially around Halloween.

Now, it's said that Priscilla locked herself in the Manor's attic after her brutal attack and basically nested in there, only coming down to feast on the rotting corpses of her family. It's rumored that she became nocturnal after isolating herself up in the dark attic by herself for weeks, only coming down at night to feast. She died in the attic from dehydration and starvation after picking the bones clean from the skeleton of her father, who she saved for last.

Sadly, this is true, and her ghost roams the halls at night. She's left me alone since I started to leave packages of raw ground beef outside my door (I first met her when she was digging in my trash can, eating some rotted ground beef I'd thrown out- hence the ground beef). Priscilla won't bother some of the special patrons either. She won't go into the guests rooms for some reason, but if she catches you sneaking about in the hallways of the house, she'll drag you up to the attic and devour you.

It took me a while to figure out that it wasn't The Thing taking small children and elderly guests, but Priscilla. I didn't know she ate people until the B&B opened to the public. I figured it out when she left the skeleton of a child in front of my door as a thank you gift for all the raw meat I gave her.

That's when I started suggesting people be in their rooms by 9 PM, but didn't enforce it.

Most parents complained about their children wandering out of their rooms and probably out into the forest- same with the old folks kids- so I implemented the rule so they'd stop nagging and complaining. I also got tired of lugging all that luggage down to the basement. There's only so much storage space down there you know.

So at 9 PM all guests must stay in their rooms for the rest of the night. You don't have to go to bed and can fuck around until you do go to bed, just in your room and not in the halls.

Because of the rule I stopped accepting late check-ins, interacting with guests (only doing so if they called and in case of an emergency) and started locking the front door of the Manor.

If people stay out past 9 and find the front door locked, tough shit. Should've read the rules, because I don't let people back in until morning. No matter what.

Parents think it's because of "the wandering kid" issue and I let them believe it.

On the flip side, Priscilla isn't very happy with me now and stopped gifting me children's skeletons- which I'm pretty grateful for.

Rule 3. No garlic, salt, silver, or holy water is permitted on the premises.

This is a Bed & Breakfast, so while I provide meals for my guests, you don't have to eat what I cook. Many guests bring hot plates and stuff to cook their own food in. The rooms are big enough to fit tables in and each room has a mini fridge as well, so you're perfectly capable of feeding yourself.

But, please be mindful of other guests' allergies- food and otherwise.

While I understand you want to season your food, it is quite rude and unfair to keep the nocturnal guests from eating *their* meals without having to put up a fight. It's not my fault if you invited another sparkling and mysterious patron into your room or if you came in on the night of a full moon.

Rule 4. No pets!

Again, people have allergies and I don't want to spend my days cleaning dog/cat piss and shit off the floor, carpets, mattresses, and walls. The only exception to this rule is for certain patrons only, and they're required to pay extra in incidentals.

People also have weird pets. This tall, gaunt looking guy tried to come in one day with a giant three headed dog once. Shut that down real quick and told him to find somewhere else to stay.

The guy wasn't very happy and the dog left a giant shit in the yard.

That was not a fun day.

And last but not least:

Rule 5. ALWAYS leave a tip!

Seriously, please leave a tip. I work very hard to ensure all my guests have a helpful and amazing stay at Harlow Manor.

There's a very big and nice glass jar with a "tip jar \$\$" label sitting on the right hand side of the front desk, *wink wink*. It doesn't matter if it's when you're checking in, checking out, or just hanging out in the foyer during the day, just drop some money in it. Even as little as a few quarters are appreciated! I also accept Apple Pay, Venmo, Cashapp, and Paypal!

Besides, it's not worth losing your life over.

Don't get me wrong, managing and running this Bed & Breakfast is my life and I absolutely love it, but there's so much stress when it comes to the hospitality business. Dealing with Karen's and Kyles all day isn't fun, and plus a man's got to get rid of his stress somehow.

Remember how I told you I was in a very dark and low place when my grandfather died? I was stressing and spiraling about school and financial problems then. Before the B&B I had my own way of dealing with stress. The Smiley Face Murders ring any bells?

Well, anyway, I take my frustrations out on those that don't tip now. A lot of my stress relief is practically handed to me on a silver platter!

So again, please be mindful of my list of rules. There's a paper with the rules on it in every room, a big one by the front desk, and other ones plastered throughout the halls. Most people laugh after reading them, thinking it's a joke. It's not.

Not only are they there to ensure your safety and protection from the things in the Manor and other guests themselves during your stay at Harlow Manor, but they are also there for all guests to have a comfortable and pleasurable experience!

Please come visit the Manor soon, I can't wait to see you!!

I Am Emily

"Listen, uhhh... Emily. This is me being nice," the old hag in front of me stated after squinting her dull eyes at the cheap name tag pinned to my chest. She then crossed her arms into her chest as a blue shirt draped over her left forearm. I had to intensely fight the urge to roll my eyes at this woman.

The Karen shot me a fake and menacing smile, "Now, I don't want to have to get your manager involved here. So why don't you just let me return this shirt and I will go on my merry way."

I heaved a heavy sigh and then brought out my best customer service voice, "I'm sorry ma'am but I have to tell you again, you can't return a shirt that wasn't purchased at this store. They would just say the exact same thing as I'm telling you now if they were to come out here."

She then made an expression as if she was just stabbed in the back by her best friend of fifty years.

"You kids nowadays and your 'non binary' whack-a-doo. Listen here missy, there are only two genders! No in between."

This lady then went on a ten minute rant about how being gay, trans, and/or non binary is a sin and unnatural. The whole irony of the situation is when I said "they" I meant plural because our little outlet store always has two managers on duty during work hours. But of course this homophobic bitch just *had* to find an excuse to push her hateful beliefs on me.

"I'm going on break!" I suddenly shouted after I had had enough of this old lady's bullshit. She continued to yell at the back of my head as I walked into the back.

I grumpily sat down at the small round table in the break room, leaning over to rub my temples as the beginnings of a migraine brewed in my brain.

"Want me to go kick some old lady ass?" My co-worker/best friend forever asked as we could faintly hear the Karen still causing a commotion out front.

"What would I do without you?" I said with a small smile, "But no thanks though, I just want to sleep for the mandatory fifteen minute break we're allotted every shift," I said as I buried my eyes into the crook of my elbow.

A soft warm hand landed on my tense shoulder. Some of the tension melted away with a single touch. "Alright. I'll come and wake you up in fifteen then."

I then heard Lydia's footsteps fade away as my consciousness did the same.

Girlish giggles, a spatter of blood, then a haunting scream. I flinched awake at the memory, unable to stop my hands from shaking. Instead I busied them, scrolling through my phone until my break ended.

I was grateful for the cool night air as I left the small hot and stuffy outlet store that was my job.

"You ready to party?" Lydia asked excitedly after she closed the door to the passenger side of my car.

"No, but a party is a party, so I will be," I said with an exhausted smile as I pulled out of the parking lot.

Lydia gave me a sympathetic smile, placing her hand on mine and squeezing.

After the short ten minute drive to our shared apartment, we got out and made the short trip to what we called our little abode. I took off my dingy red and white uniform vest and chucked it on the couch as soon as I unlocked the door and walked into the mid-sized open floor plan studio apartment.

"What do you think of this?" Lydia asked as she held up a hanger with a silver cocktail dress over her front side as she stared in the full body length mirror at the glittery shimmers.

I let out a small chuckle before I answered her question, "It's a bachelorette party Lydia, not a costume party. You'd look like a twenty's flapper girl in that."

Lydia pouted in the mirror as she looked at my reflection coming from behind her. "Ugh, you're so right, but I never get a chance to wear this thing!"

"You could wear it for Halloween next year," I suggested with a shrug of my shoulders.

She threw the dress on her bed before turning around to face me. "Har Har. You're hilarious, Emily."

"Why thank you!" I said with an innocent smile. Lydia just rolled her eyes and continued to comb through her closet for a decent outfit to wear.

I ended up wearing a pink floral off the shoulder maxi dress with a pleated bottom. Lydia wore a plain noodle strap black pencil dress with a light blue jean jacket. Lydia pulled her long black locks into a cute messy bun. The whole look was tied together with her mesmerizing emerald green eyes. I myself pulled my medium dirty blonde hair into a half up half down hairstyle. I curled the ends slightly to make it look like my hair had more volume and bounce to it then it actually did.

Basically, we both looked like hot as fuck bad bitches. But not too hot to outshine the bride-to-be, that would be just plain rude.

It was ten pm when we rolled up to the bar. Surprisingly, for a pub called "The Shack," it was very formal. The bar stools twisted, the bar itself was made out of a dark marble, and the booths were made with a nice black pleather.

"No way!" A shrill high pitched voice rang through the semi large crowd of people. "Is that Emily Emerson and Lydia Green? Before my very own eyes?"

A tall dark haired woman with two outstretched hands, one with a martini and the other with a gorgeous engagement ring, came out of the crowd and enveloped the two of us in a big group hug.

She stepped back and Lydia and I got a good look at our old friend. She was wearing a black floral patterned dress with a complementing dark red lipstick. She had a darker jean jacket on and amazing six inch stiletto heels.

"Maddison! It's so great to see you!" Lydia said as we made our way to the bar. One of the beauties of tonight is that it was an open bar and all on Madison's Maid of Honors tab.

"So are you excited for next Friday?" I asked as we took the last three stools farthest from the front door.

"Yes! But I'm also scared to death! Marriage is a huge commitment, and then of course the last thing after marriage is kids," Maddison said after gulping down the rest of her martini.

"Oh she's already drunk isn't she?" Lydia whispered into my ear as Maddison ordered another martini.

"Yup," I whispered back.

How would we know this? Well, Maddie isn't the type of girly girl that would just spill out her feelings, at least not when she's sober that is.

"What can I get for ya?" The young and surprisingly handsome bartender asked us.

"I'll get some bourbon," Lydia requested.

"Double shot of whiskey please," I asked.

The bartender got to work and we watched as he poured our drinks.

"Have a tough day at work?" Maddison asked, curiously.

"Don't you know it," I said, raising my eyebrows as I shot down my drink.

"Should've seen the Karen Emily dealt with today."

"Oh! I want to hear all about this," Madison said excitedly.

After a few more hours of drinking and dancing, our whole party was heavily inebriated. Except for me, since I was the designated driver. All I got was my double shot of whiskey and then I just drank coke and water for the rest of the night.

It was about to be last call when Lydia and Maddie started to drunkenly reminisce about our high school days. You see, Lydia and I had been best friends since Freshman year, but Maddie transferred to our high school near the end of Sophomore year. We all hit it off instantly and were a really close clique, but after high school ended we kind of drifted apart from her. We all follow each other on social media and keep up to date every now and then but Maddie went to a different college than we did, so a natural rift just formed. Hence why we're only bridesmaids and neither of us are her Maid of Honor.

"D-do you guys remember Junior Prom?" Maddison asked as she finished another shot of tequila.

"Oh, hell yeah!" Lydia yelled a bit too loudly.

I nodded my head. "The Spray Paint Incident, right?"

A loud hiccup escaped from Maddison's lips and then a giggle followed right after it.

"Yeah!"

Lydia turned to face me. "I still can't believe they framed you, Emily."

"Yeah whoever the asshole who did that can suck a nut."

A round of giggles went around us like we were freshly turned teenage girls again.

"It was so cool what you did for me, Lydia," I said as I gently grabbed her hand that rested on the counter.

"Well I couldn't just let you take all the falsely accused blame for yourself!" My sister from another mister said as she flashed me a drunk smile.

Maddie gasped. "Are you going to say it?"

"You're my ride or die, after all."

"My partner in crime," I said after.

Maddison began to freak out and she had this huge smile on her face. "Oh my god! You said it!!"

A feeling of warmth filled my chest at the remembrance of our old catchphrase.

A loud crash came from my left. I looked over to see Maddie had lost her balance on the stool and had tipped over. The three of us started to roar with laughter as I helped pick the bride-to-be off the floor.

"Alright girls, that's enough for you tonight," the cute bartender said with a wholesome smile.

"Ugh. It feels like there's a jack hammer drilling into the inside of my head," Lydia groaned after she turned her alarm clock off.

"That's what happens when you drink hard alcohol all night," I laughed as I rolled out of bed.

"I'll get you some water and a Tylenol."

Lydia rubbed her eyes as she sat up on her bed. "Have I ever told you how much I love you?"

"All the time," I said as I held out my hand full of pills to her and then the small glass of water.

"Do I have to go to work today?" She asked, giving me puppy dog eyes.

"If we don't want to keep the lights on," I countered.

She sighed and got out of bed, begrudgingly.

"Can we at least get Starbucks on the way to work?" Lydia asked as she got in the passenger side of my vehicle.

"Yes, we can get Starbucks," I answered, rolling my eyes.

"Hell yeah!" She cheered as she did the Victory Baby meme pose.

When we pulled up to the outlet store's parking lot, there were two police vehicles parked by the front door. The manager on shift, Amelia, was speaking with two detectives, it looked like.

"What do you think is going on?" Lydia asked, curiously.

"I- I don't know," I said truthfully. My heartbeat sped up as we got closer and closer.

"Hey Emily! Lydia!" Our manager yelled across the parking lot to us as we got out of my car. "Come here!"

We both walked up slowly. My hands were starting to tremble a little, small beads of sweat forming on my brow.

"This is Detective Harrison from the local PD," Amelia said, gesturing to the man on the left. "And this is Special Agent Thomas Buford with the FBI," The tall bulky blonde agent flashed his badge at the two of us.

My face paled, my heart was racing like a motorcycle engine in one of those circle box cages at this point.

"What's going on?" Lydia asked them after shaking their hands.

The two men turned to me. "We'd like to take Miss Emerson here down to the station for questioning," The detective spoke.

"Um, what for?" Lydia asked, defensively.

The FBI agent answered, "Emily here is a person of interest in a case we've been working on."

"As I said," the detective began again, "we need to take her down to the station for questioning."

"S-sure thing," I stuttered. "Let me just get something from my work locker real quick," I said with a shy smile. When I walked into the store there were two more cops waiting by the checkout counters. I gave them a small head nod and made my way to the back of the store. One of them stalked behind me as I went to my locker and shoved my belongings into my purse.

The officer then walked me back to the front and practically burned two holes in the back of my head as I left.

As soon as I came out Lydia was clinging onto my arm.

"I just managed to convince them to not take you out of here in cuffs!" She whispered furiously into my ear. "What the hell is going on, Emily?"

"I don't know," I whispered back.

Lydia walked me back to the car and then waited for the detective and FBI agent to lead us out of the parking lot. The other cop car sandwiched us in between.

After a few minutes of driving behind them we approached a stoplight and a plan formulated in my head.

"Lydia," I stated as calmly as I could.

"Yeah, Em?"

"When we get to the next red light I need for you to get out."

"W-why? You're not going to run are you?"

"Lydia, please."

"No. Nuh uh. No way. You can't be *serious!*"

"Lydia."

"You aren't escaping alone," she said as she crossed her arms.

My eyes widened in surprise.

"You're my ride or die."

"Lydia, *no*," I warned.

"Say it back," she demanded.

"I can't let you do this."

"Say it."

I slumped my shoulders and gave in. "My partner in crime."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" I asked her as the next stop light approached.

"As I'll ever be," she said evenly.

When the next light came up, instead of following the cop car in front of me, I swerved into the turning lane and floored it. The cop car behind us was fast on our tail with their red and blue lights flashing, but I managed to make enough turns and quick lane switches to evade them. After a good thirty miles of speeding and random twists and turns later, I was confident that we had lost them.

"Why do they want you?" Lydia asked as she finished the last of her coffee from Starbucks, oddly calm after just being involved in a police pursuit.

"I have no clue," I answered, tapping my fingers on the steering wheel, avoiding her stifling gaze.

"Then why are we running if you're innocent?"

"I have no clue. I-it's just a gut feeling okay?"

Lydia scoffed, sitting back in her seat, turning her head to look out the window. "Okay. It's just that this is all so crazy, Emily. You know that right?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry for dragging you into this mess," I couldn't help but apologize.

"You're my best friend, I'd take a bullet for you. Don't be sorry," Lydia said after a minute, turning to me with a comforting smile. "So uh, where are we going to go?"

"You remember that cabin my family used to go up to for the summer?"

Lydia scrunched up her face in confusion. "I thought you guys sold that place."

"Oh, we did. But, there's this old abandoned cabin about a two hour hike away from it. My brothers and I would sometimes squat there on our little camping trips," I explained.

"Won't they be searching the area there though? I mean there was an FBI agent after you for Christ sake!" Lydia exclaimed as she pulled her knees up to her chest. "They probably know everything about you."

"It's so hidden and remote, I doubt they'll find it," I moved one hand to her shoulder while keeping the other on the wheel. Her shoulder was tense.

"Hey. It'll be okay," I said, giving a gentle squeeze.

"I know."

The gas gauge was close to E. We'd been driving for a few hours by then and we were both starving. I found a sign pointing towards a small, somewhat desolate gas station. It wasn't the cleanest looking thing, but I'd seen worse.

"Pass me my purse?" I asked Lydia.

"Here," she said as she stretched in her seat.

Lydia's eyes almost popped out of her skull when she saw the big wad of cash I pulled out from my purse.

"What?" I asked defensively, " You know I always carry cash."

"That much?!"

I shrugged my shoulders, "You never know."

"Alright, you pump this old hunk of junk full of gas and I'll pay inside. Get us some snacks too," I said, stuffing some cash into my pocket.

Lydia nodded and we both got out of the car.

Some old country tunes played in the store as I browsed around, the sound of the mounted tv drowned most of it out though. I put a small case of water bottles on the bottom of my basket, then some convenience store sub sandwiches and a couple bags of chips and made my way to pay.

"Forty on pump three, and all of this please," I said softly as I grabbed the cash from my pocket. The old man gave me a slight nod and soft beeps could be heard from him scanning my items.

"Breaking News at Five," The television announced. The cashier took his attention off my items and towards the screen. My heart fell to my stomach when a picture of Lydia and I was plastered all over the screen. In large white letters at the bottom of the screen it read "*Fugitive at large, possible hostage situation.*"

"Earlier today, suspect Emily Emerson escaped police custody and has continued to evade them for the past several hours. Her friend Lydia Green..." The words of the news anchor faded out as an intense ringing noise filled my ears. My heart was racing and my palms began to sweat.

The cashier looked at the tv then to me, back to the tv, and then to a screen behind the counter I couldn't see. His face furrowed as he stared. He brought his gaze back up to mine and I gave him a nervous smile.

"We need to leave. Now," I yelled, running out of the small gas station.

"What? Why?" Lydia asked, confused, as she put the gas nozzle back.

"Get your shit out of the car and let's go!" I yelled as I grabbed my stuff out of the driver's seat.

"Is that blood?" Lydia asked as she saw a small red stain on my shirt.

"Hurry up!" I ordered, ignoring her question.

I tossed my keys on the seat and took out a set of keys for a Ford F-150. I pressed the unlock button and scanned the parking lot for red blinking lights. We dashed across the lot and threw our belongings into the back of the truck and hopped in.

"Emily, what in the hell is going on?!" Lydia demanded to know.

"Do you trust me?" I asked as I sped out of the parking lot.

"Emily-"

"Do you trust me?" I asked again, but with more conviction this time.

"Yes. With my life."

"Okay then," I said with a hard nod as I focused on the road in front of me.

The drive had been silent since we left that gas station. It was dusk now seeing as it had been a few hours since the gas station. The only thing between us and awkward silence was the soft pop music coming from the truck's stereo and the soft splats of rain dropping on the window.

"We're about two miles out," I finally said, trying to ease the tension.

"Alright," Lydia said bluntly. Her head had been facing out the window, her eyes glued to the passing scenery.

Suddenly, a pair of flashing blue lights turned on behind us. This caused Lydia to sit up and look out the rear window.

"Shit!" I said as I tapped my thumbs against the steering wheel.

I started to speed up, but then a strip of tire spikes and a police vehicle appeared in front of me. I quickly stomped on the breaks and we skidded to a stop.

"Oh no," Lydia said as she stared out the windshield. Waiting there in front of us was that FBI Agent, Thomas Buford.

"Step out of the vehicle with your arms in the air!" He shouted through a megaphone.

"Now!" He ordered when we didn't comply.

Lydia and I both looked at each other.

"Let's just do what he says," I said, shakily.

Thomas ran towards us when we both got out. He knocked me down on my knees and pinned my arms behind my back.

"Emily!" Lydia cried when an officer grabbed her away.

I was drenched by now and the rain blended in with the tears falling down my cheeks.

Cold, hard, metal was shoved up against the back of my head. I stifled a sob as I realized what it was.

"Who are you?" He shouted at me.

"I'm Emily. My name is Emily Emerson!" I spoke softly.

"Don't you fuck with me!" He pressed the gun down harder. "This thing is loaded with silver bullets."

"S-silver bullets?!" Lydia said as she tried to break free from the officer's grasp.

"I'm not! My name is Emily!" I said again, this time I hyperventilated because of how hard I was crying.

"No, no you're not," Buford said calmly.

Lydia shouted, "What do you even mean? She is Emily! She's right there."

"No!" Thomas said as he pushed down even harder. "Three days ago two hunters came across a young teenage girl's remains out here deep in the middle of the reserve. Dental records matched with fourteen year old Emily Emerson."

"What?" Lydia asked, obviously shaken.

"So, let me ask you again, one last time," he said in a calm and cold voice.

Buford cocked the gun.

"Who? Are? You?"

"Alright, alright!" I said putting my hands up defensively. Slight relief flooded through my body as the pressure from the gun eased. The rain was steady and soft now, it looked like it would ease up soon.

The jig was up.

"My name isn't really Emily," I confessed.

Lydia fell to the wet tarmac, her raven hair a wet tangled mess. A hand covered her mouth as she stifled her sobs.

"My real name is Cara Brooks."

Lydia picked her head up and looked at me with slight recognition of my words. You could practically see the light bulb above her head flicker to life.

"W-where do I know that name from?"

I looked at her and then back to the ground with shame.

The gun was once again thrust onto the back of my skull with force as the special agent yelled, "Doesn't matter. It's time for this *thing* to die."

"No wait! Please!" I begged as I brought my head closer to my chest, trying to scrunch down and make myself as small as possible. I don't know if I was shaking because of the literal gun pointed at me, the fact that I was drenched in freezing cold rain, or because I was terrified. Maybe it was a mixture of all three.

"L-let me explain! Please."

"Why should I?" It was clear in his conviction that he wasn't going to change his mind easily.

"I know I'm going to die tonight, and hell maybe I even deserve it for all the terrible things I've done. But at least give me the opportunity to explain to Lydia what happened."

I felt him turn towards her, contemplatively.

I almost pissed myself as all my muscles unclenched themselves when the pressure and sensation of the gun left the back of my head. A hard and calloused hand grabbed my shoulder and ripped me off the ground. I was then thrown into the back of the police vehicle. Lydia and Thomas occupied the driver and front passenger seats.

There was a moment of intense awkward silence.

"Lydia, do you remember why everyone thought I was responsible for the graffiti?" I blurted out meekly, referring to Junior Prom.

"You had red smears all over the bottom of your dress."

I nodded my head. "Do you remember what it said?"

"Cara Brooks is a freak," she looked down and twiddled with her thumbs nervously.

"I didn't spray it, but I did try to wipe it off, hence why the red was there."

"I don't get it. If you, however the hell you were able to do it, were Emily at the time, why didn't you just leave it be? Act like you didn't know who it was?" Lydia asked.

"Because even though I was living as her, I still had most of my memories."

"What the hell does that even mean?"

"As a shapeshifter, when I change into someone else I absorb their thoughts, feelings and memories," I explained further. "At first it's small glimpses, little meaningless bits of time. As time goes on though, the more important memories started to surface."

Special Agent Buford chimed in, "Wouldn't your old and new memories mix and you'd get them confused?"

I scoffed and crossed my arms, fighting the urge to squirm at the soft squishiness of my wet shirt. "Oh, you should know the answer to that one already."

"What does she mean?" Lydia asked Buford.

I answered before he could utter a word, "People... things, like me, don't normally grow up in the most stable environments. Good memories are few and far between."

I took a deep breath before continuing. I had to mentally prepare myself for the mental deep dive I was about to take into my childhood, *my* actual childhood.

"My mother," I began, "was petrified of people like Mr. FBI agent over there. The ones that hunt us. You probably aren't even an actual agent are you?"

His white knuckles gripped the steering wheel, confirming everything I needed to know.

"Well, being isolated by my mother didn't really help my social standing when it came to school, being poor didn't either. I was seen as the loner, the quiet kid, the weirdo, the freak. Nobody wanted to be friends with me. Needless to say, with all the hurtful words that the bullies ingrained into my head, the fact of knowing what I am and how crazy my mother was, I had really bad self-esteem issues. I was too short, too fat, my hair was unkempt and greasy, my teeth were disgusting... it all took a toll on me, mentally."

Looking at Lydia, I saw her face fill with concern as I talked badly about myself. That's the thing about her. Whenever she knew me as Emily, every time I talked down to myself, she would say ten things about me that she loved.

