

EXPLORING SEXUALITY: AN ANTHOLOGY OF QUEER SHORT STORIES

by

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DEDICATION

To all my loved ones.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| DEDICATION | iv |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | v |
| ABSTRACT | vii |
| INTRODUCTION | 9 |
| The Rose and the Boar | 12 |
| Bitter and Sweet | 19 |
| Dear David, | 26 |
| I'll Be There with You the Whole Time | 41 |
| Puppet Bride | 57 |
| The Monster in the Alleyway | 80 |
| Everything Stays | 124 |

ABSTRACT

The thesis I have written is an anthology of short stories about topics ranging from sexuality to queer experiences in general. During my freshman year at Texas State, I discovered that I had feelings for another woman. I had never experienced romantic attraction to someone before, so it was both terrifying and exhilarating for me. I did not know what to call myself, or who to tell. I was thrust into my own journey of self-discovery and sexuality, one that I was not prepared to have. After some time, the two of us fell in love and started dating. On top of it being my first ever relationship, I also had to deal with the pitfalls that come with being in a same sex relationship. Including our love being seen as less than or as an upgraded friendship. I could hardly ever see myself or my struggles reflected in the media I consumed. I took it upon myself to write my own stories about people who went through the same things I went through. And people who loved in the same way that I loved. On top of these things, the topic of sexuality was fascinating to me. It was so much more complicated than what I had been taught my entire life. When writing this thesis, I wanted to create stories that explored complexities of sexuality and love. I wanted to write about how multifaceted queer people and queer relationships could be—messy, sweet, loving, and imperfect. I want to push my readers, just like how I was pushed, into reconsidering themselves and the world around them. And most importantly, I wanted to write something that people like me could read and see themselves in the page.

INTRODUCTION

Finding queer experiences and queer love is something that is quite rare in writing. Because of this, I began to write stories that reflected both my own frustrations and experiences. Every single one of my stories is about sexuality and queerness. Some of them are straightforward love stories, and some of them are about being queer in general. Some of my stories portray romantic relationships that are more complicated, or even toxic.

With my first story, “The Rose and the Boar,” I wanted to show the raw, pure love. I wanted to start with this story as it is short, simple, and shows the beauty of same-sex relationships, particularly between women. Romantic relationships between women are not often taken very seriously and are merely seen as a strong friendship or a phase. This story was inspired by my own love for another woman, and my need for it to be seen as valid, as true love.

“Bitter and Sweet” is a simple depiction of the queer experience, although it is not a happy one. I wanted to capture the isolation of being queer, especially in an environment where there are no queer people in your life. I do not want to depict queerness as something that brings misery; instead, I wanted to show the struggle’s queer people face when living in a society where it is othered. I also wished to show a type of homophobia may not be outwardly hateful but is much more common than people realize.

“Dear David” was once written in epistolary style as a coming out letter. It was a story about the sheer terror of coming out as queer. Something as simple as telling a

coworker that you have a same sex partner can be paralyzing. Though Quinn's story ends on a happier note, the world does not always work that way. The interesting thing about this story is that it once about the heartbreak of having your love rejected and it has become a story about strong platonic love.

"I'll Be There with You the Whole Time" is not a story about dying; it is about promise. Everyone has given up on Simon in the world of the living, and he has become hopeless. In his loneliness, he sees Leo's ghost and the two of them fall in love. Simon is no longer abandoned; he has found someone who has promised to stay with him in both life and death. I also wanted to show that queer love can be strong enough to persist until the end of time.

"Puppet Bride" is a borderline queer horror story that was the toughest story to write. Particularly because there is a pressure to write same-sex relationships as inherently pure and good, even though they are equal to, not above, heterosexual relationships. Same-sex relationships between women are often idealized and fetishized to the point where many ignore the fact that this type of relationship can be abusive or toxic. Because of this, I wanted to depict a lesbian relationship that falls apart due to toxicity, selfishness, and internalized homophobia.

"The Monster in the Alleyway" is a modern-day fairytale; it is meant to be a queer take on *Beauty in the Beast*. Historically, queer people have been coded as villains or as physical monsters in stories. When creating this love story, I wanted to portray a broken man unhappy with his world who falls in love with a demon. The monster represents change and a chance to take control of one's fate. And this time, the "monster" is not coded, he is in an explicit intimate relationship with a man.

“Everything Stays” is personal largely due to the setting. I went to middle school and high school in the notoriously conservative state of Mississippi. There are many people from Mississippi who are queer despite the reputation of their home. This is also a story about sex and sexuality. Sexual identity is often ignored when discussing queer people, even though that is literally a factor of someone’s sexuality. Therefore, I felt it was important to portray a character who was asexual, while also having the story’s climax be a sex scene. The characters go through their own sexual journeys of self-discovering and grow by learning about their own sexualities.

The Rose and the Boar

Lena found that sitting still was much harder than she expected. Her back ached and pressed up against the cheap, flimsy wood of the desk chair. The musty humid heat filled the room and hung over Lena's head. Sweat gathered in her armpits and chest, making her shirt cling to her body. *I swear to god, it wasn't this hot earlier*, Lena mused to herself. So why did it suddenly feel like the sun was hurtling toward her shitty college dorm? Lena squirmed in her seat to get into a more comfortable position.

Rose was sitting painfully close across from Lena in the cramped dorm room. Rose sighed, took her pencil, and pressed an eraser against her sketchpad. She scrubbed at the page with a frustrated scowl across her brow.

"Lena, please don't move. It messes me up."

"Oh. Rose, I'm sorry," Lena mumbled in response.

She had the easiest job in the world; she just had to sit there as Rose sketched out a portrait. Somehow, she couldn't even get that right.

Rose glanced up from her page and smiled at Lena. The irritation in Rose's eyes was immediately replaced with her usual look of gentle patience.

"Hey, it's ok! You're doing me a huge favor after all!"

Lena couldn't help but nod and smile back. There was that odd, fluttery feeling beginning to rise in her chest; it was a feeling that she only got whenever she was with Rose. Rose was selfless and caring, always doing acts of kindness for everyone else, rarely asking anyone to return the favor. Rose would immediately come to Lena's side

whenever she needed help. Lena was practically doing nothing compared to the mountains of support Rose had shown her over the two years they had known one another.

Lena was ashamed to admit that she was the complete opposite. She was crass, rude, loud, and was terribly hotheaded. She got into arguments and yelling matches with nearly everyone she knew—her friends, roommate, parents, siblings, and classmates. She would lose her temper at the drop of a hat. With Rose, things were different somehow. Rose would always stand her ground when others were treating her poorly; she would show acts of kindness to complete strangers.

Lena could only watch Rose from afar, admiring her compassion. There was something about Rose that made Lena want to be a better person.

“Lena,” Rose called out, snapping Lena out of her daydream.

“Hmmm?”

Rose giggled.

“Don’t stare at me, silly! I told you to look straight ahead, remember?”

“Well, I couldn’t help but admire your beauty,” Lena attempted to joke, but she could feel the blush rising to her cheeks once again.

God, I can’t believe I just said that. The heat in the room seemed to get heavy once again, and it felt like the walls were closing in on the two of them.

“Well, umm, I’m n-not...” Rose stuttered. She started to get flustered herself.

Lena tilted her head and shook off her embarrassment.

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it?”

Rose looked away.

“Thank you, Lena. There is a reason why I’m drawing a portrait of you rather than a self-portrait for my art class.”

Lena laughed and roughly put her hand on Rose’s shoulder.

“Oh, c’mon, seriously? Have you even seen yourself? You look like a delicate flower, and I just look like...a boar.”

Rose scrunched up her nose and laughed.

“A boar? Oh no, that’s true at all!”

“But it is!”

“No, it’s not!”

“Yes, it is! Everyone else would agree!”

Rose shook her head. “No one thinks that. You’re a lovely person, Lena.” Rose turned a deeper shade of red as though she had just realized what she admitted. The two of them turned away from one another.

The tension grew thicker and hung over the room like a dark cloud.

Lena finally cleared her throat and broke the silence.

“Well, for what it’s worth, I do stand by what I said. A portrait of you would be the most breathtaking picture in the whole world,” Lena proclaimed, before lowering her voice to a whisper. “I have no idea why you would want to draw me of all people.”

Rose peeked up at Lena from behind her sketchbook.

“I’m grateful that you think that way. I am wondering why you would compliment me and insult yourself in the same breath.”

“Well, um, you know—”

“Lena, there is a reason I chose to draw you over anyone else. I always have a hard time standing up for myself, and you’re the only person who doesn’t try to take advantage of me.” A grin spread across Rose’s face. “Plus, I think you look super badass all the time. More like a superhero rather than a boar.”

“A superhero, huh?”

“Yeah! Well, at least to me you are! You’re always standing up for yourself and others!”

Lena snorted.

“Oh please. I always get myself involved in situations where I don’t belong!”

“No. I think you’re brave. And that’s something I admire.”

Lena’s heart raced with giddiness. She had no idea that Rose felt this way about her. She turned to face Rose.

“Well, I think you’re brave in your own way, Rose. You always know how to keep calm in the worst types of situations. I could only dream of doing that.”

As the two of them smiled warmly at one another, the tension and throbbing heat seemed to disperse. The tiny room was filled with a warm, soft glow. Rose finally put her

pencil down and closed her sketchbook. She began to gather up the rest of her art supplies.

“Wait, you’re done already?” Lena asked. She was disappointed despite her discomfort in the desk chair.

“Well, not quite. It’s just that’s it’s getting late, and we should probably get to bed.”

“Yeah. I guess you’re right.”

Rose glanced up at Lena. “I still need to finish it by the end of this week. Same time tomorrow?”

“You know it.”

Rose turned away, stepping over bundles of clothes and books that littered the floor as she began making her way out of the dorm room. Lena watched her leave and drew in a breath.

“Rose. H-hey, wait.”

Rose stopped and looked over her shoulder.

“Yeah?”

It took every ounce of strength in Lena’s body to open her mouth and find the words. “Well, you know...this is going to sound a bit awkward, but—” Lena swallowed “—I like you. A lot.”

Blood crawled up her neck and all the way to her face. Rose's cheeks turned pink as well and her eyes widened in shock as she realized what Lena was saying.

"If you feel the same way, then maybe..." Lena anxiously drummed her fingers against her desk, trying to force the words out. "...maybe after you finish your project, we could do something else?"

"Like what?"

"You know...like a d-d-da—"

Rose's entire face lit up, and she smiled warmly.

"Like a date?"

Lena cringed inwardly. *You idiot, why would you say something like that?!*

"Well," Rose began slowly, "because I've been thinking a lot about my feelings lately. And I think I like you a lot too. So, I would love to go on a date if that's what you mean."

Lena's head snapped back up sharply. The feeling returned to her chest, fluttering around like a swarm of butterflies.

"Y-yes, of course! That's what I meant!" she exclaimed, perhaps a bit too eagerly. "I'll see you tomorrow night, then?" she asked.

Rose nodded and gave a little wave of her hand. "Yeah, see you!" she replied. She turned around to exit the room but stopped.

“Um, Rose? Is something wrong?” Lena asked nervously. Her heart was still recovering from the excitement. “Did you forget something?”

“Yeah, I think I did!”

Rose whirled around, wearing a grin, and practically launched herself forward.

Lena barely had the chance to process why the smaller girl was barreling toward her when suddenly Rose placed a brief, gentle kiss on her lips. Lena stared back at her, stunned.

“Wha—”

“I wanted to give you a proper goodbye,” Rose said, with a giggle. “Besides,” she looked away shyly, “I’ve always wanted to kiss you.”

She finally turned away and walked out the door, artbook still in hand.

Bitter and Sweet

Amanda smiles at Jackie. It is genuine, sweet, almost seductive.

Something was wrong.

Amanda walks across the classroom, toward Jackie. She drops her coat on the floor.

This isn't right, this isn't right.

Amanda places her hands on Jackie's shoulders. Jackie is on a roller coaster of emotions. The thrills of going up and down from nervousness to excitement courses through her veins.

Beads of sweat covered Jackie's sleeping form. She murmured and wriggled around uncomfortably under the sheets. In her fitful unrest, she tried to convince herself to wake up.

Jackie smiles back. She and Amanda press their foreheads together first, then the tips of their noses brush up against each other.

No, no, no, no.

And then slowly, carefully, their lips sink into one another tightly. Their tongues tangle around each other. The two of them went deeper and deeper, faster and faster.

Why was she doing this? Why was she like this?

It's so good. She shivers with pleasure as Amanda places a hand against her exposed neck. Her hand trails down, lower. It travels down Jackie's collarbone, down to

her lower back, and until she stops at her waist. Amanda tugs at the hem of Jackie's pants, pulling at them—

Jackie's head shot up from her pillow. She sat up in her bed, gasping for air. A tremor ran through her body, and she gulped down her shaky breaths. She grasped at the quilt of her bed, trying to untangle her body out from the sheets. Heat rose to her cheeks, and she pressed her hands up against them, as though to try to stop the blush from spreading. *No, not again. Not again.*

This time it was about Amanda. Her friend and her classmate. A person who went to the same high school as Jackie, someone who was also 17 years old. A person who trusted her, someone who would never imagine Jackie thinking about her in such...in such shameful ways. Last week, it was a girl in her church youth group named Carolyn. And then the week before that it was another classmate named Lauren. There were other girls too, but they all blurred together in Jackie's mind. She was trying to forget, trying to stop but she just couldn't. *Why can't I stop having these dreams? What's wrong with me?*

She rubbed at the corners of her eyes, as though wiping away tears. She was surprised to find that they were dry, as she certainly wanted to cry. But she couldn't bring herself to do so. She glanced at the alarm clock on her bedside table. *It's only 6:00 AM.* It was thirty minutes before she needed to get up for school. But there was no way she could go back to sleep now. She inhaled and swung her legs out of the bed and trudged toward her bathroom. *I might as well get ready.*

Her ears pricked at the sound of clashing dishes in the kitchen. She sniffed and caught a whiff of freshly scented coffee. *It's early, so that means Dad is probably awake.*

She walked to the entrance of her bedroom, and her fingers hovered over the doorknob. She hesitated for a few seconds, before opening it.

She came into the kitchen where she was greeted by her father, who was wearing a tie and his work suit. He smiled at her brightly, and she tried to force a cheery one onto her own face. He took a sip of his coffee and placed it onto the counter.

“Good morning, Jack!”

She gave him a half-hearted wave.

“G’ morning Dad.”

He tilted his head at her.

“You’re up unusually early, aren’t you?”

Jackie bit her lip and hugged her arms across her waist, as though she was nauseous.

“Yeah. I had a rough night. Couldn’t sleep.”

“Sorry about that, Jack. Would you like me to make you a cup of coffee too?” He lifted his own and sipped from it again. “It might make you feel better.”

Jackie nodded. Relief began to flood through her body. *Dad always knows how to make me feel better, even if he doesn’t know what I’m going through.* She sat down at the kitchen table and stared into its dark wood. She traced patterns in the wood with her fingers. Her dad hummed as he poured her a cup in the kitchen.

“Two teaspoon of sugar and a half cup of milk, right?” he called out to her.

She giggled.

“You always remember how to make my coffee just the way I like it.”

He walked over to the table where she was sitting and placed the mug in front of her. He grabbed a chair and sat down next to her. She eagerly lifted it up and began gulping the coffee down. It spread warmth through her chest and relaxed her tense muscles. It was bitter, sweet, and milky all at once. *It tastes like love.*

Her Dad watched her drink it. He shook his head with a sigh.

“I don’t understand how you can drink it with all that milk. It just dilutes the coffee and makes it too watery for me.”

Jackie scrunched her nose up and put the mug down.

“You’re judging me for putting stuff into my coffee? It’s way too bitter and gross without it!” She made a playful gagging noise and pointed at the back of her throat.

Her father chuckled.

“When you get older, you’ll grow out of needing to put milk and sugar into everything. Eventually, you’ll start to appreciate the subtle flavors of things like coffee and other dishes.”

Jackie rested her elbows onto the table. She stared down into her mug, the sugar in the drink smelled sickly sweet, clashing with the earthy scents of the coffee itself. The liquid was light enough so that she could see her own reflection wavering and wobbling back at her.

“Hey Dad?”

“Yes, Jack?”

“Can, I, um...” her voice faltered. “Can I ask you a question? Even if it’s a really weird one?”

“You can talk to me about anything. You know that I won’t judge you, right?”

Jackie looked at him. Their eyes met. She took a deep breath and gripped her mug tightly.

“Do you know if-if it’s normal to like, you know, have weird dreams about people who are the same sex as you?” She gulped and her fingers shook. “B-but you can’t control what you dream about, right? So, that’s ok?”

Her father stared at her blankly. His face become dark, and his eyes turned harsh. He leaned forward.

“Do you mean romantically?” He was speaking faster, louder.

Jackie fidgeted in her chair. The wood creaked underneath her bottom.

“I...I guess, I mean—”

“Do you have these dreams?”

“W-well, I don’t, I don’t—”

He reached across the table and grabbed both of her hands. He clasped his hands and her hands together, as though they were in prayer. He squeezed them tightly, his knuckles turning white. Jackie flinched from the pain. She tried to pull away, but his iron grip didn’t budge. The look in his eyes was wild, like a deer caught in the headlights.

“Jacqueline Feinberg.” His voice was dangerously low. “Do you have feelings for women? Are you a...?” He stopped, as though the words were stuck in his throat. “Tell me that you don’t have feelings for women. *Please.*”

Jackie made a strangled noise but nodded quickly.

“No. No, I would never. Believe me, I would never.”

Her father dropped his hands and her own landed on the table next to her mug. He rubbed her hair and planted a gentle kiss on her forehead. The anger had drained from his face, replaced by his usual loving gaze.

“Ok. Let’s not talk about this again.” He glanced down at his watch. “All right, Jack, I really need to get going to work, have a nice day at school.”

He reached down to hug her, and she tentatively hugged him back. He walked away from the table and toward the door. He looked over his shoulder at Jackie one last time.

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Dad.”

He opened the door and left the house. Jackie could hear the engine rumbling and his car pulling out of the driveway.

She stared back down into her coffee mug. Her shoulders began to shake, and the tips of her fingers trembled. Tears fell from her cheeks and splashed into the muddy liquid, blurring and distorting her reflection. She sniffled quietly and wiped away

dripping snot with the back of her wrist. With wobbling hands, she lifted the mug to her lips and sipped the coffee. It was salty.

Dear David,

The pencil hovered over the blank sheet of paper. Quinn's brow was furrowed with deep concentration, yet his hands trembled. His sweaty palms made it difficult to grasp his pencil firmly enough, and he could feel moisture drip from his forehead onto the page.

"I know that you think we know everything about each other. We've known each other since we were seven years old, and we've practically been inseparable since then. You're my best friend, and I want to tell you everything, which is why I'm writing you this letter. I feel like you're the only person who I can actually trust. The thing is that I'm gay--"

Quinn pressed down from the top of his page and erased everything. His fist tightened around the pencil until his knuckles turned white. He stared down at the paper, thoughts swirling through his head.

Pull yourself together, the voice in the back of his head whispered to him. You're never going to write the letter or work up the courage at this rate.

"Quinn!"

Just give up. Do you want to scare him away? Do you want him to hate you? What if he never speaks to you again?

"Quinn? Do you hear me? I said that David's here!"

"Shut up..." he muttered to himself through his gritted teeth.

He unconsciously tapped the pencil against his desk, still deep in his own thoughts.

“QUINN!” his mother yelled, flinging the door to his bedroom open.

Quinn jumped up, completely startled.

“Mom—”

“I’ve called you three times and you completely ignored me! David is waiting for you out on the porch!”

“I’m s-sorry,” he stuttered nervously. “I-I-I didn’t hear you.”

His mother rolled her eyes, clearly exasperated. “You know that it’s rude to make people wait on you. We raised you better than this.”

Quinn watched her eyes narrow suspiciously as she looked at the blank sheet of paper and the pencil he was gripping.

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

“Homework.” His voice was meek.

Her hard expression softened slightly. “Ok, well don’t stay out too late. You better apologize to David for making him wait.”

“Yes ma’am,” he mumbled.

Quinn quickly grabbed his coat and slipped past his mother. He rushed out of the house and stumbled toward David’s car. He opened the door to the passenger’s seat and squeezed his way into the tiny vehicle.

“Hey Quinn! What’s up?” David greeted him with his usual grin.

Despite the conversation that just transpired with his mother, Quinn couldn't help but smile back. His heart skipped beat as he stared at David. He was dressed perfectly for the upcoming party. He looked extremely handsome as usual.

Quinn tore his gaze away from his friend. *Stop it*, he scolded himself. *You're acting like a creep.*

He cleared his throat. "Sorry for being late," he said awkwardly.

David looked shocked.

"What? You aren't that late! I had to wait maybe two minutes!"

"Oh. My mom told me to apologize to you. She seemed really upset with me."

David rolled his eyes. "I swear, that woman is too hard on you. How did you convince her to let me take you to this party anyway?"

"She thinks we're going to a school event."

"Oooo, nice one."

"Well, I feel a bit bad about lying."

"What? Why? Both of your parents are way too strict! You deserve to have get out of the house every so often!"

Quinn looked away. "Yeah, you're right. It's not like I'll be doing anything crazy at Mike's place. I know that his parents will be there anyway."

David glanced over at Quinn from the driver's seat.

“Exactly! There’s nothing wrong with a bit of fun while his parents aren’t looking.”

“Oh, come *on* David.” Quinn let out a chuckle.

He felt much better now that he was talking and joking with his best friend. Quinn had always felt very comfortable with David, especially compared to how jittery he was around his parents. To him, David was the only person in the world whom he could tell anything without being judged. That’s why he felt that David was the only person who could really know about *it*.

“Hey, we’re almost here!” David shouted, interrupting Quinn’s thoughts.

“Oh, cool!” Quinn tried to sound like he was enthused.

He was a bit nervous because he didn’t know as many people as David, and he didn’t do very well in large crowds. David pulled up and parked at a curb next to the house. *Just stick with David and you’ll be ok.*

The two of them went inside and immediately got drinks. They were having a good time chatting with each other and occasionally other people who would come up and join the conversation. David was going on and on about a new game that had just come out as Quinn nodded along silently. He suddenly and explicably felt a strong urge to wrap his arms around David and bury his face into his chest. He wanted David to just hold him tightly, as though he would never let go. A part of Quinn felt foolish for thinking this, while another felt as though David would be the type of person to love him unconditionally. David wouldn’t scream at him or become indifferent to his presence like his mother and father. He wouldn’t be seen as a disappointment or a failure. Quinn felt

warm and dreamy as he watched David's mouth move, only half-listening to what David was saying. He was staring into David's eyes, and he felt as though the entire moment was perfect.

Quinn's illusion shattered when David leaned in and pointed to someone at the party he didn't recognize.

"Do you see that girl over there? She's Katie, my lab partner. She doesn't realize it yet, but she's definitely my type." David took a swig of his drink. "I'm thinking about going to prom with her."

Without warning, so many emotions swirled up and bounced around inside himself uncontrollably. He attempted to muster up the courage to say something, but he couldn't open his mouth. Something inside of him went cold and numb.

David cupped his hands over his mouth and yelled Katie's name. He caught her eyes and beckoned her over. Her eyes lit up as she waved and began walking over, drinks in hand. Quinn noticed that the edges of David's mouth softened into a warm, kind smile. Quinn's heart dropped. David never smiled at him that way.

David had nudged Quinn with his elbow and grinned.

"See Quinn! I'm pretty good at getting girl's attention! I think you could use a few tips!"

Katie sat down next to the two of them.

"Hey, David!" she said, her tone chipper. She turned toward Quinn. "And you must be?"

“Quinn,” David answered for Quinn. “He’s my good friend.”

Quinn winced at the word “friend.”

Katie smiled warmly. “Well, it’s nice to meet you, Quinn.”

Quinn shook her hand and tried to smile back. He tried to squash the irrational feelings of envy and hurt that were building up in his chest.

“Thanks. It’s nice to meet you, too.”

Blood rushed to his cheeks and spread across his face like an angry, irritated rash. He tried to tune into their conversation, but his pounding head forbade him from doing so. He could barely think. They were talking and laughing, seemingly forgetting that he was there. Quinn’s vision began to blur as his eyes filled with tears. He took a deep breath and tapped on David’s shoulder, interrupting the conversation.

“Hey.”

David turned back toward Quinn, a grin vanishing from his face. Quinn figured that he looked upset, because David’s face contorted with confusion and worry when he looked back at him.

“What’s up? Everything ok?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure, Quinn?” Katie asked gently.

Quinn felt a twinge of guilt for being so upset by her presence. She seemed very kind.

“I’m fine,” Quinn replied, hoarsely.

