



JAMILA MIKHAIL

MOMENTS  
*in*

TIME

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

# MOMENTS IN TIME

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# THE WAY HOME

The city streets were dirty and the heat of the sun made a garbage odor linger in the air. By the ocean you could catch a breath, but downtown the smog didn't help either. I stood there in the streets contemplating the meaning of not only life but existence in general, not expecting much. It was your average day with nothing out of the ordinary or so it seemed. For a moment I felt as if I was alone in the whole universe; my hands were in my jacket pockets, the wind blew through my hair, and everyone around me momentarily disappeared leaving me with nothing more than the present moment. There was so much life around me but everything momentarily eluded me.

"It smells bad doesn't it?" the voice of a little girl said from behind me.

Reality quickly came back to me as I was startled by the sweet high pitched voice. I turned around instantaneously, a movement that is involuntary for most people even though someone tells you not to look but you do anyway. Behind me there was a chubby little girl with a big smile on her face. My first impression of her was that she didn't have a care in the world but I knew too well that the first - and second, and third - impression was only what met the eye, there was always so much more beneath the surface, hidden and locked away behind closed doors. The little girl looked like she was about seven or eight years old, maybe a little more and maybe a little less, brown hair cut into a bob and dark chocolatey brown eyes that contrasted against her pale skin. Her full cheeks gave her the appearance of a cupid and a reassuring and calming demeanor. The true picture of innocence and an uncorrupted heart.

"Indeed it smells terrible out here today," I replied neutrally.

"What's your name?" the little girl asked me enthusiastically, "I'm Jade Grace, or just Jade for short, I'm not a big fan of Grace anyway."

"The pleasure is mine Jade, my name is Jasenko."

"What? Come again? I'm not gonna remember that you know."

"People call me Jason to keep things simple, since nobody can get the pronunciation or the spelling quite right."

"Ugh, my stepfather's name is Jason, we'll have to find you another name. But right now I'd like to go hang out by the ocean because it stinks too much here."

I grinned at the little girl who decided to start walking towards the nearest bus stop and then turned around as if she expected me to follow her. When I hesitated too long she put her arms up in the air and shrugged with a so-are-you-coming-or-not look on her face. I had to oblige.

"You just want to me to get you on the bus don't ya?" I teased her as I caught up to her.

"For your information, Jack Sauce or whatever your name is, it's free for kids under ten," she fired back playfully.

"When they are accompanied by an adult," I muttered, "and my name is Jasenko."

"You're an adult," she replied affirmatively with a crooked grin on her adorable face.

That's when I knew that I wasn't going to win so I gave her an affirmative nod with my head and when I did so she jumped of joy and hugged my waist. She looked as if she might've been eight or nine years old but with maturity far beyond her years. Where were her parents? If I had a child her age I wouldn't be letting them wander out on the streets all by themselves.

"Do your parents know you trick strangers into letting you ride around the city for free?" I asked her as we saw the bus coming down the street.

"First of all, I didn't *trick* you," she told me as she stared at me with her big eyes, "and my parents couldn't care less, so let's get out of here shall we? It smells so bad that I want to puke!"

The bus pulled up right in front of us so I made no further comments until we were seated onboard. I paid for my fare and told the driver that Jade was with me but she already seemed to know that. Jade was probably a regular on the city buses because she knew exactly what she was doing. The two of us sat in the mid-section next to one another and looked outside and the beautiful day that was just beginning out there.

"So, Jack Sauce, what are you exactly?" Jade quizzed as she put her little hand over mine, "You seem to be pretty exotic."

"My mom was Croatian and my dad was Armenian," I replied sweetly.

"Yup, you're exotic," she spoke in an upbeat affirmative voice, "like Kim Kardashian."

"Do you like exotic?"

"Yes! You have nice skin like a clay sculpture and Americans are boring anyway."

"I prefer America over my homeland, I'm more into boring than into war."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. I'm blessed to have been born in this land but I'm one of those people who wander who really *are* lost."

"How can you be lost? You're still so young!"

Jade shrugged, not having an answer to my question. There was indeed an epidemic of hopelessness even in the land where all dreams can come true. At least they make you believe that America can make all of your dreams come true until you grow up and realize that it was nothing but make-believe and if you really want something you'll have to get it for yourself.

"You look deep in thought Jack Sauce," Jade interrupted my train of thought, "and I don't like calling you Jack Sauce, I need to find you a new name and *not* Jason. »

"Why do you dislike your stepfather so much hon?" I asked her in a serious tone of voice.

"Some of the most poisonous people you will ever meet are disguised as family," she muttered in an equally serious tone of voice.

"Touché," I replied as I squeezed her little hand in mine to comfort her.

She then got off her seat next to me and climbed onto my lap. She let her head rest on my shoulder and looked outside as the buildings went flying by. It was a rowdy day in Mapleford near the shipyard because the trial of the century was underway at the courthouse nearby. News crews, protesters, supporters, tourists, fangirls and the general public all filled up the usually peaceful streets. I loved sitting near the harbor and watching the boats go by with another section of the city in the backdrop. It was a beautiful area of town with few disturbances considering the constant hustle and bustle of city life. Jade could see the ocean and get away from the stench of garbage in the dirtier neighborhoods of an otherwise spectacular city. Jade hugged my neck as the bus slowed down in the clogged up streets.

"I pray he doesn't get the death penalty," Jade whispered softly to me as people lined up the side of the street holding up signs to have mercy and execute justice instead of people.

"He'll get what he deserves," I muttered as I stared out the window of the moving bus.

Jade looked up at me with her chocolatey brown eyes seemingly begging for mercy. I wished I could've given her what she wanted but it was beyond me at that point. I could not possibly imagine even showing a single shred of leniency to someone who had done such harm to so many people, but Jade did not share that opinion.

"I wonder if he's as good-looking in person as he was on the cover of the town newspaper," the youngster sitting on my lap contemplated as we passed the courthouse. I didn't respond, I simply kept looking outside the window.

"You sorta look like him in a way," she went on playfully, "your black hair sticking out of everywhere and all."

"I'm exotic," I teased her, "like Kim Kardashian."

Jade bursted into a frenzy of giggles and put her arms around my neck again. Passed the courthouse there was a bus stop near a park by the waterfront that was usually quiet and peaceful but had since become an area of commotion and protest. That didn't bother Jade though. Nothing was going to stop her from her boardwalk stroll to get away from the smell of the other end of the city. The bus came to a halt and the two of us were the only ones to get off at that particular stop. The freshness that came with inhaling the mist of the salty water was like breathing for the first time. The skies had become partly sunny and partly clouded over which controlled the humidity and the

smell. Jade began strolling around the shores joyfully and throwing her arms up in the air and letting the wind blow through her dark hair.

"Come on Matteo!" she yelled out when I was taking too long to catch up to her, "You're so darn slow!"

"What did you just call me?!" I muttered out in both surprise and shock.

*Matteo. Matteo Torres. Just like the killer.*

"Jack Sauce," she teased.

Once again I had to oblige. A few people sat at tables near the water casually eating and watching the boats and the airplanes. Jade looked as she walked passed them but didn't stop. By the time I caught up to her she was already sitting down by the water in a secluded spot away from the wind that she had probably picked out for herself a long time ago. She signaled me with her hand to sit down next to her. I did and she let her head rest against my arm. She appeared to be deep in thought as she looked into the distance and at things that I probably couldn't see. Between the roaring engines all around us I could hear from yelling in the distance but I couldn't've cared less what all the commotion was about I was in a happy place.

"Do you come here often?" I asked Jade after a moment of silence between us, "This part of the city is usually the one I avoid because it's so expensive."

"I used to," she replied, not giving the question much consideration, "my travel buddy died a little while ago and I have yet to find another suitable companion. She was 87 years old you know. She just stopped coming one day and then I saw her obituary in the Mapleford Observatory about a week later. I couldn't read it but I recognized her picture when I was searching for the caricatures section."

"I'm sorry for your loss," I said in a soft tone of voice.

"Thanks. I've been searching for someone else ever since but most people don't like this deal. A few threatened to bring me to the police and in turn I threatened to get them put in jail," Jade replied trying not to laugh, "so you better not look down on me as some sorry and unwanted child."

"I won't, I promise, but I have to ask, don't you go to school or have parents that look out for you?"

"That house is not a home and I'd rather not be in it. It corrupts my soul anyway. My mom isn't just some abused housewife either, she beats Jason up just as much as he beats her."

"Do they beat you too?"

"Sometimes. Don't tell the police, it'll just make everything so much worst. Right now everything is working fine."

"Don't you worry hon, I'm not going to force you to send me to prison. I don't want to go there."

Jade giggled as she looked up at me. Her story reminded me so much of my own. I was the kid of poor immigrants who had failed to find the American dream. My mother was in a long-term care facility and didn't even know who I was whereas my father had been deported and I had no clue what had happened to him after that.

"I have six siblings and step-siblings in total but most are in foster care," Jade went on, "I hear it's terrible. More terrible than deadbeat parents. They wouldn't let me travel or even hang out. I know, I know, *good* parents don't let kids like me do these things but despite everything it *works*. My life works, and I don't want anyone screwing that up. I live my life the way I want and choose."

The two of us locked eyes for a moment before she turned away and looked at the boats and airplanes in the distance again. I gently placed my hand on her shoulder to comfort her. Obviously her living situation greatly pained her but she was afraid that changing it would only make it worst. I had also been taught that if something works fine the way it is, don't do anything to mess that up.

"I've got a few coins left, do you want to go somewhere for some food?" I asked Jade after yet another extended moment of silence between us.

"Sure," she replied sweetly, "but are you implying that you're poor or homeless?"

"I guess I am. I hop around from place to place."

"Then I guess I'm homeless too. Except that I have a real room in a real house. Last night I put some scented nail polish on my feet, do you wanna smell my toes?"

\* \* \*

The sun went down over the city as pizza was being ripped to shreds in between my teeth. Jade, on the other hand, carefully took off all the mushrooms without disturbing anything else that was on her slice. My piece of pizza was long gone by the time she took a careful first bite out of hers. Delight swept over her little round face when no mushrooms were detected on her tongue. The crust was the only thing left when she was finally done her piece, nearly an hour after I had swallowed mine. It had been quite a long and tiring, be it fun, day and Jade was visibly tired. A full stomach only made her want to doze off even more.

"Where are you staying tonight?" Jade asked me in a concerned tone of voice.

"The truth is I don't really know," I replied in a low voice.

"Do you want to go to the shelter with me?"

"Why would you want to go to the shelter when you have your own room to sleep in?"

"Because Jason is going to come home drunk and super belligerent and nobody seems to be willing to do jack shit about it and it's easier to just stay away, you feel me?"

"I know hon, my grandfather was an alcoholic. My dad spent most of his life trying to help him but you can't help those who don't want to be helped."

"I'm sorry to hear that your family life is super crappy too."

"Don't worry about that Jade, I'm still vertical. Just focus on you."

The two of us left the restaurant and as we walked down the street Jade put her little cold hand in mine. I affectionately looked down at her and she smiled at me softly. As we approached the bus stop I saw a bunch of people gathered outside the homeless shelter on the corner a few blocks down before the doors opened.

"Maybe it would be best if we didn't go there," Jade commented as her pace slowed down before going to sit on a nearby bench.

Unfortunately much of the regular homeless population stayed out of the conventional homeless shelters because such places were filled with junkies and other types of people that society had puked up and rejected. Being around them wasn't pleasant, and it was probably best policy to stay away. Much like Jade's perception of her stepfather, nobody who had the power to change something seemed to want to and hence walking the other way was the best thing to do for us.

"I *really* don't want to go home," Jade muttered in an exasperated tone of voice.

"Do you have anywhere else to go?" I asked her, trying to cheer her up, "like a friend's place maybe?"

She was deep in thought for a moment, looking at the sunset between the tall buildings. The airplanes flew over us with a deafening roar and ascended high into the multicolored sky until they were out of sight.

"If I go home," Jade spoke slowly, "you *have* to promise me that we'll hang out again tomorrow."

"You have my word little girl," I reassured her in a soft tone of voice as I moved her hair out of her face with my hand.

"Matteo Jack Sauce," she muttered in a menacing tone, "you *better* meet me at the corner of Bolton and Dorchester tomorrow morning for breakfast *or else* I will cry blood and eat your soul. Understand me?! »

I nodded affirmatively in silence. A big grin appeared on her face and she hugged me. She grabbed a strand of my overgrown hair and let it slip through the fingers of her little hand.

"Your hair isn't as soft as I imagined it would be," she said nonchalantly.

"Bring me some of your Barbie shampoo tomorrow," I challenged, making her grin again.

"You'll look so hot people will have to call the fire department," she laughed, "well, there's still plenty of time to kill before we call it a night so what do you want to do?"



"It's getting pretty late for someone so young, are you sure you don't want to get on your way home? By the time you arrive it'll be pitch black."

"You have time for what you make time for in life, sleeping can wait. A pastor once told me that the most precious thing you can give someone is your time."

"So you're saying that by staying with me longer you're making me a gift."

Jade cracked up laughing at my joke. In fact she laughed so much that she was out of words to swing something back at me. She let her head rest against my shoulder after her episode of laughter was over.

"Do you wanna walk the bridge at night?" I asked her, "Looking up at the stars and seeing the city lights in the distance is quite an incredible sight!"

"Yes!" Jade exclaimed joyfully, "I've never walked the bridge at night but I've always wanted to!"

"I'll carry you if you want, I know that you're running out of energy even if you say you aren't."

Jade said it sounded like a decent compromise so I carried her on my back a few miles down to the suspension bridge. She let her heavy head flop over my shoulder with her arms slouched over my chest, unable to hold on to anything out of exhaustion. She seemed to slip in and out on consciousness at different times during the walk but I couldn't say for sure. She grunted and yawned from time to time and if sleep did win over here and there, it wasn't because she hadn't put up a fight in order to stay awake. The atmosphere had cooled down considerably by the waters so I gave Jade my light jacket once we got to the bridge's midsection. She had nothing on but a t-shirt and some jeans with flip-flops. She gladly accepted my jacket but she also expressed worry. "Now you're going to get cold," she said in a mousy voice.

"Don't worry about me," I assured her with a playful tone of voice, "I'm exotic."

"You know that body heat is the best and most efficient way to warm up another person right?"

"If you want me to carry you, you don't need to make excuses, just say it."

"Fine then, keep on carrying me! »

I extended my arms towards her and then scooped her up and cradled her on my chest once more. I stood on the edge of the bridge, the traffic to my back, holding Jade and looking at the city lights in the distance with the stars dangling above our heads. There wasn't a cloud in sight with only a gentle breeze blowing through my hair. Jade held on to the back of my neck with one hand and kept the other one inside the jacket I'd tightly wrapped her in.

"Looking up at the stars and knowing who holds them up gives me peace of mind," Jade spoke in an awe-filled tone of voice, "sometimes I have my doubts but I know that one day things will turn around."

"You have more confidence than I ever could have," I muttered.

"I used to think that I'd have to walk this road alone but then I experienced God's mercy and grace. Now, no matter where life takes me you'll always find me with a smile."

"The stuff that's been happening lately shakes me to the core and it's so hard to see the light amidst all of this darkness."

"God is faithful, just ask him to send an angel."

"He already did."

Jade put her other arm around my neck and hugged me tightly, or at least as tight as she could considering she was struggling to stay awake. I let my chin rest gently on top of her head and for the first time in what felt like a century I allowed myself to feel vulnerable and I let a tear escape. I tried hard not to cry, but I couldn't help myself.

"Yuck! You're making my hair wet!" Jade exclaimed angrily, making me laugh through my tears, "Quit that stuff right now!"

"Alright, I'm sorry," I said as I giggled.

Jade wiped my tears away with her fingers and made sure I was okay before letting her head flop on my shoulder once again. In a way it was like Jade kept my heart from getting colder or turning into stone completely. When I'd first arrived in Mapleford I thought I would be one of the good guys but I'd done things that I wasn't proud of. I was in denial about whether or not I was forced to make a choice that wasn't mine or if I had done that willingly because I was a sick individual, not very different than the ones I told myself I hated.

"Jasenko," she said softly after a moment of silence, "I love you."

I don't know if I was more surprised by the fact that she'd cared to remember my name or that she'd just told me that she loved me.

"I love you too," I told her when I was able to catch my breath again.

The two of us stayed there with the breeze blowing through our hair for a few more moments before I got down from the curb on the edge of the bridge. I carried Jade back to the nearest bus stop just in time for the last bus to take her home. I gave her a few dollars to pay her fare since I wasn't getting on with her. She gave me my coat back and gave me the longest and tightest hug before I had to literally pry her off of me and sit her down in the bus for her to finally let me go. She waved at me through the window as the bus roared away with only a few passengers onboard. I waved back from the outside before turning around and walking away. From time to time I turned back to look at the impressive bridge lit up with the city in the background.

I loitered around for a while looking at the stars in the clear black sky but eventually I made it to the corner of Bolton and Dorchester and laid my head down on the nearest park bench. I slowly closed my tired eyes. The wood was cold but I dozed off out of lethargy and it didn't take long.

\* \* \*

Only a few hours seemed to have gone by before I was woken up in the best of ways. Ten little fingers played around in my hair and touched my face. I slowly opened my tired eyes to a light blue sky and Jade's little round face. What time was it? Almost six in the morning maybe? I pulled myself up slowly and sat upright on the bench, pretty sore from having dozed off out of exhaustion in a rather uncomfortable position. I was sore and stiff but I'd had a good night's sleep nonetheless, all things considered. I looked up at the sky for a moment and saw that the sun was already climbing up on the east side. It was indeed pretty early for Jade to be out on the streets by herself. The city hadn't even woken up yet! My little friend sat next to me nonchalantly and stared at me with her big round brown eyes.

"When you told me to meet you here you left out the part about meeting you here at this time of the morning," I muttered as I yawned, still only just half- awake.

"Do you have anything better to do?" she asked me in a cheerful voice, "I don't."

"No, I guess I don't either."

"I brought you some Barbie shampoo just like you requested. And I stole one of Jason's razors just in case you wanted to trim that. It's not very nice to touch."

"Thanks hon."

Jade scooted from her current position and sat on my lap. I put my arms around her and held her gently. She held her plastic bag in her hand and although I didn't know what was in it, but it was definitely more than just shampoo and a razor. She probably hadn't slept too much not any more than I did. She looked tired and her little eyes closed when she let her head flop over my chest.

"I took money out of my mom's purse and took the first bus from my neighborhood to here," she said after a while, still with her eyes closed, "then I walked a little bit and saw a dude facedown on a bench so I thought I would go over and talk to him and it turned out to be you."

"And what would have you done if I hadn't been here?" I asked her.

"Talked to the homeless guy facedown on the bench until you arrived," she replied as she let out a couple of giggles in between her words.

"And what if I'd never showed up?"

"Well, I probably would've went out looking for your replacement. And I would've been really sad."

"I take it you're not going to school either."

"Nope."

We both struggled to stay awake at first but it wasn't long before the city came to life with a large influx of commuters needing to open up shop by seven and those with much less enthusiastic faces going to early morning classes. Busses passed with a roar, cars honked, people talked, all creating a buzz that you couldn't ignore.

"What do you want to do today?" I asked Jade as we both watched the traffic pass by.

"I'd like to either ride the metro or a boat," she replied in a neutral tone of voice, "I'm sort of really familiar with the bus routes and I've seen everything. Oh yeah, and I have some money for you."

"I don't want your money Jade, or Jason's money or whatever."

"It's my money."

"I don't want it either way."

"You're saying you don't even want ice cream?"

"I'm saying I can pay for it myself."

"No you're not!"

Regardless of what I said, I wasn't about to win with her. Finally she handed me the bag and I found a pouch of coins, kind of like what you'd find in a piggy bank, a complete shaving kit, a girly bottle of shampoo that smelled like strawberries, a black pashmina scarf, last week's crumpled up newspaper, a notebook with a pen, a pair of sunglasses and a couple of sugary snacks.

"You have an interesting adventure kit here," I commented as I looked at all the items in the bag.

"It's mostly for you," she added joyfully, "I don't have many manly objects but I did my best."

"Thank you," I replied sweetly.

She smiled when I gave her a kiss on the forehead to thank her for her gift. I unzipped my backpack and squeezed in a spot to put the goodies in. In my bag I had a change of clothes, a hat, my own little pouch of coins and a few hygiene products. It wasn't much but it was enough for me to survive.

"How did you become homeless?" Jade asked me in a mousy tone of voice after an extended moment of silence between the two of us.

"It's not a one-sentence answer, but I'll tell you the short version anyway," I replied after I let out a loud sigh, "after my parents split, the steady income everywhere went down and eventually it became non-existent to the point that I could no longer sustain myself either. The street is all I had left at the end of the day."

"I'm sorry to hear that, you seem awfully young to be stuck in something like this."

"I'll be twenty later this year, if I live to see my next birthday."

"I hope you do. I want to see my tenth birthday later this year too. So do you wanna go to the corner store and try my Barbie shampoo?"

"Sure, let's go."

Jade and I walked a few blocks at a rather slow pace because I was very tired, lethargic to be more specific, and I hadn't gotten the chance to swallow any caffeinated drinks to give me a temporary boost either. Jade, on the other hand, was full of energy and my lack of it annoyed her so she grabbed me by the hand and dragged me along the sidewalk through the many commuters filling the downtown streets. I rubbed my tired eyes and then scratched my face where my beard had begun to unevenly grow back. On the bright side I was one of those lucky people who didn't have the burden of shaving every day. In such circumstances I probably would've wanted to shave my whole face off.

"You're so damn slow!" Jade muttered with a hint of annoyance in her otherwise sweet voice when I wasn't catching up to her the way she wanted me to.

Eventually we did make it to our destination, but not quickly enough for little Jade. The warmth of the inside of the building only made me drowsier from being out in the cold for so long.

"But I can't go into the men's bathroom!" Jade protested when I wanted to go in and take a birdbath but she didn't want to be alone.

"You can go in the men's bathroom more than I can go in the women's bathroom," I tried to convince her, "just come, we can lock the door behind us."

"Okay," she gave up after a few moments of hesitation.

The bathroom wasn't the best smelling but I couldn't say it was the foulest smelling either. Obviously the place hadn't been cleaned in a while, but it was cleaner than the streets. The roof was leaking in the corner so whoever was in charge of the place put in a hose that drained into one of the three sinks on a large counter. For a bathroom the room was quite large. Showers could've easily been mounted on one wall since there were no windows. Generally birdbaths made a mess but in my case it would count as cleaning up. Jade was obviously grossed out, and I couldn't blame a little girl who wasn't used to stuff like that for reacting negatively.

"On second thoughts maybe it would've been better if I'd just stayed outside after all," Jade muttered, seemingly embarrassed.

"Why?" I asked her, "It smells too bad for you in here or what?"

"No," she replied blushing, "I don't want to see you take your clothes off."

"Just turn around for thirty seconds," I proposed, "it won't take long."

Without saying anything more Jade turned around so she was facing the door and went one step further by covering her eyes with her hands. I quickly stripped down and washed myself as best as I could with the orange liquid soap that had started to dry up in the dispenser. I made quite the puddle of soapy water on the floor but the janitor would have one thing less to do, not that he did much to begin with. I then put on the change of clothes I had in my bag.

"Okay, you can look now," I told Jade.

She reluctantly turned back my way but didn't uncover her eyes for another few moments. She began by peeking through her fingers and when she saw that I was decent she removed her hands from blocking her vision and smiled at me.

"How do you like my outfit?" I asked her, "Do I look good?"

"You always look good," she replied giggling, "because you're exotic."

"Thanks hon," I added.

I was only wearing some faded dark grey sweatpants and a plain black tee I'd gotten from the Salvation Army a few weeks prior. I then proceeded to wash my dirty clothes in the sink and letting them dry over the stalls while I tested out Jade's Barbie shampoo. Putting my head under the running water of the sink made it splash all over the place much to Jade's amusement. Like any young child would do, she played around in the constantly growing puddle of water on the floor. The drain in one corner of the room near the sinks must've been clogged up completely because not a drop of water went down and the puddle was slowly becoming a lake. I squirted a large dose of the strawberry shampoo into my abundantly greasy hair and created an eruption of bubbles that overflowed onto the counter and of course, the floor. That stuff definitely bubbled up more than your conventional men's shampoo.

"Make sure you get all the tricky spots behind the ears and everything," Jade reminded me like a mother would do, "and by the way you could really use a haircut."

By the time I'd gotten all of that out of my hair the water had even gone underneath the door to create another puddle on the other side. It made me somewhat anxious because I was usually careful not to do precisely that, especially when I planned to leave without cleaning anything up. Since I had no shaving cream I put some of the excess bubbles floating around on my face before taking out the very expensive razor Jade had brought me and grooming myself some more. Growing up I'd always enjoyed the look of facial hair but I couldn't stand the feel of having it. It itched constantly and it was too warm for what I was used to. Jade laughed at what I was doing and I couldn't help but start laughing too. I had to stop for a moment so I couldn't cut myself with the blade but in the end I successfully shaved without any incident.

"You know I've never shaved with a blade before," I told Jade as I was washing everything off my face, "I always bought the cheap battery-operated ones and threw them out when they stopped working."

My clothes were still damp but I shoved them in my bag anyway when I heard more and more footsteps outside the door. Jade put her little hand in mine as we walked out

without drawing any attention to ourselves despite the fact that we both left a trail of wet footprints from the bathroom to the front door. I looked over my shoulder to take one last look at the massive puddle that had begun to flow into an aisle before I walked out abruptly and trying not to laugh when a man appeared to mutter profanity in a foreign language upon noticing the mess I'd made. When we made it outside Jade couldn't help but crack up laughing as we made it to the nearby bus stop to get out of the neighborhood.

"I'd like to stop by the courthouse and say a prayer or two," Jade told me in a somewhat sad tone of voice, "nobody is beyond temptation and nobody is beyond redemption."

"One thing I'll never understand is how tragedies can either rip people apart or make them stronger," I muttered as I looked up at the clouds, "I guess it's like pressure. It can either burst your pipes or make diamonds."

"With open hearts we can see what matters," Jade went on in a more upbeat tone of voice, "he chose hate but I chose love. I'm not like him."

But maybe I was? *Was I?* Could I ever really be? I'd never harmed anyone and taken pleasure in it. But I was guilty of hatred. Weren't we all at some point? Was hatred really the common denominator in acts of evil, no matter how bad?

"That's not something I've ever really thought about," I spoke gently after a few moments of silence on my behalf.

"My prayer is that God's grace doesn't escape him and that he may be healed and not die," Jade continued, "just because you can't have a new beginning it doesn't mean that you can't have a new ending. That goes for everybody, because we're all guilty at some point."

Was she able to read my thoughts? Could she see right through me?! Never in my life had I previously imagined that there was another soul out there who wandered the streets that could share my story like that. Puffy white clouds covered a deep blue sky overhead. A large plane flew over the two of us and was heading towards the airport.

"Are you ready for the courthouse?" I asked Jade in a bland and emotionless tone of voice.

"Bring it on!" she said cheerfully.

Once our bus arrived after loitering for a while, I paid for my ticket and Jade joyfully climbed in behind me and smiled at the driver as if she was proud to fall into a loophole that enabled her to ride public transit for free as much as she wanted. There was still a spot at the back through the morning commuters so I sat on the one available seat with Jade on my lap. She seemed happy about that too because she could have a nice view of the scenery outside compared to being in that filthy seat where you couldn't see anything, plus the back section was on a higher platform than where we'd previously sat. Through the roaring engine and the chatter of the passengers I could hear Tim McGraw's *Live Like You Were Dying* playing on the radio. Something about that song eerily reminded me of Jade. When I held her something changed inside of me. She

taught me how to love. She looked up at me with her big round chocolatey eyes and I couldn't help but give her a kiss on the forehead.

"What attracts you to street kids like me?" I asked Jade as we both looked at the buildings flying by outside, "We're the ones that they told you to run from."

"Because nobody loves me like you love me," she responded sweetly, "and when I'm gone, please don't forget to remember me."

"And where might you be going?"

"You'll have to ask God that because I'm not the one in control of that but life is like a vapor. One day you're here and the next you're not. All of this should remind us of how precious life really is. All life."

"In times like these you prevent my heart from growing colder."

"I could say the same about you Matteo. I mean, Jack Sauce. Sorry, that's just been swirling around my head recently."

"No worries Jade, anything but Jason."

She smiled at me again and let her head rest against my chest as she looked outside. The bus stopped every couple of minutes and people got on and off constantly. Their chatter was like a hum through the other noises of the city as more and more sections woke up from a rather peaceful night. No shootouts, no raids, no violence, no sirens, at least not where I'd slept. Closer to the courthouse police vehicles lined up the streets and helicopters hovered around instead of clouds. Everyone wanted a shot of the perpetrator like his face hadn't been plastered all over the place enough already. Jade looked at them in awe, probably wondering if she'd have her chance at being on camera for just a moment too. Later on in the day the jury would begin deliberations on whether the young man my age would live or die.

"Get out of jail free card," Jade muttered to herself, "you can't be held accountable in the court of law when you're dead."

\* \* \*

"I don't understand how the world just raises an eyebrow saying that it's just another mass shooting in a country plagued with such tragedy but then everybody blows up because of the middle finger he shot to the cops before he was arrested," Jade contemplated as the two of us sat in the food court, "no pun intended."

There was a large TV mounted on the wall next to our table and Jade watched the news coverage attentively despite that the sound was muted and the remote was nowhere in sight. All around us people were chatting about the various nightmares turned to reality on the news channel. We lived in a dangerous world but still one with the promise of also turning dreams into reality. That was more than I could say about my homeland.



"I hope that he gets to see God's face in prison. The important thing to keep in mind here is that heaven is ultimately home, not wherever you are in this earthly dimension. At least that's what the Bible says, and basically so do all the other scriptures like the Koran too but I only know about Catholicism. You know, I think it's sad that his family came to America for a better life and this is what ended up of it," Jade went on with food in her mouth, "but you probably know all about that."

"I do," I said softly, poking around my soup with the spoon.

"Do you believe in multiple universes out there?"

« What?"

"Like Hugh Everett's theory."

"Sorry hon but I've never heard of that."

"A while back I overheard some people talking about that at the laundromat and it was very interesting. Like you know, nerdy rich kids with science degrees."

"Is that something that interests you?"

"Sort of. I'm also interested in law, medicine, the environment, and that's just what I've figured out so far. There's still so much to discover. I've met these forty-year-olds on the bus that still don't know what they want out of life so I can't expect to have it all figured out at my age either."

"You're in a city with many prestigious schools and considering how smart and articulate you are, you're probably going to have a PhD before I even get my high school diploma."

"But I have to go to school first, and I hate school."

Jade smiled playfully at the contradictions in her dreams for the future. People came and went throughout the food court and Jade also enjoyed eavesdropping on their conversations, not to be impolite, but instead to gain wisdom and insight.

"You wanna know something Jasenko," she spoke after a few moments, "I wish that people would stop saying that they don't have time. You have time for what you choose to make time for in life. It's not about how much you can fit into a certain timeframe, it's about priorities. You could be doing a million other things but instead you find it in your heart to stay with me."