My gaze went back to my hands where I twiddled my thumbs as I fought back tears as the memories resurfaced.

"Then in middle school," I breathed in a shaky breath as the tears started to sting my eyes, "I saw Emily Emerson for the first time. I was completely infatuated with her. She had the life of my dreams, Lydia. She was beautiful, popular, had an amazing family that loved and supported her, and most importantly, she was free. Free to be herself and not hide who she truly was. So, that's why I began stalking her," I explained.

Lydia gasped as she cupped her hand over her mouth. I saw Buford side eye me in the rear view mirror.

"It was minor at first, just following her to her classes, memorizing her school schedule. Then it escalated to me memorizing her whole routine and where she lived, learning each and every one of her friends' names, Emily's mannerisms."

"I thought you said you absorbed all their memories and stuff, so why did you do all that? To help assimilate to her life easier?" Lydia asked, interrupting me.

"I did," I answered before continuing more, "and yeah it did help to blend in easier, but you have to understand something else, this was my messed up coping mechanism. I'd watched her every move like a character on a tv show. Emily lived my dream life, so I watched it play out for her while in the back of my mind the plan formulated itself."

"Do you want to know the truth about how I knew there was that old and abandoned cabin in the woods by her family's cabin?" I asked Lydia, Thomas's eyebrows rose with interest.

Lydia nodded her head as she chewed on one of her knuckles. This was a nervous habit of hers.

"The truth is, my bro- her brothers," I corrected, "never squatted there. It was me. The second to last summer before middle school ended, I followed her family on their vacation. I stumbled upon the old cabin when they went on a hike one random day and then memorized those woods like the back of my hand. Then the next summer before Freshman year, when they returned, I set up shop once again as I waited to build up the courage to carry out my plan."

Lydia mumbled, "You didn't..."

"I did," I said, sadly. "Emily would go on morning hikes by herself on one of the trails by the cabin. One morning that fateful summer, I had finally found the courage and I followed her until she reached a secluded spot on the trail. That's when I confronted her and well..."

"Decapitated her," Buford bud in.

Lydia's eyes widened with shock when she learned the ugly, brutal, truth.

"She put up a fight! There was no other choice, I had to slit her throat! It was the fastest and easiest way to get her to die!" I admitted.

The cabin of the car was filled with a tense silence yet again.

"I don't regret it though," I said, putting my hand on Lydia's shoulder. She was quietly crying into her shirt.

"Sure, I was a bit confused for a little while after I became her. Keep in mind this was also the first and last time I shifted into somebody that wasn't me, used my ability. But when I got my old memories back and learned about my past, I couldn't have been happier. My family was great and- and then that next year I met you, Lydia. And you became my best friend and got to know me, the real me. You didn't judge me like how everyone else did with Cara. I might've looked like Emily Emerson but deep down I was still me, just an echo of the former Emily. Then Cara Brooks went missing, and her mother never bothered to find her. It was easier for a shifter to hide in plain sight when they don't have to worry about taking care of a child anyway."

Buford cleared his throat and said gruffly, "Get to the point."

I took a little offense to this, considering I was pouring my life story and heart out to the guy, but went on anyway.

"I thought Cara Brooks had been scrubbed from existence. Nobody thought of that one weird girl they grew up with that just disappeared into the background anymore. But somebody remembered, and spray painted that awful message. So, I tried to clean the spray paint and erase Cara Brooks forever. It worked, at least for a little while, and now we're here."

"Emi-" Lydia started, "Cara?"

"It doesn't matter," I answered while avoiding eye contact with her.

"Em, I had no idea."

I chuckled to myself as some more tears slipped out, "Yeah that was kind of the point."

"I'm so sorry," was all she had to say.

The three of us sat there in silence before I perked up again. With a deep breath and a fake smile on my face, I said, "Okay, I'm ready. You can kill me now."

Thomas nodded firmly before stepping out of the vehicle and I followed.

"What? No, wait! You can't do this!" Lydia screamed.

I got on my knees, put my hands behind my back, and kept my head down. I heard Thomas's footsteps slowly retreat behind me as he readied his shot.

"No!" Lydia cried as she rammed into me, covering my back with her own.

"Move it!" Buford shouted at her.

"I don't want to live like this anymore!" I snapped at her, sniffing. "I am so tired of hiding and feeling paranoid all the time, Lydia! I just want it to end. But at least my shoulders feel a lot lighter now that you know the truth. I'm a murderous monster!"

"Em! Emily! You can't talk like this! We'll figure this out, I promise everything will be okay, I swear it!" She pleaded frantically.

"If you don't move I won't hesitate to shoot you too!" Thomas let out a frustrated grunt and then stormed up to us after Lydia wouldn't budge. The sound of metal colliding with skin filled the air as he pistol whipped her off of me.

I stifled a sob as she let out a grunt before her body fell to the ground. At least Buford had the decency to drag her out of the way.

His footsteps retreated yet again and I readied myself for the end as little bits of rain dripped on my head. I winced once the sound of the gun went off, but nothing ended. There was no piercing hot pain where the bullet had made contact. I turned around to see if he missed the shot.

My body froze when I saw Lydia lying behind me on the ground, red oozing onto her shirt from the gaping bullet wound.

"L-Lydia!" I screamed as I made my way over to her. Thomas was freaking the fuck out, since he didn't shoot the creature he was aiming for.

"See? I told you I'd take a bullet for you," she said weakly with a laugh. I grabbed her hand and pressed it tight as I took my other hand and applied pressure onto the wound.

"Why would you do this?" I asked her in between sobs.

"Because you're my ride or die and I love you, no matter who or what you are."

"No, no, no, no!" I cry into our entangled hands. "It wasn't supposed to go down like this."

"Say it," She whispered, the life clearly draining from her quickly. "Pretty please?"

"My- My partner in crime. I love you, I love you so much!"

I couldn't do anything but watch as her once dazzling green eyes faded into a lifeless gray as the corners of her lips turned into a small smile.

I sobbed into her still warm chest as my mind still processed what happened.

"Go, get out of here!" Thomas yelled at me.

"What?" I asked, trembling and confused.

"You need to leave now. They're going to think you did this."

"B-but I didn't."

"I know you didn't, kid!" He screeched as he chucked the gun into the bushes.

"So, why don't you just kill me?" The rain started to pick up again.

"I don't know! I- I just can't. This is the least I can do. Just get out of here! Take my truck, and disappear!" He tossed his car keys to me.

I tried to say something to him, some form of stunned gratitude, but the words got caught in my throat and he motioned for me to go. I jumped in the black truck that he was driving and peeled out of there- in the opposite direction of the tire spikes. The last thing I saw was Thomas Buford standing over the dead body of my best friend.

Lydia's words rang out in my head the whole time I was driving. I eventually stopped in a small town and got a motel room using whatever cash that was left on me. I had to stop a few times and switch cars so nobody could trace me. Thankfully the clerk hadn't asked any questions about me looking like an awful mess and the blood stained on my hands and shirt.

Once I settled into the dingy old motel room, I stared at myself in the bathroom mirror for a long time, thinking about my life's decisions and the choices I'd made leading up to this point. Then I replayed Lydia's demise on repeat in my mind.

I stripped myself naked and looked over my body. My dirty blonde hair went a little bit past my shoulder blades and was unruly and unkempt. My hands were stained with blood and dirt. My makeup was running from all the crying and the rain.

I braced myself for the inevitable pain that I was about to experience. Suddenly a vision of the body I wanted to become popped into my mind and my body began to morph. The bones in my face snapped as my muscles rearranged themselves. My skin burst open and began to slide off like a slimy jacket. I fought my screams as my whole body felt like it was on fire and I was burning from the inside out. Then just as quickly as it started, the pain was gone. All that was left was a pile of skin and hair surrounding me.

I looked in the mirror and saw me- the real me. I saw Cara Brooks- albeit I was covered in blood and my hair was matted down soaked in the metallic smelling substance.

One long hot shower later I emerged a new woman, *literally*.

My body had changed a lot since I was last in it. I was taller now- about the same height as Emily had grown into- I had nice curves and I wasn't too fat or too skinny either. I actually

looked really nice. I kinda missed my long silky black hair, and it reminded me of Lydia's. I'd always miss Emily's crystal blue eyes though.

But Emily was dead now, along with Lydia.

I'm me again, and I'm living by my best friend's last words. I'm loving myself for who and what I am now. I realized that all these years I was being me, not Emily (even though I had her face and body). All the friends I had made along the way were all there for me because I was me.

Obviously I'm not going by Cara Brooks anymore, that would be impossible and cause a lot of issues for me. I go by Lydia now, and I've started a new life in honor of the Lydia that died for me, I mean it's the least I can do.

I am Cara.

I am Emily.

I am Lydia.

My Girlfriend Is A Gargoyle

I met Gretchen a few days after moving into my new apartment in the city. New to me at least, the apartment building itself had been standing for a long time. Two hundred and twenty-two years to be exact. It's a four story, twenty-eight unit, gothic built in the early-mid eighteenth century with an off white (probably due to sun bleaching) brick exterior with black accents on the doors, balconies, and window frames. The thing that really drew me to the building, though, were the gargoyles perched on top.

There were eight of them in total, two on each corner of all four sides of the building. Each one was unique in their own right. Many of them looked like hybrids between different animals but there was one that was distinctly wolf/dog like, a menacing looking dragon, a typical goblin looking gargoyle, and finally, a griffin. Griffins are mythological creatures with the body of a lion and the head of an eagle with wings, very majestic looking things really. They're also one of the best fantasy creatures and there just so happens to be a tattoo of one on my back left shoulder.

My favorite part about the apartment was that I could admire the griffin gargoyle from the comfort of my balcony- since my unit was next to the corner apartment on the third floor. Basically meaning that it was a prime viewing spot to admire the architecture.

I'm sure everyone knows what a gargoyle is but for those who don't, gargoyles have an architectural/structural and mythological/spiritual duality to them.

Gargoyles are specifically used in gothic architecture. There's a reason why the sculptures' mouths are carved open and why the griffin looks like it's screaming some sort of battle cry. When it rains, the water falling off the roof lands in the trough cut into the gargoyles back- there the water flows and exits the open mouth, directed away from the sides of the building. This way the rainwater doesn't run down the masonry walls and erode the mortar between- essentially keeping the building's structural integrity. Some gargoyles are sculpted in an elongated way as well, since the farther away the spout is from the building, the better. Architects typically used more than one gargoyle to divide the flow of rainwater equally off the roof in order to keep potential damages at an all time low- hence why there were eight of them on the building. Though gargoyles are typically seen hunched and sitting down, my griffin was standing up- wings stretched wide and in a powerfully prideful stance.

Mythologically speaking, despite their monstrous appearances, gargoyles are guardians known to protect buildings from evil spirits and other supernatural creatures. They also bring no harm to humans. The reason why you can find so many gargoyles on medieval Christian churches is because they help ward off the Devil and other evil spirits. Gargoyles were also used to scare people into going to church. It was said that they would drag people's souls down to Hell if they didn't come to worship.

During the day they are hard as stone, but at night, they shed and come to life. In the cover of darkness, those with wings fly around and battle other creatures- only returning to their posts as the sun rises. A gargoyle's two weaknesses are the sunlight, obviously, and proximity to the building their post is at. Despite this, Gargoyles are somewhat immortal, can shape-shift into

a human form, turn other beings they touch into stone, and are invincible and impenetrable at night.

Said to be, anyway, because you know... they weren't actually supposed to be *real*.

Yes, there's the whole suspended disbelief thing but really? A piece of sculptured stone coming to life at night, how absurd! At least that's what I would've thought three months ago, before finding out the truth about Gretchen.

I'm a huge nerd, hence the rant about Gargoyles and architecture. Which ended up being good for me since it's the reason I got a job as an assistant to the head architect at a prominent firm. The only thing was that I had to relocate from the small town a few hours away I used to live in, to the heart of the city where the firm's located (this was not a problem for me).

Now, I'd never lived in this city before so I knew absolutely nobody and had no idea what I was doing. But hey, at least I got a steal for a studio apartment in a beautifully built building.

It was only the second week I'd been in the city when some of my new co-workers invited me out for drinks. They were all so nice and giddy, so I'd have felt bad if I said anything else but yes. I'm more of an introverted stay at home type of gal, but I figured I'd let loose for one night and make some new friends.

After clocking out of work that day, I made the journey back to my apartment. The first thing I did after returning home was step out onto my balcony and smoke a cigarette, just immersing myself in the hustle and bustle of city life sound. My ass found its way to a cheap lawn chair I'd bought from a sketchy convenience store down the way. I crossed my legs, relaxed, and inhaled as my gaze found the griffin gargoyle. It truly was a remarkable piece of architecture.

Before long, I smashed the cigarette butt out in my black plastic ashtray before re-entering my apartment.

With a tug of a hair tie, my long wavy brown hair was released from the tight bun I'd worn to work. A white button up blouse and short black pencil skirt were then tossed in my ever growing pile of dirty laundry. I rubbed off the thin layer of makeup on my face with a wipe as steam started to fill the bathroom from the hot shower I'd started to run.

After thoroughly scrubbing the dirt from work off my body and washing the gel and hairspray off my hair, I dried off, then stepped out of the shower and towards my closet.

That night I decided to go for a simple black noodle strapped dress that fell just above my knees, pairing the look with some silver heels. I also kept the makeup simple, and my hair simple as well. The last thing I wanted to do was stand out.

And I didn't... at first.

I met up with my co-workers at a local dive bar. We all greeted one another before heading into the dimly lit establishment. At first things went okay, just chatting up about current work stuff, but when they started to reminisce and bring up old inside jokes- I was promptly excluded and then shut out from the conversation.

I felt a little crummy at first, but then decided it was for the better. Besides, if I wanted to stay here, being invisible was what I needed to be.

I had just finished what I'd decided to be my last cheap beer of the night before going home, when I noticed a very hot, tall, and muscular woman sitting down the bar to my right, staring at *me*. She had pale skin, long curly black hair, and the most dazzling pair of emerald green eyes I'd ever seen.

Our eyes met for the longest second before my cheeks went red hot and my gaze averted itself down to the empty brown bottle in my hands. When I looked back up, the very beautiful stranger was no longer in her seat, instead she was making her way towards the very conveniently empty seat right next to me.

I tried my hardest not to stare at her stunningly sculpted physique, but it was basically all I could do, considering she was merely wearing a black sports bra and some very tight fitting biker shorts. She almost reminded me of She-Hulk a little bit.

So much for not standing out if I caught the eye of someone like her.

"What's your name?" She had asked in a medium velvety smooth voice, taking the seat next to me. She motioned to the bartender to get her another drink.

"M-Mavis. Mavis Ames," I stuttered out, dumbly, fighting the drool that threatened to fall out of my mouth.

The woman let out a chuckle, and I didn't know if it was the beer or not, but the sudden closeness of this chiseled goddess made me very warm.

"And you're...?" I asked after a long silence.

"Gretchen."

"Just Gretchen?"

She chuckled before downing the shot of tequila she ordered, "Just Gretchen."

"So, Just Gretchen," I began, struggling with myself if I should flirt with her or not, "how old are you?"

"Getting right to it, aren't ya?!" She laughed heartily. "I'm at the crisp, ripe old age of twenty-two. And how about yourself, Mavis Ames?"

A pleasant chill crawled up my spine at the way Gretchen said my name, "Twenty-one."

"Well then, that explains the beer!" She roared. "Only inexperienced drinkers would drink that cardboard tasting shit."

"Or broke drinkers..." I shrugged to myself. If Gretchen had heard my comment, she ignored it.

"So, I saw you came in with those bunch of assholes," Gretchen said after ordering two rum and cokes for the both of us. She pointed over to my co-workers- who were in the middle of leaving the bar, without me.

"Yeah... they kinda invited me out but then ended up ghosting me," I replied lamely, rubbing my arm nervously.

"Well, fuck em!" Gretchen cheered as the bartender slid over our drinks. "What do you do for work anyway?"

"I'm an assistant for the head architect at some firm. Nothing special for now, but hopefully I can work my way up."

Gretchen shot me a crooked, approving, smile before taking a sip of her rum and Coke, which prompted me to take a sip of mine as well.

"You?" I asked back in an attempt to shoot the shit with her.

"Oh, me? I'm just a security guard."

"Oh cool! Where at?" I asked, genuinely intrigued.

"Meh, it's kinda freelance work. Wherever I'm needed you could say," A beat. "So, that griffin tattoo peeking out from under your dress there," Gretchen added, curiously, "any significance?"

"Oh," I chuckled nervously, turning in my chair and lowering the dress strap so she could see it better, "it's my first and only tattoo so far. I got it right after I turned eighteen. I dunno why I got it, just really like griffins," I explained.

"Well, griffins do symbolize courage, and you, mighty lion, seem to have a lot of it."

I blushed, hard, at the compliment. "I guess I've never thought about it like that. Hard times, it was then. Still are, I suppose." I took another sip of my beverage, coughed like an idiot when it went down the wrong pipe, then downed the rest of it like a real woman.

Gretchen chuckled to herself and we sat there for a bit, not saying a word. A little bit of awkward tension formed in the air between us.

"C'mon, have a shot with me!" Gretchen suddenly shouted, breaking the tension and putting a firm arm around my neck- cheering me on to join her.

"I-I'd rather not," I replied with an uneasy stutter, gently shrugging her arm off. "I don't trust myself when I'm drunk," I was already dangerously tipsy at that point, feeling a warm buzz come over me.

"Why?" Gretchen asked slyly, as she rested her chin on her hand, smiling this amazingly lazy smile at me.

"Because I'd do something like this-" I said, leaning in and kissing her, all logic flying out the window as my desires took control of my brain.

Instead of her pulling away, like Becky Meyers did when I tried to kiss her back in the ninth grade, Gretchen kissed me back after an initial moment of shock.

Things got pretty heated after that, and we hailed a cab back over to my place. Best. Sex. Of. My. Life.

"You just move in?" Gretchen asked the next morning, taking a sip of the dark roast I'd brewed for her. I woke up at four thirty in the morning to her trying to sneak out of my apartment. She explained that she had to go to work, but I convinced her to stay and have breakfast with me for a little while.

Her assumption had been correct. Besides some cheap furniture I'd bought and unpacked boxes stacked in the corner of my living room/bedroom, the apartment was practically empty.

"Yup," I answered, cracking an egg into a pan. "The move was pretty spontaneous, so I couldn't really bring much. Not that I had a lot to begin with anyway," I'd confessed.

"What did you do before this job?" Gretchen asked in between sips.

I cracked two more eggs into the pan before starting to scramble them with a spatula. I then took a piece of recently fried bacon and stuck it in my mouth. "Just some freelance temp work. Kind of like you. I just went where I was needed."

"Don't you think it's kind of dangerous living alone like this in the city?" Gretchen asked spontaneously after I'd set down a plate of bacon, scrambled eggs, and toast in front of her. "Especially since you're so young?"

"You're only a year older than I am!" I retorted back with a joking defensiveness.

"Right..." she muttered to herself before taking a bite out of her toast. "But I have roommates, and you're all alone."

"Well, not that it's any of your business, but I'm perfectly capable all on my own. It's been me, myself, and I ever since I turned sixteen," I said, finding myself somewhat annoyed. I don't know why, but something deep inside was telling me I could trust Gretchen with that last bit of information.

"I- I didn't mean it like that!" She said, waving her hands around frantically.

I sighed, understandingly. "I know you didn't. It's just a sore subject for me."

"You don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to."

That's the problem. I'd only known this girl for a few hours, but I wanted to spill all my guts out to her. I was so enamored with Gretchen, it was like I was a fly stuck on a sexy spider's web.

"My mom threw me out after I came out to her," I admitted. "Well, actually I was outed by the girl I *thought* had feelings for me too."

That same sorrowful and pitiful look crossed her face and I found myself pissed off. Everyone always gave me that look when I told them.

"Tensions were growing between us then anyway, so it was only a matter of time before I left," I said quickly, waving it off. "You know how small towns are and everything when it comes to these types of things," I blurted out after a moment of awkward silence.

"That sucks, and I'm truly sorry," Gretchen apologized after finishing her food. She then gave me a hug from behind and kissed my cheek. "Moms are overrated anyway."

"Yeah," I chuckled. "Except for your mom, she did an excellent job with you."

Gretchen then left a trail of sweet kisses down my cheek leading onto the sensitive skin on my neck before bringing them back up and kissing me on the lips.

"C'mon why don't you call out or something? It's Saturday and we can spend the whole day in bed. Just the two of us?"

Gretchen seemed to consider my suggestion before rubbing my shoulders gently. "I wish I could, but I can't. Maybe another day, Mavis?"

"At least stay to watch the sunrise with me?" I pleaded, motioning to the first golden rays peeking above the horizon outside.

"Ah shit, the time!" Gretchen shouted suddenly, frazzled. She then ran by the door, starting to shove her tennis shoes on. "I gotta go... or I'll be late for work!"

"Will I at least see you again?" I asked dramatically, like we were in some rom-com or something.

"I know where you live!" She shouted back before promptly closing the door behind her. A second later a text notification pinged on my phone;

Plus, I put your number in my phone ;)

I spent that whole Saturday thinking of Gretchen and our time together that night. God it was like I was in high school again.

Gretchen showed up at my door the next night wanting to take me on a date. She took me out to a restaurant and wore this beautiful red sequined dress with a slit on the upper thigh. It went extremely well and I got to know a little bit more about her. She didn't tell me too much about her personal life, but I think the air of mystique surrounding her is what drew me in.

Gretchen rooms with her three best friends that she met in high school. They all pay rent for a decent sized apartment where she has her own space and everything. She loves to workout and keep her muscular physique, which I also do happen to love, and she's always been interested in protecting and helping people- so she became a security guard.

I, on the other hand, couldn't help but tell her my tragic and depressing life story, which I think soured the mood. My dad killed himself after I was born and my mom blamed me for it. I was always the black sheep of the family, could never be the daughter my mother never wanted, which was especially true when she found out about my sexuality. She was so ashamed to have a lesbian daughter that she kicked me out the second Becky told everyone I'd tried to kiss her. Turns out that bitch was in it for the long-con.

Everywhere I went bad things seemed to follow and terrible people wanted to ruin my life- hence why I've never stayed in one particular place for long. I didn't even mention my dating life to her because *that* in and of itself was a crazy whirlwind nobody wants to hear about.

Truth be told, I was envious of Gretchen. She had a life I adored and everything; a job she loved, beauty, brawn, she was smart *and* had amazing friends, with a family that supported her.

I didn't have an education past the tenth grade, I'm not skull crushingly beautiful like Gretchen, and I was all alone. Hell, I got ditched by the people who invited me out drinking that one night!

Although every fiber of my being was telling me that Gretchen was far out of my league, I couldn't help but continue to pursue a relationship with her. It was like Becky all over again. I

had convinced myself nothing would go wrong this time, and that maybe... just maybe, I'd finally found the one to spend the rest of my life with.

Just one more teeny-weeny relationship. Nothing would happen this time, *right?*

Famous last words.

Gretchen and I went through that honeymoon phase every couple goes through. We went on a lot of dates, hung out at night, and had amazing sex. Gretchen even took me to the dive bar we met at and introduced me to her friends/roommates.

I swear to god all of them looked like chiseled Greek Gods and Goddesses. There was Brody, he had short blonde hair and blue eyes. I could definitely tell he was the golden retriever of the group, plus he was super kind to me. Then there was Fantasia. She was the shortest out of the rest of them (still taller than me though) and had short layered black hair. She was of East Asian descent and seemed to be the edgy goth girl of the group. Then, finally there was Evan. He had long shaggy dark brown hair and didn't say much to me. I feel like he didn't really like me.

I felt a lot of anxiety that night. I wanted Gretchen's friends to like me because I had developed some pretty serious feelings for her at that point. I was thinking of staying in town for a lot longer than I'd planned to, which was something I didn't do often. While Brody and Fantasia seemed to tolerate me, Evan was a different story. I resolved myself to believe he would come around one day, he just needed to warm up to me.

And alas, as all good things do, the honeymoon period ended.

The thing that really annoyed me was that Gretchen only texted me at night and ignored me during the day. Of course her excuse was because of her job, but security guards sit on their asses most of their shift (that's what I think anyway) so she shouldn't be that tired in the morning when she gets off of work. She could've at the most reacted to some of the memes I'd sent her, but no, complete and utter radio silence.

That's another thing, we only ever went on dates or hung out at night. Never during the day, especially on my off days when I wanted to spend them with her.

Well, now of course I know why, but back then I didn't.

And then *things* started to happen, things I was afraid of.

First, it was the calls and texts. I ignored them

and cursed at her for somehow getting my new phone number. I tried not to keep in contact with anyone from where I previously lived. Then it was the letters showing up in my mailbox. When I came home from work one day and found a pink envelope had been slid under my front door, I almost passed out.

I started to distance myself from Gretchen then. Whenever she swung by I'd start petty little arguments. I fucking accused her of cheating on me when my landlord came by one night and Gretchen was with me. He got upset with her being there and I was amazed that my landlord even knew her, but he apparently knew something I didn't.

