

## **Night In with My Monster**

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**Smashwords Edition**

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### **Chapter 1 - Trouble**

Ford made his way under Becky's bed, lying flat on his back. In his right hand, he gripped the handle of a knife in the front pocket of the navy blue hooded sweatshirt he wore. In the furthest reaches of his mind, where the madness roamed rampant he envisioned the blade drenched in blood, the warm, crimson liquid dripping onto his hand.

The thumping music from the party hosted downstairs made him feel like a child again. He had spent his younger years in Las Vales, the city of sin, spin and win, alongside his show business parents. He had called many casino hotels that would book his parents, home and the parties those days were endless.

The wait for tonight's host of the high school graduation party, Becky, continued, his heart pounding louder with each passing second. It wasn't long until the music below stopped but his waited resumed. He wondered what took the party-animal so long to come to bed: maybe she was passed out downstairs in a drunken haze, uploading pictures to her online profile, or cleaning before her parents arrived the next morning.

Ford grunted and started to slide from beneath the bed, though the moment he did so the silver doorknob turned, prompting him to quickly return to his previous position. Becky entered the room, her bare feet thumping against the soft, pink carpet of her room.

She sat on her bed. "I can't believe Ella puked on the couch. Idiot," she muttered to herself, disgusted.

Becky stood from her bed and headed over to her rooms closet. She yanked the doors open and started to undress. Ford had two options: surprise her from behind, forcing her to wonder about his identity, or meet her face-to-face, quickly ending her without any dramatics. The time for a decision ticked away, Becky slipped on an over-sized, plain t-shirt, though the choice came easily for him. It had been a long time since he had slashed, and he wanted the dramatics.

Ford silently crawled from beneath the bed, removed his weapon, and positioned himself behind Becky. Unaware of his presence, she fluffed her blonde hair and started to turn towards her bed. Ford wrapped his left arm around her waist and his right around her neck, making sure the blade in his hand was positioned parallel before her eyes.

He rested his jaw against her shoulder. "If you scream, you die."

Becky trembled, her eyes shut. "This isn't funny. The party is over."

"This isn't a joke, though I think you already know that."

"Please don't kill me, my father has money."

"I'm sure he does. You have nothing."

"He will pay you if you let me live," she bargained.

"That's sweet; he must really love you."

A tear streamed down her cheek. "I'm a good person."

He pressed the knife against her cheek. "And I'm a mad one."

Becky started to struggle aggressively in his arms, punching with her restrained arms, pushing away from her attacker. He was surprised at her will to survive, so much so that he nearly let her slip away. She let out a scream that left his ears ringing, though the familiar tune made him smile. Ford, still positioned behind her, took his knife and drove it into her stomach, her screams halting and turning into grunts as the hard steel cut through layers of her soft flesh. He removed the blade from her stomach and shoved her against her closet door. The bloody blade caught his attention, though it distracted him for only a moment.

Becky slid down to her knees, leaving a trail of blood against her closet door. Ford drove the knife twice into her lower back and stepped away, a broad grin splitting his face. As her breaths faded, so did the thrill of the kill. Only a few seconds after the slashing the thrill he craved for months and the guilt had already set in. He returned his weapon to his pocket and calmly left the home of a dead girl.

He headed across the street and started towards his car, two blocks away from the slashing scene. The autumn wind blew, ruffling the leaves of the gently swaying palm as well as Ford's dark, low-cut hair.

A slasher came here tonight to feed a craving and a human left, regretting taking the life of a young girl. The man who walked now was a completely different person from the mad man who had entered the party only a few hours ago. Ford was like many others in this world.

There were movies depicting their behavior, and quite accurately if truth be told. The reality and onscreen scenarios were similar. His first slashing mirrored the script of the movie 'Bloody Beach Bash'. A young couple snuck away from a bonfire, decided to make-out in a parked car, only for him to slip in and stab them both to death. Unlike in the movies, the credits didn't eventually role, his life resumed along with his slasher behavior.

He arrived at his car, a dark four-door. After a short struggle to unlock the dented door, Ford entered his car and started home. His family had arrived in Draper, Carolina six years ago. A lot about them had changed since their arrival, but this town remained the same. The coastline weather rarely dampened his days and the people remained friendly, unsuspecting. He resided a few miles away from the suburbs, in an apartment complex.

He parked his car and entered the maze of apartment buildings. The monthly rent made it nearly impossible to enjoy the luxuries of life. He was one of the many in the country living from paycheck-to-paycheck, and soon his unemployment benefits would expire, leaving him even more desperate, searching for employment. He arrived at complex 'M', which contained four apartments. He headed up the steel staircase, unlocked his door, and entered his one bedroom apartment.

Ford flipped the nearest light switch to discover his power had been shut off. He laughed, knowing stressing would not reinstate the electricity. Continuing towards his bedroom, he kicked off his sneakers, sending them flying into the darkness. He dug into his pocket, the memory of his furniture arrangement present in his mind, and sat the blade down on his kitchen table.

"Bad night?" a voice in the darkness asked.

"Horrible," Ford responded.

He headed into his bedroom, crashed to his creaking bed, and drifted off to sleep.

The next morning Ford awoke, the sun blazing through his room window blinds and his clothes glued to his sweaty body. He stood from his bed, the lack of an air conditioner adding to the heat index within his apartment. Ford took off the hooded sweatshirt he fell asleep wearing. He was disgusting, he knew. His teeth coated with plaque and his armpits emitting a stench. He exited from his bedroom and headed across the hall for a quick shower.

The first item he spotted upon leaving the bathroom was the crimson stained knife resting on his kitchen table, crusted blood peeling off onto the tabletop. He rushed over, removing it from the round, mahogany table, and tossed it into the sink. He turned the handle on the sink faucet to make it as hot as possible, running the steaming water on the knife, and watching as the blood came off and swirled down the drain. He loathed the aftermath of a slashing: the guilt, feeling like a monster that preyed on a hapless, helpless society. He knew he was more than a slasher, yet it had such a strong presence in his life for so long since the age of sixteen. Ford turned off the water and turned away from his sink. He needed to think; the normal part of him needed his attentions.

He took a seat on his dingy, dark green couch. "I'm in trouble, Rubble."

The limbless teddy bear that sat on his couch shrugged. "There's not much I can do about that, is there?"

Ford glanced down at the handicapped, murderous stuffed-animal. "There never is."

"Maybe, if you sew me on some new limbs, I can kill, while you search the victims for loose change."

"No more slashing," Ford snapped, "I'm done."

"A slasher, who doesn't slash," Rubble chuckled. "A novel idea."

Ford bristled at the pathetic bear's arrogance. He did not like how Rubble made light of his slasher tendencies, but did not take it personally. Not anymore. Rubble had been a gift from his aunt when he was eight years old. In the

past, they had both attempted to wrong each other, Ford being the more successful. Eventually, the murderous bear had attempted to kill him. After a struggle and a painful roll down a set of basement stairs, a young Ford managed to remove Rubble's limbs. He was young, but wise, a fan of many movies related to the frightful scenario. Instead of trashing the stuffed animal and risking it returning repaired, Ford held him captive to this day.

Ford ignored the bear's foul humor. "I need money."

"I need limbs, a knife, the body a young human boy, and a soul transferal spell."

Ford stood from the couch and slipped on his worn sneakers. "You want unattainable things."

"If I had a heart, that statement would have crushed it."

Ford headed towards his apartment door. "Instead you're stuffed with cheap cotton and evil."

"Where are you heading?" Rubble shouted as Ford opened the door.

"To get money." The slasher shielded his eyes from the blaring sun. "Damn, it's hot."

Ford made his journey downstairs to the blisteringly hot parking lot. It was autumn; the leaves were falling, painting the town orange, brown, and yellow. Visually the season was apparent, but only after dusk could you feel the cool winds of the approaching winter. During the day, the sun dominated, as it always did.