Suddenly, his phone buzzed, and he glanced down at it. His heart sank when he saw who it was.

“I-I need to go home. My mom just texted me. She says she doesn’t want me to stay out too late.”

“Oh, I get it,” David said, the confusion vanishing from his face only to be replaced by worry. He turned toward Katie. “Quinn has had an... argument with his mom, and it’s been bumming him out.”

Relief washed over Quinn. “Yes, it’s been weighing on my mind.”

“Oh. Well, good luck with your mom.” Katie was still staring at him.

David stood up.

“I can drive you back with you if you want.”

Quinn shook his head quickly.

“No, I’ll be ok by myself! Plus, I just got here.”

“Dude, are you sure? This is kinda far away from your house.”

“Yeah, I’m fine! Thank you, though!” Quinn answered with a poor attempt at a smile. “I’ll see you guys later!”

He waved goodbye to Katie and David, and practically ran out of the house, barely remembering to take his coat with him. *Why didn’t you just take his offer, you idiot?* Quinn chastised himself. *Now Mom’s going to be pissed at you for being so late.*

But Quinn knew he would be unable to control his feelings around anyone, let alone David right now. He practically sprinted all the way home, barely registering his surroundings as he made his way back. When he got home, his mother was furious at him, like he predicted, but he barely paid attention to her berating him. All he could think about was how David and Katie were probably making out at the party.

His mom finally demanded that he go up to his room. Quinn trudged up the stairs and slammed his door shut. His eyes flickered to the trash can near his desk, which was filled with wadded-up letters that he had written with the intention of giving to David. Quinn made his way over to his desk and sat down. He scooted up his chair as he warily picked up a clean sheet of paper and his worn-down pencil. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, swallowed hard, and then, he pressed the pencil against the paper and began to write.

“Dear David,

I know that you probably think I’m odd for writing you this letter. Only weirdos like me would write a letter like this after all. You probably think that I’m a freak for a bunch of other reasons too, like the fact that I’m—”

Quinn stared down at the words he just wrote. He then violently erased the page until it ripped apart. He stared down and swallowed hard as his head swirled. His lip began to quiver. Tears slipped down his nose and splattered onto the paper. What was wrong with him? Why was he doing this? What was even the point of writing stupid letter that no one would ever bother reading anyway? Quinn finally surrendered,

crumbled up the worn sheet of paper, and unceremoniously threw it in the trash. He could feel a hard lump forming in the back of his throat.

This is a complete waste of time, he thought. Finishing the letter at this point seemed like an impossible feat, and the guilt of harboring feelings toward his completely ignorant best friend weighed down on him. He decided that he couldn't live in secret like this anymore. He needed to tell someone, anyone, how he felt. Even if David rejected him, then at least someone would know. He took a deep breath, picked up his phone, and dialed David's number. He stood there, legs shaking as he waited for David to answer.

"Quinn!" David's cheerful voice rang out from the other end. "Did you make it back safely?" He lowered his tone a bit, showing concern. "I didn't get you into any trouble, did I?"

"H-hey David." He tried to sound casual but his voice trembled in his throat. "I'm fine, my parents weren't upset with me for being late. I just wanted to know if you're free to hang out soon?"



A few days later, Quinn stood nervously on his front porch waiting for David's arrival. He wasn't sure how this conversation would go. All his attempts at the coming out letter had failed miserably, so what were the odds that this would be any better. There was also the fact that David had told him about several crushes he had on women. Quinn didn't know if he had any attraction toward men. If he did, he certainly wasn't open about it at all. Quinn was forcing himself to prepare for the very real chance that he would get shot down completely. Quinn could already feel a sense of dread creeping up on him as

David's car pulled up into his driveway. Quinn glanced back at the house nervously. His parents were out at a restaurant, and he hadn't told them that he invited David over. He watched as David opened the car door and walked out onto the pavement.

"Hey Quinn!" he called out. "What's up? You said you wanted to hang out, right?"

"Well...I-I need to tell you something. It's really important. It's something that I haven't really talked about with anyone before. I trust you, ok?"

"Sure, you can tell me anything man," David said with a hint of worry in his voice. "Did something happen with your parents, Quinn? Are you ok? Are you hurt?"

Heat rose to Quinn's face. Tears were threatening to push out of his eyes. He was so nervous that he could feel his entire body shaking.

"I'm fine. You don't have to worry about me. It's not really that big of a deal. It's just—" he paused.

"—it's just what?" David finished. "You don't have to worry about talking to me. I won't tell anyone else."

Quinn stood there, unable to open his mouth. He knew that every second he delayed the inevitable conversation would just make him feel worse. He could feel his guilt weighing down on his shoulders like a giant boulder threatening to crush his entire body.

Quinn swallowed his words and his throat closed. Nothing would come out no matter how hard he tried. It was as though his windpipe sealed itself shut when he tried to

speaking. Quinn could feel his stomach knot into a ball of fear, shame, and self-loathing as the second passed. *Hurry up, you coward. Just tell him.* Quinn couldn't bring himself to say it. He was extremely terrified, as every horrible scenario ran through his brain. *What if he rejects me? What if he laughs in my face? What if he never talks to me again?* Quinn was only fighting a losing battle with himself.

David frowned, and he shifted his legs awkwardly.

"So, what exactly did you want to talk about?"

"O-oh—um—yeah," Quinn stumbled over his words. "S-sorry, it's something that's a bit hard for me to talk about."

Quinn knew that he would lose the chance to get a sense of closure if he didn't come out and say it. He would be stuck in an eternal limbo of wanting to confess, but also wanting his secret to stay hidden. Everyone would know, love and care about a "perfectly normal" Quinn, but no one would realize that there was the Quinn who loved men too. He knew that no matter how much it would hurt, it would hurt even more to remain constantly isolated and unknown to the world. Quinn took a deep breath, looked straight into David's eyes, and opened his mouth.

"You have to promise not to hate me," he blurted out.

He cringed at what he just said. *What a horrible way to start this conversation,* he thought. It took all his willpower to prevent himself from puking all over David's t-shirt. David's brow furrowed.

“Quinn what are you even talking about? You’ve been acting really weird lately, like at the party, and especially right now. You know, as your friend, it’s a bit concerning.”

“Just please promise me that you won’t hate me for what I’m about to say.”

“Ok, ok. I promise. But I would never hate you, Quinn.”

Quinn took a deep breath, and finally let everything out.

“I’ve always known that I was a little weird—well, not weird in a bad way or anything—just different. Do you ever just get the feeling that there is something off about yourself and you... you just don’t know what exactly it is?”

Quinn shifted his gaze down toward his sneakers, unable to look at David in the eyes anymore.

“Then, you finally realize exactly what it is, and you feel at least a bit relieved that you know who you are? And terrified at the same time because there is no way you can tell anyone. You see, I’ve never felt anything toward a girl before. You know, like romantically. Being with a girl, somehow, it just doesn’t feel right to me. I’m not sure when it happened, but I guess that it finally clicked. One day, I realized that I was gay. I haven’t told anyone yet. A-and I got lonely, and I guess I just wanted someone to talk about this.”

Quinn finally stopped talking after pouring his heart out. It was dead silent. His eyes were glued to the ground; he didn’t dare lift them up to see David’s reaction. He could feel his face turn pale beneath the setting sun.

“Sorry, this is weird,” Quinn mumbled, defeated. “You can go if you want.”

Suddenly, David stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Quinn. Quinn stood limp in his friend’s grasp, numb with shock. His heart pounded lightning fast, threatening to burst his chest open. Quinn could barely register that this was truly happening. He looked up at David to find that his eyes were full of sympathy.

“Hey, you don’t have to apologize,” David answered gently. “I’m really glad you told me everything.”

Quinn pulled himself together and pushed away from the embrace. “Wait, seriously? You aren’t freaked out?”

David shook his head.

“No. Why would I be? You’re my best friend, Quinn.” His voice was firm.

Quinn flinched at the word ‘friend.’

“About that—”

“About what?” David asked. He noticed the blood rushing to Quinn’s cheeks and his eyes widened in realization. “Wait...you don’t mean...”

Quinn nodded and turned away. “Sorry. I know it must be really weird.”

David put a hand on Quinn’s shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Quinn, I don’t mind if you have feelings for me. I haven’t given it much thought, but I’ve only really been interested in women.”

“I know.” Quinn’s reply was barely audible.

He knew that this moment was inevitable. Hot tears began to slip down his face and onto his sneakers. He grew angry at himself for crying. David was being so patient that it was making him feel bad for being so upset. David put a hand on his shoulder.

“However, that doesn’t mean that you’re no longer my best friend.”

Quinn looked back at David. His friend’s face was filled with kindness and warmth. He gave his trademark cocky grin, and Quinn couldn’t help but smile even through his tears. David pulled him in for another hug, and Quinn buried his face into David’s chest, sniffing into his jacket.

“I’m glad you’re my friend.” Quinn’s words were muffled. “Thank you.”

“Thank you for trusting me, dude.”

The two of them broke from the embrace, and David got ready to go before Quinn’s parents returned. They promised to meet up to hang out and talk more that weekend. Quinn went back inside the house and watched David’s car pull out of his driveway. He was still a bit shaky from the conversation, and his stomach felt like it had been turned into spaghetti. There was still a warmth that spread throughout his entire body. There was a weight that had been lifted off his chest and something inside him was set free.

Quinn’s eyes wandered around his room and landed on his trash can, which was filled with the crumbled-up pieces of rejected letters. *I guess that the only person who knows other than me is David*, he thought to himself. His parents, relatives, and other friends still had no idea, and the thought of any of them finding out paralyzed him with fear. Maybe none of them would accept him. Maybe all of them would hate him or think

he was weird. That would be ok. At the very least, Quinn accepted himself. Now, he knew that his best friend would always be there for him, supporting who he was. For right now, that would be enough.

I'll Be There with You the Whole Time

Simon closed his eyes. There was nothing but blackness. He wondered if this was what it was like to be dead. Nothing but the endless sea of black sprawling in front of his eyes. If it was really like that, then maybe he wouldn't mind being dead. Yet he was still alive. He could still feel the cool breeze ruffling his hair, the scent of rain, the chirping birds, and the intense pain rotting through his body.

He sighed. At least when he died, the leukemia destroying his body would die along with him. The pain would finally end. When he was gone, would there be anything else left to feel? He supposed an infinite world of black may be peaceful and calm, but it also would be lonely. Maybe he would no longer be able to think at all when he died, so he wouldn't have to worry about emotions like loneliness and pain. Maybe that's what would happen. Then why did his frail body tremble with fear when he toyed with the idea of dying? It didn't matter whether he died right now or 50 years from now; it would always be his fate.

Simon opened his eyes. He was still sitting by himself in his wheelchair in the quaint park of St. Dominic's Children's Hospital. Everything about the park was about the same as when he spent hours sitting in quiet solitude. This time when he opened his eyes, though, something was different. There was a teenage boy staring directly at him.

Simon blinked once. He blinked again, squeezing his eyes shut and then opening them again. He found that he was mildly surprised to discover that he wasn't hallucinating.

"Who are you?" Simon asked sharply. "What are you looking at?"

For a split second, a similar look of shock seemed to pass over the mysterious boy's face, before quickly disappearing. He tilted his head.

"You can see me?" His voice was gentle, like the soft, twinkling sounds of a music box.

Simon scowled. His loneliness vanished and was quickly replaced by annoyance and embarrassment. Simon would never admit it, but he hated being by himself after excruciating and terrifying chemo treatment. He would always choose to be alone anyway. Having sympathy for company was far more unbearable than being in isolation.

"What're you doing here?" he demanded.

"I live here."

"I guess you're also a patient in the hospital?"

Simon looked the boy up and down. He was wearing a long pale gown, but other than that he seemed completely healthy. Strangely, the boy wasn't wearing anything to cover his bare feet even though the sun was setting, and the air was growing colder. *Maybe his illness is internal?* Simon thought to himself.

The boy shrugged. His entire body was extremely pale, almost as white as his gown. Simon noted that the boy was about the age of a high schooler, maybe 16 years old, the same age as Simon. Despite his age, he looked delicate, almost like a porcelain doll, as though his glassy skin would shatter with a mere touch. The boy smiled.

"You could say that this place is my home."

There was a long, awkward pause. Simon wanted to tell him to go away, but at the same time, he was oddly fixated. Then, the boy stepped forward and broke the silence.

“My name is Leo. May I ask for your name?”

Simon was quiet for a few moments.

“Simon.” His voice was curt.

“Simon...” Leo smiled. “What a lovely name.”

“I guess. It seems standard enough.”

“I have never encountered anyone else with that name.”

Simon supposed for a few moments that he has also never met anyone with his name either.

“Who cares about my name! Aren’t you going to tell me what you’re doing out here?”

Leo looked up at the sky. “It’s a beautiful day today. I want to be outside.”

“I didn’t hear you come out.”

“I was already outside before you were. Do you want me to leave?”

“No... it’s ok,” Simon muttered. He knew he was being unreasonably rude. “I’m sorry, I’m in a bad mood. As you can see, I’m not exactly doing well.”

Leo’s pale complexion brightened for a few seconds.

“Is it ok for me to stay here?” A smile blossomed on his face.

“Um, yeah. Sure. This hospital park is public to all the patients and visitors after all.” Simon shifted in his wheelchair.

“Thank you.” Leo walked over to Simon and sat on the ground next to his wheelchair. “You know, Simon, there are times when I feel lonely here. It would be nice to have extra company.”

Simon gave a small, sad, sympathetic smile. He didn’t want to admit that he felt the same way; that there was a crushing loneliness weighing down on him every day. He turned toward Leo.

“You know, I come here every so often for...” Simon looked for the right words, not wanting to admit that he had to get chemotherapy treatments. “For my appointments. I ask the nurses to wheel me out to this park after I’m done. It calms me down, I guess.”

Leo listened carefully, fully attentive, and quiet.

“You know...it can get lonely. I guess what I’m trying to say is that it would be nice to have someone with me out here.” Simon rubbed the back of his neck.

Leo hesitated.

“Would you like me to visit you when you have to come for your appointments?”

Leo’s question was polite, unobtrusive. Simon could tell that he was trying to refrain from being too pushy.

Simon shrugged his shoulders, not wanting to give an answer. He was still wary of this strange boy, but there was also an aura about him that seemed comforting. He wasn't exactly sure how to feel.

"Do whatever you want," Simon finally answered.

Leo smiled brightly.

"All right then." He stood up and turned around. "I'm sorry Simon, but I have to go."

Simon nodded. Strangely enough, he felt almost...disappointed? "It's ok, I have to go too. My parents will probably come to get me soon." Momentarily, he forgot his pain, and a burst of hope flickered in his chest. "I'll see you next time."



Days turned into weeks and weeks turned into months. From then on, Simon asked the nurses to wheel him out after he finished his painful treatments. They tried to be as positive as possible with him and would tell him that he was taking the treatments like a champ. When the nurses and doctors thought they were out of earshot, he overheard them say things like "it seems like the cells are starting to resist the chemotherapy," and "we might need to start him on a second treatment."

His parents, of course, were very concerned about him first. He was their only son after all, and they truly loved him. Simon noticed very quickly that it began to drain on them both. They visited quite often at first, bringing flowers and gifts, and generally tried to have an upbeat attitude. However, these visits became more and more infrequent as

time passed. With each visit, Simon couldn't help but notice that his parents looked more haggard. There were dark circles beneath their exhausted eyes and wrinkles that increased their rapidly aging faces. When they thought he was asleep, he heard their whispers about money and the rising hospital bills. They would talk about things like how this would ruin them financially, or how at least one of them would have to get a second job. All for a sickly son who would likely expire anyway.

I guess I can't blame them if they really think that of me. A nurse cautiously pushed him in his wheelchair, as he had just finished one of his treatments. *I bet they would be relieved if I were gone. Even though it's not really my fault.* The nurse wheeled him to his usual spot.

"Simon are you sure you're feeling all right?"

"I'm fine," he responded flatly.

The nurse looked concerned but smiled politely.

"Ok, well let me know if you need anything else. Your parents should be here to get you soon."

Simon closed his eyes. When he opened them again, there Leo was waiting for him. Just like he had for many days before, Leo walked behind Simon's wheelchair. He grabbed the handles and wheeled Simon over to their regular spot, a nearby bench. The two of them sat in solidarity and stared up at the clouds.

"Leo, do you ever have anyone visit you in the hospital?" Simon asked, suddenly.

Over the past few visits, he could feel himself become more and more curious about his new... acquaintance. Although, now Leo seemed to be becoming more like a friend than anything else.

Leo shook his head.

“No. There is no one to remember me. I have been here for a long time.”

“Aren’t you sad?”

“No, not really.” he paused. “You know Simon, I cannot recall making a friend like you in many, *many* years.”

Simon laughed. He was becoming more comfortable as the conversation continued.

“Yeah, I could say the same about me. I haven’t had a friend to talk to for over a year until I met you.”

Leo looked over at Simon, unable to hide his bewilderment.

“Is that true?”

“Yeah. I mean, when I first got diagnosed...when I first found out, the people around me were more supportive. Or, at least, it seemed to be that way.”

“What happened?”

“Well, I don’t know. I became far too sick to attend high school.” Simon turned away. “I couldn’t see my friends in person, I couldn’t do the things that they could. I

guess we just stopped talking to each other after a while. It became too much for all of us.”

However, Simon knew this was a lie. His friend stopped answering his texts, they stopped visiting him in the hospital. Despite his starvation for contact, his pleas for them to answer his texts, they just stopped. There was a part of him that understood he became a burden to them: someone who was just a dying kid.

Leo gently lay his hand over Simon’s. Simon looked up, startled. He couldn’t recall Leo touching him before now.

“It sounds like they weren’t your true friends.”

Simon shrugged.

“It’s a weird feeling, remembering that I used to have friends. I really thought they cared about me. You know, one of them even came with me to my first chemotherapy appointments. He held my hand the entire time.”

He shifted in his wheelchair. It felt so familiar to have Leo’s hands on top of his own, even though they did feel strangely cold. Simon stared down at his lap and continued.

“I felt...confused around him, I guess. I really wanted him to stay my best friend and be there for me. Other times, I wanted him to hold me. To comfort me.” Simon trailed off. He swallowed hard, and his cheeks burning with hot blush. “I will probably die without ever having been able to experience that ever again.”

Simon lifted his head up in shame to look toward his friend. To his surprise, there were tears flowing down Leo's cheeks. He drew his hand away, startled.

"H-hey, it's ok. It doesn't bother me that much anyway."

Leo turned to face Simon, his dull gaze piercing Simon's soul. Without making a sound, Leo stood up in front of Simon's wheelchair, bent down, and wrapped his arms around Simon's body. Simon was frozen with shock. There was something else...a warm feeling flowed through his body. How long had it been since he had experienced something like this? After what seemed like an agonizingly long amount of time, he tentatively hugged Leo back.

After an eternity, Leo gently pulled away and stared into Simon's eyes. Leo's eyes were filled with sadness. His lips were nearly inches away from Simon's. Simon's cheeks grew hot, and perspiration ran down his forehead. His heart pulsed in his chest and his breath hitched.

"L-Leo?"

"You've never kissed anyone, right?"

Simon shook his head.

"Do you want to?"

Simon nodded, dazed.

Leo leaned in closer. Simon's heart began to race even faster. *Oh god. Oh god.* His panicked thoughts were bouncing inside of his skull. *I'm going to die of a heart*

attack right here on the spot. It won't even be the fucking cancer that kills me. Even so, he leaned in as well.

Their lips met. Leo's lips were icy. Simon felt as though his entire world was spinning and shaking. His heart pounded lighting fast as shock began to course through his veins. He could barely think due to the odd mixture of panic and elation swirling around in his brain, but he was beginning to process what was happening. He pulled away, gasping.

The two of them stared at each other. Simon was as bright red, and even Leo's pale cheeks were slightly pink.

"I...I...you..." Simon fumbled over his words. "Y-you were so cold," he managed to stutter.

Leo said nothing. His face was completely blank. He merely stood up and walked away. Simon watched him disappear into the shadows.



Simon stared up at the ceiling of his empty hospital room.

"Leo." The word fluttered from his dry, cracked lips.

Shortly after the day of his first fleeting kiss, his doctors deemed that his treatment failed. He asked them if he could go outside, but they told him that it would be too physically taxing on his body. He had been lying in the hospital for the past few weeks with nothing else to do except ruminate on that awkward moment with Leo, who he couldn't see anymore. There was no one to interact with except the doctors. His

parents may have visited once or twice, but they soon gave up after that. His parents never outright admitted it, but the sight of him repulsed them.

Simon could feel himself drifting off. He closed his eyes and felt a familiar voice call out to him.

“Simon...”

Simon’s eyes fluttered open, and Leo’s worried face was staring back at him. He smiled with relief.

“Good. I finally found you.”

Simon rolled over on the bed, away from Leo.

“It’s been a while.” His voice was filled with bitterness and hurt. “Did the nurses let you in?”

Leo said nothing.

Simon sat up and looked at his friend, scowling. “Why didn’t you visit me?”

“I did not know where to find you. You just stopped coming to the park for a very long time.”

“The doctor won’t let me go outside. They say I’m too sick.” Simon paused. “Why couldn’t you have just asked one of the nurses to let you into the room?” Pain flooded through his chest. He couldn’t tell if it was the cancer or his own feelings.

Leo looked away.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Sorry? Is that all you have to say?”

Silence.

“You know, Leo...it feels like everyone has abandoned me. I don’t even bother reaching out to my friends anymore. My parents barely ever visit me too. They would be glad to forget about me once I die. Just like everyone else.” He let out a chuckle that sounded more like a sob. “Even you...even you abandoned me.”

Leo’s eyes widened.

“Simon, I—” he started, only to be quickly interrupted when the door to the hospital opened. A nurse came in carrying his tray of food.

“Good morning, Simon!” the nurse said warmly. “I have your breakfast right here!”

The nurse walked right through Leo’s body, as though he was made of dust. She seemed completely oblivious to his presence. Simon’s eyes widened. He glanced between the nurse and Leo before shock began to settle inside of his stomach.

“What are you looking at?” the nurse asked. She followed his gaze and made direct eye contact with Leo. “Simon, are you sure you’re ok? You look pale.”

Simon nodded unnaturally fast.

“It’s fine,” he said quickly. “It’s just that...” he scrambled to think of an excuse. “I’m not—I’m not super hungry.”

The nurse pursed her lips into a frown. She scribbled something down on a clipboard.

“Simon, I know it’s hard, but you should try to eat more. That way, you can recover!” The nurse injected false cheeriness into her voice.

Simon noticed that she wasn’t taking her eyes off the clipboard.

“Thank you for the food,” he told her. “I’m fine right now.”

The nurse walked out of the room, without looking back at Simon.

When the door shut, Simon turned toward Leo. There was a sad smile on his face.

“I didn’t know how to tell you, Simon.”

Simon swallowed hard. “Are you—”

Leo nodded. “I died in this very hospital a long time ago.” He looked up and tapped his chin thoughtfully. “Although, I’m not sure exactly how many years it has been.”

“Then why—why can I see you?” Simon fumbled. His head pounded as his brain tried to process this information.

Leo was silent for a moment.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t want to tell you. I didn’t think...you would even believe me.”

Simon slowly turned toward the closed door.

“She went right through you, but I could touch you. Y-you even kissed me. You pushed me around on my wheelchair...” Simon trailed off. He rubbed his hands through his hair, anxiously.

Leo's pale gaze flashed with sorrow.

"Some people have a deeper understanding of death than others. There are those who are able to see the dead when they are on the verge of death themselves and may even form a connection with spirits," Leo explained, his voice slow and quiet. "People who are healthy, like the nurse, who is quite healthy. But for those who are near death..." he stopped and made eye contact with Simon.

Simon stared back into Leo's glassy eyes. "Then that must mean--?"

Leo said nothing, but his face was a grim, stony mask.

Simon sank down in his bed and pressed his face deep into his pillow. So many questions were swimming around in his head, he didn't know where to start. However, there was one in particular that kept popping up again and again.

"Leo, does it hurt?"

Leo seemed surprised by the question. He shook his head. "No, not exactly. I do not remember feeling any pain, just numbness. Well, maybe it does a bit at first, but not for very long. I think." He paused for a few moments. "I don't think I can recall all the details. It was a long time ago."

Simon felt as though there was something heavy on his chest. His entire body felt like it was on fire. He opened his mouth to speak but it was as though there were sandbags weighing down on his lungs, preventing him from speaking.

"Simon, I promise, it is not that bad," Leo attempted to comfort him.

Leo's voice sounded far away to Simon. He began to take deep, shuddering gasps of air. His vision went white and black. He was completely unable to process the crushing truth of his own mortality. He squeezed his eyes shut.