Even though she was upset with me for accusing her like that, Gretchen kept actively trying to make it up to me. I feel like an ass looking back on it, but I had my reasons. Thought it was the right move to put the wedge between us- for her own good.

Everything crescendoed last night when I was followed home from work. Ever since the pink love letters started showing up underneath my door, I'd grown very paranoid. Looking over my shoulder every few seconds just to make sure I was safe.

I'd stayed late at the office to help my boss with some blueprints he'd gotten behind on. The sky was dark and cloudy, which heightened the paranoia. I refused the offer for a ride home from my boss, instead opting to walk home.

I knew, I just *knew* some shit was going to go down and I didn't want to drag anybody else into my drama.

It was the sound of those godforsaken heels click-clacking against the pavement that clued me in. I'd gotten them for her as a Christmas present the previous year. She wore them all the time.

A dark pit formed in my stomach as I walked on, pretending to be oblivious.

Even though semi-covered by a gray hood, I recognized the familiar blonde and bouncy hair of my ex-girlfriend, Marney, bobbing up and down as I caught her walking a short distance behind me. I'd pretended to take a picture with my phone, revealing a sinister look plastered all over her face.

I hastened my pace ever so slightly so she wouldn't catch on that I knew she was following me. I eventually made it to my apartment building, and felt oodles better when I made it to the safety of the lobby.

Marney *probably* wouldn't try anything in public.

I took the stairs up to my floor and immediately went out on the balcony, after tucking a knife into my sleeve. I already knew Marney knew where I lived, so all I could really do was wait for her to show up.

It took a second for my hands to stop shaking enough for me to light a cigarette. My anxiety slowly mellowed out as the butt of my cigarette got closer and closer to my lips. It was dreary and getting dark outside. Everything felt like shit, and yet, somehow looking at that griffin gargoyle made me feel safer. Like it would come to life like in the legends and protect me from any harm that would come my way.

Thunder rumbled in the distance as rain started falling from the almost night sky.

"Please, little griffin," I asked, looking up at it as a waterfall had started to trickle out of its mouth, squashing the cigarette out in the ashtray, "won't you come save me?" I then sighed a deep, melancholic sigh- standing there in the rain for a second, praying the clouds would just swallow me up. When they didn't, I went inside.

A few minutes later a knock came at my front door.

"This is it," I said to myself, readying the trick up my sleeve.

Instead of coming face to face with yet another stalker ex of mine, it was Gretchen at the door. Her hair was soaking wet and her clothes were drenched too. She wore a plain white T-shirt with a pair of black sweatpants.

"Gretchen?" I asked, a little relieved, as she took a step into my apartment, making herself at home. "What are you doing here? Look! You're all wet, let me get you a towel."

"We made plans to hang out, remember?" She said, wrapping the fresh towel I'd given her around her hair. I'd put the knife down inconspicuously by then.

"Did we?" I asked, combing the files in my brain for this information. "I must've forgotten."

"Yeah, and I forgot to bring an umbrella. We're two forgetful sons of bitches, aren't we?" She said with a breathy laugh.

"Mhm," I answered, despondently. It got real quiet then.

"Something on your mind, Mavis?" Gretchen asked, concerned as she took a seat next to me on my bed, wrapping her hand around mine. For a moment I felt safe. Comfortable. Then I ripped my hand away.

"Listen, Gretchen, I love you," I started, already feeling the tears welling up in my eyes. Gretchen's eyes lit up in surprise.

"I-I love you too Mave!" She whispered excitedly.

"But-" I continued, "we should break up."

"W-why would you suggest something like that?" Gretchen asked, shocked, dazed, and confused.

"Because I was stupid enough to let myself have you, to believe someone like me and someone like you could ever be in a relationship together."

"Mavis-"

"Not only that, but I really don't know you."

"Yes you do, don't say that!" She shouted, putting a hand on my shoulder. I quickly shrugged her off. "You've met my friends, you know my job, you know me Mavis! You know me!"

"I've never been to your apartment!" I countered. "I've never met your parents! You never talk about them. I don't even know where you grew up, your family, where you went to high school? I don't even know your friends, Gretch!"

"Then, I'll tell you! I'll tell you everything, just *please* don't do this to me..." she begged as tears started falling from her eyes.

It felt like I was stabbing my self in the chest with a knife.

"You never even talk to me during the day! You literally ghost me every single day. It's like you're a vampire or something!" I told her off.

"It's because I'm sleeping, then Mavis. That's not fair! You know I work the night shift and sleep during the day!"

"Well, I don't care, Gretchen! I'm done. We're over and that's final."

"Mavis-" she said weakly.

"It's for your own good, anyway," I whispered, falling to my knees, starting to sob. Gretchen rushed to my side and stayed there even after my attempts to swat her away. "My mother was right, I am cursed!"

"No, no you're not, Mavis," Gretchen whispered into my ear as she rubbed my arm. "Maybe broken, but not cursed. You're just a human with human problems... If anybody's cursed, it's me."

I found it in myself to drag my gaze up to hers. I looked up into her teary eyes and tried to tell her she wasn't cursed without the words leaving my mouth. I tried to tell her that she was perfect in every single way and I didn't deserve her. Our breaths grew heavier as our faces grew closer. Our lips were almost embraced in a kiss.

Suddenly, the sound of glass shattering filled my apartment. Loud wind gushed in as cold rain fell in through the broken window. A bright flash of lightning lit up the sky as an earth shattering thunder followed quickly behind it. The power to my apartment suddenly cut out.

A maniacal giggle came from the crouched figure covered in glass that sat in the middle of my living room. As if in an anime, Marney turned her face towards me and it was like her eyes had gone pure black. In her hand was a gun.

I felt Gretchen's body uncover me as she took up a protective stance, sheltering me from Marney, who too stood up and got in a fighting stance.

A shiver ran through me, there's no way Gretchen could beat a gun.

"You think you're safe hiding behind this cheating bitch?" Marney yelled, crazily. "You're mine, Mavis! You'll always be *mine!* And if I can't have you, then nobody will!"

My worst fears had come to fruition. My insane ex-girlfriend was here to kill me.

As Marney raised the gun and readied it, Gretchen looked behind her and down at me, "I told you I'd tell you everything, babe."

"Gretchen, No!" I screamed, reaching an arm out to her after a loud bang followed the sound of the gun going off.

Marney laughed crazily, but her laughs quickly subsided as she stared at Gretchen, confused.

Instead of hearing a wet squelch coming from Gretchen's flesh as the bullet pierced it, I heard a dulled *thwack* and saw the bullet fall to the floor.

"What- the? How is that possible?" Marney screamed in frustration.

I quickly got off the ground behind Gretchen, slowly inching my way towards my kitchen. Marney was too focused on the scene in front of her to point the gun at me. The sound of heavy rocks rubbing against each other echoed through my studio apartment as I finally got a good front view of Gretchen.

She was looking at me, like she was relieved to show me herself, her true self. I brought my hand up to my mouth as stone manifested itself from nowhere onto Gretchen's skin. Suddenly two large stone wings emerged from out of her back as her facial features morphed into those of a stone eagle. Gretchen's clothes were ripped to shreds as her lower body's physical makeup changed into that of a lion. She looked like a griffin. A familiar looking griffin.

As the large stone behemoth in front of me let out a loud roar directed towards Marney, I slipped outside onto the balcony to look at the griffin gargoyle's perch. My heart sank down to my stomach. The perch was empty, in fact all the perches were empty!

"What the hell?" I murmured to myself as I slipped back into my apartment. I rubbed my eyes and pinched myself to see if I was dreaming, but no, the griffin gargoyles were there in the middle of my living room.

Marney was screaming her head off waving the gun around and firing it randomly at Gretchen, "Die, fucker, die!!"

The burnt smell of gunpowder filled my nostrils as the bullets hit against Gretchen's stone skin. They didn't even penetrate the material or ricochet off it, the bullets simply imploded in on themselves and fell to the floor.

I grabbed the knife from earlier and slowly made my way up behind Marney. At the same time, Gretchen closed the gap between her and my ex.

I readied the knife as Gretchen roared once more. Another lightning strike lit up the night sky. In the darkness that followed I struck, thrusting deep and dragging the blade's serrated edge across the skin on Marney's throat.

The gun fell to the floor as Marney's hands went limp. Blood splattered everywhere as the terrible sound of her choking on her own blood filled the empty space in my apartment. Marney's body fell to the floor as she breathed her last aspirating breaths, before wasting away there on my floor.

As if the nightmare was over, the lights to my apartment came back on. Gretchen, still a gargoyle, began eating the remains of my ex-girlfriend, even lapped up all the blood that spilt on the floor. In mere seconds the evidence of my crime was destroyed.

The knife still in hand, I fell to the ground. Gretchen looked at me in all her gargoyle-ness. I scooted back, still in shock and a little scared.

Seconds later, the stone armor receded and Gretchen the Griffin Gargoyle was just human Gretchen.

She stood there, naked and covered in blood, just staring at me awkwardly.

"A fucking security guard, huh?" I breathlessly laughed out a moment later, wiping stray tears away.

Gretchen laughed too and I stood up and ran over to her, embracing her into a hug. She squeezed back tightly and I think one of my ribs cracked.

"You're a gargoyle?" I asked, incredulously.

"Y-yeah. I wanted to tell you but you know-" Gretchen admitted, gesturing to herself.

"That actually makes a lot of sense, thinking back on it." I giggled.

"I knew there was something about you that made me want to hold you tight and protect you," Gretchen admitted as she walked over to my closet and put some of my comfy clothes on (they didn't really fit her though).

"Well I guess that is in your nature, but what do you mean?" I questioned, sitting on her lap and holding her hands, even more in love with her than ever before.

"So, as it turns out, you really were cursed. And I just ate it. That poor girl was possessed by an evil love spirit. It must've been following you your whole life." Gretchen said, her gaze not leaving mine.

"That would explain all the crazy ex-girlfriends stalking and trying to kill me. Marney was the reason why I had to leave my last place and come here. I thought I could escape and avoid her, but obviously that didn't work out."

"Well, it's all over now, Mavis. I've taken care of that pesky spirit, so you're free now. And you set that girl free too."

I smiled as it felt like a tremendous weight had been lifted off my shoulders. Gretchen then kissed me. It was a long and tender one. I wanted it to go on forever.

"God, I still can't believe you're a gargoyle," I said after she pulled her lips away from mine.

"I can't believe you actually killed her," Gretchen laughed, matching my energy. "It looked like you've done it before."

"Well, there was a reason I had to leave my previous place before I met Marney. I always tried to run away from them when they got crazy- to avoid all this," I motioned to my broken window and messy apartment, "but they always seem to find me. There was only one way to escape them permanently... Plus, I couldn't let the cops catch on to me," I confessed.

"God, I fucking love you," Gretchen said as she kissed my forehead, cradling me like a baby.

"I fucking love you too, babe!" I exclaimed before kissing her again.

We made sweet, sweet, love last night, and needless to say we didn't break up. Everything is actually pretty amazing right now between us.

So, uh, yeah, I guess my girlfriend is a gargoyle!

**I Recently Began Seeing An Old Patient Of Mine
Again. He Was Mugged.**

"Well, Mr. King, it's been quite a while since you've last been in that chair," I said, greeting my two o' clock appointment.

It's always nice to meet with previous patients of mine, however there's always a twinge of sadness to it. As a therapist, you never really want to see a familiar face sitting on the other side of your desk again.

The man sitting across from me chuckled lightly, sweeping some of his light brown hair out of his blue eyes. He readjusted himself in the chair. "Please, Dr. Morris, call me James."

"Alright then, James," I said, dropping the formality. Playfully I added, "It's still Dr. Morris to you, though."

"Alright, *Harrison*," he quipped back with a sly smile. In response, I smiled and laughed.

Even though it's been two years since I last saw James, he was still as charming as I remembered him to be.

"So," he started, locking his hands together and leaning closer to me in his chair, "How's the wife, Doc? The kid?"

"I'm not paid to sit here and talk about myself, James. Let's talk about what's going on with you, shall we? Why are *you* here?"

"Okay, no time for small talk, I get that," he mumbled.

I sat comfortably in my plush leather desk chair waiting for him to answer my question. A tense moment of silence passed. James's cheerful mask slipped away, revealing a harder, more solemn expression.

He cleared his throat before he finally gave me an answer. "I- uh... I was mugged."

"I'm sorry that you experienced that," I apologized genuinely. "It must've been traumatizing."

"It was," was all he said.

"Do you want to talk about it, James? I'm assuming that's why you scheduled an appointment with me after all?"

He nervously twiddled with his thumbs before giving me a very abridged version of events. "The boys and I were hanging out at my parents' cabin up in Mount Glenda. I went out for a late night walk and got attacked. Was in the hospital for a couple days. Now I'm here."

"Do you remember much from the attack?" I questioned, noticing there weren't any visible scratches or contusions on him. He was wearing black acid wash jeans and a button up flannel shirt, so it's possible he was attempting to cover them up.

"I- I'd rather not recount that right now, if that's alright with you, Dr. Morris."

I nodded my head understandably. "Okay."

James started picking at some skin on his fingers, a common nervous habit for him. "Thanks, doc. It's still a little fresh to talk about."

"It's not a problem. We can talk about it whenever you're ready, James." Changing the topic, I asked, "So, how are things with you and Katie?"

James scrunched his eyelids closed and wrinkled his nose at the mention of her name. If an onlooker didn't know any better, they'd say I'd just punched him in the face.

I frowned. "Last time you were here, you two were hitting it off pretty well. So well, in fact, you stopped scheduling sessions with me."

"We broke up," he admitted, messing with one of the cuffs on his red and white flannel sleeves. "That's why we were up on Mount Glenda in the first place. My friends wanted to help cheer me up. Help me get over her."

"Well that was nice of them," I commented, writing down some observations I'd made. Given the way he avoided eye contact and became anxious while talking about the events that led up to his attack, a PTSD diagnosis was certainly in the cards after a violent experience such as a mugging. But, I needed to fully complete my evaluation before I could say anything was concrete.

"They had good intentions," he grumbled.

"Why did you and Katie break up, if you don't mind me asking? Was it amicable?"

James scoffed. "If by amicable, you mean she cheated and left me for the other guy, then yeah you can say it was amicable."

"Mhm," I muttered, taking more notes. "Want to talk about it?"

"What's there to talk about?" James raised his voice slightly. "She cheated on me and we broke up!"

Clearly I'd struck a nerve. I cleared my throat and moved on. "Why don't we talk about something else, then? How's work at the diner? How are your courses going at university?"

"L-look, Dr. Morris, I don't even know why I came here," James laughed out breathlessly, starting to stand up from his chair. "I'm sorry for wasting your time."

I stood up with James, gently placing my hand on one of his. He paused and I could see in his eyes he was hurting. I could sense he wanted someone to talk to. *Needed* someone to talk to.

"How about this, James, why don't we end our session early today. Go home, drink a warm beverage, take a nap. Come see me next week. Friday, same time."

James nodded his head, "Okay, Doc."

I called out suddenly as he was about to walk out the door. "You can come back anytime before then. If you want to talk about it, I'm here for you James."

James flashed me a weak smile before walking out of my office.

I was unsure if I'd see James again. He seemed to be teetering on the edge of a depressive episode the last time we spoke. It's not easy to ask for help once a person passes that threshold. So, I was glad when I saw he had requested an emergency session with me just a couple days before his next scheduled appointment.

"I was attacked!" James exclaimed, rushing into my office. He was wearing a plain white t-shirt with a gray zip up jacket and a pair of blue jeans. Slung over his shoulder was a black backpack with a red stripe down the sides.

I disregarded his incredibly rude entrance and placed my phone face down on the desk. I adjusted my reading glasses and raised an eyebrow inquisitively.

"I know? You were mugged."

"No. No, no, you don't understand," James said, tapping his pointer finger on his temple erratically. "I was attacked, not by a person, but by *something!*"

I crossed one leg over the other and leaned in closer to him. I wondered where this was heading. "How do you mean, James? You weren't mugged? Were you attacked by an animal?"

"No I *was* mugged," he explained, tucking a small tuft of his hair behind his ear. "My wallet and phone were gone when my friends found me."

As confusing as it sounded, this was good. James was opening up more about the mugging.

I sat with a puzzled expression, waiting for Mr. King to elaborate.

"I was mugged alright," James paused for dramatic effect. "Mugged by a werewolf!"

I had to stifle a laugh. Trying my best to keep my expression neutral I asked, "You? Mugged by a... werewolf?"

James nodded his head frantically. He looked tired. Like he hadn't gotten a good night's sleep in a couple of days.

"Do you maybe want to describe exactly what happened while you were mugged, James? Help me understand what you saw."

"It was dark," he started, taking a seat in his usual chair. He clutched the backpack closely to his chest. "I didn't see much, but I know I was attacked. It was quick and fast, smelled real bad too! It was a werewolf, I'm telling you! It had to be... and I think it turned me."

Oh this couldn't be good.

The blood-shot eyes.

Delusions of grandeur, more fantastical than ever.

His unstable and nervous demeanor.

"Are- are you using again, James?" I placed my hand gently on one of his, a gesture to show that I cared and was worried about him.

James was a recovering addict, it's one of the reasons he started seeing me in the first place.

He quickly withdrew his hand from under mine. He scoffed. "Y-you don't believe me do you?"

"I believe that you believe you were attacked and turned into a werewolf," I told him.

Clinical Lycanthropy. I'd heard of it before, but never thought I'd witness a possible case in real life. What a truly fascinating trauma response.

"Tell me why you think that, James." I clicked my pen, ready to jot down some notes.

James gave me the side eye. I waved it off and prompted him to continue. He gulped before speaking.

"Well, I don't know how to explain it, Doc. Everything just feels... different."

"Try to explain it," I urged.

"Everything is just so *bright* and *loud* now. So I guess enhanced senses? And I'm hungry. All. The. Time. These cravings I'm having, they're intense!"

"Cravings?"

"Meat," he answered. "Lots and lots of meat."

"Mhm," I said, nodding along as I wrote down my thoughts. "Have you experienced any accelerated hair growth as well? Lupine-like urges?"

James grunted. "This is serious."

"And I'm being serious, James," I countered. "I need you to be as detailed as possible."

"Listen," he said earnestly, leaning close, "The full moon is two days from now. I'll be able to prove it to you then. Come with me before I turn, please?"

Quite frankly I didn't know how to verbally respond to that type of request. My face however, said it all.

"I'll even let you video tape it!" He added hastily after seeing my reaction.

I raised an eyebrow inquisitively. Instantly, ideas for experiments and different studies for this disorder ran through my head. Just the thought of researching and exploring this rarely talked about mental phenomenon was making me giddy. I felt like an undergrad student working on my senior thesis again.

"You can use the video to break out in the medical world or something, I don't know," James said, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly.

"But why me, James? Why not one of your friends?" I asked, curiously, seriously considering this insane proposition.

"Because, you're the only person I trust with this. Plus, patient confidentiality and all that jazz."

I couldn't help but let out a small laugh at that logic. "If you truly believe you're a werewolf, aren't you scared of hurting someone? Aren't you terrified of becoming this big dangerous creature? Why not go off alone?"

"There's a good reason for that, Doc," James answered, opening his backpack. He reached in and pulled out a thick metal chain. "I need someone to help chain me up."

I can't believe I'm doing this, I thought to myself as I walked into Nancy's diner. James had requested we meet up for dinner before we headed off to see his "transformation."

Me meeting up with a patient outside of office hours was practically unheard of, and on top of that, extremely unprofessional. I honestly don't know what's worse, me aiding James with his delusion or the fact I was excited to see where this would go.

The inside of the diner was much warmer compared to the ambient temperature outside. So as I searched the small dining room for James, I took my overcoat off and slung it around my forearm.

James spotted me and waved me over excitedly. I walked over to the small booth and sat down across from him. It felt like we were in my office again.

"Cozy," I said. James chuckled and took a sip of water.

He was wearing a thick gray hoodie, some dark blue jeans, and some converse sneakers. I wore my usual work attire, black slacks and a light colored long sleeve cotton button up.

"Are you alright, James?" I asked, noticing how shaky he was. He started rubbing his arms intensely.

I made a mental note of this. If James had been using drugs again, he was most certainly in the beginning processes of withdrawal.

He rubbed his arms some more before answering me. "Just fine. It's just freezing in this diner."

I offered him my coat, which he graciously accepted.

"Thanks. And thanks again for coming all the way out here. Dr. Morris-"

"Please, James," I stopped him, "I'm off the clock now. You can call me Harrison."

"H-Harrison," he stuttered, "I just wanted to let you know how much I appreciate you coming out here. Once I prove my 'condition' to you, you'll have no choice but to believe me. I know if I'd gone to anyone else they'd have just thought I was on Stardust again and not given me a chance."

Well James, the consensus was still out on that last one.

I smiled and nodded. It was clear James was mentally unwell, probably due to both his break up and the trauma from his attack. I was merely there to make sure he didn't harm himself with his little demonstration tonight, or at least that's what I kept telling myself.

What are the chances James actually does transform into a monster tonight? It's improbable to happen, but there's always that excitement that comes with the question: What if?

"Hi, welcome in!" Our waitress greeted us, bringing over some menus and a couple glasses of water. Her name tag read Jenny. "What can I get started for you this fine evening?"

James ordered first. "I think I'll have a cheeseburger. Everything on it and I'll take that rare please."

Jenny nodded as she jotted down his order in her book. She then looked at me.

"I'll just have the Cesar salad please."

"Alrighty, folks!" Jenny announced as she snapped her book shut enthusiastically. "Your food will be out in just a moment."

I looked out the window our booth was sitting next to. The horizon was full of light pastel colors as the sun started to set.

"If you're worried about nightfall, I'll turn when the full moon is at its peak. That's what the internet says anyway," James informed me. "You won't have to worry about me, *ya know*, before then."

I disguised my scoff as a laugh as I continued looking out at the pretty sunset.

Our food came out and we started eating. I don't know if James was just putting on a show or what, but he stared at his cheeseburger like he hadn't eaten for a year. He sunk his teeth

into his food at the same time I took the first bite of my salad. James scrunched his face in confusion. Then he waved our server over.

"What the *Hell* is wrong with you?" He started.

Jenny's unnaturally happy smile faltered. My eyeballs almost burst from their sockets. I started choking on my salad at James's brash outburst.

"I asked for my cheeseburger rare! Does this look RARE to you?" James shoved his cheeseburger in our waitresses face.

"I- I uh," Jenny stumbled, clearly taken aback.

"Make me a new burger, rare like I asked for," he demanded. "You can charge me for this one too, I'll eat both of them."

Jenny nodded before quickly running into the diner's kitchen, clearly about to cry.

I just sat there in shock as James tore back into his cheeseburger like it was a turkey leg you get at Medieval Times. He demolished that thing in three bites. Since he ordered his burger rare it didn't take too long for his second one to come out. James then demanded our waitress bring him a full rack of BBQ ribs.

She looked to me for help to control my friend, but I was just as flabbergasted as she was. I hadn't touched my salad as I sat in awe watching James. If he was acting, he deserved an Oscar. It was actually kind of terrifying seeing him act like that.

It looked like James was on the cusp of an orgasm as he took the first bite of his second cheeseburger. Once again, it was gone in a couple bites. James snacked on his fries as he patiently waited for his second entree to come out.

When she returned, Jenny laid down the huge oval plate with a very judgmental look on her face. She scoffed as she took away James's empty plates.

James waved her off as he began inhaling rib after rib. He devoured those ribs like he didn't know when his next meal would be. I seriously thought he'd start popping the bones in, swallowing them whole at one point. He finished the whole rack of ribs only a couple minutes after Jenny had brought them out to him.

"Laying it on there real thick, huh, buddy?" I said sarcastically. Truth be told, I was bewildered that he actually managed to eat all that food.

James wiped all the barbecue sauce that had accumulated around his mouth with a couple napkins as he finished his meal. "What do you mean by that, Doc?"

"This whole..." I leaned in close to him and whispered, "werewolf thing. I mean the food, your aggression towards our server? That's not like you, James."

"I told you, Doc, I haven't been feeling myself. All day I've been agitated, and on top of that *starving!* It must be the moon. It's affecting me."

I rolled my eyes. There's no way he was blaming his behavior on the moon. This Clinical Lycanthropy thing was getting pretty bizarre to witness.

James checked his watch before standing up and chucking a wad of cash on the table. "C'mon let's go. It'll be time soon."

Still in a fugue state of shock, I followed James out of the diner. He got in his car and I got in mine. James quickly peeled out of the small parking lot. I followed closely behind him.

Honestly I was kind of relieved to have space from him. James was almost starting to freak me out, and that's saying a lot coming from a therapist because I've seen some weird shit before.

We drove for about ten minutes before driving down a random dirt road. James got out of his car and prompted me to follow him. The two of us walked for about five minutes before arriving at this old rickety looking gazebo that was in the middle of nowhere.