"I hope you know that I will never leave you," I assured her, "unless you kick my butt to the curb or decide to send me to prison or something, then I'm going to respect that."

"Just so you know, the only reason I'd kick your butt to the curb is if you died and it wouldn't be because I wanted to."

"I hear ya."

"And I should also tell you that I don't want to go home either. I wanna stay with you."

"And what's your mom and Jason gonna say about that?"

"I've spent weeks away in the past and they never did a darn thing about it. They never came looking for me and I wasn't even in danger."

"Well, I guess you can do what you want. You are your own person and not my property. I'll keep you if you want to stay so bad."

"Thank you. »

"You should go home and get some supplies though. It can get cold out here at night."

Jade and I agreed to meet at the corner of Bolton and Dorchester again in a couple of hours while she went home and got stuff. In the meantime I would go to the dollar store and stock up on a few things of my own. I still had some leftover coins in my pouch in my backpack for some supplies so I was due for a run to the dollar store anyway. You could find a Dollar Tree on the corner of almost every street so I didn't have to look far to stock up on goods for only \$1.25 or less. As I walked into the store and strolled from aisle to aisle I couldn't help but notice all the parents with their kids buying crayons and cheap toys. Most of them were Jade's age, also the same age as some of the younger victims and survivors of the mass shooting that still seemed like it was just yesterday. The whole thing disturbed me so much that I left my cart filled with cheap products in the middle of the aisle and walked out.

The temperature had cooled down considerably since I'd gone in. How long had I been in there? Longer than I'd been aware of it seemed. The sky had darkened and it was almost nighttime so I decided to drop everything and head back down to the corner of Bolton and Dorchester on foot. I usually wasn't cold in this type of weather, but for some reason I felt frigid inside. Even walking for almost an hour at a fast pace didn't warm me up. I figured that maybe I was coming down with something so I dismissed it and kept walking. In the distance I saw Jade sitting by herself on the bench that I'd fallen asleep on when she found me earlier that morning. Her short legs were swinging beneath the bench as she waited patiently, looking at the passing traffic and lights off the airplanes passing overhead in the distance. Once I got close she smiled sweetly at me like she always did when she looked at me so lovingly.

"You're a little late but I forgive you," she said softly as she signaled me to sit next to her with her hand.

"Sorry hon," I apologized as I put my arm around her, "I neglected just how fast the clock ticks time away."

"The important thing is that you showed up. Even if you hadn't, I wouldn't've gone home anyway. Mom and Jason were fighting like animals and the baby wouldn't stop crying and I'm not interested in being around when one of them decides to take the pistol out of the drawer."

"You found a gun in their room?"

"Yeah, I found it a long time ago but that was when things were better and my dad was still alive. He kept it for protection because our house was robbed one time."

"I'm sorry that this is what you have to deal with, especially at your age. Nobody should have to deal with that."

"And according to the TV it's a common occurrence."

"Unfortunately it is."

"So where do you usually stay when you're out on the street?"

"When it's warm I'll opt for a bench or a park but when it's cold I'll find a place that cuts out the wind. On a night like tonight I'd try under a bridge."

"But it's a nice warm night tonight."

"I'm freezing believe it or not."

"You must be coming down with a cold. There's a pharmacy nearby if you want some syrup. The one my grandma gives me works well but I didn't have any at home."

The two of us agreed to walk to the nearest pharmacy a few blocks away that hadn't closed at ten, just a few minutes earlier. Jade handed me her Pokemon backpack filled with things that were important to her. From the weight of the things in there it appeared that she wasn't intending on going home for quite a while. She was cheerful as we walked in the dark streets illuminated by streetlights on the other side and cars passing by from time to time.

"Even in the rush of things I finally feel like everything is in order," she told me happily as she skipped next to me on the sidewalk, "no hard feelings and no regrets."

"In the old days back at my place when I was much younger I believed that when I'd be an adult it would be the happiest time of my life and the most coveted," I reminisced, "but then I grew up and my eyes were opened."

"I love traveling through unknown paths and discovering new things," she went on, "and I know that when all of this is over a happy ending will become reality."

I smiled at her youthful enthusiasm. It reminded me of my own. It reminded me of a time where things were simpler and my existence wasn't so complicated.

"One of the things I enjoyed doing where I lived previously was look through the windows of my neighbors' houses and watch TV," I said as we passed an apartment building in which the light of the TV was clearly visible from the outside.

When I said that Jade ran up to the window and peaked through. The news story was a report about the upcoming verdict due sometime tomorrow.

"I don't know what happened to him, how he faded," Jade said mostly to herself as she turned away and resumed walking, "but if nothing good can come out of this, and if we keep on spreading around hatred and violence then he wins."

I didn't speak. I kept on walking next to her in silence up until we reached the pharmacy open all night in one of the not-so-nice neighborhoods of the downtown core. It was a hotspot for gangs and drugs and prostitution at night. I wasn't particularly comfortable being there but Jade insisted and I decided to trust her.

After all, I wouldn't be able to keep her if I was unwell. As much as I hated having her exposed to life on the streets I knew that she liked it more than being home so I let her do what she wanted. I cared for her better than her parents did anyway and I'd care for her as long as I was permitted.

"Ugh, this part of the city stinks," Jade muttered as we neared the pharmacy.

The two of us casually walked into the pharmacy on the corner of the street and Jade walked me to the aisle that contained her favorite syrup. It only took a few moments for someone else to walk in but what I realized too late was that these guys were in the middle of a robbery for prescription meds and they were armed with guns and merciless to bystanders. I thought I could duck down in the aisle and then make a run for it when they weren't looking but that didn't work. Jade started running for the door immediately and I ran behind her but the robbers weren't about to let us go easy after we'd clearly seen their faces and could identify them if they got caught. I didn't see anything and I felt nothing but numbness everywhere but I clearly remembered hearing the gunshots.

\* \* \*

The next morning I woke up in a hospital bed, gunshot wounds to both legs and a concussion. Not anything serious the nurse told me and the doctor was ready to release me later that morning but first the police wanted to know if I remembered anything from the robbery or if I could identify mugshots of repeat offenders. None of the men in the photos were the culprits but apparently several pharmacies had been robbed that night within a short amount of time so someone was bound to identify them.

"How do you know Jade Grace Timberland?" one of the officers asked me.

"I met her on the bus the previous day, or sometime, I don't know what day it is anymore" I replied, "is she okay? Where is she?"

"Yeah, she's known to hitch bus rides and wander around," the officer replied, "I'm sorry to tell you that she did not survive the assault."

I'd never previously known what it was like to have a broken heart. If being shot in the leg sent numbness radiating through my body, nothing could describe the grief I was feeling knowing that I'd miserably failed at caring for the little girl I'd been entrusted with. God had given me a gift but of course I'd screwed things up. Not only had I messed up badly, she'd *died* because of me. She had paid the ultimate price and it was my fault. I should've known better than to bring her in an area like that. I knew better, I really did, but that logic had went down the drain somewhere along the way. Why? Why did the young and innocent have to suffer unjustly like that? I didn't even get the chance to say

goodbye. I didn't get the chance to tell Jade I loved her. And I wouldn't get the chance to say I'm sorry either.

The officers thanked me for my cooperation and wished me a speedy recovery before they left my room and moved on with their investigation. Just before noon the doctor came to see me to see how I was doing. Hospital staff came by to see if I could walk and properly get around by myself. The bullet hadn't gone in very deep into either of my legs. Jade was the one who'd gotten most of the spay of ammunition. Her parents must've hated me. They must've wanted me dead. I would've given my life in exchange for hers in a heartbeat. No second thoughts. No regrets and no hard feelings. The only consolation I had was that if there was indeed a place called heaven the way she believed there was, she'd gone straight there. I'd never been religious but I had to believe for her. She was in no more pain. She wouldn't have to deal with the smelly downtown streets or Jason or me or anyone.

The doctor deemed that I was okay to be released later that day. He gave me instructions on how to clean my wounds once I took the bandages off before he let me go. Before I left I was given my stuff at the counter, including a Pokemon backpack. I swallowed hard and ran outside before I broke down in tears in the parking lot of the hospital. I clutched the bag in my arms and headed for the bus stop that was just across the street. I didn't have anywhere to go but a part me hoped to find Jade on the bus. Maybe she was headed towards the courthouse and I'd find her sitting around with some of the anti-death penalty advocates gathered there. But I knew that I was kidding myself. Jade was gone and I could ride all around the city without finding her. She was gone. She was dead because of me.

I rode around the city on the bus for hours and hours until finally the driver asked me if I was alright once it parked at the station in the early evening. All I did was shrug. She smiled softly at me before returning to her seat up front. Finally I got off the bus before a new wave of people boarded it. Inside the station I flopped down on the first available seat in front of a large TV mounted on the wall. I saw a newspaper on the table not far from me. Jade loved looking at the newspaper even though she couldn't read much of it. A newscast was about to come on in a few minutes too. In the meantime I decided to finally open up the Pokemon backpack. I hadn't been ready before. I took a deep breath and unzipped the little Oddish zipper about halfway through before I had to stop. It was still too painful. I wanted to preserve that little piece of her that I had left so I zipped up the bag without looking at the contents inside.

There was another small pocket on the front that was partially opened so I decided to content myself with opening that one. Inside there was a pen with a couple of crumpled up postcards with notes she'd written on the back. I clutched them tightly in my hands, crumpling them up even more but I couldn't help it. I wanted to feel a little piece of Jade in my hands again. I was momentarily distracted by the newscast beginning on TV. Someone turned up the volume when the top story was the verdict in the Torres trial. I squeezed the postcards even more as my heart began to race. For the first time I wanted so much for him to live. For Jade's sake I prayed that he hadn't been sentenced to death, but my hopes were soon crushed.

"Tonight's top story is the verdict in the Torres trial," the anchor began in a very seriously tone of voice, "after deliberations the jury voted unanimously to sentence him to death by lethal injection."

The rest I didn't remember. I only let go of the postcards when my first was becoming numb from holding on to them so hard. Seeing the chunk of cardboard they'd turned into I quickly tried to undo the damage. On the back of a postcard of the Empire State Building I was brought to tears again by Jade's messy handwriting.

*If you think you're too small to have an impact just think about trying to go to sleep when there's a mosquito in the room!*

# THE NEXT SIX DAYS

## *Day 1 — Sunday*

It was 5:59 a.m. when my cellphone rang. On my day off. Sure, I was off duty, but I was still on call. Not for very long. My black iPhone 4S was always right there on my night table for when duty called in the middle of the night. I had been in Port Hope merely a few weeks and had only been working at Mount Hope Trauma Center for a week and a half as a trauma nurse. I'd been flown some 3000 miles just to get the position as part of a new initiative to hire new staff for a new section of the treatment center. I'd been out of nursing school for a couple of years, had worked as a nurse for a few more years, had recently gotten married, bought my first new car, was still in debt beyond words, yet work is what ruled my life. I spent most of my days in the hospital, basically nursing the dead back to life.

"Yes?" I answered the phone, already knowing what I was about to be told.

I knew all about being called at all hours of the night, doing grocery shopping and having to leave everything in the cart right there in the middle of the aisle, having to speed through traffic like a madman to get to work to save someone's life. But at the end of the day it was all worth it.

"There's an emergency at the hospital," my boss spoke urgently, "you need to come right away."

"Count on me," I muttered, "I'll be right there."

My husband Corey turned to look at me when I grunted loudly and momentarily let my head flop on the pillow for just one more minute. When I opened my eyes again it was six o'clock. And so I got up in a jiffy, stripped off my pajamas making them fly all over the little room and putting on my scrubs, grabbing my car keys and bolting out the door without anything else. It might've been October, but Port Hope had a cold northern climate and without a coat even the ten second journey to my Pontiac was frigid. I hadn't even said bye to my husband before I barged out the door. A light blue sky illuminated everything in the neighborhood. A considerable amount of traffic was already flooding the streets, mostly people who had to open something up for seven o'clock. After having extensively studied science and nursing as well as having only worked in hospitals during my adult years, there was no thinking required on my behalf to mentally prepare myself for whatever I was about to face at work.

I'd seen people be shot, lose limbs, be in incredible car crashes and still miraculously survive unsurvivable circumstances. I was indeed a believer in miracles; I helped make them happen. I loved seeing a patient smile at me, seeing them wave as they walk out of the hospital alive and kicking, and being told that I had helped them through a difficult

time. My mother had always told me that the magnitude of a job could only be measured by the depths of its rewards and the only thing I could say about that was that my job was definitely one of the most fulfilling things in my life. Being around tragedy all day wasn't that bad after all. I had peace of mind knowing that at the end of the day I could go home and tell my husband that I had saved someone's life.

York Avenue was rather clogged up, with mostly police cars, journalists, and people with a multitude of tense looks on their faces. Something had obviously went down since I had last turned on the news, turned on the radio or opened up a newspaper. I parked the red Pontiac in the staff parking lot and barged in through the door. I was immediately greeted by just under a dozen police officers with some intense looks on their faces like they meant business. I swallowed hard and walked up to them, waiting for them to tell me what was going on or instruct me on what to do next.

"Are you Lina Anna?" one cop asked me in a stern tone of voice.

"Yes," I spoke softly, having completely transformed into meek and compassionate nurse since walking through the doors.

"Please show us some identification, then Sgt. Murdoch will search you and you can go through."

"Alright, here you go."

I showed the officers my identification, and let them pat me down quickly before they let me go through and meet up with Dr. Allen so he could give me a little heads up on what was all the commotion and heightened security. Shortly after the officers were finished with me, some of the other new nurses walked in behind me, having been called around the same time I had. For the first time in my career I felt a surge of anxiety. What had gone on that was so bad, that was so horrible? I swallowed hard again before meeting up with the doctors and the other nurses in the meeting room down the hallway. Dr. Eric Allen handed me a cup of coffee as he closed the door behind me, also with a very serious look on his face.

"As some of you might've heard, there was a shooting at the Lakeside Mall yesterday," he spoke in a slow voice, "and subsequently there was a shootout between the police and the suspect in which multiple were injured."

I had missed that on the news obviously, because it was the first time I'd heard of such a thing. I gulped down my cup of coffee in just a few sips and quickly got ready to relieve the overnight nurses of their duties. I take it they had been called some twelve hours prior, when the shooting had originally occurred.

"Nikki, Lina, Phil and Robyn, y'all are on the sixth floor," Dr. Eric said softly, "everyone else on the eighth floor. Dr. Roberto Ng will be arriving at any moment to replace me."



The elevator made a *ding* noise as I stepped out on the sixth floor. Just down the hallway there were eight police officers guarding a single door. The other nurses and I approached quickly as the trauma nurses about to finish their shifts were going to fill us in on what to expect since we had yet to be running into the emergency room and stitching up gunshot wounds.

"Come here Lina," Maxine, the head nurse, instructed me as he led me through the door with heavy police presence.

I followed her in silence, nodding at the officers on my way in. Two more officers were in the room, slouched against the wall and looking at the young man laying limp in the bed. Most of his face was bandaged up and most of all available hospital machines were hooked up to him. He was even cuffed to the bed even though it seemed like he wasn't even still alive at that point. Maxine told me that he'd just come out of surgery and was in a deep coma; one that nobody knew if he was going to get out of. Obviously the young man was the suspect of all the violence in Port Hope, a generally very quiet community, but he looked like he was just a kid quite frankly. So far six people had been confirmed dead in the commotion, with another seven in critical condition. That was at Mount Hope Trauma Center; there were three other hospitals in the city, and I didn't know how many people they had.

"As you can see he's barely alive," Maxine spoke in a tired voice, "you won't be doing much other than watching him and taking his vitals and giving him more medication every hour until he wakes up. You'll have to change the bandages on his neck and abdomen as well as clean the wound every three hours."

"What's his name?" I asked, puzzled more than anything else.

"It's Vadim Pushkin," she replied, "he's six days shy of his eighteenth birthday, one that he might not even see because the police shot him."

Maxine saluted me before walking out. I pulled up a chair and sat next to the bed. On the table there was a medical file for him but it was incomplete as the boy had been admitted a few hours ago and had just come out of life saving surgery. Dr. Ng was supposed to come in and run some tests on him once he arrived. Although I couldn't see much of his face, Vadim Pushkin looked young for his age. He was quite frankly just a kid. He'd been shot in the neck by police in a firefight that ultimately put him in the state he was in. His left eye was sutured shut, if there was even an eye left under there, and multiple tubes were in his mouth. His left arm was in a cast from the elbow up to the fingers and had multiple gunshot wounds to the abdomen and right leg. His skin was depleted of color, with only his thick black overgrown hair left to contrast against it and the bandages turning red.

The two officers in the room looked bored as they both paced around the room. They wanted to question Vadim but nobody knew for sure if he was even going to wake up. For the first couple of hours there was no activity at all. I cleaned up Vadim and

changed his bandages when the time came but he was still deep in a coma. I hadn't spoken to the two officers and they hadn't even spoken to each other except for when it came time to switch shifts. A single officer came in and had much of the same face as the other two had. When my shift came to an end I nodded at the young green-eyed cop and went on my way. I grabbed another cup of coffee before making a brief stop to the washroom, grabbing my things, and walking back to my car. Outside the weather had gotten much warmer, but the whole day had gone by and I hadn't even seen it at all.

Back at the apartment Corey was gone. He'd left a note on the kitchen table saying that he'd be picking up food for the two of us if I got home before he came back. Generally I told him about how my days went, without mentioning specific people due to confidentiality of course, but if I sewed up someone who had been shot I'd tell him how it went. *But not tonight*, I thought to myself. I had a hard time digesting what I had seen during my day. The kid who was in critical condition who had to be monitored 24/7 had went on a shooting rampage. Lucky me, I had arrived home at around the same time that the news started. And of course, the tragedy was the only thing consuming the airways. I quickly turned it off, me who usually liked to watch the news when I had the chance, but that chance was often rare.

"Hey there!" Corey greeted me joyfully as he walked in through the door with a large deluxe pizza (with no mushrooms!) and came to sit down next to me, "You aren't watching the news, what's up with that?"

"Oh, I'm just tired," I dismissed the question, "it's been a long day."

"I take it you treated some of them," he spoke in a low voice, obviously referring to the shooting.

I simply nodded. I had treated him, and I didn't want to talk about it. That brief exchange concluded the communication between my husband and I for the rest of the evening.

## ***Day 2 — Monday***

Monday mornings. I never met a single person who liked those. On the bright side though, my brain had remained in work mode from the day before. It wasn't like having spent two days laying on the couch and eating pizza and then having to give it all you got for a shift that lasted twelve hours and sometimes more. That was hard, I will not lie about that. Because of the crisis the hospital was running short on staff and I'd be working irregular hours until things calmed down, however long that was going to take. It wasn't uncommon for nurses and even though I hadn't been one for eternity, it didn't particularly bother me. There was nothing that a good cup of coffee, or a few, couldn't fix in the morning!

At the hospital that morning it was much of the same routine. Different officers, same procedures. Of course the media had gotten a hold of the news story that the gunman was in the same hospital as some of his victims and that had prompted backlash to

some degree, but there were more reporters in the parking lot than I had ever seen at one time. I had been strictly told to ignore them, so I did. I walked up to the staff lounge, grabbed an overly large cup of coffee, did my little routine as I quickly gulped down the java and went to my post, still Vadim's bedside. I had seen terrible things working as a trauma nurse but I had never previously seen someone in such awful shape in such a deep coma. I didn't quite know what to make of that yet. No patient of mine had ever died. I knew I couldn't save all of them, but the first cut was always the deepest.

To my surprise Maxine was still wandering the halls upstairs looking exhausted, like she hadn't slept in over a century. She greeted me and briefly stopped me in the hallway, telling me that there would be free counseling sessions for nurses for a couple of weeks if I was interested. I had probably seen the paper advertising it in the staff lounge but had overlooked it with my regular routine. It was pretty much always the same. It had gotten to the point that it did itself. I also crossed Dr. Ng in the hallway who was finally going home after working more than twenty hours straight but he had concluded that Vadim Pushkin should wake up, and soon, because he was young and he was healthy. If it was the case, I'd probably be the first one to get to talk to him. As a nurse I always tried to remain optimistic, but in the back of my mind I knew too well that not everything turns out the way they are *supposed* to.

Certain things are *supposed* to turn out certain ways, but sometimes they don't. You can only hope that they do. Sometimes the things that happen are out of our control, and sometimes the only reason why something happened was because it seemed like a good idea to the person who set it in motion at the time, no matter what the end result may be. Sometimes the *reason* behind something isn't a reason at all, but an illusion, a facade, one that we cannot see past so we must try to make sense of it the best we can under the circumstances. All one can really do in life is do what they can with what they have to get where they want to go, and enjoy the ride along the way, because life might as well end in an unforeseen blink of an eye. And just like that, it's gone, and you can never get it back again.

"Wow, no more tubes," I exclaimed somewhat optimistically as I entered Vadim's room and noticed that the apparatus inserted into his mouth had been removed.

"I don't know what you did Lina," the nurse said to me as she was leaving, "but his condition improved a whole lot."

"I'm telling you that I didn't do anything," I muttered, slightly taken aback by the sudden progress in his condition.

"Then you must have magic powers," she replied, "the boy should be dead."

That was rather accurate. Not a whole lot of people survive a blast of bullets like that. It takes only one to be fatal, yet some people survive two dozens at once. In a certain way, it's not always a bad thing that life doesn't necessarily turn out the way it's *supposed* to be. But in a case such as that the moral dilemma between him and his

victims still remained. Why should he live and not them? I did not know the answer to that question. What I did know, however, was that I had taken an oath in which I stated that I would treat all my patients equally, regardless of what they had done to land themselves in my unit. It didn't matter if a person was the victim or the perpetrator, in an establishment such as a hospital, everyone had the same right to life. No questions asked. No points to prove. And I agreed with that.

The majority of the late morning and early afternoon was highly uneventful. I did my regular duties and watched the cops come and go as they switched shifts. One young guy that came in later on was particularly talkative. He spoke at length about everything ranging from the aging infrastructure to the different cloud formations in the sky to what kind of music he and his colleagues listened to in the police cruisers while they were on patrol last week near the shipping docks to each particular marking on the calico cat he had waiting for him at home. I smiled at him as he went on and on but his partner looked rather annoyed. I figured the young officer did that constantly. After days and days of that, yeah, I'd be annoyed too. But for me it was a welcomed distraction since my patient was pretty much mute.

The only thing that interrupted the young officer's upbeat chatter was Vadim's heart monitor that started beeping out of control. All the cops lurking around the doorway seemed to panic at the sound. They wanted that guy *alive* no matter what that consisted of. They wouldn't accept *we did the best we could* as an answer. Immediately Vadim was administered medication to bring his blood pressure down. His condition had stabilized a considerable amount overnight but he still wasn't awake. After a few more hours Dr. Kelly came in to look at Vadim's wounds when I cleaned them. His jaw wound was no longer bleeding which was a big bonus because he had lost so much blood and an urgent appeal was sent out for more blood donations in the area since many of his victims had also badly needed blood transfusions. Vadim's face looked peaceful in the midst of his otherworldly sleep.

"So, Karla isn't exactly fond of that new cat food recipe," the officer hesitantly resumed talking after an extended silence, "so I switched to buying the organic kind from the store down on Main Street."

It wasn't long before the chatter resumed in full swing. I grinned at the cop's comments but his partner sighed loudly, purposely to make his exasperation known to his chatty coworker. Unfortunately for him the young officer didn't seem to take notice and kept going on and on. I aimlessly paced around the room since I had been ordered to not leave Vadim without medical supervision at all times. Even on his way out when his shift ended he kept on talking on and on much to the displeasure of the other officer. Two other officers entered the room next and did much of the same sitting around since Vadim wasn't moving. One officer asked me about his condition since they had barely been briefed on what they were heading into when they arrived. I answered as best as I could since nobody really knew how the living dead boy was feeling since he couldn't tell us.

I anxiously paced around the room for a while as I looked at the clock. My shift was almost over. I was hoping to have a chat with my husband. It seemed that in recent weeks we had barely spoken at all. The police officers seemed to want to get on with their lives too but at the same time we were only answering to the needs of the jobs we had sworn to do consistently and with conviction. A whole lot of things were going on through my mind as I thought about coffee among a multitude of other things but my moment was interrupted much like the young chatty officer's had; by Vadim needing attention. He had grunted and exhaled loudly, like someone who was in deep pain. Both the police officers and I rushed to his bedside to see if he was conscious or not. Sure enough, he was waking up.

"He's waking up!" one officer shouted loudly to the people down the hallway.

Two doctors and an army of nurses came running into the small room. It was a few moments before Vadim opened his one eye that wasn't sutured shut and looked around the room. Dr. Kelly examined him and asked him questions but the boy didn't respond at all. He didn't seem to be quite lucid just yet. His eye wandered back and forth around the room, seemingly searching for something familiar but not quite being able to process everything in the state he was currently in. The doctor had barely finished speaking when the officers started interrogating a Vadim that was still in a daze, mainly asking him if there was still a threat to the public since there had been some reports of a second shooter opening fire but nobody knew if it was someone associated with Vadim or a copycat shooter or a completely separate incident. Vadim wasn't able to speak nor had he been read his rights prior to the cops beginning their tirade of accusations against him.

"Guys, stop immediately!" Dr. Kelly angrily shouted in a loud tone of voice, "He's on some strong painkillers and cannot even speak at this point! Save this for the morning! Let him rest!"

But the cops didn't leave him alone. They continued to probe the young man despite the fact that he obviously had no idea what was going on around him. Vadim was handed a pen a pad of paper so he could write the answers to the questions because his jaw injury still prevented him from speaking. For a little while, a confused and disoriented Vadim scribbled aimlessly and incoherently before finding the right words to say that he wanted to rest. He badly wanted to sleep, he even went as far as circling the sentence *rest please* but he didn't appear to fully understand the rest of the questions. I don't think he even knew he was in the hospital or why he was there. He asked why his right hand was cuffed to the bed but he didn't seem to understand the answer he was given. Before I left my shift I had to sign yet another confidentiality agreement stating that whatever confession or other word coming out of Vadim's mouth could not be repeated under any circumstances whatsoever. I had no choice but to agree.

And then I went home after doing about an hour of overtime until the police let Vadim rest indefinitely before attempting to question him again. Corey seemed to have figured out that the gunman was the person I was treating because he was overly soft compared to the way he usually was with me once I got home from work. He asked me

if I wanted to talk about it as soon as I sat down at the kitchen table to have a snack and some coffee. No, I did not want to *talk* about *it* because I still hadn't digested the whole thing. As a nurse I was a very compassionate person who loved to nurse the needy back to health but I was facing a moral dilemma in not only treating someone who had committed a horrible act but I also had to think about the fact that he might as well face execution if convicted.

There was always a certain amount of love and affection involved in caring for others. Healing someone and then watch then be injected with poison was a bizarre thing to contemplate and despite that Vadim definitely deserved a harsh sentence for his actions I did not believe in capital punishment. I never had, and Vadim Pushkin did not change my opinion about that. Everyone had a right to life in this country, even him. Maybe treating him made me want him to live so much more but I also had to deal with my feelings of guilt regarding treating him after also witnessing the destruction that he caused. Maybe telling Corey about my feelings without going into specifics would've been a positive thing for me as my thoughts weighed deeply on me after spending the large majority of my day in the middle of what was bothering me.

### ***Day 3 — Tuesday***

Another early morning shift. At least I possibly had a conversation with Vadim to look forward to. Or maybe not. Maybe he wouldn't be able to talk, or maybe he wouldn't want to. Maybe he'd tell me that he was proud of what he'd done or tell me to go screw myself. Or maybe we'd have a nice long chat since both me and another nurse were assigned to him now that he was awake. I got the day started early so I could actually taste my coffee as I drank it but also to catch up on what was going on before I actually had to start working in the middle of it. I hadn't spoken to Corey much and hadn't said a word about work to him. He hadn't said much to me either. He knew that when I remained silent it was because I wanted the silence.

At the hospital there were now five officers in Vadim's room. A skinny teenage boy that was tied to his bed and suffering from multiple gunshot wounds didn't need a truckload of cops surrounding him at all times. When I walked into the room he was still sleeping and another young nurse named Adrienne was already at his bedside. I got the impression that he had slept all night and hadn't said a word by the look on the officers' faces. Their demeanors were intimidating since many of them frowned angrily as they silently looked at each other. I greeted everyone by nodding my head and continued on with what I was supposed to do. There was an eerie quiet in the room with only the sound of my footsteps as I walked around and more noise down the hallway. At around eight that morning the doctor on call came in and checked on Vadim before any of his other patients.

Vadim woke up once the doctor began to speak loudly and unlike the first time he woke up after being heavily sedated and in a coma, he looked scared and nervous. His eye darted across the room, only seeing police officers no matter where his gaze landed. His blood pressure went through the roof again and he had to be given medication to

relax so he didn't go into cardiac arrest after all the trauma he had recently been through. The doctor must've had a harsh word with the police at some point because they didn't attack him with questions as soon as that tired brown eye opened up. They gave Vadim the chance to speak first but he kept looking around the room not knowing what was going on.

"You should have died," the doctor told Vadim.

That was probably not the best thing you could tell someone who was just regaining consciousness but the shocked and terrified expression on Vadim's face didn't change at the words the doctor spoke to him.

"Do you know where you are?" the doctor asked.

Vadim looked around a little and then nodded his head slightly before bursting into tears. It was quite a disheartening sight to see. It didn't matter if that person was the victim or the perpetrator; that person was my patient and it was my duty to be kind and compassionate to them. I sat by his bedside and held his little hand in mine in hopes to comfort him a little bit but to no avail. He was crying so hysterically that he had to be sedated again for a while. The cops had wanted to ask him some questions about public safety again but they weren't about to. They only seemed to be angrier that the suspect needed healing of his own. The intense police presence all around me began to make me nervous after a while of them lurking around the place. Less than two hours later Vadim woke up again, and began crying again. The officers weren't about to waste any more time though, they immediately got on his back.

"Were you the only shooter?"

He nodded his head as he was unable to speak.

"Are there any other threats to public safety?"

He shook his head.

"Are you sure?"

Another nod.

"Here's a pen and a pad of paper if you'd like to tell us anything."

I held the pad of paper in place for Vadim to attempt to write as best as he could considering he was nearly immobile in his bed, not to mention cuffed to it. His writings weren't very coherent but you could clearly make out the words *lawyer*, *vomit*, *rest*, *I'm sorry* and *why?* He scribbled all over the page as he tried to write something that wasn't quite coming out the way he wanted. Eventually he dropped the pen and let out a loud sigh of exasperation.

"You need to vomit?" I asked him.

He nodded his head slightly with an urgent look in his eye.

"Well," I said in a low and almost embarrassed tone of voice, "you can't puke because your jaw is wired shut. But I'll get you something for that, it's just a side effect of the strong painkillers you're on."

"I'll go get something," Adrienne almost cut me off as she got up and stormed out the room, "I'll be right back."