He struggled as usual to unlock his car door and climbed in to be greeted by an even more intense heat than on the outside. Carefully, he started the car, the seat and steering wheel burning his hands. Ford powered on the radio, jamming to whatever pop song was the flavor of the month. He wasn't a music enthusiast and was not ashamed to bob his head to a song about a girl proud to hail from the sunshine state and sip martinis near her pool. He shamelessly found it to be catchy.

He loved driving through Draper. Historic buildings occupied the downtown area, most painted soft colors you could identify in the rainbow. The young women from the local college walked the sidewalks while wearing as little clothing as possible and the skateboarders tumbled in the streets, creating unnecessary traffic jams. In the air, you could smell food from the endless amounts of locally owned restaurants. Sometimes, the atmosphere almost convinced Ford that the madness in the world didn't exist. A madness that he was a part of.

He arrived at a beachside, soft blue home, beside similar residences. A glossy, apple red convertible was parked in the pebbled stone driveway. He made his way to the white door of the home, decorated with a seashell wreath. Ford used his key to let himself in. The majority of the windows were open, the decorating scheme reminding him of a beach cabana. A towering, tan skinned woman, with flowing dark hair stepped from the kitchen.

Ford smirked, delivered a wave and let out a monotone, "Hey."

Harriet mockingly returned the gesture, "Hey."

"No fair, other-mother," he whined sarcastically, "Don't make fun of me."

Harriet, sporting a two-piece, pink bikini, approached him. "Greet me like you're glad to see me."

He took another attempt, adding a bit of enthusiasm, "Hey gorgeous!"

"Hello my pride and joy, what brings you here?"

"I'm going to be an irresponsible adult about this and directly say...I need money."

"If you had finished culinary school you would probably have a great job and savings by now."

After slashing the woman who taught the baking course Ford had become uncomfortable showing up to the class. It wasn't long until he abandoned all his courses at the community college and started working at a video rental store. He fooled himself into thinking that job would last, but it only took a few months for the company to file for bankruptcy in the tough economy. His passion for cooking still lingered, but he lacked the drive to re-enroll in any classes. The slasher's main focus was now on controlling the madness inside.

"Thanks for reminding me of my poor life decisions, but how about that money?"

Harriet laughed. "I'm scrapped for cash."

"It doesn't look that way. I'm sure beach side property, a convertible, and gender reorientation surgery weren't included together in a discounted package. I just need about one hundred dollars to get my electricity reconnected. I'll pay you back once I get my unemployment check. My house feels like a sauna, other-mom."

Harriet strutted away. "That reminds me, I have a sauna appointment." And returned to the kitchen.

Ford followed Harriet, formerly known as Harry, and entered the kitchen. "Other-mom, I'm not trying to invade your financial privacy, but don't you have money left over from your show business days? This is an emergency. What if I return home, take a nap, and end up dying in my sleep from dehydration?"

Harriet resumed slicing a watermelon that sat on her kitchen table. "Fine, stay here."

"Honestly, who wants to spend more time with their parents?"

Harriet twisted her lips. "That was mean."

"I'm sorry, dad...I mean other-mom."

Harriet aimed her knife at him. "And that was just evil."

"It's only been a few years since your surgery, I'm still adjusting. Now, about that money?"

"Not until tomorrow, I'm in debt at the moment. I made a large purchase."

"What did you buy?"

Harriet rested her knife on the glass table, stood and excitedly made her way out of the kitchen. She returned carrying a large mirror, the frame golden and encrusted with diamonds. "I brought this from a shop downtown yesterday, it was worth every penny. Isn't it spectacular?"

Ford nodded at it, not amused. "Yeah neat, how much was it?"

“Just about four thousand dollars, but it was tax free.”  
“Other-mom, all mirrors work exactly alike. Why this one?”  
She motioned at the frame. “The price is in the artwork.”  
“Great, I’m in the dark and the heat, but at least you have a nice mirror.”  
Harriet placed the mirror back in the living room and returned. “I have a question.”  
Ford rested his back against the stainless steel refrigerator. “I’m listening.”  
Harriet tugged at her bikini top. “How are my titties looking?”  
Ford banged the back of his head against the freezer door. “Are you serious?”  
“I noticed some guy staring at them. Are they lopsided?”  
“He was staring because they’re tits, not observing their positioning.”  
She blew out a sigh. “You’re right. I get frazzled sometimes.”  
“Get used to the attention other-mom. You’re a woman now, men will stare.”  
She struck a pose, puckering her lips. “Are you saying I’m attractive?”  
This moment surpassed all past awkward moments in Ford’s twenty years of existence.  
Harriet fluffed her hair, attempting to maintain her pose. “Answer, I’m cramping.”  
“And I’m leaving.” Ford stepped away from the refrigerator. “Have fun with your mirror.”  
Harriet shouted after him, “Call me tomorrow about the money, okay?”  
“Of course,” He responded as he exited the home.

Ford climbed back into his car and drove back towards his apartment. Sighing, he knew his other-mom had the money, but purposely made him wait. The process always played out this way, even when he was a child. He would ask for something, be denied and receive it on a later day. His other-mom explained it was to prevent him from transforming into a show business brat.

It frustrated a young Ford to no end, but today he was thankful. Most of the show-children he grew up with, those he had considered friends, had received anything they requested from their parents. Soon the behavior led to more extreme requests from others beside their parents, drugs and alcohol. He was busy playing with action figures that took him three months to get, while his friends were in the hotel basement sniffing coke, already bored with their toys.

He arrived back to his apartment. As he walked toward his complex building, he noticed a dark-haired woman standing on his porch. He arrived upstairs to find her holding a plastic garbage bag in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She wore a tight, faded-pink tank top, the sight of her nipples imprinted in the shirt proving she wasn’t wearing a bra, and a pair of tattered jeans and leather combat boots. The rough-faced woman smiled at him, revealing her yellowing teeth.

Ford’s attention was on the bag, not greeting her. “Mom, what’s that?”  
She strained as she raised the bag. “Some shit.”  
“Stolen shit?”

“I sure didn’t pay for it,” she proudly blurted out.

Ford thumbed over his shoulder. “My neighbor is a cop.”

“Your neighbor,” Valarie raised her voice, “Can lick my pale ass!”

Ford shook his head as he passed his mother who smelled like beer and wet denim. He opened his apartment door, letting her in. She cut before him and headed into kitchen. Valarie put out her cigarette in her palm and carefully shoved it into her pocket. She rested the garbage bag on the kitchen table and began digging through it.

Ford joined her. “And what do you bring today? Clothes that don’t fit?”

She removed a DVD player. “Entertainment.”

“I have a DVD player.” He noticed the cut power cord. “And this is damaged anyways.”

She returned it to the bag. “Fine, I’ll give it to Leroy.”

“Leroy?”

“Yeah, he’s this kid I blow for smokes. About your age.”

He regretted asking.

She continued digging through her bag. “I have some used panties if you’re into that stuff.”

“No mom and why would you steal used panties?”

She smirked. “A special request for this guy I know. He’s a teacher.”

He made the decision not to dive deeper into the discussion.

She removed one more item from the bag. “I only have this... I don’t know what it is.”

Ford knew. He snatched it from her hands. “Mom, this is a laptop, and an expensive one at that.”

She shrugged. “You can have it...”

“Awesome,” he muttered while examining the device, which was in perfect condition.

“...for five hundred dollars,” Valarie finished.

“What?”

“Based on your reaction, it’s worth something. I need the money.”

He hugged the laptop to his chest. “But I’m your son, you owe me.”

She rested her left hand on her hip. “How in the hell do I owe you?”

“Other-mom told me about all the drinking and drugs you did while pregnant with me.”

“That gossiping bitch,” Valarie mumbled.

“Yeah, if you give me this laptop I will forgive you for all my mental defections.”

She placed her hand against his cheek, rubbing it with her thumb. “You’re perfect.”

Only Rubble knew of the true Ford, the slasher within.

“Mom, I won’t give this back to you.”

“Fine,” she submitted. “But only because I’m ready to leave. This apartment is hot.”