"James, you seriously can't still believe this, can you?" I questioned as he pulled a thick and heavy chain out of his backpack. He handed it to me, the weight of it almost knocking me off balance. I'm surprised he carried that thing on his back without breaking a sweat.

James looked up at the clear night sky worriedly, the full moon slowly rising higher in the sky, "Hurry up, Doc," he pleaded, taking off my jacket and his hoodie

I stared at the now shirtless James, confused.

"So I don't tear through it when I turn," he explained nonchalantly. "The pants stay on for obvious reasons. I'm not getting fully nude in front of my therapist."

"Yeah, cuz *that's* weird," I sighed, tying one end of the chain to the sturdiest looking part of the gazebo. The other end was wrapped around his waist and then his wrists.

"Okay," James said after checking the time on his phone. "The moon should be at its peak within the next minute."

I set up my phone across from him and pressed record. The light from the moon intensified as it reached its peak in the sky. James clenched his eyes shut and braced for pain, letting out a couple of anticipatory grunts.

He did look pretty sweaty and unwell, I have to admit. But, it could just be from all that food he ate, I rationalized.

James stayed that way, bracing himself for something to happen. He looked pretty uneasy. Scared. I felt bad for him.

A couple minutes passed and nothing happened.

"Wasn't something supposed to happen by now?" I asked, stopping the recording on my phone.

James opened his eyes and looked down at his very human hands. "Maybe Google was wrong. Let's wait a little longer."

"James," I said testingly. "You can't let this go on."

"Please," he begged. "I need this, Harrison. Please!"

I scoffed, climbing down the steps of the gazebo, kicking a rock- feeling silly. I started walking back to my car before turning around. "Fine. We can wait a little longer."

An hour passed and nothing happened to James. I got fed up and finally freed him from those ridiculous chains.

"I- I don't understand," James looked dejected. "Nothing happened. Why didn't I turn into a werewolf?"

"C'mon James it's getting late," I said, not answering his question. Instead, I put my hand on his bare shoulder to try and comfort him. He dragged his feet while I guided him back to his car. He looked like he was about to cry.

"Let's go home."

"Jesus, James, have you been eating?"

It was a couple days after the whole werewolf thing was debunked. James had just come in for his regular session. He looked worryingly thin, almost emaciated. To lose that large amount of weight in only a couple days wasn't healthy. I worried the events that transpired the other night made James spiral even deeper.

It was quite embarrassing to witness, so I can only imagine how he was feeling.

"Yes!" He said plopping down in his chair. He must not have showered in a couple days judging by the ripe smell that wafted off him. "That's all I've been doing!"

I wrote some notes down. He started lying. This wasn't good.

"Mr. King-"

"I had it all wrong," James interrupted me almost excitedly, a worrying glint in his eyes. "I've been doing research. I know what happened now."

"Oh really?" I asked. Now James was starting to sound like a conspiracy theorist at that point.

"I was cursed," he stated matter-of-a-factly.

I wrote some more notes down. "Cursed?"

"By a wendigo."

"James, not this again," I said with a heavy sigh, massaging the bridge of my nose.

"I'm serious, it all lines up! The hunger, the weight loss, why I'm always cold all of a fucking sudden! Not to mention the slow transformation and matching symptoms to lycanthropy."

"Wendigo's don't exist. They're just creatures of Navajo folklore," I said, exasperated.

What does exist, however, is Wendigo psychosis. A mental condition where someone believes they are becoming this cannibalistic creature. It usually stems from the person believing they lack the food and resources to stay nourished, especially during the winter, which causes them to turn to cannibalism.

I found out about it while researching more on Clinical Lycanthropy. And it seemed like James had too- falling down yet another misguided Google rabbit hole.

Sure, his skin had shrunk around his nails making them look longer, sharper too, and his skin was pale and sweaty. With how skinny he had become, he did look taller too, but that didn't mean he was a Wendigo. He was just using those as a confirmation bias.

"James, let's be rational here."

"I AM BEING RATIONAL!" He yelled, getting up from his seat. He started pacing around the room, nervously.

"Clearly," I mumbled. "James, if you think this is true, how do you think you became 'cursed?'"

"Isn't it obvious?" He let out a maniac laugh. "The mugging! That thing must've attacked and cursed me. That's the only reason why it let me live. According to my research, not many people live to tell their tales about encountering these things. Harrison, please! I need your help trying to reverse this curse. I want to go back to normal!"

James's mental spiral was becoming quite concerning. If I let this continue for any longer, someone was bound to get hurt.

"James," I said softly, sliding a business card over to him. It was a contact number for a mental hospital named Brightburn. "I don't think I can help you. But they can."

"You're a skeptic!" He shouted, throwing the card across the room.

"And you're delusional!" I snapped. "I mean Wendigo's and Werewolves?! James, you're unwell!"

"I wonder why!" He shouted, gesturing to himself. "Do you see what I'm becoming!"

"James, you're not a wendigo!"

"I am!"

"You're not!" I paused and lowered my voice. "Katie cheated on you! Left you for another guy!" His face fell when I brought up his ex.

I continued, explaining further, "So now you're using this mugging as an excuse to make yourself something you're not. You're trying to make yourself seem like something bigger than you actually are, James. When deep down all you're really doing is trying to do is show her that you're someone worth staying with. Someone worth not cheating on!"

"You have no right to bring Katie into this!" James cried. "That's not what's happening! I've been cursed, I'm telling you!"

He grabbed his chair and chucked it across the room in a fit of anger. My chair splintered into a million pieces.

I sat back in my one intact chair and sighed, rubbing my temples. "You say you want help, James. They can help you more than I can. If you don't want to go, then that's on you. But if you won't help yourself, I can't be your therapist anymore."

"No- don't do this. Doc, you're the only one I have..." James pleaded.

"You can't keep this charade up anymore! I've indulged you long enough. You're not turning into some supernatural creature. You are a human being!"

James sniffled, smoothed the wrinkles in his blue flannel shirt before making his way to the door. He stopped and turned to me.

"Just you wait, doc. I'll prove it to you," he seethed. "You better watch your back."

With a slam of my office door, James King was gone.

I took a breath before picking my phone up to call my secretary and to alert security to not let James back in the building.

"I think I'm being stalked," I admitted to my wife, Lori. It had been a rough week with patients, plus I kept receiving threatening letters in the mail. But I couldn't tell Lori about it. I didn't want to worry her.

We just found out she was expecting.

"You're being silly, Harrison," she said, trying to comfort me.

"Yeah, you're probably right," I said, giving her a kiss on the cheek good night. I turned over in our bed. My heart sank when I saw the shadow of a person glide past my window.

I came home late from work a little later than expected.

My office had been broken into and trashed. I had a sneaking suspicion who did it. Nevertheless, I had to clean my office, file a police report, and finish the rest of my appointments for the day.

Lori had told me she had a surprise waiting for me at dinner, so I stopped on the way home to pick up flowers and a little gift for Brandon, our four year old son.

The overwhelming stench of iron and something putrid and rotting filled my nostrils as I opened the door to my house.

A massive pool of blood in the kitchen was visible from the doorway.

I dropped everything in my hands and ran, almost puking after finding the dead bodies of my wife and son lying on the dining room table.

Half of Brandon's face had been chewed off, his frozen expression that of terror. Lori had been disemboweled. Her intestines and other miscellaneous organs strewn about the table. On her chest was her uterus, which had been half eaten.

I fell to my knees and started bawling my eyes out. My family had been murdered.

Something growled animalistically behind me, "Believe me now?"

My stomach flipped. A tall, emaciated figure stood in the doorway. Its arms were disproportionately longer than its torso. Its hands and wrists were caked in blood. Sharp teeth glinted in artificial light. That putrid smell from earlier worsened.

A Wendigo.

James, or what was left of him. It had to be.

He'd been right all along.

The wendigo pounced, but I managed to dodge. James recovered with supernatural speed. I ran as fast as I could for safety, lunging to the door of my home office for protection. I kept a pistol in there.

Somehow I managed to reach the gun before James reached me. He ripped the door off the hinges and bellowed out a blood curdling roar. I managed to squeeze past him and into the hallway just in the nick of time. I flicked the safety off and cocked the gun, praying I had left it loaded.

Click-click.

James crawled up the banister of my stairs, hanging off of it like a deranged monkey. He let out a triumphant howl, having chased me into a corner.

I braced myself as the thing that used to be my patient jumped. As it barreled towards me with a sadistic smile on his mutilated face, I pulled the trigger and aimed right for his chest. The force of the blast knocked me down.

When I regained my bearings, there was no monstrously disfigured body on the floor in front of me. Instead, my front door swung wide open.

James was in the wind. He left me alone, with my dead wife and kid in the next room. Grief and anger flooded my veins.

All I wanted to do at that moment was kill *that thing* for what he'd done. I wanted to kill myself for not believing him and allowing this to happen.

Then I remembered reading about something online. Something about the wendigo's weakness being fire.

That's when it hit me: I could kill it with fire.

I could kill *James* with fire.

After taking a moment to regain my bearings, I started gathering anything deemable as a good weapon. Once that was done, I started packing what was left of my life into my car, a game plan slowly formulating in my head.

After leaving it for the last time, my house burst into flames behind me- courtesy of an old match and some gasoline from the garage. Burning along with my home, my family, was all the evidence of the Wendigo's attack. The act was a send off, but it was also meant as a message.

Now all that was left was a streaky blood trail and the hunt, and it was on.

So much for a mugging, eh?

A Simple Misunderstanding

"You're a monster!"

I had just gotten home from a long and miserable shift at work. I had opened the door to my bedroom, ready to take a much needed and deserved nap, only to discover the petite frame of my best friend sitting on my bed. She'd been waiting in the dark for who knows how long to confront me.

I froze in my tracks as she uttered those despicable words.

Ophelia repeated her statement once more when I hadn't spoke a word or moved a muscle. "You're a *monster*, Daphne!"

I dropped my bag and took a step back, trying to roll the words I wanted to say off my tongue, but only managed out a pathetic lithe stutter. A look of utter horror showed plain as day on my face.

How did she find out about my deep dark secret?

My brain analyzed every interaction, went over every single detail, between Ophelia and I within the past two years I'd known her. My memory turned up nothing that could explain the revelation of my farce.

Ophelia interrupted my thought process as she suddenly stood up from the bed. Her orange sundress flowed marvelously, revealing a delectable glimpse at her long and slender legs as she stood at attention. Her bobbed shadow root blonde hair framed her face perfectly.

Alas, I had to admit, she had discovered my secret. I was a lesbian living in a small, very Christian, town deep within the Bible Belt.

A lesbian... who had a raging crush on her best friend.

"We've been friends for all this time and you've never once told me you were a monster!" Ophelia repeated yet again.

"Could you stop calling me that?!" I snapped at her suddenly.

Ophelia's mouth was left in the shape of a quaint "o".

I took her silence as my chance to defend myself. "I get it, I'm a lesbian who's had a major crush on you since we first met, but that doesn't make me a *monster*!"

"W-what?" She muttered out breathlessly, staggering back.

"I was scared to tell you because, well... Well, you know where we live! And I hate to break it to you, O, but your parents are 100% homophobic! They'd never approve of me," I paused, allowing myself the courage to confess my true feelings. "I thought you'd never approve of me," a scoff couldn't help but leave my mouth, "Guess I was right."

I sulked my way over to the bed where I promptly plopped and laid down, beginning to mourn the death of our friendship.

Like me before, Ophelia stumbled with her words, "D-Daphne that's not-"

"What? That's not what you meant?" I interrupted, angrily. I sat back up and faced my friend. "Then what *did* you mean, Ophelia, by calling me a monster three times in a row?"

A heavy sigh was breathed from Ophelia's chest. She swiped some hair out of her face then sat next to me on the bed. A moment later she rested her head on my shoulders.

Looking down, I noticed a dopey smile on her face. An eyebrow rose in confusion.

"I've always known you were gay, you idiot," she whispered gently, intertwining her fingers in mine. "It's quite obvious."

"What do you mean it was obvious?" I questioned, dumbly.

Ophelia stayed quiet for a moment, blushing. Then she winked at me, "You're hopeless."

"I thought I was a monster?" I quickly quipped back.

"Yeah... that," Ophelia sighed. "I was referring to you being a werewolf."

I pulled away from her suddenly, my heart racing in my chest. I stared at her in awe with a puzzled expression. "H-how did you-?"

"It's all in the patterns," O replied nonchalantly, cutting me off. "Once you notice it, you can never unsee it. Your appetite for red meats, the way you somehow always know I'm behind you when I try to scare you... Always taking one, not so random, specific night off every month."

I shot my friend a knowing glance. "Girls night?"

"Girls night."

Now things were starting to make more sense. I had to cancel our girls night out last week because of the full moon that night. I would've been forced to shift into my wolf form, and nobody around me would be safe.

Needless to say, Ophelia was not happy about me ditching her.

Ophelia started laughing so hard, she had to lay down on the bed to catch her breath.

"Girl, you were so adamant about not coming, that I couldn't help *but* be suspicious! Then I noticed the patterns and everything clicked into place from there."

A nervous chuckle escaped me as I rubbed my hand gingerly on my neck. Humans were normally so oblivious, but then again, this was Ophelia. I should've known I wouldn't be able to hide this from her forever. Honestly, kinda glad she figured it out though- if it had to be anyone, I'd want it to be her.

Ophelia then sat back up. "Thought I was crazy for a minute there, but-" A metallic object fell out from her pocket and clanked against the floor.

"I-is that made out of silver?" I inquired, looking at the small knife that rested on the ground in front of us.

"Yeah..."

"Were you going to stab me with that?"

"Only if I needed to, swear it!" Ophelia proclaimed, defending herself.

I let out a soft scoff before smiling at her. "Don't worry. I don't bite. Unless you deserve it, of course."

A tense, awkward, moment of silence passed between us. "Soooo... are we good?"

Ophelia smiled. Then she leaned in and kissed me. It wasn't long or hard, just a peck, but it was a kiss nonetheless. An intense heat blossomed in my chest. With that one little action I knew. Ophelia was the one for me.

"Yeah... we're good," she giggled. "That's so cool," O stated after a moment, resting her head on my shoulder once more.

"What is?" I asked, scribbling little circles on the back of her palm.

"You being a werewolf."

"Not really," I shrugged, adding playfully, "I eat people's hearts."

Yesterday I Was 19... And Human

TW: Sexual assault

I met Wes in Junior year of high school. He sat in front of me in English class.

We were partnered up for the final project- which was forty percent of our overall grade. I wasn't the best at the subject, so I *really* needed to do well on it.

After about two weeks of working on the project, together, both in class and at my house, we finished our creation and had made a connection. We did well on the assignment and I didn't have to go to summer school, which was great because I ended up spending the whole summer with him. We went on cute little dates almost every other day and by the start of school, we were official.

"I wish I'd looked behind me sooner," Wes always said to his buddies. I couldn't help but blush after those sweet words escaped his mouth.

That was the honeymoon phase.

When we first started dating, we took it slow. Hand holding, snuggles, and hugs were the peak physical contact. But as senior year came to a close and Prom grew closer and closer, I wanted more. We had been dating for almost a year at that point and we'd never shared a single kiss.

I expected it to happen at Prom. He'd steal a tender kiss from my lips during a romantic tear-jerking slow song, then we'd escape into the night and rent a cheap motel room where I would give him my virginity.

I'm a hopeless romantic, I get that, but a girl can dream. And that's what it was- a dream. No kiss, no sex, no *nothing*. All we did was dance, get milkshakes after, and he dropped me off at home. We didn't even share the damn milkshakes either. He got chocolate and I got a strawberry.

Needless to say, the lack of romance and limited physical contact put a strain on our relationship. Then we graduated and saw less and less of each other as we worked for college tuition money.

We were both going to the same college, so I proposed we moved in together. It had been a few months since Prom and I was horny. If we lived together, I figured we would get to see one another more. And on the plus side, I'd be able to have sex with him in our own, little, shared and sacred place. Though, it took me a while to convince him. I first had to drop it into the conversation.

"You know, if we moved in together we'd be able to see one other more. Like all the time," I said, seductively, putting a french fry in my mouth. We had been out on a rare lunch date when I decided to shoot my shot.

Wes narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "Oh?" He questioned, his voice teetered on the cusp of intrigue.

I gave him a look and raised my eyebrows.

"You want to move in together?" He asked, as if he was just about to solve the hardest puzzle in the world.

"Bingo!" I said, throwing my hands up in the air.

He scratched his head. "I- I don't know, Veronica. People say it's bad for friends to move in together. Especially in college."

My eyes went wide. Sadness and rage rushed through my veins like a tsunami. "Oh, so I'm your *friend* now, is that it?" I yelled at him, getting up from the tacky, worn down booth. I stormed out to my car and drove home. Alone, again.

Wes kept calling and texting me after, but I was really hurt by what he said, so I ignored him. Why didn't he want to move in with me- his girlfriend? We were both at that age to leave the nest anyway.

The next day I woke up to a text from Wes. It was an apartment listing a block away from campus. I couldn't help but smile when I read it.

It wasn't much, but it was ours. A cozy open floor plan. One bedroom, one bath with a nice living room which connected into a dining room/kitchen. The first night in our apartment I tried to kiss Wes as we were on the verge of sleep in our new shared bed.

He ended up pushing me away, turning over. I cried myself to sleep that night.

The next morning Wes acted like it never happened. After that it was awkward for a while, at least for me. Eventually, school and work got the best of us again and we were back to only seeing glimpses of the other in passing.

I love Wes. *I do*, but I could only take so much. I mean, I was a nineteen year old virgin in college! People would ask and it made me ashamed and embarrassed sometimes to tell them the closest that Wes and I had ever gotten was spooning.

Then, around the middle of the first semester, I finally snapped.

"Have sex with me!" I pleaded with Wes as he entered the apartment. He'd just gotten home after a shift at the gas station. I had bought and wore a nice looking set of lingerie to hopefully entice him.

"I-I can't." Was all he muttered out.

"Why not?! We've been together for almost a year and a half and we've never even kissed yet!" I said, simply stating the facts as tears brimmed on the edges of my waterline.

He stared at me with a solemn expression. "I know, but I just... can't." Wes then left the apartment, not even bothering to change out of his work clothes.

I couldn't take it anymore. That night I downloaded Tinder and set up an account.

I had started chatting with this guy named Rico. He was twenty-one and worked at a bar near campus. He was funny and charming, and knew all the right things to say.

While Wes would be dead asleep, I would stay up sexting with Rico late into the night. Of course I felt bad, but I *technically* wasn't cheating. Physically anyway. I mean, Rico and I only ever talked over text. So, it was like he was a friend, just with the same interest as me.

We'd been talking for almost three weeks when Rico finally asked to meet up. I don't know why, but I was on the fence about it. Sure, I wanted to meet him, yeah, but at the same time I loved Wes and I couldn't bear the thought of actually having sexual relations without him. Wes was the one I wanted, but because he wouldn't give me it- I went looking elsewhere. But it just wouldn't be the same, so I left Rico on read.

My friend Jess invited both Wes and I to a party she was having at her boyfriend's frat house. We went together, and feeling bad about the whole Rico thing, I decided I would use this chance to reconnect and rekindle what was left between the two of us.

The beginning of the party went great. A few shots of tequila numbed my worries and I just partied hard. I was cuddling up with Wes when Jess pulled me away for a game of cup pong.

When the game finished, I looked for my phone to check the time, but couldn't find it. I figured it must've slipped out of my pocket when Jess had pulled me away, so I navigated my way back toward the couch to retrieve it.

I found Wes standing there, looking through my phone. A surge of panic went straight through my body and sobered me up a bit.

Wes looked up at me and I could see the hurt, betrayal, and disgust in his eyes. He threw the phone on the couch and made a dash for the exit, tears welling up in his eyes.

It was then that I knew I had fucked up, majorly.

"Wes, wait!" I yelled, grabbing my phone and chasing after him.

I left the hot and stuffy crowded house, stepping into the cooler breeze of the night. I couldn't see a Wes shaped silhouette anywhere, figuring he had gotten in the car, I made my way to it. When looking in the window, there wasn't a soul in our car.

Suddenly, his emerald green eyes and light sandy brown hair emerged behind me in the reflection of the car window. A tuft of my hair was grabbed and then my face was slammed into the side of the car. My vision was littered with stars before going completely black.

I came to in our apartment, laying down on our bed. I went to sit up but a rush of pain flooded my head. I steadied myself, trying not to throw up everywhere.

Wes emerged from the bathroom. He looked different though. I don't know if it was because of my head injury or what, but he seemed... older. His face sagged a bit and his sandy brown hair was sprinkled with ash. His once shiny green eyes were dim. He looked like he was maybe in his late fifties.

"W-Wes?" I muttered out, still feeling nauseous.

He came closer and that's when I noticed it, he looked hungry. But not hungry for food. No this, this was something else. Something primal.

Before I could react, he lunged for me. Wes jumped on me, pinning my arms and legs down to the bed. Then he *kissed* me.

I'd finally gotten what I wanted, but not like this. It was sudden, uncomfortable, and most definitely not passionate, but it was a kiss nonetheless. But it was long. The longer it went on the more tired I felt, like he was sucking my energy. When he was done, I was on the verge of passing out. Wes got off and let me go.

I felt winded and drained as I sat back up, but I looked at him and he looked like himself again. Young and handsome as ever. He was staring at me, like he was waiting for me to say something, or for something to happen. And then it did.

I looked down at my hands and saw them wither before my eyes. My nails grew long and yellow, my skin began to thin and sag, my veins became visible. Age spots littered the surface of my skin. I felt my bones become brittle and weaker, my breathing shallower. I watched as my once shoulder length black hair grew longer, thinner, and grey. My vision faded and it got harder and harder to breathe. I threw my head back as I began to choke, desperate for air. But, strangely, another sensation became present. An intense and deep insatiable hunger.

"C'mon babe. You'll be alright, I promise," I heard Wes's muffled voice say. I felt him grab my shoulders, but at the same time I could feel myself fading far, far away.

Suddenly, a cool sensation slid down my throat. It was energizing, *life changing*. I'd never felt more alive than in that one moment.

All at once my senses flooded back to me.

I took in a loud gasp of air, hyperventilating while clawing at my throat as if I might never get to breathe again. But, after calming down, I was able to take deep breaths of air, eventually finding a normal breathing rhythm. Once somewhat composed, I found myself on the ground. I looked at my hands. They were normal again. I got up and rushed past Wes and into the bathroom to look in the mirror.

I looked like me again, in fact I looked better than ever. The heavy bags under my eyes were gone and my skin looked soft and smooth, it felt like silk. I looked *rejuvenated*. Not knowing how to feel, I exited the bathroom to confront Wes.

That plan was thwarted as I let out a scream, backing up from an old man's body about to wither away into a pile of dust that was in the middle of the bedroom. I bumped into Wes behind me and immediately turned away.

"W-what did you do?" I screamed at him. He looked at the poor shriveled up thing and then nonchalantly pointed at me.

"That was all you, babe," was all he said.

"Mind explaining *what the fuck* is going on?" I asked, frantically pointing to the now pile of ash.

Wes tossed my phone to me. It was open to my conversation with Rico.

There was a reply to his last message:

Sure! Meet me at this address.

Attached was a pin to my location.

"And that," Wes said, pointing at the mountain of dust on the floor, "was Rico."

I looked at him in disbelief.

"Listen Veronica, I'm not human," Wes explained bluntly, clapping his hands together. It seemed like he'd practiced this very conversation in his head a thousand times.

"Yeah no shit. There's a pile of what used to be a twenty-one year old person on our floor," I said ruefully, stepping over what was left of Rico to sit on our bed. "What *are* you?"

"I'm a type of incubi, but instead of feeding on sexual energy, I feed off of a person's life force. Their youth, essentially."

My eyes scrunched up in confusion. I ran a hand through my now luscious hair. "But I see you eat normal food everyday."

"Well, I can eat normal foods too, but it's not sustenance for me. I'm essentially human, except I need to feed on someone's life force every once in a while to stay young and healthy," Wes then took a seat beside me.

"Let me guess," I said, rubbing my forehead, "you 'eat' by kissing and having sex with someone don't you."

"Bingo," He replied with a sigh, looking down.

Satisfied with that answer, I pressed on. "So, you want to tell me exactly what you did to me?"

"I've loved you since day one, Veronica. But I always knew I couldn't kiss you. The best I could do was snuggle, and I was content with it. But I knew that would only be tolerated for so long. That night, when you were in the lingerie, I wanted to kiss and hold you so tight. Wanted you to be *mine*. I never wanted to let go, but I knew what would happen if I gave into my fantasies...I'd hurt you and it would destroy me," a tear fell away from his eye and traveled down his cheek. "I knew you were unhappy and had my suspicions, but I was being selfish and ignored it and ignored you. So, when your phone fell out of your pocket earlier- I just had to see. In the moment I couldn't think straight, I was *devastated*, Veronica."

Now it was my turn to cry.

"When you found me by the couch and I stormed off, an idea popped into my head," Wes continued. "I honestly don't know why I hadn't thought of it earlier. After I left you, I waited and then slammed your head against the car to make you pass out."