She was much more anxious than I was around the police trying to nurse the suspect back to life. She came in less than a minute later and gave Vadim yet another cocktail of drugs to take away the side effects of the previous drugs. She barely had time to sit down again before the police started grilling the invalid boy with questions again. *LAWYER* Vadim wrote on a piece of paper and even circled it when the police kept asking him things, which he didn't reply to.

"He wants a lawyer," I said in a mousy voice as the police didn't seem to get the message, "I think he's entitled to one during this kind of questioning."

None of the officers responded to my remark but two of them looked at me menacingly. Then Vadim kept on writing that he wanted to rest; he was tired and beat up and quite frankly wasn't supposed to be alive after something like that. The cops let him sleep for a while but as soon as he woke up the same routine started up again. He began to cry, the cops switched shifts and the young talkative officer was back. He more than happily officially read Vadim his rights before telling him, probably with more words than was necessary, that he could have a court-appointed lawyer to represent him. I wanted to grin as I thoughts back to all the other things he had previously said the day before. To let go of some anxiety I felt like asking him what Karla thought of the organic cat food, but it was not the time or the place so I kept the thought to myself.

At the end of my shift I reluctantly left. Believe me, I was happy to get away from the huge police presence but I also had to admit to myself that I was worried about Vadim. I was worried about what they might do to him. I knew I could take good care of him, and not that I didn't trust the other nurses because after all they'd gotten that job because they were competent enough to do it, but I saw the coldness in their faces when they looked at him. I knew thinking too much wasn't good for me so I did my best to brush off the thought, well knowing that I'd be back in the morning for another round of that. I'd get to care for him again. Soon. I took my time to go back home dreading facing Corey whom I knew wanted to talk to me. Once I walked through the door I was immediately greeted by him waiting for me.

"You're treating him aren't you?" he asked immediately, "The shooter?"

"Yes," I admitted.



"I sorta figured that because you get all mousy and shy when you feel guilty."

I sighed loudly, almost on the verge of tears.

"I don't know how to reconcile this inside my head," I muttered out with another loud sigh, "when you see a kid hurt like that you can't help but feel sorry for him, but then I walk out of that room and see all the pain he caused others. When I look at him I don't see a mass murderer, a teenage killer, a terrorist, or even the bad guy. And then I walk out of there and ask myself if people would be grateful to me for helping save his life or if they'd be angry."

Then I put my hand over my face and began to cry. Corey walked towards me slowly not wanting to upset me more, and then wrapped his arms around me.

"At work I don't think about it because it's my job," I went on, "but then when it's over I'm left to ponder what I did for the past twelve hours. I ask myself why I give him painkillers, why I clean his wounds and why he's allowed to live but some of his victims aren't. And then I wonder why I pour my heart out into my job to save him when he might as well be executed."

Corey squeezed me tighter and attempted to comfort me but in that moment I wasn't sure anything could be done for me. I contemplated maybe going for those free counselling sessions while they were available if my feelings didn't go away in the near future.

"You have to treat him Lina," Corey whispered to me, "you have to."

"Deep inside my heart I know it's the right thing to do," I replied in an exasperated tone of voice, "but I can't help having second thoughts or anxiety about it."

"Never forget that I am proud of you Lina and that I look up to you for your service."

"Thanks darling, I really needed to hear that right about now."

#### ***Day 4 — Wednesday***

I was already tired when I woke up. Corey and I had stayed up late, just talking about anything that was on our mind. He was still sleeping soundly when I walked out the door. The morning was particularly frigid for the time of the year. It wouldn't've surprised me if there was snow in the forecast for the day. At work it was much of the same police security checkpoints. I was almost getting used to it. I felt a great deal less of stress regarding my job but I felt much more emotional than usual. In the lounge as I had my regular coffee Maxine was telling me that such feelings were normal for the current circumstances we were facing. Some of the other nurses who had treated Vadim and watched over him all night — there were eleven of us including me — had said that they'd had dreams of the nightmarish things they saw when he and some of the victims

were rushed in with multiple gunshot wounds. Thus far I had been lucky to maintain an undisturbed sleep.

Only two officers were in Vadim's room when I arrived to take over the shift. There was, however, an incredibly heavy police presence in the hallway outside his room. I figured Adrienne hadn't reacted too well to having to nurse the shooter back to life since she wasn't the one who assisted me despite that it was the two of us who had been assigned to him. My new partner of a nurse was an older lady named Terese who had never done anything else than be a nurse her entire life. I admired such dedication. I had always wished to be able to be at least half the nurse she was at some point during my career. She was very calm compared to Adrienne, but not talkative at all. She barely spoke to me as we both tended to Vadim who seemed annoyed more than anything.

"In just about an hour and a half you're going to get that apparatus taken out of your mouth so you'll be able to speak again," I told him hoping that it would cheer him up.

His face showed no emotion when I spoke. I smiled softly at him in the hope of giving him a bit of encouragement considering he still had a long road to recovery ahead of him without counting the endless legal hurdles he'd have to go through. There was no doubt in my mind that he was doing the best he could to *enjoy*, if such a thing could be done, his time in the hospital because it would probably be the last time he'd be outside concrete walls and barbed wire fences.

"Are you in pain honey?" I asked him.

He shook his head. He did however attempt to make gestures with the hand that was tied to the railing of the bed. His other hand was bandaged up and limp so it wasn't of much use. I handed him the pen and paper but that wasn't what he wanted.

"He wants your hand," Terese told me in her usual soft voice.

Not knowing what else to do I slipped my hand into his and he squeezed it lightly. He let out a light sigh, seemingly one of relief, as I put my other hand over it as well. Where was that kid's mom? His dad? Anyone? He was completely alone. Nobody had come for him. The nurses were probably the only motherly figures around to comfort him. I sat next to his bed speaking to him softly until the doctor arrived to perform minor surgery on his jaw. The wires were removed and all of the bandages remaining on his face were history as well. I'd still have to clean the multiple stitches on the side of his face but at least I could rest easy knowing another one of my patients would walk out of the hospital alive and well. The sutures were removed from his eye as well revealing a blue eye next to the brown one.

"Here you go young man," Dr. Ng said pleasantly once the job was over, "almost as good as new! Your jaw will be sore for quite a while so don't try to put too much pressure on it right now but your prognosis is excellent. You will make a full recovery."

Vadim seemed unfazed upon hearing that he was expected to recover well. Occasionally he would try to rub his bottom jaw or slightly stick out his tongue but he appeared to be apathetic to everything else. He'd held on to my hand the entire time but he hadn't spoken to me, or anyone, and the severity of the situation didn't seem to bother him very much. He hadn't asked to look at himself in the mirror to see if he was disfigured or plead with the police to call his parents. At first I had thought that maybe he didn't love them, but on second thoughts maybe *they* didn't love him. Whichever it was, I couldn't help feeling slightly protective of him.

"You have beautiful eyes," I told him as he glanced in my direction for the first time since the doctor had been finished with him.

"Thank you," he said as he smirked at me slightly, it was also the first time that I heard his voice, "it's also good to be able to speak again. That was more frustrating than I can say right now."

"I can relate, I broke my jaw when I was fourteen, and subsequently I needed two surgeries to correct that."

"For me it wasn't so much about the pain, I just wanted to tell that cop to stop talking. God, I never thought he was going to shut up!"

I couldn't help myself. I cracked up laughing. I covered my mouth with my hand so my outburst wouldn't attract attention. Vadim chuckled slightly but then winced in pain so I got him some more meds for that. He hesitantly took them orally but thanked me for them afterwards. His jaw was sore that was understandable, but neither his physical injuries nor the impending legal case against him seemed to be what was bothering him. Part of me wanted so badly to be able to help him but I knew that once I got home I'd have to deal with incredible feelings of guilt. Guilt for just going my job; helping someone who needed healing. And that created even more conflict inside my head. Why should I even feel guilty for helping someone, regardless of who they were?

"You look like you've got a storm going on inside your head," Vadim muttered after a few moments of silence on my behalf.

"That's putting it mildly hon," I replied sweetly, with a warm smile on my face.

"It's not gonna kill me to hear what you have to say, plus you only have to spend two more days with me."

"You're already getting moved so quickly?"

"Well, that's what the police want. Of course I have no say in that. I'm going to federal prison on my eighteenth birthday, but I deserve that."

"I'm so sorry dear. It doesn't matter what you deserve or don't deserve, when I see someone in your situation I can't help but show them compassion."

"You're a nice nurse."

"Thank you."

I gently and affectionately squeezed his arm. He definitely wasn't going to get any of that from the correctional officers in prison. If there was even a slight chance of preserving some form of humanity in that young man, the responsibility fell on my shoulders.

"Do you think I'm troubled?" Vadim asked me out of the blue. The question caught me off-guard.

"Troubled?" I asked again.

"Yeah, like messed up," he said, "and no offense to you lady but you seem to be really distraught."

I took a deep breath and let out an overly loud sigh.

"I'm going to tell you the truth Vadim," I spoke gently after a few moments, "it's hard to see a patient get better so quickly and then have to think about their execution in a couple of years."

"I'm sorry that my presence makes you feel that way."

"Life is so precious, and as a nurse I am definitely a lover of life, and the worst possible thing that can happen to a caretaker is see one of their patients... die. »

"I hear ya."

"But don't you worry about me. My job is to take care of you and I will, no matter what."

I went about my business for the rest of the day without a hitch. Terese and I took turns sitting with the young man and talking to him. Terese seemed to really soothe him while I paced around the room anxiously. The young talkative officer returned. He didn't come back to guard Vadim though, but nonetheless you could hear him somewhere down the hallway. Vadim cracked up laughing but soon complained of jaw pain again and Terese decided to get the doctor to look at him prior to his routine patient checks. Unfortunately for the boy, he had suffered some nerve damage from being shot and the doctor had to perform another mini surgery on him and wire his jaw shut for the rest of the night until the following morning. That put an abrupt end to the chatter and had me bored for the rest of the shift since I had been looking forward to not just sitting in a chair and watching a patient sleep.

The police had requested that Vadim be in the constant eye of a medical professional since they wanted him alive at all costs. Alive so the State could kill him instead? He had been a trooper throughout his treatment but his condition seemed to slightly deteriorate before my shift ended that night. He came up with a mild fever and some of the stitches in his mouth were bleeding. You could see it in his eyes that he wanted all of that over with. I did my regular nurse duties and cleaned him up before calling it a night. There would be no overtime. I'd actually have a night to spend with Corey for the first time this past week. While I couldn't really talk about the specifics that went on at work with him due to patient confidentiality, I could at least use a moral boost and unwind from all the stress. Just as I was ready to walk out the door of Vadim's room he began making loud grunting noises to get my attention drawn back to him.

"What's wrong hon?" I asked him even though he couldn't speak, "Are you in pain?"

I then handed him the pad of paper and a pen so he could tell me what was up. Kiss goodnight he wrote simply before the pen trailed off the page. I leaned over and smooched him on the forehead before smiling sweetly at him.

"Good to go?" I asked before leaving.

He nodded his head. I then closed the lights, closed the door behind me and walked out into a snowstorm. As I inhaled and exhaled loudly out in the merciless wind, the air burned my lungs. I felt numb inside, still struggling to reconcile unreconcilable things inside my mind. There were always going to be people who leave traces on your soul, and for me Vadim Pushkin was one of them. It really didn't matter how much you loved and cared for a person or wanted for them to get well, there was nothing you could do to stop them from causing harm, and much less undoing it.

### ***Day 5 – Thursday***

By the time I got through the clogged up traffic, I arrived at work almost two hours late. A tanker truck had flipped and spilled fuel all over the road and the environmental cleanup people had blocked it off only leaving one lane that each side had to share. When I walked into Vadim's room he didn't look happy.

"I didn't think you were coming," he sternly said to me as he was able to speak again.

"I'm sorry, I got caught in traffic," I replied softly, "you might've heard people gossiping about it, but there's a big spill on one of the main roads."

"I don't like the dude they sent to replace you."

"Like you actually need all these people to watch over you."

He smirked at my remark. Then I noticed Brandon, the newest and only male nurse in my unit. Officer I-Can't-Keep-My-Mouth-Shut was in the room with another frail-looking

police officer that was old enough to be his great-grandfather. He too seemed annoyed and unhappy.

"Please talk to me!" Vadim grumbled as I sat next to his bed.

"I'm right here," I assured him as I held his little hand in mine, "how's your jaw doing this morning?"

"They finally fixed it right apparently. Right now I'm pretty buzzed up on morphine, but I'm disfigured."

"Disfigured?! Where? So you've got a few stitches on your pretty face where the bullets went in but there's nothing abnormal about it."

Yes, Vadim's face was badly beat up, but there was nothing indicating that it wouldn't return to normal.

"Here," he said pointing somewhere around his mouth and his cheek, "the side of my mouth. It looks like I'm always grinning evilly even when I'm not."

"Well, that's definitely not the worst disfiguration I've ever seen," I replied blandly.

While Vadim and I both laughed at my remark, it was indeed true. As a trauma nurse I had seen people come out of life-saving surgery missing a couple of pieces including eyes and ears and such and needing multiple reconstructive surgeries afterwards. So a patient who got a permanent smile on one side of his face definitely wasn't the worst disfiguration I had ever seen.

"It's a result of nerve damage honey," I said in a more serious tone of voice, "from being shot in the temporomandibular joint area."

"Say again?" he muttered, somewhat alarmed like I had just told him he had terminal cancer.

"TMJ, for short."

"I have a headache just thinking about words like that."

"Nursing school gave me many headaches, believe me!" "Police officers give me headaches."

It was so hard not to burst out laughing at that point but a few giggles escaped anyway. Vadim cracked up laughing but soon winced in pain since laughing like that put strain on his fragile and swollen jaw.

"What's so funny?" the young talkative cop asked once he heard the laughter.

"Our patient here has quite the sense of humor," I replied as I turned back to look at the officer, but then spoke on a more serious note, "but why is it that we need so many people to be with him around the clock? He can't even get out of his bed!"

"It's just orders from the big guys," the chatty one went on, "we just gotta do what we're told and not ask why I guess."

And then of course came a lengthy speech. I rubbed Vadim's hand to relax him since I knew he hated that kind of chatter. The cop's partner had an enormous frown on his face and so did Brandon. I knew that he'd heard Vadim say that he *didn't like the dude they sent to replace me*. I had never previously worked alongside Brandon but I knew that he didn't sit down at the bedside of a teenage killer to hold his hand for hours at a time. It was hard to switch in and out of nurse mode all the time. At home you have to cringe at violent crime but at work but you have to be very affectionate and caring towards the very people who make you cringe like that. During the day you have to revive the killer and when you go home at night you have to agree with giving him the death penalty. I guess in a way it was just business as usual for me despite that in an ignored part of my conscious it weighed on me heavily.

"They're sending me to a federal medical center tomorrow," Vadim said after a few moments of listening to the chatter, "I'll even get to meet my cheap ass lawyer that your taxes are paying for."

"I know, you told me earlier and the doctor was doing some paperwork for you to be transferred when I arrived," I replied in a gentle tone of voice in hopes to comfort him even just a little bit, "but don't you worry. They'll take very good care of you at McGraw Prison. Some of the nurses here get sent there sometimes too when there's a shortage of staff so you might see me again."

Contrary to what I had hoped to accomplish, Vadim grumbled and sighed loudly at my comment. Vadim's face fell and he frankly looked like he was about to cry.

"After this crap is over I never want to see you again," I muttered in a low voice.

I didn't know how to respond to that. The young man saw that I was taken aback by his comment so he squeezed my hand; the gesture that I usually used on him to comfort him.

"I'm not saying this to hurt you," he went on in a shaky voice, "I'm saying this because I love you."

"I love you too," I replied softly also squeezing his hand in return, "and I understand that it would hurt you to have me around because then you would long for me. I know what that feels like. It's probably better that I don't get too attached to you either, because if you receive a death sentence for this it will rip me up inside too since I got to know you the way that I did."

I bowed my head down and pursed my lips. I thought a couple of tears were going to come out of my eyes but none did; it was Vadim who had tears rolling down his cheeks. I grabbed a tissue and gently wiped them away, being extra careful not to irritate the surgical cuts that had just started healing. For the first time since I had walked into the hospital that morning everyone in the room was silent. The young talkative officer looked like he wanted to cry too. Everyone else still had their frowns but their faces seemed to have softened up too. I couldn't help but wonder, where were this boy's parents? Anyone? Corey and I didn't have children but I couldn't imagine having a son — regardless of what he might've done — lie in a hospital bed critically wounded and then facing execution once his trial got under way. That was someone's child, but it seemed like somewhere along the line the responsibility of being a mother to him had fallen on my shoulders.

"It's going to be okay," I attempted to reassure him.

"That's what she said," he replied dryly before a little smirk appeared on the other side of his face.

"God takes care of all His creation," I spoke softly to him as I rubbed the top of his hand. "Not a believer. If there was indeed a god things like this wouldn't happen. I hate it when people tell me that this is all just a phase or that I'm having a bad day when they don't see that I'm slowly dying inside. Really? Do you think this was just a phase? It's a little too late for me to be taken care of now."

"When I was your age my older brother shot himself. I'm the one who found his body in the garage. Back then I felt much of the same way you're feeling now but there came a time where the reasons why I didn't believe turned into the reasons I did believe."

"Try me. »

"My faith gave me purpose. For the first time I felt as if my suffering hadn't all been in vain; it hadn't all been for nothing. I have no idea why that happened, or why this happened, but I simply must trust that somewhere in the order of the universe it will have served something. Otherwise life is utterly cheap and meaningless. I don't have all the pieces or all the answers, but I trust that God does. When it seems like I'm trying to put all the Cornflakes together to make the rooster on the box to no avail, I trust that God is paving a few more miles of my journey."

Vadim chuckled slightly at my metaphor but the look on his face soon returned to being serious.

"Do you believe in miracles?" he asked me after a short moment of silence.

"As a nurse, I have seen miracles," I retorted, "you were supposed to die but by a power beyond anything in medicine you didn't, and I trust that that wasn't just a coincidence or all for nothing."



"I bet I'm a Cornflake in your box."

"The circumstances surrounding this is the Cornflakes factory, but you have made me hold on so much tighter to what I believe in. And I know how crazy all of this sounds to you, it sounded insane to me once upon a time too."

*Silence.*

"I'm sorry that your brother died like that."

"Thank you."

"One thing I don't understand is why my whole life has been nothing but pure crap and now, now that it's basically over, there's some pretty Cornflakes lady who sits at my bedside holding my hand the whole damn day."

"Sometimes I wonder if this isn't a test of my own convictions, or maybe it's what will make the rest of your life change course, but on most days I simply do my best and let God do the rest because otherwise I'm a complete mess."

"Have you ever prayed to touch the heart of another person?"

"Of course! I think everyone prays to leave a good kind of scar on another person at some point in their lives."

"Then consider your prayer to have been answered."

Before I could respond, the doctor walked in to check up on his patients before going home for the day. He seemed to be surprised at how quiet everyone in the room was.

"So how's your jaw?" he asked Vadim in an upbeat tone of voice.

"He had quite a lot to say today," I replied before he could speak.

"That's certainly a sure sign of healing! But you also don't want to put too much stress on it right away."

After the doctor finished with him it was also time for me to call it quits for the night. I kissed him goodnight like I usually did and walked out. My body, mind and soul had been worn out from the day's emotions. At work there were always plenty of distractions and sounding alarms and bandages to be changed, but when it was all over I was left with the remnants of the subconscious impact that all had on me. Yes, I wanted justice to be served, but I was also worried about him. I didn't know where that worry came from, but it was there.

***Day 6 — Friday***

I had barely slept at all. I was somewhat ashamed to admit it, but I had cried. I had been particularly cold to Corey and had also left for work too early so I wouldn't arrive late and risk making Brandon and Vadim deal with each other until I got there. Since I had plenty of time to spare I went into the staff cafeteria where I got a mini box of Cornflakes to give to my patient, be it that he probably wouldn't be able to eat them. Some of the other staff members were talking about how he would be moved just before noon.

"I won't mind seeing the death penalty."

"One thing I'll never understand is how people can feel bad for monsters like that. How can he just shoot up some place like that? That's just crazy!"

I didn't blame them for their opinions. I felt a chill run down my spine as well. Was I insane to feel compassion for someone like that? But who was I to let his monstrous actions get the best of me? Unlike him, I chose love.

"I know I'll breathe easier when I don't see all the cops loitering around here."

With my box of Cornflakes in hand I walked into Vadim's room. The other nurses were still there since I was still about ten minutes early for my shift but they all smiled at me when I walked in. The smile on the now eighteen-year-old's face stretched from ear to ear, as much as possible at least, since one side of his face was stitched up and still in pretty bad shape. When I showed him the box of Cornflakes it's like his whole world was made complete.

"Happy birthday!" I told him as joyfully as possible.

The others in the room didn't seem to be aware that it was his birthday, but once it was brought to their attention we all sang him the good ole *happy birthday to you* blah blah up until we had to get everything under wrap and make sure he was ready to be moved. For the first time at work I felt an intense wave of emotion. That usual disconnection, that *it's a job* mentality, left me for the first time. It almost frightened me. There's a certain form of zoning out you have to go through in order to be able to cut people up and sew them back together at work. But then again, maybe that sort of disconnection is what had happened to Vadim in order for him to be able to shoot dozens of people. That was something I wasn't sure I wanted to contemplate.

"You didn't forget about me," he muttered in a hoarse voice, seemingly not wanting to cry.

"I'll never be able to forget about you," I reassured him as I grabbed his hand possibly for the last time, "even if I tried."

After he was given a mostly clean bill of health considering the condition he was currently in, I fed him dry Cornflakes one by one until the the prison officials who were in charge of moving him arrived. I'll reluctantly admit that I was sad to see him go because

I knew he wasn't going home; he was probably going to await his eventual execution on death row. I felt like asking him about his parents but I decided to go against it because I didn't want to ruin his birthday mood. He probably wouldn't have anything nice to say about them anyway.

"Is there anything you want before you go?" I asked him, trying to keep my own voice from cracking.

"I ask for your forgiveness," he said blandly, "and I ask that you pray for me."

I was caught off-guard by his request and it took a moment for me to respond.

"Of course honey, I can certainly do that for you."

"Thank you."

As the correctional officers approached I had to try hard not to give into my nurse instincts of coddling the patient. *Be careful! He's hurt! He's just a kid! Take good care of him!* But I kept my mouth shut. It was erroneous to react as if the police were the danger; the danger had been tied to the hospital bed for a week.

"One last kiss Vadim?"

"Yes please."

The kiss got a mixed reaction. Some of the many individuals in the room understood that I was just taking care of the kid, but some of the officers frowned at the gesture. Vadim was stone-faced as they led him away into a police van just before noon. My heart was aching in my chest when I walked outside during my lunch break into puffy snowflakes coming down from the sky. I leaned against the side of the building and looked at the scenery before me. Most of the journalist were gone, trailing behind the multitude of police vehicles, including two helicopters, who wanted a shot of the perpetrator. I was relieved that he was gone, but I still contemplated what would become of the boy I had once come to love. I'll admit a little less reluctantly that part of me was worried about him.

*I still am.*

# THE HUNGER

The sun was now rising and I could hear the city buses running. The New Yorkers would be on the streets heading their own separate ways soon. I didn't need to worry about them just yet. With the powerful rays of the morning sun making my eyes sparkle it was time to take cover until people heading to work would fill the streets. Nobody would come to such a part at six in the morning but paranoid as I was, I hide in between the trees. This park was densely wooded. That's what made it so beautiful. Untermyer Park was a fairytale built in 1900. Now that the dream was dead the park was now owned by the city. What used to be the mansion was now the hospital, my favourite place to visit during the darkest nights.

I hide between the trees until about eight that morning. Then I leave the park discretely and pretend to lead a normal New Yorker life. People were walking down the sidewalks smiling and talking to each other. I had my hands in my pocket and walking a straight line. People moved out of my way. I guess maybe they didn't like the dark circles of eyeliner around my eyes and my black shirt with the ripped jeans. Everybody dressed like this in New York City but Yonkers was more of a business city and a tourist attraction other than a land of chaos and prostitutes. In a way that was good and in another it was bad. I always remained undecided.

I try to stay where there were a lot of people so I wouldn't get noticed or framed. I didn't want to stand out, I didn't want people to know my face. I was just another New Yorker. It was just the same old situation once again. I was sick and tired of going around in circles all day. I decide to go back to Untermyer Park to enjoy the solitude of the place. I should've known better than to sit in the middle of a wide open space by myself in the middle of the afternoon but it felt so good. The wind blew a sweet delicious smell from behind. It was so divine. So divine that I lost my focus for a moment and when I reopened my eyes a man was walking past me. He took me by surprise.

"Hey there!" He warmly greets me as he walks by.

"Hi." I reply in my innocent little voice.

I usually didn't talk to people. I never addressed a person and rarely ever replied. When I was asked something I'd reply in another language, pretend I didn't speak English. Saying hello was not a big deal but now this guy would know my face and recognize my voice. One person wasn't much of a worry but you never know who or what you have to deal with. Especially not in the big city. But I've got to say that this guy seemed pretty nice. His soft brown eyes were sympathetic and his gentle smile was warm. He was about 5'8" with a medium build and longer blond hair. He wasn't somebody I should fear.

"Nice place huh?" He says.

“Yeah I like it.” I reply.

“It’s my favourite place in the whole world.” He continues.

“It’s a very nice place indeed.” I reply.

“Truly is, well I have to run. Take care.” He says continuing his walk down the stairs.

This was my first conversation in a long time. I almost didn’t know how to behave around people anymore, even less talk to them! I sat there a long time pondering over the short conversation I had with a complete stranger. I was desolate and any kind of contact with a person made wild thoughts run through my mind.

Later that afternoon I walked down the same path the man had took. I followed his scent up until it lead out of the park. I would remember his sweet smell, it was one I couldn’t forget. It was so sweet it made my mouth water. It was cravings like theses that I had a hard time with. I had to try hard not to give into them. Not many people had such a scent and the ones who did were the main reason I’d go half way around the country. I came from Florida the last time, two years ago. I had lived in New York City since then but came here to Yonkers for something new.

I stayed in the park trying to keep a low profile until nightfall. When the few city lights came on it was time for me to get to work. I look around in dark allies for prostitutes, pimps, the homeless and all others who had no purpose in life. I found a fat drunk man in an ally, this was my chance. I jump on him and quickly snap his neck with my teeth. I was lucky not to spill too much blood. I hated to waste precious nutrients. I drink all the blood before placing his body underneath a car so it would look like an accident. His blood was sour, tasting only like alcohol. The taste wasn’t pleasing but I’d rather settle for this than to feed off people who live important lives. I was only cleaning the earth of its impurities and having a meal at the same time. This was my first murder in Yonkers.

I jump rooftops and retreat to the marina. I lie down on top of one building and patiently look at the stars until they slowly start to disappear in the light blue sky. Morning was here once again. Again at eight I start moving in the streets. I loaf by the post office for a while until someone startles me again. It was the man from the park I met yesterday afternoon. What did he want again? I should have recognized his sweet scent but I was staring at this helicopter in the sky. It was different but I couldn’t really pinpoint why. I turn around to face the man whom I met in the park yesterday.

“You’re the girl I met in the park huh?” He asks me smiling.

“Yeah that’s me.” I reply.

My makeup must have been smudged and my hair dirty because when I turned around to face him his smile disappeared. I should have told him that I never saw him or that he got the wrong person. He knew my face now. Let’s hope I didn’t have blood stains

somewhere I couldn't see. The man examined me from head to toe. He looked at me in disbelief. What was it again? Was I really that dirty? I just give him my usual blank stare. I wanted him to leave me alone.

"What happened to you?" He asks.

"I slept in the trash bin, obviously." I reply.

This only shocked him more. I should have shut up. Yet, it seemed like he cared for me. Nobody else had ever shown that sense of caring for me before. I didn't know how I should feel about it. I wasn't friendly and I didn't need anyone's sympathy. There weren't many nice people on earth and maybe I shouldn't waste this chance. After all I could destroy him if things didn't go my way. He smelled so sweet that I wished things didn't really go my way.

"You have no home?" He kindly asks.

"No." I reply. "I'm an orphan from the city."

"There's people who..." He says but I cut him off.

"I don't need anyone's help." I bitterly snap back.

"This is no way to live!" He pleads holding out his hand.

I innocently place my hand into his and he pulls me closer to him. I look down and my shoes. If I looked at the man I'd be too tempted to drink his blood. I wasn't thirsty but he smelled so good. He made my mouth water. I had to focus. I needed to find some sort of distraction.

"Do you like rock music?" He asks.

"Yes." I reply.

"I have a show tonight, you should come." He says. "You'll have fun and we can find you a place to stay."

I didn't want to go to his show. Evening was feeding time. I'd get caught too easily. I didn't need to feed every night but it was better that way. I wouldn't get wild and furious cravings afterwards. Yet the thought of a bath and a soft couch to relax on seemed pleasing. Maybe I'd try it just to see what happens. It didn't really matter didn't it?

"Sure." I reply.

This would probably end badly but I could probably gain something as well. The man, still holding my hand, leads me to a bench nearby. We sit down and start talking. He first

asked me if I knew who he was. Innocently, I said no. He introduced himself as Al Ramsey. He had his own band that was playing a show tonight. He asked me my name and what had happened to my parents.

"They were murdered." I told him.

I wasn't going to tell him the truth. Yes, they *had* died but not the way I told him they did. I had outlived them a long, long time ago. I didn't age. I'd be seventeen forever. I always had to move because people would eventually notice that I never got older. A normal person doesn't look seventeen when they are forty. But I wasn't forty, I was a lot older. I had been born in 1663. I had seen it all. I did not only remain young forever, I was practically indestructible. The only way I could be destroyed was to be shredded to pieces and burned.

"I'm sorry." Al whispers, putting his arm around my shoulders.

"It's okay. I was nine so I don't remember much." I reply.

"You're a strong person." He says looking straight into my eyes.

"Not all the way through..." I admit.

"None of us are but keep holding your head up high." He whispers.

It had been very hard to watch everyone I've ever loved grow old and die. There was nothing I could do about it. I could only sit there and watch them die. I was an immortal beast. I didn't like what I was. I wish I could lead a normal life, even just for a day. After all of these years I still missed my parents but most of all, my brother. My brother meant the world to me yet he had been dead for so many years. He had been dead for at least 300 years now. He had died in 1692. He was the only one who knew what I had become. He was the only person I had told. Since his death I promised both of us that no one else would ever find out what I was. I was ashamed. I never wanted to be like this. I never asked to be like this. I hated myself for something that wasn't even my fault. I never wanted to be immortal.

"It's not easy." I whisper.

I had never talked about such a touchy subject with anyone before. It wasn't easy. Al had hit my weak spot. I wish I could tell him the truth. I wish I could tell everyone the truth. It wasn't that simple when no one understood your existence. I couldn't accept myself, no one could, that's one of the reasons why I was so melancholic.

"I know it isn't but keep moving on in the right direction." He replies. "I'll pray the lord to heal you."

"I can't be saved." I whisper. "And why do you even care?"

“Let me tell you a little story okay?”

I look at him and wait for him to speak.