"I-I don't want to die!" he cried out, his voice shaking with sobs. Tears began to flow down his cheeks and splattered on the snowy bedspread.

Leo took Simon into his arms and hugged him tightly. "I know," he whispered in his ear.

They pulled away. Simon attempted to get his sobs under control.

"I'm scared."

"I know."

Simon sniffled and wiped his face.

"The thing that terrifies me the most about death is—" he stared up at the ceiling trying to find the words. "It's the fact that everyone will forget about me when I die. No one will care. No one will cry for me. There will be a funeral, some nice words, and they'll lower my casket into the ground. Then, everyone'll go home and forget about me."

Leo took Simon's hand and held it firmly in his own. "Simon, I promise that's not true."

"What do you know?"

"I cannot tell you how your friends and family feel. I do know for sure there is at least one person who cares deeply about you."

“There is no one.”

“There is me.” His voice was firm but filled with affection. He smiled at Simon sincerely. “I love you. I would never forget you, no matter. I would never abandon you, neither in life nor in death.”

A feeling of warmth, one that he had not felt in eternity, spread throughout Simon’s body. And there was something else...was it also love? He feebly pulled himself closer into Leo’s icy embrace.

“Then, will you stay with me, even when I’m dying? Will you hold my hand, just like this, when I die?”

“Yes, I promise. I promise you that when that time comes,” he squeezed Simon’s hand. “I’ll be there with you the whole time.”

Puppet Bride

Amelia stood in the cramped kitchen of her apartment, chopping the onions. It would need to be pasta night again. That's the easiest and cheapest meal to make after all. She sighed and wiped the sweat from the brow. She glanced up at the clock. Chloe should be home soon. Nervousness bubbled up in her stomach. She pulled out her phone and looked at what Chloe had sent her this morning before her shift started.

Are you going to be home this evening?

Yes.

Good. I have something I really need to talk to you about.

Amelia couldn't help but dread the conversation. She had a feeling she knew what it was going to be about. It was something she wasn't ready to have, something Chloe *knew* she wasn't ready to have. Still, she couldn't help but feel her heart tug when she read Chloe's next message:

Hope you have a great day. I love you so much.

Love you too.

Amelia bit her bottom lip and typed out another message with shaking fingers.

Hey, can we not talk about anything serious tonight? I'm not exactly in the mood for anything heavy.

Her thumb hovered over the “send” button, quivering as she dared herself to press it. She exhaled, deleted the text, and slammed her phone on the counter facedown. She brought her attention back to her onions, their sour and pungent odor filling her nose.

Her thoughts shifted to her parents. They were currently on vacation with her brother and his wife. She and Chloe hadn’t been invited, although that wasn’t much of a surprise. It wasn’t even worth asking at this point; they barely could stand being in the same room as Chloe.

She squeezed her eyes shut, their disappointed words and faces haunting her mind.

“We still love you of course,” was the first thing they said to her when she told them about Chloe. *“After all, God gave you to us. You are a gift from Him. But we cannot accept your lifestyle.”*

Amelia gasped and wiped away a tear that was trailing down her cheek. “Stupid onions,” she whispered to herself.

Suddenly, the front door opened, interrupting her thoughts. She flinched, but relaxed when she saw Chloe walk through the door.

“Ames!” Chloe called out to her. “I’ve been waiting all day to see you!”

“Hi Chloe,” Amelia responded, head down and eyes still focused on the cutting board.

Chloe came behind Amelia and wrapped her arms around her waist. “I missed you today,” she said, placing a kiss on Amelia’s cheek.

A small smile spread across Amelia's face. For the first time all day, there was warmth flooding into her heart. She turned around to embrace her partner, kissing her directly on the lips.

"I've missed you too."

"Wow, Ames. You look really tired. Is everything ok?"

"I'm fine." Amelia paused. "I've had a long day at work. That's all."

Chloe looked concerned but nodded. Suddenly, a grin spread across her face.

"Oh! You know, I have something I want to talk to you about, right?"

"Um, Chloe, about that..." Amelia hesitated.

"It's a surprise! Wait right here!" Chloe turned from Amelia and opened her briefcase.

Amelia tapped her foot anxiously. "Chloe, you don't have to get me anything. You know I don't like gifts."

"This isn't just a gift Amelia. You'll see what I mean!"

"Chloe—"

"I know you'll love it! I made sure to get the one you would absolutely love!" she pulled out a dark red box. Amelia's eyes widened.

"Chloe don't—" but before she could finish, Chloe was already bending down on one knee.

“Amelia,” she began. She opened the velvet box, revealing a bright golden ring encrusted with a ruby gemstone. “I know that this isn’t the most extravagant proposal ever. But I want you to know that I have never loved like I have loved you. And I want to show you that my love is eternal. So,” she took a deep breath. “Will you marry me?”

Amelia could see the pleading look in her eyes. She turned her head away and looked back at the onions.

“I need to start boiling some water.” Her voice sounded far away. “That way, we can eat the pasta soon.”

Chloe frowned and quickly raced to her feet. “What the hell, Ames?”

“I should keep cooking before it gets too late. You’re probably hungry after all.”

“Wha—no! I just asked you to marry me and all you can think about is making dinner?!”

Amelia firmly placed the pot on the stove with a loud *clang*. She turned up the flames and stared into the water, silent.

“Ames!” Chloe grabbed her by the shoulders and whirled her around. “It’s fine if you don’t want to! At least a straightforward ‘no’ would be better than this!”

Amelia still couldn’t meet her eyes. “Chloe, I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say. I-I promise that I really love you, it’s just...”

“It’s just what?”

Amelia pushed Chloe away. Her mind drifted back toward her family. Her parents couldn’t look at her in the eyes for months when she was caught kissing another girl in

the parking lot of her high school. They recoiled in disgust whenever she dared to mention the word *girlfriend* or *lesbian* around them. But the pride in their eyes when her brother got married to his wife was unmistakable. There was the unspoken “*Why can’t you be more like your older brother?*” It wasn’t something that had ever belonged to Amelia and was something that could never belong to her if she married another woman.

She shook her head. “Chloe, I love you so *so* much. I truly love you with all my heart. Really. But this is all so sudden, I...I...” her voice faltered.

“I get it,” Chloe said stiffly. “You don’t want it then.”

“It’s not that—”

“Ames, we’ve been together for six years!” Chloe raised her voice. “I can’t take it anymore! I want you; I want to move forward with you!” She became quiet. “I want you to take my relationship with you seriously.” She looked at Amelia one last time.

Chloe turned away. “Forget dinner. I’m not hungry. I think I’m going to go to bed right now.” She walked toward their bedroom and slammed the door. Amelia watched her walk away. *All we can do is pray that you will stop living in sin*, her family’s voices echoed in her head.



Amelia opened the door to her apartment, with her purse and an oddly shaped box in tow. She threw her purse and the box onto the kitchen table. She buried her face into her hands and sighed. *I can’t believe that he convinced me to buy this stupid thing. What am I going to tell Chloe?*

When Amelia was on her way to her shift at the mall that day, she had come face-to-face with a stand filled with countless dolls. There had been dolls of all shapes and sizes filling the shelves of the stand. They were quite beautiful, with their satin clothes and painted faces. Amelia couldn't take her eyes off the dolls, almost transfixed as she stared into their eyes. She was in awe, but also slightly disturbed. They were so lovingly crafted that it almost gave them a realistic quality. It had been nearly uncanny.

"Is there perhaps anything you find interesting?" the little stand's vendor had asked her.

"No, I'm just looking. I don't think I'll buy anything, sorry. Your dolls are really beautiful, though."

"Marionettes actually."

"What?"

"Marionettes. More commonly known as puppets. I specialize in crafting and designing marionettes."

"O-okay."

The vendor had picked up a puppet that was roughly the size of a shoebox. He extended his arm, holding it out to Amelia.

"If you're having a hard time picking out just one, ma'am, I have a suggestion for you."

The doll had sported thick, curly blonde hair and red painted lips. It's unblinking glass eyes stared up at the ceiling. Something about the doll made the hair on the back of

her neck stand up in that moment. She had backed away, eager to get to her shift in the mall.

“I’m not really looking to spend money right now.”

“I can give you a special discount. Normally I charge about \$50 for the little guys but I can give you half off,” the shopkeeper continued to press.

“I-I’m not sure if I really want a doll right now.”

“Do you have a daughter? Or perhaps a spouse?”

Amelia had shoved her guilt down at the mention of the word spouse.

“Not a spouse, but I have...I have a girlfriend.”

The shopkeeper smiled. *“Oh, a girlfriend! Any girlfriend would love to get this as a gift! You should buy it for her! Show her your love!”*

“I don’t—”

“I’ll let you on a little secret,” he had said, lowering his voice to a whisper. *“This marionette brings about good luck. It can make all your problems go away. All you have to do is buy it, my dear.”*

Amelia had relented and bought the stupid thing. She just wanted to get the shopkeeper to leave her alone, but now she was stuck with this creepy *thing*.

She stared at the box and sighed. She bet that Chloe would laugh in her face if she gave a gift like this to her. They weren’t children after all, and why would a stupid doll make her forgive Amelia?

At least Chloe wasn't back from work yet. There was a stab of guilt in her side for feeling relieved. She plopped down on the couch next to the box. Maybe some TV would take her mind off things? She was staring at the flickering lights when she heard Chloe cursing and fumbling for her keys outside their front door. She flipped it off and opened the door, only to be greeted by Chloe's icy glare. Amelia waved at her awkwardly.

"Hey."

"Hey yourself." Chloe pushed past Amelia and dumped her things onto the kitchen table. "Thanks for getting the door."

"No problem."

Tension filled the air, as neither woman dared to speak a word to the other. Amelia desperately tried to think of something to say, but her head pounded with exhaustion. She nervously fiddled with the buttons on her shirt and bit the inside of her cheek.

"Chloe, I'm—"

"Look, Ames, I'm sorry that I got so upset with you last night. I *get* that I asked you a life-changing question. But like I said, it's been 6 years. I feel like I'm reaching my breaking point. At the very least, I want an answer."

Chloe's eyes locked onto Amelia's. Amelia's heart was fluttering. All she wanted to do was throw her arms around Chloe and forget all the arguments and the fighting between them. She wanted to apologize, to promise to do better, even though she wasn't sure if she would actually be able to prove those promises weren't hollow. She stepped

forward to, arms stretched to embrace Chloe, but Chloe moved away, attention fixed on something else now.

“What’s this?” she asked, pointing at the doll-sized box on the table.

“Well, it’s a gift...I guess.”

“A gift?”

“I technically bought it for you. Um, you know, to make up for, you know, last night. It’s not much, but it was kinda meant to be my apology. Although, I don’t think you will like it very much...” Amelia braced herself for another fight. Chloe would probably be insulted by such an infantilizing gift.

“You didn’t have to get me anything,” Chloe said absentmindedly as she tore open the box and pulled out the doll, wrapped in a wad of bright red tissue paper.

Amelia cringed as she watched her partner tear off the wrapping paper, only to be shocked as her eyes twinkled with amazement.

“It’s so beautiful,” Chloe breathed. She shifted the doll into her arms, and caressed it’s face delicately with the tips of her fingers. Amelia recoiled a bit, noting that she had never seen Chloe hold something so lovingly or gently in all the time she knew her.

“I’m glad you like it.” Amelia strained her voice. “Although it’s technically not a doll, it’s a marionette.”

Chole nodded, but only seemed to be half-listening. “How did you know? I loved playing with dolls all the time when I was a little girl.”

“Really? You’ve never told me anything like that before.” Chloe had never seemed like the type who grew up playing with girly dolls or toys. Apparently, she never felt comfortable enough around Amelia to tell her these things.

Chloe shrugged. “It’s something I never thought was worth mentioning.”

“Oh.”

Chloe remained hunched over the puppet as though she was a scientist studying new specimen. Amelia wasn’t expecting such an odd fascination with this object.

“So, you really like the doll then?”

“You said it was a puppet I thought?” Chloe asked. Her voice sounded as though she was far away.

Amelia frowned. “Yes, that’s what I was told.”

“Huh.”

“Yeah...”

There was something peculiar about this doll that seemed odd. Amelia leaned forward to peek over Chloe’s shoulder to get a better look at the doll. She tried to touch Chloe’s shoulder, but Chloe snarled at her and shoved her away hard. Amelia stumbled to the ground but was able to catch herself on the table. She let out a grunt as shock radiated throughout her body.

“Stay away!”

“I-I just wanted a look at it! I’m sorry!”

Amelia tried to step forward but Chloe, she backed away like a caged animal.

“It’s MINE. You didn’t ask me permission to look at it!”

“Are you crazy? We live in the same apartment and practically share everything! I don’t have to ask you permission to use any of your other things!” Amelia’s gaze flitted to the doll, which was clutched tightly toward Chloe’s chest. “Plus, I was the one who bought the thing anyway!”

“You said it was for me!”

“It is for you! But—”

“No! It’s mine and if you want to look at it then you need to ask! You might break it or something.” Chloe twirled her fingers around the doll’s silky hair.

Amelia’s resolve deflated. “Fine. Will you please let me see the doll? I want a closer look.”

“No. You already had the chance to get a closer look.”

And with that Chloe stormed away toward their bedroom and slammed the door behind her. Amelia was left alone yet again, feeling as though she had just met her partner for the first time.



The puppet Amelia brought home somehow managed to make their relationship even more frayed than it already was. Its presence hung over the entire apartment like a thick, wet blanket that grasped them in a chokehold. Chloe would spend her entire day at work

as usual, but now she would gravitate to the doll as soon as she came home. Her obsession was getting to a point where she began to ask the doll if it wanted to go to work with her.

Amelia was growing tired of her partner's conversations with the doll. After all, she could barely get Chloe to say more than a few words a day to her, let alone rip her attention away from her precious doll. Chloe seemed to prefer the doll's company over her human partner, even glaring at Amelia if she so much as looked in the doll's direction.

That night, Amelia had come home with an armful of pizza boxes, attempting to catch Chloe's attention, maybe even force her to spend some time away from the doll.

"Look at what I brought home, honey!" Amelia called out, injecting cheeriness into her voice. She hoped that the smell would at least snap Chloe back to reality.

Chloe sat at the kitchen table with a tiny plastic hairbrush in her hand. She was gently combing the doll's hair, muttering things under her breath to the doll. She didn't seem to notice Amelia's presence at all.

Amelia's smile faltered a bit, but she pressed on. "I made sure to get your favorite! Pineapple with basil and tomatoes!" If anything could get her girlfriend's attention it was surely this.

Chloe side-eyed Amelia but said nothing to her. Instead, she whispered something into the doll's ear and burst out laughing. Amelia scowled.

“Oh haha. Nice to know that you find me trying to do something nice for you so hilarious.”

“So now you’re trying to do something nice for me? Well, there’s a first time for everything,” Chloe shot back.

“I-I do nice things for you all the time! What are you talking about?”

“How can you say that when you can’t even answer a yes-or-no question?”

Amelia didn’t answer. Instead, she plopped the boxes down on the table next to Chloe, who immediately leapt from her chair.

Amelia rolled her eyes. “Ok, what did I do now?”

“Don’t ever set food close to Annie again.” Chloe stared daggers at Amelia. “You could get her dirty. If you get her dirty, there will be hell to pay.”

“Geez, ok, ok...wait, did you name her Annie?”

“Why is it any of your business to what she’s called?”

“I was just curious about why you chose that name, that’s all,” Amelia tried to sound as casual as possible.

“That’s the name she wanted to be called.”

Amelia scrunched up her nose. “How would it know what it wants to be called? It’s not real.”

“She, not it,” snapped Chloe, “she told me what she wanted to be called.”

“She told you?”

“Yes, I’ve already said this three times. Now either put the pizza somewhere else or I’m leaving the kitchen with Annie.”

Amelia bit her lip but nodded. She put the pizza boxes on the counter and watched as Chloe fiddled with her doll. A twinge of jealousy pinched her chest. *We still love you honey.* Chloe was acting as though she wasn’t even in the room with her. *But we are disappointed that you have chosen a lifestyle of sin.*



Amelia stared down at the doll, her mouth stretched into a thin, straight line.

The doll grinned from ear-to-ear right back up at her. Eerily enough, it felt as though the doll was taunting her. As though it knew that Chloe was choosing it over her partner. Amelia roughly brushed her thumb across the doll’s face. What exactly was so special about this stupid thing anyway? She had gotten home from work early, so she could inspect the doll more closely.

Thankfully, today had been one of those days where her partner didn’t slip the doll into her briefcase with her. Amelia felt like that was probably a good thing; Chloe would probably lose her job if she let the thing distract her at work like it did at home.

Amelia could feel nothing but indifference, which was coupled with a growing contentment as she held the doll. This was surprising to her. She had almost expected to feel compelled to take care of the doll, to adore it as much as Chloe did. Instead, there was only numbness. She just didn’t understand why Chloe would be so fascinated by such a useless thing, when there was a whole other human being living with her.

Amelia placed the doll on the table. Perhaps the best course of option would be to get rid of the doll. Maybe she could throw it away, or donate it to a child? Chloe was far too old to be playing with a doll like this after all. Although Chloe was already upset with her enough as it is, maybe it would be unwise to rock the boat even more.

Amelia chewed on the inside of her cheek. Perhaps the best course of action would be to destroy the doll completely. That could be enough to finally get Chloe back to bring her out of her trance. *Do it, a voice nagged her. You need to do it now while you still have the chance. She isn't here. No one will know. You can pretend like the doll got misplaced and then you can move past this.*

Amelia reached for the doll, the idea still in the back of her head. She stopped, briefly, her hand still hovering over the doll's body. She retracted her hand and slowly backed away from the doll. She walked toward the kitchen to get started on dinner, both she and the doll still waiting for Chloe.



Amelia finished taking a shower and wrapped herself up in the towel when she heard Chloe talking to the doll again. Her laughter and chatter rang out, her voice echoing throughout their one-bedroom apartment. Amelia slowly cracked the door open to avoid making noise and strained her ears to hear what Chloe was saying. She slipped into the hallway and stopped in her tracks when she heard Chloe's voice.

"...Really? Is that so?" Chloe murmured to herself.

Amelia stepped forward as quietly as possible and craned her neck to see what she was doing. It looked like Chloe's hands were folded against the table, and she was muttering to something.

"Yeah, I've been getting fed up with her too. I think I'm at my breaking point."

Amelia's palms were clammy, and she clenched the fabric of her bathrobe tightly. Bathwater trickled down her back like drops of sweat. She's talking to it again, she realized with a sinking heart.

"She never listens to me like you do," Chloe continued to whisper, shaking her head. "I know she needs me, but she doesn't love me. Or at least, she doesn't love me enough to put me first."

Amelia's heart plummeted. She opened her mouth to call out, to insist that it wasn't true, she did love Chloe, but her voice faltered.

"When she started dating, she made me promise that I would never bother her or her parents. I was head over heels, so I agreed. I would play the role of the silent, pure girlfriend who could easily be handwaved as a close friend." Chloe brushed the hair out of her face with her fingers. There were tears slowly streaming down her cheeks, dripping down onto the doll's porcelain body.

"I guess some part of me thought that maybe things would change. That she would change." Chloe laughed bitterly. "She didn't love me enough to change. She continued to put me last. I'm always last no matter what."

Chloe pulled the doll into her arms, cradling it as though she was holding her newborn child for the first time.

“You know, I’ve never been the most important person to anyone. I was the black sheep of every friend group. I was the one kid in the class that all my teachers ignored. My parents could hardly stand the sight of me. My own partner doesn’t even care about getting engaged to me. I’m not worthy of being family apparently.”

She stroked the doll’s skin with the tips of her fingers.

“Well, at least you listen to me. I think I’m finished though. I don’t think I want to do this anymore.”

Chloe scooted her chair out from under the table and got up, still grasping the doll in her hands. She grabbed a blanket and a pillow from the storage closet and began making the couch up.

Amelia’s eyes were wide, and her entire body was completely still. She wanted to call out, but her mouth was numb. Her feet were rooted firmly into the ground, almost preventing her from moving toward her partner. Instead, she backed away into the room and quietly closed the door.



Amelia slipped out of the bedroom as quietly as possible. She was nearing her breaking point; she needed to end things now if she didn’t want to be a slave to a stupid doll. That, and she also needed Chloe back. She allowed others to have control over her life for too long, first her parents, then her bosses, and now this doll. No more. She would refuse to

perform as a puppet in someone else's play. It was time to take charge of her life, if not for her sake, then for Chloe's sake.

She tip-toed past the kitchen and into their tiny living room, near the couch where Chloe slept peacefully. Her arms were wrapped tightly around the doll. Amelia looked down at the doll. It stared back at her with its bright glassy eyes and its sickly-sweet smile. She stood there by the couch, determined to destroy it this time.

However, she was quite unsure of how she would even do this without Chloe noticing. She had no plans of how to get rid of the doll; she was acting too impulsively. She could easily throw it in the garbage, but Chloe would be able to dig it out of the trash just as easily. Hiding it or locking it away was also a no-go, as she knew that Chloe would tear apart the house to find it. She had a feeling that if she tossed it somewhere, it would manage to crawl its way back to the apartment. She shuddered. No, she needed to destroy it for good.

Her eyes darted toward the oven. Slowly, an idea began to form in her head. *Can porcelain melt?* she asked herself. *Will it be enough to destroy it completely?* Only one way to find out.

Without a second thought, Amelia cranked the oven up to 500 degrees Fahrenheit. Their oven tended to overheat at times, which means that the chance of it melting the doll would be greater. Amelia checked the microwave clock nervously as she waited for the oven to finish heating. *What if Chloe wakes up before it's done? What would she do to me if she realized what I was trying to do?* She squeezed her eyes shut. No, she would just toss it in, and then Chloe would snap out of it. She would have to be quick.

Finally, the oven finished with a loud *ding!* Amelia made her way over to Chloe, trying to stay as soundless as possible. She prayed that Chloe didn't wake up from the oven's alarm, or the creaking of her slippers on the wooden floor. After what seemed like an agonizing amount of time, Amelia was near enough to grab the doll. She reached out, yet hesitated once more, her hand outstretched. *No, you can't back out this time*, she scolded herself. *You have to do this for her. For you.* Whatever spell it had on Chloe needed to be broken. She snaked her hand around the couch and grasped the doll in her fist tightly. She held it in her arms and stared at it expressionlessly.

She was hit with a rush of adrenaline, an eagerness to shove the doll into the oven, to awake from this nightmare for good. She flung the oven door open with one hand, still clenching the doll in the other. The heat immediately hit her in the face; it was as though she was about to throw her entire body into a furnace.

"Perfect," she whispered. She could feel a grin spread across her face as the suffocating heat coated the entire room. She clenched her fist ready to toss the doll inside. Right before she was able to do so, a fist clenched her arm, pulling her away. Amelia's heart stopped. She turned around to face Chloe's murderous rage.

"MINE!" Chloe shrieked, as Amelia struggled to break free from her iron grip.
"GIVE IT BACK!"

Amelia shook her head wildly. She was shaking with terror; her heart was pulsing in her throat. She had never seen Chloe look at her, or anyone else for that matter. She tried to open her mouth to speak, but she only managed to wheeze a few breaths.

Chloe grabbed at Amelia's hair and dragged her away from the oven. Amelia cried out in pain.

"Chloe—OW!" She tugged at Chloe's nightshirt with her free hand trying to push her away.

"I said GIVE IT BACK!" Chloe screamed again. Her nails dug into Amelia's skin and warm blood began to drip down her arm.

"Y-you, you're hurting me," Amelia wept.

"MINE!"

Amelia blindly kicked at Chloe, catching her off-guard. She leaned forward and sank her teeth into her shoulder, causing Chloe to yell with pain and rage. But she let go of Amelia's arm.

Amelia dashed toward the still-ajar oven door, nearly sticking her hand inside. She winced; she could feel her body baking under the heat.

Chloe stood near the couch, staring with wide, blood-shot eyes. "N-no, don't." She shook her head. "Not my A-Annie..."

Amelia took a deep breath. "Chloe, this is for your own good. This doll is destroying you." She tossed the doll into the oven and slammed the door shut.

Chloe wailed horrid, inhumane noises that Amelia never thought Chloe was physically able to make. She barreled forward, roughly throwing Amelia to the ground. To Amelia's horror, Chloe opened the oven door and stuck both her hands inside. She

screamed in pain as the heat seared her body. The overpowering stench of cooked flesh and porcelain filled the room. Amelia gagged.