“Mom you’re homeless, I’m sure you’ve experienced hotter settings.”

She fanned her face. “But this is just ridiculous sweetie. The shelter has air conditioning.”

“My electricity got disconnected; other-mom is paying the bill tomorrow.”

Valarie scoffed. “Harriet to the rescue,” She sarcastically stated. “I have a question.”

He nodded, his laptop still hugged to his chest. “Yeah?”

“Whose tits are nicer, mines or your dad’s? He always wore a pair of tits better.”

His parents had met while both performing in shows that required them to cross-dress often. He had seen his other-mom dolled up many times, wearing ruffled dresses and covering her face in bright makeup. He had seen his mother dressed in a suit and wearing phony facial hair. It was now obvious that it had meant something more to his other-mom and simply show businesses for his mother. Their marriage fell apart once they both retired from the stage.

They arrived in Draper as a fragile family, only to crumble two months after unpacking. The couple went through dramatic changes: his other-mom transforming from Harry Fischer to Harriet Fischer and his mother using the cash she had left to splurge on drugs and booze. Ford was too busy exploring his mad side to dwell on the personal lives of his parents.

He sat his new, stolen laptop on the kitchen table. “I’m not going to answer that.”

Valarie grabbed her bag from the kitchen table. “I’m going to go; I’m running low on cigarettes. Make sure you lock your door and try not to go out late; a girl was killed last night in her own home. I can’t imagine what her parents are going through. It’s heartbreaking. She started a project that would have involved her traveling the country, providing books and school supplies to unfortunate children. Now she’s dead for no reason. We live in a fucking mad world.”

His mother's words struck him still. He zoned out, not even realizing she had waved goodbye and left. Last night he eliminated somebody from the world, a person who contributed more than he had ever done. He was a monster, no different from Rubble. And like the stuffed animal that attempted to take his life, he needed to be stopped.

Ford made his way over to his couch and kneeled down beside it. Using his left hand, he raised the couch from the floor and positioned his right hand over the dent in the carpet where one of the four couch legs rested down to the floor. His right hand, the hand that had wielded the same knife that killed a good person. Ford released the raised couch from his grasp, sending the massively heavy couch crashing down onto his hand. He felt the bones in his hand shatter, it instantly swelling. He bit down onto his bottom lip, to fight off any reaction to the pain. It was a humiliating act, no confidence in himself to willingly change. The slasher was now handicapped. This pain was good, a pain he was proud of. There would be no more slashing.

## **Chapter 2 - Nightmare**

Milo found himself in the center of a ruckus crowd. They bumped him from all directions as they jammed to the rock song being shrieked out on stage. The artist performing wore a dark gown and the tears of blood painted on her face matched the shade of her lipstick. Milo wore the same fitted, gray t-shirt and blue boxer shorts he went to sleep in. The dreamer was aware this was a nightmare, and not his first. He kept his eyes focused of the dingy and musky concert goers around him, his guard up. Milo was not here to join in on the fun, but instead a victim in waiting.

He searched for an escape route. As Milo maneuvered his way through the concert goers it became more crowded and confined. It made it complicated for him to take normal breaths which began to affect his stamina. As he continued his search for a way out, he dug through his memories of past nightmares, experiencing again such horrors as endlessly falling into a bottomless pit, being tossed into the center of a violent stampede of bulls. And that was not the worst of it.

He found a towering light post that shone down on the crowd. In reality, most saw his trained, muscular physique and labeled him a health-nut or a vain jock striving to maintain his youth through his strength. His dedication to health and fitness, though, was for neither of those things. It was for moments like this. He climbed up the metal pole and stopped halfway. The dreamer searched for an exit but the sea of people was endless. In each direction he looked he witnessed unpleasant acts: drug use, self-harm, and aggressive sex with various partners in some cases.

“I choose him, bring him to me,” The artist on stage commanded.

Milo turned his attention to the stage to notice her pointing at him and smirking. Members of the crowd climbed the pole after him. He had no other option but to continue upward. Those who pursued him were relentless, cynically laughing as he did his best to flee. Somebody threw a beer bottle from the crowd and it shattered against the pole, a shard of glass slicing at his cheek. He lost his strength to continue upward. The dreamer’s arms went weak, he lost grip and collapsed, the crowd catching his limp body.

The crowd passed him along over their heads, some punching at him, and delivered him to the stage. The artist yanked her microphone stand from the stage floor and revealed its sharpened tip. She raised the weapon in the air setting off pyrotechnics which made the crowd even wilder. Milo covered his ears as he staggered to his feet. The artist charged forward with her blade aimed at Milo’s chest. It would not kill him, he knew, it could not; his alarm clocks were properly set to avoid that happening. He had to the will to flee, but not the strength. His attacker reached him...

“Milo,” a female voice lazily groaned out. “Stop fidgeting.”

He gasped as he sat up in his bed, examining his torso. It lacked a wound. His attacker failed, he realized with a relieved sigh.

The woman who slept beside him elbowed him in the side. "Another nightmare?"

"What do you think, Serena?" he responded, his voice harsher than he had intended.

She sat up, scratching at her dark hair. "Are you catching an attitude?"

"You've been with me for a year, you know about my living-nightmares."

She flopped back down. "I wish I didn't," she snapped back. "Oh, and your face is bleeding."

He had forgotten about the scar he gained on his face. "Thanks."

Serena, half asleep, groaned out, "Uh huh."

The five alarm clocks placed on the bedside table went off, causing Milo to flinch. He powered off the alarms on each of the individual clocks, some battery powered and others powered by an outlet in the wall. The sun had started rising, creeping in through the blinds of his neatly kept bedroom. Serena groaned as she aggressively tossed the burgundy sheets from her curvy figure.

Serena sat up, resting her feet on the hardwood floor of the room. "You kept me awake all night," she yawned.

"I'm sorry," Milo, who was equally tired, responded as he rose from bed and stretched his arms.

"My entire day is going to be thrown off. I can't function without proper sleep."

"I said sorry. I'll start sleeping on the couch."

"No, I'll still be able to hear your odd noises from the living room. Something else has to change."

He knew his nightmares were here to stay. "Do you want me to make breakfast?"

Serena stripped as she made her way across the hall to the bathroom, muttering, "Sure."

Milo took a few moments to collect himself before making the promised breakfast. He headed from the bedroom into the lone bathroom of their one bedroom apartment. The steam from the shower Serena was taking warmed the room, fogging up the mirror at the same time. Milo turned on the sink faucet and splashed some chill water on his face, checking in the mirror above the sink to make sure he cleaned any blood from his wound. It was a nasty scar, but barely recognizable on his tanned skin. He used a damp towel to clean up the remaining blood and applied a bandage over his wound.

It wasn't a perfect morning, Milo reflected as he exited the bathroom and headed into the kitchen to start breakfast, but it could have been worse. Milo, along with many others in the world, suffered from living-nightmares. The moment he fell asleep, he entered a second reality much more dangerous and madder even than the one he dwelled in now. A condition passed on from his late mother. She was not as prepared as Milo, and she had slept past her cycle point.

All of those who suffered from living-nightmares had a cycle that pinpointed their time of death. Your first living-nightmare was your one and only chance to determine your cycle point. Many simply returned to sleep after their first living-nightmare, never taking record of their cycle point. Many of those met death soon afterwards. Luckily, Milo had his mother there following his first living-nightmare, to help him calculate how long he had been asleep before waking at his cycle point. If he slept longer than an estimated six hours, he would experience death in his living-nightmare, equaling the same result in his waking life.

His mother's cycle was more stressing, two hours. He remembered alarm clocks constantly going off during the night as a child. He and his sister feared inheriting their mother's condition, but Milo had been the unlucky recipient at the age of sixteen. A year ago, his mother carelessly neglected to update the batteries in her alarm clock and slept past her cycle point. She was found slaughtered in her bed in a pool of her own blood, eyes closed, and her face peaceful.