“Being in a band involves a lot of traveling. I’ve been near and far with some band mates who had various problems with drugs and alcohol. I’ve lost many of them to their addictions. I’ve even lost my wife to alcoholism. I’ve tried to help her but the bottle was stronger than me. You don’t know how sick it makes me feel. You’re still young, you can be spared. You deserve a good chance at life. If I can spare even one life, yours, I could at least say that good has come out of all this. One life can make all the difference.” He says. “Don’t waste your chance.”

His story brought tears to my eyes. It was so similar to mine. It brought back so many bittersweet memories of the 400 years that I had seen. I move over on the bench to be closer to Al. I wrap my arms around him and squeeze him tight. His touch was soft and gentle. I gripped my claw-like nails into his shirt and try not to suffocate him with my superhuman strength. If I lost my focus for just one second everything could come crashing down all around me. I didn’t want that so I let go of Al and move to the very edge of the bench.

“I’ll be back for your show.” I tell him. “I’ve got things to do.”

“See you there.” Al replies in his reassuring smile.

I walk away without looking back and hop on the bus to the downtown region. I would drink a little bit before going to the show just to make sure. Drinking too much made the thirst go away. It replaced it with the desire to burn some energy because I had too many nutrients in my system. That strategy would probably work for the show. I planned on sitting in various city busses and ride all day long until the show. I had nothing else to do anyhow. My existence was worthless. Not just to me, but to everyone. I was nothing but a senseless cold blooded killer. I killed to quench my thirst, but still. I sit at the very back of the bus by myself. I didn’t want anyone to come near me. I stare outside looking for my next prey. They were too easy to find.

I spotted a few that would satisfy my needs. I’d wait until supper time. I’d snatch somebody and do what I do best. Until then I would ride. I went around the city five times in this bus, it was time to get aboard another one. Taking various buses during the entire day gave me the chance to really appreciate the beauty of Yonkers. The sun was high in the sky and made my white skin sparkle. It was time for me to move to a darker area of the bus. I couldn’t be in the sun for more than four hours straight because my skin would slowly start to burn and my powers would be no more. That damage was irreversible. My powers were all I had and I didn’t want to lose them. They weren’t much but they were something.

It was supertime now. I get off the bus and stalk the dark back alleys of the not-so-nice part of the city. I find an old homeless man all by himself. He smelled good. I let a small



growl escape from in-between my teeth as I approach him. I jump on him in the blink of an eye and he was dead. His blood tasted sweet. There was no alcohol and no drugs in it but it did lack in certain delicious nutrients. I was beyond full now. I walk in the shadows all the way to the venue where the show was taking place. I still had a while to wait so I sit on the trash bin at the back of the venue. A tour bus stops not too far from me and four guys walk out with various instruments in hand. They probably didn't even notice me. They all smelled like alcohol. I would just wait until the show would start now.

I didn't wait long before a red car pulled up behind the tour bus. Al and this other guy walked out. The other guy walked straight into the venue by the same door the four alcohol-smelling musicians had taken. I was in the shadows but Al deliberately took a peek in my direction. He probably just wanted to see if I would really show up. I guess he was another person who jumped to the conclusion that I liked dark areas and back alleys. He smiles and walks towards me. His sweet smell didn't bother me now. I was more than full now and I was ready to rock.

"Hi Marissa." He said as he approached me.

"Hey." I reply.

"I'm really glad you came." He continues.

"Yeah but I have no money to get in." I lie.

"That's okay, we'll take you in backstage." He replies.

He holds out his hand for me to grab it. I slide my hand into his and jump off the trash bin. I really didn't need his help but he had no clue what kind of creature I was. I'd just pretend to be a sweet little girl around him. Leading the way we walk into the venue. It was hectic backstage. Al leads me to the bathroom and gives me a bar of soap. Yeah sure, I get the message. I close the door behind me and snarl at myself in the mirror. I wash my face until all the old smudged makeup and dirt was gone. I then wash my hands and a few other areas of exposed skin. I looked decent enough now. I walked out of the bathroom and saw him talking to that other guy he was with in the car. He introduced the other man as Joey Banton. He would be the lead singer at the show tonight. I shake his hand and gently smile.

It was show time now. The guys made sure to make me stand in the front row so I could perfectly see everything. Monsters like me had perfect vision. I didn't miss anything. Joey was a good singer, I had to give him that. I hadn't heard music in such a long time. Al was such an amazing guitarist. I had never seen somebody play guitar like that. His fingers went so fast on that thing that I had to focus just to keep up. I was flabbergasted. He must have seen the expression on my face because when it was time for him to play his solo he made sure he was right in front of me at the edge of the stage. He smiled as he saw the amazement in my eyes. I had my eyes on him – or his fingers – the entire show. I was happy to have come tonight.

When the show was over I run to Al backstage. I had wasted plenty of energy and his sweet scent filled the air. I wasn't thirsty but he always made my mouth water. I don't know what it was about him but he smelled so good, so divine. His sweet innocent smile only made him more vulnerable. It's not that I couldn't have him, but the thought that it wasn't right to destroy him only made me want him more. I don't know what it was about him that made him smell so good but there were very few of them out there.

"How did you like it?" Al asks with a smile.

"I loved it!" I reply.

"I'm glad you did!" He said taking me into his arms.

I wasn't comfortable having my arms around him. I was scared to claw him. I really didn't want to slip up. He was the first person to approach me with open arms. In all the years that I had been wandering he was truly the first. I let a smile appear on my lips for the first time in the longest time in the world. This time it wasn't a fake smile, it was real.

"Come we'll get you a motel room okay?" He proposes.

"I don't really want to stay in a fancy motel room..." I protest.

"You can come and stay at my place if you'd like."

"Sure."

Al goes into another room and has a brief talk with the other musicians before taking me by the hand and bringing me outside. I sit in his car next to him and try not to get distracted by the sweet smell. The drive to his house wasn't long. There surprisingly weren't many people on the streets at this hour. I thought there would have been more for a city this size... We get to Al's house and he opens the car door for me to step out. I step outside and follow him inside.

Al's house was an incredible mansion. I had seen all sorts of architecture in the past few hundred years but this was different. His place was filled with music awards, vintage guitars and other music-related items. I played guitar a little bit. I wasn't very good but I had potential, or so people said. Al brings me upstairs to a big bedroom and instructs me to put on one of his shirts and to leave my dirty clothes in the hallway so he could wash them. I do as he tells me and lay in the bed until I stop hearing noise. He must be in bed himself now. I open the window without making noise and jump on the roof. It was hunting time now.

With Al I would always have to be full. He smelled too good for me to be thirsty, even just a little bit. I snatch this teenage girl walking by herself down the street. I didn't feel like going very far to catch someone without a purpose in life. Being killed in the blink of

an eye by having your neck snapped by me was always better than to be kidnapped, raped and brutally murdered. I still had done a good deed, before something bad happened. Her blood tasted great. I'd be good for a while. I jump back into the roof of Al's house and slid into the room by the window. I didn't make any noise and I would doubt that he came to check on me during this beautiful night.

Creatures like me didn't need to sleep but we could. It wasn't impossible. If your nutrient levels were dangerously low sleeping would preserve them for a while. I might as well try to preserve what I had just in case I would get tempted by Al's sweet smell. I close my eyes and everything went black. It was somewhat dangerous for creatures like me to sleep because we could completely go unconscious of the things happening around us. I wouldn't go into a deep sleep but still. I wasn't comfortable letting my guard down like this. My subconscious would still be aware of the nearby things. If Al got close I would know it. My subconscious would detect his smell.

In the morning Al comes into my room and sits on my bed. I knew he was there but I pretend to still be sleeping. He gently places his hand on my shoulder and rubs my soft skin. Nobody had ever gently touched me like that.

"Wake up sweetie." He whispers.

I open my eyes and turn on my back to face him. He softly smiles at me. I close my eyes and smile back. I smiled for real. Al had this aura of love and happiness. The only thing I had to watch out for was his tempting smell. Otherwise I was perfectly at ease around him. He was gentle and compassionate. He seemed to be very understanding as well. His brown eyes were filled with sympathy for me as I stared into them. His love was real. If it hadn't been true I would have noticed. It's one good thing that comes with being a monster. I could tell whether a person was lying or telling the truth.

"I was waiting for you, I just don't think I ever knew." I tell him.

"Everything happens for a reason." He replies. "Just remember that."

I sit up and wrap my arms around Al's neck. He smelled so good but he deserved a nice hug. He was such a sweet guy. I lay my head on his shoulder and take a deep unnecessary breath. He places his hands on my back and I squeeze him tightly.

"What do you want for breakfast?" He asks me.

"I'm not hungry." I reply.

"Are you sure?" He asks. "You haven't eaten since last night after the show."

"I'm sure."

"You know it won't cost anything to eat here."

“I know.”

“And it’s a lot better than eating out of the trash!”

He was so innocent. He didn’t know what I was. Al reminded me a lot of my brother. I think that’s why we somehow gravitated towards each other. In a certain way I was scared to get closer to Al because if we ever got close like my brother and I did... History would repeat itself. He wouldn’t live forever. I didn’t want to have to watch him die like it happened with my brother. Even after 300 years I still wasn’t over it. I needed to get away. I couldn’t stay here with him.

“I’ll make breakfast while you take a bath alright?” He proposes.

“Yeah.” I reply.

I get into the big tub and make sure that my porcelain skin was the whitest again. I was fascinated by the mysterious patterns that the dull light projected onto the walls when it reflected in the water. I had never actually seen that before. I plunge my whole head underwater. I didn’t need to breathe. It was just something I unnecessarily did so people wouldn’t figure out my secret. I stayed like this for a long time. I wasn’t sure what I should think of Al. He seemed to see something in me that no one else did. He was just like my brother, so perfectly imperfect. All of nature’s charms put into one. I had to get away, I had to go far away.

I get out of the tub and put my clothes back on. Al had left them at the door, washed and neatly folded. I go downstairs and go out the door. Al was making bacon and eggs. He expected me to eat with him I guess. I’d get sick every time I ate or drank something that wasn’t blood. Water didn’t affect me too much though.

“I need to go.” I say as I run out the door. “Thanks for everything.”

I run at my superhuman speed into the woods. I needed to get as far away as I could. My best bet at the moment would be going all the way to northern Canada. I was born in Canada actually. The journey would take about a week running at top speed and not sleeping but as long as I got away from Al nothing else mattered. I couldn’t be around him. He was too much like my brother Jay. I loved Jay so much. He was my whole world. He was my whole world and I had destroyed him. He was still young, he was in pain after being shot so I decided to end his suffering once and for all. When he suffered, I suffered too.

I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I ever had to hurt Al in any way. Getting away, leaving without a trace might not solve much but it was the only option. The memory of my brother still killed me inside. Al shared his innocence and his tranquility, probably his understanding too. Both were so peaceful even in hard times. They wanted to help me but I couldn’t be helped. Even if I could, I probably wouldn’t want to.

I stayed twenty-one days in Canada. The thought of Al just couldn't get out of my head. I almost felt guilty. Guilt was not an emotion I felt, remorse even less. I decided to go back to Yonkers. Al didn't deserve what I had done to him. If I got to the point where I could trust him maybe I would tell him the truth. It's not that I wanted to but... I didn't understand his simple sympathy for me. He was like my brother. He had gotten under my skin because of that. I didn't think I was so weak. Al had mellowed me out more than I would admit. I was attracted to that sense of comfort, his aura was like my brother's, that's why I always ran back to him.

I landed on his door step it was very dark outside and I was running a little low on nutrients. I hadn't stopped for food at all and I did my very best to avoid all civilization. You could say I was on an angry guilt trip. I poke the doorbell button and wait. Al eventually opens the door and just stares at me with a shocked and surprised expression on his face. At this point I regretted coming back. Al froze on the spot for a few seconds but then stepped outside barefoot and took me into his arms.

"You had me really worried there." He said squeezing me.

I didn't speak, I only pushed him off me. I tried to use the less force possible on him. I looked down as he let me go and looked at me in confusion. I turn around to look at the street. The clouds were moving in and it was starting to drizzle. A thunderstorm was rolling in. I particularly loved thunderstorms. It made it harder to hunt in some way because people ran for cover but it made it easier in another way because there would be no blood stains on the ground and I could easily fake the murder as a drowning. Rain felt good on my skin. It was so melancholic and cold. Rain made some of my powers become more alert and it relieved certain pains too.

"I can't let you go out in this." Al tells me grabbing my shoulder.

I was thirsty and I wanted to hunt. But I decided to comply with Al and get into his house without protesting. Even if I did protest, I had no excuses to go out in this weather. I walk into his house remaining silent and go sit on his big leather couch. I had to focus and control my temptations. My nutrient levels were very low. I hadn't drank much up in Canada. The only thing in Alert was some scientist research base or something. And at the time I visited the place, there wasn't anybody. I might have fed twice in more than a month. I would have no choice but to sleep until morning and then some, Al would probably want to keep me during day time too.

Al sat down next to me and let out a big sigh. I look at the time, it was past two in the morning. Al lets himself fall back on the couch letting out a sigh of relief this time. He lays his head on the armrest and places his hand over his eyes. All the lights were off except for the computer monitor that generated a little bit of light. I move over so I could be closer to Al and take the opportunity to lay my head down on his chest and to rest a little bit. As I make this gesture he places his arms around me. I hope he didn't notice that my heart didn't beat, or that I didn't breathe when I was asleep. It doesn't take long for Al to fall asleep. He was relieved. Rain gave me the ability to feel exactly what

another person was feeling within a reasonable radius. He was happy to have me back. I smile and close my eyes. I would soon drift away into the world of sleep, letting my guard down...

My eyes suddenly open and Al's sweet scent filled the air. It made my mouth water more than ever before. He was still innocently sleeping, and he was at my mercy. I touched the soft skin of his neck. I wanted to bite him. I gently slide out of his hold without waking him up and stare at him drooling. I kneel down next to him and press my nose into his hair. He smelled so good. I gather all my courage and jump all the way up the stairwell. I landed without making any noise. I opened the bathroom window and jumped outside. The sun was only coming up. The morning air was still cool. I jumped on the first person I smelled. It turned out to be a woman carrying a young child. Two meals in one was always nice. I would be okay until night now, but at night I would *have* to feed.

I get back into the house and walk down into the living room. It didn't seem like he would wake up anytime soon so I decide to go into the kitchen and try to fix him something. I didn't know how to cook but following simple instructions on packages must not be so hard. I take out a pack of raviolis from the freezer and try to cook it just right. The microwave made noise and it woke up Al. I guess the smell also didn't help him to stay asleep. He gets up and comes sit down at the kitchen table and rubs his tired caramel brown eyes.

"If you're hungry I'll cook you something." He says. "Don't be afraid to ask."

"This is for you." I reply handing him over the plate of raviolis.

"Why thank you!" He says surprised.

He hesitated a little bit to eat the raviolis but then he picked up a fork and started eating. I was flattered when complimented my cooking. It was my first time using a microwave. Al was sincere when he said my cooking was good. I would have felt it if he was lying. After he was done he asked me if I wanted anything but I told him that I had eaten already. He asked me what I had eaten and simply replied I had eaten some cookies. I had seen a bag in the self, or I thought I did. I close my eyes and sit down in front of Al. When I reopened my eyes our gazes locked. I could see the compassion in his eyes, and the hurt. It was like I had stabbed him straight through the heart.

"I'm sorry." I whisper.

"No worries sweetie." He replies. "Just please don't do that again."  
"I promise."

"If you ever need anything or want to go somewhere, just say it instead of vanishing."

"Okay, I'm sorry."

“I know you feel bad, it’s okay.”

Our gazes were locked once again. I loved Al’s soft brown eyes. I could see right through them, they were so easy to read. Al was lonely, you could even say desperate. Not desperate for love, but for some sense of comfort. I was exactly the same so we somehow gravitated towards each other. I’m glad we did because I was starting to like Al. He was a good guy living with a monster. I was a demented beast. I didn’t know what I was but I sure didn’t like it. I often wondered if there was anything else like me out there... I didn’t think there were. I wasn’t a vampire, I wasn’t some sort of mythical creature. I was something real.

I hear a loud noise coming from outside. I close my eyes in irritation and open them a few seconds later. I roll my eyes and look at Al. He looks at the ceiling before looking at me too.

“That helicopter again.” He says. “I don’t know what it’s patrolling around for.”

I thought back to that day when I met Al at the post office, just before we started talking. I was looking at this thing in the sky, was it that helicopter? I hadn’t paid too much attention to the sound because we were in the city but now I was trying to think back. What was this helicopter looking for? I imagine it was the police helicopter looking for something of someone? Was it looking for me? All of a sudden I became very paranoid. I didn’t fear for my own safety but I feared for Al’s. It seems like now his scent filled the air of the room once again. I tried to shrug it off but decided to leave the room to collect my thoughts. My excuse this time was that I needed to go to the bathroom, which I really didn’t.

I lock the door of the bathroom and stare at myself in the mirror. I stare right into the reflection of my own eyes. My look was fierce and I showed my teeth. I hissed at myself and furiously shook my head in anger. I then continue to stare at myself for a while up until I was ready to return downstairs. I slowly walk down the stairs. Al was washing the plate I had put the raviolis into. He turns around to look at me and smiles.

“I guess if you’re going to stay I might as well adopt you.” He says.

I don’t say anything. I simply look out the window.

“Would you like that?” He continues.

“I’m not sure.” I whisper.

“Why not?” Al seemed shocked.

“You know I’m used to the street, and I like it there.” I reply.

“Marissa...” He softly says

"Yeah I know, its okay." I cut him off. "This is just all so new to me."

"Remember what I told you that day we sat on the bench? About second chances, and those things? You are young!"

"Yes I do, and very vividly."

As a matter of fact I did not forget much when I really focused. Of course I did not remember *everything* but almost. I would certainly not forget this. Al's words echoed through my mind as I imagined myself right back to that very day.

*"Being in a band involves a lot of traveling. I've been near and far with some band mates who had various problems with drugs and alcohol. I've lost many of them to their addictions. I've even lost my wife to alcoholism. I've tried to help her but the bottle was stronger than me. You don't know how sick it makes me feel. You're still young, you can be spared. You deserve a good chance at life. If I can spare even one life, yours, I could at least say that good has come out of all this. One life can make all the difference." He says. "Don't waste your chance."*

I take a deep unnecessary breath. I did it often when I was human when I needed strength. It was a habit I always kept even after all theses years. I look into Al's eyes as his words kept echoing through my skull. He really believed in me, and I didn't believe in myself. My existence was the one of the damned. My brother also had so much faith in me. He said that I could lead others into the light, although I never really understood what he meant by that. I bite my bottom lip and quickly glance at the floor tiles before lifting up my head and looking at Al again.

"What do you say?" He asks.

"I'll give it a try." I reply in a soft whisper.

I immediately regret it that. It would take more control than I had to live with Al. He smelled too good. Before I had the chance to think of anything more Al comes to take me into his arms. I gently place my arms on his back rib bones and lay my head on his chest. I loved listening to his heartbeat. It was so alive, and human. Al runs his hand down my hairline and down my back to my waste before starting it all over again. I did my best to ignore his sweet and delicious scent. I always wondered if he would notice that my heart didn't beat or that I didn't need to breathe... Al then takes my face in between his hands and looked straight into my eyes. I close mine as he moves over closer to me and kisses me on the forehead. He then gently lets me go and goes back to do his thing.

I stare outside the window at the birds and the beautiful clear blue sky for a long time as I tried to collect my thoughts without success. Al asked me a few times if I wanted anything to eat but I kept saying no. He went upstairs to play his guitar for a while before coming back down and asking me if I wanted to go to town with him. I'm not sure



if I wanted to but I decided to go anyway. I go sit with him in the front seat of his car and drive away into the downtown. The first place we stopped at was the mall, of course. Thank goodness it only took about twenty minutes to get there because it wasn't rush hour. I didn't want my skin to start burning because then Al would figure out what I actually was. We walk into this clothing shop and I buy the first long sleeve shirt I see. I go to the bathroom and put it on as soon as I buy it. This way most of my skin wouldn't be exposed to the sunlight. This would be much safer. I had old ripped jeans that didn't show too much skin so I'd be okay like this.

Al wanted to keep shopping for some more clothes so I simply went along with him and bought anything he showed me. I hated shopping and I didn't mind wearing the same clothes over and over and over again. I was used to it by now. I actually liked it. The mall was surprisingly not too busy at this hour but noon rush hour would soon be here. I was uncomfortable in large crowds but at the same time I blended into them. But for the moment Al and I walked down the large strip mall to the beat of the music playing on the radio. I enjoyed rock music. I looked around in wonder at everything. I swore I actually smiled for a fraction of a second. Al's yummy smell didn't bother me too much blending into the others. I practically jump into his arms and hug him before we both keep walking. He smiles at himself as I keep doing my thing. Maybe this wouldn't be too bad.

But as time went by though, Al's smell was becoming harder and harder to ignore because my attraction for him didn't cease. I told him repeatedly that I was dangerous for him because I was a monster but he didn't seem to want to understand a word of that. I knew that one day I was going to slip up but I had no idea that that would be so soon! One lazy afternoon as he was sitting in his living room chair with the windows open and a breeze blowing his scent my way, I jumped on him, snapped his neck, and drank all of his blood. Oh God I wanted MORE! And so my feeding spree in the streets of New York began in a frenzy....

# THE VESSEL

“Did you hear what Churchill said on the radio Leopold?” Eleonora asked for what seemed like the millionth time. “He said that we can have a brief period of rejoicing now that Germany has surrendered!”

As much as I would have liked to rejoice, I was still far too tired to feel anything other than precisely *being* tired. Eleonora had also neglected to mention the fact that Churchill also said that there was still a long and hard road ahead. The Japanese continued to fight and the journey across the Pacific would be a long one.

“Honestly I don’t know how we can rejoice when there’s nothing left of the entire continent.” I grumbled. Eleonora had learned to breathe again, but I had not. I still smelled the smoke, I still tasted the grime and I even still wore my stripes.

“Life in America will be so amazing,” Eleonora continued on. She too was still wearing her stripes but the smile on her face seemed to distort them. I didn’t really see them anymore. I knew they were there, but I couldn’t see them. “Although the vessel will be arriving in New York I really want to go to Boston. Some of the Americans in the port were talking about what life is like there and I really want to go.”

I had no choice but to admire her for her big dreams. They hadn’t taken them from her, despite everything, she still had a good heart. But the big question was, how would she make a life for herself all alone in a foreign country at just fifteen? We had nothing except the clothes on our backs and our souls, if we had any left.

“And what if the boat sinks on its way to New York like the Titanic?” I mused as both Eleonora and I sat on the deck in the open air waiting for the vessel to depart.

“Leopold,” Eleonora grumbled herself, “the Nazis couldn’t kill us, do you think the ocean will?” It wasn’t like her to be annoyed, and especially not with me, but I could not bring myself to share her hope for the future. “I know it’s hard,” she put her hand on mine, “but we’re free now. You can close your eyes and rest easy at night now knowing that our British and Russian friends and allies will stand up for justice for us.”

The boat kept on filling up with other passengers, many also wearing stripes just like us. I said nothing for a while as I looked up at the fluffy white clouds in the sky. My entire family had gone up in smoke, *literally*. My home had been completely destroyed. Rubble was the only thing left of my house that had been taken over by some Germans after we were forced out. The entire street had been leveled too. There was nothing left.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go to Palestine?” I asked Eleonora after an extended moment of silence.

"You're not a Jew." She replied emotionlessly. Eleonora was an Italian Jew but I was only a Pole. Palestine didn't have much to offer me. There was nothing left of my own country either, or much of any country in Europe for that matter. "But you are." I added dryly.

"I can't leave you behind Leopold! You risked your life for me. You gave me your extra rations, you even took a beating from the SS for me in the factory. And you expect me to run off you and never think about you again? I have nobody else. You have nobody else. Who are we if we don't have each other?"

Tears rolled down my cheeks for the first time since liberation. When the Russians opened those gates I was right there and collapsed into the arms of the first Red Army soldier I saw. I didn't understand a single word of what the disheveled man told me but no words were necessary in a moment like that. I then grabbed Eleonora by the hand and we walked out. Just like that we were free. Just like that we'd also been deported almost two years earlier too.

"Are you alright my son?" An older man asked me as he passed me by on the vessel.

"Here, have some chocolate," he went on as he handed me a bar, "it makes anybody happier!"

"Thank you," I said as I took the chocolate bar and split it with Eleonora.

"It's true that chocolate makes anybody happier," she said joyfully, "I mean, as long as it's not milk chocolate when you're lactose intolerant."

We both began laughing. How long had it been since I laughed? Since the war began? Six years? More than that? Eleonora and I both ate the delicious chocolate and licked our fingers afterwards. I also hadn't seen any in years, and out on the streets it was a luxury very few people could have with the food shortages and the destruction left in the wake of all the bombings. A fortunate few had gotten rich off the black market but I'd already given up all of my remaining golden teeth that the Nazis had missed to buy Eleonora and I tickets to New York.

"You still have thirty seconds to change your mind about Palestine." I said blankly as the last few passengers boarded the vessel.

"Look, Leopold, if you hate me that much we can part ways when we get to America." Eleonora replied, equally blankly.

"What makes you think that I hate you?" I chuckled with chocolate still in my mouth, "I just want you to have a good life. You don't owe me anything. I did what I did because I wanted to."

"Me too."

She scooted over to me and laid her head on my shoulder as the boat horn sounded announcing the departure. People waved at those still on land and everyone except me had a smile on their faces that stretched from ear to ear.

“I could’ve missed out on the camp but that also means that I would’ve had to miss out on you,” Eleonora spoke softly through the cheers echoing all over the vessel, “and I wouldn’t wanna miss you for the world.”

# MOTIVES

I suddenly wake up, covered in sweat and breathing heavily. Today was graduation day. For the past three years, I had been intensely studying spells at Red Velvet School of Magic and Witchcraft. I thought I had finally perfected a spell, and today after graduation, I would put it to the test. I take a deep breath and get out of my bed. The clock indicated 6:30 on this chilly April morning. The sun was just about to rise over the city of Dublin.

I open the patio door of my 13th floor apartment and breathe in the cold morning air. It was so pure, so fresh. Content of myself, I close the door and go take a cold shower before putting on my favourite black jeans and the long sleeved black and white shirt with horizontal stripes. I comb my short red hair to the side like I always did and look at myself in the mirror one final time just to make sure everything was perfect.

With the satisfaction of looking in the mirror, I put on my army boots and head out. I step into the elevator and ride down to the empty lobby for my daily early morning walk. With the morning sun warming up the pale white skin of my face, I take a deep breath of confidence that today would be a great day. This afternoon, we would all graduate after the free lunch held by the staff to thank us for the great year they had with us.

I had just written my last exam yesterday and tonight would be the night that all my hard work over the past three long years finally paid off. With a big smile on my face, I walk down the crowded streets of this industrial neighbourhood in my hometown of Dublin. After my graduation I had big plans for myself and a certain group of individuals who had extremely wronged me in the past.

After my unusually long walk, I invite five people for a little graduation "after party" in my apartment. The first one was my longtime elementary school bully, Melanie. The second, my abusive ex-husband Ridge. The third, my brother Allan, the fourth, Jeremy, a local police officer and last but not least, the fifth, the owner of the building, Roger. All people whom I didn't speak much to, but whom all thought I was their friend and totally forgave them for what they had done to me. I was, up until now.... Just to do this.

I set up a few things for my "party" before looking in the mirror one more time and going to my graduation ceremony. My friends, classmates, and staff ate our free lunch in cafeteria, enjoying ourselves, laughing, and having fun. We reminisced about old times and good memories spent here together in college. The long ceremony afterwards lasted all afternoon but in the end I left the building with a diploma in my hand and a big smile on my face.

Back in my apartment, I make the final touches to the dark decor and patiently wait for my guests to arrive. The first one to arrive was Roger, the owner of the building. I smile and invite him inside. We sit down and casually talk until my other guests arrived one by

one. First my ex, then the bad cop, my brother and my longtime enemy. They all patiently sit down on the couch while I go into another room to get their drinks. Ice cold beer how about that? Not to mention a sedative mixed in with that. One by one, they slowly complain of being tired and wanting to leave but I prevent them from doing so.

I stand in the door when Jeremy attempts to leave and start reciting my spell. In the matter of a few seconds, all my guests were shrunk down to only an inch tall. They almost instantly fall asleep so I pick them up one by one and place them in a bucket until they wake up. My ex-husband wakes up first so I grab him and lift him out of the bucket to look at him. I could see him begging for his life despite that his voice was too low for me to understand anything he was saying. I grab him with a pinch and hold him up high in mid air. He did everything he could to get out of my grip but without success. I would make him pay for the 4 years of abuse I endured at his mercy.

"This is for all the times you've hit me, slapped me, and pushed me against the wall." I tell him as I swing my arm and throw him against the wall as hard as I could.

There was no blood, but his lifeless body lay motionless on the floor like a forgotten piece of dust. Too bad the others couldn't see what kind of fate was waiting for them.

The next one I grabbed out of the bucket was Melanie.

"Oh poor sweet innocent thing." I tease her.

She, too, begged for her life but out of all people I had ever met in my life, she was the one I hated the most. Ever since first grade, she had been there to watch my every move and to make my life as miserable as she could. It had worked well in her favour for 8 long years, Now it was payback time.

"Don't you wish you had died instead of lived?" I keep taunting her. "Those were your exact words to me when I returned to school after my big accident. Now I shall ask you the same."

She moves around and cries as I held her high in mid air just like I had done with Ridge.

"You know perfect little Melanie," I begin, "I'd just be cleaning the Earth of it's scum."

I grin even wider as I squeeze her tight and then drop her in a box full of cockroaches.

"They are the same as you." I whisper as I let her go.

I then return to the bucket and pick up my brother Allan. He was relatively calm compare to the others. I guess he knew what kind of fate was waiting for him. All these years he had told me never to take a drink, while he was just an alcoholic himself. He also didn't know how to swim, so I grab him and shove him down a half empty bottle of Jack

Daniel's. I put the lid back on and patiently watch him drown. My only regret, would be to waste such great whiskey.

I then pick up Roger out of the bucket. He had locked me inside of my own apartment once. He and Jeremy had proceeded to violate me and steal some of my belongings. Of course I couldn't do anything, because one of them was a police officer and the other would throw me out in the street. For Roger, I put him in a Ziploc bag and watch him suffocate. It's for Jeremy that I had the real surprise. I go to my room and grab the shotgun out of my closet. I load my 12 gauge and chamber a cartridge. I then grab Jeremy and shove him down the bore. I walk outside and pull the trigger, pointing into mid air. With a loud popping noise, droplets of blood fly out the barrel of my gun.

I smile.