Chloe writhed in pain but still managed to pull both her hands and the doll out of the oven. Its hair was singed, its dress was nearly ash, and its partially melted skin was cooking in Chloe's hands. Amelia's jaw dropped in horror as her eyes moved toward Chloe's burns. It looked like she had directly touched the boiling metal of the oven to rescue the doll. Her skin was raw and red; she could already see dead pieces of flesh hanging off her fingers. Tears were streaming down her face, but she continued to cradle the burnt remains of the doll in her meaty hands even so.

Amelia felt her stomach lurch at the sight. She jumped up to her feet and raced toward the bathroom, without so much as a second glance. She leaned her head over the toilet, retching as she emptied out the contents of her stomach.



The next morning, Chloe still lay unresponsive on the couch, almost catatonic. The deformed doll was still clutched tightly in her unbandaged hands, which were now beginning to ooze with puss. Amelia passed by Chloe, trying to get Chloe's attention, tried to comfort her, but it was all too late. Chloe's only indication that she knew Amelia was there was when she shifted away from her touch. Amelia glanced at the clock.

"Chloe, please bandage your hands."

Silence.

“Chloe, please. You could get a serious infection, or even something like sepsis. Have you even washed your wounds yet?”

“...”

“I can help you. I have some time before my shift.”

“...”

“I know you’re awake. Stop pretending like you can’t hear me.”

“...”

“Chloe, please. I’m sorry. We can start over. We can—” Amelia stopped herself. She sighed. “You have to understand. I was trying to do what was best for you. I just wanted to go back to normal. I just—”

She brushed away a few tears and picked up her purse. She was about to walk out the door when Chloe spoke.

“There won’t be a normal.” Her voice was muffled through the pillows, but Amelia could hear the exhaustion and heartbreak, nonetheless.

She said nothing in return. What more was there to say at this point? She walked out the door, hoping that by some miracle Chloe would still be there when she was finished with work.

Later that evening, Amelia returned to a dark, empty apartment. The only lighting was the gentle sunlight that seeped through the blinds of the windows. Amelia already could tell that something was off before she even stepped through the door.

“Chloe?” she called out, her voice echoing throughout the room.

She stood in the doorway, and then she spotted something that twinkled on the kitchen table. Her heart tumbled to her stomach, and she let out a gasp that sounded like a sob. She dumped her purse onto the ground and walked forward, dread building up with every single step. She laced her fingers around the small object that was bathing in the evening light, picking it up for further inspection. She was holding the engagement ring that she and Chloe had picked out together, but her brain was still trying to process what exactly she was looking at.

Amelia twirled the ring around in her fingers over and over as she stared at it blankly. Her legs gave out; she collapsed to the floor. She held her aching stomach, her body wracked with sobs.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” she howled over and over, although she wasn’t sure if it was to Chloe or to herself.

She grasped the ring tightly into her fist, the metal cutting into her skin.

“I’m sorry...” she repeated once more through her tears, but there was no one left to hear her.

The Monster in the Alleyway

Josh stared outside the window of his apartment, watching as the rain slammed onto the glass. The droplets trickled downward, hurtling into each other to create something new. He wished that he could be consumed by the water that way, to disappear and combine into something unrecognizable. He breathed, his breathe creating clouds of fog against the surface. He pressed his hands against the glass and watched as his reflection wavered in the window. He looked like a mess.

Briiiiiiiiiinnnnnnngggg!

“Shit,” he mumbled to himself. “Please don’t be Mom.”

He walked over to his bed and picked up his phone. Its screen was brightly lit with the caller ID sporting blinding white letters that spelled out “Mom.” Josh groaned. After a few agonizing seconds, he pressed accept with his pointer finger.

“Hello?”

“Josh!” his mother called out back to him cheerily. Josh winced at the volume of her voice.

“Mom!” he answered, injecting as much false cheeriness into his voice as he could. “It’s so good to hear from you! It’s been a while!”

“It really has been! But it wouldn’t be an issue if you called me more often!”

Josh sat down against the edge of the bed. He watched as the raindrops reflected the bright reds, greens, yellows, and blues of the downtown Houston area. They warped

together in a distorted mess of purples, which filtered into his room. He looked around the room, which clearly hadn't been cleaned in months.

“Ah, I'm sorry, Mom. I promise that I'll call you more often.”

“Good! I probably annoy you so much, but I just can't help it! I miss my baby boy!”

Josh dug his fingernails into his sheets and gritted his teeth. He let out a forced chuckle.

“I've been an adult for nearly nine years Mom...”

“Oh, I know, I know, but I have a hard time seeing it that way! My son all grown up and attending law school in Houston—”

Josh sucked in a sharp breath.

“—and I'm just so proud of you!”

“Thanks. It means a lot.”

“How has that been going anyway? You're still making good grades, yeah?”

Josh grabbed the sides of his boxers and grips them tightly. He looks over at his alarm clock. 9:30 PM. *Is it really this late already? I need to get started on that assignment. I really can't afford to fail again...*

“Y-yeah. Everything is going great.”

“That's my boy! Remember, your father was worried about you going so far away but look at you now! You're in the top of your class!”

“Uh-huh.”

Josh bent over and began picking up clothes. He lifted them up to his face to see which ones smelled the least disgusting. He tossed a t-shirt, sweatpants, and socks onto his bed. His mother continued to chatter animatedly.

“Your father told me that if you can stay in the top ten percentile it increases your chances of getting into a good firm!”

“Yup.”

He held the phone away from his ear, barely aware of the voice on the other end. His mind became hazy, as though it is far away from his body. *I need to get to the library now if I want to finish. Do I even have a chance of finishing it now? There's no way.*

“—and don't even worry about that horrid ex-girlfriend, honey.”

Josh nearly dropped his phone on the floor. Right. He'd just been dumped.

“What about her?”

“I know the breakup has been hard on you, but this is a sign! You know, I have a real good friend, her name is Mrs. Bennett. You've met her a few times! Do you remember Mrs. Bennett?”

“No.”

“Well, she has a lovely daughter named Ruthie about your age and I think she would love to meet you! Next time you come to visit, I can call her and ask—”

“Hey Mom?”

“Yes?”

“I need to go.”

“O-oh okay!” His mother’s voice sounded strained. “I guess I just thought we could talk a little bit longer?”

“I have some work I need to get done. I have this assignment I need to turn in soon.”

“Ah, all right! I get it, I get it! That’s my hardworking son! I love you sweetie and I miss you!”

“Love you.”

Josh ended the call and quickly got dressed. He walked briskly out of his unit carrying nothing but his briefcase. His urged his legs to walk faster, but it is as though they are the consistency of molasses. He plunged the door to the building open and walked outside. *Why didn’t you do more work ahead of time, he wondered. Why must you always do this to yourself? Your advisor said that you would fail if you kept this up. Will you even make it to the library in enough time? Maybe if you cleaned up your filthy place and made it look suitable, you could get stuff done there.*

Oddly enough, every part of Josh was numb. He knew that he should feel urgent, worried, but there was nothing. Nothing but indifference. Maybe he should just quit, stop trying altogether. It would be less painless than sleepless nights of agonizing papers and study sessions. Of the same days and nights passing over and over until time itself blends, becoming indistinguishable.

Josh never really wanted to become a lawyer. It was his school counselor who suggested that he would be good at the profession, which was something his parents were ecstatic about. So, he went for it anyway. Passed the bar exam, got into a decent school. Met a pretty girl, became a couple. And then she left. He couldn't blame her leaving, just like all the others he dated. Anyone could do better than him. Who would want to be with some guy who was pretending to live, just going through the motions just so he could get through each day?

He sloshed through puddles of water. The rain poured down harder, mercilessly until it sprayed in his face and distorted his vision. Was it even worth it at this point? He slipped against the water, nearly falling onto the ground. He stared at his feet and widened his eyes. A streetlamp shone overhead, illuminating a puddle filled with bright red mixed into the muddy water. *Blood?* His thoughts were panicked. *It can't be blood. There's no way. But it looks just like it...*

Josh turned his head toward a nearby alleyway where the blood was pouring out from, staring into it with sheer terror. He stepped forward, at the edge of the darkness. *Don't do it. You have no idea what's in there. You may never come back out.*

"Hello?" he called out against his better judgement. "Is anyone there?"

He strained his ears, trying to make out any sort of answer. The only thing he could hear was ragged breathing. He squinted his eyes, barely able to see the silhouette of a figure lying on the ground. It looked like a...man? Perhaps? Though much larger than the size of an average human man. Despite every facet of his body screaming at him to stop, Josh continued to step forward, curious about the body in front. He took out his

phone, flipped on his flashlight, and turned it onto the figure. He gasped, shaky and stunned.

It wasn't human.

Or at least, there was no way it couldn't be human. It was covered in fur, sported large horns, sharp claws, and massive fangs that peered out of his snarling snout. Muscles rippled across its body as it breathed. There seemed to be odd horns sticking out from its back...no they were wings, although they were folded up against its side. The entire thing was massive, something that could easily end Josh's life in one fowl swoop. Josh dropped his phone and it shattered against the wet pavement. The light went out and Josh was enveloped in darkness with the creature once more. The figure stirred.

"Is someone there?" its (his?) deep voice rumbled. His English was startlingly clear.

Josh yelped. Iciness swept through his entire body, and he realized that he couldn't feel his fingers nor his toes. He was lightheaded, and his stomach became weak with sickness. He vaguely wondered if he was going into shock. The creature growled, struggling to sit up and turn toward Josh. It sniffed at the air.

"So, someone is here. And it smells like a human, is that correct?" The creature's voice was gruff, raspy.

Josh swallowed. He began to back away. The creature continued.

"You can't hide from me, human. But perhaps I shall spare you if you help me."

Josh fought the urge to burst into tears. He opened his mouth, surprised he still had a voice, and called out to the creature.

“I’m s-s-sorry, uh, s-s-sir? But I need to get to the library. You see, I have an assignment due soon—”

“Please,” the creature begged. “Please help me. I will be in your debt. I will promise not to hurt your or your dearest kin.”

The creature struggled to lift itself up. Josh could see his eyes, red slits blinking back intelligently through the blackness. Josh stared back at them and nodded. His entire body was shaking horribly, and his bladder was threatening to burst. Yet he still stepped toward the creature anyway. His heart pumped adrenaline through his body, and his brain was manic. *I think I’m definitely going into shock now. Jesus, I hope I don’t faint here.*

“I c-c-can afford to miss this one.”

He reached the figure and kneeled next to him. With no warning, the creature grabbed onto his shoulder with an iron grip. Josh hissed in pain. He could feel the creature’s claws digging into his skin.

“Yes, help me. Please.”

Using Josh’s body to steady himself, the creature managed to get to his feet. He pulled Josh up along with him. Josh let out a strangled noise that sounded like a cry for help. He strained his neck to look at the creature’s eyes. It was probably a good foot or two taller than him. Josh shuddered. The creature leaned onto Josh’s body, who’s legs

trembled from the weight. The creature's fur was surprisingly soft, warm. Josh gulped down his own fears and did his best to support them both.

"I have an apartment. But it's pretty far away from here."

"Take me there."

"But—"

"I need a place to rest. I'll do my best to explain everything in the morning. I promise that I will do my best to show you my gratitude tomorrow, little human."

"Ahh, ok. I guess."

The creature smiled at him, showing all its glowing white fangs.

"Lead the way."

And the pair struggled their way through the dark back alleys and roads, back toward Josh's empty apartment.



Josh stared at the sleeping monster. He ran a hand through his head of hair and let out a broken laugh.

"Shit. *Shit*. What am I going to do?"

Orange and yellow sunlight streamed through the windows, reflecting off the withered raindrops that still clung to the cool glass. The rain had waned long ago, and everything was quiet, save for the gentle hum from the air conditioner and the chirps of birds. Josh squinted at the rising sun in the distance. Of course, he had missed his

assignment's deadline. He turned toward the creature again, for what must have been the hundredth time that night. There were bigger issues he had to deal with than homework. Perhaps this was a sign, either from the heavens or hell, that he should just give up.

He sighed and rubbed his eyes with his fingers until they burned.

"I think I really am going insane," he muttered to himself.

He should really try to get some sleep. He made his way from one cramped room to another, kicking garbage out from under his feet. He stood over his cheap couch, which was covered in a sea of clothes and trash. He shoved it all onto the ground and sat down on the couch. *Yes, that's it. Perhaps I should go to sleep. When I wake up, this will have been a dream.*

Josh held at his trembling hand in order to inspect the back of it. *They say if I'm dreaming, I'll have less than five fingers.* He carefully counted five fingers repeatedly. He cursed under his breath and his body shuddered sporadically. It was all too real to be a dream. He looked at the closed door to his apartment.

Last night, he carried his monster into his apartment, where they both collapsed at the doorstep in exhaustion. Josh had grabbed bandages and a first aid kit from his bathroom to stop the bleeding. With the help of the now barely coherent monster, Josh just managed to stop the bleeding with a tourniquet and disinfected the area. *Do demons even get staph infections?* he had asked himself when applying the Neosporin. When they were finished, Josh dragged the monster to his room, where it collapsed on his bed. It called out to Josh before going to sleep.

“Thank you...human. I will remember this. I will not come to harm you nor your kin.”

Josh shook his head at the memory. Why had he even bothered helping this creature in the first place. Was it because he was terrified? Intrigued? Empathetic? Or was he merely an idiot who couldn't make decisions properly? He did let this bleeding creature into his home...oh right, it was bleeding wasn't it?

He looked down at himself and his stomach dropped, as though he had just been pushed off a high ledge. He was covered in...that *thing's* blood. He tugged at his shirt and rubbed at the spots in disbelief. He pressed the fabric against his nose and inhaled; the smell of rusted iron filled his nostrils. He choked. He groaned again.

“How the hell am I going to get this out?!”

His fingers became numb, and he dropped the fabric. Shit. What about the rest of his apartment? What about the rest of his complex?

Josh launched himself from the couch and surveyed the rest of the room.

“Nononononononono,” he muttered to himself.

Dried blood clung to his walls, his furniture, his carpet. His stomach turned once more. If this was real, how was he going to clean all of it up? He opened the door to his apartment and looked into the hallway. There was a trail of blood leading up to his apartment. He sucked in his breath and ran a hand through his hair roughly. Suddenly, the blood began bubbling up and fading away, sissling as it did so. It was as though the blood

was disintegrated before his very eyes. He turned back to his room and watched it slowly disappear into the air. *Huh*, he thought. *Can monster blood do that?*

He felt a stinging pain against his chest. He looked down at his clothes and his eyes bulged. The blood was fading away from the fabric, taking his clothes with it. It was as though it was burning and searing the very cloth that held his clothes together. He slammed the door shut and grabbed at the collar of his shirt.

He rushed into his bathroom, barely remembering to shut the door behind him. He pulled off his crumpling clothes and threw them to the floor before turning off the facet to his shower. He slipped, nearly tumbling to the floor and balanced himself against the wall. He gritted his teeth painfully as the warm water rushed over his naked body.

It's okay, it's okay. He scrubbed away at the blood caked on his body. He hissed in pain as it sizzled against his bare skin. The red mixed with the water and swirled away into the drain of the tub, which was nearly black due to lack of care. He watched the water bubble up and smoke from the searing heat of the blood. *Huh. I guess I need to clean my bathroom too.*

BANG BANG BANG!

A rough pounding at his door scattered his thoughts, startling him. He cried out.

“Human? Human, I know you’re in there!” the creature shouted gruffly.

Josh opened his mouth to speak, but just managed to squawk in terror. The creature pounded at the door.

“I need to talk to you about something!” It paused briefly. “I’m coming in!”

“Wait—” Josh gasped.

With no warning, the door was pushed open, and the creature came through. Josh shrieked with fury.

“NO! Don’t come in, don’t come in!”

He blindly grasped at the shower curtain, pressing it against his naked body. The tension rod snapped out of place, pulling the shower curtain down along with it. Josh barely managed to dodge the rod, while the water-stained curtain draped itself over his body. Josh gasped and gracelessly stumbled out of the shower toward the creature’s feet. Josh glared up at more furious than scared.

“Haven’t you ever heard over privacy?” He clutched the curtain to his body even tighter. “I invite you into my home, treat your injuries, and now you walk in on me without a care?”

The creature ignored him. His red eyes flickered around the room, and he let out a huff that sounded almost like a laugh.

“You live in filth.”

“Really? I haven’t noticed.” Josh’s words were sharp with sarcasm.

He found that he no longer feared this creature, now more numbness or irritation at the situation. *Maybe I’m just going into shock.* He blindly groped for a towel on the floor. The creature handed him one that was covered in stains.

“We’ll need to take care of that. I can’t live like this.”

Josh blinked. “*We?* What do you mean live here?!”

“That’s what I needed to talk to you about.” He gestured toward his bandaged side. “I need someplace to stay until I can heal properly.”

Josh let out a deep breath and wrapped the towel around his body. The creature roughly forced him to his feet. Josh bit the inside of his cheek. What on earth had he gotten himself into?



Josh pulled his sopping hair into a loose ponytail and was sitting down, legs crossed on his bed. He managed to scrounge up some clothes that were slightly clean and put them on his body. The creature was standing in the doorway, as per Josh’s request. His gaze was hard, unreadable, and he never took his eyes off Josh’s body. Josh shifted kept shifting and readjusting his body uncomfortably. He took a deep breath.

“So...um, what are you going to tell me, uh—” he stopped himself. “What is your name anyway? Do you even have one?” He ventured.

The creature turned his head toward the window, where the sun shone confidently in the sky. He grinded his teeth, as though he was mulling over the answer. Josh searched his face, trying to decipher what exactly the creature was thinking, but it didn’t do any good. It didn’t look like it was emoting, or at least not in the way that a person would. Though, it did look as though there was a deep sadness in his eyes.

“Reapers like me are given names, but it’s a long one. You probably won’t be able to pronounce it well as someone who speaks the language of humans.” The creature rubbed the back of his neck. “However, I was a human once, and I have a name of my own.”

Josh stared at him. “And? What was it?”

The Reaper’s eyes flashed angrily. Josh leaned against his bedframe, his heart pounding against his chest. Jesus, what did he do to make it so upset?

“Do not ask me for my name. I don’t remember it.”

“But—”

“You can merely call me by my title, Reaper.”

He cut Josh off abruptly, as though that was the end of the subject. Josh clamped his jaw shut. The Reaper pushed himself away from the doorframe and sat on the bed next to Josh.

“Speaking of names--” Josh instinctively peeled himself away from his hulking frame as he scooted closer. “What do you call yourself, human?”

Josh frowned but obeyed. Telling him that wouldn’t be divulging too much information, would it?

“It’s Joshua. Everyone calls me Josh for short, though.”

The Reaper hummed in agreement. “That’s a fitting name for you.”

“Th-thanks.” Josh looked at the Reaper quizzically, wondering if that was a compliment or not. “Ok...Reaper, let me get this straight? Why do you need to stay at my place?”

“I already told you, human. I’m injured. I can’t complete my work as a Reaper until all my wounds have healed.” He spoke slowly, as though Josh was a child.

Josh clenched his fists and stared back.

“What are you talking about? What are Reapers? What are you? And what makes you think that you can just take over my apartment without my consent?”

The creature’s large claws bore into the bed, as though he was about to rip the sheets to shreds. His massive wings remained folded behind his back, but they twitched, as though he wanted to fling them open.

“Trust me, I do not want to remain here anymore than you do. But I’ll do what I must to survive.” Reaper looked back down at Josh, his red eyes glittering. “I’ll explain myself to you. It’s the least I can do after you’ve helped me, I suppose.”

Josh nodded slowly. He was eager to know more about what exactly was happening.

“As I said, I was a human at one point. I lived a normal life, just like everyone else. But I...I don’t remember much about it. Just that it was an average, boring life.”

The monster stared off into the distance once more, as though he was trying to recall what exactly happened. His mouth turned downward into a frown, and he grimaced as though he was in pain.

“I do remember how I died, though. That is probably my most vivid memory, out of everything. I was still quite young, probably in my late 20s or early 30s? Either way, I was shot.”

Josh’s eyes widened and he clenched his jaw. He let out a hiss of sympathy.

“Sh-shot? Shot to death?”

Reaper let out a low growl. “Yes. There was a gunfight. Or something. I’m not sure, but I think I was caught up in the crossfire. The bullet hit me in the stomach, and I was bleeding everywhere.” His eyes flitted to a bloodstain in the corner of Josh’s bedroom. “I was so injured...much like I am now. I couldn’t stand up properly, so I just lay on the ground as the blood seeped out of my body and into the earth.”

He pressed his hand against his bandaged stomach, as though he could feel the ghost of pain. Josh reached out, tempted to touch Reaper’s arm, to comfort him. But he let his hands fall to his side, still once more. His mouth felt numb.

“Did anyone help you?”

“There were voices...voices that called out my name over and over. It got darker and colder. I was too tired to keep my eyelids open, and I knew that if I slept, I would never wake up again. I remember the paralyzing fear of dying, the unknown. I didn’t want to go, not yet. At the same time, I wanted the pain to end. To hurry up and die so I couldn’t feel anything.” He turned toward Josh wearing a wry smile. “Isn’t that funny? I wanted to die and live at the same time.”

Josh tried to swallow, but his throat was completely dry. A spasm shook his body. *You know that feeling all too well, don’t you?* a voice whispered in the back of his mind. He said nothing and the monster continued.

“When I came to, I found myself in a dark place. A purgatory, something that wasn’t quite Heaven and wasn’t quite Hell. There was another being there with me, a Reaper like myself, although I didn’t know at the time. They told me that my death was unnatural, so I was given a choice. I could die and go to either heaven or hell depending

on how I lived as a mortal human. Or I could choose to be reborn as a Reaper, someone who collected the souls from the earth and brought them to the afterlife.”

“So, you chose to be reborn?” Josh whispered.

Reaper nodded. “I did. I wanted to live. I wanted a second chance and got to be reborn as an immortal creature. Although there were some things that did get taken away from me as a result.” He paused. “Such as my humanity. My memories. Even the ability to die if I wanted to do so. All for a life where I toil away.”

“I don’t mean to be blunt, but that sounds truly dreadful,” Josh responded, nearly forgetting who, and what, he was talking to.

The Reaper barked out a laugh.

“I suppose I don’t mind it. Probably better than the other alternatives, where I go waste away in the afterlife for all eternity.”

“Sure. Whatever floats your boat, I guess.” He paused. “But that doesn’t explain why you need to stay at *my* place. Or how you got that.” He pointed to the bandaged wound.

“All you need to know is that I got hurt while traveling between the earth and purgatory. Nothing else.”

Josh crossed his arms. “At the very least I want to know why you needed me of all people.”

“I normally don’t show myself to humans, but I was desperate. I saw you coming my way and I revealed myself to you. That’s all you need to know.”

Josh rubbed his temples in distress. *Jesus, why didn't I just leave him there?! Surely, he could've found someone else!*

"I don't really have a choice, do I?"

The Reaper smirked, showing all his sharp teeth. Josh crossed his arms.

"Fine. You can stay until you're healed, but no longer, got that!"

"Then we have a deal, human."

Josh groaned. He got up from the bed and walked toward the other side of the room. "I think I'm going to take my leave now. I should probably go get some things done. You should stay here."

The Reaper readjusted himself on the bed. He kicked away some of the garbage on the floor in disgust.

"Maybe when you get back, we could do something about your...living situation."

Josh sighed and slapped his palm against his forehead.

"Yeah. Yeah, that might be a good idea."

"I have no idea how you live like this."

"You've already made that clear, buddy."

Josh opened the door and turned back toward the creature. Something in the back of his mind was begging, screaming at him to ask. He caught the Reaper's gaze.

"Why did you do it? Choose to be reborn this way?"

The Reaper merely shrugged.

“I’m not sure myself. I guess I just didn’t want to stop thinking...for everything to go dark.”

Unsatisfied with the answer, Josh dropped his shoulders. He nodded, waved goodbye to the creature awkwardly, and shut the door.



Josh balanced a bag of groceries in his arms as he made his way back to his apartment. Why did he think that this would be a good idea? Why couldn’t he have just taken the bus back to his apartment? He stood at the doorway and fumbled for his keys. He glanced nervously at neighbors who walked past him. Thankfully, no one had realized that something was going on at his apartment the entire two weeks the Reaper had been staying with him. But he was going to have to do something new if he wanted something to change. He was running tight on money. Luckily, he had his retail job, but it was getting hard to work long hour shifts without worrying about the monster living inside his home.

His ringtone went off and he swore under his breath.

“Damn it...”

He clumsily dug his phone out of his pocket and his heart sank when he stared at the caller ID. He hit the answer button and put the phone up against his head.

“Hi, Mom. What’s up?”

“Josh! It’s been over two weeks since I last heard from you! I miss hearing your voice so much! Why don’t you call me more?”

“Mom, I’m so sorry, but I’ve been super busy with school!” He put on his fakest cheerful voice, trying to keep out any trace of guilt.