Milo finally managed to cook eggs and fried bologna, though the preparation of his meal received less than most of his attention, as he adjusted from his mad night of sleep. He placed the plates of food on the table along with a few utensils and two glasses of orange juice. Serena left the bathroom in her pink bathrobe, her dark hair damp, grabbed her fork and started eating her breakfast. Milo joined her, sitting across the glass dining table from her.

Serena set down her fork. "I know what needs to change."

"You do?" He took a sip from his orange juice.

"Yeah. Us."

He fought back a smirk, accustomed to her wanting to break up. "Matching tattoos," he joked.

"No," she bluntly responded. "I'm moving back with my parents for a month."

"Why exactly?"

"I miss having a normal sleep schedule. Sleeping with you drives me insane."

"Are we still a couple?"

She nodded.

He finished his meals. "Good, because I... I think you're fun."

Serena chuckled softly, "Just fun?" She rolled her eyes and flipped her hair over her shoulders. "Men."

"...Men," he said, mocking her voice and actions.

Following breakfast, Milo cleaned the dishes from their small meal and took a quick shower. Serena, being the manager at a local clothing store, left for work to open the shop while he bathed. After primping his low-cut, dark hair in the bathroom mirror and a quick shave, Milo got dressed for work, slipping on his dark slacks, matching uniform shirt, silver police badge, and attaching his pistol and required equipment to his waist belt. Milo left the apartment, the southern heat greeting him, and headed to his car.

This world was his escape and he made sure he enjoyed every aspect of it, even its madness. He climbed his two-door, silver sports car, started the vehicle and headed downtown. Milo was in the mood to make others happy and he knew exactly what would deliver smiles. He arrived downtown, parking before a 'Dolly's Donuts'. Though the prices were cheaper at a nationally known donut shop located a few blocks away, Milo chose to support the local businesses.

He made his way inside the brightly lit shop for his nose to be greeted by the scent of buttered donuts and the sweet glaze that was drizzled over many of them. The shop had an uplifting design scheme, the colors white and yellow heavily present and the floors a light colored wood. As he approached the counter, a dark-skinned, youthful girl sporting a bubbly smile appeared from the back baking area. She slipped on her white apron that hung on a hook attached to the donut display case. The apron vibrantly displayed the name of the shop in yellow stitching.

"How's your morning?" Milo removed his leather wallet.

Her smile, weaker up close, faded entirely at the question. "It's been tough. A girl from school died last night." She sighed. "At least the sun is out."

He heard the calls on his squad car radio last night. "I haven't had a chance to hear the details."

"They're saying she was stabbed. I wonder who did it."

He removed a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet. "I'm sure we'll catch the killer."

"Unless it's a slasher..."

Slasher related cases were the toughest to solve. It was nearly impossible to connect them to the victim or uncover their motive, since they chose their victims entirely at random, or so it seemed. He was offered many slasher cases, but after failing to solve four similar murders in his past, he knew to deny them. He didn't want to add to the cashier's doubt, so he simply ignored her words.

"It smells delicious in here," he stated in a poor attempt to redirect the conversation.

"I know. I love it." She glanced back at the mounted menu. "What can I get you?"

"Three boxes of cinnamon donuts." He handed her the cash. "The change is your tip."

She flashed him an appreciative-smile and rung up his purchase. Once pocketing the change, she prepared his order. The cashier boxed three dozens of donuts into white, rectangular boxes and returned, handing them over to Milo.

He retrieved the boxes. "Thanks and chip up."

She sighed. "I'll try officer and thanks for the tip."

He left the shop, placed the donuts into his passenger seat, and headed to the precinct. The crime rate in Draper was low, but danger was always present. It was foolish of any officer to hope for a quiet day, since the precinct wasn't far from the downtown area. It was located in a town square that included a church, the capitol building, a hospital, museum and a few office buildings. All the buildings in the area were constructed from white stone. He parked in a space reserved for officers, grabbed one box of donuts, and headed up the mass set of stairs that lead to the precinct.

"It might be cliché, but it's true. We love donuts," Milo voiced the moment he set foot inside.

His statement received some laughter and smiles from the officers who overheard his words. He sat the box of donuts in the break room beside the coffee machine, watching with a grin as the first of his co-workers raided the box.

Milo had been a cop for five years. He joined the academy following his high school graduation. This career field wasn't his lifelong dream as a child, as he'd had a more ambitious goal to become a super hero who spent his time fighting the madness of the world. He grew to love the job, mainly because he grew up and recognized his dream was simply a fantasy.

After claiming one of the donuts for himself, he left the break room, heading to his cubicle on the second floor of the building. It was crammed into a crowded floor of other cubicles that mirrored his in near every detail. Most of the main floor offices were reserved for the higher ranked officers or those who served the force longer than a couple of decades. He took a seat in his office chair and powered on his computer. The machine made odd noises, one sound similar to the horn of an eighteen-wheeler, as it took its precious time to boot.

Milo distracted himself by organizing some reports he neglected to submit and repositioning the family portraits pinned to the wall of the cubicle as he remained in his swivel chair. He focused on a picture of his mother sitting under a tree, holding a younger version of him in her arms. The image brought a soft smile to his face. He remembered that day and her arms hugging him close to her.

"Where were you last night?" a male voiced questioned.

He turned to his cubicle entry to discover Officer Jamie. "I was home."

A bald Jamie continued, "I went to this back road bar last night and needed your back up."

"How exactly?"

"I met this Spanish chick with the nicest ass, but she didn't know a lick of English."

Milo motioned at himself laughing. "And you were expecting me to translate?"

"Yeah, you're Hispanic or some shit along that line, right?"

"My mother was Mexican, but she never taught my sister or me her native language."

"Damn, I guess my search for el translator continues."

Their conversation was interrupted by Captain Austin. He was a plump man, his uniform barely fitting his aging body. The lower half of his face was buried beneath a graying beard and his thick glasses occupied the upper-half of his plump face. He raised his palm to his mouth, clearing his throat.

"Morning, Captain," Milo greeted.

Jamie simply nodded at the round man.

Austin tugged at his belt. "There's an issue downtown at the park tower."

"What kind of issue," Milo asked.

"There's a possible jumper held up in the tower and the crowd is getting a bit thick and press is starting to arrive to the scene." He pointed at Milo. "Your rookie is outside the precinct waiting. Head down to the park and get the situation under control. After the stabbing of that young girl last night, the last thing we need is another death occupying the local news and scaring people."

Milo rose from his desk chair. "I'm heading out right away, captain."

Milo made his way between the two men, headed downstairs, and exited the building. The temperature had risen further still, and the square was crowded. The hospital day staff and capitol employees were all arriving. Addison stood, leaning against the black and white squad car assigned to the pair. She has only worked as his partner for two months.

Milo approached her. "Am I driving?"

She put her blonde hair in a ponytail. "Sure."

He entered the driver's side, Addison the passenger's. His partner powered on the car's siren as they started toward the park. The sound got Milo's adrenaline pumping. He drove at full speed, taking racetrack worthy turns. As they arrived to the park a crowd of locals could be seen and officers were doing their best to keep them a great distance from the park and develop a calm atmosphere. Milo pulled the car over and he and his partner joined a group of officers who were trying to access the entry door of the park tower that was constructed from white stone.

"Has the jumper been identified yet," Milo asked.

The officer struggling with the lock pick glanced over his shoulder. "Nobody recognizes her."

"I'm great with locks," Allison said.

The officer wiped sweat from his forehead as he handed her his tools. "The lock is old as shit."

Allison took over and immediately managed to pick the lock. "I picked the lock of my parent's room door many nights. They kept almost everything hidden under their mattress: weed, money, the fun stuff."

She received some applause from her colleagues and her partner.

"I'm heading up," Milo declared as he yanked the door to the stairs opened.

Allison grabbed at his arm. "But I'm the one who unlocked the door."

"If that woman jumps we need somebody strong enough to catch her and pull her back to safety."