# KEEPER OF ME

*Keepers are said to be departed souls who return to the metaphysical world to provide guidance for fellow humans. Keepers are not guardian angels; they have not ascended into heaven. Keepers are souls who have once been human, whether it was 1000 years ago or yesterday. The legend says that keepers can come in many forms; a faint presence, a glowing orb, or even in the form of a human being with flesh and bones. Not much is known about Keepers apart from ancient legends written thousands of years ago. It is said that every human has a keeper, but many are unaware as keepers manifest themselves in various different ways.*

*The legend says that keepers come back to Earth to guide us but are able to retreat to their vortex beyond this universe since their souls are free. Since the atomic energy that composes their souls can vibrate at two places at one time, they are free to come and go as they please. Energy cannot be created nor destroyed, and our human bodies are nothing but a transition phase for the soul; we come from nothing and we are nothing when we die. But not all souls become keepers, nobody knows why some are somehow selected to return to Earth, but for some reason they do. Keepers keep many secrets and are a mystery to earthly beings, but they only feed off two things; love and truth.*

I was lying on my bed crying, with only the street light down below illuminating parts of my room in the dark night. The street lights generated enough light for me to clearly see the fresh wounds on my arm and the bloody razor blade on my night table next to my bed. As tears escape my eyes everything became a blur of faint colors as the dim light could not penetrate through the tears. My body ached with stress and despair, my mind felt like a bomb about to blow and my heart was crying out for help. I wished that the sheets could just have suffocated me in my wake. My whole world seemed like it was coming down, crashing hard as it hit the ground. My soul shattered under the fire of pain and the absence of momentary hope.

Each vertebrae in my spine seemed to throb, begging my mind to cease the pain and my heart seemed to shake my entire core. The cuts on my arm burned as the blood coagulated and sealed my skin together again. I thought it would've helped me forget the emotional pain but it didn't; my whole body was declaring a state of emergency. One by one all my hopes had vanished just the same. My erratic breathing seemed to slow as my mind gradually shut down. I felt like my pain resonated throughout the entire universe, maybe it did.

I let out a sigh of relief as my tense body seemed to relax. It was almost like a hand touched my every aching bone and filled it with the essence of serenity. I couldn't move onto my back, but I felt a presence behind me. As my mind became more aware of my surroundings I realized that something was indeed touching me, it wasn't just in my head. But I wasn't afraid, I felt a sense of calm and pure bliss sweep over me. I eventually managed to sit up in my bed and look at what was behind me. A young man



about my age was sitting there right next to me with one hand on my shoulder, easing up the tension. Needing comfort, I latched onto him and he took me in his arms as I kept on crying. His body was warm, and he had a heartbeat! His gentle touch relaxed my racing mind and brought it to a peaceful place. The rhythm of his heart soothed me and brought me to a place almost beyond this world. He was a godsend! I clutched onto him, never wanting him to leave.

"Please, please don't go!" I whispered in a hoarse voice. "I never will," he whispered in a soft voice.

I wrapped my arms around him and caressed his soft skin the same way he caressed mine. His body was warm against mine and I completely indulged. I tilted my head up to look at him and grabbed a strand of his long hair. The young man had long sandy wavy hair and pale blue eyes on pale white skin. He had a long face and little pink lips with no distinctive features other than his long grunge-era hairstyle. He looked at me with sad yet sympathetic eyes and softly stroked the skin of my face, wiping away my tears. Eventually, I fell asleep in his hold and woke up a few hours later, still in his arms with my head on his chest listening to his steadily beating heart. I climbed up over him and let my chin rest on his chest as I looked deeply into his eyes in awe. *My keeper.*

"What's your name?" I ask him in a soft whisper.

"Kevin," he whispered back to me in a gentle tone.

"Are you my keeper?" I ask.

"Yes I am," he replies with a gentle smile and his hands caressing my face, "I am always going to be here for you."

I rested on my side and he positioned himself behind me and wrapped his strong arms around me. I placed my little hand in his and closed my eyes.

"Can you stay with me tonight?" I ask him.

"I will be with you every moment of every day," he reassured me, "now get some sleep."

He held me close and I drifted away to a far away world to the sound of his breathing. I woke up the next morning some ten minutes before my alarm clock. Kevin was still there, hold me. I turned over to face him, filled with exhilaration at the thought of my very own keeper. I was so relieved to have someone there to hold me and love me unconditionally like only a keeper could. His body was so warm and his touch so gentle. It was everything I needed, and I never wanted Kevin to leave.

He let go of me and sat up on my bed and I sat up next to him. He wore some black cargo pants and a plain back shirt. His unruly hair was gold-like in the sunlight coming through the window of my room. He looked so sublime, he was perfect. He took my arm

into his hand and turned it so he could see my scars. He pressed it to his lips and each cut disappeared with every kiss. I watched in awe as the scars all faded away. I touched where they used to be because I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I didn't even know Kevin but I already had so much reverence for him because he loved my so passionately and so purely. My skin was soft, there was absolutely no evidence that I had ever cut myself there.

"Are they going to come back? »

"Not if you don't make them come back."

"How is that even possible? »

"It's possible in my world."

Kevin gave me a tender kiss on the forehead.

"Are you like my guardian angel? »

"No, I'm just a keeper. Angels are from a completely different world. I don't know exactly how they come about their business, but angels are not human. I am."

He took my hands into his and I leaned over and put my head on his shoulder. I closed my eyes and clutched onto him. My keeper. I was so grateful to have him by my side. I knew nothing about keepers or much about life in the first place, but the young man next to me made me see a whole new facade of it that I hadn't been able to appreciate before. I had given up but he had given me that faint glimmer of hope that I had been so desperately needing.

"So you were human before?"

"Yeah, I was a create of the earth before this, just like you. »

"Do all dead people become keepers?"

"I have no idea dear. I don't know why or how I got here. I don't know much more than I did back when I was still human. I don't know if this is a punishment for what I've done or my chance to redeem myself. »

"What did you do?"

"I did something bad and I guess now I'm paying for it. But just know that I love you."

My alarm clock went off to disturb our perfect moment and Kevin patted me on the shoulder, indicating that it was time to get up and get ready for the day. I reluctantly got up and picked out some clothes out of my closet. I grabbed some faded blue jeans and

a purple shirt with black stripes. When I turned around to talk to Kevin I noticed that he was no longer in my room. I looked all over but he wasn't there. He was gone. I was disappointed and frustrated that he had disappeared just like he had never come in the first place.

"Hey don't worry, I'm still here!" he said as he came up behind me and pulled me into a tight embrace.

I put my arms around him in return and instantly found relief. He kissed my neck and I went back to getting ready for school.

"Am I the only one who sees you?" I inquired as I was brushing my long brown hair.

"Well, not really," Kevin replied, seemingly thinking hard, "you see, keepers feed off energy humans give us and if it's needed we can appear to others but that's rather rare."

"What kind of energy are you talking about?"

"Love. Right now I'm replenished on energy but to have me around like this in the future you'll have to emerge yourself in agape. It is the purest form of love, unconditional love. Feel agape from deep inside your heart and soul and I'll be here, always."

I closed my eyes and let the love flow from inside of me for a short while but I couldn't sustain it.

"Don't worry, it'll come." Kevin reassured me, "For the moment just focus on the now. I'm not going anywhere."

« Kevin?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you hear my thoughts?"

"No, but I can feel everything you feel. That's where the agape energy comes in. No matter what, I will comfort you if you want me around."

I touched his hand just to remind myself that he was real and smiled to myself. I felt so much relief from the inside out. I felt like I could take a breath without it burning like fire deep inside.

"How long will you be here?"

"I don't know, but don't worry about that alright?"

I smiled at him and finished getting dressed, putting on some light eyeliner to compliment my hazel eyes and tied my hair up in a ponytail since I couldn't get it to be the way I wanted it. I walked downstairs into the kitchen where my mother was making breakfast with my two younger sisters. Ever since my dad had died when I was seven, things were awkward at the table. There was a piece of the family missing and even after nine and a half years, the pain was no less. I had always been daddy's girl, but my daddy was gone. My youngest sister Carrie wasn't even born when he died so she was lucky to escape the pain I was constantly feeling.

"Well you're up early!" my mother commented as I walked into the kitchen.

"Yeah I'm gonna walk to school and grab some breakfast at Gilmore's on my way there."

We said goodbye to each other and I walked out the door. Kevin walked with me and grabbed a hold of my hand as we neared the end of the driveway. He held my hand as we passed over the bridge and headed over to Gilmore's. We both walked into the small restaurant and stood in line behind a few other hungry customers.

"Do you eat?" I asked Kevin.

"I can," he replied looking at me with tender eyes, "but I don't have to."

"Do people know you're here with me? »

"No, they don't. They aren't aware of anything."

I ordered one of Gilmore's world famous bacon and egg sandwiches and headed back out with Kevin following me. We walked hand-in-hand all the way to school as I ate my breakfast sandwich with the other hand. Despite the frigid morning air, Kevin kept me warm with his overwhelming presence.

"Do you know what happened here?" I asked Kevin as we walked into the school's parking lot.

"No," he whispered to me, "I don't know anything."

I swallowed hard and clutched his hand tightly.

"Well, I guess you'll find out."

The two of us walked in and made our way down the halls to where the memorials were set up on the wall.

"What went on here?" Kevin asked me in a soft whisper.

"Two girls got killed in a drunk driving accident two weeks ago." I replied in a shaky voice, "I'm the one who was supposed to be the designated driver but I bailed early."

Kevin put his arm around me and comforted me greatly as the memories of that night came back to haunt me.

"While they were bleeding to death in that car wreck I was goofing off with a homeless man at the corner store on the end of the street here. I stopped in to buy a snack on my way home and I ended up giving it to him. He was a cool old dude you know. We sat there as he ate his chips and told me about his life before his daughter got killed in a drunk driving accident."

I broke down crying and Kevin hugged me tightly. I couldn't shake that thought out of my mind. I bailed on my friends to hang out with a homeless man who told me some heartbreaking story of how he lost his precious daughter while my friends were actually dying in the same kind of nightmare.

"Don't blame yourself for this, this isn't your fault."

"I know it isn't, but some people blame me anyway."

Kevin looked at me with compassion in his eyes as he stroked my cheek with his big hand. I remembered that he could feel everything I felt too. He hurt just as much as I did. Kevin's loving hand calmed me down and comforted me like he had promised me he would. I held him tightly in my arms and indulged into the serenity his aura gave off.

"I know it wasn't my fault that they got behind the wheel drunk and I know that they could've called a cab or someone else could've taken them home but there's just this part of me that hates myself so much for not being there when my friends needed me the most."

Most people didn't blame me at all, but some of the girls' closest friends needed someone to blame for their poor judgment that night and that person ended up being me. While the majority were supportive, the few who gave me harsh words really got to me. They made sure to remind me every day that both of them were dead and it was because of me. They really made me believe that if I hadn't bailed early, things might have gone differently. At times, I believed it too. I wiped my tears and walked to my first class holding Kevin's hand. I squeezed it as it brought me comfort to know that I was no alone. I walked around the classroom aimlessly before finding a seat.

"Does this mean you can give me all the answers?" I jokingly asked him trying to lighten the mood.

"Only the ones I know," he replied laughing, "I'm good in language and science but not so much in math."

"You don't have supreme understanding of the universe now that you're dead?"

"Not here. I only know what I learned on Earth and what I can currently observe."

"Do you believe in multiple lives, you know, considering you're still here?"

"It would be inappropriate to say that I don't, but this isn't exactly my idea of the afterlife."

"I guess that makes you the perfect companion for me because this isn't exactly my definition of a life either."

I finally picked out a seat at the back of the room and sat down. Kevin sat next to me and reassuringly placed his hand on my knee.

"That's why I'm here," he replied as he leaned over and kissed me in response to my feelings.

"Do you see other people's keepers too?" I inquired to make conversation before the bell rang.

"No, it's just you and me."

"That's kinda cool. I guess we both have a lot to learn about life. »

"I'll make sure you have a good one, that's my promise to you. I know that I was sent to you for a reason and I won't screw this up. I know you have a lot of questions and I don't have a lot of answers, but just know that I love you and you are not alone."

I placed my hand into Kevin's and let his love and strength wash over and guide me for the rest of the day. My school day went without incident. I stayed away from most people except this freshman girl named Rosanna, who asked me for directions in the big school. The two of us ended up sitting together at lunch with Kevin sitting behind me, completely unnoticed.

"Man, sometimes I wish I was invisible like you," I muttered to him.

"No you don't. Life is something to be cherished and celebrated. I wasted mine. Heck it hadn't even started yet, but it's gone. »

"So does that mean that I will get old but you won't?"

"That's right, I'm always going to be seventeen and I'm always going to carry around regret."

After Rosanna and I finished eating, I sat down in a deserted hallway to spend some time alone with Kevin before my next class.

"What is it that you did that could possibly be so bad?" I ask him, "Did you commit suicide or something?"

"Yes I did." Kevin's voice was nothing but a soft whisper.

I took him into a hug and held him tightly.

"How long ago?" I asked him.

"Longer than you've been alive. But I'm here now and if I can make things right for you it will have made it all worth it." he replied in a sympathetic voice.

"I love you already Kevin." I whispered in his ear and squeezed him tightly.

I could see that he was a broken young man but that he had a big heart. He wanted to make things right and I desperately needed someone to comfort me and to help me deal with the pain of losing two of my closest friends. I hated myself for what happened to them instead of being grateful to God that it wasn't me. My parents said it was some sort of survivor's guilt or something but I didn't really understand my own emotions anymore. Why did I feel the way I did? I didn't know.

After school I walked home with Kevin and sat down on my bed next to him. I slouched my head over his shoulder and cried. He held me close and his presence was very comforting since nobody had really been there for me. My dad wasn't around and my mom worked long hours plus she had other children who were still young to take care of. Kevin and I laid down on my bed and I let my head rest on his chest. He ran his gentle fingers through my hair and serenity swept over me. I indulged in the love and comfort he gave me. I didn't know him but I already loved him. I knew that a keeper's love was infinite, even though my limited human understanding could never comprehend it.

"Does everyone have a keeper like you?" I ask him as I looked into his deep blue eyes.

"I don't know how it all works," he admitted, "but I do believe that everyone is watched over whether they are aware of it or not."

"Did you watch over me before this?"

"No, all of this is new, I've never done anything like this before. I died nearly two decades ago but it's only now that I've come back so to speak. I don't know where all that time went, because I don't remember it."

"Well you're here now, don't ever leave."

"I won't."

During the first few weeks of school after the accident, Kevin was always there by my side in each moment, but after that he only came by when I gave him agape. The trade of energy between us was overflowing and it was easy to sustain. During the hard moments I only had to think of him and his loving arms were around me. I spent every night with him and brought him everywhere with me. I spoke to him at length before I went to sleep and he became so much more than just someone to watch over me. He was my best friend, my protector and my lifeline.

"I love you Arlene," Kevin whispered to me just before I went to sleep.

"I love you too Kevin," I whispered back, "I'll see you in the morning. »

"Honey, who are you walking to?" my mother asks as she was passing down the hall.

"Nobody," I replied in an absent-minded tone.

"You were obviously talking to somebody," she pressed on as she walked into my room.

"I was talking to myself," I dismissed.

She didn't make too much of a big deal out of it but told me that I should get help to deal with my grief. What she didn't know was that I did have help, he was holding me in his arms. I also ended up forming a friendship with Rosanna. She was my only real friend left after Sabrina and Melanie died. Their friends didn't like me because they blamed me for their deaths but Rosanna was very understanding and supportive. By the end of the school year we were best buds. She had just moved to the community during spring break, during the same time as the accident, and I was the only person who had really welcomed her.

I ended up spending my summer with Kevin and Rosanna at her grandparents' farm in upstate Wisconsin. My mother thought it was a good idea and she was right. It gave me a new perspective on both my life and the tragedy as well as giving me a good opportunity to get my emotions in check. Rosanna's grandparents had a beautiful antique-style home and warmly opened its doors to me. Rosanna and I had to share a room and each night after she fell asleep I had my nightly conversations with Kevin. He was always faithfully by my side with his head resting on the pillows and his sandy-colored all over my face. I had been the happiest since the accident.

"Who is that Kevin guy you talk to at night?" Rosanna asked me one evening before we went to bed.

I was taken aback that she knew about Kevin but I also realized that it was my own fault that I hadn't been more discrete about it. Not wanting her to think that I was crazy, I decided to tell her the truth about Kevin.



"He's my keeper," I told her.

"Do you really believe in all that keeper stuff?" she asked me, seemingly confused. "He's real real Rosanna, he's been with me ever since the accident. »

"Good for you, I'm really happy for you."

She didn't seem to believe me at first but she was fine with it. She embraced Kevin even though she couldn't see him, touch him or interact with him. At night she even gave me an extra pillow and an extra blanket for him even though he didn't need it. For a while I acted as some sort of mediator between Kevin and Rosanna so they could communicate with each other. After some time Rosanna came to believe that Kevin was indeed real and that the legend was true. I told her about agape and all the valuable lessons about life and love that Kevin taught me. She was just as amazed when she heard my stories as I was when Kevin shared them with me.

At the end of the summer we both returned home to our normal lives and returned to school in September. During that whole time Kevin never left my side. During one hot afternoon we got a spare in our last class so Rosanna and I decided to hang out outside in a nearby park and that's where she saw Kevin for the first time. For the first time she could see him like I did, complete with flesh and blood and everything. The three of us were equally mystified and overjoyed at the same time.

"I'm so happy to finally meet you!" Rosanna exclaimed once he appeared to her. "Me too!" Kevin exclaimed too as he wrapped his arms around her.

I could tell by the sparkle in Rosanna's eyes that the transfer of energy because Kevin and her was amazing. I smiled as I watched her grab a strand of his hair and stroke his cheek. The three of us reveled at being able to finally all be together in a way that we could equally enjoy ourselves. Rosanna didn't seem to be in touch with her own keeper though, but Kevin was always with us when we were together. Kevin and Rosanna loved each other as much as I loved them, it was nothing short of wonderful to be always surrounded by such love.

All that wonderful love was dampened when my mother got a call from Rosanna's parents saying that Rosanna and I had some weird obsession over this imaginary boyfriend we both had and that they didn't want me to hang out with her anymore. I felt so betrayed that she would do something like that to me after having believed to the point that Kevin actually revealed himself to her. And not to mention the months we spent together making memories of the three of us! I was so hurt by what she did that it felt like that car crash all over again. Maybe she hadn't died, but she certainly felt dead to me. Even Kevin seemed to be heartbroken over the situation.

"This Kevin person, was he the one you've been talking to when you said you had been talking to yourself these past few months?" my mother asked me.

"Mom, Kevin is real," I insisted, "Rosanna sees him too! »

"No she doesn't honey, she only went along with it because she's concerned about you and your wellbeing."

"What are you talking about mom? The three of us spent so much time together!"

"After the accident happened you were grieving and you made up Kevin to help you cope with your loss."

"No I did not!"

"It's good to turn to spirituality to help you cope with your loss and to hold on to a future hope but sweetie, Kevin isn't real."

"Yes he is mom! He's real, he's right here!"

Kevin was faithfully by my side during the whole ordeal but he told me not to defend our relationship. I didn't listen to his advice and my mother ended up telling me that I was delusional and that I needed therapy. The next morning at school Rosanna approached me just like nothing had happened, like she had never betrayed Kevin and I.

"How dare you!" I shouted at her in front of everyone as she approached me in the hallway.

"Arlene, listen," she pleaded, "let me explain, this is just a big misunderstanding!"

"No Rosanna, there's nothing to explain."

"Arlene please, I had to make up a lie so my parents don't lock me up in the psych ward! I believe Kevin is real, I know he is!"

"Well I'm the one who is going to be locked up in the psych ward now! »

"I'm sorry Arlene, please forgive me, I was just trying to protect myself. And where's Kevin? I want to apologize to him too."

Kevin had been right there the entire time but Rosanna seemed to be oblivious to his presence. He was invisible to her again.

"You can't see him because he hates you!" I snapped back before I turned around and walked out of the building and broke down crying on the sidewalk.

"I don't hate her sweetie," Kevin whispered to me as he took me in his hold, "and you shouldn't either."

"I guess it's just you and me now," I whispered to him as I buried my face in his chest.

He held me tightly as he always did and I ended up ditching my first class that morning so I could spend time alone outside with him. He advised against it but I wanted to be with him in the cool morning air to collect my thoughts. My mother was called since I had skipped class and I got in trouble again because of it. In defiance to my mother asking why I skipped class, I told her that I wanted to spend time alone with Kevin. I knew it wasn't going to help anything but I wasn't going to give up on Kevin over some hypocrites and unbelievers.

Rosanna still wanted to be my friend after the whole thing but I no longer wanted anything to do with her. Kevin encouraged me time and time again to forgive her and take her back but I was too hurt to do so after the betrayal. Rosanna didn't really have any friends other than me but I had Kevin and he was all that mattered. I loved him so much and I wasn't about to give up after all that he had done for me. My parents sent me to therapy and I told my therapist all about how wonderful Kevin was because I did not want to forsake him over a lie any longer. He told me on numerous occasions to deny him but I loved him too much for that and I made sure to show him that his endless love for me was reciprocated.

I spent long nights in my room by myself with Kevin since I had no more friends and things between my mother and I were hostile. She had convinced herself that I had some mental illness that made me crazy because I was seeing people who weren't there and that I needed therapy. It hurt me deeply but it was comforting to know that Kevin was there. I could clearly see in his eyes that he was hurting too since he could feel everything I felt but a keeper's love was infinite and he wasn't about to give up on me. I wasn't about to give up on him either over some notion that I was completely crazy.

"You should forgive Rosanna," Kevin whispered to me one night while he was holding me tight.

"I know I should," I replied tiredly, "but I'm still so hurt Kevin. »

"I know you are, but remember that I'm here for you and I'll help you heal. That's why I'm here in the first place! And make peace with your mother, dear."

"She's the one who's going to have to make peace with me!"

I cried thinking about all the hurtful things she had said to me. Not only had I just lost two friends in a freak drunk driving accident, but I had lost Rosanna and ultimately her as well. Kevin was all I had left and people treated him with such hostility and accused me of being completely insane. Sometimes I came to believe them even if Kevin was nothing short of very real to me. The news of my "imaginary boyfriend" somehow spread to school and people began making fun of me too, and Rosanna was one of them. I couldn't understand why she would do those things to me. Not only did we spend

countless nights together in the company of Kevin but she even had the audacity to ridicule me in front of everyone.

After one particularly horrible day at school, I came home and locked myself up in my room and took out that same razor blade that I had cut myself with the first time. I had left it in my night table and I proceeded to create twelve bloody lines on my arm. My soul shattered under the fire of pain and the absence of momentary hope. In the middle of that crisis I called to Kevin in agape and he was there in a heartbeat. He took me into his gentle hold and was about to press his lips to my bleeding scars before I stopped him.

"Don't," I whispered to him, "let me show my mother first."

"Why would you want to do that?" he asked me, seemingly puzzled.

"Let me show her my scars, and then kiss them away and I'll show her my arm again."

"And what exactly are you trying to prove by doing this?"

"I'm going to prove to her that you're real. »

"Do you think that's a good idea?"

"Do you? »

"No, because I'm afraid she's going to do something drastic because you cut yourself."  
"She can't do much worse than shun me like she already is."

Kevin advised me to just cover up my arm and not show her since I wouldn't let him erase them but I went right ahead and made my arm visible during breakfast the following morning.

"You're not going to school like that!" she sternly told me after my siblings had left the table.

"Kevin is real mom, "I told her, "I'll prove it to you. »

"And how do you think you're going to do that?"

"He's going to kiss my scars and all of them will fade away like they never were on my arm."

She looked at me defiantly, not believing a single word I said. I gave her a defiant stare in return before I went up to my room and handed my arm over to Kevin. He tenderly kissed every scar and one by one they vanished and my skin returned to its soft pink state. I went back down and showed my mother. She didn't know what she was seeing,

and she even touched my arm to make sure they were really gone, but she still didn't believe that I had a keeper named Kevin. To her the scars were just another crazy stunt for attention.

"She thinks I only want attention," I whispered to Kevin in a sad voice. "Do you?" he asked me.

I grimaced at him, hurt at the fact that he thought that I was just doing that for attention too.

"The night I came to you I know the hurt was real," he went on, "but now you're angry. It's not about grief or confusion anymore."

"Go away Kevin," I dismissed him before laying down on my and wishing that the sheets would suffocate me in my wake again.

Dead silence filled the entire house up until I heard my mother dial a number on the phone. I didn't pay too much attention until she told the person on the other end that she was calling about me because she was afraid for my safety. I grunted loudly and slapped my head on the pillow next to me. I started to cry again and called on to Kevin to comfort me. He was there in the blink of an eye to make everything okay again just like he had the first time we met.

"Are you aware of what goes on in my life when you're in the other dimension?" I ask him as I put my head on his chest.

"Yes," he replied in a soft whisper, "but I can't see or hear, I can only feel. »

"I'm so sorry I treated you so badly earlier. Please forgive me."

"Already forgiven."

He kissed my forehead and I traced his soft lips with my index finger afterwards. He kissed my finger and smiled at me like he always did. I caressed his soft cheeks with my hand and traced the beautiful features of his face. His face was only inches from mine and I could feel the tingle of his warm breath on my skin as I looked deeply into the sea of his eyes.

"Why did you commit suicide?" I whispered to him.

"I just couldn't live with myself," he replied as he closed his eyes, seemingly hurting.

I kissed his left eye as I put my fingers in his sandy hair and stroked it gently. I loved him so much, it was impossible for me to picture him hating himself so much that he thought suicide was the only way out. I kissed him and reveled at the amazing love he gave me any time I asked for it. I began to imagine that we had been sent to each other so we

could help one another and fix each other. My fingers ran all over his scalp as my lips gently pressed against the skin of his face.

"Ain't I the one who is supposed to kiss you?" he whispered to me grinning.

I grinned back at him and he took a hold of me and shifted our body positions so he was the one who could kiss me and stroke my face just like I did to him. I put my hand on the back of his neck and pulled him down towards me and we both kissed each other passionately. The feel of his hands on my neck and collar bone was enough to really make me crazy. Mine breathing rapidly accelerated but his slowed down since he didn't need to actually breathe. Our perfect moment was disrupted when I heard my mother's footsteps coming up the stairs. She then barged into my room without knocking and began to talk apprehensively about this apparent mental illness that I didn't really have. "I know you've been hurting a lot Arlene," she told me, "but you need some help and I've arranged for you to live with your aunt and uncle in Portage. They have some good facilities to help you there too, so pack your bags. »

"You can just send me away!" I angrily shouted back, "I am not your property! I have a say in this!"

Kevin put his warm hands on my shoulders and softly whispered to me to comply with my mother for my own sake but I pushed him aside and had a screaming match with my mother. Kevin begged me to hear him out about the whole thing but I didn't want to.

"No Kevin!" I shouted at him, "I'm not going!"

"Yes you are!" my mother shouted back at me, "And you're going to get rid of Kevin!"

"I'm gonna get rid of *you*!" I defiantly shouted back at her, "I'm gonna pack my bags and go on *vacation* far away from you with aunt Marie and uncle Bill!"

She didn't know what to reply to that. I looked over at Kevin who was still standing by my closet and grinned at him, knowing that we'd spend all our days together at aunt Marie's and uncle Bill's. My mother's plan didn't sound so bad after all and I more than willingly packed my bags with Kevin's help. We smiled at each other the whole time and I marveled at how he could turn an awful situation into a pleasant one. Spending some time alone with him at my aunt's and uncle's house, I couldn't have asked for better! And the timing was perfect too. I climbed over the bed and smooched him to say thank you and I grinned to myself in delight.

That same afternoon my mother decided to make the eight-hour trip to Portage with me to get me out of the house as soon as possible. I was riding shotgun while Kevin was faithfully behind me in the backseat with my luggage. He reached out his hand and began to play with my hair during the long and boring ride. The skies were overcast for a while before it began to rain heavily. The big raindrops were more than the windshield wipers could handle and it became very hard to see the road ahead. The streetlights

were nothing but a distant blur until we hit the highway. Everything was black in the late evening and neither my mother or I could see anything. I turned around to ask Kevin if he could see anything more than we could but he was just as human as the rest of us and he was no help.

"When are you going to leave Kevin alone?" my mother was nearly shouting at me, "He isn't real! Get over him!"

"Mom! Watch where you're going!" I yelled back as she was swerving on the slippery wet highway.

Another fight broke out between us again and my mother ended up slapping me in the left temple area when the back of her hand. I quickly glanced over at Kevin in the backseat but noticed that he wasn't there so I didn't hesitate to slap my mother back twice as hard on the side of the face too. It caused her to swerve violently again on the wet road but she had time regaining control of the van as we kept on going from side to side in the rain. Ahead I saw a white dot in the distance as it quickly got closer I realized that it was a set of headlights headed straight in our direction. The vehicle ahead was serving too and I quickly called on to Kevin in agape for him to comfort me but nothing happened. I screamed his name much to the frustration of my mother but nothing happened, he wasn't there.

I could clearly see the truck headed exactly for us in a head-on collision despite all the rain. I braced myself for whatever was to come and silently pleaded for Kevin to come rescue me in my time of need. As the truck was about to hit us, I saw Kevin standing in front of it with his arms stretched out on the front of it, seemingly trying to push it in the opposite direction. And then everything went black. All I remembered was something cold surrounding me completely. I didn't feel anything else other than cold. It was almost like a dream-like state.

\* \* \*

Bright lights were all around me and I could hear faint voices in the background, possibly coming from another room. I focused more on what was surrounding me and I could hear a constant, steady beeping sound. The beeping sound like on those hospital machines. The thought didn't sink in immediately, but then I realized that I was in the hospital and I was hooked up to those machines! The beeping then increased as I was hyperventilating. Doctors quickly rushed to me and gave me some sort of sedative. I woke up a short time later and I could feel something on my head, like a hand. I opened my eyes to the bright lights again but my eyes slowly adjusted and the hospital room became clear around me.

On my left Kevin was sitting on my bed and had his gentle hand over my head, calming me and keeping my blood pressure down. I examined him from head to toe to make sure he was okay after the accident but he didn't have a scratch. Only his hair was messier than usual, but apart from that there was nothing different about him. He still

had on the same dark clothes and the same look on his face. He was just like he had always been.

"Everything is fine darling," he whispered to me, "you're going to make a full recovery and so will your mom. The other driver is going to be fine too."

I smiled softly at him and he gave me a tender reassuring kiss. He stayed on my bed until I fully aware of my surroundings and my condition. I didn't have any serious injuries, but I was pretty banged up. Kevin then walked around my room talking to me and eventually turned on the TV. The six o'clock news had just come on and I tuned in since Kevin seemed to want me to watch them. The first thing they showed on the large TV screen was a picture of an awful car wreck with a white silhouette in the form of a man standing next to it. There were no details or features on the silhouette, but it was obviously the one of a young man. The wreckage was something to see. Both the vehicles had been completely destroyed, there was *nothing* left.

*Here's an update on yesterday's devastating car accident near Portage. A small family van collided head on with a freight truck heading in the opposite direction. First responders on the scene said the crash was due to poor visibility during yesterday's storm. In this photo you can clearly see what's left of the wreckage in the middle of the highway along with a mysterious white silhouette seemingly looking over the crash site. Everyone survived.*

I couldn't believe what I was seeing! How was it possible that I survived that crash? Both vehicles were totalled! I looked over at Kevin who had returned at my side. I looked deep into his diamond eyes with such admiration and gratitude. He kissed my forehead as tears escaped from my eyes as the full scope of the situation sank in. Kevin had saved my life. He seemed to be overwhelmed with emotion too as he took me into a tight hug and took a series of heavy breaths even though he technically didn't need to breathe. His touch calmed me down and relaxed my stiff, aching muscles.