“I’m sure you’ve been working hard! What have you been up to? Are your grades still good?”

Josh’s heart stopped. In truth, he had not gone to school a single time since that night when he found the Reaper bleeding to death in the alley. He just couldn’t. He had ignored every single email from professors, every phone call, and texts from worried peers. He wondered how long it would take for the school to finally kick him out. A part of him wished that they hurried up and did it. But he couldn’t tell his mother that, not after she and his father supported him all these years. He drew in a deep, shaky breath, trying to think of the best way to formulate an answer to this question.

“Look, it’s all a bunch of boring technical stuff that I don’t want to bore you with.”

“You would never bore me—”

“Hey, look I really think that I have to go soon! I really need to get something done! I’ll talk to you soon, ok?”

“O-ok.” He could hear the hurt in his mother’s voice. “I love you. *Please* promise you’ll actually call soon?”

Josh bit his lip. Guilt grew inside of his stomach, building up like mold. *She*

couldn't understand what's going on in your life right now. No one could. You have to let it go, he scolded himself.

“Sure Mom. I’ll call you back. I promise.”

He hit the end button and unlocked the door to his apartment. *Christ you really are the world's worst son.*

Reaper was sitting on the edge of his couch, flipping through a book. His lax posture suggested that he was incredibly bored. He turned his head as Josh walked into the room.

“You’re finally back, human.”

Josh scowled and dumped the groceries onto the table.

“Like I said, don’t call me that. You know my name.”

“Fine, *Josh*.”

The creature got up, his head nearly hitting the ceiling above. He stomped over to Josh.

“Don’t you have anything more interesting to do in this tiny place?”

Josh narrowed his eyes.

“Hey, you’re the one who decided to stay here. And I don’t exactly have time to entertain you.” He looked at the clock. “I have to go to work in a few hours.”

The Reaper mumbled something and covered his face.

“You know, if you want something to do, you could always help me put up the groceries.”

The creature’s eyes flashed with anger. He nearly looked offended.

“How dare you? I’m a Reaper, my kind is not suited for such lowly tasks meant for humans.”

Josh rolled his eyes. Who did this guy think he was fooling? He had been lying on his couch, unmoving for weeks on end.

“Suit yourself. If you’re so above humans or whatever.”

Josh opened his fridge door. As usual, smelled like someone had raided his fridge and stuck a dead body inside. The putrid smell of rotting meat, spoiled dairy, and moldy leftovers filled his nose. He was usually used to the stench, but it was particularly unbearable today. He pulled his head out of the fridge door, gagging. He rubbed at his watering eyes.

“...Ok it’s time I clean this place out.”

The Reaper snorted irritably. Josh glared at him.

“What?”

“You think you would have figured that out by now.”

Josh said nothing. He put on some rubber gloves, ripped a trash bag out from under the sink and looked around his dirty apartment. He froze. As usual he had no idea where to start.

He paced around the living room, unable to shake the fact that this was going to be an insurmountable task. He groped at a few stray cans and chip bags on the ground before throwing the trash bag to the side.

“Forget about it,” he murmured to himself. “This isn’t worth it.”

A wave of exhaustion came over him, suddenly hitting him at full force. *Maybe I should just go to bed. I can find a way to somehow Tetris-fit the groceries into the fridge—*

“You’re already giving up?” The Reaper broke through his thoughts.

Josh blinked. He laughed nervously.

“Well, I don’t feel like doing it now. Maybe I can do it some other time.”

“You’ve been living like this much longer since I’ve been here, haven’t you?”

Josh nodded cautiously. Much to his surprise, the hulking monster picked up the garbage bag himself. He sighed dramatically, loudly.

“Fine. If you aren’t going to do it, then I guess I’ll do it myself. I’m sick of living in such squalor.”

Josh stood there in shock as he watched the Reaper clean. He wasn’t used to living with anyone else, and he certainly wasn’t used to receiving help from a monster. As he watched, his bout of exhaustion ebbed away. He clasped his gloved hands together and picked up a can from the floor.

“I can’t let you clean my own apartment all by yourself.”

The monster stared at him. Josh could feel the red eyes on his back, boring into his soul like white hot fire.

“I thought you were too lazy to clean.”

“I usually don’t get the luxury of being offered help.”

The Reaper merely grunted in response.

The two of them worked together in silence. Josh didn’t understand why the creature was so fixated on helping him. It was horrible and dehumanizing labor, but Josh was beginning to be able to see the actual floor again. It was as though sandbags had been lifted from his chest. He snuck a glance at the creature and a burst of gratitude flooded his body. The creature usually acted so distant, so cold, yet it was offering to help him after all. He had told Josh that he was no longer human, nor did he have human tendencies, but maybe that wasn’t completely true. Perhaps there was a shred of humanity left in the creature. Perhaps he was capable about caring for others. Or maybe he did feel like staying in Josh’s disgusting home was beneath him.

Josh smiled to himself. He couldn’t remember the last time he smiled so genuinely or was so warm inside.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

He didn’t intend for the creature to hear him, but he received a gruff “You’re welcome” in response.



It wasn't something that Josh could quite understand himself. There were few quiet moments where Josh wasn't thinking of anything and then his inhuman houseguest would pop into the back of his head. When he was away from the apartment, he wondered what the Reaper was doing all by himself. Was he almost done healing? When was he going to leave? Time was passing by and the creature was still not ready to leave. How long did it take for an immortal demon to heal, anyway? Despite his reluctance to allow the Reaper to stay in his home, Josh was no longer keen on letting him leave.

Sometimes he would be at work, and someone would begin to flirt with him. Josh awkwardly laughed it off, rejecting any advances. *You can't date*, he would tell himself, *not while that demon is in your life*. There was something about the creature that made Josh eager to get up in the morning and return to his home after work. He was happy to return to a cleaner apartment, of course, but he was also eager to spend time with the strange creature. Josh no longer thought about any of his exes in the same way; he had long forgotten about them, as they were barely on the fringes of his mind. He wondered if the Reaper thought about him in the same way, if he even cared about Josh. He was sure he just saw him as a tool, as a way to get shelter.

When the two of them were at home alone, Josh's mind couldn't even escape the Reaper. He was always to steal glances when he was sure the creature wasn't looking. Josh found everything about his appearance to be intriguing. He studied his dark fur, massive claws, folded wings, and snarling mouth. He found himself memorizing every nook and cranny of his body, until he could close his eyes and picture the creature perfectly in front of him. He kept an eye on the Reaper's wound to try to gauge how it

was healing, because he wouldn't tell Josh when pressed. He pondered more about the Reaper's personal life, his humanity. Days went by and more questions formed.

One night, over a month after Josh had brought the Reaper into his home, the two of them were spending time together on the couch. They had just finished an episode of *The Great British Baking* show, which was Josh's idea. He had been trying to get the Reaper interested in humanity by showing him his favorite shows. Josh turned off the TV and stretched his arms out.

"So, did you like it?" Josh asked.

"No."

"Oh."

Silence permeated the room. Josh fiddled with the tassels of the throw pillows of his couch awkwardly. His face was flushed.

"Whatever. You don't like anything I show you anyway."

"That's because it's boring. Your human shows are boring."

Josh threw his hands up into the air in exasperation.

"Well, what do you like to do? I don't know anything about you other than your weird occupation as an underworld deliver guy!"

"Reaper," the creature corrected in a clipped voice. "I already told me everything you need to know about me. And I don't 'like to do' anything because I only have time for my job."

"Oh, c'mon. You really don't have time to do anything for fun?"

“I already told you that’s all I do. It’s the reason I lived.”

Josh turned his head away from the Reaper, resting it on the armrest.

“Well, was there anything that you remember liking back when you were a human.” He glanced up nervously, almost expecting the Reaper to blow up at him. But he didn’t.

“I already told you, I barely have any memories from when I was a human.” His voice sounded pained.

Josh put his hands up in defense.

“All right, I won’t ask about that.”

Josh yawned. He was tired and he had an early shift tomorrow morning. He grabbed one of his pillows and began to walk back toward his room.

“I should really get to bed,” he called back.

“Wait,” the Reaper interrupted.

Josh turned back around. “HmMMM. Do you need an extra blanket or something? I know the floor can be uncomfortable.”

“You demand so much information from me.”

Josh frowned at the accusation.

“I don’t—”

“I want to know something about you. Why did you destroy your own home? Most humans I’ve seen don’t let their living spaces get this way.”

Josh found that he was shaken at the question. It was as though he had been thrust in the spotlight and asked to relay something he had never been asked about. He tugged at the edges of his hair, not quite sure what to say.

“Are you sure you want to know the answer to that question? You’ll probably think I’m, like, extra pathetic.”

“I promise that I’m not judging you. It’s just something I’ve been curious about it. Did someone come in here and destroy the place?”

Josh let the pillow fall to his side.

“I let it get this way because of me.” His voice was soft, vulnerable. His eyes met the Reaper’s intense flames. “It was my fault.”

He barked out a wry laugh and leaned against the wall. He slid down, sitting on the floor.

“I came to this city—Houston—to start law school. I-it was something my parents really wanted me to do. Promised to pay for it if I pursued it, I guess.” He swallowed thickly and the words shook in his throat. “I got a job, did the work, tried my best...anyway, I did horribly. I couldn’t understand what I was doing wrong. Kicking my ass didn’t work, so I just gave up on everything else. And that included cleaning my apartment.”

He hugged his legs and buried his face into his knees.

“You know, I haven’t been to law school since the day that I found you. I gave up entirely. There’s no point, now. Soon, my parents will find out and they’ll never forgive me.”

His words were muffled, and his throat was heavy with tears. The Reaper cleared his throat and Josh lifted his head.

“I see no value in human things or the human life.”

“Wow. Thanks. That makes me feel so much better.”

The Reaper rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“No, I mean that none of that matters in the grand scheme of things. Your life is short, and one day it will end. You might as well live it in a way you want to, free of judgement. Free of useless, worldly things, such as currency and status.”

Josh wiped his eyes and smiled sadly.

“I wish that it was that easy. I really do. It’s what we humans do to survive. I just fucked up in that department and I’ve basically screwed my life over. I’m just waiting for the inevitable at this point.”

He lifted himself up, and his body shivered. His own body was distant, as if he was now inhabiting a stranger. He had never spilled his guts like that to anyone before. The Reaper was still watching him with what must’ve been great interest. He growled, his voice rumbling deep in his chest. His head turned toward the makeshift bed on the ground.

“I do not wish to sleep on the floor tonight.”

Josh shifted his weight between his feet. His eyelids were beginning to way him down, and he wasn't sure if he was actually tired or if his melancholy was making him wan to lie down.

"You can try to sleep on the couch, then? Although, I don't know if you can fit."

"I normally don't need as much sleep, but I do now in order to heal. I can't get rest on the floor."

"Ok, well—"

"Let me sleep on your bed, with you."

He looked back at the Reaper in confusion.

"I get that my bed is softer than the floor, but why on earth would you want to sleep with me? It isn't that bad in here, is it?"

"You're lonely." The Reaper's voice was firm but not unkind.

Josh's eyes grew wide. He was winded, like someone knocked the breath out of him.

"Huh?" he managed to wheeze.

The Reaper stood up from the couch, his figure tall and imposing. He made his way toward Josh.

"You need someone, yes?"

Josh nodded, his lip quivering. Sweat rolled down his neck and into his nightshift and his face grew hotter as the Reaper approached.

“Then let me stay with you.”

The Reaper extended his hand. Josh took it, almost trembling with both excitement and fear. Josh’s hand was so tiny in comparison, it was lost in the fur in skin as it was wrapped around the creature’s own. He led the hulking creature to his room, to his bed. He shut the door behind the pair, refusing to let the world inside with them.



The first few nights and mornings were uncomfortable and downright bizarre. Josh would stare up at the ceiling completely awake, barely being able to shift in the cramped bed. The two of them would lie there in the bed, stiffly, until the sun began to rise. Throughout the nights, the same thoughts echoed in his skull: *What are you doing? Why are you doing this? What has your life become?*

But eventually, all of that washed away. Josh found solace, comfort in the monster next to him. The Reaper allowed Josh to pull himself close, to bury his face in his chest. Josh breathed into him, finding the humanity still left inside of him. The Reaper, held him, tentatively at first, and then firmly but gently. A week went by, and clothes would come off; Josh let the cool air and large hands brush up against his body. And almost every night, the two would become one, melting into each other and clashing together. They became lost within each other’s bodies, like raindrops in an ocean.

Josh found that it was easier to stop questioning the actions of himself and the Reaper. The warmth of his bed at night made the scorching days at work bearable. It made easier to ignore every dwindling email he received from his school. He could guiltlessly lie through every phone call with his mother, bullshit every conversation he

had at work. Even his coworkers and boss took notice of his newfound happiness and would often ask if something had changed.

It had been over two months when Josh opened his apartment's mailbox and grabbed a thick stack of mail. Most of them were coupons or bizarre scams, but the one that caught his eye was in a plain, white envelope. It was addressed from his school. He knew what this was. Rather than dread, or self-loathing, he stared down at it with indifference. Or was it relief? He tore it open and stared intently at the words.

We regret to inform you that due to your low attendance and poor work ethic, we will not ask you to return to University of Houston Law School—

His hands shook badly. Other bits of mail fluttered to the ground and landed at his feet, but he hardly noticed. Beads of sweat coated his forehead and the edges of his mouth formed into a toothy grin.

"I'm free." The barely audible words left his mouth, and he knew it was true.

He was finally free and had nowhere else to go. He walked back to his apartment, almost in a dreamlike state, his hands quivering at the doorknob. He opened it.

"I'm coming inside," he called out to the Reaper.

Perhaps he did have a way out.

The Reaper greeted him with a curt nod. He was sitting at the kitchen table, which looked comically small next to his large frame. Josh's eyes flickered to the Reaper's injured side. It looked like he was almost healed. He didn't say anything about it. Instead, he greeted the Reaper shyly.

“Looks like they finally kicked me out of school.” He lifted the letter up. “I finally got the news.”

The Reaper crossed his arms and scowled.

“They aren’t going to give you another chance?”

Josh rubbed the back of his head.

“No, I’m not worth it. I’ve skipped so many classes with no communication on my end and I’m really shitty in law school. Some other guy can take my place.”

The Reaper shook his head with a sigh.

“Is it my fault that they cast you down?”

Josh shook his head quickly, harshly.

“NO! No, this has nothing to do with you!” He sat down at the table next to the Reaper. He placed the palm of his hand on top of the Reaper’s. “I think I was trying to get them to expel me. I didn’t exactly want to go to law school. Like I said, it was my parents, not me. Not sure what I’m going to tell them though.”

The Reaper took his hand in his own and squeezed it gently.

“Perhaps you should tell them the truth, little human.”

Josh laughed nervously.

“I guess they’ll find out eventually, but—” he glanced up at the Reaper nervously. “—maybe I won’t have to do that after all. You know, I think I might quit my job too.”

The Reaper stared down at him, worry deepening in his harsh eyes.

“What? Don’t you need to sustain yourself? You told me that it’s what you have to do to survive.”

“It’s like you said. Worldly things like currency, jobs, school are all useless in the long run.”

The Reaper pulled his hand away from Josh’s feeble grip. He placed it on his injured side.

“I’m almost healed, Joshua. I can grant you the wish I promised. I can make sure that you are cared for when I am gone.”

Josh frowned. He balled his hand into a fist.

“When you’re gone?”

“Yes. I need to get back to my work—my real purpose. I’ll return to purgatory, and I’ll only come back to the earth to retrieve souls.”

Josh leapt from the table. He stared into the demon’s dark eyes with intensity. He gritted his teeth and a fierce growl developed in his throat.

“Take me with you.”

“Human, you do not know realize what you’re saying—”

“I do,” his voice rang out, echoing in the small apartment. “My only wish is to go with you.”

The room was silent for what must have been a few moments, but for Josh, it was hours. His determined eyes never wavered, and he stood tall. The Reaper burst out into horrible, cruel laughter. It burned Josh's ears like nails on glass.

"Take *you* with me?! A human?!"

"Yes! I want to have a second choice, like you! I don't want to live this horrible life anymore! I feel like shit all the time and I suck at everything I do!"

Now it was the Reaper's turn to stand up from the table. He towered over Josh's small figure, and his eyes gleamed with immense fury.

"*How dare you.*" His words were quiet yet filled with white hot fire. "Do you think I truly had a choice? Do you think that I would choose the life I have now if I was still alive, such as you?"

"I have nothing to live for here—"

"You have EVERYTHING!" the Reaper roared. The apartment's walls seemed to shake, the windows bursting at the seams with noise. Josh backed away, crying out in shock. He lifted his hands up to cup his ears. The Reaper's nostrils flared. "I had my LIFE, my HUMANITY taken away from me. Even my memories, my only proof that ever lived, are gone, lost with time." His intense gaze pierced Josh's soul, as though he could see right through him. "And you want that for yourself?!"

Josh lifted his hands away from his ears. He was frightened, perhaps even more frightened than the fateful day when he met the Reaper in the alley. But he refused to

look down, refused to turn his back. He was filled with just as much fury as well. His voice shattered and his words spilled onto the ground like shards of glass.

“There are so many things about yourself you’ve kept from me, yet you still expect me to understand you. But you don’t make any effort to understand me.”

Josh walked away from the table with the letter still in his hand. He looked back at the Reaper, who was still glowering at him. He crumpled up the piece of paper until it was wadded and unreadable.

“What am I to you? Just a toy? A tool? Something for you to discard once you’re done with it? If that’s the case, then leave me behind. See if I care.” The lie came out as a low hiss through his clenched jaw.

He didn’t wait for a response. He walked toward his room and slammed the door shut firmly. He wouldn’t let the devil in bed with him. Not tonight.



The next two days went by in a blink. Or perhaps it was a week? Josh wasn’t sure, time was blurring together. He could feel his depression returning to him once more, filling the room, wrapping around his body, drowning him. He barely ate anything during those times and could hardly bring himself to leave his bed. The door to his bedroom was shut tightly, rarely opened, to keep him safe from what lingered outside. The emptiness of his apartment reverberated in his brain as a constant reminder that he was all alone.

The Reaper gave up reasoning with Josh very quickly, and Josh refused to acknowledge his presence. He shut out the creature aside from the occasional icy glare. A

part of him thought that, perhaps, this would be good enough to get him to change his mind. Instead, the Reaper left the apartment for the last time. There was no warning, no goodbyes; he abandoned Josh. He really was just a tool for someone else's game. He was not important enough to be allowed to make his own decisions, to live for himself.

Josh did his best to shut the rest of his world out too. He received angry calls from his boss, threatening him with ultimatums if he continued missing shifts. The worst of it were the frightened emails his mother left. Each one became more frantic, desperate.

"Please, call me back, sweetie. I'm so worried about you. I can't eat."

"I called the law school and they said you were expelled? Did something happen? If you just talk to me, I promise that your father and I won't get upset! We'll figure something out!"

"Joshua, I'm begging you! Please, PLEASE let me know if you're all right! What can I do to get you to answer? Do I need to send someone in for a wellness check?!"

This was enough to make Josh finally respond.

"Can't talk rn. So sorry. Please understand. Will call later. I'm so so sorry."

He buried his face into his pillow, trying to drown out the self-loathing and guilt. How could he do this to his mother? How could he do this to himself? He dragged himself out of bed and put on some pants. He walked into his bathroom and stared at himself in the mirror. Hollowed out eyes stared back at him. He slapped his sunken cheeks and smoothed out his frazzled hair, but to no avail. He still looked as though he was falling apart.

He downed a water bottle by his bed, forcing his dehydrated throat to take all of it. If he couldn't live for himself, or love for himself, then at the very least he could continue to live for others. *I really should go to work today. I can beg my boss for my job.* He glanced at his phone on the nightstand. *Maybe I could figure something else out with law school. Maybe I could—*

BANG BANG BANG!

The harsh noise of tapping on the glass of his window filled his ears, startling Josh out of his thoughts. He turned toward his window and his brain went into panic mode. His eyes widened and his jaw dropped. The Reaper himself was at his window, the bandage at his injured side now gone. His magnificent wings were spread wide open, casting a massive dark shadow into Josh's bedroom. Josh rushed toward the window, still gaping at the sight. The Reaper gestured to the latch on the windowsill. Josh nodded, undid the latch, and tugged it open.

Without warning, the Reaper flew inside, flapping his massive wings as he did so. The wind roared in Josh's ears, filling his eardrums until he felt like they were going to pop. He was both giddy and furious, wanting to know why this creature would dare show his face back here after all this time. He backed away from the open window, propping himself up against his dresser. Being so high up, he had never once considered opening his bedroom window. He gripped it so hard that his knuckles turned white. A shrill, angry snarl rumbled in the back of his throat.

"What the hell are you doing here?!" he yelled over the wind. His hair whipped around wildly.

“I needed to see you again. It’s been consuming me; all I can think about.”

Josh grabbed his stray hairs to prevent them from obscuring his vision. He wanted to scream that it was too late, that he knew he was being used, but he couldn’t. The Reaper’s face had never expressed emotion more clearly. There was remorse, fear in his eyes. When Josh squinted, he could even see what he thought might be passion. And no matter how hard he tried he could no longer turn his head away from The Reaper’s face. Josh let go of his dresser and stepped forward.

“You’re taunting me. You’re coming back just so you can leave me again forever, aren’t you?”

The Reaper inhaled, his muscles rippling. The edges of his wings fluttered gently.

“I’ve changed my mind.”

Josh’s mouth went numb. He swallowed, unsure if he heard the Reaper correctly.

“What are you talking about?”

“I want to give you the choice. Do you want to come with me to the world that is beyond this one? Or do you want to stay here and live out the rest of your life as a human?”

“R-really? You want me to come with you?”

The Reaper nodded. Josh rubbed a hand through his tangled hair.

“You won’t be offended if I give up my life.”

The Reaper’s brow twitched, and he let out a low growl. But he did not argue with Josh.

“Do what you wish. But this is the one time I will offer you this chance. Either leave with me now or remain here forever.”

Josh stood still. He turned back toward the phone on his nightstand. He was almost certain he knew what his answer was. *Is it really ok for me to throw away my life here?* His thoughts lingered on this question for several moments. He looked at the Reaper, who seemed to be growing impatient.

“What do you say?”

Josh grabbed the phone from his nightstand and looked at the Reaper. He shivered, perhaps from the air, perhaps from the shock of the situation.

“Ok. I’ll come with you.”

The Reaper seemed surprised by this sudden answer. He dropped his wings, and stepped toward Josh.

“If you come with me, I cannot bring you back.”

“I know.”

“You will never see your loved ones again.”

“I’m aware of this.”

“Not even I will know what is going to become of you. You may lose your humanity, your memories, like me, and I—”

“I don’t care.”

The Reaper lowered his voice to a softer tone.

“What if you end up regretting this decision? It’s one that will stick with you for all eternity and cannot be undone.”

Josh looked up at the creature. He chuckled lightly.

“Every decision I’ve made in my life is one that’s ended in regret. So why does it matter if I regret this one too?”

The Reaper stared down at him, silently. He reached out for Josh, pulling him into his strong grip, burying him into his body.

“Then I’ll take you with me. We can be reborn together in this new life. We shall need to leave now.”

Josh pulled away, the phone still in his grasp. He looked down at it.

“I need to do one last thing before we go. Is that ok?”

The Reaper scowled but nodded slowly.

“Make it quick.”

The Reaper spread his wings once more and dove out the window. He flapped them steadily, keeping himself level with Josh’s apartment complex. The two of them watched each other. Without looking down, Josh hit his mother’s caller ID and lifted the phone to his head. She picked up barely before the first ring was finished.

“Josh?! Oh, honey, is that really you?”

“Yeah Mom, it’s me.” Josh’s own voice sounded like a stranger to his ears.

He tried to swallow his shame, but the lump stuck in his throat. He listened to his mother break down at the other end of the line.

“My baby, my boy! Please don’t do that to me ever again, you don’t understand!”

“Mom, I want you to know that I love you. And I’ve been a terrible son to you. I don’t even deserve you in the slightest.”

“That isn’t true! I don’t know what you did, or if you made a mistake, but we can fix it together!”

“No, Mom. This is something I need to handle by myself. I’m going away to a far away place, and you might not get to hear from me ever again.”

“What are you saying?! Josh?! Joshua?!”

“I’m happy with everything you’ve done for me. But I need to live my own life, now, and make my own decisions.” Hot tears began running down his face, the salty moisture slid into his mouth. He wiped it away. “Just know that no matter what happens, I’m ok. But I want to say goodbye to you. I really love you, Mom.”