I wiped my cheek and chuckled, rubbing the side of my head. "Yeah, thanks for that, by the way."

"I know it was shitty and bad," Wes admitted, rubbing his thumbs nervously, "but I didn't know what else to do. I'd never done this before. I texted Rico to come over. He arrived before you woke up so I knocked him out too, which was hard to do considering my youth was declining. When you awoke I had to feed. Normally, I would've drained all of your life force, but instead I managed to leave just enough in you. Then I kinda made you and the other guy kiss. I helped move his life force into your mouth, then you did the rest on your own. Sucked it up real fast, too. And now I think you're like me. We can quite literally be together forever."

Wes looked at me with a hopeful glint in his eyes, hoping that I would understand why he did what he did.

I grabbed his hand, "Did you know it would work?" I asked, seriously. "Did you know I'd take his youth?"

He let out a shaky, uneven breath. "I mean, I've heard of it being done before, but never witnessed or met someone who was turned. I was born like this."

I hit his arm and scowled playfully.

"I deserve that." He said with a smile. Then I leaned in and hugged him.

After we patched things up with a tearful heart to heart, Wes and I went and got some Waffle House. I was starving, we both were, and not just for some waffles. After feeding, we came back and immediately got into bed. I'd never felt so close and connected with Wes before, and I loved it. I love *him*.

We kissed passionately all night, and well... I can now officially say, I've lost my V Card.

I'm Stuck In My AirBnB, Playing A Lethal Game of Hide and Seek.

I just wanted to have a nice vacation getaway after fall midterms.

Instead? I'm crammed into a hot tiny space, barely able to breathe, trying not to pass out while actively being hunted.

For reference, this all started when the girls trip we talked about in the group chat finally became a reality. You see my friends Callie, Genevieve, and I, Elenor (Ellie for short) are hardcore Halloween fans. Anything horror related, spooky, paranormal, you name it- we eat that shit up. Fall is our favorite time of year. So, as a reward for our hard academic work this semester and passing exams, the three of us saved up and pitched in for a trip to New Orleans, Louisiana. The most haunted city in the United States of America. The best part? Our trip would take place the week of Halloween.

Exciting, right? *Wrong.*

It should've been, but it didn't turn out that way. For me at least. I don't know where my friends are or what they're doing. All I can do is hope that they're not stuck in the same sick and twisted game as me.

Sorry, I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me explain.

Last night, the second night of our trip, some local told us about The Seeker's Game. Our AirBnB was in the French Quarter, which is home to Bourbon street- where the party never ends. We'd been bar hopping and partying all night dressed as the Powerpuff Girls. Callie was Blossom, Gen was Buttercup, and I was Bubbles.

It was pretty late in the night when we stumbled into that bar. It was mostly empty with just the three of us, the bartender, and The Local occupying the space.

After our first round of shots, Gen started lamenting about how she wanted to see something *really* spooky. We'd been on a couple ghost tours already, but nothing was really hitting the spot, ya know?

Callie and I agreed, clinking our shot glasses together before ordering another round of drinks. That's when The Local stepped in.

"So you want to see something scary, eh?" A Creole accented voice asked ominously from a booth in the corner.

The three of us gave each other "the look" before bursting out into a fit of giggles. We went back to drinking, brushing the man's interruption off. Then he got up from his booth and started making his way towards us at the bar, a whiskey sour in hand.

The Local was an older, skinny black guy. He walked with a bamboo cane to help with his limp. One of his eyes was blind, a cataract causing his retina to look pale blue and clouded. A salty goatee cascaded down his chin in the shape of a V.

"You should play The Seeker's game then," he suggested, slamming his glass on the bar, causing the three of us to jump in fright. This garnered a little chuckle out of him as he took his seat on a barstool.

"T-the Seeker's Game?" I asked, shakily taking a sip of my drink. He'd definitely grabbed our attention now. "What's that?"

The Local grinned with a glimmer of mischief in his good eye. "Oh ho ho, Mon chéri! Do you really want to know? Because once you do, there's no going back."

Callie, Genevieve, and I looked at each other skeptically. Callie then answered his question with another question. "Would we be asking you if we didn't?"

"Ha!" He drunkenly laughed, energetically banging the palm of his hand on the counter. "You three are fun, I like it!"

We responded with more nervous laughter. At that point he was starting to creep us out more than this game was supposed to.

The Local then threw his head back, gulping down the rest of his drink. "To play The Seeker's Game, you first have to call out to him. The Seeker will then extend an invitation out to you, if he wishes to accept. The game begins when the invitation is received. Be warned, though, for he sets the perimeters. He picks the time. The only thing you have to do... is hide."

"How do we call out to him?" Callie asked, chuckling under her breath. Clearly, she didn't believe a word he said.

Gen finished what was in her glass, looking The Local over curiously. She tried and failed to conceal her intrigue. "Do we just say his name?"

"No, Mon chérie," The Local innocently grinned. "A chant must be invoked so The Seeker can hear you. It goes: *Seeker, Seeker, heed our call! With every breath, we hide and sprawl! Seeker, Seeker, heed our call! As shadows dance, let fate enthrall!*"

He leapt off his seat, swaying his shoulders back and forth with his arms up in the air. He laughed a wicked laugh before saying, "Then you must gather around, holding hands, and shout to the heavens: *We want to play the seekers game! We want to play the seekers game! We want to play the seekers game!*"

When The Local was done with his display, he took a bow before getting back in his seat. Gen gave the man a weak pity applause.

"Okay..." Callie said, taking another shot. Needless to say, we were thoroughly freaked out. But, another round of drinks would fix that. "So, what's the prize if we win, do we get a wish or something?"

The Local stiffened, giving her a serious look, "The prize? The prize is your *life*."

"No fucking way," I murmured into my shot glass. Gen and Callie gave each other "the look" again. They followed in my footsteps and consumed more alcohol.

"Like I said, once the game starts there's no going back..." he said, shrugging his shoulders.

"Well, thanks for telling us about this scary game of yours," I said, pulling out my wallet to pay. Genevieve and Callie followed, apparently on the same wavelength as me. "Consider us *spooked*."

The Local tipped his imaginary hat at us. "Do have a Happy Halloween now," he said, flashing a smile before hobbling back over to his booth.

We gave the man our final pleasantries before leaving the bar for the night.

"So, should we do it?" Callie asked randomly as we walked down Bourbon Street. By then, some time had passed since our encounter with The Local. It was nearing almost four in the morning.

"Do what?" I responded, fiddling with my costume.

"Play The Seeker's Game, duh!" Out of the three of us, Callie was the last person I expected to bring up playing that game.

Gen pulled out some chapstick from her purse and started applying it on her lips. "Sure, seems fun."

"Uh, am I the only one that remembers him saying we could die?" I laughed, tightening my pigtails.

"Puh-lease!" Callie squealed. "It's not real, Elenor, so there's no harm in trying it."

I couldn't argue with that logic.

After looking around for a place with the perfect ambience, we landed on an old courtyard. A defunct fountain sat in the middle with vines covering it along with some marble benches. The moonlight gave the courtyard an ethereal, yet eerie, glow. We set our things down and started the chant.

"Seeker, Seeker, heed our call! With every breath, we hide and sprawl! Seeker, Seeker, heed our call! As shadows dance, let fate enthrall!"

Next we gathered in a circle and grabbed hands, mimicking The Local as we gyrated back and forth. We danced and spun around, having had a little fun with it. Our raucous laughs filled the old courtyard as the sound ricocheted and our shadows swayed.

"We want to play the seekers game! We want to play the seekers game! We want to play the seekers game!"

The three of us stood there waiting in silence for something to happen. After standing there for five minutes, Gen and Callie snorted and started giggling like school girls. Nothing had happened.

But I felt weird. Too creeped out and too drunk. I voiced my thoughts to the group. My friends wanted to stay out a little longer, so I went back to the AirBnB early by myself. I bid the girls adieu and somehow managed to stumble back and right into bed.

Today, I woke up with a raging hangover around three in the afternoon. My first stop in the bathroom revealed I looked as bad as I felt. The hair in my pigtails were thin and wiry, my makeup was running, and there was a stain of unknown origins on the blue dress I'd gotten from Spirit Halloween.

My second stop was to the kitchen. There, I brewed myself a fresh cup of coffee and downed about four aspirin. Groggily, I stumbled to the front door, wanting nothing more than to enjoy my morning cup of joe in one of the rocking chairs out on the porch. I wanted to take in the historic scenery and watch as people got ready to start Trick-or-Treating.

A warm gulp of coffee slid down my throat as I stuck my hand out for the door handle. A swipe and a miss. I paused, the lip of my mug stopping just beneath my mouth, wisps of steam still floating off the hot beverage.

The doorknob was gone.

A deep breath, then a step back. I must've been more out of it than I thought. After rubbing my eyes, I looked again.

Still no door handle. In its place was a patch of smooth wood painted white. Like there had never been a doorknob installed there at all.

I let out a disbelieving laugh. I'd try the glass sliding back doors next. The coffee mug just about slipped out of my hands. The plastic handle on the doors had been removed too.

Frantically, I searched every door in the house. This is when I discovered pretty much every other door still had its handle. Only the doors leading to the outside world seemed to be unopenable.

Okay, if I can't leave through a door, I'll just have to crawl out a window, I rationalized. Imagine my surprise when I found that the windows we'd been able to open just the other day, were now one big pane of glass, unable to open. No biggie. Glass could be broken.

Honestly, I was bugging. Completely freaked out and feeling like a caged rabid animal. And caged rabid animals do crazy things when they're scared.

The dining room table of our Air BnB had these fancy wicker chairs surrounding it. They were light, but sturdy too. Just sturdy enough to break through a glass pane.

A guttural yell passed through my lips as I charged at the back door, a wicker chair as my battering ram.

Thunk!

My shoulder crashed into the piece of furniture, aiding my attack on the glass. Unfortunately, my first attempt was fruitless.

Composing myself, I picked the chair up and charged forward once more. The view of the outside taunted me. Just beyond those glass doors lay a whole world filled with fresh air and freedom. I set forth my second attack, running with all my might. The collision was a hard one, but not enough to break the glass.

My balance wavered from all that momentum. I tripped, tossing the chair back with me. Thankfully, I managed to catch myself on the kitchen counter before cracking my head open on the floor. That's when I saw it. *The note.*

It was addressed to me, Ellie. The handwriting on it was hauntingly light and elegant, written in a form of calligraphy. It was an invitation.

My heart sank to the bottom of my stomach. "No way," I breathed out, shakily. "It can't be-"

But it was. The back of the note revealed the rules of this game.

This house.

"He sets the perimeters."

The game lasts until midnight.

"He picks the time."

The game starts now.

"All you have to do... is hide."

Fuck. Me.

According to the note, he would begin seeking at sundown. That gave me about an hour and a half to find a good hiding spot, which wouldn't be easy in this AirBnB. The layout was small: only a master bedroom, a guest room, living/dining room and kitchen. Plus furniture was sparse too.

Hiding under the bed, in a closet, or in the shower would be too easy. The Seeker would find me too fast. The cabinets were a no go too. They were filled with food or other miscellaneous items.

I needed to think outside the box. Get creative. Creativity might be the only thing standing between me and my life.

I searched the bedrooms for a crawlspace entrance or an attic door- just to see if maybe there was a secret hidden entrance somewhere. I pulled a couple books out from the bookcase. Nada.

Maybe the couch? No, it would look lumpy and be obvious if I hid in there.

With a groan, I kicked the thing, letting all my frustrations out because at that point I was going to die.

My purse slipped off the cushion from the harsh vibrations, falling to the floor and spilling its contents out everywhere. Including my set of car keys.

My eyes lit up as I remembered my car was out in the garage! Normally it'd be parked out on the street, but something in my gut told me to bring it in last night.

Now I had the perfect hiding place.

You see, my mom wanted us to drive her old minivan down here. She went on and on about luggage space, good gas mileage, and reliability. Basically, she didn't give me much choice about taking it. But the good thing about this minivan is there's these built in compartments in the middle. The middle seats can fold down into them, giving the cabin a lot more trunk space if needed.

When the middle seats were up, however, theoretically there was just enough space in those compartments to fit a tiny, petite, body like mine.

Knowing I'd be in there a while, I grabbed a large water bottle and my phone before heading out to the garage.

To double check and make sure, I tried to open both the regular door and garage door once I got out there. Just as I thought though, they wouldn't budge.

The minivan chirped as I unlocked it. Stealing one last glance out of the garage door window before hopping in, I noticed sundown just off in the distance. It wouldn't be long before The Seeker started to look for me.

Squeezing myself into the compartment was harder than I thought. The angle needed to be just right for me to fit down there. Relief flooded through my body as I finally got my hip into a good place where it wouldn't pop and dislocate.

I slid the door to the car closed, grabbing the compartment hatch and floor mat at the same time. Slowly, I lowered the upper half of my body down into the small space, carefully sliding everything above me in place.

From an aerial view, it should appear like a normal minivan from the inside, with nobody none the wiser that I was hiding right beneath the seats.

It got dark out. I know because there's a hole on the floor that's about the size of a penny. I can see out to the garage's concrete floor.

Someone's been moving around inside the Air BnB. It's probably The Seeker. I can hear him searching, angrily tossing things about because he hasn't found me yet.

I've been holding my breath since the light in the garage turned on a couple minutes ago. Slow, methodical footsteps filled the air as The Seeker walked around, still looking for his target. Me. I could see his shadow moving about from my little peephole.

My tongue almost came off as I bit down, stifling a scream when the back door to the minivan slid open. The car jolted and shook as it opened. I mentally kicked myself for not locking it behind me. Yet, part of me thinks a locked car wouldn't be too difficult for a powerful supernatural being to bypass.

My hands were clasped tightly around my nose and mouth, making my breathing barely audible. I watched his shadow in anticipation as he rifled around in the cabin above me.

My shuddering sigh of relief was concealed by the sound of the car door slamming shut.

The Seeker stormed out of the garage in another fit of anger. He's back inside the Air BnB now, still seeking.

I've outsmarted The Seeker for now, but there's still four more hours until midnight and nothing is stopping him from coming back out here to make a more thorough assessment of the minivan.

All I can do is pray to God that he doesn't find me. I don't think I'll survive if he does.

Seven Years Ago I Was Abducted And Sold Into Child Trafficking. I Haven't Been The Same Since

TW: Human/child trafficking, child abuse, sexual abuse, depictions of self harm and suicide.

I don't have a name.

Well that's untrue, I suppose we all have names. Plus, I do actually have a name, had several in fact, it's just that I don't remember the one I was given at birth.

Most of my early childhood is a blur, and most of the things I do remember are unimportant. I'd say that one of the only really important things that stuck was that I grew up in an orphanage. My therapist said my brain most likely blocked the rest out as a sort of trauma response, but it's whatever.

I know you didn't come here to read about my early childhood, you came here to read about my pain and the time I spent being trafficked.

It's okay, I know you all mean well. I haven't taken any offense to it. Believe me when I say I couldn't, even if I wanted to.

It's not like any of this will matter to me soon anyway- this is sort of my suicide note for the world (my adoptive parents will be getting a different one) if you haven't caught on by now.

And you know what? Scratch that, nothing has mattered to me since the night I, the real and authentic me, died three years ago.

Let me explain:

Seven years ago I was abducted and sold into child trafficking.

As I mentioned earlier, I was raised in an orphanage, a place where most unwanted children end up.

A yard full of kids that nobody would miss was practically prime real estate for my traffickers.

I remember that before I was taken, a few kids from the orphanage would go missing every now and then. My caretakers didn't really care though since it was a few less mouths to feed and take care of.

All these years later, I wonder if the two parties had an unspoken agreement.

Anyway, the memory of my kidnapping is crystal clear. One of the few memories from before that are.

I was friends with this one girl, we were more like acquaintances in reality. Her name escapes me.

She was short, really chubby, but overall cute looking. Her curly blonde hair framed her freckle-filled face nicely and her blue eyes sparkled whenever she saw ice cream. She was pretty and knew how to use it. She'd flirt with the boys and they'd give her their food or whatever sweet treat they managed to get their hands on to win her favor. She was really snooty about it too, but I guess her only downfall was food and some egotistical issues.

It was mid afternoon. I remember the humidity and feeling like a melting popsicle.

I had longed to be inside with the functioning A/C but our caretakers were forcing us to spend time outside in the yard. Blondie and I were hogging the swings- most likely trying to cool down with the breeze generated from swinging up and down- when we heard that little tune play from the ice cream truck coming up the road.

Blondie squealed with delight as she launched herself off her swing. She flipped like an acrobat and landed like a ninja on the tan wood chips before sprinting away. A few other kids rushed off in the same direction as her, their hands shoved into their pockets looking for loose change. We would get a few quarters in exchange for doing chores here and there, so that's how us sugar deprived children managed to pay for ice cream and other treats.

The two girls who were waiting for us to vacate the swings sighed with relief once Blondie left. One of them took her seat while the other stared at me expectantly as I swayed slowly.

She let out a frustrated grunt when she realized I wasn't going to move and started to push her buddy. It was hot out and ice cream did sound tempting, but I think I was saving up for a book at the time.

Blondie had come back sobbing as the vanilla swirl in her hand started to melt. For some context, the back of the orphanage had some heavy foliage as I think the place was built by some secluded woodland.

Perfect area to be taken am I right?

Blondie had said that as she was on her way back to the swings, she kicked the soccer ball a group of boys were playing with and it went behind said foliage. They got mad and started to yell at her. She didn't want to get anything in her ice cream so she asked me to go get the ball for her. I remember telling her that I'd hold her food so she could retrieve the ball, but she refused to part with it. With a huff and a sigh, I marched my little butt over to where she pointed to where the soccer ball had supposedly landed. I don't remember ever seeing a soccer ball fly over there, but mini me must've thought nothing of it.

I was grabbed when I broke through the tree line. As I struggled to get out of the man's grasp as he dragged me away, I remember being able to see a glimpse of the yard. There, standing by the swings, I saw Blondie happily licking her ice cream. She tossed a dollar's worth of quarters up and down in her hands, pleased with herself. Everything clicked when I was thrown into the back of the freezer part of the ice cream truck.

Blondie must've unknowingly traded me for free ice cream. That's the only plausible explanation I can really think of anyway. Like I wrote earlier, the girl really liked her ice cream.

The thing that I like to think kept me going during that time was that my traffickers wanted me. Sure it was for nefarious purposes, but they picked me out of a crowd of kids and lured *me* away, not another girl like Blondie. Deep down, behind the feelings of terror and shock, there was honestly hope.

It's fucked up, I know, but that was when I was still an innocent little shit and thought the world was all magic and rainbows.

It's sad, but coming from someone who grew up in a place with unwanted people and feeling unwanted myself, it was a nice feeling to have. I miss that feeling.

The ride in the back of the ice cream truck was long and I was freezing. To pass the time I took in my surroundings. The man that took me was sitting on one of the freezer chests that housed all the delectable desserts inside. His eyes were pinned on me, making sure I didn't try

anything. He was dressed in an all black sweater and pants. Adorned on his face was a balaclava. His hand rested on his hip and on top of his gun holster.

I was old enough to know what was happening to me and what a gun was. I was ten at the time, I'm seventeen now. That image of the gun and what his stance was implying will forever be burned into the back of my eyelids.

For most of the ride I stared at the little menu board and memorized the options. Repeating all of the different flavors and types of treats in my head managed to calm me down.

My kidnapper was rough with me once the vehicle arrived wherever we were. He stuck a black bag over my head and bound my hands behind my back with zip ties. I was physically kicked out of the back of the truck. A new type of terror rushed through my veins as I fell, having no idea how long I'd be falling for. In reality it took like half a second for my face to meet the pavement, but it felt like an eternity in the moment.

I was then ripped up off the ground to stand at attention by my hair. I was then pressed forward. My eyes were watering at that point from the pain in my head and scalp, but I did my best to keep my composure. Something told me that if I cried like a baby, I'd provoke him into giving me a full on beating.

After what felt like centuries, we had finally stopped and the bag on my head was removed. I was then pushed forward for one the last time. The room was dim and the walls were white and bare. There was a table in front of me, behind it sat a tall, tan skinned man. He had a nice suit on, his hands were clasped together on top of the table, and a big smile was plastered on his face. His whole aura was intimidating and I found myself shaking and sniffing. A glance behind him showed a few more girls huddled together in the corner. Silent whimpers and cries rang out throughout the small room. Everyone seemed to ignore them, but me.

My body shivered as I felt his gaze look over every inch of me. Was this my fate?

"Tsk, tsk, tsk," he said aloud after he had finished his visual assessment of me.

His words were laced with anger, "She's too visibly damaged. We'll have to wait for the bruises to heal. She'll have to be a part of the next Harvest."

The man sprung up from his chair and slammed his hands on the table. I flinched as the sudden burst of noise startled me. His footsteps approached rapidly and I braced for whatever this man was about to do to me. When his footsteps passed me, I looked behind me to see where he was going.

"I told you to not be so rough with the merchandise!" A loud smack echoed through the space as the man in the suits' fist connected with my kidnappers masked face.

"Now I'll be one short for this harvest, and you know how I don't like to lose out on my money! Get him out of here. I don't ever want to see your filthy face again."

Two men who I hadn't seen before dragged my pleading kidnapper out of the door behind me as the suited man went back to his desk. A collective shudder surfed through the cluster of girls in the back of the room as they watched the man get closer to them.

"Sorry about that, sweetie," he said in a sickly sweet voice, sitting back down and collected himself. "Do not fret, everything will be just fine in due time. If I let you out of those bindings, you'll be a good girl and not run away, right?"

I shook my head vigorously in response.

He got up once more and walked behind me. I felt the pressure on my wrists lessen as he cut the zip ties. I heard him mutter, "These wounds are going to take a while to heal."

Once he finished cutting my bindings he stood in front of me and placed his large hands on my shoulders. "There, all better?"

I nodded my head yes again, trying not to shudder.

"Hi there, I'm Fuego," the man in the suit said, introducing himself, after taking a step back and sticking his hand out.

I hesitated to shake it, but once I motioned my arm forward he grabbed my hand and shook it firmly.

"Ah, I see you're a quiet one," Fuego said with that same sinister smile he flashed earlier.

I swallowed the lump that had formed in my throat. A second of silence passed before he spoke again. This time he placed his hand gently on my back and guided me through the door, away from the other girls.

"You're a good and ripe apple, I can tell already."

We walked through what looked like an abandoned office building. Fuego led me past a bunch of deserted cubicles and into another room. It was smaller than the last and there was a personal bathroom attached.

"You'll wait here until I come and get you again," Fuego instructed before leaving.

The walls were white and there was blue carpet flooring- kinda like the ones you'd find in a school library or something. There was a singular, dark wooden door, no windows, and four bare walls. I tried to open the door after Fuego left, but it wouldn't budge. Must've been locked from the outside. A small mattress with a thin looking blanket and pillow laid in the corner. I took a glance at my stinging wrists only to find deep red indents on my skin. No blood was drawn, but I figured they'd bruise nicely. I made my way into the bathroom to explore. Thankfully there was a toilet, a small sink, and a mirror. It took me a second to work up the courage but I eventually went and looked into the mirror to see the "damage" that was done to me during transit.

I had a nice looking welt in the middle of my forehead from when I face-planted earlier. It looked like I'd have a black eye too as bruising had begun to form on my left eyelid. I took in my disheveled appearance. Scraggly brown wisps of hair stood up at different angles from the bag being placed on and ripped off of my head. Chocolate brown eyes stared back at me, fright swirled all around in them. After taking in a deep breath, I ended up leaving the room.

For the first time I let myself cry since I had been 'nabbed. I huddled myself into the corner on the mattress and silently sobbed until sleep graced me with its presence and overcame me.

I have no idea how long I was in that room for. Every once in a while someone would come and bring me food and water, sometimes a change of clothes. Fuego came a few times, just to look me over. He put some kind of ointment on my wrists and bandaged them up for me and would come to check on my healing process.

I had nightmares about what the "Harvest" entailed.

I remember thinking that maybe I'd be chopped into itty bitty little pieces and then my body parts would be shipped all over the world for some deranged cannibal to eat. Or maybe my organs would be sold on the black market. My imagination had run rampant in those days.

When Fuego came to me and let me out of that dingy little room, I knew I'd find out my fate soon enough.

You can't imagine how confused I was when he took me to a coat closet where a bunch of white laced dresses were hung up.

"Pick one that's in your size." He commanded, calmly.

I did as he said. Except for the color and lace, the dresses were all different. Some had sleeves while others didn't. Some had a two piece appearance while others didn't. The dresses were all different lengths too. I ended up picking a thick strapped pleated dress that had a ribbon tied around the waist separating the smooth top from the pleated bottom. The silky fabric went down a little past my knees.

Fuego smiled approvingly as he led me into another room across from the coat closet. There were two long tables with all different types of flowers lined on top of them. I counted twenty four in total.

I watched as Fuego slowly moved in the middle of both the tables. His gaze scanning each and every colorful petal and pointy stem.