"You saved my life," I whispered to him through my tears.

He didn't say anything. Instead, he leaned over and kissed me again.

"Can you *die*?" I asked him.

"I'm already dead," he replied chuckling, "I don't think I can die again."

"Are you hurt though?"

"No sweetheart, I didn't feel a thing. Don't worry about me, it's my job to worry about *you*."

A sweet gentle smile appeared on his lips as he said those words. It was another perfect moments until a doctor and some nurses walked in to check up on me. They all smiled broadly when they saw I was awake. They told me I had only been out less than twenty-four hours, which was quite something considering the severity of my injuries.



I had broken nearly every bone in my body and had a severe concussion as a result of a skull fracture on impact. As horrible as my injuries were, I was grateful of just being alive after such a horrific crash. I also knew that no matter what happened, Kevin would always be there by my side to help me get through it all. And he was. It took over a year for me to walk again, but eventually I did. My mother had only crushed one leg in the crash but it took her multiple months to walk again too. I never got any updates on the other driver, but I knew he was alive.

My mother had never seen the photo of the crash site they had shown on TV until over a year later, when I showed her on the internet. She was in awe as she looked at Kevin's silhouette and the pieces of the wreckage scattered all over the highway. She still couldn't believe that we had both survived the crash, it was nothing short of a miracle.

"Kevin is real mom," I whispered to her as we both looked at the picture.

She didn't speak. She didn't seem to know what to believe. She could no longer deny that Kevin was real since she had experienced his presence and seen his aura. However, she still didn't seem to believe that he was my keeper. On the good side though, she left Kevin and I alone. She no longer made a big deal about my friendship with him. I didn't need to go to therapy and I wasn't sent away after all. The whole ordeal just made me love Kevin even more. I owed him my life! We only grew closer and closer. At school I eventually made more friends, with Rosanna not in the picture. I wondered if she had gotten in touch with her own keeper if she had one, but since Kevin had no interactions with other keepers the only way to know would have been to ask her.

Eventually my mother met another man through a mutual coworker in whom she was interested. I encouraged her to pursue it and she did. I was happy for her that she had found someone after my dad and she seemed to be happier than she had ever been in a long time. Kevin and I were both elated that she had found someone and could finally be happy. I had Kevin so I didn't anybody else, but my mother had never been able to get in touch with a keeper. In the summertime when I finished my school year my mother wanted to travel to Ohio from Wisconsin where Jeffrey, her boyfriend, had been transferred after getting a promotion. She wanted to bring my siblings and I but I didn't want to go and decided to stay home instead. I was going to spend some time with Kevin and some friends I had made in school instead. I helped my mother pack up her bags to go spend two weeks with Jeffrey out of state with a smile on my face as big as hers but at the last minute Kevin told me to stop her from leaving.

"Why don't you want her to go?" I asked Kevin, confused because he had been so happy that my mother had found someone.

"I have this awful eerie feeling about it Arlene," Kevin had a sharp edge in his voice, "just don't let her go."

"What's wrong?"

"I can't tell for sure, but I just know it's not good."

I didn't want to dampen my mother's happiness but Kevin had never been wrong before and I decided to put my trust in him again. I trusted him that he truly knew what was best for my family and I so I listened to what he had to say and did what he told me.

"Don't go mom," as she was finishing getting ready.

"Well come with me!" she told me with a warm smile.

"No mom, please don't go. »

"Why not? What's wrong?"

"Kevin told me something bad was going to happen."

She let out a loud sigh and gave me the *not-this-again* look. I begged her to listen to me and to not blow me off after the horrific car accident Kevin had saved us from. All she did was get angry though, and give me that lecture about how Kevin wasn't real. I looked over at him and he kept telling me to not let her go. I lost the argument though and she ended up leaving and slamming the door in my face but not before giving me some harsh words about my relationship with Kevin. I dismissed the whole thing but Kevin was obviously distraught and kept on begging me to call my mother and convince her to turn back.

"I can't Kevin," I tried to calm him down, "her mind is made up."

"There's gotta be something you can do!" he pleaded with his spiritual body shaking like a lead in the wind.

"What's wrong anyway?"

"I don't really know, I just have this deep feeling from deep inside of me that's telling me that something's not right. »

"Is there a way that you can go watch over her even when she doesn't see you? I'll give you all the energy I have."

"I don't know, but we can try."

Kevin disappeared from my presence but I kept on giving him all the energy I could manage. I prayed that wherever he was, he could somehow help my mother or help me help her that something bad was going to happen. After a few minutes I was no longer able to sustain the agape and the energy field crashed. I was afraid that because I couldn't sustain the energy that I wasn't going to be able to help Kevin. I was anxious for

him to come back and give me some news on what went on. Time seemed to tick forever before he appeared next to me at the kitchen table. I was so relieved to see him but he still seemed so tense.

"Call your mom, *right now!*" he commanded in a tired voice.

I immediately grabbed the phone on the kitchen table and dialed my mom's cellphone. I was barely able to breathe as I waited for her to answer. I heard a few too many rings before I heard her voice. I looked over at Kevin, not really knowing what to say after she answered.

"Tell her to pull over," he told me.

"Mom," I began, "please pull over. »

"Why sweetheart?" she asked me in a confused voice.

"Tell her there's a tanker up a head on the other side of the hill and that it will hit her if she doesn't pull over. »

"Mom, there's a tanker coming your way and..."

I could no longer speak.

"Tell her Arlene!" Kevin almost shouted at me.

"What's with the tanker? And how do you know that anyway? »

"Do you see it mom?"

"Yes I do, it's right here. How did you know there was a tanker coming my way?"

"Kevin told me mom, now pull over right now!"

For a few moments I heard nothing but dead silence. I shouted my mom's name over the phone until her blank voice told me that she had just seen the tanker explode right in front of her.

"Are you okay?!"

"Yes honey, I pulled over."

I collapsed to the floor in relief that she had listened to me. Kevin was still with me but I could no longer touch him. Every time I reached for him my hand would go right through him.

"I'm running out of energy," he told me, "don't worry. You rest for now and I'll come back later."

I nodded my head as he disappeared from my sight. I stayed on the line with my mother until the first responders arrived on the scene. Somebody had called 911 and the police officers on site were rerouting all the traffic. She told me she was returning home before she hung up and I patiently waiting for her until I heard her insert her keys into the lock of the front door. I quickly rushed over to her and hugged her tightly. Both us let out a massive sigh of relief as we held each other. My rigid muscles finally relaxed as she held me in her arms and thanked me endlessly for having convinced her to pull over on the side of the road. When she let go of me she looked at me with such a horrified look on her face.

"What is it?" I asked her.

"Kevin," she whispered.

"What about him? Do you see him?"

"No I don't, but he was with me on that highway wasn't he?"

"Yes he was, he's the one who told me about the tanker truck." Chills ran down her spine as she thought about it.

"Only a keeper would know something like that," she whispered, "only a keeper could predict that the truck would explode right next to me."

We looked at each other for a few moments before she threw her arms around me again. We were both overwhelmed with emotion and began to sob in each other's arms. Kevin showed up a few moments later and put his loving arms around us too. I grabbed a strand of his hair before I stroked his face. After a few moments our tears dried up and the three of us sat on the couch and talked for a while. My mother was mystified that she had just been saved from another accident. She seemed to finally understand that Kevin was indeed real and that he was looking out for us.

"He's real," she whispered to herself in a barely audible voice.

"Yes I am," Kevin whispered in her ear as he put his arm around her but she didn't seem to notice.

"Is he here?" she asked, still seemingly oblivious to his presence.

"He's right beside you mom," I whispered to her.

She looked over at her side but she still didn't seem to see Kevin. However, she lifted up her hand and reached out where Kevin was sitting and although she couldn't see him, I

could perfectly see that her hand was caressing his face. He smiled softly at her and then looked at me with that same smile. He put his hand over hers and she seemed to be overwhelmed with the same feeling of inner serenity that I felt from being in Kevin's presence. My mother then looked at me with a blank, mystified expression on her face. I hugged her again and we both wept some more. Kevin put his arms around the both of us and we both felt his amazing presence.

"Who is Kevin?" my mother asked me.

"I'm just a kid who screwed up," he replied to himself. "He's a teenager who committed suicide," I whisper to her.

Tears escaped from her eyes as she listened to me telling her how Kevin took his own life before I was born and how he came to me the night I contemplated taking my own life as well.

"What's his last name?" she asked me.

"I don't know mom," I replied, "he never told me. It doesn't really matter anyway."

"No it doesn't, but you say he was human before? »

"Yeah he was, it's cool isn't it?"

"It's nothing short of amazing. I love the young man although I've never met him."  
"Maybe one day you will, Rosanna saw him."

My mother was taken aback. We had completely put the Rosanna story behind us a long time ago and both forgotten about her completely.

"I remember you saying that," my mother whispered, "gosh I hate myself for what I've put you through."

"But Kevin was there to get me through it all," I reassured her.

"I should've been there for you after the drunk driving accident but I wasn't! And on top of that I've put you through so much with Kevin."

"That's fine mom, we're all still alive aren't we?"

We hugged each other again.

"Do you want to come out to dinner Arlene? Just you and me?"

"Sure, of course!"

"And Kevin, does he eat? »

"He doesn't really, but he's coming regardless."

We both laughed at once and went on our way to the restaurant. My mother and I enjoyed a good meal and Kevin sat next to me across from my mother. Once again I was the mediator for the two of them to talk and my mother was in complete awe as she got to hear his thoughts and opinions. After our meal was over, just as we were heading out the door we came face to face with the driver of the freight truck that totaled our van. It took all of us by surprise to see each other, but at the same time everything was relieved. He broke down in tears and hugged us all, so thankful that we had made all out alive and in one piece. For a moment he looked in Kevin's direction but he ended up looking past him.

"Are you the one who called 911?" my mother asked the freight truck driver.

"No," he replied, "they told me a boy named Kevin did."

My mother and I looked at each other with tearful faces. I then looked at Kevin and he gave me a kiss on the cheek. I hadn't previously known that he's the one who had called for help, I had never really thought about asking because it's not what concerned me.

"Kevin?" my mother choked out, wanting not to cry.

"Yeah, nobody knows where he called from," the driver replied, "or how he knew about the crash in the first place. His voice isn't even on the audio recording but the operator was speaking to him!"

My mother and I knew. We grinned at each other before saying goodbye to the freight truck driver and going back home.

"He never told me he's the one who called," I told her.

"How in the world did he do that?" she asked me.

"I don't know, I don't think he even knows himself how it all works, but we're never alone as long as he's around."

"And he knew about the tanker going to explode in the ditch too. »

"Yeah he somehow did."

Kevin and I were always together and our love for each other only grew deeper with each and every day that went by. He was still evasive about my questions regarding his past and his human life. He was obviously ashamed of it and confessed to me that he

had remorse, but he still refused to tell me. I eventually just let it go since it really wasn't important. His old life was gone, he had a new one with me and that's all we both really cared about. My mother was never able to see him but despite that she always made sure to somehow include him in the household. He even had his own room in the house! It was also obvious to me that he loved her just as much in return. He helped all of us heal, and there came a time that the pain had completely vanished like it never came.

One night I was watching the news by myself with my mother and my siblings out in town and Kevin resting from energy in another dimension when Kevin's picture suddenly appeared on the TV screen. I immediately turned up the volume and tuned in to the newscast to see what they were going to say about him, especially since he had died before I was born and apparently nobody except me could still see him! The photo soon switched to the mugshot of another young man named Nate following by Nate in an orange jumpsuit being led out of a courtroom.

*Nate Anderson, 18, and Kevin Hegarty, 17, were responsible for three murders in Nashville in 1993. Amelia Sinai, 13, and her sister Natalie Sinai, 18, along with her boyfriend Gregory Sims, also 18, were savagely shot to death right in their own home one morning while they were getting ready for school later that day. The murders were apparently a result of Nate's jealousy towards Natalie after she left him for George. Kevin Hegarty committed suicide after the murderous rampage, his body was found next to Amelia's in the living. He died from an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. Today Nate Anderson had yet another life sentence added to his already lengthy prison term after stabbing a correctional officer who later died in hospital.*

I didn't know how to react to what I saw. My breath left me completely as I listened in horror to what Kevin had done with his friend Nate. I threw the TV remote across the room and broke down crying. I screamed and hit the end table with my fists as it sank in that Kevin was nothing but a murderer! *My whole world seemed like it was coming down, crashing hard as it hit the ground.* My body shook uncontrollably to the point that I eventually had to lie down because I was so upset. I had never felt betrayed. I had shared everything with a murderer, a teenage killer. I had let him into the most private and sensitive areas of my life, told him all my secrets and let him sleep in my bed at night. He had saved my life and healed all my pain, but he had committed murder and that was unforgivable.

I was so hurt and angry at myself for having loved a murderer the way I did. I truly hated myself for having let him into my life the way I did. I hated the entire realm of keepers for having sent me a *murderer* as a keeper. I went up to my room and cut myself again. It wasn't for attention or to prove to anyone that Kevin could heal my scars, but to try to lessen the immeasurable pain of betrayal and loss that I was feeling. Conflicting feelings went round and round inside my head. I still loved Kevin, but I couldn't accept loving a murderer. I yelled out to the sky that Kevin and the entire realm of keepers better not ever come into my life again. At the same time I was so angry at Kevin for leading me

on the way he did and not being forthcoming on the multiple occasions he had the chance to tell me the truth.

I felt lightheaded from being in shock and cutting myself so I let myself drift into a dreamless sleep. I woke up again a few hours later to a still empty house. My cuts burned as I passed them under hot water. Kevin was no longer around to kiss them away. I broke down crying again as I thought of all the memories shared with Kevin and all the time I spent with him. I owed him my life! I owed him a lot more than just my life. Deep inside me I felt sympathy for him and eventually compassion too. His bad choices obviously haunted him profoundly and it saddened me deeply. I was even angrier at myself for having disowned him the way I did instead of trying to understand first like he had begged me to do with Rosanna. I had lost her and I ended up losing him too. As angry as I was with him, I still wanted to talk to him and try to understand the full scope of the situation before passing any more judgments.

I tightly closed my eyes and left myself be overcome with agape but I just couldn't do it. I was too angry at Kevin and hurt by his actions to immerse myself in pure love for him. I put my hand over my bloody arm and begged for him to come back and erase my scars but nothing happened. I had never felt so alone. After two years of always having him by my side, I ended up alone. In between my hatred and my tears, I tried to sustain the agape to talk to Kevin one last time before I decided whether he was worthy of being forgiven for his crimes or not. I took a deep breath and let my mind drift off back to that first night I met Kevin. I remembered how his gentle touch comforted me and how serene it felt when he held me in his arms. The agape came flowing over me again just like it did on that night. I turned over onto my back and saw that Kevin was there. I was overjoyed and went over to him.

He looked at me with a blank stare and I saw the gaping head wound in his left temple area. Some of his hair was soaked in blood and his left ear was soaked in it. I gasped in shock and reached out to touch him but my hand went right through him. I looked at him in pure horror, that's what he looked like after he shot himself! My heart broke for him and I reached out to hold him again, focusing especially on sustaining the energy. His body was cold in my arms and although I could interact with him, he wasn't breathing. The features on his once-beautiful face looked tired and worn out. His blue eyes weren't as bright anymore, and his overwhelming peaceful aura had faded away. I held him tightly against me and poured my love over him just like he had done to me in the past in hopes that it would heal him the same way it worked on me.

"I've failed my mission," Kevin whispered in a bleak, tired voice.

"I'm so sorry Kevin," I muttered through my tears, "please forgive me. I never meant to hurt you. »

"Of course I forgive you Arlene, I love you, and I always will long after I'm gone here."

"What do you mean *gone*? Where are you going?"



"I've failed Arlene."

His voice was just a soft whisper filled with angst as he told me to stop giving him agape since it no longer did anything for him. As much as I begged him to stay, he didn't have a choice but to say goodbye. He expressed regret and sorrow before he slipped out of my hold and disappeared from me. He hadn't been able to heal my scars no matter how much he tried and was no longer able to sustain his own energy. There was no way I could reach him, he was gone. I buried my face in my pillows and pleaded to higher powers to send Kevin back to me so I could properly make amends. Nothing happened. I thought back to what I had seen on TV, that Kevin had shot himself next to Amelia's body seemingly regretting what he and Nate had done.

I called on to Amelia in agape just like I used to call on Kevin in hopes that she could give me answers to the missing pieces of the puzzle since Kevin was no longer around and I never got the chance to ask him why. When I reopened my eyes, I saw this teenage girl standing at the edge of my bed. It was Amelia! She came over to me and sat next to me on my bed. She was a beautiful young girl with long shiny brown hair down passed her shoulders and deep green eyes that complimented her small round face and a few freckles. Her little pink lips were out of the way to reveal a perfect set of white teeth and a welcoming smile.

"You came!" I exclaimed.

"The keepers heard your prayer," she told me in a gentle voice, "whatever you request of me, I'll do my best. »

"It's about Kevin Hegarty."

"What about him? »

"Why did he shoot you like that?"

"He's not the one who shot me, he didn't even know I was in the house. Nate wanted to kill my sister for leaving him but the three of us ended up being in the house. »

"So Nate's the one who shot you?"

"Yes, he's the one who shot everyone. Kevin didn't even fire his gun before he shot himself. »

"I presume you were already dead when he committed suicide?"

"Yeah, Nate had already shot me point-blank in the face but I do know that Kevin didn't know I was even in the house. When he stumbled across my body on his way out he just couldn't live with himself so he decided to put an end to it right there."

Amelia spoke in a very sympathetic tone of voice towards Kevin and Nate. The glimmer in her eyes showed that she understood their actions and she didn't show any kind of anger or resentment towards either of them.

"Do you forgive them?"

"Yes I do, it's a part of me having peace of mind, even here. »

"I just don't understand why it all ended the way it did. I mean, we loved each other so much and then he was just gone! Do you think it's someone not forgiving him?"

"I wouldn't know, but it's definitely something plausible."

I sincerely thanked Amelia for her insights and her time away from eternal bliss and proceeded to speak with Natalie and George. Natalie had come to forgive Kevin, but not Nate and George hadn't forgiven any of them. That's where the problem was, Kevin had not been able to get the proper closure and forgiveness he needed and ended up wrecking his relationship with me. I understood why he wasn't able to forgive him, what Kevin had done was unforgivable but I loved Kevin enough to try to reach out to George and help him move on from the tragedy.

"You're not able to move on aren't you?" I made conversation with George who had appeared in front of me.

"No," he muttered back, "I can't."

"You can't forgive Kevin."

"What he did was unforgivable!"

I felt his pain. I had felt so betrayed when I learned that Kevin had helped his friend murder three innocent people and never thought I was going to be able to look at him again but as I looked deep inside of myself I realized that nothing changed my love for Kevin, and I wanted to forgive him and fix our bond. It also saddened me deeply to see even the departed stuck in limbo because they weren't able to let go. I realized at that point that I needed forgiveness too. I had never truly forgiven myself for the drunk driving accident. I shared my feelings with George and he listened attentively just like Kevin had done.

"It wasn't your fault," he told me in a gentle whisper, "they aren't dead because of you. It wasn't anything you did."

"And it wasn't anything you did that made Kevin and Nate kill you!" I replied doing my best to hold back tears.

George sighed deeply and looked up at the ceiling, deep in thought. It was true, what happened wasn't George's fault and he shouldn't have to be the one who constantly suffers for it. I knew from the look on his face that he understood that. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath myself, letting my mind drift away into limbo. Somewhere along the way I decided to let go of my guilt regarding the tragic deaths of Sabrina and Melanie. What happened wasn't my fault, it was an accident. For the first time I felt like I was actually able to take a breath, a real breath of air. A feeling of calmness swept over me and consumed me for the short moment it lasted. I had lived with guilt for some two and a half years, but I was finally free.

"Feels good doesn't it?" George commented.

I let out a sigh of relief and as I opened my eyes I saw Kevin standing at the edge of my bed. His face was very pale and his eyes were dark and lifeless. The gaping head wound was no longer visible but Kevin was no longer vibrant and full of life like he had once been. He was formally dressed with his hair neatly combed back, he looked like a person who was about to attend a funeral. I sent him agape but nothing seemed to happen. He still stood there like a walking corpse. George left my side and walked over to Kevin's side of the room where the two of them looked at each other, each seemingly waiting for the other to begin.

"Forgive yourself," George commanded Kevin with a somewhat sharp edge in his voice.

"I can't do that," Kevin replied in a soft whisper as he bowed his head.

"I'm done with this. I'm not going to let this dictate the rest of my eternal existence!" George went on. "I'm letting go today!"

In that very moment when George forgave Kevin, a show of lights sparkled around both of their auras. George's aura stayed bright but Kevin's faded away. He was still dark and lifeless while George was radiant and lighting up the whole room. George commanded Kevin to forgive himself again but there was no visible reaction in Kevin. I soon saw Amelia and Natalie join in with both of their auras shining bright too. I crawled over to the edge of my bed and joined them too. The five of us were standing in a circle in the middle of the room with each person's aura helping to illuminate the rest. I looked up at Kevin with compassion and sympathy in my eyes and threw my arms around him. His chin was pressed down against my shoulder when he let out a deep sigh too and I felt a surge of energy all around me.

His aura engulfed me and the biggest sense of pure bliss came sweeping over me like a hurricane. Kevin's aura had always been very comforting but it had never been quite like that. I got out of his hold and looked up at him again and saw that his eyes had become shiny and radiant again. His heart was beating again and he had regained all of his color. His golden locks of messy hair were softer than they ever were and a gentle serene smile appeared across his lips. It was finished. Kevin had forgiven himself and had received the forgiveness of the people he had hurt along with Nate. The five of us

looked at each other with smiles on everyone's lips. I had never felt so much love in my entire life, I was completely surrounded by it. In a flash of white light the Lord joined us and I got to stand right there in the midst of his amazing glory.

I watched in complete awe as one by one George, Amelia and Natalie were taken up to heaven. Only Kevin and I were left in the awesome presence of the Lord. We looked at each other for the fraction of a second and hugged each other one last time. We said our last goodbyes and Kevin gave me one last kiss on the forehead before the Lord took him up to heaven. As he ascended he waved down at me with a big smile on his face. He was so happy, he had finally gotten his wish after almost twenty years. He was forgiven, he was free. After they had all ascended into heaven all signs of their auras and their overwhelming presences dissipated like they never existed in the first place. I sat on my bed and let my mind go blank. I had just witnessed the most amazing thing in the world but I already missed Kevin terribly.

Reality came back crashing in when my mother knocked on my bedroom door. I was startled after still reeling from my recent experiences but managed to compose myself as she walked in and sat next to me. She asked me what I had been doing up in my room all alone on such a nice day but I dismissed her and told her that I was tired and that I simply needed a little rest from time to time. I didn't tell her anything about the Lord making things right between Kevin and the people he had wronged in his human life but I did slip up and mention that Kevin was gone. My mother was taken aback at my comment and asked me what was going on.

"Kevin was taken up to heaven," I whispered to her holding back tears.

She wrapped her arms around me and held me into a tight hug as we both cried. I eventually confessed to her the whole ordeal with Kevin in the last moments of our relationship and how the Lord had redeemed him. I was comforted that he was finally in his happy place where there was no more pain but I still missed him terribly and grieved for him because I had loved him so much for the two short years that we had spent together. I felt like I was the luckiest person in the world to have gotten the chance to know him like I did even though he was gone.

"I hope he knew that I loved him before he left," my mother whispered to me as she grieved for Kevin too.

"I know he did mom," I reassured her, "he's with dad now and we'll see both of them again one day."

The mood was sober in the following few days but I reminded myself of how much Kevin and I really loved each other when the thought of being without him was unbearable. His voice always remained in the back of my mind to somehow comfort me and give me advice when I felt alone and didn't know where to turn. I eventually rekindled my friendship with Rosanna and the two of us were able to reminisce and comfort each other with the good times we both spent with Kevin. With his help and his

love I became a new person and I always wanted to honor his memory by being the change I wanted to see in the world and by giving others what he gave me, hope. It delighted me to share his wisdom with others who were willing to listen.

As summer came to an end I was getting ready to move away for college in the next few weeks and was aimlessly wandering around the basement while my mother was doing the laundry. I watched her take my clothes out of the washing machine and shove them in the dryer. She then looked down to see if there were any clothes left in the washing machine and bent down over it to pick up something. In her hand was this small stainless steel link bracelet that I had never seen before. We were both puzzled since it didn't belong to either one of us and it didn't belong to any of my siblings. She gave it to me and I decided that I might as well wear it since I had it!

The morning before I left for college I decided to pull up some pictures of Kevin, Amelia, Natalie and George to carry around with me in my wallet so I would never forget the convictions and values all of them had taught me since I knew that it would be too easy to get caught up in my new life and lost in the great big world out there. For some reason I wasn't able to connect to the internet to get some so I texted Rosanna and told her to send me some when I got to college. She agreed to print some and send them to me once I got settled. A few days after I arrived there I got an envelope addressed to my name with four pictures in it. As I looked at them I couldn't help but notice the bracelet on Kevin's arm. As I looked more closely it became clear to me that it was the bracelet my mom found in the washing machine!

"How can this be?" I exclaimed to myself alone in my dorm.

I opened the window of my room and looked up at the cloudless blue sky in awe. I smiled to myself as I traced each link with my finger. I knew that Kevin hadn't left me and that he was always going to hold a very special place in my heart. I closed the window and immediately called my mother to tell her what had just happened. She just as flabbergasted as I was when I found out but we both rejoiced at the thought that Kevin was still very much in our lives. The bracelet became my little memento commemorating our time together and with it came all the sweet memories of him being there when I had no one else and him saving my life *twice*.

I proudly wore the bracelet wherever I went and never took it off. I only seemed to have to poke it around with my finger and Kevin's overwhelming presence was still with me. I couldn't see him or talk to him but his aura still lingered around my dorm and the classroom. My mother commented that she sometimes indirectly sensed someone there in the house with her when she was alone, and I simply smiled to myself as the thought that even though Kevin's work might have been done with my life, it would never really be over. I stayed in touch with Rosanna but she never mentioned Kevin's presence still lingering around her like my mother did. I didn't tell anyone else other than my mother about the bracelet or my experiences with Kevin but the things he taught me were my motivation for everything I did.

I ended up putting his picture along with the other three on my night table so they were the last thing I saw when I went to bed at night and the first thing I saw when I woke up in the morning. Seeing them made always me smile. It might have been better for the world if Kevin had never existed, but it would not have been better for me.

# CEREALS

As usual I awoke from a deep slumber in my uncomfortable little bed and immediately went into the kitchen exactly as I did every other morning. Passing by the bathroom I picked up my bottles of pills to treat schizophrenia and depression, also exactly as I did every other morning. I took the big blue containers from the medicine cabinet and looked at them menacingly. I hated taking pills, especially with my breakfast! I squeezed the containers in between my fingers and walked downstairs where my usual bowl of alphabet soup was waiting for me. I hated eating cereal for breakfast. I hated eating cereal period. My grandfather had always lovingly prepared the soup for me ever since I'd moved in with him two years prior.

I forcefully threw the pill bottles onto the table and sat down, waiting to be served my morning bowl of soup. Oddly enough though, my uncle wasn't around to eat with me that morning. In fact the house was completely silent. He'd made the soup, but left it near the kitchen sink. That was odd for him and as I got up and walked closer to investigate I noticed that much soup had been spilled all over the floor and little alphabet pastas were floating around on the floor everywhere. I bit my bottom lip and headed over to grab my big bowl of alphabet soup that was way too full before sitting back in my usual spot at the table.

Intensely, I looked at the little letters floating around passively in the broth without moving a muscle. After a few minutes of looking into my bowl of soup I noticed that the letters were spelling out different words. *Joseph Stalin. Adolf Hitler. Donald Trump.* Disgusted, I abruptly got up and looked around the room for my grandfather. I wanted my grandfather! The fear and anxiety of being alone overcame my body. I looked down at my myself and noticed that I wasn't wearing my usual white nightgown. I had on weird striped pyjamas that didn't belong to me. What the hell were those?! I was in my own house, not a concentration camp or the insane asylum! I swallowed hard and looked intensely around the around one more time.

I took an old fork from the counter and squeeze it in my hands. I felt my blood pressure rise, that happened when I got angry. My God! There was nothing I hated more than eating alone in a dirty environment! The mess of soup in the kitchen was disgusting! I squeezed the hot and sweaty fork one last time before violently stabbing the letters in my bowl of soup. The broth and little letters splashed everywhere, subsequently making an even bigger mess and spelling out more words and sentences. *The zombies are coming.* I cringed and threw the fork at the wall with all my might. I shoved my hand in my lukewarm soup and grabbed a bunch of letters before then shoving them in my mouth and swallowing them whole.

The pasta was too mushy and the broth was too cold! Gross! With each chew I became more and more disgusted so I spit everything out on the floor. There wasn't anything else to eat so I forced myself to swallow that disgusting soup. I didn't get far because it

was too disgusting so I decided to take the bowl and go dump the contents in the toilet upstairs. On my way upstairs I looked towards my grandfather's room but instead of finding his bedroom door I came face to face with a white wall. There was a slight sound coming out of it, like a broken TV, so I threw my bowl of soup at the wall and electricity came out of it as it began to warp. *The NKVD want some more tea* the little letters spelled out as they slid to the floor.

The wall began to melt and revealed some sort of holographic projection on which I could see my grandfather serving alphabet soup to cannibal Nazi zombies in the kitchen downstairs when they cast a magic spell over the soup and the little letters levitated into the air and consumed my grandfather. He vanished into the bowl and the zombies ate their respective servings. I didn't notice if the hologram continued showing different images or not, all I knew was that I needed to get back downstairs, get a baseball bat and track down those Nazi zombies and make them bring my grandpa back!

I ran down the stairs but stopped abruptly in the hallway as I came face to face with one of the zombies who had merely been in hiding because they had never left the house after they made my uncle disappear. I ran into the kitchen since I couldn't pass the zombie to get to the basement door but three more were sitting around the kitchen table. I grabbed the rest of the pot of soup that was still on the stove and got ready to whack one of them with it but as I prepared for a confrontation they began reciting their magic spells again and I knew that I needed to get rid of the soup before I disappeared too!

I quickly ran back upstairs and dumped the alphabet soup into the toilet and flushed it. It appeared like it had gone down the drain for a few moments but then it came back up and the toilet overflowed. A million little letters came violently spilling out onto the floor and flowed into the hallway. The little letters spelled out all of my dirty secrets for everyone to see and I started panicking! Then I heard the zombies laughing their butts off in the hallway as they read what my alphabet soup was telling them about me. All I could do was scream and scream some more. *Then I opened my eyes.* I was laying down in my bed and my grandfather was trying to wake me up from my nightmare.

"It was just a dream, everything is fine," he reassured me, "come down and eat your alphabet soup before it gets cold."