“Josh, I love you too, but please, explain to me what’s going—”

Josh pulled the phone away from his head and ended the call. He let it fall from his grip and drop against the floor. He lifted his head at the Reaper, who was waiting for him.

“I’m ready!” he called out loudly.

The Reaper held his arms wide apart, his strong hands open.

“Jump!” He yelled. “I’ll catch you!”

Josh crawled through the open window, trying not to stumble over the edge of the sill. He stared down at the ground so far below him and his stomach dropped. A bout of nauseousness came over him. He grabbed at his curtains blindly and cried out in fear. The Reaper flew in closer with his arms still outstretched.

“I promise, Joshua!”

Josh squeezed his eyes shut and leapt forward. The solid foundation beneath him gave way and there was nothing but air. He fell, and for a few seconds, he was certain that he would hit the ground below. He had never felt such terror, yet his breath was caught in the wind. He couldn’t even scream for help. And then, strong, yet gentle, arms caught him and held him tightly. Josh opened his eyes and looked up at the Reaper. The Reaper pulled him close to his chest.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” was all that Josh could manage to say.

“Good.”

The two of them were lifted up in the air, slowly flying closer to the gleaming stars above. Josh snuggled closer to the Reaper and buried his face into the crook of his neck.

“Why?”

The Reaper looked back down.

“Why what?”

“Why did you come back for me?”

The Reaper paused for a brief moment, before answering.

“My reasoning is as simple as yours, my Joshua. I am lonely.”

Josh smiled to himself. He was no longer scared of anything. The Reaper’s wings flapped in the air; they beat gently like the rhythm of a soft lullaby. He closed his eyes, knowing that if he went to sleep, he wouldn’t wake up from this dream. Their bodies seemed to melt together, and they held each other tightly in the night sky. The two of them became one as they ascended to the Heavens and disappeared into the clouds.

Everything Stays

Sam stared out the window of the bus, watching massive trees and muddy swamps pass by in a whirlwind. She leaned her head against the window, and rubbed her cheek against the warm, finger-print stained glass. The air conditioner whirled around the stuffy bus, almost like a stuttering lullaby. She closed her eyes.

“The woman of God’s duty is to serve her husband.” The pastor’s booming voice echoed throughout the entire church.

Breathe-in.

“The woman’s purpose is to be dedicated to the family. She must give all her love up to her family, as well as God, her Father. It isn’t an easy job, but it’s a very important one.”

Breathe-out.

“Amen!” Someone in church pews cried out.

Sam watched as those around her raised their hands high in the air upward toward the ceiling.

“Women have the gift of childbirth, the ability to become mothers,” the pastor continued. *“Without them, we wouldn’t be able to bring more Children of God into our church halls.”*

Sam’s eyes flew open. She rubbed her shaved head for what seemed like the thirtieth time that hour. Her mother was going to kill her when she saw that Sam shaved it at college. She could imagine how that conversation would go.

“You look like a military boy!” her mother would shriek.

Sam chuckled to herself thinking about the look of horror on her mom’s face. She wondered what MK and Evelyn would think about her haircut. Surely, they would love the cut.

She turned on her phone and glanced down at her screensaver. Her younger self, along with two girls stare back at her with smiles. MK held up a peace sign and sported a wide grin that showed off her neon pink and blue braces. *That’s right, she did used to wear braces*, Sam thought. *God this was taken such a long time ago*. Her eyes drifted over to Evelyn, whose smile was meek. Her shoulders were tense, and her back was slightly hunched, as though she was uncomfortable with taking her picture. But even so, her warm eyes were still filled with the kindness that Sam so fondly remembered. Sam brushed her finger over Evelyn, stroking her face gently.

The bus hit a bump, jostling Sam in her seat. The contents of her stomach sloshed and tumbled around. She pressed her mouth shut, urging her body not to puke. She slid her phone into her backpack and stared out the window once more. She watched as she passed billboard after billboard.

“Car accident?” one of the billboards taunted. It sported a smug looking man on the side. He pointed a finger down at any unsuspecting drivers who may have wrecked near the sign. “Call 601-403-8992 for Bob Dillard, best lawyer in Mississippi! It takes one call, that’s all!”

Sam smirked. She had come home.

She spied another billboard. This one, however, made her feel nauseous again.

“TAKE BACK THE RAINBOW!” The sign seemed to scream at her, painted in ugly, bright yellow letters. “THE RAINBOW BELONGS TO OUR LORD AND SAVIOR!” Next to these words was a poorly photoshopped cross and crude clipart of a boat, an old man, and a bunch of farm animals. The old man’s arms were outstretched to depict him guiding the animals to safety. *Safety from what exactly?*

Sam stared up at the ceiling of the bus. She looked for patterns in the peeling paint and breathed. Breathe-in. Breathe-out. *This is a reminder that you don’t belong*, a voice in the back of her head whispered.



“C’mon, c’mon,” MK muttered to herself as she lugged her carry-on suitcase of the plane. Her head was spinning due to her body being stuck on one shaky plane to another since 4 AM. Not to mention that her stomach was raging and moaning at her for not eating anything the entire day. Maybe she could grab a banana or some crackers on her way out.

The second she stepped off the plane and onto solid ground, her body shivered with relief. She hadn’t realized how tense she was until her heart had dropped from her throat and her shoulders drooped down naturally. Her body gratefully gulped down the fresh air once she entered the airport. The clean and chemical smell replaced the suffocating air that had filled the cramped plane. MK stretched her arms out before glancing down at her watch. She was two hours later than she expected. She groaned. *Of course. I’m going to need to apologize.*

She rubbed her hands across her face and lugged her suitcase forward. She still had to wait at the baggage reclaim terminal for the rest of her junk. She had to bring a lot; she would be back in Mississippi all summer break after all.

She made her way around the corner over to the terminal. It was so different from the Seattle airport that it was nearly uncanny. Seattle's airport was constantly bustling with thousands upon thousands of travelers wearing business suits or vacation attire that it was nearly impossible not to get lost in the crowd. Lines for tickets or check-in would wrap around the columns of the massive building. Countless restaurants and luxurious shops lined the Seattle airport as though it was a great shopping mall. MK couldn't help but compare *that* to the tiny, empty Jackson airport that seemed to have the charm and excitement of her grandpa's toolshed. She shook her head and smiled to herself. *I'm finally back home.*

Her first two years at Seattle University had been like a dream come true for MK. She was getting to study journalism at her dream school on a great scholarship. She got to meet countless other students who were from all over the country and even around the world. She was already pursuing an internship, almost guaranteeing that she would have a job as soon as she graduated, *and* she was on track to graduating at least a semester early. Her new fast-paced life seemed to offer her so much more than her slow and steady hometown in Mississippi.

She stared down at her phone. She cringed when she saw that Emma Kate had sent her a message saying that she had arrive about 80 minutes ago. *Sorry sis,* she clumsily typed back, *I'll be out there to meet you as soon as I can. Love you!*

She scrunched up her nose when she saw that someone else had sent her a message. It was from Kent, a guy she had slept with about a week ago. *Do u still want to meet up when u get back*, the message said. MK shoved the phone into her back pocket. She swallowed down her thick nausea that coated the back of her throat and the sides of her mouth. Just the thought of having sex again urged her body to empty out what little was inside of her stomach.

There it was again. That almost sick, anxious, and nearly *disappointed* feeling that hovered in the back of her mind whenever she thought of sex in general. MK could remember the mind-numbingly boring sex ed class she was forced to sit through in high school. “*Remember, abstinence is always key. Abstinence is the safest, healthiest course of action,*” MK’s science teacher had lectured to them in her thick Mississippi accent.

The teacher had attempted to scare the students when it came to having sex, but it didn’t work. Or at least, it didn’t work for MK. Nearly everyone in her life made the act of sex seem like it was such a mature, scandalous, and inappropriate thing to do. It was adventurous. To MK, it would be a sign that she was a proper adult, one who no longer needed outdated concepts like purity or virginity. Plus, she had heard that it made people feel *amazing*. So once MK flew across the country to attend college, having sex was certainly one of the first things on her bucket list.

The first person she tried it with was a pretty girl named Lisa. Lisa had short curly hair and was always wearing a cool smirk. Lisa was both a local and a veteran when it came to sex, so MK could hardly contain her excitement at trying it for the first time with an expert.

Except Lisa couldn't get her to orgasm. She remembered Lisa scowling and frowning as she stuck her fingers all over MK's vagina and clit. She kept asking what felt good and MK could only nod with a grimace. She remembered wondering if it was supposed to feel so uncomfortable. Eventually Lisa gave up after about 30 minutes, figuring that it was just because it was MK's first time.

Next, she had sex with a guy this time, someone named Brandon. He was in her College Algebra class. It was the same story except he was much more offended by her obvious lack of enthusiasm. But MK was determined not to give up. She had to figure out what was wrong. Next it was Michael, then Sarah, then Isabelle, and finally Kent, who she had been seeing for a couple of months by now. Nothing changed except MK was now decent at faking an orgasm.

MK made her way over to the terminal and hauled her luggage into her arms with gritted teeth. She placed it on the ground with a *thump* with the thoughts of sex still weighing on her mind. *Why can't I do it? Is there something wrong with me?* She tried to push those feelings back down as she made her way outside the airport with her luggage in tow. She wished it didn't bother her so much. Maybe sex was just this uneventful and everyone pretended like it was something great.

She walked outside into the sun, that was still shining harshly in the sky despite the June weather. She squinted and saw a familiar figure waving wildly toward her. She broke out into a wide grin.

"Emma!" She waved back wildly.

"Oh my God, MK!"

The two sisters embraced with tears in their eyes. They broke away and Emma Rose stared down at her sister in awe, brushing the hair away from her eyes.

“Look at you! You’ve changed so much!”

“I have not!” MK said with a laugh.

“You have! You look so...so grown up!”

MK flinched.

“I just don’t know how to process it!” Emma continued, unaware of MK’s sudden shift in mood. “Time passes us by so quickly and before you know it, your little sister’s already an adult!”

MK forced out a laugh. “Oh yeah. It’s crazy, right? I feel like I’ve gotten so much older since I’ve last seen you...”

Emma grabbed MK’s hand and squeezed it gently. “I have something I need to show you.”

MK followed Emma back to her car.

“What is it, sis? Do you have a present for me?”

Emma turned around with a sly smile.

“Something like that.”

“Huh. You want to surprise me?”

Emma nodded. She unlocked the car door and pulls out a massive, yet familiar, box.

“Look, I know that you’re all grown up now, and you probably don’t have time for toys anymore. But do you remember when we used to play with Legos together?”

Emma jostled the box. “We would build these massive sets all the time.”

Memories of sitting down on the dusty floor of their old house began flooding back to MK. She watched Emma put the box back down in her car.

“Well, I thought maybe we could do that here. Only if you want to! I mean, only if you feel like it. Wow, I probably sound like a dumb little kid—”

MK walked forward; her arms outreached.

“You know that I love two things, and they are building junk and spending time with my big sis.”

Emma looked both relieve and giddy; she embraced MK.

“Why don’t we build the best Lego University ever? To celebrate your time in Seattle?”

“Or better yet,” MK responded, pulling away. “We could build the best utopia in the world out of Legos.”



Evelyn snapped the long strands of dry spaghetti in half and dropped them into the boiling water. She watched as they bent and curled into each other, as though they danced around in the pot. She glanced at the clock. *Guess it’s time to put the sauce on too.*

She grabbed a second pot, filled with the pungent scents of tomato, meat, garlic, and onion. She set the pot on the burner and flipped the heat to let it simmer. It was nice that she was allowed to make such a simple dish for dinner tonight. She shuddered at the thought of a repeat of last night. Her pot pie was burnt, and her terribly homemade crust was soggy. She was terrified that the Parkers would fire her on the spot.

She walked over to the microwave clock and set the timer to seven minutes. She watched the seconds count down as she stirred the sauce slowly.

“Miss Evie, miss Evie!” a voice yelled out to her from across the house.

Evelyn sighed deeply, urging herself to be patient. She put on a fake smile, as Peyton scurried from his room and toward the kitchen.

“Hi Peyton.”

“Miss Evie! You have to help me with my math homework!” he squeaked.

“I will as soon as I get the chance. But right now, I’m busy with dinner.”

“What are we having for dinner tonight, Miss Evie?” The Parker’s other child, Penny, yelled from her upstairs bedroom. She trudged down the stairs and looks over curiously. She scrunched up her nose. “Ugh, not tomato sauce.”

“Penny, tomatoes are good for you.”

The timer went off with a *beep*, and the two children watched as Evelyn drained all the scalding pasta water out from the pot.

“If it’s so good for me, then why does it taste so disgusting?”

“Maybe you would like it if you tried a bite.”

“I *did* try a bite!”

“That was a long time ago. I’m sure you’ve changed your mind.”

Penny scowled and stormed away.

“Wait for me!” Peyton called out and ran up the stairs behind her.

Evelyn let out a shaky breath as she stirred the sauce some more. She added some basil and garlic powder. She thought about adding a pinch of cayenne pepper to give it some kick, but she stopped herself. Mrs. Parker would kill her if she fed their family food with even the tiniest amount of spice. She turned away from the stove to stare at the clock again. It was only 5:30.

It had been nearly two years since Evelyn became the Parker family’s live-in nanny. When she graduated, the only thing on her mind was going to Berkely, her dream school. California seemed like a magical place, so far away from the tiny state of Mississippi that her life here would seem to be no more than a locked-away memory. Unfortunately, there was no way her parents could afford the school even with her stellar grades and the scholarships she received. Thankfully, her mother’s family friends offered her the perfect solution: a gig that could help her save up money.

She remembered packing her bags and settling into the Parker’s home. *It will only be a little more time and then my life can finally begin*, she had thought to herself at the time. She never dreamed that she would still be living here by now. The Parker’s blindingly white, chemically cleaned, and sparsely decorated home would become the

very thing that imprisoned her. She let out a deep, sad sigh. A job that included child-rearing and bending over to scrub the floor wasn't exactly the life she had in mind after she graduated as one of the top students in her high school.

Ding-dong!

The noise caused Evelyn to jump up in surprise. She hadn't been expecting visitors at all, and the mail usually didn't come this late. She took the sauce off the burner, covered the pot with the lid, and walked over to the front door.

Ding-dong! Ding-dong! Ding-dong!

"Stop! STOP! I'm coming!" she yelled. Why wasn't the person at the door able to wait more than five seconds?

She put on her most irritated look and opened the door.

"What is it—" she called before stopping in her tracks. She gaped at the person in front of her.

"It's been a while, huh?" Sam answered with an awkward grin. She gave Evelyn a half-hearted wave.

"S-Sam."

"The one and only."

Evelyn embraced Sam with a hug, squeezing her tightly. She buried her face into her neck and let out a sob.

"Oh, Sam!"

“Hey, it’s good to see you too.”

The two of them pulled away. Evelyn rubbed at her eyes to keep herself from bursting into tears. And to reassure herself that she wasn’t dreaming.

“What are you doing here, Sam?”

“What, I’m not allowed to see my old friend after all these years?”

Evelyn lightly smacked Sam’s arm. “No silly! I mean, how did you know I was here?”

“Your mom told me that you scored a job here with the Parker family! She gave me your address.” Sam chuckled and rubbed her shaved head. “She kept staring at my egghead.”

Evelyn pressed her palm to her mouth and giggled. “You certainly look different! I can hardly recognize you! But I love it, Sam, it’s very you.”

Sam shrugged. “Ah shucks, it’s mostly just the haircut.”

“You look so grown up now! And cool! And independent—” Evelyn’s voice faltered. She looked away awkwardly.

Sam leaned onto the backs of her heels and clicked her tongue. “Sooooo…” She poked her head into the house. “This sure does look like a fancy place to live.”

Evelyn blushed. “This house doesn’t belong to me.”

“You still live here though.”

“I guess.”

“I bet it’s awesome to live in a place this nice. My apartment up in New Orleans sucks. It’s really cramped, and the roommates never clean the toilet. It’s got all these weird brown stains and—”

“That’s nice, Sam,” Evelyn interrupted her.

“Uh, yeah. Anyway, you are really lucky to get to live in a place this massive.”

Evelyn grunted. A worried look crossed over Sam’s face.

“Did I say something weird?”

“No. I’m sorry Sam, but I’m wondering why you came all the way here?”

“To see you, of course.”

“That’s it?”

“Duh! Why else would I be here? Unless... maybe I’m actually here to steal everything in the Parker’s home!” Sam put on her best evil grin.

Evelyn giggled once more and pushed Sam out of the door frame. “All right, all right. You got to see me!” She glanced down at her watch. “But my bosses will be home from work at any minute, and you have got to go!”

“Ok, ok!” Sam dropped her hands in surrender. She backed away but caught Evelyn’s eyes.

“Promise me that will meet sometime soon? And MK too of course. When you have time?”

Evelyn’s heart skipped a beat.

“Yes. Honestly, Sam, you don’t know how happy I am to see you again.”

Sam’s mouth broke out into a grin. “I’m happy to see you too. I’m going to go talk with MK, but I’ll come get you soon.”

Sam turned around and jogged out of the driveway. Evelyn leaned into the doorframe, never taking her eyes off Sam’s back as she ran farther and farther away.



Sam watched as MK stuck out her tongue to the side and pressed the Lego down. Sam reached down into the box of Legos and pulled out a bright red block. She rolled her eyes. She knew that she would have to run everything past the world’s strictest Lego dictator. MK was barely allowing her to help in the first place, and she insisted that everything be inspected before it was set into place. Getting her to allow Sam to work was like pulling teeth; Sam wasn’t sure why she bothered. But when she saw Evelyn watching MK build her little city with that twinkle in her eye, she knew that she wanted Evelyn to watch her like that. Plus, it seemed like MK needed the extra help. She tapped MK’s shoulder and held out the Lego.

“I was thinking that I should put this one right here.” She pointed her finger at the tiny Lego restaurant the two had started.

MK snatched the Lego out of Sam’s hand, who pouted in return.

“Hey! What gives?”

MK let out a dramatic sigh.

“Your ignorance is showing my dear Sammy.”

Sam narrowed her eyes.

“Excuse me?!”

“You can’t put warm colored Legos over there. That’s where the Lego church is going to be built.”

“Are you kidding me?! A church? It’s bad enough that I have to go to church in real life and now it exists in your Lego world too.”

MK shrugged. “I don’t see why you can’t tell your parents you don’t want to go to church.” She pressed the Lego in place once more.

“You don’t understand! Once they saw my haircut they freaked! They’ve been insisting that I go with them!” Sam raised her fingers to create air quotes. “*‘You’re trying to look like a boy! Now everyone in town will think you’re a heathen lesbian!’*”

MK stifled laughter. “I thought you were a heathen lesbian?”

Sam leaned away from the Lego set. She had barely talked to her parents since going away to college. She wasn’t the perfect daughter they had envisioned. And so, when she turned 18, it was time for her parents to discard her as though she was nothing more than a worn out, faded sweater. They held to the strict tradition that the child was no longer their own the minute they turned 18 and could take care of themselves. It had worked out for them, and it would work out for Sam. They kicked her to the curb and told her to figure it out. Sam had merely shrugged her shoulders, packed her bags, and left without a second thought.

She worked her ass off in high school and managed to receive a full ride to her dream college. With the help of student loans and back-breaking work at her two jobs, she had managed to keep herself afloat without the help of her parents. She learned the cheapest places to live, how to shop for groceries on a budget, and how to thrift for clothes. Her parents wanted to show her that they no longer needed her. Fine, but she could easily show them that she no longer needed them. Two years came and went, and Sam barely communicated with her parents anymore.

This was why she was stunned to see mail addressed to her from her parents. It was painstakingly handwritten with flowery words of love and heartache. *Please come back to us, baby girl. We miss you so much.* The letter waxed poetic of summer break with the family and redoing the ties that had been severed. Sam knew she was being foolish, but it made her heart flutter. Perhaps she could start over with them; perhaps she could become close to them like her friends in college were close to their parents. But of course, she was an idiot for thinking this. As soon as she came back, all the nonsense about how she failed them started again.

She placed her hands into the box of Legos and grabbed another one. The plastic was cool in the palm of her sweaty hand. She looked over at Evelyn and MK. She smiled despite herself. She had plenty of reasons for coming back after all. She tossed the Lego to the side and looked back at MK.

“I’m a proud lesbian who will probably go straight to hell, but that doesn’t stop them pestering me about it! They think they can fix me like I’m a bad boy in a tween novel!”

MK looked at her without a shred of sympathy. “Sorry dude, but we have freedom of religion here. I need to build my church. That sounds like a *you* problem, not the problems of the Lego people.”

Sam threw her hands up in exasperation. “You’re still impossible, you know that?”

Evelyn let out a giggle. MK and Sam turned toward her. Evelyn placed the palm of her hand over her mouth and continued her laughter echoing like a gentle music box. Sam’s face was hot. She hadn’t noticed how beautiful Evelyn’s laughter could sound. A small part of her nervously wondered if Evelyn thought she was acting like a child.

“What’re you laughing about?” MK asked, scowling.

“It’s just that the two of you haven’t changed a bit.”

Sam blinked. Her heart sank.

“Aww, Evelyn what? You think we haven’t changed?” she whined. She tried to keep the hurt out of her voice.

“Oh, it’s not an insult at all! It’s just that I’ve missed you both so much. I was so scared the two of you would be completely different people, but you’re as innocent as ever!”

Sam’s heart dropped. She let out a huff and crossed her arms. “I’ll have you know that I’ve changed a lot! As you can see—” she roughly grabbed Evelyn’s hand and pulled it onto her head.

Evelyn's eyes filled with warmth. "I know that you've changed physically! But you're still the same sweet Sam on the inside!" Evelyn rubbed her head gently.

Sam pulled away. Did Evelyn not think that she had changed since she had gone to college? That she hadn't grown up? She still saw her as this goofy puppy, one that was helpless and kicked to the curb by its owners. She needed Evelyn to know she was different now.

"Yeah, well—" She paused. "I've matured a lot since I've been at college."

Evelyn cocked her head. "Really?"

"Obviously! Is that so hard for you to believe?"

"Yup," MK answered bluntly. She smirked at Sam.

Sam shot a threatening look at her. "I didn't ask you."

MK stuck her tongue out.

"Have you been to parties yet? Gotten anything to drink?" Evelyn asked with curiosity in her voice.

Sam froze. She *had* been to parties before, but they always made her nervous. The first time she got drunk she threw up all over the floor and needed to spend the entire next day in bed. Besides, she didn't have time to go to parties. But if Evelyn knew that....

"O-of course!" Sam pounded her fist against her chest. Guilt shot up as the lie slipped out. "I drink all the time! I'm the best at holding alcohol out of all my friends!"

Evelyn made a face. "Isn't that dangerous?"

"Um, I do it safely! *And* I don't drink and drive."

“I sure hope not,” MK chimed in. Evelyn turned toward her.

“What about you, MK?”

“I don’t like huge parties, but I do really like hanging out in smaller groups of people. They’ve showed me how to mix drinks.” MK nodded to herself. “And we’ve done stuff like shrooms and weed. Nothing that strong.”

“Woah, that sounds fun!”

“It sure is! You just have to pace yourself, Evelyn. Know your limits.”

Evelyn touched her shoulder. “You’re so wise, MK. And cool. You’re so lucky you get to do all those things between classes.” Evelyn looked away.

Sam frowned. She attempted to squash the envy that was building in her stomach. *I need to impress her...but with what?* Her brain fumbled and panicked as it tried to muster a way to catch Evelyn’s attention.

“Evelyn, do you know how many ladies I’ve pleased?” she blurted out, immediately regretting her choice of words.

The two of them blinked at her. Evelyn pulled away from MK.

“What?” Evelyn asked.

“Soooo many. I can’t even keep track of my own body count,” she bragged through clenched teeth. *What are you doing you idiot?* every part of her brain screamed at her. *You’re still just a virgin!*

MK made a face. “Oh please. *Pleased?* I don’t believe for a second that anyone who describes sex like that has gotten laid.”

“I-I have! I’m a bit of a heartbreaker, actually!” Sam stuttered. “And what would you know about having sex, MK?”

Fury washed over MK’s face. She let out an audible growl and scowled at Sam.

“I’ve been with at least five different people.”

“F-five?”

“Yeah. It’s not even a crazy amount.”

Sam nodded. She could feel the sweat soaking into her clothes. *They know that you’re lying*, her brain chanted.

“Five? A body count? I’ve never even had it with anyone,” Evelyn said. She backed away from Sam. “So what? Are you trying to say I’m a loser?”

“I—”

“Don’t worry, Evelyn,” MK interrupted. “Sex is overrated. I’ve never felt anything anyway.” MK whirled around toward Sam. “What about you? Do you like it?”