"Ah," he said, stopping abruptly. "This suits you perfectly."

He walked back towards me with purpose as I saw the flower he picked out in his hand. It was a little yellow daisy.

Fuego brought his hand up to my cheek and looked me in the eyes as he held the flower up to me before moving some of my hair behind my ear.

"Your name is Daisy now, understand?" He then placed the flower behind my ear. I saw flashes of the yellow petals in my peripheral vision.

I nodded my head slowly as it took all my willpower not to cry. I remember a feeling of sadness welling up within me because, in that moment, I understood. Fuego was stripping me of my name, my identity, who I was as a person. All for his Harvest.

"That's my good little Daisy," he said as he rubbed my back before leading me out of the room.

Fuego brought me into a small bathroom. There was a package of baby wipes and a hairbrush on the counter. He nudged me gently inside.

"Clean yourself up and make yourself all pretty. I'll be waiting," that last part was said lowly, implying that I shouldn't waste time or try anything funny.

I quickly took the flower off and the gray t-shirt and sweatpants I was wearing before opening the package of baby wipes. The scent of artificial coconut filled the air. I started rubbing my skin gently with the wipes all over. My face, armpits, neck, everywhere. My damp skin smelled like a mix of coconut and sweat when I was finished. This was the closest thing I'd had to a shower in that time so it would have to do.

The dress fit me nicely and was very pretty, I had to admit. It took me a while to brush through all the knots that had accumulated in my tangled hair, but I eventually finished. I styled a little side sweep bang to add something. A lump formed in my throat as my gaze caught the yellow daisy sitting on the counter. I jumped when a soft knock came from the door. I quickly placed the flower behind my ear and opened the bathroom door.

Fuego smiled once he saw me. "Very good. I have high hopes for you."

He then grabbed my hand and stuck a needle in my arm. I felt a cold liquid enter under my skin as it began to burn. My vision faded out and I remember feeling very scared. Scared that I wouldn't wake up ever again.

I was sadly wrong.

I woke up on a cold, hard, concrete floor. I was shocked to find that there were other girls lined up next to me in a straight line. We were all chained together by our wrists. Some of these girls looked to be half my age, some looked to be double. A few girls were still knocked out. Some were praying, others were crying. I noticed they all had flowers tucked behind their ears. I counted twenty four of us in all.

There were guards in front of us that were carrying what I now know are assault rifles. They kept jamming the butt of their guns into the shoulders of the girls that were crying too loudly. It took everything not to pee myself out of fright.

It didn't take long for everyone else to wake up. When we were conscious enough, we all looked at each other, but nobody spoke a word. Too afraid of what would happen if we did. So we were all silent. Silently talking amongst ourselves, silently praying, silently pleading to whatever higher power there was for our rescue- and if not that, the least horrible outcome.

The sound of a door opening echoed in the distance and multiple sets of footsteps followed.

By the looks of it, we were in some kind of warehouse or storage facility. There were two or three big black cars that sat in front of a large closed garage door about twenty feet in front of us. I'm assuming that's how they brought us girls there.

"Sit on your knees! Eyes forward!" The guards ordered suddenly in whispered yells.

They jabbed and poked at everyone not moving fast enough. Eventually all of us girls were sitting in a uniform position. There were many who still hadn't gained their composure though, and as the footsteps got louder so did the sobs.

"Welcome gentlemen to this month's Harvest!" Fuego boomed with delight as he and several other men entered my line of sight.

There were many a murmur that came from the small crowd of men. They were all wearing fancy suits, similar to the one Fuego was wearing the day I met him. The men differed in size, shape and age.

I brought my gaze to the ground as the men started to roam about and look at their options. I had the "if I can't see them they can't see me" mentality.

Cold metal made contact with my chin as my head was forced up. A sharp pain exploded in my jaw.

"Face forward!" One of the guards said menacingly to me.

I didn't dare move my head down again as I tried to tune out the silent sobs and no's coming from besides me.

Eventually, Fuego and this younger looking man approached me. He had short brown hair and green eyes. He must've been in his late twenties or early thirties. I distinctly remember his blue bow tie for some reason.

He looked down upon me as he scanned over my body. He got down on his knees and to my level. I shuddered as he lifted his fingers towards my ear. A tear slipped out when he began to caress the side of my face. He played with my hair for a bit before getting back up.

"What's her name?" The man asked, his voice being deeper than I expected. It was crisp as an apple and smooth like butter.

"Daisy. She's a good little girl isn't she?" Fuego said, proudly.

"Yes, yes she is. She's a good little Daisy. I think I'll take her."

My heart sank at his words. I desperately looked to Fuego but as the man took out his wallet I saw pure greed and evil in Fuego's eyes. I don't know why I felt so betrayed at that moment. I knew from the get go that he was bad, but it must've been his gentleness and the way he spoke that got me thinking otherwise.

"No," I whispered softly as Fuego unlocked the chain that connected me to the person on my right. My whispers fell on deaf ears as I kept saying no as he unbound me. I was forcefully picked up and carried towards the garage door. I tried to squirm and claw my way out of the young man's grasp as the metallic door slowly opened.

There were a bunch of cars waiting outside the garage door. It was dark out and raining, and there were too many cars to count. A driver exited one of the cars and opened the back door. The man gently placed me in the backseat and quickly closed the door before I could try to get out. The sound of the door lock clicking filled the cabin. A second later the man entered and sat in the front passenger seat. A thick glass window separated the driver's seat and shotgun from the back seats.

I watched in horror as other drivers exited their vehicles to open doors for the other girls who were sold off too. They were screaming and kicking, trying to fight to get away, but just like me, none of them succeeded.

I remember feeling a deep pit of despair forming in my stomach as the car started to drive away. I crunched myself up into a ball in the back seat and cried into my dress.

We had driven in silence for a while before the man spoke up out of the blue.

"I haven't told you my name yet, have I?"

I stayed curled up, my eyes burning holes into the fancy leather that lined the seat.

"My name is Richard. Richard Ubanks. It's nice to meet you, Daisy."

When I didn't respond he kept the one sided conversation going.

"I understand how you must be feeling right now, but I promise you it's not as bad as you think."

A scoff escaped past my lips.

"She's alive!" Richard yelled, playfully crazily.

I rolled my eyes in response.

Some time passed before he spoke again, "You probably already figured it out by now, but I'm rich."

"Richard The Rich," I mumbled out sarcastically.

"Exactly! You are quite the funny one. I knew I was right to choose you."

I shuddered at the word choose.

"Now, the truth is Daisy, I've adopted you," he said bluntly.

"What?" I questioned as I unfurled myself out of my ball form.

"That's right!" He said with a laugh as he turned around and smiled at me. "You are now my daughter!"

"Adopted? B-but I saw you hand cash over to Fuego," I stumbled out, confused.

"You did indeed! You see Daisy, adopting a child is similar to adopting a puppy. You have to pay a little bit of money for the doggie, and I paid a little bit of money for you."

"T-the chains.."

"Ah yes, I rescued you from those bad men. Isn't that right, Arnold?" Richard turned to his driver, who I assumed was Arnold.

A long moment passed before Arnold let out a soft, "Yes. Yes that's right."

Arnold looked like he was about to shit a brick.

"Chin up kiddo. Things are looking up for you! There's a nice, big, room waiting for you when we get home. You're going to have all the prettiest clothing, all the toys you could ever dream of, and so much more, my love," Richard said, excitedly.

A spark lit up in my chest as he talked about all the things we were going to do. In retrospect it's pretty easy to convince a ten year old they're safe when you bribe them with toys and sweets and such. But what really sold me in the moment was the way Richard seemed genuinely happy and it made all the bad feelings I had melt away.

We had even stopped for food and after finishing my happy meal, I opened up more to Richard.

I indulged him with my time at the orphanage while playing with the little toy that came with my meal. He paid attention the whole time. He paid attention to *me*. He responded to *me*, listened to *me*, even asked about my thoughts and feelings. Nobody had really paid that much attention to me before, and I had felt seen for the first time in a long time.

Richard laughed with glee when he saw my reaction to seeing his house. It was quite literally a mansion. There was a giant fountain with a stone dolphin statue in the middle spewing water out of its blowhole. The architecture was absolutely magnificent and the house was so big and pretty. My heart filled with excitement when the car stopped and Arnold let me out.

This was real, this was my house. My home.

I eagerly took Richard's hand as he led me up the driveway towards his home. The smell of petrichor filled my nostrils and I had become giddy with glee.

Things were finally looking up for me.

My heart sank into my stomach when he pulled me away from the steps that led to his front door.

"W-where are we going?" I asked, frantically. His grasp on my hand tightened as we neared a gate on the side of the mansion.

"To your room, my dear."

He led me into his backyard. There was an Olympic sized swimming pool filled with crystal clear chlorine rich water. There were lounge chairs and a nice patio set next to the pool. The whole space was bougie looking.

A few yards away sat a decent sized pool shed. I felt like I was going to throw up when I saw the padlock and chains wrapped around the door handles.

"No, no please!" I begged as he dug the keys out of his pocket. I was trying to pull away from him, but my ten year old strength was no match for his.

Once he managed to get the door open he shoved me in.

"B-but you said!" I cried out as I tried to push open the door.

I felt the light in my chest go out when I heard the lock click back into place.

"Don't worry darling," Richard said menacingly, "Daddy will be back soon for playtime!"

My ears started ringing and my head was spinning. My chest was tight and heavy. It was hard to breathe. It was at that moment I realized he had lured me into a false sense of security. Richard gave me hope, then snuffed it out when he had the chance.

What kind of monster buys a little girl and makes her think he adopted her, only to throw her in his pool shed? Richard Ubanks, that's who.

I didn't know it then, but that would be the night when my innocence was taken from me.

It took me a minute to realize that someone else was in there with me. She had snapped me out of my panic attack by shaking me back into reality.

She had long wavy brown hair and the bluest eyes I'd ever seen. Her face was weathered but her body was young. I could tell that she was in the same boat as me.

She comforted me as I broke out in tears. She brought me to one of the cots that stood in the middle of the room. The cots were the only thing in the room really. The floor was concrete and the air was hot and stuffy.

Once I had calmed down a bit, she gave me some time to adjust.

"S-so, what's your name?" I choked out eventually.

"He gave me a Lily."

Lily adjusted herself on her cot.

"Daisy," I muttered as I tried not to cry again. I remember feeling that pit of despair begin to form again.

Lily looked like she wanted to say something but winced when she heard the lock begin to rattle.

"Oh Daisy~" Richard said in a sing-songy voice, "it's play time!"

I stifled a sob as he dragged me out of the shed. I didn't want to have playtime.

He slid open the sliding glass back door and led me into the mansion. The floor was a smooth marbled tile and there was a fancy oak dining table right by the back door. The kitchen was huge and filled with shiny appliances. There, in the middle, stood a giant island with similar marble tiling as the floor. Richard led me up a grand staircase and I got a glimpse of the living room. There was a big black leather couch and glass coffee table with a gold rim. His entertainment system was huge and in the center lay a giant flat screen tv.

We had passed many doors by the time we got to the master bedroom. His room was absolutely massive. A shiny crystal chandelier dangled from the ceiling above his king sized bed lined with red satin sheets.

Richard sat me on the bed then closed his door and locked it. I sniffled and wiped tears from my eyes. I knew playtime wasn't really playtime. I just didn't know what he was going to do to me. But I knew whatever it was couldn't be good. It was wrong. All of this was just wrong.

I remember him pouncing on me like a lion, suddenly. He held me down on the bed with his hands around my wrists, his knees pinning my legs.

I told Richard to stop, that what he was doing hurt me. That was when he started kissing my face and neck. I tried to push him off of me but he kept holding me down as his kisses traveled further and further down south.

He pulled the dress off over my head.

"No," I told him firmly.

He kept going. He slid his fingertips beneath my training bra. He played with it, the fabric made a snapping sound as it made contact against my skin. I tried pushing him off of me but he just wouldn't budge.

"No. Please stop! You're making me uncomfortable," I said again, this time louder.

He slid my bra off and started to moan with every kiss he stole on my bare skin. His slimy fingers traveled down towards my underwear. When he touched me down there I lost it.

Tears welled up in my eyes and I exploded into a fit. I kicked, punched, slapped, and screamed at him.

"Stop it! Stop it! I don't want this so don't touch me anymore, please!" I pleaded as tears streamed down my face.

I felt Richard's weight lessen on me, and then I felt a sharp sting on the side of my face. He slapped me. Again, and again, and again. He slapped me harder with every strike as he yelled at me.

"Shut up you ungrateful little fuck! I gave you a nice new home and hot food, I saved you from that miserable place and this is how you repay me? I am your father now, and you will do whatever I want you to! Do you understand me?"

I cried as I rubbed my blistering hot cheek. He roughly grabbed my arm and slapped my face again, a drop of blood fell from my nose.

"I said, do you understand me?!"

"Yes. Yes, I do!" I cried out.

"Yes, Daddy," Richard said as he breathed heavily.

He raised his hand again, threateningly, "Yes, Daddy!" I blurted out as I flinched and put my hands up to protect my face.

"Good. Now lay there and think about what you've done for a minute," he said as he got off the bed and went into what I presume was his bathroom.

I laid there as he said to. I couldn't move, I could barely breathe.

A minute later he came out bare bottomed and had a little condom on. He was smart like that. He wanted all the fun and pleasure that came with having toys like Lilly and I, but not the possibility and responsibility of getting one of us pregnant and having a kid. He knew no evidence could be left behind.

That was the night I learned what rape was. How horrible and terrible it is to feel violated like that. This was the night where my virginity was stolen from me.

I was just ten fucking years old.

When he had finished having his way with me, Richard brought me back out to the pool shed. My legs and hips were so sore that he had to practically drag me since moving brought me so much agony.

I sobbed on my cot until I couldn't cry anymore.

"Alex," Lily had said to me at one point during the night.

"What?" I asked her, taking a deep breath after all my crying.

"They named me Lily. But despite what I look like with my hair and everything, deep down I'm a boy. I just know it. My name, my real name, is Alex."

He gave me a soft smile as I cleared the tears from my eyes to look at him.

I said softly to him, "Well Alex, it's nice to officially meet you."

That night was a night of many firsts for me; some terrible, some good- like meeting my best friend for the first time- but there were a few last's too.

That night was the last time Richard hit me like that. I learned to just comply with what he wanted. That way I wouldn't get any more bruised than I needed to. If I wanted to survive I'd have to learn how to adapt in Richard's world of horrors.

That night was also the last time I called Alex, Lily.

Alex wasn't as lucky when it came to Richard's beatings though. He would always put up some type of fight. Alex never stopped fighting in the four years I knew him, not once- and this quickly caused me to become Richard's favorite daughter/toy.

Richard was more gentle with me after I became complacent, however, he got rougher with Alex.

Richard would bring me into the house and dress me up in fancy clothes like I was some sort of princess Barbie doll. On rare occasions, he'd feed me fancy meals and then have his way with me. He'd call them our little daddy daughter dates.

Whenever he was in a bad mood was when he had playtime with Alex.

The good thing about that, is when I was around I could always get Richard into a good mood. That meant that Alex didn't have to suffer as much with Richard as I did.

For most of our time we were held captive there we were in that godforsaken pool shed- only allowed out for playtime. There was one of those orange five gallon buckets from Home Depot for us to use as a toilet in the corner of the shed. When we were old enough for lady flow to start visiting every month, we were given the luxury of a diaper. Richard was kind enough to let us shower before and after he had his fun, of course he stood in the bathroom and watched as we cleaned ourselves- but it was the best we could get.

He would bring us food on paper plates or paper bowls with plastic utensils only. Again he was smart. He knew not to give us anything that could be used to harm him or ourselves.

We lived like caged animals. But at least we had one another.

I learned that Alex was twelve, two years older than I was, when he got abducted. He'd been living with Richard for a few months already when he decided that he needed another, more obedient, "daughter."

Before he was sold into Richard's possession, Alex had escaped a conversion therapy camp his parents had sent him to when he came out to them as trans-masculine. After he escaped, he was homeless for a time before he was snatched up in the streets late one night by Fuego's men.

It's ironic really. Alex would say this to me all the time, "I escaped one prison, only to get sent right back to another."

He wasn't wrong. I felt horrible that Richard treated him the way he did. I know that the beatings got a lot worse when Alex told Richard who he truly was in a fit of anger. Richard, like Alex's parents, refused to accept who Alex was. Richard made sure to dress Alex up in very girly and frilly outfits and ensured that his hair stayed long and flowy.

And so that's how we lived for four years. That is until the day Alex cut his hair.

It was the summer months, so the shed was unbearable most of the time. The humidity made the bathroom bucket smell even worse than it already did, so it got even harder to breathe. There was no air conditioning in the shed and Alex was suffocating under his long hair.

Since I was his "Princess Daisy" as Richard had begun to call me, he would trim my hair whenever I complained of it getting too long or making me too hot.

Alex hadn't had his hair cut the entire time we were in that shed. It was down to his crack and he was miserable.

On that fateful day Alex managed to "accidentally" trip and fall after returning from playtime. After getting told off by Richard, Alex returned into the shed, victorious. When he fell he managed to grab a decently sized rock.

I was too busy sweating what little liquids I had in my body out at the time and didn't end up noticing the rock until I heard it scraping against the concrete floor.

"What are you doing?" I asked as I sat up on my cot.

"Cutting my hair," Alex replied as he continued to sharpen the rock's edge into a point. After each stroke a little white line was left behind on the concrete. "I can't live like this anymore, D."

A devilish smirk filled his face once the rock was sharpened to his liking.

I laughed out sarcastically, "Richard is going to kill you."

Alex laughed with me as he gathered his thick mane of hair. He started sawing away and I could see the relief on his face as he was cutting.

It made me happy seeing him happy.

"It's just hair, D. It'll grow back," he'd said nonchalantly.

It took a little bit, but eventually Alex had done it. His hair went a little bit above his ears and it was a very uneven cut looking back on it, but he was happy that he looked more like a boy and wasn't suffocating with all that hair on his head.

Alex didn't get to enjoy his new haircut for long as Richard had come back with dinner. The food fell from his hands as he stared at Alex's fluff of hair on the floor, then back up at Alex.

Richard was furious and grabbed Alex by the arm. Alex had tried to stab Richard with the rock, but after cutting all his hair the edge was dull and the rock was too small to do anything.

I started to sob when Alex started pleading with Richard as he was dragged away into the house.

Alex was gone for hours. Longer than he had ever been before. I paced back and fourth in that fucking shed until my feet were rubbed raw on the concrete.

I almost burst out into tears when I heard Richard come back. He tossed a mangled Alex onto the floor and left.

Alex was barely conscious when I got to him. He was beat up really badly. An eye and his cheek were swollen to high Hell. I think one of his arms was broken and he was covered in black and blue bruises. A bunch of his teeth were missing, and he barely looked recognizable. I knew Alex wasn't going to make it at that moment.

I laid his head on my lap as I tried to soothe him as best as possible. I cried into his hair as his wheezes worsened and his cries slowed.

I remember when he grabbed my hand for the last time. He squeezed it and managed to look up at me with his good eye. We both knew he was going to meet his maker soon.

He struggled to speak. I tried to tell him that it was okay and to save his breath, but he refused to listen to me. He was like that, as stubborn as a mule. Once he had his mind set on something he'd always achieve it.

"G-get out. You have to get out. Promise me you will. You have to..." Were his dying last words to me.

"I promise," I whispered as I closed his one good eye. The dazzling blue that was once there was replaced by a lifeless gray.

Alex was twelve when he got here. He was sixteen when he was brutally beaten to death, just for cutting his hair so he could feel comfortable in the Hell that Richard put us in.

I was ten when they abducted me. I was fourteen when my best friend died in my arms.

I sobbed all night long as his body laid there. His last words echoed through my mind. I knew what I had to do. I had a promise to fulfill.

Richard left Alex's corpse in there with me for a few days. It was pure psychological torture just sitting in that confined space with a decomposing person right next to me. My eyes were glued on the white scratches on the floor as the memory of that night played on repeat in my mind.

Richard came in and removed him one night when I was sleeping.

It was about a week after Alex's death when Richard brought me inside for one of his fancy daddy daughter dinner dates. He'd been more rough with me during "playtime" since he couldn't use Alex as his personal punching bag anymore.

I had numbed myself years ago so it didn't really matter. Of course I still felt emotions, I just got good at pushing them down and ignoring them.

Richard never brought up Alex during the dinner, acted like he never existed. Instead he talked about his job and his schedule for the next few days as I sat and nodded my head like the perfect little puppet I was.

On the menu was Rib-eye, mashed potatoes, and grilled asparagus.

When Richard wasn't paying a lot of attention towards me, I snuck the unused steak knife into my bra. He didn't notice.

I think Richard was trying to make it up to me with dinner since we didn't have playtime that night like we'd usually do. He knew how close I was to Alex and passing had affected my mood/attitude. I was acting brattier than usual, if not a little more distant too.

"I'm too tired," he'd said after dinner. It didn't matter though.

It was fine. Everything would be just fine.

I waited a bit after Richard left the shed to pull out the steak knife. I remember the immense sadness that I felt in that moment, that feeling of helplessness consuming my soul. The loss of my best friend. I couldn't do this alone. I couldn't live like this without Alex.

I couldn't live without Alex.

Get out, he told me. So that's what I'd do. I was getting out of there. This Hell on earth. I was doing it. I promised him.

I remember the pain in my wrists as I slit them open. First the left then the right since I'm right handed. I remember thinking about the zip ties from when I was first abducted and how that was nothing compared to slicing my skin and nerve endings open. I remember feeling relief as the warm blood gushed out of my veins. I remember feeling tired, so cold and tired and exhausted, when my vision began to blur and I slipped out of consciousness...

I remember there was this dark abyss that surrounded me. It was freezing. I remember not being able to move my body at all.

I remember seeing... me. Younger me. I was in that white laced dress from oh so many years ago. A little yellow daisy behind my ear.

"Am I dead?" I asked myself.

"Not entirely," I replied.

"Why am I here?"

"You have an opportunity. The gods have taken pity upon your situation."

"An opportunity?"

"You have the opportunity to take revenge on those who have wronged you in your life. To avenge your fallen friend. To be *extraordinary*," I said, taking a step closer to myself.

I remember feeling dread. "What will it cost?"

"Just your soul," I said with a simple shrug.

"So, are you ready to live again?" I asked myself, a wicked smirk spread on my lips.

I didn't even have to think.

"Yes."

I walked towards myself. The smile turned into an evil, vile, laugh as I reached for the daisy behind my ear- gently placing it in my hands.

I remember feeling even colder than before, and then there was this pulling sensation. It hurt and burned brighter than the sun itself, but then it didn't hurt anymore. It felt like... nothing.

I woke up on my cot. It was dark and suffocatingly hot inside the pool shed. Something was different though, I was different.

They called out to me.

And I called back out to them.

Early morning light suddenly filled the shed as the lock was destroyed and the doors opened. I looked down to see my wrists were fine, there were no scars or anything on them. No sign of my attempt at all.

I got up, brushed myself off, and left the shed. Walking towards the mansion's back doors, I breathed in the fresh morning air before bursting in. I marched my way into Richard's house, past his kitchen and his living room, up his grand staircase, and right into his bedroom where he slept like a baby.

I called out to them once more and they answered. Richard woke up confused as my vines contorted around his limbs, pinning them to his bed.

"What the Hell?" He asked as fresh terror swirled in his eyes, confusion filled his face.

The thoughts of all the ways I could kill him swarmed in my brain. I knew I wanted to make him suffer a long, excruciating, death.

Then it hit me. I grew a hemlock seed in the palm of my hand, watching as the seed blossomed into a sprout and then into a small plant in mere seconds. I plucked a little white flower as I walked to Richard's bedside.

"No, no please. I'm sorry!" He begged, eyes wide and watery as my vines gripped him tighter as he tried to struggle free from my grasp.

He thought he could keep his mouth closed and stop me.

I climbed on top of him, watched him squirm for a bit, and then slapped him hard. I shoved the flower in his mouth when his lips reflexively pursed open. I made sure that the flower's roots wiggled slowly down his windpipe.

From the corner of the room I stood, watching as Richard slowly choked on my flower. The roots grew slow and I made sure he felt the effects of the hemlock poisoning tenfold.

Though, I found that I couldn't enjoy myself watching as Richard perished slowly and agonizingly. I wanted to relish in his pain so bad, but I just couldn't.

Richard was dead within a few hours. A forced smile formed on my lips when the hemlock plant finished growing out of his mouth.

I had the vines move him in front of the shed while I found a phone and dialed for help.

"Nine-one-one what is your emergency?"

"H-hello?" I said, making my voice sound like I was little and scared.

"Hi, sweetie," the operator said softly, "where's your mom and dad?"

"I don't have a mom or a dad."

"Oh. Uh, then what's your name, sweetheart?"

"They called me Daisy, but that's not my name."

"Well, then what is your name?"

"A-Alex."

"Alright Alex," The operator said, I heard some keys clicking before she continued, "do you know your address, Alex?"