Allison started to argue but noticed some of the other officers nodding with him in agreement. She stalled a bit before conceding and freed Milo's arm. The dreamer took off up the spiral of crooked wooden stairs. After a steep climb he arrived to the top balcony area. A woman with blonde hair stood outside the brass rails wearing a flower printed house robe.

She looked back at Milo as he stepped onto the balcony. "I have to deliver my flock of souls."

"My name is Officer Milo Amos. Ma'am, may I have your name?"

"I am their murderer." She said in a monotone voice. "I suppose you can call me Mindy Valley."

"Miss Valley, I'm going to need you to step back over the balcony before you hurt yourself."

Mindy laughed as she focused on the crowd that gathered below. "It's Mrs."

"Mrs. Valley, think about your husband. If you jump—"

"I'm going to jump," She interrupted. "As for my husband, he thinks I'm insane and so does my daughter."

"Stephanie, I need you to listen to me," He said to her as if she was a child.

"Please don't speak to me as if I'm unstable. I've been assigned a task that I've been trying for years to avoid. It's been a decade of fighting their presence but the burden is becoming too heavy. It's time for me to cross over, taking my flock of souls with me. Officer, don't waste your breath on me."

"And what if I just snatch you back onto the balcony?"

"You won't" She looked back at him once again. "May my flock rest in peace."

Mrs. Valley leaped and Milo could hear screams from the crowd below. He rushed to the edge of the balcony and glanced over the rails to discover her body sprawled out on the concrete walkway, surrounded by black feathers. He loathed each slowly passing second as she just lay there. A medical team trailed by some officers sprinted toward the body but the officer knew the woman was gone.

Milo spent the rest of his day in his cubicle with a cloud of failure hanging over his head. The officer understood he could not save everybody, but being so close to the woman only for her to slip away left an impact. He had to conduct a few phone interviews about the situation, and file a lengthy report. The clock struck five, ending his workday.

He made his way back home, grabbing the remaining two boxes of donuts from his car. Before he went to his apartment, Milo made a quick detour. He headed over to his neighbor's door and knocked. After a short wait Ford, who looked as if he had just woken up, answered it.

Milo raised the box of donuts. "I brought you some doughnuts. They're cinnamon."

Ford slipped outside, shutting his door. "I'm not really into sweets."

Milo laughed. "It's okay to accept gifts Ford. I don't believe you dislike sweets. Who doesn't like donuts, anyway?"

Ford stalled before grabbing one of the boxes. "Fine, does that make you happy?"

"Yeah," Milo admitted, "And if you're not doing anything, you can certainly come over and watch a movie."

Ford shook his head. "No, I'm really busy."

"What are you up to?"



Ford laughed. "You love interrogating others, don't you officer?"

"No, I'm just making small talk, being neighborly."

"Maybe we can hang another time, but not today. Thanks for the doughnuts."

Ford returned to his apartment, closing his door.

Milo headed across the porch towards his apartment. He felt sorry for his neighbor. Rarely did Ford have guests over. Milo wanted to end his loneliness, but no matter how persistent he was, how many offers he made, there remained a wall between the two. His attempts of being neighborly would resume; he felt he was getting close to befriending Ford. As for now, he would make a quick meal, call Serena, and head to bed. Tonight he would have another nightmare.

### **Chapter 3 - Paranoid**

Sidnee relaxed in bed as she used her laptop to stroll through various meet-up websites. She had only been living in Draper for a few months and had yet to find the proper social group. There were many distractions, including her still unpacking, working, and paranoia. She was aware of what was buried deep within some, the madness that lurked in the hearts of many. Sidnee, like most in her family and many others across the world, could communicate with demonic forces. She was an exorcist.

She let out a few yawns, her lean body exhausted and sore from setting up her bed frame that was shipped earlier in the day. Her apartment still needed to be painted. The plain, white walls only made her feel lonesome. She was aiming to paint them something bright, but had not found the free time to visit any of the local hardware stores to view paint blotches.

She stumbled over a website advertising a group for adventurous young women titled 'Uphill'. One of the factors that inspired her to move from the upstate town Hackshaw to Draper was its vast amount of opportunities for those who considered themselves athletic. This group appeared to be the perfect fit, with all the interests Sidnee shared, including water and land-based sports. She strolled through a couple of the group's photos that displayed young women kayaking, camping, and partying on the beach. The entire group appeared normal, but Sidnee was well aware that behind some smiling faces, demonic things hid.

She viewed the group's schedule to discover they had a meeting scheduled for three in the afternoon tomorrow. Sidnee saved the address in her cell phone and shut down her laptop. It was nearing midnight and she had a morning shift to work. She decided to take a quick shower and headed to bed.

The next morning she awoke, scurrying around for her work uniform. She did her best to primp her dark hair as she rushed around her one bedroom apartment. Sidnee discovered her red uniform shirt on the kitchen table and her black slacks on the white tile floor. She slipped on the outfit and a pair of sneakers. Sidnee hastily brushed her teeth and applied lotion to her dark skin. Since she was attending the group meeting today, she grabbed changing clothes, jean shorts and a sleeveless blouse, from an unpacked box. She left her apartment, beginning a new day.

The outside heat did not bother her, as she enjoyed beach weather, even in its extremes. She spent most of her savings on her apartment down payment, but the remaining on a used four door that was fine enough to get her around town. The field of exorcism was a profitable business, her family had discovered, but a business she retired from. The twenty-one year old had decided not to settle for a career driven by her mad trait, but instead one she genuinely had interest in. She packed up and moved away, out on her own, and taking the first job that would hire a high school graduate.

Her place of work was located downtown, 'Burstin Burgers', a locally owned fast food restaurant. She parked behind the redbrick building and arrived through the back employee entrance. The place was busy, as usual, and the sports channel that aired on the mounted televisions only served to add to the noise. The restaurant was popular with the college crowd and the locals. Her job was simple: to provide friendly customer service.

She smiled at and greeted her co-workers on staff as she headed to the employee break-room. The room contained dark painted lockers for the employees to store their personal items, a table for them to eat lunch, and a refrigerator. Sidnee used the out-dated computer in the room to clock-in. She shook her head, ridding herself of any morning fatigue.

Daniel entered the room as he messed his low cut, sandy-blonde hair. "Hey Sidnee."

She flashed the boyish Daniel a quick smile. "Hey."

She started for the exit only for him to block her path.

Daniel adjusted his vintage style glasses. "What are you doing after work?"

"I'm going to this group meeting, why?"

"Oh, what are you doing after your meeting?"

She laughed. "I haven't planned that far Daniel."

"I was wondering," He paused as he built up his nerves, "If you wanted to hang out?"

She instantly found herself wondering what madness lingered within him. "Um..."

"We can go to my place," he suggested. "Order some pizza and rent a movie."

She knew nothing about Daniel, other than that he had been kind the few times they had spoken. "Daniel..."

His mouth formed into a subtle frown. "Are you turning me down?"

"No," she quickly responded. "I just think it's too soon."

"We work almost every shift together. Isn't that enough time? Don't you like me?"

"I do, you're the nicest guy here."

"Then what's wrong?" he whined.

"I'm not interested in any romantic relationships at the moment."

"How can I convince you to say 'yes'?"

She motioned at the clock that hung above the break room door. "I'm on the clock Daniel."

He slouched his shoulders, fanned his hand at her, and headed over to his locker. Sidnee had nothing against him, but the exorcist inside her made it difficult to establish romantic relationships. Her last relationship ended when the demon within her boyfriend took control and kicked her down a set of stairs. That affair had left nothing but pain, especially in the lower back.

The demonic forces sought out those who could unveil them, possessing those close to the exorcist and others like her to make their lives difficult. She knew spending time with Daniel would spark a slow possession within him, so Sidnee blocked out the glum look on Daniel's face and exited into the dining area.

She grabbed a notebook to take orders from behind the checkout counter and headed to the area she waited. The place was famous for its gigantic, flavorful burgers, a part of Draper's history, what with so many politicians using it often for publicity photos. Sidnee spotted one of the regular customers, her face lighting up with a genuine smile as she approached the woman.