Sam nodded quickly. “For sure, for sure! All the ladies constantly tell me that I’m the best partner they’ve ever had! That I’m amazing in bed! That I’m great!” She averted her eyes as she said this. *They know how pathetic you truly are.*

MK rolled her eyes. “All you’re doing is repeating yourself. So do you even feel good, Sam?”

Sam was taken aback by the question. She opened her mouth to say something and shut it quickly. What was she supposed to say in this situation? She had no idea what she was talking about.

Evelyn stood up. “I don’t really have much say in this conversation,” she said stiffly. “I’m glad you two have been enjoying yourselves so much.” She grabbed her things, flung open the door, and marched out of the house.

“Evelyn—” Sam called out, watching helplessly as the door slammed shut. *I blew it. I blew any chance that I possibly had with her.*

MK patted her on the back. “Smooth moves. I’m not sure why you thought bragging about a ‘body count’ would win her over.”

Sam plopped down on the couch and buried her hands into her face.

“Me neither.”



MK laid on her bed flat on her back staring up at her light pink ceiling. Endless stars danced in front of her eyes, while thoughts whirled around in her brain. She knew that she was delirious from a lack of sleep, yet she couldn’t bring herself to shut her eyes at all. The air in the bedroom enveloped her like hot, moist breath. She kicked off the covers and the quilt, turning onto her side. She was met with the face of her stuffed bear, Teddy. He stared at her, blankly. She scowled back at him. She roughly grabbed him and tossed him across the room. MK could hardly believe that she wasn’t a child anymore. Maybe she was right. She curled up into the fetal position and let out a pained moan.

“Can’t sleep either?” Sam whispered hoarsely.

MK flipped over and stared at the edge of the bed to see Sam. She had settled down in a frail nest made of a sleeping bag and a pillow. MK smiled to herself in the dark. Sam looked quite uncomfortable on MK's hardwood floor.

"No, not exactly."

"I'm sleeping on the floor. You're sleeping on a soft bed. What's your excuse?"

"Oh please, the bed isn't that comfortable. It's hot under all these blankets"

Sam threw her only pillow up at MK. She caught it and put on top of the others.

"More for me. You aren't getting that one back by the way."

"You could've at least offered me the couch or something," Sam grumbled.

The two of them were silent for a moment, laying there in the dark. Warm moonlight streamed through the windowsill and illuminated Sam's face with a soft glow. MK could see the sadness in her eyes.

"Why did you do it?" MK asked, breaking the silence.

"Hmmm?"

"Why did you lie?"

"Was it that obvious?"

"Yeah."

Sam paused. For a brief minute, MK wondered if she finally went to sleep, before she spoke again.

“I-I don’t know. I think I wanted to impress Evelyn. And maybe impress you too.”

“It didn’t work.”

“I know. It’s just, I thought that maybe she would think that I’m cool.”

“So, you still love her? After all this time?”

Sam sucked in a shaky breath.

“It’s more complicated than you think.”

“You can’t move on? Find another girl at college?”

“Believe me, I’ve tried.” Sam covered her eyes with the back of her hand. “There have been a few, but none like...her.”

“You could always, oh I don’t know, talk to her about it?”

“I would make her feel uncomfortable. Unsafe.”

“Fine. Don’t tell her.”

Sam’s eyes flashed in the darkness.

“I guess you think I’m a creep then?”

MK sighed. “It’s not that. I think you’ll never truly be able to move on unless you tell her how you’re feeling.”

Sam made a noise.

“Sam, you can’t help how you feel. It doesn’t make you inherently wrong or anything. But this has been going on for years now. You can tell her, but there is the possibility she’ll reject you. Or you can choose to stay silent and let the unknown eat away at you for years.”

“What if she hates me? What if she is so disgusted by me that she won’t be able to look at me the same ever again? What if I lose her forev—”

“Whoa, slow down!” MK exclaimed. She lowered her voice. “Calm down, Sam. Evelyn isn’t like that. She’s always turning down suitors gently. Just as long as you aren’t pushy about it, I think she’ll be ok.”

“What if I don’t take it gracefully though? What if I lash out at her? What if I cry and make her feel bad? What if I can’t be friends with her anymore? What if—”

MK pinched the bridge of her nose. “Ok, then like I said, don’t tell her.”

Sam let out a giggle. “You always give the worst advice.”

MK cracked a grin.

“I know.”

“Hey, MK? You were telling the truth, weren’t you? You know...about sex at college?”

All the muscles in MK’s body tightened. She could feel her heart pulsating against her ribcage. *Why do we need to bring this up again?*

“Yes,” she answered through gritted teeth.

“Wow. You didn’t really like it?”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“...I’m sorry,” Sam responded, her voice cracking. She became silent.

MK’s body relaxed, and she immediately felt a twinge of guilt. She didn’t want Sam to feel guilty about this too. She called out.

“Sam?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t go to sleep. Yet. I want to ask you something.”

“What is it?”

“How did you know what you are?”

“Excuse me?”

“Uh, I mean, how did you know what your sexuality was? How did you figure it out?”

Sam sat up from her sleeping bag and stared up at MK. She seemed unsure of what to say. Finally, she spoke.

“I don’t—no one has ever asked me that question before.” She paused. “I guess there was no exact moment where it clicked, and I knew for sure that I was a lesbian. But I have some memories from here and there where I *knew* that I was different. I knew that I was queer at least.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I remember watching *Sleeping Beauty* as a kid. I thought the princess was so lovely. I imagined that I was the prince, the one who leaned over to kiss the princess, to dance with her, to sing to her. I wanted to be the one she saw when she opened her eyes and knew she was in love.”

“That’s so cute! I never knew you could be this adorable!”

“Shut up! If I had another pillow, I would slap you silly with it!” she growled. Her features softened. “Though...I am thankful that you said it was cute rather than weird.”

MK felt a burst of warmth in her chest. She lowered her arm off the bed, offering her hand to Sam. Sam took her hand in her own, rubbing them together gently. MK was surprised to find that Sam’s hands were rough, calloused like sandpaper. Yet, they were also strong and gentle.

“I would never think that you’re weird, Sam.”

“I know. MK, I want to let you know that there is a girl I’m friends with at college who went through a similar experience.”

MK’s face drooped. “You mean with sex?”

“Yup, I met her at a club meeting. Her name was Susie. She had experienced it a few times during high school. But she hated it every single time. She told me that she was asexual.”

“Asexual?”

“Yeah, like ‘non-sexual.’ I was wondering if you’ve ever heard of that?”

“Is that for someone who doesn’t like sex at all?”

“I’m not an expert, but I think so.”

MK was shocked at the immediate relief she felt welling in her body. There was that hope that was beginning to blossom in her chest as well. *There’s a word I can use on myself? I’m not abnormal?*

“Huh,” was all she could say. “You think I might be asexual then?”

“Your experience reminded me of what she said, so I wanted you to know. But you’re the only person who can decide that for yourself, ok?”

MK squeezed her hand slightly. “Ok.”

“I don’t know how much this will help you, but the first time I realized I was a lesbian was when I was teased about liking a boy in one of my classes back in high school. I entertained the idea of dating a man. Marrying one and having children with one. Being tied to him for the rest of my life and dying next to him when I got older. That filled every single part of me with absolute dread.”

MK chuckled. “Maybe you just don’t want to get married.”

“Maybe. But I’ve never felt this way about starting a life with another woman.”

“Like Evelyn?”

“Sure. Like Evelyn.”

“Maybe you should go to her. Apologize.”

“What? She’s probably asleep by now.”

“Yeah. But I know you haven’t been able to take your mind off her. You should go.”

“In the middle of the night? Are you kidding?!”

“Oh, you’ll be fine, Sam. I know you. You used to sneak out all the time.”

Sam let go of her hand and stood up quietly. She grabbed her shoes and began shoving her belongings into her bag. She tossed her backpack around her shoulder and glanced back at MK.

“Thanks,” she whispered.

MK blinked and she was out the door. MK breathed hot air out through her nose. She tilted her head to glance at her clock. It was already 3:00 AM. It was a lot later than she expected. Sam was right; perhaps it was a bad idea to suggest that she go out alone at night. She stared back up at the ceiling. She wondered if she would ever get to sleep at this point. She had nothing but the suffocating heat to keep her company now. Maybe the air conditioner was broken. She made a mental note to talk about it with her parents in the morning.



Evelyn scrubbed at the grime on the tub forcefully. The dark, molded spots freckled the side of the otherwise pristine bathtub. No matter how hard she scrubbed at the spots, they wouldn’t come off; they were like stubborn warts that embedded their roots deep into the skin to ensure they wouldn’t budge. With immense self-control, Evelyn gently placed the brush back onto the ground and placed a nearby towel over her mouth. She screamed in

frustration and fury while kneeling on the bathroom floor, her shrieks only muffled by the towel. She lifted the towel away from her face, panting and her mouth coated with saliva.

She wasn't supposed to be working this late normally, but the compromise for her going out to hang late with friends was that she had to scrub the bathrooms clean when she returned home.

"You've been slacking off a lot lately!" Mrs. Parker had scolded her that afternoon. "You've been behind on so many chores that I shouldn't even be letting you out in the first place. I'm a nice woman, so I will just this one time. But I want to see that you are doing the responsibilities my husband and I are actually paying you to do."

Evelyn had nodded and smiled politely. She was going to be as perfect as she could. But it was never perfect enough, it seemed. Moving in with the Parkers was like having a second pair of more overbearing, stricter parents that would never approve of Evelyn no matter how hard she tried. She would always be indebted to them and their hospitality. She was in a constant state of needing to earn that approval through her work.

That's why the other two just didn't *get it*. They gained their freedom when they left high school and got to explore the world. Evelyn traded away her freedom and stayed behind, forgotten by the other two. They had barely asked her what she had been up to after high school, only a few questions about how she seemed super responsible with her job. Never mind that she was trapped as a live-in maid while she was starting her twenties. Never mind that they got to take their lives for granted while she wasted away trying to get hers started.

Maybe that was why the sex thing, *especially* when Sam brought it up, bothered her so much. Sam was practically rubbing it in her face that she was so much more mature, got to do all these things without people breathing down her neck. Surely Sam knew what she was doing when she started to brag about a body count. She knew what Evelyn did for a living; she *knew* that Evelyn wouldn't be allowed to have people over in the house. There was no conceivable opportunity for her to have sex with anyone else. She wasn't allowed to do anything that wouldn't fit under the Parker's perfect umbrella of Christianity and holiness.

None of their friends would ever be able to understand what it felt like; they all left her behind to go into their own perfect world. Other the occasional happy birthday text or Christmas card, her friends completely forgot about her. They got to create their own world, their own adventures, simply grow up for the first time. Evelyn was not allowed to do these things if she wanted to survive. Surely Sam and MK realized that they left her to rot in this town where everything stayed the same except the people who came and went. They left her all alone in this suburban prison that had glossy marble counters, blinding tile floors, and white picket fences.

Evelyn took a deep breath and picked the scrub brush off the floor and made her way toward her room in the Parker household. She knew she wasn't being fair to either of her friends. They didn't have control over her life, nor did she over their lives. But there was still that ebbing pain nagging in the back of her head, whispering in her ear that they abandoned her. They started their new life and threw her away like she was a ragged childhood doll, worn away from age and tough love. Evelyn grinded her teeth hard, hearing them snap from the inside of her skull. She squeezed the wooden scrub brush as

hard as she could in the palm of her hand and let the anger flow through her body momentarily. *How could they? How could they be my friends if they can't understand? How could Sam—*

THWAP THWAP THWAP!

Evelyn jumped up, startled by the loud thumping on her window door. Her anger immediately turned into ice cold fear. She swallowed thickly and turned toward the direction of the window.

THWAP THWAP THWAP!

Evelyn covered her ears with shaking hands. That couldn't possibly be something like a tree branch or stray wind. It was so violent and rhythmic that it had to be a person. Slowly, she made her way toward the window.

THWAP THWAP! The banging began once again. This time, it was accompanied by a voice.

“Evelyn? Evelyn, are you there?!” It was Sam.

Irritation, and perhaps the blossoming feelings of fury, flared up inside Evelyn's chest. She let out a loud noise of frustration, one that she hoped Sam could hear. She flung aside the thick curtains of her windows and met Sam's shocked, nervous face with her scowling one. She undid the latches of the window and slid it open roughly.

“What are you doing here?” she hissed.

“Evelyn, I—”

“How the hell did you know that this was the window to my room?”

Sam chuckled nervously. She looked down and nervously fiddled with the buttons on her shirt.

“You see, I may have peeked just a little bit through the other windows...”

Evelyn slapped the palm of her hand against her forehead.

“You what?!” Evelyn shouted. Her eyes widened and she lowered her voice. “Are you kidding me?”

“Please, I just needed to talk to you.”

“Talk to me? At four in the morning? While intruding on my bosses’ property?”

“If you put it like that—”

“Sam, no!” Evelyn whispered forcefully. “What if you had been found? You could’ve gotten me fired! You could’ve gotten yourself arrested! You didn’t even bother to text and ask if it was ok with me first! What the hell is so important that you needed to risk all of these things just to talk to me?”

Sam stood there staring back at Evelyn blankly. She shuffled backward on her feet and looked down.

“Evelyn, I wanted to apologize. For tonight. I know I was acting weird, and I promise I wasn’t trying to hurt you.”

“So. You came all this way too apologize.”

Sam nodded slowly. Evelyn snorted.

“Apologize for what?”

“Oh, I-I guess for the weird conversation we had about—”

“—the body count? Sex?”

“Yeah. Look, I don’t actually have a body count.”

“I see.”

“I lied about that. And I’m really sorry, it’s just that I wanted...you know I wanted...”

Sam cautiously slipped her hand through the open window, reaching for Evelyn’s hand. She forced her head up to make eye contact with Evelyn, looking determined. Evelyn looked down at the outstretched hand, hesitating. If she touched it, everything could just go back to normal. She could be pulled back into the old world with her friends, the people who used to be there for her no matter what. She nearly took the hand, before Sam spoke up once more.

“I did it because I wanted to impress you.”

Evelyn exhaled. She pulled the hand back down toward her side once more and backed away from the window.

“Please, Evelyn. You don’t know how much I adore you, and I just really wanted you to feel the same way about me.”

“So that’s it?”

“Huh?”

Evelyn ran a trembling hand through her hair. She wished she could scream at Sam, to shove her away from the window.

“I’m just another girl that you want to impress, huh?”

“No that’s not—”

“I didn’t just disappear, you know. You claim to care about me so much, but you barely contacted me while you were away. Never asked what I was doing. Never checked up on me. You had a million chances to show how you felt and you want to do this now?” She shook her head and bit her lip. Tears formed in her eyes. “Good night, Sam.”

“Evelyn, I, I’m so sorry. Please, I didn’t mean—”

“Good night, Sam. Please step away from the window so I can close it.”

Sam backed away from the window, withdrawing herself from Evelyn completely. Her dark eyes were filled with horror, pain, but she stepped away.

“Good night,” she whispered in return.

Sam watched Evelyn as she slid the window closed, firmly placing the glass between them. Evelyn slid the dark curtains shut silently as tears swam down her cheeks.



MK had been hunched over at her desk in her dimly lit room for nearly three hours now. She thumped her pen against the desk thoughtfully. Her notepad sat directly in front of her, illegible writing scrawled all over the page. A half-empty cup of room temperature coffee sat on her right side. It had probably imprinted a cream-colored ring onto the worn white paint of her desk by now. Clothes and books from her unpacked suitcase were

strewn about on the ground, along with stuffed animals, food wrappers, and loose pieces of paper. Her mom had been hounding her about making her room look at least somewhat decent during her stay. But she was too focused on other things to keep things tidy.

She stared at her screen. The words “What is asexuality?” stared back at her. She tossed her pen onto the desk and sighed. How the hell was she supposed to figure out any of this? She briefly wondered why there wasn’t a guide to help people figure out what their sexuality is. Well, there was that “Are you asexual?” ten-question quiz that she took on BuzzFeed. She doubted that it helped her very much.

The first two articles were from mental health or medical websites. They went on and on about asexuality and the ways it could manifest. The next few results were about sex aversion, including the difference between asexuality and sex aversion. There was something called “aromantic” that wasn’t the same thing as asexuality but was very similar. There were also countless forum threads and posts about the subject. Some argued about what exactly asexuality is. Others argued about how to differentiate between asexuality and sex aversion.

She stumbled across someone’s blog post. It titled “Why asexual people don’t belong in the LGBT community.” MK scrunched up her nose. Everyone in the comments was either calling the author a bigot or agreeing with the post. Another post talked about the glaring issue of nearly all forms of media lacking any sort of asexual representation. She slammed down her laptop shut and scooted her chair away from her desk. This was starting to get depressing.

She picked up her coffee mug and stared at her distorted reflection in the milky brown liquid. She breathed in a whiff of its sickly sweetness and could immediately tell that the drink had been sitting out in the open for far too long. She pushed her way out of her room and into the kitchen to dump the likely toxic liquid down the sink. She returned to her room to find that her ringtone was calling out loudly. She flipped her phone over on its back to see who was calling. Evelyn. She exhaled and hit the receive button.

“Evelyn?” she asked.

There was a long stretch of silence. MK sat back down at her desk and cleared her throat.

“Hi MK,” Evelyn said. Her voice sounded slightly scratchy and wet.

“Evelyn, is everything ok? After yesterday I thought—”

“Did you tell Sam to come and see me?”

“...I didn’t really tell her one way or another. I just told her that she needed to decide for herself.”

“Oh. You knew?”

“Yeah. Sorry, I should’ve stopped her. But once she’s made up her mind, there’s no stopping her.”

Evelyn let out a sigh on the other end of the phone. It almost sounded like a sob.

“I got so mad at her last night.”

“Well she did try to invade your home.”

“I yelled at her.”

“Understandable. She came over early in the morning.”

“She told me...or I think that she told me...” Evelyn hesitated.

MK drummed her fingers onto the surface of her desk impatiently.

“She confessed to you didn’t she.”

Evelyn let out a strangled noise. MK couldn’t help but bark out a laugh.

“Wow, I didn’t expect you to be so disgusted.”

“I’m not!”

“Well do you like her back then?”

Another pause. MK could hear her wheezing on the other end of the line, almost as though she was fighting to keep her lungs working.

“MK, I don’t know how to feel.”

The corners of MK’s mouth turned upward. “Tell me about it.”

“She was just so rude and gross last night. She endangered my job and made me feel *awful*. But then, she wanted to tell me that she was sorry, that she didn’t mean any harm, and that she likes me. What should I do MK?”

MK glanced down at her desk. Notes were crumbled and flung all over its surface, next to her computer where she had been doing research all morning. She sighed.

“Evelyn, I don’t know anything about myself,” she answered. “How do you expect me to give you advice about how you should feel?”

“You’re right,” Evelyn choked. “I shouldn’t dump my problems onto others.”

“It’s not about that. How do you really feel about her?”

“I’ve never given it much thought. I know she had a small crush on me in high school, but I figured she got over it.”

Small? MK thought to herself. She rolled her eyes. Her friends could be quite dense, sheesh.

“But now, I’m not so sure,” she continued. “Sure, I have a way to gain income, but I hate this job. It’s just awful, and I feel like it’s holding me back. Even though I was furious, when Sam came to me, it almost felt like a fairy tale prince rescuing me from the dungeon. There was a part of me that thought that it would be for the best if I lost my job, if I could follow Sam. But I can’t. There’s no way I can. Why am I like this?”

MK leaned back in her desk chair and stared up at the ceiling. She put a hand behind her head.

“I love you, Evelyn. We both do. Personally, I believe that you should choose what’s best for you. The choice that will make you happy.”

Evelyn snorted. “Easy for you to say. You can prioritize your own happiness.”

MK frowned. She leaned forward in her chair. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. Hey, I need to get back to work. I only had a small window to chat.”

“Sure. Good luck.”

The line went dead. MK jumped up and tossed her phone onto the bed. It seemed like she wasn't very good at giving advice after all.



“After all we’ve done for you, you come home to us looking like that?”

“Looking like what?”

“Like a boy! Like a lesbian!”

Sam's body shuddered. She pulled her legs to her chest, curling into herself. Everything was painful, everything was wrong.

“I am a lesbian! You know this!”

“And now everyone else will know that you’re living in sin!”

Sam moaned. Why was it so cold and hard? It was as though her entire body was encased in cement, trapping her, crushing her.

“This wouldn’t have happened if you didn’t leave. This wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t given up on your faith!”

“You didn’t give me much of a choice! You packed my bags as soon as you could!”

She became aware of the fact that she was lying down. She rubbed her cheek against something that was somehow both leathery and soft, yet painful. *I’m lying on my backpack*, she thought briefly. Her neck and back were on fire. They were bending,

melding into one another like the rest of her body. She wondered if the pain would end soon.

“If you defy me and your father, then you aren’t welcome in our home. We didn’t invite you here just so you can disrespect us once again.”

“Are you kidding me? I have nowhere else to go!”

“That’s not our problem. Refuse to act like our daughter, and we will no longer see you as our daughter.”

That’s right. She didn’t have a place to stay. Sam struggled to remember where she was. She urged herself to wake up, but her eyelids were weighed down by heavy sandbags. Her muscles had turned to mud, and her bones were glass. She was already beginning to sink back into a deep sleep.

So, you don’t love me at all anymore? Is that it? Is it because you love the sinner but hate the sin?

“...S...?”

Maybe you love me, but you don’t accept me. Or would it be a bad look if you stopped loving your own daughter?

“...Sa...”

Did you ever love me at all? Why did you bring me here at all if I was destined to be despised by both of you?

“Sam!”

Someone was gently pushing her, attempting to shake her awake. Sam's eyes flung open. A shiver coursed throughout her body, jolting her like an earthquake. She pawed at her eyes, trying to force them to stay open.

"Sam? Are you ok?" It was Evelyn's gentle, yet concerned, voice.

All at once, Sam's emotions came flooding back toward her. Shock shattered her barrier of exhaustion and she lifted up her head with complete alert. Her heart pounded with excitement; she was found by Evelyn of all people. And then the humiliation of being found lying on the ground like this came rushing toward her at full force. She batted Evelyn's hand away from her and held her body up with one arm. She grunted in pain. Evelyn reached out for her, but Sam shook her head.

"I don't deserve your help." Her voice was hoarse, scratchy. Her throat was filled with thorns that tangled around one another. It throbbed, both hot and dry. She needed water.

It must've been obvious that she was dehydrated because Evelyn reached into her purse and pulled out a bottle of water despite her protests. She quickly unscrewed the cap and lifted the bottle to Sam's lips.

"Here."

"But—"

"I don't want to hear any of that crap. I'm going to help you whether you think you need it or not."

Sam gulped down the water gratefully. Even though she had only been lying on the ground for a few hours, it felt like she hadn't had anything to drink in days. Fleeting questions in her mind wondered what time it was. She squeezed every last drop of water from the bottle until there was nothing left without a second thought. The water washed away some of the burning sensation in her throat and rehydrated her dry mouth. She pulled the bottle away from her mouth, gasping.

"Th-thank you."

"Sam. What the hell are you doing here?"

"What? Where am I?"

"I just dropped the kids off at school. I was doing some errands when I saw you lying in a goddamn parking lot. At 7 in the morning no less." She scooted away from Sam and crossed her arms.

"Holy hell..." Sam sat up all the way and took in her surroundings. It looked like she was in the middle of nowhere.

That's right, Sam remembered. I needed a place to spend the night.

"Sam, what's going on?"

Sam turned toward Evelyn. They locked eyes. Sam noted that Evelyn's dark eyes looked just as faded with fatigue as she felt. She wondered if that was partially her own fault. She felt a stab of guilt once more.

She cleared her throat. "Obviously, I wanted to spend the night in this parking lot." She spread out her arms with a lopsided grin on her face.

“This isn’t a joke Sam.”

Sam dropped her arms. “My parents kicked me out.”

“They did?”

“Yup. A few days ago. I’ve been couch-surfing.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“I was going to stay with MK last night, but...things fell through.” She pulled at her shirt awkwardly. It was caked in dirt and soaked through with her own sweat.

“Does MK know?”

“Nobody knows. Except for you, I guess.”

“Are you going to fly back?”

“I already bought my plane ticket about a month from now. I can’t really afford to fly back. I would have to dip into my savings account.”

“Couldn’t you at least try to stay at a cheap motel?”

Sam shook her head. “Like I said, I’m in no position to spend money right now.”

Evelyn frowned. “Why didn’t you just go back to MK’s place last night?”

“I don’t-I don’t know.”

“You could have told us! You have options!”

“You don’t get it Evelyn.”

“You have money! Anything is better than you falling asleep out in the middle of the parking lot like this! Do you know how reckless you’re being right now? You could get hurt so easily!”