"No. But I've been kidnapped by a bad, bad, man. It's okay though, I think he's dead," I said bluntly.

The operator sounded shocked. "Dear god, uh ok. I've traced your call and help is on the way. Don't you worry, sweetie, you're safe now. Everything will be alright. Just stay on the line..."

I was rescued three years ago, after enduring four years of sexual abuse and psychological torture from the hands of Richard Ubanks, who, ironically, turned out to be a psychologist.

The doctors concluded that he died from a heart attack and he just so happened to conveniently drop dead right after unlocking the lock to his pool shed, setting me free.

Three years ago, the real Alex died, and Daisy died with him.

I told Alex's story to the world after my case went viral. I've avenged him and fulfilled his dying wish.

I got out. I'm free. But I'm different now.

I can create and control plants and they do my bidding if I want them to. The cost was my soul. My emotions and moral compass.

I've only used this power in avenging Alex.

First, I killed Richard. Then a year later, I tracked down Fuego. It had been years since I'd last seen him, so he didn't know who I was. His heart got turned into a daisy to remember me by.

It's taken me the last two years to track down Alex's parents. It was hard to find them considering I never knew Alex's last name and they never managed to find his body.

His parents should've loved and raised him for who he was. His parents should've accepted him, but instead they abandoned and banished him to a trans conversion therapy camp.

I guess you could say I found them through the grapevine. With the help of my plants, I found them and made damn sure they felt all the pain that they had put Alex through. They got everything they deserved and then some.

They're all suffering in Hell now, each and every one of those bastards who hurt, tortured, and kidnapped us. And I'll soon join them.

I'm not an idiot, I know what the kind of thing I sold my soul to was.

I haven't been able to *feel* since I woke up that morning. Sure I can feel physical sensation like the temperature outside and the texture of the things I touch, but I can't feel emotions.

I remember what emotions are supposed to look and sound like in a person, I did have them for fourteen years of my life after all. It's been easy to mimic and act out how I'm supposed to when I'm supposed to, but a person can only last so long feeling nothing.

Even when I numbed myself after being abused by Richard, I still felt feelings deep down. Denial is a pretty powerful thing, but I can't even feel that anymore.

I got out and avenged Alex, so there's no purpose for my life now anyway.

I have wonderful actual adoptive parents that love and provide for me, but I can't even love them back. I have friends who I should all care for and treasure dearly, but I don't. *I can't*. And they don't deserve that.

I've been empty inside for so long. And as Sleeping at Last sings in Touch, "Oh god I wanna feel again."

I don't even care about all the pain I'll suffer down in Hell. At least I'll feel something then.

What is life if you can't feel it?

All the happy and tender moments, or the sad devastating and angry situations a person goes through. All the things that make you feel alive, and I can't feel them.

So this is my end, my true end. This is my goodbye to you all.

The best part is that I know how I'm going to end it. It's symbolic really.

I'm going to find myself a nice, spacious field, and spread myself out as far as I can reach into a bunch of white lilies and yellow daisies.

The Midnight Man

A tingle crept down my spine after hearing the doorbell go off while I finished getting ready in my cute cat girl Halloween costume. I straightened the cat ear headband that rested on top of my straight brown hair and touched up the whisker makeup that covered some of the freckles on my face.

Weird... I hadn't been expecting any trick-or-treaters to come by yet. It was only four o'clock and the porch light hadn't been turned on. The doorbell rang again after a minute.

Leaving the bathroom, I made my way to the front door. No one else was home at the moment and a third ring of the doorbell told me that whoever was out there wasn't leaving. Grabbing a festive candy filled bowl, I opened the door, ready to pass out candy to greedy little children.

A confusing sight met my gaze. Nobody was at the door. The porch was devoid of any life, including my failed attempts at aesthetically pleasing hanging house plants.

A floorboard creaked somewhere in the house. Feeling a little freaked, I turned to look behind me. Nobody was there. A sigh of relief left my mouth as I turned back to face the porch.

"Trick or Treat!" A man in a Jason Vorhees costume yelled at me, seeming to have materialized out of nowhere. I screamed and punched the masked man square in the jaw, dropping the bowl of candy in the process.

The mask fell off, revealing a familiar face. "OW! Jesus Christ, Claire, it's me, Noah!"

"Noah?!" I questioned one of my closest friends, bringing my palm to my chest. I could literally feel my heart thumping against my ribcage. "What the *Hell* are you doing here? I thought Kristy and I were meeting you at the movie theater?"

Finally able to breathe properly after the sudden fright, I was able to fully appreciate his Halloween costume. Noah wore dark blue jeans, a black t-shirt, and a dark green coat. Fake blood was splattered all over his clothes. His curly, sandy brown hair was teased to look unruly and he wielded a fake bloodied machete. As I looked into Noah's crystal blue eyes, I noticed a slight bruise forming where I struck him.

"Well, I thought I'd surprise you, and pick you up," Noah said as he picked his Jason mask off the floor, dusting it off on his jeans, "but obviously I'm the one that got surprised. Claire, you have one hell of a right hook, you know that?"

He placed the mask back on his head, but kept it off his tender face.

"Serves you right for sneaking up on me like that!" I started picking up the stray pieces of candy and placed them back in the bowl. Noah joined me on the floor and started helping. Once all the candy was picked up, I grabbed my coat and met him out on the porch.

"Whose car are we taking?" I asked, looking between both of our cars. I drove a silver sedan and Noah drove a beat up red F-150.

"Yours is nicer," was all Noah said as he made his way to my front passenger side door. The car purred to life as I turned my key in the ignition. I backed out of my family's driveway and headed in the direction of my best friend Kristy's house.

Noah, Kristy, and I have been friends since childhood. Kristy and I became friends after she threw a dodge ball at my bully's face in the fourth grade. Noah... well, he was my bully. When Kristy was finished with him, Noah was crying and begging for my forgiveness. I thought Kristy constantly following him around after and terribly singing "Baby" by Justin Bieber was hilarious, but punishment enough. Eventually though, I forgave him. But Noah still shudders every time he hears that song come on the radio.

We eventually got to talking and started hanging out. Kristy reluctantly let Noah join our friend group, but kept a watchful eye on him until he gained her trust. As for why Noah bullied me, he was having some trouble at home and decided to take it out on me. Deep down he was a good kid, he just needed to vent his frustrations and I was the closest thing to him.

To be fair, I was an easy target as a kid. Reserved, wore glasses frames that were too big for my face, preferred to read at recess instead of play- usual nerdy loner kid things. I'm just glad things turned out the way they did. I couldn't ask for any better friends than them.

Kristy was outside waiting in her driveway when I pulled up. She was wearing a sexy she-devil costume with red leather pants and a tight red crop top that looked more like a bra. There was a matching tail clipped to the back of her pants and a headband with devil horns nestled on top of her long, silky blonde hair. On top of all that she wore bright red three inch stiletto heels. Her hands were folded into her chest, a plastic pitchfork was tucked under her armpit. She looked cold.

"Finally!" She shouted as I put the car in park. She got in the back seat and leaned over to the dashboard where she cranked the heat. "I'm freezing!"

"Do you want my jacket?" Noah offered, starting to pull the article of clothing off.

Kristy stopped him. "No offense, Noah, but that jacket totally clashes with my costume. Thanks, but no thanks."

He shrugged and put his coat back on. "Suit yourself then."

Kristy looked at my cat makeup through the rearview mirror. "What the hell, Claire? I thought you were going as a sexy angel to match my sexy devil?!"

"Sorry Kristy, but you know my parents. They never would've let me leave the house. 'What kind of example would you be setting for poor, little and impressionable, Annie?'" I said, doing a stellar impression of my mother.

Annoyed, Kristy blew a tuft of hair out of her face and slumped in the back seat as I pulled out of her driveway, "Excuses, excuses."

Noah and I shot each other a look then started giggling to ourselves, knowing how extra Kristy was. She was the firecracker of the group. She was much bolder and braver than Noah and I'd ever be. There was no way I'd ever be able to pull off a sexy costume of any kind, that's why I went as a cute, but basic, kitty cat instead.

"God, I still can't believe how lucky we are!" Noah geeked next to me as we neared our town's local movie theater. "A Halloween screening of *The Midnight Man*, back in select theaters one night only!"

Kristy groaned as Noah started talking about his all time favorite obscure horror movie, *The Midnight Man*. It's some old 2000s-2010s teen slasher horror movie about these kids that supposedly summon some supernatural entity at a halloween party that goes around killing people. At least that's what Noah says, I've never seen it before.

"Why do we even need to go see this movie when Noah has explained the whole plot like a bajillion times already? You've basically seen it, Claire. Besides, Noah made me watch it with him once. The movie was crap!"

An offended expression made itself known on Noah's face. "It was not!"

"Because he's our friend, Kristy," I intervened, "that's why!" What I didn't say is, anything is better than being stuck at home and having to deal with my little sister and her post trick-or-treating sugar rush. "Besides, I'm kind of excited to see it. I wanna see if the movie lives up to the hype Noah gives it."

"The plot twist isn't even that good," Kristy mumbled.

"Oh yeah, what was the plot twist again? I forgot what Noah said it was," I asked her, entering the parking lot.

Kristy opened her mouth to say something, but was interrupted by Noah, "Shh! We're about to go see the movie, there's no point in telling Claire now! The whole movie would be ruined! Let's just let her experience it for herself."

Kristy and I rolled our eyes as we all got out of my car. If there was one thing Noah took seriously in life, it was his movies.

A late October breeze blew through the parking lot, causing Kristy to book it to the building's entrance. I zipped up my jacket as a chill crawled up my spine. Noah wrapped his arms around himself for extra warmth. As we caught up to Kristy, I realized that the parking lot was pretty empty. Unusual for Halloween in our town, which was usually filled with horror movie fanatics crawling out of their dank dwellings to watch the latest releases as soon as the theater's doors opened. Despite the bad feeling swelling in my gut, I brushed it off. I didn't want to say something and ruin the good mood.

Just like the parking lot outside, inside the place was seemingly deserted, but way colder.

"Hellooooooo? Anybody home?" Kristy asked as she tapped her fingers on the empty concessions stand counter.

"Are they closed for the night or something?" I asked.

"They better not be!" Noah exclaimed, taking out his phone. "It said on the website they were showing a screening of *The Midnight Man* here tonight, in like twenty minutes."

I looked around, not another person or employee in sight. Noah's phone was suddenly shoved in my face. Displayed on the screen was the movie theater's website, and just like he had said, a notice for the special screening of the movie was being advertised on there.

"Isn't there like a bell or something we can ring for service?" Kristy asked, leaning against the concessions counter.

I scoffed. "This isn't a hotel, Kristy."

She shrugged and started snooping around, trying to find signs of life with the rest of us.

The bad feeling in my gut grew and I finally spoke up. "I dunno guys, maybe we should leave? Maybe we can go back to my place and just stream it instead, Noah?"

He shook his head disappointedly. I knew how much he cared about this. It was almost unhealthy the way he constantly talked about going to see this movie since he found out it was coming back to theaters for a night.

Suddenly, as if sensing we were about to go, a woman wearing the theater's uniform (black slacks and a white polo with a matching hat) emerged from the employee's only door. "Sorry about the wait," she chuckled as she went behind the concessions counter, "all the theaters are absolutely packed right now!"

She had ultra pale skin and her obsidian-colored hair was cut into an awful bob that ended just past her chin. Her eyes were a glassy shade of gray and her lipstick shade was blood red. She gave off weird and creepy vibes. Perfect for the holiday. I just hoped it was only a costume.

I snuck a glance back out to the still empty parking lot. Besides my car, there were only two other vehicles parked out there. "Yeah, sure..."

"I love your Halloween costumes!" She complimented us enthusiastically. All three of us thanked her politely.

"Three tickets for *The Midnight Man*, please!" Noah asked the employee, his mood severely improved from barely a second ago. He was practically vibrating from his excitement.

"Any refreshments?" She asked as she started punching stuff into her POS.

"Three medium sodas and an extra large bucket of popcorn, extra *extra* butter," he answered, thrilled that he'd be able to see the movie in the theater after all.

The employee nodded her head curtly and finished typing in our order. She handed Kristy three cups and told us our total. "That'll be thirty-five dollars, sir."

Noah took out his wallet and paid the woman, who had her hand held out expectantly. She then started preparing our popcorn after putting the cash in her till. Us three fucked off to the soda machine where we each filled our cups with our favorite beverage. When we were done, we returned to the concessions counter and waited for our popcorn. She gave Noah the bucket with a bright smile on her face. "You'll be going to theater thirteen. It's to your left just down the hall and it's the last door on the right," she instructed.

Taking our food and drinks, Noah eagerly led us to our destination. "Thank you miss! You have a nice night," he said as we departed.

"Enjoy the show!" She suddenly yelled creepily, for some reason maintaining direct eye contact with only me the whole time we were still in view.

"We will!" Noah shouted back as we rounded a corner and made the trek to theater thirteen. Something about the way she looked at me gave me the willies. I tried to shake the uneasy feeling as we walked down the hall.

Kristy suddenly elbowed me. She leaned down and whispered into my ear, "What a creep that lady was, right?"

A warmth filled my stomach as I let out a voracious laugh in agreement. I was glad I wasn't the only one who got bad vibes from her. I was relieved Kristy felt the same and told me about it. She joined in, chuckling with me as we kept walking. Noah would periodically look behind him to see if we were okay with how hard we started laughing. Eventually, we made it to theater thirteen, a digital display above the door confirming the movie and showtime.

To nobody's surprise, theater thirteen was completely empty when we entered it. The seats were barren, The screen was blank, and no previews or anything were playing. But hey, at least the lights were on.

"They must not have turned the projector on yet," Noah said, running to snag the best seats in the theater, "and we're the first ones here!" He chose the seats right in the middle of the room where the seats weren't too close to the screen or too far. We'd have the perfect view of the movie here. Kristy and I took a seat on opposite sides besides him.

"Maybe they won't play any previews!" Kristy said, hopefully. She never did like staying still for too long.

We took a few minutes to settle in and get comfortable, despite the uncomfortable silence within the theater. Armed with a fistful of popcorn and ready to watch the movie, Noah said impatiently, "They should've started the movie by now."

He checked his watch. It was almost six.

Then, as if on cue, the lights dimmed and the blank screen roared to life, the beginning movie credits began flashing on and off screen as ominous music started playing through the surround sound speakers. I looked behind us as the sound of the door closing and locking rang out. It seemed like it would just be the three of us watching this showing of *The Midnight Man*.

Noah shushed us and our imaginary audience as we all nestled comfortably into our seats as the hour and a half long film started. I had to say, despite how odd stuff was leading up to us being in that moment, I was still pretty pumped to watch the movie.

My slight moment of peace was interrupted as something strange happened after the beginning credits finished. The screen seemed to glitch and the screen went blank again.

"Huh?" Kristy said, squinting her eyes at the screen.

"What now?!" Noah grunted out in frustration, almost chucking the popcorn bucket to the ground. Remembering the price he paid for it, he refrained from throwing it.

I felt weird. "Guys, I don't like this..."

Suddenly, the movie screen flashed again and everything was enveloped in a white hot blinding blast.

When my vision returned after the bright light faded back down, our surroundings had changed. Kristy, Noah and I were no longer in a movie theater, but back in my car. It was the middle of the night outside and we were parked on the side of a road that had woods on either side. There was a line of cars parked in front of us as other kids our age in Halloween costumes walked up the road.

The air felt electric as we got out of the car. It felt like we were out of place. Outsiders.

"What the hell happened?" I asked, as if Kristy or Noah would know anything. "Where are we and what time is it!? My parents are going to kill me for being out this late!"

Kristy gulped, "Um, I hate to break it to you Claire, but I don't think we're in Kansas anymore."

"The fuck?" Noah said as he took in our surroundings. I knew that look on his face. He knew where we were.

"Noah," I called his name testingly. I couldn't fathom what his answer was going to be, but somehow, deep down, I already knew.

"This is the outside of the Kessler Estate," Noah answered with a tremble in his voice.

A disbelieving chuckle left Kristy's mouth as she ran a hand through her hair, a nervous tick of hers. "No. Fucking. Way."

The name disturbingly rang a bell. I remembered it from one of Noah's many rants. "Kessler, as in the same last name of two of the main characters in *The Midnight Man*? Vannesa and Bryan *Kessler*?!"

Noah cleared his throat, "Veronica and Ryan, not Vannesa and Bryan," he corrected.

"Whatever!" I yelled, freaking out. "The point is, we somehow got sucked into a fucking movie, and not just any movie, a goddamn slasher film!"

"Oh god," Kristy cried, "I'm going to die from cringe!"

I elbowed her in the ribs, "Now's not the time for that! We need to figure out how to get out of here."

"Let's just get back in the car and try driving away? If we never go to the party then we can't die, right?" Noah reasoned.

Kristy and I looked at each other before looking back to him in agreement. We got back in the car. I took a deep breath before turning my key in the ignition. My heart sank when the engine stalled. I turned it again, no luck.

Noah's face went pale. "Try it again."

"I am fucking trying!" I yelled back at him, turning the key one final time. I almost cried when the engine turned over. We all let out a collective sigh of relief as I put the car in drive and turned around.

Trees whizzed past the windows as we drove down the long, winding, dirt road. It was only when I let out a breath did I realize I'd been holding it in since I started driving, anticipating something to happen. However, it seemed we were out of the woods, figuratively, that is. The Kessler Estate was in the middle of nowhere.

"Thank god!" Kristy sighed from the back seat. Noah rested his head back as if he was going to fall asleep.

My heart practically jumped out of my chest when a drunk teenager stumbled into the middle of the road. I slammed on the brakes, causing everyone to lurch forward violently. The guy was wearing a Where's Waldo costume, holding an entire bottle of Jack Daniels in one of his hands. I honked my horn and yelled at him to get off the road. He kindly flipped me the bird before stumbling off somewhere else.

"Jesus Christ!" I mumbled under my breath, frustratedly. I lifted my foot off the brake and put it on the gas. I just wanted to get the hell out of there.

A minute later, we passed by more drunk pedestrians. It was a trio of girls dressed as The Powerpuff Girls.

"No. no, no, no, no, no!" Kristy cried as she crawled over to the right window and pressed her face against it. We passed by the front gate that led into the estate. As I kept driving, more and more party goers were in sight. They were all drunk and laughing, either heading into the party or leaving.

I pressed my foot harder on the gas, zooming past the gates. "You've gotta be kidding me!"

"Claire," Noah said, seeing what I was doing, "I don't think it'll be any different this time."

"Fuck off Noah, there has to be a way out of here!"

A minute later we passed by the gated entrance again. I stopped the car in the middle of the road, "SHIT!" I slammed my fist on the wheel, accidentally pressing the horn. I scared the people outside and they gave me a dirty look.

Noah started rubbing my shoulder, trying to comfort me.

"What the Hell are we supposed to do now?" I asked, looking at him. If anybody would have an answer, it would be him. He furrowed his brows as his mind went to work thinking of a possible solution.

Surprisingly, Kristy added her input first. "I think- I think we should just play along? Maybe that's how we get out of this. If we comply and deal with whatever the being that put us here throws at us, they'll let us go."

"No," Noah countered, thinking of something else. "I think we should go in there and tell the main characters the truth. Tell them they're in danger, who the killer is, and call the cops. Then they can handle it and we get everyone out of there and to safety. This way nobody has to die, even them."

"Oh that's a brilliant plan, Noah!" Kristy chided. "You're just going to walk in there and tell them they're all going to get murdered? Because they totally won't think you're some psycho freak and kick you out! Then we'll all die!"

Noah turned and leaned closer to Kristy in the back, "Oh and your plan is so much better? My way there's a chance to save everyone. If we do it your way then someone is bound to die. Do you really want that hanging over your conscience?"

"It's better than being dead!" She quipped.

If there hadn't been a seat in between them, I'm sure they would've been butting heads. Then, Noah and Kristy both turned to me and asked in unison, "Claire, what do you think we should do?"

"You want to pin this on me?!" I could barely be trusted to look after myself, much less make a life or death decision! Despite the obvious panic in my face, my friends looked at me expectantly.

"Kristy," I blurt out, "I think we should follow Kristy. There's no need to make a scene. Let's just try to have as quiet a night as possible." I wanted to go with the safest option, and to me this was it.

Kristy high fived me for siding with her, Noah left the car in anger. We got out of the car and chased after him. He was heading to the party.

"You guys don't know what you're doing!" He said, kicking dirt. "I've seen this movie a thousand times. Kristy's seen it once and you haven't seen it at all, Claire. I practically know all of them on a personal level, I know how they'd react!"

"You can't really believe that, Noah," Kristy said, "You're right, you do know better, so tell me, do you think if you stormed in there right now, before their character development, they would believe everything you'd tell them?"

Noah took a second to respond. His shoulders sank and he let out a sigh, "No... I just-don't want to die!"

"Neither do we," I chimed in. "We're all stressed. Tensions are high. Let's just go in there and party a bit before we have to deal with an ax wielding murderer."

"Knife wielding maniac," Kristy and Noah both corrected. I rolled my eyes. Kristy and Noah laughed at my cluelessness.

I got a good view of the place as we approached the estate. The Kessler's lived in a three story antebellum style mansion. The building was white with a flat roof and dark blue accents. The front doors were propped wide open for guests to come and go as they pleased. Spooky Halloween music blasted inside, loud enough to hear it from the driveway.

"If you run into one of the main characters, just be yourself," Kristy said, taking the lead. She looked to Noah. "*Don't* say anything about what we know, under any circumstances, got it?"

"Got it," he replied, stuffing his hands into his coat. He went back to his kicked puppy demeanor.

"Can somebody remind me who the main characters are please? I don't know who I'm looking out for," I said, feeling out of the loop.

Noah perked up and Kristy rolled her eyes. "Okay, so there's five people to look out for. Claire, you already know about the Kessler's. Veronica and Ryan are brother and sister, Ryan being the youngest, and only sensible person within the group. He acts as the voice of reason. Then there's Beck Hunter, Veronica's boyfriend. She's the bitchy head cheerleader and he's the star quarterback."

"Obviously," I sighed.

"Cringe!" Kristy said, trying to hide it in a cough. "So cringe."

"It's not my fault the movie is full of stereotypes," Noah said, defending himself. "Anyway," he continued explaining, "then there's Selina Cortez. She's a total airhead, and also happens to be Veronica's best friend. She's also the first one to die, that's important."

"Typical," Kristy scoffed, "of course the only person of color is killed first."

Noah shrugged at the mention of the classic horror movie cliché. "Last, but not least, we have Brynn Fields. She's a goth, so the group kinda looks to her for guidance once the killings start happening. Her and Ryan get close during the movie and they trauma bond and get together in the end. They're the only ones that survive."

"We should totally stick close to them," Kristy suggested in a whisper. Noah nodded his head, agreeing with her.

"Okay," I continuously repeated their names over and over again in my head, trying to remember everyone and their importance to the plot. A feeling of anxiety washed over me as we reached the front porch. A wild party full of kids about to die raged inside.

Kristy was the first one to go in, then Noah. He waited for me to gather enough courage to step into the house. I hesitated, but eventually crossed the threshold. The three of us entered the teen filled foyer and pushed our way deeper inside.

"Yes, please! Come to mama," Kristy said as she picked up a random red solo cup near the front door and started sipping at its contents.

Noah and I both looked at her flabbergasted. That drink could've been spiked for all we know.

She noticed our judgemental glares. "What? You said to party, and I'm partying! Let's split up for now," and just like that, Kristy disappeared into the crowd.

"She's spiraling," I said, knowing my best friend very well.

"Yup. C'mon let's go find something to drink," Noah said, grabbing my hand, leading me away.

I suddenly bumped into someone's back, causing them to spill their drink.

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry!" I apologized, grabbing some nearby napkins and handing them to the guy I bumped into. Noah let go of my hand amongst the commotion. His eyes went wide when he saw who I was talking to. It was a normal looking teenage boy. He was tall, had short brown hair and eyes, and the deepest dimples when he smiled. He was wearing some loafers, tan pants, and a black turtleneck.

"It's okay, accidents happen, right?" He said, grabbing the napkins and dabbing them on his wet clothes.

"Nice Steve Jobs costume, by the way!" I complimented him.

"Oh, actually-"

Noah suddenly pushed me out of the way. "I apologize for my friend, she can be quite clumsy sometimes. Norman Bates, right? Killer costume!"

I shot Noah a look since he practically dragged me into the guy.

The guy smiled. "Ah, I see what you did there! Thanks for recognizing the costume, it's quite refreshing. People have been mistaking me for Steve Jobs all night. Maybe I should've worn a plastic apron or something on top of this."

"Nah, the costume is great by itself. The other people suck for not recognizing your genius," Noah said, nudging me in the shoulder. I stuck my tongue out at him.

"Hey, thanks man, Love the Jason costume by the way. You guys enjoy the rest of the party," he said before walking off and mingling with other guests.

I gave Noah a 'what the fuck was that?' look.

"Claire, that was Ryan Kessler! A running gag throughout the movie was that people kept mistaking him for Steve Jobs instead of Norman Bates."