"Hello, Harriet."

Harriet glanced up from her cell phone at Sidnee. "Hey, I'll have my usual."

"A burger and a coffee," Sidnee wrote down the order. "How's everything going?"

"I'm throwing a party next weekend and everyone who knows me is invited, including you."

"What are you celebrating?"

Harriet motioned at herself. "My complete transformation."

"I don't understand."

Harriet laughed. "Those who worked here long enough knew me as Harry once."

Sidnee stood mouth agape. "I'm so sorry for prodding."

"It's okay, dear, you can close your mouth," Harriet said with a grin. "I'm just surprised nobody told you."

"I'm not one of the most social waitresses here."

"But you're so sweet. We chat all the time."

"I only have time for quick chats though. I'm still moving into my apartment."

Harriet snapped her fingers as a thought resurfaced. "Have you painted yet?"

"Nope, I'm still picking a color and searching for somebody to do the actual painting."

"Once you settle on color, give me a call. I can get my son to paint for you. He's unemployed and can use the extra cash. Actually, he lives in the same apartment complex so won't have to travel that far. I can give you my number." She paused. "Wait, I can do better than that. I'll introduce you both at my party."

"I'm not searching for anything romantic right now."

"I understand, but you both can discuss prices."

Sidnee attempted to underplay her embarrassment. "That makes a certain amount of sense."

Harriet winked. "I never play match-maker, just to let you know."

"It's okay. I feel silly for even thinking that way. Where's your party?"

"My house along the beach. The music and decorations will highlight it."

Sidnee curled her plump lips as she nodded. "I'll be there. Now I'm going to go put in your order."

She dropped the order ticket off at the kitchen. She liked Harriet. The regular stood out from most of the others, and had managed to slip past Sidnee's paranoia-wall. The woman appeared to care about her without just being extra friendly at the chance of receiving extra fries.

Her workday went routinely; she took orders, counted tips, and avoided Daniel who moped around. When the clock finally struck two o'clock, Sidnee clocked out, changed outfits in the restaurant bathroom and drove towards the meeting.

She had entered the address into her phone's GPS system, which took her down a dirt road that eventually led her toward the edge of the city limits. She stopped a few times along the drive to double check the address at various gas stations. Those familiar with the place gave her the same directions: keep heading north. She underestimated the duration of the drive, but the excitement of what the group could offer inspired her to continue along the dirt road. The journey led her down a side trail, which brought her to a two-story cabin that resembled the design of an office building. A few other cars were present in the dirt lot she parked in.

She exited her car, adjusting the blouse she had changed into. Towering pine trees surrounded the building. She took the wooden stairs with a few leaves scattered upon the steps' surface, and made her way through a set of opened doors. Inside sat a group of women at elongated mahogany tables, the majority wearing matching dark green t-shirts displaying a white silhouette logo of women jogging up a hillside. A brown-skinned girl with her hair braided in a ponytail stood before the group, speaking. She and Sidnee's eyes met. She continued with her speech as Sidnee took a seat in the rear of the room.

Sidnee listened on, the woman hyping a few upcoming events and fundraisers. She emitted strength in the way she strutted before her audience. Her movements brought the speech alive and nearly all her jokes drew laughter. Instantly Sidnee felt welcomed, as if she belonged. The woman ended her speech by announcing the next meeting date. Sidnee stood as a few started to leave and the others socialized. The speaker made her way through the crowd, shaking hands mostly with those who weren't sporting one of the group's t-shirts.

She approached Sidnee. "Hello, I'm Shamantha Dobson, and your name?"

She was vibrant, with her toned legs and arms giving her a slightly intimidating appearance.

"I'm Sidnee Vincent."

"And may I ask what brings you here?"

"I stumbled over this group while browsing online. I'm interested in joining."

"That's nice to hear, the more members the better."

"How exactly do I join?"

"You must pass a physical exam and pay an application fee."

"I love the outdoors, I'm prepared for the examination whenever."

Shamantha pointed at the floor. "Excellent, we'll host the exams here, next week, same time."

"I'll be here and on time. I wasn't expecting this place to be so far out."

"Where did you travel from?"

"Draper."

"I come from the same place. A few of the others and I carpool together."

"If I pass the physical exam, I'm definitely available for carpool."

Shamantha looked outside. "It's getting dark out," she muttered. "We're actually camping overnight." She browsed the room. "You seem to be the only non-member still around. If you don't want to be driving on the road all alone, I suggest you leave now."

"Yeah, it's been nice meeting you."

"The same," Shamantha started to turn away. "Drive safe and I'll see you next week."

Sidnee returned to her car, starting her drive back home. She felt safe, with only one car traveling behind her. The few moments she spent around Shamantha and the other women changed her. She realized that her paranoia was absent during the entire visit. Her mind drifted as she imagined herself as a member of the group, making new friends, having some fun for once. Maybe she was paranoid for no reason; maybe she was seeing madness where there was none.

Sidnee returned to reality as her car was rammed from behind, slightly jerking her body forward. A quick glance in her rear-view mirror revealed the car behind hers driving extremely close. The incompetent driver's car horn blew and headlights flickered before delivering another ram. The actions of the driver confirmed that it was not simply bad driving, but an attempt to run Sidnee off the road. She sped up, but the stalking car did the same and rammed her once more. Her thoughts raced as she wondered at the identity of the driver.

Sidnee had to focus on survival. It didn't matter who the driver was, this person could end up hurting her or worst. She continued speeding down the road, going miles above the posted limit, but the other car remained directly behind hers. A sign before her prompted her to switch lanes, but Sidnee kept forward, temporarily ignoring the warning. At the last moment, she aggressively turned her steering wheel left. The car stalking her was too slow to react and went crashing through the sign only to flip into a pothole large enough to total the vehicle and end the driver's hope of catching her.

Heaving a relieved sigh, Sidnee pulled over to the side of the road. From her backseat, she grabbed the axe she had purchased not long ago. She was a young woman in the world on her own; she needed protection, and the axe had seemed foreboding at the time. The axe in her hands, Sidnee exited her car and made her way over to the red vehicle that stalked hers. As she approached the driver's side, she recognized the person who sat lounged back, panting heavily.

"Daniel?" she shouted.

He slowly turned his head to face her, his eyes widened. "Sidnee?"

"What in the hell were you thinking?"

"I wasn't. What happened?"

"You nearly killed me! How did you even find me?"

"I remember watching you leave from work." He started to cry. "I'm so confused, Sidnee. This isn't even my car, I bike. I don't understand what's going on."

"Daniel, I don't understand why you tried to run me off the road."

"I don't know what came over me. I'm not crazy."

"*I'm in the mood to play mad-matchmaker,*" a mousy voice snickered suddenly, a voice that was certainly not Daniel's.

It was the demon within him.

"*The more you reject him, the weaker he becomes, and the more powerful I grow.*"

Its words were true. The demon would sabotage any relationship between them, she knew. Tonight's actions were a prime example why she put her love life on hold. She figured rejecting Daniel today, after he built up the nerves to ask her out, delivered a major blow. He became emotional wreck that gave the demon enough strength to convince Daniel to nearly end her life tonight.

Daniel tried to start his car, aggressively turning the key in the ignition. "The car, it's stuck."

"I suggest you call a tow-truck, good night."

Sidnee returned to her car, resting her axe in the passenger's seat. She could not offer him a ride. That person who sat in the disabled vehicle was not the same Daniel she worked shifts with. Instead, a demonic force that played off his damaged emotions. He needed a good night's sleep. Sidnee hoped Daniel would not allow the demon to take more control of him. She forgave him for tonight's actions, but not the demon within him. Sidnee would not allow herself to

be bullied into a relationship.

