

Chapter 1 Remnants v3

Maria's life is seeing her brother die. The bullet in his forehead. Blood leaking out of his skull. Brain matter sprinkling the cabin's wooden floor. An endless vision. A montage of decay. The last of her purity, contaminated by his corpse. Her blood thickened at the sight and when the sludge inside her heart choked her, she spiraled down a whirlpool. Down into the death that made her.

Maria traveled through the mountains in an ancient pale Cadillac. A junkie had 'sold' her the car. He was about to overdose but never felt high. At the last second, she took advantage. Giving him a few stacks of fake hundreds from her other pocket. The man knew nothing; too strung out and too far gone. She didn't call 911 when he started seizing on the ground.

He did it to himself. She thought, speeding off.

Seven years. She laughed. Seven years since she lost everything.

She went past the trees that sang a siren song. The wind rushed past, trying to attack her car with branches. Then came the pattering rain, drowning the windshield. She wouldn't protest. A few clacks against her windshield were nothing. At one point a gun was at her head.

Clouds flew by. She tried to feel them. Tried to find the magic that would give her life. Even as they perished in her hands. Never able to feel them. The void came back. Alien. Her feelings were alien. Trying to reach for them only led to emptiness. Only seeing her brother die made her feel anything. Anything less and all she had was the

void. That crippling void, that could only be satiated by reliving a reel of his life. Was she only him? She didn't know. Maria lost whoever she was long ago.

In the backseat of her car is a hoarder's paradise. Her frail plastic grocery bags held mounds of clothes. Her pillow and blanket threatened to fall off the polyester seats and onto the muddied underside.

Each year, she'd drive up this mountain. Insanity. Pure insanity, would lead her to visit a dead man's cabin. Her dead brother's million-dollar home. Foreclosed upon. Foreclosed because she couldn't sell his home. No. She couldn't let him go.

Two dead-end dishwasher jobs were taken. Eighty-hour weeks. All to keep his memory alive. The curse of disability. The curse of not speaking right. Most of her coworkers were gang banger men out of prison. They loved to grope her. She'd be damned to say no. And to say 'get the fuck off me' wasn't an option when you're struggling to survive the night. After all. The perverts you know. Are better than the ones you don't.

She drove past a fractured tree. The chimney of the cabin greeted her from afar. "I'll always take care of you." Her brother's voice echoed. Another few tears slid down her cheeks. A leak behind her eyes. Still, empty inside. She forced her car up the driveway. The engine roaring like a demented old man on the verge of death, rumbling and wheezing as it threatened to explode into flames upon approaching two-hundred thousand miles. Her wallet was empty, but like all things, she'd made it work.

Save every penny. Maria thought. And she did save. She'd cling to every cent she was given in hopes of paying off the mortgage. She didn't need a stable home. Her car was fine. Everything was fine, as long as the remnants of her brother stayed alive.

And you couldn't even do that right. Maria grabbed the mirror. The small square mirror with a silver trim that rested on the passenger side. Her brother's mirror.

She closed her eyes. Her brother loved to tell stories. He talked about rainbow skies. Little wizards bustling through the heavens on broom-sticks.

"They're not witches." Her brother said. He pointed to a corner of the mirror as Maria slammed toy blocks across the carpet.

Maria yanked the key out of the ignition. She grabbed the mirror and swung the car door open. Feet plopping on sharp gravel. Her shoes are covered in duct tape. She patched them together in the back of her car. Every night.

I'll come back for you when it's time. Luke's killer had told her. A knife against her throat. Her fault. Luke warned her not to go right away. He threw her to the ground and ran. Ran deep into the woods. Police couldn't find him. Six dead. He killed once a year. Always on the day of her brother's death.

See you in the seventh year Maria.

She'd been careful. Working under the table. Lying about her real name. Telling her bosses she was too technologically challenged to use a phone. Another lie. She wasn't a technical genius, but she could handle modern technology just fine. A few feigned motor tics and the fact she couldn't look a soul in the eye was all it took for them to believe her. Her life was a list of lies. Piling on day by day. A fabrication of a girl she never was and never would be. She knew people saw her as incompetent. Why risk them finding out she wasn't an idiot? She'd get by on pity. Pity met free food. Pity met less work. Pity meant a place to park her stolen car at night. How long could she run? She thought. He'd find her. He found everyone.