# DEADLY NIGHTSHADE

It was the early hours of the morning and it was raining outside. I could hear them in the other room. They were fighting again. It wasn't unusual but this time it was going one step further. She was scared, we scared, and she wasn't the only one. I had my back against the wall and my hand on the door knob of my room. I was shaking. I slowly open the door and look into the hallway. Their door was closed. I slowly walk down the hallway not making any noise and go downstairs. I look into my mother's purse and take out the credit card, the bank card and the remains of her money out of her wallet. I shove it into my pocket, grab my coat and quietly step outside into the pouring rain. The thunder rolls and the lightning strikes. I touch my coat pockets. I had it, I'll be fine.

I run down the street that leads to the highway. All I could see were the transport lights that come and go. I walk down the highway to the other side of the bridge. I would have time to freeze to death before I got to the airport. I would have time to freeze to death by the time morning came. I see a taxi coming down the street. I stop it.

"Toronto..." I tell the driver.

I sit in front next to him and patiently stare out the window into the dark. He talks to me but I don't pay attention. My heart was beating faster, I couldn't breathe. I could feel my temperature rise. I was feeling restless and alone but I knew I could make it on my own. I bite my lip and try to calm myself. The airport there would be open. I could get far away from here before they would even notice that I was gone. I lay my head back on the seat and close my eyes. I could still feel myself shaking. The driver asks me what was going on. I didn't reply. Just drive, just drive.

"Airport." I tell him as we approach the city limits.

There had to be an ATM machine at the airport. I would never have enough money. The taxi didn't even come to a complete stop but I flew out the door. I left \$200 and a note on the seat. You never saw me. You don't know anything. You were home on Friday. I wrote on the note I left the driver. I run inside the airport and go to the ATM machine that was only a few steps from the door. I withdraw \$700 from the machine. It's all I could get. I then go see the lady at the counter.

"Outta here.." I tell her.

"The next flight is in 20 minutes." She tells me.

"I'll take it no matter what." I reply.

"You'll be the only one on the flight." She adds.

I pay for a one-way ticket to the first destination with the credit card. I sit alone in the waiting room, 20 minutes couldn't go by fast enough. I was stressed. I quickly bolt off the chair as soon as I saw the boarding signal come up on the screen. I sit in the 5th row of the small 37-passenger plane. I was all alone. The storm wasn't as bad here so the delay wasn't too long. I would be in Toronto in two hours but that still wasn't soon enough. I look outside as the storm was clearing and the sky was becoming of a dark navy blue. I still hadn't calmed down but I was safe now. It would be a while before they even figured out I was gone. I at least had until noon today. I would be long gone by then.

The plane touches down at some big airport. I get off and go inside the terminal. There were so many people here. I wouldn't be noticed. I didn't know anybody here. That was a good thing. I run into the bathroom and look at myself in the mirror. I looked like hell. There were huge bags under my eyes and all my gothic makeup was smeared. I didn't care. I run to one of the many desks inside the terminal and wait for service. A plane landed at least every three seconds here. I knew from experience, I had been here a few times when things were better.

"Yonkers?" I ask the lady at the counter.

"New York City?" She asks.

"I'll take it." I reply.

"Here you go, 6 a.m." She says handing over the ticket.

I look at the time, then at the screen reading the boarding times. The plane was boarding now. I run across the gigantic airport and right through security. One of the guards stops me before I get on the plane. I pull out my passport from my coat pocket and show it to him. He nods and I board the plane. Most of the seats were full so I sit next to an old woman who looked like she would fall asleep any moment now. I had no more cash money on me. But at least now they couldn't track the credit card transactions, there wasn't any. I just look outside at the pale blue sky and patiently wait.

Landing in New York City I had to show my passport to a million people before I could get out of the airport. The flight had been long with a few delays. It was noon now, I was hungry and I hadn't slept very much. I would sleep in the bus. I sat at the very back and closed my eyes. No one would find me here. I slept for a while, it was 4 p.m. when a NYPD officer woke me up. I got off the bus and stuffed my face at a restaurant. New York food was the best. I had first tasted some last year. I had the time of my life! I take my time not rushing anything before walking all the way to Grand Central Station. I take the metro to Yonkers. I was almost there.

The metro was filled with people but I still had a good spot. The ride to Yonkers would take a while because we had to make so many stops and believe me this wasn't the fastest thing I had ever been on. I checked the time and it was 9 p.m. I still had two

hours to ride in this thing. I would probably only set foot on Yonkers soil in the early hours of the morning. I took the time to think about certain things. Did they notice I was missing? Did they report me missing? Were they looking for me? I hoped that they weren't but you never know. You never know.

When I get out of the subway station in Yonkers it was raining here too. It was cold and I was still partly soaked from the last storm I had to walk in. The street was empty here. I needed to find a taxi or a bus. I had a place to go. It was probably sometime past midnight now. I didn't care. There were only a bunch of drunks coming out of a bar so I start walking. I finally get to Palisade Ave. This was one long street and I had to get to the very end of it. The only thing I could do now was walk and believe me, I walked for a long time.

It was 4 a.m. but I was here. The payphone I had been looking for was right before my eyes. He would find me here, I just needed to call him. I knew his number by heart so I start dialling. He wouldn't like his phone ringing at this hour but he would help me, he has in the past and he never hesitates to help a friend in need. The phone keeps on ringing and ringing until his answering machine picked up. I breakdown.

"Hey! Pick up your phone! It's me, it's Melania! I need help!" I spit out crying.

"Melania?! What's going on?" He answers.

"Just come and pick me up, please just come." I reply.

It wasn't long before I saw his blue Ford Mustang speeding down the street and coming to a sudden halt when he saw me. He looked exactly like I remembered him. He just didn't have that sweet smile he wore when we hung out last summer. He opens the door for me and I quickly sit down next to him.

"What's going on Melania?" He asked me.

I never told him how much I hated my name. He was the only person who still called me by my name. I look deep into his caramel brown eyes. They were filled with sympathy, confusion, chaos and fright.

"Just drive, I'll tell you when we get there." I reply.

I try to calm myself as he drives me down a forest road to his amazing house. He talks to me but I ignore him. I didn't want to hear it. I just wanted to his car's engine and the music playing on the radio. He never seemed to drive fast enough because it seemed to take forever just to get to his house. The sky was turning a light blue once again. It was only a matter of time before the sun rose and that I would be missing for 24 hours. Finally at the house I barge in and go straight to the kitchen. I look into the drawers of every counter until I found a big steak knife.

"Ah this is what I was looking for." I say to myself taking it out.

He was standing in the hallway just staring at me. I walk right past him with the big knife in my hand and stomp upstairs. I open the first door that I see. Bathroom. I go to the next. Storage room. And the next once again. Bedroom. I slam the door beside me and look into the drawers of the dresser. I grab the first shirt I see and take my wet clothes off. I put on the shirt and lay the knife on the night table beside me. I get under the covers and just wait for him to come up. It was only a matter of time before he did and next thing you know the door of the room opens.

"Explanation?" He asks me.

"Let me sleep. I'll tell you in the morning." I reply.

He lies down next to me in the bed and takes the knife from the night table. I don't even bother to turn around and look at him. He would know sooner or later. At the moment I just wanted to sleep. I wake up not too long after falling asleep. I had only slept five hours. I look around the room. My clothes were washed and neatly folded on the side of the dresser. I put them on and head downstairs. He was at the table drinking tea, waiting for me. I don't sit down. I just stand there and stare at him.

"It's only a matter of time..." I whisper.

"For what? What is it Melania?" He asks.

"If there was one place I would go, it would be here. They will come." I tell him.

"Take it easy Melania, relax."

"Relax?! They know I'm here! They'll find me! »

"Let's go for a little drive okay..."

I nod and follow him out the door. I sit in his blue Ford Mustang and wait for him to drive away. We go passed the city limits and onto the Hudson River Bridge. This was a big bridge and my heart was starting to beat faster again. My breath was accelerating at a high rate and my temperature was rising rapidly. We were right on the edge of the bridge. I could see all the water.

"Do you love me?" I ask him.

"Of course I do." He replies.

"Do you love me a lot?" I ask.

"Yes what is this about?" He asks.

"If you love me like you say you do you will drive off the bridge." I reply. "If you love me enough you will drive off the bridge."

# JOSEPHINE

I remember the first time my gaze came across her beautiful dark brown eyes and her brown hair. I didn't need to have any second thoughts. I knew from that very second that she was the one, the one I wanted to be with forever. My heart sank in the pit of my chest when our looks crossed and were locked together. The moment seemed to last forever in the instant it happened. I swore I stopped breathing for the few seconds we looked at each other. The world around me had stopped turning completely. She was the only thing I wanted, she was the only thing I needed. As I slowly approached her, she turned to look at me and smiled. Her smile made my heart explode, I swore it could have lit up the whole world.

"Hi, I'm Josephine," she introduced herself to me in her velvet voice.

It was almost like singing as her crystal clear words sank into my brain. My heart skipped a beat as I heard her speak to me.

"Josephine," I whispered, "I'm Albert."

"Hi Albert, would you like to dance?" she asked me in her always charming and sexy crystal clear voice.

I swallowed hard. She had me hostage of those beautiful eyes. I got lost in them looking for the road to her heart. Before I could speak a single word she already had placed her hand into mine leading me onto the dance floor. She then placed her hands around my neck and shoulders. I placed mine around her waist and let the music do the rest. Josephine had such a passionate gleam coming from the center of her beautiful eyes. I took one of my hands to swipe her hair out of her face to get a better look at her.

I let my fingers trail down her neck and then back up to her chin. We both stared into each other's eyes up until I closed mine and our lips locked. In that moment in which we kissed my heart stopped beating completely and all the oxygen in my body was robbed from me. When our lips separated all the air came flowing back into my lungs accompanied by the uncontrollable desire to have another taste of Josephine. The second time around I placed both my hands on her neck and aggressively kissed her.

I pulled Josephine closer to me and kept making out with her up until oxygen was rare for the both of us. My heart was pounding almost out of my chest and my knees shaking beyond belief at that point in time. We looked deep into each other's eyes once again. We were unaware of anything happening around us, we didn't care anyway. I grabbed Josephine and dragged her out of the club and into the streets. I was just about to grab the strap of her white satin dress and slide it off when I heard the bus pulling up not too far from us. I took Josephine into my arms and took her aboard the midnight bus. We kept on passionately kissing as the bus drove us back to my apartment. I ran my fingers

through her silky smooth hair as our lips locked and our saliva mixed. My heart was still pounding insanely inside my chest as my fingers travelled inside her bra.

"I think it's our stop Albert," Josephine softly whispered into my ear in her seductive voice as the bus slowly came to a halt at a street corner.

I take a peek outside in the corner of my eye, yes it was our stop. The bus driver quickly glanced at us to see if we were getting out there.

"Take me to bed," Josephine whispered to me.

I took the beautiful young woman into my arms and carried her up the stairs to my apartment. I shut the door behind me with my foot and carried Josephine into my room and laid her down on my bed. I climbed on top of her and started kissing her again. I was madly in love with a woman I had just met. We had just met but it felt like we had known each other forever. It felt like we had been full-time. I ran my fingers through her silky smooth hair as she began to pull my shirt off. She then proceeded to biting down my neck as I took her dress off.

"Don't ever, ever leave me," I whispered in her ear, "no, not tonight, Josephine."

She didn't say a word. I kept on kissing and biting her furiously as I took her bra and underwear off. At the same time she took off the rest of my clothing too. My heart was almost pounding out of my chest as her hands ran all over my body. Her nails dug into the skin of my back and my neck as I penetrated her. Her moans were the most beautiful sounds I had ever heard. I looked deep into her eyes, our gazes locked once again. I ran my fingers through her hair and bit down on her neck. She did the same to me. I kept making love to the gorgeous young woman for hours, trashing my entire apartment as we were so wild in the process, never wanting to stop. After we had finally stopped we both lied in my bed holding each other tightly. I never wanted her to leave, my Josephine.

"Albert," she whispered, "I need to leave."

"No! You can't leave!" I protested, "You can't just leave me!"

She went to get up but I grabbed her and pulled her towards me.

"I need to go Albert! There's somebody waiting for me!"

"Who?! Who's waiting for you? I love you Josephine!"

She struggled to set herself free but I didn't let her go. She was the only one for me, I loved her so much. I couldn't let her go, no, not that night. She was my one and only love, my Josephine! My one and only love! I used force on her to pin her down on my bed and cover her mouth with my hand. We intensely looked into each other's eyes

when she finally shut her mouth and stopped protesting. I could feel my heart racing and hers too. I took my hand off her mouth and retreated from holding her down underneath me.

“Let me leave!” she shouted as she got up and ran to the other side of the room.

“No!” I yelled back, “I can’t!”

“Why not huh? Why not?!”

“Josephine!”

“You’re going to have to eat my heart before I stay here with you, you creep!”

I furiously jumped on the young woman. Who did she think she was? I pushed her against the wall and grabbed her by the wrists with one hand. She screamed and yelled for me to let her go but I covered her mouth with my free hand.

“Shut up!” I yelled back at her.

She kept on moaning for me to set her free but the more she squirmed the more force I had to use on her. I finally managed to grab a piece of clothes and tied it over her mouth so she would stop yelling. I hit her in the face with my fist, against my will, to calm her down while I ran into the closet to get some rope. I fought against her up until I got to tie her up in the bed. She laid there motionless, crying to be set free. I took one last look into her beautiful dark eyes.

“You know that if you left me it would be breaking my heart,” I whispered in her ear, “please don’t go Josephine.”

She didn’t stop fighting back. I was getting angrier by the minute so I put my hand around her neck and pinned her down even harder.

“I told you Josephine,” I yelled in between my teeth, “you can never leave me!”

I go and take out a scalpel and hold it over her face so she could clearly see it despite that the room was pitch black. Fear filled her tearful eyes one last time as I started cutting.



# THE CONQUEROR

I'd known Tamerlane Rodriguez for literally half of my life. I had first met him ten years ago, when we were both ten years old. His birthday was the day before mine, in fact we had an age difference of about five and a half hours. What had always stood out about the young man and still did were his oversized chocolatey brown eyes. They were like a galaxy in themselves. *The Chocolate Milky Way*. In the sunlight there wasn't anything else like that river of liquid chocolate that I could've gazed into the whole damn day.

"Did you find it yet?" Tamerlane asked me, seemingly annoyed, "You know, you've done this to me my whole life."

"Sorry!" I muttered out in embarrassment at being caught looking into his eyes, "But it's only been half your life, only *half* Tamerlane."

All he did was grin at me. I had indeed done that to him from the very day we'd met in the neighborhood park. It was nothing but a crummy little run-down playground tucked away behind a large apartment building mostly filled with people just trying to put food on the table for their families. I was new to that neighborhood and had no friends within walking distance so I'd gone to the park on a cloudy afternoon and the only other kid my age there was a little part Arab and part Spanish boy playing in the sand. I walked up to him and he looked at me almost fearfully. I extended my hand out to him in hopes that he wouldn't see me as the enemy but it didn't seem to be helping anything.

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"It's Tamerlane," he muttered in a shy, almost pained voice.

"My name is Caroline, do you want to be my friend?"

"Okay."

I approached him and kneeled down in the sand next to him as he dug up a toy car and handed it to me. He didn't say much at first but once he warmed up to me he was a sweet boy. He was very polite, soft-spoken and intelligent. His father was a coal miner that had immigrated from Venezuela some fifteen years ago and his mother's family had originally been from Saudi Arabia. The two of them had come to America in the hopes of a better life but had only come face to face with poverty. Amidst the financial destitution though, I had made myself a lifelong friend. The only one that had seen me through everything and stayed with me throughout the whole thing. He understood my own struggles with poverty because he lived them too and I empathized with his shyness around strangers because I had been trampled on too.

Tamerlane was really the closest thing I'd ever had to a brother. Despite the fact that the color of our skin was different, we shared the same soul, thought the same things and

chased the same dreams. I had always been rather jealous of his beautiful, almost golden-like, skin because it seemed like he had a perfect perennial tan while I turned into a lobster the moment I stepped out into the sunlight. When you put a bronze god and seafood side by side, it's obvious which one comes out on top. In ten years I'd never told him how beautiful I thought he really was but I knew that he knew. And I always made sure that he felt beautiful around me, because he was really the only one I could be completely myself around without fear of repercussion.

"Do you want to go to the restaurant?" Tamerlane asked me, "I've got some spare change."

"Keep your money for yourself," I replied, "you need it just as much as I do. Buy yourself some hair gel or something."

"Who needs hair gel when I can just walk into a store and put it on right there?"

"Get a haircut in that case!"

I affectionately nudged his shoulder with my elbow as we walked down the street towards the downtown core where all the restaurants were lined up next to one another. All of them had specials of the day up in their front windows in hopes to attract hungry people there instead of somewhere else. As we passed by a vacant business space with dark, almost mirror-like windows Tamerlane stopped to look at himself in the glass and rearrange his hair. If his skin and his eyes weren't beautiful enough, he had a full head of thick black hair that was overgrown and curly but most importantly, *messy*. His hairstyle depended largely on which direction the wind was blowing at any given moment and no matter what he tried to do with it, he had flyaway hair sticking out of everywhere.

"You're worst than my mom with your hair obsession!" I commented as I walked passed him.

"Well if you'd like to try to get this under control, knock yourself out!" he responded in a cheeky tone of voice.

"Okay, well sit down on the bench here and I'll fix that up for you."

"Just because your mom is a hairdresser it doesn't mean that you have any skills."

"Hey! If you don't want me to slap you sit down and keep your mouth shut!"

Tamerlane affectionately bumped into me and I responded by hitting his shoulder blade right where I had tattooed him the night before.

"Ouch!" he muttered out, mostly in shock at my gesture, "Do you not have sympathy for people whose skin was recently massacred by their best friend?!"

"Oh Tammy, you begged me to tattoo you!" I playfully reminded him.

"I don't beg, I command."

"Nah, that was definitely begging!"

"Have you forgotten that I am named after Tamerlane the Conqueror of Asia?"

"He was a terrorist and you're just a nerdy adult that still behaves like a child!"

The two of us playfully pushed each other around until we arrived at the bench a few steps away. Tamerlane sat down and I tried to no avail to at least flatten his hair and get it a little more under control. The more I tried the messier it seemed to get. Eventually I just gave up and flopped down on the bench next to him. I attempted to poke his shoulder but he slapped my hand before I could. The previous night I had tattooed *Tammy* in Arabic in my basement with makeshift equipment including a sewing needle. It had taken me multiple hours to complete a small tattoo about three inches in length and Tamerlane had whined the whole time.

He had inherited the nickname Tammy and me George back when we were about twelve or thirteen years old. It had all started with our mutual love of George Jones and Tammy Wynette when Tamerlane's neighbor babysat us. Sure, we were old enough to stay at home by ourselves, but our parents all worked incredibly long hours and we'd practically be left alone entire days to raise ourselves. Tamerlane's father worked in a mine some four thousand miles away and was gone for weeks at a time while his mother was a waitress and didn't come home until the early hours of the morning. My mother worked part-time at the corner store and then did hair and nails in the basement of our duplex apartment. She too worked long hours and I rarely got to see her. My father had died in an accident at the sawmill when I was just six years old and unfortunately I didn't remember much about him.

Tamerlane's neighbor was a sweet old lady well into her nineties that lived right next door to him on the third floor of the large apartment complex behind the playground we'd met in when we were children. All the old lady named Opal had was an eight-track player and a couple of classic country tapes that she listened to around the clock. Both Tamerlane and I had taken quite a liking to *Something To Brag About* as it was an accurate description of the blue collar lifestyle just trying to make it by but having plenty of love to share. He became Tammy when he literally stopped getting haircuts for a while and when I stopped having hair altogether. I didn't like one of the haircuts my mother had given me so I had Tamerlane help me shave everything off. And so I became George, and those nicknames had stayed with us our whole lives because they reminded us of a much more stress-free and hassle-free time when our biggest problem was making sure our hair looked just right.

"Let me see if the swelling has gone down," I said as I pulled up Tamerlane's shirt to look at his shoulder blade.

"It wasn't all that bad this morning," he responded as I poked around underneath his shirt, "at least most of the redness is gone."

"Ah, it ain't that bad at all. I didn't botch it too badly."

"On the bright side you were cheaper than a professional tattoo artist."

"And I can be a cheap hairdresser too!"

"But I like my hair!"

That, he certainly did. I had never liked mine very much, and I thought that was maybe part of the reason why I liked his so much. My entire life up until I became a teenager, my mother had done crazy things to my hair and I had often been embarrassed about it. For a while I cut my own hair myself which ended up being twice as bad as the hairdresser antics my mom made me go through on a regular basis. Then I gave a pair of scissors to Tamerlane who attempted to straighten out what I had done but then layers became stylish so I had one less hair dilemma. Most days I wore my hair short and periodically cut it once it got down to my shoulders. I was a sandy blonde with dark blue eyes, an almost identical duplicate of my mother. I liked my mother even though we didn't really know each other. I wasn't home very often, and in most of her free time was spent with her boyfriend Bailey, who was rather controlling and uptight in my opinion.

"So have you decided what you wanted to eat?" Tamerlane asked me as I poked around his skin around his tattoo, "I'm really not up to going to the soup kitchen and eating their cardboard bread today."

"I know it's disgusting Tammy but you should save up your money instead of spending it on me and restaurant food," I replied as I pulled his shirt down.

"There will be more money."

"I know but it's only Tuesday and we need to make it through the whole week on a hundred bucks."

"Stop worrying so much! There are plenty of ways to acquire money! This is Tamerlane the Conqueror wanting to feed you!"

How could I say no to those big brown eyes? I finally accepted and let him pick where he wanted to go. We ate at Barker's, a chain restaurant across the midwest where you could have almost a whole meal for under two dollars but you definitely got what you paid for. I had some chicken nuggets and some root beer while Tamerlane had the cheapest, smallest cheeseburger I had ever seen. It wasn't much, but it was a meal.

"For such a powerful military commander your meals are rather skimpy," I joked as we both sat at a table by the window.

"I have my moments," Tamerlane chuckled, "I'm at war against the world that tried to break me but I broke free."

"It's in moments like these that you captivate me the most."

"Remember my name darling!"

I remembered one particular event in which I had experienced precisely the greatness of Tamerlane the Conqueror. Tamerlane was what we called a *crossover*; literally a crossover between an introvert and an extrovert. A crossover was a person who was generally shy, quiet and reserved around unfamiliar people and outgoing, talkative and confident around close friends. But that one particular time when we must've been eleven years old or so, Tamerlane the Conqueror had definitely overpowered Tamerlane the shy little boy from the park. We were going back to the apartment building after buying a few dollars worth of candy when a group of older children caught up with us and started pushing us around and tried to take our sweets. At one point they blocked our way and demanded the candy in exchange for letting us go through. I was afraid of them and I knew that my best friend was too, but something bigger than fear swept over him.

"I am Tamerlane the Conqueror," he spoke boldly, "and you will not intimidate me or my best friend!"

He then marched forward right at the other boys and pushed one when he attempted to grab a bag of candy. Tamerlane pushed the other boy into a puddle of water on the side of the road and everybody else laughed at him. The boy started crying and the group left us alone. Growing up poor and being trampled on and looked down upon by those of higher socio-economic classes, Tamerlane had since gotten much bolder. Neither one of us went looking for trouble but we didn't turn around and run when we were faced with something.

"What are you thinking about?" Tamerlane asked me with a grin as I was obviously deep in thought and not very talkative.

"The Conqueror," I replied with a smile, "when he was eleven years old. Oh, and by the way, I have a hat for you in my backpack."

He hadn't been able to do anything with his hair which seemed to only get unrulier by the minute but it didn't bother him. I opened up my faded green haversack and yanked out an overly creased black and white baseball cap. I tried giving it more of a shape before placing it over Tamerlane's head and pressing hard on it so his hair would flatten out under it. Hair was still sticking out from under it all over the place but it had partially tamed the mess. The baseball cap gave Tammy a sweet boyish college kid appearance. He had managed to finish high school about a year ago, but I had never graduated. I had never even completed my freshman year! I had been much more interested in working part-time and then hanging out than actually wasting my time with school considering that it brought me nothing to help me survive for one more day. I never managed to keep a straight job for very long and I still didn't have anything solid but at least I managed to have food to eat and have a bed to sleep in at night.

"I got fired from the club this morning," Tamerlane admitted after a moment of silence.

"And now you're buying me lunch," I replied with food in my mouth, "so what are you gonna do now?"

"I don't have much of a clue honestly."

"This just validates what I told you earlier to keep your money! Now you have no job, you're already behind on the rent and you don't want your folks to kick you out, and you want a college education. None of those things come free."

"Money really isn't the only thing there is to life George, I believe in the principle of giving until it feels good. Don't you?"

"It's unfortunate Tamerlane, but it's the givers who have to set limits because the takers rarely do."

Tamerlane pursed his lips and slightly looked down. His dark hair partially covered the chunks of chocolate he had for eyes. I knew that he was stressed out because he was usually very talkative and upbeat around me but he didn't want to worry me so he lessened his own problems to treat me to some cheap and nasty restaurant junk food.

"Do you think that taking until it feels good works the same way too?" he asked me after a brief moment of silence.

"I see nothing that would prove to me otherwise," I responded after my own short moment of silent contemplation, "nothing that I have ever seen, read, heard, or experienced proved that money and material wealth brings happiness and satisfaction."

"It would definitely bring more peace of mind though."

"Of course! Financial security is important, but that's not really the point here. What's important is that you have \$100 left in your name and you're out here spending it on me. Let me help you out okay?"

"You already tattooed me for free Carrie, you paid for the kit and everything that came with it out of your own pocket, that's more than enough considering that it's on my skin forever."

Just a little under a year prior I had gotten myself a DIY tattoo kit because it was only about \$30 compared to getting a tattoo professionally done. I had used up most of what came with it except for some girly ink colors and miscellaneous junk that had come with it. I had no more needles for the machine itself, hence I had to brutalize my Tamerlane with sewing needles that I had sterilized using the flame of a candle. I had tattooed myself so much that I'd used most of everything in the first two months of getting the kit. My leg artwork wasn't great but I liked it. For Tamerlane it had been his first tattoo, and considering the experience, probably his last. The only thing I could really say though was that it was much easier to tattoo another person than to tattoo yourself. Most importantly, it hurt a heck of a lot less!

"I did a no show last night," Tamerlane admitted, "and this morning when I did show, I was out of a job."

"See, this is precisely what I was telling you about you begging me to tattoo you," I shot back with a smirk, "you wanted the tat so much that you skipped work!"

"That's not what happened and you know it!"

"You don't need to try to explain yourself to me Tammy, I know what kind of guy you are!"

"Oh, is that right now? I bet you weren't expecting

me to stand up to that gang of bastards when we were kids!"

We both cracked up laughing at that point. Nope, I hadn't expected that of such a soft-spoken little boy like him.

"Tamerlane was the Sword of Islam," he went on but I cut him off before he could finish.

"And you're not Muslim!" I playfully shouted as I attempted to smack his shoulder, "So it comes down to, yes, I know the kind of guy you are!"

His face turned red at my comebacks as I managed to tease him into submission.

"Alright, I give up," he admitted as he chuckled, "you know the kind of man I am."

"But this doesn't solve your job problem," I went on in a more serious tone of voice.

"Please do me a favor and stop worrying about me!"

"You're a brother to me for God's sake! How can I not care about you and and want to look out for you?!"

"I'm Tamerlane the Conqueror, you can rest easy George."

"Alright, you got me, I'll leave you alone! But please let me help you look for a job okay?"

"Sure, let's get to it."

If you didn't have a fancy resume filled with experience with you, you didn't have many opportunities. Sure, Tamerlane had a high school diploma filled with good grades and plenty of job experience since he got his first job when he was thirteen, but he didn't have any specialized training or a university degree to qualify for the high-expertise jobs that were in demand in a city in which the commercial and industrial sectors were booming dramatically. Nobody wanted to hire Tammy part-time and pay him under the table for a few days of work to pay for his next meal and Tamerlane wasn't the kind of

person to go around gaining money by means of deceit. The best he could've gotten was a few replacement shifts at a corner store on the other side of town for \$7.50 an hour. The income would've been steady for the time it lasted, Tamerlane would've been guaranteed his paycheck, but he needed money to put on the table *today*, not next month. Even after a whole afternoon, the only thing we had both accomplished was walk right through our shoes for another time. Tamerlane's shoes came from the Salvation Army and were starting to fall apart. My boots had been stolen from Walmart ten years ago. My whole life I had only wanted a pair of shoes that were *new*.

The same year that I had met Tamerlane, his neighbor had bought us both a few pieces of new clothes for the summertime. I had gotten a pair of shorts and Tammy had gotten a new pair of shoes. I had worn out the shorts in just a couple of months, but what I had really wanted was a *new* pair of shoes. I didn't want a so-called new pair of shoes from Value Village or even a pair that had never been worn from the Salvation Army. I wanted them to be *new* from the *store*. So on one autumn day Tamerlane and I had wandered into the mall in the downtown core and eventually made our way into the Walmart in there. I hadn't gone in to steal or anything of that sort, but when I saw a pair of shoes that I liked I told my best friend that I wanted to try them on just for fun while he looked at toys and other stuff. While nobody was looking, I put my old shoes into the shoebox and put it back on the shelf and walked out of there with a pair of *brand new* shoes.

"But stealing is against the Bible!" Tamerlane protested when he noticed the shoes after we had started walking back home.

He had lectured me for well over an hour but he had never threatened to tell anybody about what I had done. He had been faithful to me right to the very end. I'd been wearing those shoes ever since. I had them on my feet nearly 24/7 and my feet had barely grown in ten years. The shoes were mostly tape and rope and stitches and other thingamajigs than actual *shoes* nowadays but to me they were still my *new* shoes. They had been faithful to me too in ten years but I knew that all good things were going to have to come to an end because I was literally barefoot underneath those old running shoes. If I walked too fast I was afraid they were going to disintegrate right there on the sidewalk. Ten years ago cameras inside department stores weren't incredibly popular, or at least juvenile thieves weren't prosecuted as much, but I wasn't sure I was up to attempting another shoe robbery of the sort considering that the consequences would be more expensive than the actual shoes.

"I should buy you a new pair of shoes," Tamerlane commented like he could almost read my mind.

"There is no way in hell that I am letting you do that!" I protested, "I'll just get myself a \$20 pair from the discount store with the rest of my paycheck once my rent is paid up."

I was unemployed too. The owner of John's Pizzeria had suffered a massive stroke and was unable to manage the business anymore so he'd let me go just under a month ago. That job had been the longest that I'd ever been able to keep in my lifetime. I hadn't exactly bothered to look for another one because I had done some babysitting for old



friends here and there and mostly spent my free time hanging out with Tamerlane or tattooing myself or my friends. The days had gone by amazingly fast and my money had drained much faster than I could have ever anticipated. The good days of not worrying about a thing were long over and had been for a very long time yet I kept on prolonging them. At least I *tried* to prolong them, I knew that I was going nothing but screwing myself in the end.