#### **Chapter 4 - Comedian**

Ford sat on the edge of the examination table and grimaced as the hunched doctor wrapped his right hand in gauze and tape. The stout woman had her dark hair styled in jerry-curls and snorted repeatedly as she worked, a trait that was becoming exceedingly irritating to her patient. Ford envisioned himself using a nearby scalpel to impale her in the jugular, watching her own lifeblood flow down her neck and ending her snorting once and for all. Those types of thoughts were normal for the slasher, for any slasher, he assumed. It also led to him harming himself. His injury made it much more difficult to properly grasp any possible murder weapon, even the knife that he loved so well.

The saggy-face woman glanced up at him. "What happened?"

Ford planned his tale during breakfast. "I accidentally slammed it in my car door," He lied.

"Well, it's going to take a few weeks to heal, so I suggest you practice using your left hand."

He raised his wrapped hand, observing the woman's work. "I look forward to the challenge."

She stood up from the stool she sat on. "Unless you have any questions, I believe we're done."

"Nope. You've covered all the basics doctor."

"Great, if you would like a receipt, speak with a nurse at the front desk."

Ford slid from the gray table. "This cast is enough reminder of my visit."

She laughed, a loud snorting noise, at his statement. "Have a good day and be careful."

Ford nodded at her, then turned and exited the cramped examination room with a grimace on his face. The waiting area of the free clinic was crowded with gloomy faces, rough coughs and groaning. His lack of employment meant he had no health insurance, making this place, located in the inner city, his main source of medical treatment. It was a small fee, quick service, and questions were rarely asked. The clinic was popular with battered wives seeking treatment, the bruised homeless high on narcotics or young mothers who accidentally or purposely harmed their own children. Even those suffering from the madness that preferred to keep it hidden often found themselves in Draper's free clinic.

Ford exited the clinic, the heat wave still plaguing the town. Sweating, he made his way across the parking lot that was riddled with trash and broken glass, entering his car. As he expected, using his left hand to enter his key into the ignition took longer than usual, but he was eventually successful.

The pain in his injured hand had faded, only bothering him directly after the couch incident and overnight. It was wrapped tight enough to prevent any movement. Because of this, he was able to grip the steering wheel with the left and rest his injured hand upon it to drive over to his other-mother's house without too much agony. After parking beside her convertible, he unlocked the front door of her beachside home and let himself in.

Harriet stood in her living room staring into the expensive mirror she had purchased. She mounted it on the left side of the room, near the kitchen entry. Ford simply watched as she primped in the mirror, twirled, and modeled the yellow, two-piece bikini she wore. She angled her body sideways, inhaling and exhaling as she rubbed her hands against her firm stomach. Harriet shook her head at the sight of herself and returned to her previous angle.

"Do you ever wear clothes," Ford wondered aloud.

Harriet kept her focus on her reflection. "In this heat wave, never."

He raised his right hand. "I went to the free clinic today."

She quickly glanced over. "Ouch, what happened?"

"I smashed my hand in my car door."

"How is that possible? I can't see that happening to any sane human being," she teased him.

"It happened," He argued without trying to sound defensive. "And I've got proof," he waved his bandaged hand in front of her.

Harriet wrapped her hands around her neck. "I think I'm gaining weight."

"It's called eating." Ford removed a wad of cash from his pocket. "I'm paying you back."

She fanned her hand at him, still focused on the mirror. "I rather you keep it."

He quickly returned the money to his jeans pocket. "I'm not objecting."

Harriet executed a few weightless bicep curls. "I found you a job."

"Doing what, where, and when do I start?"

"This girl who lives in your complex needs her apartment painted."

"I haven't painted since grade school and it required me using my fingertips."

"I'm sure it's not that difficult, plus she's paying."

He used his left hand to massage his right. "This is going to slow down the process."

"Make it work Ford. I'll introduce you to her at my party."

"You're throwing a party?"

"Yes, and make sure you invite Val. I would call, but I don't know the number to her alley."

Ford let out a phony laugh. "Mom's situation is nothing to joke about."

"I was completely serious. That aside, make sure you're at my party to meet your future boss."

"There are too many new people in my life, this girl and my prodding neighbor."

"The cop," Harriet cut in. "He greeted me once when I visited your place. He's cute isn't he?"

"He's an embarrassingly lonely tool with a good looking girlfriend."

Harriet wagged her finger. "Are you judging him simply based on his appearance?"

"He smells nice and has his ear pierced. Men who smell nice are usually tools."

“Where has my kind son gone?”

“I’m right here. I’m still the same.” Not taking his slasher lifestyle into account.

Harriet pinched her nostrils. “My nose looks larger.”

“Other-mom, can you stop fawning over your own reflection for a moment. I’m trying to have a conversation with you and you’re being incredibly rude.” Ford paused, attempting to calm himself and control the volume of his voice. “I’m just asking for some eye contact or for you to show a little interest.”

Harriet chuckled, as she tugged at her earlobes. “I’m listening.”

“I know that, but have some common decency to step away from the fancy mirror.”

Harriet dug her fingers into her mouth, her response unclear.

Ford furrowed his brows as he watched. “What the hell are you doing?”

Harriet yelped as she yanked a bloody tooth from her mouth.

Ford clutched his stomach, fighting back the urge to hurl. “I’m sorry, but that is disgusting.”

Harriet stared at the molar nestled between the tips of her fingers.

“Instead of the surgeries, you should have spent some of your savings on a trip to the dentist.”

Harriet rushed off to the restroom, cussing under her breath and slamming the door closed.

Ford left her alone to deal with her hygiene issue, heading back outside to his car. He regretted stopping at her house; the visit only irritated him. His drive home was detoured as he saw a small, dirty, albeit familiar woman near a bus stop located a few blocks away from his apartment complex, arguing with a man three times her size. Ford parked across the street from the argument and exited his car. The rough faced man, sporting a vintage basketball jersey and baggy jeans, shoved his mother backward.

“Mom,” Ford shouted as he approached. “What’s going on?”

Valarie, who wore the same attire since their last meeting, pointed at the man. “Eric took my shit!”

Eric raised the bag in his ashy hand. “You owe me money, I’m collecting.”

“I’ll pay you after I pawn that shit,” She explained.

Ford watched as they argued about money, and who was the correct owner of said money. His life had become whirlwind of unexpectedness, his parents two of the main factors that created that atmosphere. He stood, sweating under the hot sun, trying not to lose his composure. Ford diverted his eyes from the argument and attempted to block out their constant shouting, especially the profanity that spewed primarily from the lips of his mother.

He spotted a broken glass bottle on the pavement. The idea of using the weapon to end their lives crossed his mind, though the thought was instantly followed by regret. Only a monster could contemplate slashing his own mother.

Valarie, reeking of alcohol, shoved Ford. “Help me!”

“I don’t know what to do, mom. This is your issue; as long as he doesn’t kill you, you can take care of yourself.”

She motioned at Eric. “Stop being a coward and kick his ass!”

He couldn’t believe the shabby woman before him once sung him lullabies. “You have no dignity.”

She smacked him across the face. “How’s that for dignity?”

Valarie turned away from Ford and kicked Eric in the thigh. She attempted to wrestle the bag from his hands only to be backhanded smacked to the sidewalk. Eric aggressively slammed her bag of stolen items to the ground beside her and spat on it. Her aggressor rushed over to Ford, blindsiding him with a punch to the jaw. Ford tumbled to the street as Eric ran off laughing at the damage done. Valarie, cussing under her breath, crawled over on all fours tending to Ford.

He shoved her away. “I don’t need your help.”

“I didn’t do anything to you. Why are catching an attitude with me?”

“Mom, shut up. I’m done with you.” He stood up from the warm street, brushing the dirt off his pants. “We’re done.”

“You’ll be fine.” She grabbed her bag from the sidewalk. “We got my shit back, son.”

Ford stormed over to his car. He glanced back at her, “Why are you like this?”

“Human?”

“No, a deadbeat mom.” He stalled to form his words, “I...I...just don’t understand.”

“I’m free to be who I want. My job as a mother is done. You’re a man now.”