“This building is abandoned.”

“Oh please! You know what I mean! Anyone can come out here with their car and find you!”

“I’m so sorry Evelyn.” She forced out a bitter chuckle. “I keep making things so much worse for you.”

Evelyn ran a hand through her hair. A slight, cool breeze rippled through the air and ruffled Evelyn’s curls. Sam couldn’t help but stare at them as they swayed in the wind. Her beauty radiated under the Mississippi sun. Why was Evelyn like this? She was so kind to Sam despite her oddities, her baggage, her terrible communication skills. She still displayed that she cared about her anyway. Sam pushed her suitcase, which she had been using as a pillow, away from herself. She collected herself and forced her body up onto her trembling legs. Evelyn stood up as well.

“Evelyn, you should leave.”

“I’m not leaving until I can figure out that you’ll be safe.”

“No Evelyn, I—”

But Evelyn was already wrapping her arms around Sam’s neck, pulling her close to her body.

“Shhhhh.” She rubbed Sam’s back.

Sam's heart began to flutter.

"You need a place to stay," Evelyn continued. Her voice sounded melodic, calm.

Sam buried her face into Evelyn's neck. Tears pricked at her eyes.

"I can't ask you and MK to help me," she retorted, her words muffled.

"You don't need to ask us for help. You can stay at our places for the night. It'll be ok."

Sam pulled away from their embrace. "But Evelyn, what about your job? Surely your bosses won't be ok with a gross, stinky stranger spending the night in their home."

Evelyn looked away. A sad smile spread across her lips. "They don't have to know that you'll be spending the night. You nearly climbed through my window once. You can do it again."

She nodded, cringing inwardly at the idea. *What would the Parkers do if we got caught?*



Evelyn could feel her eyes droop, her body gently being lulled to sleep by the whirring fan and the chirps of cicadas. Pools of moonlight washed over her face like warm water. It was so late. And she was barely hanging on by a thread right now. Her body had been worn ragged by Mrs. Parker today. According to her, Evelyn was spending too much time outside the house and was falling behind on her work. Perhaps the woman was worried about Evelyn slipping away from the grip she had on her. Perhaps she was looking for a reason to fire her.

Evelyn blinked slowly. She squinted her eyes at the digital clock on her desk. 1:30 AM. Sam was supposed to have been here over an hour ago. Why was she taking so long? It wasn't like she had anywhere else to be.

Tap tap tap.

Gentle, yet firm rapping came at Evelyn's guest bedroom window. Evelyn turned over in her bed, untangling herself from the sheets to see Sam staring back at her. She grinned nervously and waved at Evelyn. Evelyn rolled out of bed and quietly unlatched the window. She pulled it upward, sending stiff summer air into the house.

"You're late!" she hissed through her teeth.

Sam held her hands up in the air defensively. She took one giant step through the windowsill, before pulling the rest of her body into the room.

"I know, I know. Guilty as charged."

"Shhhh, keep your voice down! Where were you?"

Sam swallowed.

"I was over at MK's place. Lost track of time. Walked here slowly because I didn't want anyone seeing me."

"You're here now. Just make sure you don't get too much dirt on the rug. I swept today."

Sam nodded. She kicked off her sneakers and tossed them outside the open window. She began pulling her sweatshirt off and Evelyn came up from behind her and

yanked the window shut. She turned around to see that Sam was kicking her sweatpants off her legs as well. Evelyn instinctively covered her eyes, flustered.

“S-Sam!”

Sam stared back at Evelyn, confused.

“What’s wrong? Does the image of me without pants not fit in with the Parker’s purity bullshit?”

Evelyn sat on the edge of the bed, trying to regulate her breathing. She could feel heat all the way up from her neck to her ears. She bit her lip. Sam’s expression was blank but then a smirk spread across her face. She sat down on the bed, close to Evelyn.

“Am I perhaps...turning you on?”

She put her hand on top of Evelyn’s. She ripped it away furiously and glared at Sam.

“You—shut up!”

She trudged to the other side of the bed, before lying down, her back facing Sam. Sam leaned back on the bed, which let out a *creaaaak*.

“Aw, I’m sorry Evelyn. I can put my pants back on if you want me to.”

“S fine,” Evelyn muttered.

She could hear Sam flip her feet onto the bed and feel her tug at the covers. Sam adjusted her body, lying down on the pillow next to Evelyn. She squirmed around, trying

to get comfortable under the covers. Evelyn huffed. She turned around to face Sam. Sam's grinned at her guiltily.

"I know I'm loud."

"It's all right."

"I can sleep on the floor."

"I said that it was fine. Just go back to sleep."

"Ok."

Evelyn turned back around. She squeezed her eyes shut and snuggled her cheek into the pillow. She tried to clear her head, tried to pretend like she was the only one lying in bed. She felt a quick jab from two fingers, and she flipped around *again* to see what Sam wanted.

"What is it now?"

Half of Sam's face was buried into the pillow. A single eye stared back at Evelyn. The blankets covered the rest of her body, all the way up to her mouth.

"I think I'm making you uncomfortable." Sam's voice was muffled by the sheets. "I shouldn't have come."

Evelyn closed her eyes. As she laid there silently, her heart began to pound. Faster and faster, her breathing quickened to keep up with the pace. Cold adrenaline rushed throughout her body. Her eyes flew open. She pulled herself up closer to Sam, their two bodies flattened up against one another.

“Stay,” she breathed.

“Ah—s-sure.”

Evelyn wrapped her arms around Sam’s neck, pulling her all the way in. Sam let out a soft, startled yelp, but she didn’t jerk away. She returned the hug, holding Evelyn close, their breasts squeezed against one another and their foreheads touching. Evelyn could feel Sam’s heart beating nearly as fast as her own. Their two hearts hammered rapidly into each other as one continuous rhythm. *This is what it feels like to be so close to someone*, Evelyn thought to herself as she nuzzled her cheek against Sam’s. *It’s wonderful.*

“You’re so warm,” she whispered into Sam’s ear.

Sam’s entire body spasmed, hit with the impact of Evelyn’s voice fluttering so near her face. She chuckled nervously.

“Th-that’s because, because you’re, you...” Sam’s throat constricted against Evelyn’s cheek. “You’re so close to me. I-I’m not used to this.”

“That’s right. You haven’t had sex before. You’ve never even cuddled with someone, have you?”

Sam hummed sadly.

“No. I’ve always been too much of a coward. Too afraid of my first time. Too afraid I’ll mess something up.”

Evelyn gave her a genuine smile. She looked deep into Sam’s eyes, their noses inches away from touching.

“I don’t care if you mess up.”

“We’re literally in your boss’ home right now! What if we get caught?”

“I don’t care.”

“But Evelyn, I—”

“Sam, I want this.” Evelyn’s voice was firm. “What about you?”

Sam swallowed. She nodded slowly, her entire body tensing up.

Evelyn gently grabbed Sam’s hand and lowered it down to her crotch. She rubbed it against the fabric of her pajama pants. Evelyn closed her eyes and let out a moan. It all felt so wonderful. She released Sam’s wrists, who continued rubbing.

“Like this?” Evelyn could see that Sam’s hands were shaking.

“Yes.”

Evelyn leaned in toward Sam, her lips nearly touching Sam’s. Sam hesitated but moved in to press her lips against Evelyn’s. *Sam’s mouth tastes salty*, Evelyn thought to herself absentmindedly. *But so good*. Kissing Sam was almost natural, *right* for Evelyn. For some reason, it nearly felt nostalgic. She placed her hand on Sam’s back and pulled her on top of her body, their lips still glued together.

Evelyn spread her legs wider, and Sam rubbed even faster. Sam pulled her lips away briefly, gasping and laughing.

“God, I can feel how wet you are through your pants!”

Evelyn squealed and turned her face away, giggling and blushing.

“You don’t have to tell me!”

“Shhh! Shhh! Keep your voice down!” Sam whispered, but Evelyn could tell she was struggling to keep herself quiet as well.

Evelyn pulled her head up and whispered in her ear.

“I want you inside me. Please.”

“I can try...” Sam answered.

She locked her lips with Evelyn’s once more and slipped her fingers down Evelyn’s pants and underwear. She could feel Sam’s fingers curl around her mess of thick pubic hair and slip into the wet flesh of her vagina. She slowly, tenderly stuck a single finger deep into Evelyn. She let out a gasp and buried her face into the crook of Sam’s neck.

“Does it hurt?”

“No.” Evelyn breathed into Sam’s neck. She let out a moan.

Sam pulled in and out. She leaned against Sam and planted several kisses onto her face and neck. Sam pulled out one last time and Evelyn cried out. Sam shushed her again.

“Take your pants off.”

Evelyn obeyed. With the help of Sam, she managed to pull them off and fling them across the room. Then off came the panties. Evelyn tugged her nightshirt over her head; her body lay bare. Pale moonlight shone over her nakedness. She instinctively raised her arms to her exposed chest, shielding herself from prying eyes. Sam looked down at her and caressed Evelyn’s body with the tips of her fingers.

“So beautiful,” she whispered in awe.

Evelyn moaned with delight. She could feel her body shaking with both anticipation and nervousness. Sweat rolled down her cheeks.

“Now you.”

“What?”

“You should strip. I can’t be the only one who’s naked.”

Sam’s eyes widened.

“Yes ma’am.”

She pulled her t-shirt and undergarments off as well. Clothes littered the floor, and the two women dove under the covers. Evelyn’s lips pressed up against Sam’s right tit, her mouth encasing her nipple. Sam gasped and shook as Evelyn’s sucked on it. She rolled her tongue around the bulb and pulled at it with her teeth. Sam filled Evelyn with two fingers this time, pushing them deep within her body. Evelyn jerked her head back and nearly wept with pleasure. Sam pushed her thumb onto Evelyn’s clit. Bliss burst throughout her entire body, shaking Evelyn to her core.

“God, please,” she panted. “More. More.”

Sam and rubbed her fingers back and forth. Evelyn trembled beneath her, burying her face into Sam’s bare chest. She had never been so close, so connected, so *wanted* by someone else in her entire life, and she never wanted this feeling to go away. Sam brushed the stray hairs from Evelyn’s face and stared at her, transfixed.

“Do you want me to use my mouth?”

Evelyn nodded quickly. She was greedy for contact no matter where it came from. She could barely think about anything else.

Sam pulled her body away from Evelyn's. She pulled Evelyn's legs apart further until her body blossomed in full. Evelyn watched Sam stare down at her from her dizzied, cloudy brain.

"Do it," she urged.

Sam dove downward, nose first, and filled Evelyn up with her tongue. She lapped up all her wetness desperately as though she was parched. Evelyn let herself go, truly sobbing this time. Tears streamed down her cheeks and her legs wobbled uncontrollably. Sam licked at her clit over and over, and absolute ecstasy filled Evelyn's body.

Pleasedon'tendpleasedon'tendpleasedon'tend! Evelyn's brain shrieked. Evelyn squeezed her eyes shut tightly and groaned loudly. Fireworks went off in front of her eyes and galaxies filled her head. She briefly wondered if this is what it felt like to orgasm. And without warning Sam, yanked her head away from Evelyn's vagina with a look of sheer terror. Footsteps. And then the door was flung open.

The two of them stared frozen, helplessly as they met the gaze of Mrs. Parker. She stared back at them utterly horrified, as though she had just walked into her own personal hell.

Sam grasped at the sheets, frantically trying to cover her naked body. Evelyn felt detached from her body, almost calm.

"Mrs. Parker," she greeted hoarsely. "This is my friend, Sam."

Mrs. Parker screamed. She screamed hysterically and clutched at the cross necklace hanging around her neck. Her shrieks sounded inhumane, foreign to Evelyn's ears. She winced from the pain and Sam shrank away from the woman. Mrs. Parker's mouth was open comically wide and her words were garbled, distorted.

"OUT. GET. OUT!!!"

The two of them scrambled off the bed. They raced to pull on their clothes and tripped over themselves trying to pull on their shoes. Mr. Parker raced into the room, looking concerned.

"Honey, what's—" his eyes bulged when he saw Evelyn and Sam. He clamped his mouth shut, unable to say a word.

"EVELYN YOU ARE FIRED! DON'T YOU EVER COME BACK HERE! DO YOU HEAR ME?"

"I wouldn't dream of it," Evelyn muttered under her breath.

Evelyn pried open the window and grabbed Sam's wrist. She climbed out of the window, pulling Sam with her.

"Hurry!"

"What—"

"I ought to call the cops on you two...you two...WHORES!" Mrs. Parker called after them.

Evelyn and Sam raced away hand in hand. They ran as fast as they could away from the white house, the picket fence, the cross on the window, and the suburban

neighborhood. The two stopped at the edge of the road panting. Sam looked over at Evelyn.

“Eve-Evelyn are you ok? Jesus, man, I’m so sorry. What the hell was I thinking?”

Evelyn threw her head back and howled with laughter. Sam backed away from her with stunned silence. Evelyn sighed and wiped away tears of joy from her cheeks.

“Guess I should call my parents, huh? Let them know I got fired.”

“You aren’t upset? It’s all my fault you got fired!”

Evelyn limped toward Sam; her were sides sore from laughter. She pulled Sam into a tight hug.

“No, thank you Sam. You both saved me and ruined me.” Evelyn struggled to keep herself from barking out laughs. “I love you so much.”

Sam was shaking badly, but she returned the hug, nonetheless.

“Me too,” she managed to say. “I love you too.”



MK pressed her Lego down into the foundation of the little town she was building. Everything was finally coming together after she and Emma had been working on it for two weeks. Her head swiveled around to Sam, who was wordlessly cramming some of her things into her backpack. MK picked up another Lego and tossed it carelessly, up and down in the air.

“I can’t believe that happened last night.”

Sam zipped the backpack closed with her elbow and tried to force it to shut all the way with the zipper.

“You have no idea. I’m still in shock. It feels like it was a dream.”

“And you two had *sex*?”

Sam drew her mouth into a thin, straight line.

“Yes. We’ve already told you a million times.”

MK carelessly tossed the Lego in the box. She stood up and stepped over the Lego set to sit next to Sam. She clapped her on the back roughly.

“You finally made your moves. Though, I will admit, I didn’t think you would achieve this by making her cum.”

Sam shot her a death glare and brushed her hand away.

“Shut up.”

“You really rocked her world. That’s one night she’ll never forget.”

“My GOD MK! Shut up!”

She shoved MK away, albeit playfully.

“Yes, I know. I’m sorry.” A mischievous grin spread across her face. “Though it’s a shame you got caught before she could do you.”

Sam’s face immediately turned bright red. She turned away, mumbling to herself. MK sat up completely straight.

“Wait. You don’t mean to tell me that she *did*?!”

Sam let out a strangled noise. MK clapped her hands together, completely amused.

“Wait a minute. When did you have time? You both went straight to my house!”

“When we came back. After you went to sleep,” Sam muttered.

MK made a face.

“Ugh! Not in my house!”

“What? Sex still isn’t your thing?”

MK paused. Maybe. She didn’t *hate* it; she just was completely indifferent toward it. There was nothing, no desire, no pleasure. But maybe the fact that she felt nothing actually did mean something. Maybe that’s what it meant to be asexual.

“I don’t know.” She looked at Sam curiously. “Did you enjoy it Sam? Do you want to have it again?”

Sam rubbed the back of her head. She hesitated.

“I mean, yeah. If you’re asking me, then yeah.”

“What about Evelyn?”

Sam’s face became a shade of tomato soup once more.

“Christ. Yeah, she seemed to enjoy it.”

MK stood up and walked back over to her Lego set. She stared back at it. She and Emma had almost finished the entire thing since they had been home that summer. MK

sat down. It had started out so small, yet it was already a bustling city. She smiled to herself.

“Sam, do you think I could consider myself asexual?”

“If you think you are, then you are,” Sam answered firmly. She gritted her teeth and finally managed to zip the backpack shut.

“Thanks Sam.”

Sam turned back at MK. The two of them exchanged warm smiles.

“Any time.”

Emma poked her head into the room.

“MK, we’re almost done with our Lego set, right? We just need a few more pieces!” Emma proclaimed excitedly.

“I know! I can’t believe it!”

Emma stared at Sam, who was picking her backpack off the floor.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay with us, Sam?”

“Thank you, but I really should be getting back home. It would probably be best if I left for college as soon as possible.” Sam looked across the room and met MK’s eyes. MK noticed there was a deep sadness within them.

“It’s just too dangerous for her, sis.”

“I know. It’s just a shame though. I know you wanted to spend the rest of your summer here. Is there a chance you could talk your parents into—”

“Thank you,” Sam interrupted quickly. “But I already bought another plane ticket and I’m planning to catch a bus tomorrow. So, it’s too late.”

Sam didn’t take her eyes off MK. She collected her things and trudged away to her bedroom. She gave a small wave. MK waved back as she watched her go.

“What were you guys talking about before I came in here?” Emma asked, grabbing MK’s attention away from Sam.

“Nothing much.”

The two sisters began grabbing Legos and stacking them on top of one another. MK recalled that they would talk and do this for hours when they were younger. The building nearly provided a distraction from real life, real problems. Emma grabbed a yellow Lego and added it to the seafood restaurant.

“I heard you talk about asex-um-ace—”

“Asexuality.”

“Asexuality? What’s that?”

To her surprise, the words began to tumble from MK’s mouth almost as though it was an instinct. It was something that came naturally to her.

“Asexuality basically means ‘no sex.’ It’s a type of sexuality for those who have no sexual feelings or desires.”

Her sister nodded, intrigued. She placed her Legos down alongside MK, the two working together harmoniously.

“So that means you can’t have sex? Or you don’t want to?”

“That’s not necessarily the case. Sometimes, people who are asexual have an aversion to sex. Other times, asexual people don’t mind having sex, but they still don’t have any desire for sex. And then there are people who are both asexual and arromantic, which means...” MK stopped. She stared at her sister who looked utterly confused. “Sorry,” MK whispered.

“No, no, you’re fine! I think that’s so cool, MK, I’m just, as you know, a slow learner.”

“Really? You don’t think it’s weird or confusing? Or,” MK swallowed, “Unnatural?”

“No, not at all!” she paused for a few seconds to place another Lego down. “Are you asexual, sis?”

“I-I think so.” MK’s voice was shaky.

“What?! That’s so awesome MK!”

“Really? How is that ‘awesome?’”

“Well, because I think every part of you is cool! I, uh, hope that’s not too cheesy.”

MK laughed.

“Not at all, sis.”

The two of them placed the last few Legos down and backed away from their town. MK let out a whistle.

“This is one of the finest things we’ve created, if I do say so myself.”

“Of course! I knew we could do it!” Emma looked around, stopping when her eyes landed on her purse. “We should go get some lunch to celebrate.”

“Finishing our Lego Utopia?”

“Well, that. And you coming out to me as asexual.”

MK blinked.

“Oh, c’mon. It’s not that big of a deal.”

“It is to me! Because you’re my little sister, and you trusted me enough to tell me, even if I’m still trying to understand.” She patted MK on the back. “Let’s go get some burgers while we still have time together. My treat.”

MK happily followed her sister out of the house. Sam knew and her sister knew. They were willing to listen, willing to understand her. It was small but it was a start.



Sam grasped at the straps of her backpack tightly. She tapped her foot on the pavement as the hot Mississippi air beat down on her bare head, as though it was trying to cook her skull. It was farther into summer now and the heat was beginning to become unbearable. Mosquitos zoomed around her face, and the swampy humidity was thick and hot. Sweat dripped down her face. *I guess I won’t have to worry much about this soon*, she told herself. *If only this bus stop wasn’t in the middle of nowhere.*

Sam glanced over at MK and Evelyn. The two of them were being awfully quiet. MK was pacing about nervously. Evelyn was preoccupied with a book she brought.

Although, it didn't look like she was reading it; she leafed through the pages anxiously. Sam walked over to Evelyn, threw her backpack aside, and sat down next to her.

“So...what're you reading?”

Evelyn slammed the book shut. She gave Sam a small smile.

“It's nothing.”

Evelyn's voice was just as melodic as it had been, but it seemed to be haunted by a strange melancholy. Sam gulped down a pang of guilt. Was it because she lost her job? Was it because Sam was escaping, and she was unable to do so? Was it because she loved Sam? *No. It can't be that one. There's no way.* And yet, Evelyn was the one who had told Sam firsthand. Sam reached out for Evelyn one last time.

“I'm sorry—”

“—I already told you that there's nothing to be sorry for, like a million times. It was my idea. And,” Evelyn took a deep breath, “I don't regret it. At all.”

Sam grinned mirthlessly. “You threw everything away for one night and you don't regret one bit of it?”

“Nope.”

“Evelyn, I'm so confused. Why?”

Evelyn hesitated. She looked down at her book, her hand stroking the front cover. She didn't look up at Sam.

“Sam, you and MK have everything I want. I want to get away, to see the world, to go to college.” She bit her lip. “But I can't. I don't have the money or the ability. You

know, that's why I took this job. But I felt trapped. Getting me fired, in a way, set me free."

"Oh, that makes sense," Sam responded awkwardly.

The two of them sat on the bench in silence for a few moments before MK joined them.

"Don't forget, you both got to experience the joys of sex." Every word dripped with sarcasm. "That made everything worth it too."

Sam glared up at her, her eyes sparkling with irritation.

"Oh, fuck off, MK." She jumped off the bench as MK smirked back at her.

Evelyn sighed.

"All of us have changed so much. Yet we really have remained the same somehow."

MK snorted.

"We'll always be the same idiot friends from high school at heart."

Warmth spread through Sam's body as she stared at her two friends. No matter how hard life would get, she still had the two of them after all. Evelyn stood up from the bench wearing a concerned look.

"Sam, did you ever get to—"

"Yeah, I did. They called me. Mom and Dad said they never wanted me around again. I ruined their reputation, apparently." She fought against the lump that was

forming in her throat. “The Parkers were telling everyone in town about what a little lesbian delinquent I am. I probably won’t be back for a while. Or at least, I have no idea when I’ll return.”

She turned away from the two of them, trying to keep herself from sniffing. Tears pricked at the corners over her eyes, threatening to pour out like a flood gate. *Oh please, not now*, she urged herself.

MK let out a loud wail and flung her arms around Sam.

“Pl-please try to come back, one day!” she wept. “You always have a place with me and my family!”

Sam could no longer hold back her feelings. She cried hard, the tears slipped from her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. She pried herself from MK’s grip.

“I will try. And thank you, MK.”

Evelyn was still standing nearby, tears silently streaming down her face as well. Her arms were wrapped around her body as she watched Sam and MK.

“Yes, at least try. I want to see you again.”

“I promise.” Sam moved over to Evelyn and softly gripped her shoulder. “Evelyn, did you mean it?”

“Did I mean what?”

“When you said that you loved me?”

Evelyn turned away and shrugged. Sam let her hands fall to her side. She could hear the bus pull up to its stop, and MK began sobbing even louder. Sam searched her eyes, trying to search for a hidden truth. Evelyn wiped her eyes.

“You should go.”

Sam nodded. “Sure. Thanks for everything. I meant it, by the way. When I said that I love you. I hope...I hope you find someone, at least. I’ll try to find someone too.”

Evelyn finally looked back at Sam, her face like shattered pieces of a broken mirror. Sam grinned at her, a sad crooked grin and slid her backpack onto her shoulders. She walked up the steps of the bus.

“BYYYYE SAAAAAM!” MK cried out.

“Bye MK! Bye Evelyn!”

She waved halfheartedly to both of them and turned around to ascend the steps of the stairs.

“Sam, wait!”

It was Evelyn. Sam looked over her shoulder to see Evelyn standing up as straight as possible, her head held high.

“Sam, I meant it too. I meant it when I said that I loved you.”

Sam said nothing. She couldn’t. The pain tightening chest wouldn’t let her. It was too late, all too late and it was time for her to leave. She finished walking into the bus and sat down. She stared out the window and watched her two friends. Evelyn fell to her knees, sobbing into her t-shirt. MK bent over beside her, comforting her. The engine of

the bus rumbled and hummed; it began to pull away from the bus stop. It sped up, going faster and faster, away from both MK and Evelyn. They got smaller, until they were nothing more than a blur. And then they were gone. Completely out of sight.

Sam pressed her cheek up against the window. Breathe-in. Breathe-out. She passed the same billboard. The one that exclaimed that Christians should take back the rainbow. The one that proclaimed to the Heavens that Sam's existence was a sin. She blinked and it was gone, already in the oblivion of all meaningless billboards. Sam knew she was leaving Mississippi.

Breathe-in. Breathe-out. *I'll be back one day*, she told herself. *They may say I don't belong, but I'll come back anyway. It is our home after all.* She closed her eyes, soothed by the cool glass. *The three of us belong here, whether they like it or not.*