"I don't know what kind of excuse I'm going to give my father for not being able to pay the rent," Tamerlane muttered as we approached his apartment building, "he always counted on me. He was always proud of me for stepping up to the plate and now to tell him that I was fired, that's not gonna go so well."

"If you ever need a place to stay," I tried to reassure him, "you know you can always stay with me."

"Your stepfather doesn't think that the color of my skin makes me a bronze god."

"Number one, he is not my stepfather, secondly, I live there, he doesn't. But more importantly, if he doesn't like this deal, then he should just stay in his own apartment. You know that my mom loves you and she won't throw you out."

"I know that your mom wouldn't throw me out, but I don't want to cause trouble for you because I know how hard it is for you to cope with life."

"You make it so much easier."

Tamerlane grabbed me and squeezed me tightly against him in the lobby of his apartment building. We had hugged each other often in ten years but he had rarely hugged me like *that*. Only someone needing to be comforted and reassured gave hugs like that. I squeezed him equally tightly because deep down inside I needed the same things he did. My anger and my bitterness towards the unfairness of life often completely blocked out my much softer emotions such as the basic need to be held and knowing that I wasn't out there waging war against humanity all by myself. I removed Tamerlane's hat and put it on myself backwards before running my fingers through his hair and making it fly in every direction. The late afternoon sun made his dark features glow and once again I got lost in the Chocolatey Way called Tamerlane Rodriguez's eyes. After a few moments he let go of me and slightly leaned forward to smooch me on the cheek. He had *never* kissed me before and I was somewhat taken aback at the gesture but it definitely left me with a feeling of sweetness rather than one of bitterness inside.

My best friend and brother signalled me to follow him inside the building where we walked up multiple flights of stairs before he unlocked the door to apartment 29. It was nothing but a cheap old wooden door and the apartment had a broken window that was boarded up in the living room. The place looked sort of like mine; not too much furniture, and especially not nice new fashionable furniture, dim lights, an old TV in the corner, and books and magazines and newspapers all over the kitchen table. Tamerlane's

mother was sitting on an old chair in front of the TV with terrible reception but his father wasn't in even though it was supposed to be his day to come back home from work camp. Tammy let out an overly loud sigh after his mother greeted him in Arabic. She hadn't been home for very long because she was still wearing her work clothes. As soon as she noticed me she warmly greeted me and invited me to sit down in the living room. I politely thanked her but stayed in the doorway because I'd have to head home soon enough as there wasn't enough room for me to stay in Tamerlane's apartment.

"Where's dad?" Tamerlane asked when he noticed his father wasn't around.

"He's staying at camp because we need the money to pay the rent," his mother admitted in an indifferent tone of voice, "we got a letter from the landlord saying that if we weren't paid up by the end of this week we'd be evicted at the end of the month."

Tamerlane's head fell as another exasperated sigh came out of his mouth.

"What's wrong son?" Mrs. Rodriguez asked in a concerned tone of voice as Tamerlane was generally always upbeat and enthusiastic.

"I lost my job today mom," he finally spit out with a grunt, "so I guess I'll just pack my bags and go right now so y'all will have one person less to worry about."

"Tamerlane!"

"Here's ninety bucks mom, this is all I've got left, I really need some air."

Mrs. Rodriguez was still speaking to Tamerlane in Arabic when we both barged through the door and walked back outside. It had gotten considerably darker in just a few minutes and much cooler too but I had on an engine red hoodie and Tamerlane had on a grey sweater that had once been black. It was sort of a mutual understanding at that point that we we'd be walking over to my place just a few streets down. We both remained unusually silent during the short trek to the building that was both my house and my mother's redneck home hair salon. When we walked in my mother was cutting somebody's hair and briefly said hi to us before going back to talking to her client. Tamerlane and I went straight to my tiny little room that was about the size of a walk-in closet. Against the right side of the wall there was my little single bed that I'd had basically my entire life, then I had a regular dresser on the other wall and a small table next to it. There was a small one-door closet and a tiny window near the top of the wall. Underneath my bed I had most of my things and most of my clothes served as a carpet.

"I'll get you some new sheets for the bed," I muttered as I looked at my little bed in disgust.

I probably hadn't changed the sheets in well over a month. That didn't bother me very much but I didn't want my friend to have to sleep in my filth. That definitely would not have been polite of me to do something like that.

"Sleep in your own bed Carrie," Tamerlane spoke in a gentle voice, "I'll do the floor."

"I doubt you'll have much room down there," I protested, "but I'll manage to squeeze myself in between my furniture."

Tamerlane and I argued back and forth about who was going to sleep in the bed for a few minutes until he finally decided to grab me, shove me onto my bed and pin me down by getting on top of me.

"Sleep. In. Your. Own. Bed." Tamerlane whispered to me with a huge playful smile on his face.

An equally big grin appeared on my face and to retaliate I grabbed him by the hair and pulled him down over me.

"Then you're sleeping in it with me," I taunted him.

"Fine," he replied, "there's room enough for two people."

As he said that he squeezed himself between the wall and me and put his arm around me so I wouldn't fall off the bed on the other side. I had maybe less than an inch of bare mattress between me and the cold hard floor so I held on to his solid and steady forearm not to land in exactly the place he had tried so hard to keep me away from. I started giggling uncontrollably at the thought so I tried turning around to mask the sound of my laughter but being in Tamerlane's face like that only made me crack up even more.

"What in the world is so funny?" Tamerlane was struggling to keep his voice from cracking up into a giggle too.

"I don't know," I muttered in between my snorts, "I'm just... happy."

"Do you know how long it's been since I've seen you be happy?!"

"Probably forever."

"Something like that."

"Oh! Oh I have to go to the bathroom!"

I was laughing so hard that I was about to wet myself, and my bed, and Tamerlane too, so I barged out of my room and into the bathroom that was just next door. I flicked on the light and immediately saw my red face in the mirror, but I wasn't red from laughing. I had an awful sunburn that made me look like a lobster again. I did my business and then examined myself more closely. My whole neck was bright red too. I touched it and it was scorching hot but it didn't particularly hurt, not yet, it was still a little too early for that. But I was too happy to even think about the pain of turning into seafood. I don't know how long I looked at myself in the mirror but it was long enough for my best friend

to come knocking on the door and ask me if I was okay. I let him in and noticed that my mother had either gone out or gone to bed because all the lights in the place were off and there were no signs of life at all. Having the house all to yourself never hurt nobody.

"Oh darn!" Tamerlane exclaimed when he saw me, "Burnt seafood!"

"Yeah, I burned my dinner," I said in a much more serious tone of voice, "and this is gonna hurt."

"Put some ointment right away to avoid you the pain in the morning."

"I don't think I have any anymore, I used it all up last time."

"In the future it may be cheaper to just buy sunscreen."

"I'll keep that in mind."

I somewhat felt like playfully slugging him in the shoulder where I had tattooed him but I knew that he wasn't his usual self so I decided to hug him in the doorway instead. The light that usually radiated from deep inside of him had faded and for some reason I felt the childlike happiness that I hadn't felt in a long time just because I had my best friend close to me even though I didn't have a dime to my name and I was completely destitute. Tamerlane had always prided himself in his self-reliance and he had never been in quite a hopeless situation like that before. He let out a loud sigh when I put my arms around him before squeezing me tightly against him. After a moment of emotional intensity on both our parts, we let each other go. I took the opportunity to look into those chocolate eyes. Tamerlane stuck his tongue out at me when he noticed what I was doing, which was pretty much immediately.

"Let's go out to the drug store and get you some ointment for that lobster tan, or more like lobster burn, of yours," he said softly, "there's one open all night not too far from here."

"You don't even a dollar in your name," I protested as I grabbed his hand and tried to make him stay.

"I do have enough to buy you some cream."

"Please stop thinking that you constantly need to take care of me. I'm not that little girl scared of the dark anymore like when we were ten."

Even back when we were younger we'd love to stay up late, but I didn't like going too far after the dark settled in because I was a believer that monsters lurked out there, and as I got older I only came to believe it more. When Tamerlane and I hung out at the park or somewhere in town after dark, he always held my hand to come home. Unlike him, I'd never really had either one of my parents to guide me in life and he had come to take the job upon himself to take me under his wing and take care of me. Even though I had come to being independent over the years, that mentality had never left his mind. He

was always going to be my older brother in some way after all. I couldn't hold it against him, I could only be grateful to have been blessed enough to have him in my life.

"Come on Caroline!" Tamerlane nagged me when I didn't let go of his hand.

"Okay, well wait a minute," I replied, "maybe there's money hidden around here somewhere."

My mother and her boyfriend had their hiding places for money around the house. We'd had our place broken into a couple of times and the thieves usually went for wallets, jewelry boxes, and the like, but they rarely looked in empty cans of Maxwell House sitting in plain sight on the kitchen table. And sure enough there was a can of coffee on the counter so I opened it right up but as I did, all the kitchen lights turned on to expose me with two \$50 bills in my hand. I was taken aback when I saw my mother and Bailey come up from the basement. I had previously thought that Tamerlane and I had been alone in the house, and they had thought that they had been alone too because we were all equally shocked to see each other. Bailey hated Tamerlane simply because of the color of his skin and I knew that there was going to be hell to pay being caught redhanded in his stash of money for alcohol and other stuff necessary for his bitter and volatile existence.

Bailey immediately burst into a complete meltdown and attempted to attack me but Tamerlane tackled him to the ground long before he could lay a finger on me. I ran to my room and grabbed my backpack along with a blanket and ran outside as fast as I could. I ran all the way to the end of the street and stood by the stop sign until Tammy arrived less than five minutes later. He grabbed me by the hand and walked me to the nearest pharmacy open all night. Underneath the streetlights I could see that he'd been punched in the face pretty badly and there was blood on his shirt but he didn't complain about it, he didn't even speak about it. I felt unbelievably guilty because I was the only reason he ever got himself in trouble. If he had to get belligerent with somebody, it was because of me. If he ever had to go against his beliefs and values, it was because of me. If he'd ever have to lay down his life, it was going to be because of me.

We both remained completely silent on our short walk to the pharmacy. It was rather chilly at night but we'd be alright. Once we got to the pharmacy I bought some tissues and bandages while Tamerlane went to the bathroom to clean himself up. I then barged into the men's bathroom and saw that he'd been given a bloody nose by my mother's boyfriend and he still had blood on his neck. He had a scratch over his eyebrow but that seemed to be the full extent of his visible injuries. He held his right hand in his left one as if he was in pain but I had no trouble believing that the Conqueror had beaten up Bailey to a pulp and came out on top like a true warrior. Tamerlane let me clean him up without protest and without speaking but the emotions were building up inside of me and I felt like I needed to apologize to him for all that I had done but I didn't know where to begin. I was just as blank inside as I had been before.

"I'm sorry," I muttered, not knowing what else to say.

"You have nothing to be sorry for," he reassured me with a gentle smile.

"This happened to you because of me. And that's just what happened today. I have *a lot* to be sorry for."

"No, that's not true. This happened to me because you didn't want me to take care of you. It's better me than you. I'm Tamerlane the Conqueror after all."

I leaned forward and I kissed his forehead before pressing my face up against his. I could feel my lobster burn crying out for pain relief but I didn't pull away until the warrior pushed me away gently. The only reason he did was to mock my sunburn with the kind of humor that only he could use to make a crappy day turn into a much better one.

"You didn't buy some lotion," Tamerlane reminded me, "and you're precisely the reason why we wanted to come here in the first place."

A smile was the only thing I could give him. We both walked out of the bathroom when another man walked in. He was surprised to see a woman in the men's bathroom but I apologized and then walked out giggling. Tamerlane went straight to find me some relief lotion and paid for it with the remnants of his own money and then covered my face and my neck with it while we were still in the store. I sighed loudly at him still behaving like he needed to save me from the rest of the world. Maybe he did after all.

"I wouldn't be a good brother to you if I didn't do this," he reminded me, "and maybe one day I won't be around to do it, so enjoy it."

"Come on Tamerlane," I spoke softly, "you're the great ruler of the world."

"Now you tell me that I'm a hero after telling me that Tamerlane was a terrorist for half of my life!"

"Hey! Don't give me a reason to slap your tattoo!"

"Don't forget who you're dealing with here!"

"But seriously! Yeah, Tamerlane committed insane atrocities but you can't deny that he was a great and powerful man for accomplishing everything that he did and building such an empire. You'll never see a war without a little blood and a warrior without a little tarnish on his medals. The name does mean *iron* after all."

Tamerlane leaned forward to smooch me on the cheek but then recoiled when he got too close to me and smelled the stench of the ointment he'd just put on me. We both giggled before we walked back outside into the night. It looked like we'd both be spending the night under a bridge or something similar because I wasn't about to go back home to the mess that had just taken place there and Tamerlane was too prideful to return home empty-handed. Across the street from the pharmacy there was a motel and as we walked outside a man was dragging his two screaming kids into the lobby of the motel room while his wife trailed behind him with what looked like a very important

briefcase in one hand and a handbag in the other. I already had a headache for the poor guy and the other people trying to sleep in there.

"One day I want to have a house full of kids," Tamerlane quietly commented as we watched for a brief moment from across the street.

"Have fun," I muttered out, "having kids will ruin your life."

"Come on George! Kids make your life awesome! It's an excuse to not act like an adult!"

"That's not what my mother told me." "You are not your mother."

"But I'm also not you."

With those words I knew I had cornered him. But then one of his usual goofy smiles appeared on his face and I knew I was about to be teased.

"Well, when you do have children you will have to name the firstborn Tamerlane regardless of if it's a boy or a girl," he spoke slowly trying not to crack up laughing, "or maybe Tammy for a girl."

I began laughing too but then a strong gust of wind blew through the street and brought me back to reality with a cold chill. I was officially homeless. Only temporarily, yes, but that still didn't change the fact that I was homeless to begin with.

"Take this money," I instructed Tamerlane as I took out the cash, "and give it to your mom and go home."

"No," he replied dryly, and I knew not to make any further comments on the subject matter.

He gently grabbed me by the arm and we started walking towards the waterfront. There were a lot of abandoned buildings there that we'd be able to stay in. There was no way I was going to a shelter for women or for homeless people. George and Tammy were staying together, end of story.

"What did your mother tell you before you left?" I asked after a long moment of silence with nothing but the sound of traffic in the distance.

"She told me that she loved me," Tamerlane replied softly.

I knew too well not to tell him that we should go back to his place. Instead of opening my mouth I kept it shut and walked faithfully beside him. I trusted that he had a plan. Between the two of us he had always been the one who was prepared. Once we got to the waterfront we attempted to shack up for the night in an old abandoned building but the stench of mold burned in your lungs with each breath you took. It didn't take long before we both got out of there but the smell stayed with me for a while. I imagined having to live in buildings that smelled like that for the rest of my days. I couldn't fathom

that. I didn't want to. Something had to give. But what was there to be given when there was nothing to be taken? After about twenty minutes of looking around for someplace half-decent to camp for the night without any luck we decided to walk up the hill right behind the houses on the waterfront where there was a large but beaten up wood fence that could shield us from the wind in the parking lot of a Target store that had long since closed its doors.

There was honestly nothing to be said so I placed my blanket on the ground and Tamerlane and I laid down in it with our heads resting on the makeshift pillow that was a backpack. Tamerlane put his arm around me and held me against him so we could both stay warm. We pulled the remainder of the blanket over us since it was rather chilly at night on the pavement of an abandoned lot. All I could hear was Tammy's shallow breathing, cars in the distance and the waves splashing up on the shore beyond the fence. There were streetlights in the distance but it was mostly the moonlight and the stars that provided most of the light in the parking lot. The sky was clear and the millions of stars up there formed beautiful patterns to gaze into eternity. I wondered if there were any realms beyond what the eyes could see. There was so much beauty, how could there not be?

"Be careful so you don't get burned by that moonlight!" Tamerlane joked.

"You can't get *moonburned* for your information!" I retorted giggling, "It's not called a *sunburn* for nothing!"

The two of us cracked up laughing like only we could. Despite everything, there was still laughter in our souls and joy in our hearts. I was definitely worried about what the future would hold, if there was a future to be seen at all. It was unwritten, but I had dropped the pen to write it. I tried not to think too much since I knew too well that the art of over thinking something was nothing more than creating problems that wouldn't otherwise exist. So I dared to stare at the stars and the endless galaxy stretched out before me. Eventually lethargy won the fight my body had put up against it once the adrenaline had completely drained out of my system. And so I dozed off underneath an infinite blanket of stars in the safety of my best friend's arms and only a slight breeze blowing over the fence. And no getting burned by the light of the moon.

The sky had just begun to turn a light blue when I awoke again merely four hours later. I was sore and cold but my sleep had been peaceful and undisturbed by the elements around me. Tamerlane was already awake but he hadn't left my side. Once he saw that I was awake he removed the humid blanket from over us and got up to stretch. I did the same but not before begging my body to let me rest just a little bit more, but to no avail. I was getting up and getting ready to face the day ahead no matter what. For a fraction of a second I wanted to break down and cry. In my sleep I had no such troubles as being homeless and destitute but in my waking hours, I couldn't quite stop my current situation from looming over my head. Not when it was right in front of my face. Not when my face still burned and itched. And especially not when the flame of hope inside my soul had stopped burning completely.



"Good morning George," Tammy greeted me, "did you sleep well?"

"Morning!" I sighed, "I could sleep more. I never realized how hard asphalt really was."

"Sleeping on it is definitely different than falling on it."

"You got that right!"

Once I got on my feet I leaned against the fence next to Tamerlane for a few moments before getting on the tip of my toes to peer over it. I was taken aback by what I saw over it. Despite being in a rather impoverished neighborhood on the east side of the waterfront, right over the fence stood a large three-storey house worth a very minimum of half a million dollars. I had never really paid too much attention to the waterfront before since I never hung out there, but that particular morning seeing the house slapped me in the face more than it should have. I climbed onto the fence and sat on it to examine the house more closely. Only a couple of lights were on in the front but the sky was becoming lighter by the minute so it became easier to see the overly perfect features of the back of the house, the pool on the second- storey deck and the biggest BBQ grill I had ever seen in the backyard next to some stone decorations that were probably worth more than my actual existence.

"It's the first time that I actually notice this," I commented in a blank tone of voice.

"I always knew it was there," Tamerlane replied in a similar tone of voice, "but I had neglected to realize how big it really was until now."

"I don't understand how some people can have all the money in the world and others don't have money at all. How some people eat too much and become obese while others don't have anything to eat and die of hunger."

"Believe me when I tell you that I wish I had all the answers to those questions, but I hold on to the belief that one day everything will be balanced."

"Not in this life that's for sure, the big guys always win. No matter what you do to rise up against them, they always get the last word."

"God gets the last word, I believe that. If you wrong others your judgment will be awaiting."

I bit my bottom lip, somewhat in anger at unfairness in general, and somewhat at not being able to comprehend life itself. How had it come to such a point? Why wasn't it different? Why didn't anyone do something about it? Why didn't I do anything about it?

"Do you really believe there is a God?" I asked Tamerlane in a rather coarse tone of voice.

"Yes," he replied softly, "there has to be. I cannot suffer my whole life and then just die and there's nothing waiting for me on the other side. I have to believe that some form of justice will be served at some point."

"Cause there's no justice here."

"You can't have justice without mercy or mercy without justice. There needs to be a delicate balance of both, there needs to be fairness, and equilibrium. No, I don't believe anyone should ever be condemned, but people also shouldn't get away with things."

"I think that if people helped each other instead of destroying each other there would be much more peace and harmony going on around here."

"I agree with you, but the best you can do is live at peace with yourself."

I bit my lip again. There was no such thing as peace inside this troubled soul of mine. There was no peace in seeing one of the lights in the house come on and someone about to leave for a big important job in a big building touching the sky when I'd have to fight to live another day without knowing if I was ever going to see tomorrow. Suddenly I became rather distressed as a wave of anger flooded over me. I could not remain idle.

"There's something I've gotta do," I muttered in a voice barely louder than a whisper.

I swallowed hard, there was more I wanted to say but I was afraid that my voice would crack and that Tamerlane would have to come rescue me again. I had gotten him into this mess and I was going to get him out of it. And so I let myself slide off the fence and land on the little ledge on the other side.

"What in the world are you doing?!" Tamerlane almost shouted at me.

"I'm going to create some justice for myself in this life," I muttered, trying to sound confident when in reality I was shaking with fear inside.

"Please don't tell me that you're going to try to rob these people or something of the like!" Tamerlane shouted angrily as he too jumped off the fence and came down the ledge behind me, "They haven't done anything to you! They aren't the ones who made our lives this way!"

Logic and reason went down the drain as adrenaline began pumping through my veins. Someone had just left the house in a Mercedes-Benz so I figured that if I came in and made just a little noise the other tenants, if any, would think that it was the guy that just left who came to pick up something he'd forgotten. But even if they pulled a gun on me or called the police, I only wanted a taste of the power that had been taken from me long before I was even born. I wanted to be the one on top, I didn't want to be the one suffering anymore.

"Lord help me," Tamerlane sighed as he caught up to me, "my best friend doesn't know what she's doing!"

I turned around and slapped him in the shoulder. He didn't cringe too much, his tattoo had probably began to heal up nicely since I had done it, but he still attempted to grab my hand and pull me back.

"There's nothing you can do to stop me now," I told him harshly, "just wait outside."

"What are you even going to do?" he asked me in a gentle voice.

What was I going to do? I hadn't even thought about that because it didn't matter to me. I walked across the small yard and climbed up onto the deck on the second floor where there was a nice sliding door that wasn't even locked! Security was really nothing more than a state of mind. No locks or alarms or weapons could really keep the danger away. That was something I had learned the hard way. Once inside the house everything was dark but I could still see. There was barely any furniture or decorations in the hallways. The place seemed depressingly bleak, more like a box than a mansion. I tiptoed down the stairwell to the first floor where the kitchen was. Food is really what I wanted more than money. I looked outside through the large dinning room windows and opened one up for Tamerlane to come into the house. He approached but didn't enter. He wasn't going to tell anyone that I had broken into a house but he wasn't going to participate either.

In front of me there was a huge stainless steel fridge. I imagined it being filled with kingsize cakes and other delicious things so I opened it up and attacked the first block of cheese I saw once I opened the door. A few moments later I heard some footsteps behind me. I figured it was Tamerlane who had come to pig out in some free food too. Since I had found the food I had become a little less filled with rage. I figured that I'd just take some food and maybe a statue and leave without doing much harm. In prison I wouldn't have to worry about not having food or shelter, but the one thing that meant the most to me in life was far away from those barbwire fences. It was a young man with huge brown eyes and the sweetest smile in the whole world. I grabbed a second block of cheese and turned around to hand it to Tamerlane but who I saw was a young woman in a nightgown walking my way. As soon as she saw me she began screaming.

I was taken aback just as much as she was and ended up dropping the large block of cheese on my foot and shouted in anger. The woman immediately ran into the other hallway and I took the opportunity to take a couple of things from the fridge and ran for the open window but Tamerlane had come in through it and was running in my direction but everything happened so fast that I didn't get the chance to fully realize what was going on around me before my best friend tackled me to the ground and I heard a gunshot. The fruits and the cheese and the jar of peanut butter went flying on the other side of the large kitchen and rolled on the floor, hitting the edge of a counter and coming back rolling towards me. The side of my head hit the floor hard and Tamerlane's upper body landed over me while his legs landed next to me. Next to me I saw a bullet hole in the island counter and around me I saw a pool of blood.

But it wasn't my blood, I hadn't been shot. I wasn't injured, I had merely banged my head. It was my best friend and brother who'd taken the bullet for me. The bullet had

entered the side of his neck and came out on the side of his mouth, leaving a gaping wound in his jaw. He put his hands over the side of his face but he couldn't stop the bleeding. I kneeled down next to him and tried to help him but there was little I could do to help him. The woman dropped the gun once she saw the damage she had done to Tamerlane's face and called 911. Although I heard her yelling and crying over the phone I couldn't make out what she was saying. The gun blast had deafened me and the adrenaline pumping through my veins blocked out any logic and reasoning once again. The only thing I could really bring myself to do was hold my best friend in my arms one last time without knowing if anyone was really going to help him or not. He'd always been a warrior, but even warriors need rescuing sometimes.

"I need Tamerlane the Conqueror right now!" I managed to choke out as the air came flooding back into my lungs and setting my airways on fire in the process.

I let out a loud and exasperated sigh and started to cry when Tammy squeezed my arm with one hand. The warm dark red blood dripped all over me, his hair, and the floor. The woman had since gotten off the phone and brought a blanket for Tamerlane who had lost a considerable amount of blood and was about to go into shock.

"Please remember me," he choked up in a barely audible voice as he was coughing up blood.

"I couldn't forget you even if I tried!" I shouted out as my tears fell on his face.

"Do something good in memory of me," he tried to speak louder, "and help people instead of condemning them."

"I will," I spoke as softly as I could to reassure him, "I promise you that I will."

Finally the paramedics barged in through the door and gave Tamerlane first aid before strapping him up to a stretcher and bringing him outside to the waiting ambulance. The no name woman took me by the hand and brought me out to watch him being hauled away. She held me tightly in her arms, probably trying to calm herself down more than to comfort me, and repeatedly muttering out in barely audible mumbles that everything was going to be okay. The paramedics closed the back door of the ambulance and did their best to fix up Tamerlane on the spot before a doctor could work on him but it only took a few seconds before one paramedic looked at the other with a frown on his face and shaking his head. He was gone. Forever. The conqueror had lost the fight. But he'd gone out a hero. He'd given his life protecting the person he loved the most. Tamerlane Rodriguez had been my Superman all the way up until he took his last breath.

I collapsed into the arms of the woman as my legs gave out. Even she couldn't hold me, and after a few moments we both wound up on the ground as the sun was rising in the distance and a swarm of police cars arrived. It was all over. I raised up both my arms in surrender when a police officer approached me, but he didn't cuff me. Instead he put a blanket around me, took me in his arms and walked me to his car. He sat me down in it and asked me to tell him what had happened. I told him everything. I knew I wouldn't be

able to get out of it so what was the use of lying? I had gotten my best friend killed. I could've lied to the police all I wanted but I'd never be able to lie to myself. I knew what I'd done. I couldn't fathom not looking into those big chocolatey brown eyes again. The hardest part was knowing that he'd loved me enough to die for me. What ate away at me inside was knowing that he shouldn't've had to do that.

Down at the police station I wasn't charged with murder. I wasn't even charged with break and enter or robbery, or anything, as a matter of fact. The woman and her husband asked to drop all charges and to get me some *help* instead of some jail time but I'd have to be processed in a court of law anyway. Part of me *wanted* to go to prison and to rot in there for the rest of my life, I quite frankly deserved it, but in the back of my mind I could almost hear Tamerlane's voice telling me that nobody deserved to suffer. I literally heard his sweet voice boldly telling me that he was Tamerlane the Conqueror and he'd never let the world trample on me. From that moment on I knew I'd be looking up at the stars at night and wondering if he was somewhere up there reminding me that even though I couldn't always see him, he'd always be present. From that moment on he'd have the best seat in the house.

"I could easily put you away for most of your life," the judge spoke at my hearing, "but my job isn't to condemn you. My job is fundamentally to attempt to separate the right from the wrong. What you did was terrible, but it would be unfair of me to take away something that you don't even have. Instead I'm going to show you mercy and compassion and choose to give you a second chance, a chance for you to do something good with your life, like your friend would've wanted."

I didn't speak. I had my head bowed down low as the judge handed me down my sentence.

"You are sentenced to one year probation and community service," he said, "your probation officer will make living arrangements for you and set you up with an organization for positive reintegration into society as well as counselling to help you cope with trauma you've endured in your life."

The food bank was where I was sent for a year. I tackled it head on. I didn't pass up any chance I got to help someone because I knew too well what it was like to be in their shoes; lonely, hungry, looked down upon, hopeless. I was so good at my job that I got a promotion to manager even though I didn't get paid. When my time was almost over I got a chance to help other troubled souls as they were given community service at the food bank too. One young woman named Celina even volunteered at the food bank when her brother was given community service there just to keep him company and be a shoulder to cry on for him. I never told them how much it actually reminded me of who Tamerlane used to be to me but I tried to make it obvious with each breath I took. All I did, I did in memory of him. Most days I in fact felt too small to change a life. I wasn't a warrior, never had been, never would be, even if I had that word tattooed on my wrist in Arabic.

"Caroline," one of my coworkers barged into the back office one afternoon as I was doing some paperwork, "you will not believe this!"

"What's going on?" I asked in a monotone voice, not particularly interested in what was going on in front since I didn't work that position anymore.

"There are some people here, who have some six- figure income at the end of the year and they say that they don't have enough to eat. They won't leave until they talk to the manager."

"Alright, I'm coming."

I smacked the pen down on the desk and dragged my feet down the little hallway up until I arrived at the counter in the front. Sure enough, there was a man and a woman with three kids standing there, sticking out like sore thumbs because they were particularly well dressed compared to everyone else who usually walked through those doors to get a free bag of food upon approval. Two of my coworkers had their arms crossed and frowns on their faces as they all waited for me to send them away. There wasn't much I'd be able to do that they hadn't already done, but I figured that I should at least listen to their side of the story first.

"Are you the manager?" the man asked me in a foreign accent.

"Yes," I replied in a bleak tone of voice as I walked over to where they were standing.

A little dark-haired boy with big brown eyes took cover behind his mother's leg once I got too close. He seemed particularly shy, even afraid maybe. I couldn't help but think back to the very first time I had met little Tamerlane Rodriguez in the park. He had once been a little shy kid who didn't even look at me, but had grown up to be a bold young man who was very affectionate around his loved ones but still somewhat reserved around strangers. A young man who believed in justice and making things right, who had since become an angel in heaven.

"What's your name?" I asked the boy as I kneeled down close to him.

At first he didn't speak. He looked fearfully at me for a few moments until I extended my hand towards him in hopes that it would motivate him to come out of his shell.

"It's Tamerlane."

# AFTER ANDERSON

If you enjoyed reading this collection of short stories for free, please consider supporting my writing by purchasing one of my paid books available in paperback, ebook and audiobook almost everywhere you usually get your books! I recommend my newest release, *After Anderson*. You can also visit me at [www.jamilamikhail.com](http://www.jamilamikhail.com) for more information about this book and others.

## **After Anderson**

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*The day that Anderson brought a gun to school was the day Aly's life changed forever. Her fellow classmates were murdered right before her eyes as her former best friend embarked on the deadliest high school massacre since Columbine. Now, nearly two years later, Aly sets foot in the halls that nearly cost her her life for the first time since the shooting, ready to face her demons.*

*Unanswered questions linger, anxiety abounds and flashbacks are frequent as Aly struggles to understand how Anderson could've mercilessly gunned down her friends and classmates and how she's not only going to forgive him, but herself as well, for the role she might have played in influencing his actions.*

*Was she to blame? Did she have blood on her hands? Could she have done something more? Could anyone have done anything more? Aly sets out to find the elusive answers to just that as she also attempts to rebuild the life that was shattered by gunfire that otherwise quiet Friday morning nearly two years prior.*

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# AFTER ANDERSON

AFTERMATH OF A TRAGEDY

JAMILA MIKHAIL