"Ohhhh," I said realizing, "that's how-"

"Yes! And hopefully we didn't just fuck everything up."

"Why?" I asked, my heart started racing at his reaction.

"Because," Noah answered, "Ryan and Brynn first meet after he spills his drink all over himself. Brynn helps him clean up and knows who he's dressed as. We practically just stole their first interaction!"

A pit formed in my stomach. Kristy made her way back over to us, already buzzed. She didn't seem to feel the same existential dread Noah and I were sharing in the moment.

"Hear ye, hear ye, our queen vampiress has something she'd like to say!" A guy in a dracula costume suddenly announced from the top of the grand staircase that sat in the middle of the house, banging a spoon on a glass to get everyone's attention.

A girl wearing a stunning, and very fluffy, dark red ball gown and black matching cape appeared next to the other vampire guy. Her hair was pinned up in a very elegant bun and most of her face was hidden behind a Victorian masquerade mask. She looked like she was getting ready to say something important.

"That's Veronica Kessler," Noah whispered in my ear. "That's Beck standing next to her. They're dressed in matching vampire couple's costumes."

I nodded my head, thankful for the heads up. "Is that Selena?" I asked, pointing to the girl in a zombie cheerleader costume next to Veronica. She had sunkissed skin, green eyes, a distinctive mole resting on her right cheek. Her dirty blonde hair was pulled into two curly pigtails.

Noah smiled brightly and patted me on the shoulder, "Look at you catching on."

"Happy Halloween Belmont High! Are you having a good time or what?" Veronica cheered loudly.

Whoops, whistles, and cheers came from the crowd. "It wouldn't be a Halloween party without a spooky story, would it?"

Riled up, the crowd collectively yelled, "No!" I had to admit, this girl knew how to command a room.

Kristy suddenly poked me in the side then whispered, "I've got to use the ladies room, come with?"

I nodded my head and went to tell Noah where we were going, but he was too engrossed in Veronica's speech. I shrugged and followed Kristy to the nearest bathroom. It was to the left and a little bit down the hall. "God, I gotta shit so bad!" Kristy said, slamming the door closed and locking it.

I could still hear Veronica's muffled speech while I waited outside the bathroom door.

"Thirty years ago," Veronica began in a creepy tone, "in this very house, waaaaay before the Kessler's owned the property, a woman was brutally murdered! Bludgeoned to death during a home invasion gone wrong!"

Slowly, I found myself inching back towards the living room, interested in the story. I lingered at the entrance of the hallway, getting a good side view of the party.

"That's nothing!" Someone shouted from the crowd. Then a short, but spunky, woman made her way up the grand staircase. "That's just history. You want to know what's *really* scary?"

I deduced this was the mythical Brynn Fields, seeing as she was dressed head-to-toe in black. She wore a black t-shirt that read *This is my Halloween costume* on it, black acid wash jeans, black and white converse high tops, and black fingerless gloves. She had long onyx colored hair that was styled in a wolf cut. She was a pretty hot goth, not going to lie.

She nudged Veronica out of the way, taking the spotlight. "The Midnight Man!"

Veronica rolled her eyes and pushed Brynn out of her spot. "Don't tell me you actually believe in that bed time story!"

This garnered a chuckle from other party goers.

Brynn's expression hardened. "It's not a bedtime story."

"I'm pretty sure an evil spirit that takes naughty children's eyeballs after midnight qualifies as a bedtime story," Beck retorted.

"I'm telling you, it's not a bedtime story!"

"Fine, if you're so sure, why don't we summon him, then?" Veronica said slyly. "It is almost midnight..."

"You should definitely not do that," Brynn warned, backing away.

Veronica grabbed Brynn, "Why not? Suddenly a skeptic, Ghost Girl?"

The crowd started going crazy, laughing and mocking Brynn. Brynn pushed Veronica off of her. "Fine, your funeral," she then ran back down the stairs and disappeared into the crowd. Selena and Beck burst out laughing, cracking jokes at Brynn's expense. Veronica pulled her blackberry phone out and searched for something on it.

"The Midnight Man, The Midnight Man, come take thy children away," she started chanting. The room went silent and a chill crept down my spine. "For they are naughty kids and bratty kids who stay up way too late. The Midnight Man, The Midnight Man, lurks in the shadows and shrieks and growls, looking for his prey. Once the clock strikes twelve on the witching hour, he takes the eyes of children with souls oh so sour. Beware, beware, The Midnight Man."

The room stayed eerily silent for a minute after Veronica's big spectacle. Then everyone started laughing and cheering as the party roared back to life. It was clear nobody believed in The Midnight Man.

I stayed by the edge of the hallway, just people watching, thinking that these people were just extras in a film in our world. In this world they were actual people with actual lives. It was weird to think about, almost scary.

Selena walked past me, making a b-line for the bathroom. She turned the doorknob but found it locked. She tried it again, but it still didn't open.

"Occupied!" Kristy yelled from inside. Selena groaned, flipped Kristy off, and stormed off in search of another bathroom.

"Ugh, I've gotta piss, fucking bathroom hog!"

I shrugged and returned my gaze back to the party. Then a scream came from the bathroom. I whipped my head around and ran to check on my friend. Kristy came out of the bathroom, eyes wide and terrified. She was breathing hard. "RUN!!!"

A shadow emerged from within the bathroom, something glinted from its hand, a knife. The source of her sudden scream. Kristy started running and so did I. A loud thud sounded from behind me. I turned around and saw Kristy had tripped. "OW, my ankle!" Kristy cried, grasping at her high heels. "Stupid fucking horror movie cliches!"

Kristy started fumbling with her shoes, trying to take them off. I ran back towards her, wanting to help. Kristy looked back and came face to face with the shadow. She yelped and the shadow lunged for her! It raised the knife and stabbed it through Kristy's left eye. My stomach sank and she bellowed out a blood curdling scream of pain.

The last thing she ever said to me was, "Claire, run!" The other knife then plunged into her remaining eye.

Doing as she said, I got up and ran for the nearest open door. I covered in a dark coat closet as I heard the killer stab Kristy's corpse over and over again. I had to cover my nose and mouth when he finally finished. His footsteps slowly approached the closet. I scrunched my eyes shut as hard as I could, the image of Kristy's eyes being stabbed out burned on the back of my eyelids. He stood there for what felt like forever, breathing hard and heavy. Then he just walked away.

I left the closet and dry heaved, seeing the carnage that was done to Kristy's body. I screamed and sobbed while running back into the living room. Noah quickly found me and asked what was wrong. Everyone else in the room stared at me, whispering and gossiping amongst themselves.

Between sobs I choked out, "Kristy is dead! The Midnight Man killed her!"

Once someone else stumbled upon Kristy's corpse, chaos erupted in the mansion and everyone made a run for the door, scared for their lives. In a panic, Noah and I made a dash for the door too, when suddenly the doors slammed shut, leaving only Veronica, Ryan, Selena, Beck, Brynn, Noah, and myself inside. Beck ran to the door and tried tugging it open, but it wouldn't budge.

"H-how did this happen?" Noah asked me, looking at the white sheet we'd used to cover our friends' body.

"She ran out of the bathroom and a shadow chased her down. She tripped in her heels and The Midnight Man stabbed her eyes out!" I explained, feeling tears well up in my eyes as I recalled the events.

"Thank god I didn't use that bathroom," Selena sighed in relief. I stared flaming daggers at her, but she didn't seem to notice.

Noah's face went pale. He grabbed my shoulder and we walked away from the rest of the group. "That was supposed to be Selena! The killer was hiding in the shower and chased her out of the bathroom where she tripped and he stabbed her eyes out. This is bad, Claire!"

I covered my mouth, holding back a scream. Kristy died in Selena's place?! It felt like I was about to projectile vomit.

"Who are you guys anyway?" Veronica called out to Noah and I. We disbanded our huddle and rejoined the group. "We know everybody at school and we've never seen you before."

"I'm Noah, that's Claire. Our friend over there was Kristy. We're... exchange students!" Noah said, making a lie up on the spot.

"Exchange students from where?" Ryan asked, intrigued.

Noah and I gave each other a nervous glance.

"Canada!"

"Newfoundland!"

The group looked at us confused.

"Newfoundland, Canada," Noah and I recovered.

"We're from Newfoundland, which is a province in Canada," I explained awkwardly.

The rest of the group seemed to buy it.

"What do you mean The Midnight Man killed your friend?" Ryan asked, putting a hand on my shoulder, comfortingly.

"It looked like a shadow, I guess, the Killer?"

Brynn laughed, "I told you he wasn't a bedtime story!"

"That's impossible," Noah said, playing with his hands.

"What makes you say that?" Brynn asked, "She said a shadow killed your friend."

"Call it a feeling," Noah replied ominously.

"We're trapped!" Beck said, rejoining us in the living room. "All the doors and windows won't open."

"And the phone line and internet must've been cut!" Selena cried out, typing on her phone rapidly.

"That's fan-fucking-tastic! We're stuck in the middle of nowhere with a killer on the loose!" Veronica cried.

"Let's all just try and stay calm, alright? I'm sure there's another way out of here." Ryan said, trying to calm his sister and her friends down. "I'm going to check for another way out."

"Be careful, Ryan," Veronica yelled after her brother as he ran out of the room. "Mom and dad will kill me if you die!"

"Claire, can I talk to you?" Noah asked, dragging me away again. The Midnight Man cast started talking amongst themselves, it seemed like they were talking about splitting up. Another horror movie cliché that wouldn't end well.

"What is it, Noah?" I sniffled.

"I didn't want to spoil it earlier, but the plot twist is that The Midnight Man doesn't exist. The killer is Howard Wilcox, an escaped mental hospital patient. He went crazy after his wife was killed in a home invasion. This used to be his house! He managed to escape and started killing them because in his mind he still lives here and they were the intruders that broke into his house. He killed them for revenge! The movie was supposed to symbolize how man is scarier than the paranormal."

"T-then why did he look like a goddamn shadow?" I asked, starting to hyperventilate.

"Because that's how he first appears in the movie, as a shadow," Noah explained, "It's supposed to make the audience think The Midnight Man was the killer. Wilcox looks like a shadow through most of the movie until his real identity is revealed. He looks like a shadow to the other characters too."

"H-how do we stop him? What did they do in the movie?"

"Brynn was used as bait, luring him out by throwing insults about his wife, and when he revealed himself, Ryan snuck up on him and killed him."

I let out a sigh of relief, we knew how to take him out.

"We need to tell them the truth, Claire. We know what to do to make this stop."

Ryan screamed from upstairs. We all dropped everything and ran. His screams were terribly unsettling.

Beck noticed a shadow down the hall as we reached the top of the stairs. He and Noah both chased after it.

"Kate~" It seemed to whisper before disappearing behind a corner.

Us girls found Ryan's body halfway out the door of a random bedroom. His eyes had been stabbed out, just like Kristy's. His face was frozen with an expression of terror on it. Veronica screamed and started cradling his body in her arms. "Ryan, no!"

"The Midnight Man got him," Brynn said, somberly.

The boys returned a second later, Beck just shook his head. The shadow killer seemed to have dissipated into thin air.

"That was Wilcox," Noah whispered in my ear, "Kate was his wife."

"He got Ryan," I relayed. He stared at the body behind me, slack jawed.

"No, no, no!" Noah started freaking out, pacing around and grabbing at his hair. "This isn't right, it isn't supposed to happen like this!"

"Noah, calm down!" I said, hitting him.

He hit me back. "Can't you see? We're changing everything, just by being here! We're screwing with the plot and the order people die in!"

"You don't think I don't know that, you shithead?" I whisper-yelled back at him. "My best friend is dead! Kristy was murdered *right in front of me!*"

The remaining surviving cast were staring at us. Veronica looked at him with murderous intent. "What do you mean, 'it wasn't supposed to happen like this?'"

Noah stopped pacing and stared at her. "I can't do this anymore, Claire! They need to know the truth!"

"Noah..." I said cautiously. There was no telling how they'd react and the outcome it would lead to.

"Ryan shouldn't have died! Selena was supposed to die in the bathroom, not our friend! This was supposed to be Beck," he pointed to Ryan's body. "You were the next to die, stabbed to death in the bed after having hot sex with Veronica. Veronica was next, after the killer chased her from the bedroom."

Selena, Beck, and Veronica's eyes went wide. Beck and Veronica held each other close, looking confused and offended as hell.

"I was supposed to die in that bathroom?" Selena asked nervously. "But- but your friend-" Beck cracked his knuckles and stepped up to Noah. In comparison, Noah had a few extra inches on him. He didn't look like it in his costume, but Noah was built and pretty strong. Beck took a step back and his tough guy demeanor fell away when Noah cracked his neck. "How could you even know that?"

"I know because The Midnight Man isn't-" Noah started.

"He's a psychic!" Brynn yelled excitedly, interrupting him. "That must be how! He can see the future!"

The defeated look on his face told me everything. He was going to tell them about the movie and Howard Wilcox, not that he was a psychic. Leave it to horror movie characters to make ridiculous assumptions like that.

Of course Selena, Beck, and Veronica ate that shit up. They all nodded their heads in agreement. I missed Ryan's clear headedness at that moment.

Noah groaned and I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. There was no way Noah was going to be able to convince them now. Psychics and evil spirits were *much* more believable than a couple of kids somehow getting stuck in a bad horror movie full of C-list actors.

"Still," Brynn said, "The Midnight man won't stop until he has all of our eyes. We need to figure out a way to stop him."

"How do you propose we do that?" Veronica asked.

"Yeah, Ghost Girl, tell us what we should do!" Beck followed.

"Guys!" Noah tried getting their attention, but everyone seemed to ignore him. "God, they're hopeless."

Selena brought her pointer finger to her chin and sucked her tongue against the back of her teeth. "We should do something to try and appease his spirit. If it stops being angry at us, it'll leave us alone!"

"Yes," Brynn agreed, "and it should have something to do with Noah! His psychic aura is thick and powerful, The Midnight Man must be attracted to it!"

"What are you going to do," I scoffed sarcastically, "sacrifice him?"

A sadistic smile formed on Brynn's lips as her eyes glinted with wild excitement.

"Thanks, Claire, thanks alot," Noah chided as Beck and Selena bound his hands and feet with rope to the legs of an overturned coffee table in the living room. "You and your big fat mouth!"

"Dude, I didn't think they were going to take me seriously!" I yelled back in defense. Veronica had me restrained on the couch.

"You should know better by now!" He yelled, just before Beck stuffed a sock in his mouth.

"God, Noah, I'm sorry!" I cried, struggling to escape out of my bonds.

I watched Brynn slip into the kitchen. She reemerged holding a sharp kitchen knife.

"Aren't there some more occultish things we should do, first?" Beck asked. "Draw a pentagram, light a candle, *something?*"

Brynn poked the tip of the knife on her pointer finger. "No, not really. A simple chant should do."

Everyone else shrugged. Brynn gripped the knife tighter as she stood over Noah's chest, raising the knife. I squirmed, trying to somehow free myself. I needed to stop these psychotic idiots! Noah was the only one who knew what was happening.

"In the name of The Midnight Man," Brynn yelled, bringing the knife down, she was aiming for Noah's heart, "we make this scarif-!"

"Fuck that!" Noah shouted, managing to kick one of his legs free. "Self preservation!" He kicked Brynn hard in the stomach and she dropped her weapon, which landed on his chest. She keeled over, clutching her stomach, the wind knocked out of her. Noah managed to free one of his hands and grabbed the knife, quickly sawing the rope off his other arm and leg. Brynn steadied herself and lunged for Noah. The two were quickly engaged in a struggle for the knife.

Squelch!

The sound of someone being stabbed rang through the room. Everyone went quiet, not knowing who stabbed who. A croak escaped Brynn's mouth as her skin drained of its color. Noah thrust the knife deeper into the girl's stomach and twisted it, causing her to fall on her back. She died choking on her own blood.

Seeing me stuck on the couch, he came and cut the rope that was restraining me. I rubbed my sore wrists, as I stared at Brynn's dead body. Everything had happened so fast. Realizing

what he'd just done, Noah threw the knife away from him, as if the handle had burned his skin like a hot iron. He stood there panting heavily, looking at me. I shot him a look, trying to convey to him that everything was going to be okay.

Beck grabbed the knife off the floor while we were distracted.

"In the name of The Midnight Man, we make this sacrifice!"

"Noah, NO!" I screamed, lunging for my friends' faltering body. I caught him just as his weight tumbled to the ground. Beck had quite literally stabbed Noah in the back.

"C-c-claire!" he whispered, the life already starting to dim in his eyes. He pulled the knife out of his back with a groan. "I love you, Claire. I always have."

I wept in his chest as it slowly stopped rising. He shuddered his last breath and then he was gone. I kissed him on the lips then closed his eyelids, "I love you too!"

The knife fell out of Noah's hands, which had gone stiff and cold. I grabbed it before anyone else could. I stood up and waved it around in the air, pointing it between the last three remaining characters. They all took cautious steps back, holding their hands up defensively, pleading for their lives.

"I'll kill you! I'll kill you all!" I screamed like a mad woman, wiping stray tears off my face. "The Midnight Man isn't real you fucking mornons! The killer is Howard Wilcox!"

A sudden creak came from a floor board above the stairs. We all looked up to see the shadow killer. The shadow slowly started fading, revealing the infamous and crazy mental hospital escapee. The three of them stared in recognition. Wilcox made a sprint for the stairs.

"SCATTER!" Veronica yelled. Everyone split up and went to different parts of the mansion. I ran for the kitchen.

Of course, out of everyone else, the killer just had to come after me. A sharp pain came from the back of my arm as he slashed his knife at me. I shouted, trying to run faster. Wilcox quickly caught up and grabbed me by the hair. I thrashed, trying to kick and disarm him. He threw me to the ground, my face smacking against the tiled floor.

He turned me around and straddled me. I tried to wiggle out of his grasp, but his grip was just too strong. He raised his knife, aiming for my eyes. Suddenly, Wilcox began choking. His face went red as spit flew out of his mouth. He clawed at his chest before his lips went blue and he passed out, his full body weight falling on top of me. The murder weapon clanged to the ground, sliding across the floor. I yelped, looking into his dead eyes. I pushed his large frame off of me and scrambled away from his limp body.

I kicked him with my foot, but he didn't stir.

Beck, Selena, and Veronica came and found me in the kitchen.

"You killed him, you killed the killer!" Selena cheered, entering the ghastly scene.

"Actually, I think he had a heart attack or something," I explained out of breath, "all the excitement must've gotten to him."

"I don't care how he died," Veronica said, walking over Wilcox's body and picking up his knife. She stabbed it in his left eye and spit on his corpse. "Just as long as he's dead. That was for Ryan, you motherfucker."

Selena kicked him in the nards, "That was for Kirsten!" she said, flipping off the dead body.

"Kristy," I corrected.

Beck grabbed her hand, "C'mon guys, let's get out of here!"

The four of us made our way out of the Kessler's mansion, the front door being able to open now that the killer was dead. I left first, wanting to get out of that mansion from Hell. The three of them trailed closely behind.

We basked in the light of the full moon and cherished the night's fresh air. I focused on the wind blowing on my skin.

"So, same time next Halloween?" Selena asked in a happy and preppy tone.

The three of them burst out laughing at the bad joke. I didn't say anything, figuring that was probably the last line of the movie or something.

Selena's bubbly laughter suddenly stopped. She resembled a deer caught in headlights. Her eyes went wide as she stared at the woods in front of her. Her skin went pale and she began to choke up.

I looked around, not seeing anything in the direction she was looking at.

"Selena?" Veronica asked, worried.

Pop!

Selena screamed as one of her eyeballs suddenly popped out of its sockets, being pulled by an invisible force. Sinew and muscle tissue binding the eyeball to her skull snapped, thrusting her head back.

Pop! Went the other eye. Selena's body suddenly fell limp. Two bloody and gaping holes were left in place where her eyes should be.

"You said he wasn't real!" Veronica sobbed, looking around panicked as Beck started choking next. A dark, spectral looking figure, made itself known. It looked as if it were almost a shadow. In a heartstopping shriek she cried, "You said The Midnight Man wasn't real!"

"Help... me!" Beck pleaded.

Pop, pop, thud!

Veronica was next. She didn't even have time to grieve as her eyes went red and she clutched her throat, the specter choking her. He pinched his fingers as he reached into one of her

eye sockets and grabbed hold of her eye. She screamed and flailed as he delicately pulled the organ out. He stuffed her blue eye into his pocket before reaching for the other. Veronica's body fell to the ground lifeless after her second eyeball had been plucked.

The figure turned towards me. I turned and ran for the woods. I didn't suffer through all this shit just to die with my eyeballs being yinked out of my skull.

The figure suddenly appeared in front of me. I halted, frozen in fright. Running away wasn't going to work.

"Special... not from here," It croaked, floating up to me. Its bony finger pointed at my right eye. His hand suddenly gripped my throat, quickly cutting my air supply off.

"H-How?" I squeaked out. "How are you here?"

"Blood sacrifice..."

I whimpered, because of course Noah's blood sacrifice would summon a literal evil spirit. I was in a fucking horror movie for Christ's sake!

It cackled, *"Summoning completed after blood of the innocent was spilled. Killed the killer; then naughty children!"*

Well, at least Noah's death wasn't in vain, The Midnight Man did save me from Wilcox.

"Tell them about me..." It eerily whispered into my ear before his fingers reached for my eye. I screamed in pain as my right eye burned. I closed my eyelids as hard as I could as one last method of defense.

Then the pain was gone. The sounds outside ceased and a cold chill enveloped my body. I opened my eyes slowly, cautiously. My right eye was still sore and my vision out of it was a little blurry, but it was still there. I brought my hands to my face, examining it for any changes. Everything appeared to be where it should be. I blinked again and I could see clearly. I was back in the lobby of the movie theater.

I was alone.

I ran through the hall of theaters, looking for the theater my friends and I had been trapped in. I took the same path as earlier, but there was no theater thirteen. The highest number it went up to was ten. I could've sworn there was a thirteenth theatre there before. And all the doors were locked so I couldn't even inspect the other theaters for my friends.

Frantically, I whipped out my Iphone and went to the movie theater's website. The advertisement for The Midnight Man showing was gone. Left in its place was a notice that the theater was closed for the holiday due to maintenance.

Not knowing what else to do, I sulked back to the lobby. What was I going to tell their parents? My two best friends in the whole world were missing, their souls trapped in a ghost

theater forever! What was I going to tell my parents? No one was going to believe I survived being thrown in a horror movie and lived to tell about it!

I was about to exit the theater, for good, vowing never to step foot in it again, when a strange sight caught my eye.

In my left eye I saw the empty concessions counter. But in my right, where *The Midnight Man* touched it, I saw the employee from earlier waving goodbye to me, with a big smile on her face.

The Midnight Man: Can't Forget About The Extra Credit Scene!

My little sister Anne rested her head on my lap as I played with her curly hair. We were snuggled up by the old tv in my bedroom.

Halloween was a couple days ago. I'd been thoroughly interrogated by Kristy's parents, Noah's parents, my own parents, and the police.

CCTV footage had caught us "breaking and entering" into the movie theatre, walking into a random theater, and only me leaving. The security company had said there must've been a malfunction with the system at the time we entered the property because they hadn't been alerted.

The police searched the whole premises and found no traces of either Noah or Kristy.

Of course I couldn't tell any of them the *real* story, nobody would've believed me, so I lied. I said I couldn't remember anything after entering that theatre- and the whole thing with my eyes was a whole other can of worms I didn't even want to *begin* to deal with... So, with nothing else to go on, the police released me and are trying to find my missing friends.

But it's too late. They're gone. *Dead.*

My friend's parents are suspicious of me and think I'm lying (which I am), meanwhile, all my parents want to do is put this all behind us and pretend like it never happened. Like Noah and Kristy never existed...

There's rumors speculating all around our small town. Everyone knows about it. Everyone is watching me. Some of our peers think I helped Noah and Kristy run away together- as if they were involved in some secret forbidden love affair. I'll let them keep thinking that, it's better than the truth.

Though she didn't completely believe my story either, Anne knew how tired, stressed, and depressed I was feeling. So she tried to cheer me up with some "quality sister bonding time."

She knew what movie we were going to see and suggested I stream it for us to watch together since I didn't remember watching it with my friends.

At first I was against it, images of their murders and *The Midnight Man* flashed in my mind as his last words echoed in my ears. Then, I remembered Noah and all the times he gushed about the movie. I know that Kristy liked to rip on it, but deep down, I knew she loved the cheesy horror flick too. In the end, I decided I would watch it, to honor my friend's memories and experience the movie how it was supposed to play out.

We got about five minutes into the original *The Midnight Man* when Anne noticed something. She had me rewind the last couple of minutes and randomly yelled at me to pause the movie.

"Hey," Anne said, lifting her head from my lap. She pointed to some people in the crowd. "Doesn't that kinda look like..."

The remote fell from my hand. I squinted and rubbed my eyes, making sure I was seeing the background characters right. When the image didn't waver, my heart sank into my stomach.

"Is that Noah and Kristy?!"