Maria looked at the cabin. A few roots had started to dig into the cabin walls, causing the roof to become crooked. The rotted wood was worsened by termites. She could do nothing. Just watch as his home sank into the dirt.

She pulled up the hem of her red dress. The puddles from the rain would ruin her if they had their way. She only wore it on special days like this. The only time where she wouldn't look down and see scars. She rushed inside and shut the cabin door behind her then took a moment to breathe. Her long brown hair was drenched, but that didn't matter.

Maria refused to run anymore. Fear wouldn't keep her from mourning. Whether she lost or won the battle didn't matter. She wanted to fight for Luke. His killer wouldn't scare her from returning. If she died, at least she went down fighting.

She gazed at the mirror. Oh, the things her brother once loved. Cherry lipstick. He'd often bathe in the balm, despite the bruises their father left behind. The beatings never broke his resolve and when Maria was being mocked after school for the lisp that plagued her speech, he broke five boys' jaws, all while in a skirt and high heels. Their father had taught him the meaning of a good punch.

Luke would often look in the mirror, never seeming to see his face, pale with black eyes, long brown hair, and freckles softening his cheeks. Rather he told Maria about vast fields, and little green townsfolk chatting about their day. Sometimes he even claimed a masked man would wave too.

Maria took a seat on one of the dining room chairs. She forced herself to think back to happier times.

“And perfect,” Maria said, showing him a bucket of worms. “I made worm-getti!” She fussed with the mirror on the counter and frowned at all the dust that had accumulated throughout the years. Maria's eyes shut.

"See this Maria?" Luke said, pointing at the mirror. "No matter what happens we'll both be ok. Luke said. "I got a friend who lives here and if something happens to either of us, well, he'll take us in."

Luke wasn't ok. Maria was the one to find his corpse.

Maria polished the mirror, the light from the kitchen leaving a soft glare. With the help of the light, she noticed a word engraved in the top right corner. "*Fie.*" Maria shook her head.

Seven years and I didn't see that? Maria stared into the mirror. Her reflection smiled back with tired eyes.

—

The glow of the moon trickled through the cabin windows as Maria flicked her eyes back to awareness. She cursed herself for sleeping in so much and groaned at the soreness in her arms followed by the pounding in her temples.

Still, she was relieved to not have awoken to sirens like the last time.

The stars simmered violently in the night. She wondered why she couldn't move on with her life. The years passed like sand in an hourglass. His face was beginning to blur away. Luke's memory would fade like the photos his parents burned, long after they left.

Thud Maria's head whipped toward the front door. The time had come.

Thud Thud "Maria?" A deep voice said. She knew his voice. The voice of the man who murdered her brother. Seven years and he'd come. He always knew she'd be here again.

With a dash towards the kitchen cabinets, she flung them open and searched for the pistol she kept underneath. She'd hit a few cans. Didn't mean she'd find the strength to kill him.

She turned to the cabin door as it fell to the ground. The man stood in the broken door frame, staring back at her with a gun in his hand.

"I'm not running," Maria said. They both kept their guns trained on the other's head. Maria's hands were shaking.

"I knew you wouldn't. " The man said, taking a step forward. Maria squeezed the trigger with a shaking hand. A bang echoed through the cabin as the bullet burrowed into the wall next to the front door. She saw the man was about to fire, and jumped to the right. She barely missed the bullet and ran into the bedroom. Her will to fight was gone. Fear had consumed her. She was shaking, not ready to die.

"Oh come on. You know it's time." The man unloaded his revolver. Bullets splintered the door behind her as Maria ran for the window. She lifted her pistol to the window and fired. Glass showered the air and rained down on the grass outside. She leaped through the broken window and winced as she tripped and fell. Shards had cut through the fabric of her dress and into her skin, leaving scratch marks and blood behind.

Seven years and I can't be brave for once in my life? Maria kept her gun clutched in one hand as she used the other to push herself to her feet. Another shot rang out from behind her. Pain seared through the small of her back. She collapsed midway.