“Fine, if your job is done stop calling me your damn son.”

He entered his car and sped off, not knowing if his emerging headache was from stress or the punch he just received. Either way, he blamed the woman who claimed to no longer be his mother. He was glad to be rid of her; she hadn’t been fulfilling her role properly since their arrival in Draper. She’d been rude, filthy, all the things that a mother should not be. Though his other-mother was distracted with her appearance, she handled her role well enough.

The sun had started to dawn as he parked. He headed upstairs to his apartment. The sound of his neighbor’s door opening and closing prompted him to rush across his narrow porch to his own door. The use of his left hand slowing the unlocking of his door made it possible for his neighbor to interrupt, though.

Milo approached him from behind. “Hey man, are you busy?”

Ford kept his back turned to him. “Yes.”

“Too bad. I was heading out to eat and wondered if you wanted tag along.”

“No. I’m busy, remember?”

“Maybe next time?”

Ford managed to unlock his door. “Why do you keep bothering me?”

"I'm just being neighborly."

"You're being desperate and lonely."

"Maybe I am lonely. My girlfriend moved out, see." He let out a soft laugh.

Ford shrugged, muttered, "Then call your cop friends," and entered his apartment.

He closed his apartment door, rested his back against it, and sighed, ridding his body of today.

"Is that a happy sigh?" Rubble questioned.

"No."

"I could've guessed that."

"I had an interesting day. My other-mom lost a tooth and I disowned my mom."

"Did you?" the limbless bear asked. "Sounds like more fun than I had; I watched the news, all fucking day long. Why must you leave it on this channel, every single day?"

Ford joined Rubble on the couch, powering off the television. "Torture."

"You tore off my damn limbs, you ass," Rubble said, without a trace of humor in his voice. "I think you've tortured me enough."

Ford slouched on the couch. "I feel like a horrible person."

"You should. As I may have mentioned, you sort of ripped off my arms and legs. Is that the way friends treat each other, Ford?"

"No, but you deserved it. I feel horrible for disowning my mom, not for maiming you."

"You know what's wrong with you? You feel too much. It's not healthy. You're a slasher, you slash to feel whole."

"You say that like the fulfillment of slashing equals reading to sick children."

Rubble laughed. "Sick children, you're funny. Hell, you could be a comedian in your time off from being a slasher!"

"Right, my audience can literally laugh to their deaths."

"I'm being serious; you can be more than just a slasher. I was."

Ford stared down at Rubble, raising his brows. "You were a slasher?"

"No, a model and a lover. I dated this girl, broke her heart, and she trapped my soul in a stuffed animal."

"That's a horrible tale, why haven't you ever told me?"

"Because I don't like you."

Ford laughed. "I understand, my not-so cuddly enemy; I did tear off your limbs."

Rubble growled.

"You can still model." Ford smirked. "...In an antique toy catalog."

"I'm going to remember that, and I'll think of a devastating comeback as I mourn the loss of three-quarters of my body."

Ford lay down on the couch, crushing Rubble under his legs. "I need a nap."

He set his phone alarm for an hour. It didn't take long for him to drift off to sleep, even with a muzzled Rubble nagging him to move his legs. He dreamt about his childhood, about the days before he had two mothers, and before the urge to slash had surfaced. He found it difficult to recall how it felt to simply exist without any murderous urges.

His mother's singing played throughout his dreams. Her voice was soothing, not rough and ruined like it was in the present. He wished he could categorize this as a pleasant dream, but it was a nightmare. A reminder of what was no more.

His phone alarm chimed, freeing him from his nightmare. Ford placed his left hand against his sore jaw, the pain of the punch getting more and more obvious. He let out a groan. The uncomfortable position he slept in led to a stiff neck, and he attempted to massage the pain away as he sat up, resting his feet on the floor. Ford lounged for a few moments as he reflected on the confrontation with his mother.

No matter her words or actions, he regretted walking away from her. She was damaged, but no more so than himself. Unlike him, though, she did not hide her ways. She was comfortable enough to share her flaws with the world and most importantly, those who loved her. He was only his true self with a mangled, stuffed bear and a few members of his slasher anonymous group.

Ford stood up. "I'll be back later; I'm going to a slasher meeting."

Rubble did not respond.

Ford laughed as he advanced towards the apartment door, "The silent treatment, cute."

He left his apartment and drove toward the downtown area, the stars out, the moon full, and the air humid. It was common knowledge that slashers existed. Those slashers who socialized amongst each other, considered themselves reformed or claimed they had yet to kill. Those declarations were hardly true. These meetings were mainly attended by those who sought to rid themselves of guilt. Injuring himself was a part of that process, these meetings hopefully the final step.

The meeting was being hosted in the local community center. There were no membership applications or signup sheets, most fearing the local law enforcers would try to compile a slasher database using their information. He entered the red brick building, stepping into the lobby. They rented out one of the four meeting rooms once a week. Ford made his way down a narrow hallway decorated with plaques awarded to the community center, turning into the second door on the left. Inside waited familiar faces, a few socializing, few occupying themselves with their cell phones, and a pair

at the snack table.

Ford approached the low-cut, dark haired girl at the table. "Hello Lu."

The narrowed eyed Lu faced him. "Luke brought his famous pizza bites."

Ford scanned the room again. "Shit, which one is Luke again?"

Lu laughed. "He's the youngest slasher here." She nodded toward a corner. "That's him."

Ford met eyes one the young, dark haired slasher and smiled at him.

Luke nervously returned the gesture and looked away.

"I wish I had his smarts to attend these meetings when I was his age," Ford said.

"Me too," She stuffed her mouth with more food "But we're here now."

Ford browsed the room for the group's leader. "Where's Miriam?"

Lu shrugged. "She's not here." She stuffed a few mini-candy bars into her jeans pockets.

"How long has everybody been waiting?"

"Half an hour." Lu glanced at a wall clock near the entry door. "A few left. I'm about to leave myself."

"It's not like Miriam to miss a meeting."

"Maybe she's tired of the bullshit," Lu scanned the crowd. "We all come here, sit around and lie about how we haven't slashed in years or how we fight our will to harm others. This is all an act. I slashed a young couple three weeks ago. Be honest Ford, you're only here to rid yourself of the guilt. Who did you slash?"

"Nobody," He quickly answered, hoping to create false surety.

"You're lying, but it's common in this room."

"If this place is such a waste, why are you here?"

"The free food and the cute guy," She softly nudged him. "I'm talking about you."

"Thanks for the compliment."

"But now it's mainly the food since we've already done the dirty."

Ford tasted one of the pizza bites and spit it out. "It tastes like beef jerky."

Lu ate a few more. "I fucking love beef jerky."

"How about we go check on Miriam? She would do the same."

"Because she's a lonely old woman."

"Yes, but she lives close by anyways," Ford dug his keys from his pocket. "I'll drive."

"I suppose it'll be more entertaining than sitting home alone petting my kitty."

"I thought you were allergic to cats?"

She winked. "I am, now let's go."

As he followed her, he realized what 'kitty' she was referring to. He played with it once, nearly a year ago. Since that moment, they remained distant friends. It was odd dating somebody who possibly had the urge to stab you in your sleep. He loaded her pink and silver bicycle into his back seat and they drove to Miriam's house.

The woman lived in a small trailer park that was a short drive from the downtown area. Many nights Ford skipped meetings only to receive a phone call from Miriam questioning his whereabouts. She was a kind woman even though it was rumored she slaughtered an entire sorority house back in the seventies. They arrived at the woman's trailer, the front yard decorated with gnomes dressed as businessmen and women. The streetlights weren't operational, the neighborhood nearly ghost town like.

Ford and Lu exited the car and headed up to her front door. He raised his clenched fist to knock only for Lu to notice the trailer door was half-ajar. It creaked as she pushed it open, Ford stepping in first. The front yard theme continued inside. No matter where they looked, a gnome was visible. There were photos, miniature figures, dishware, and plush gnomes on her couch. Ford resisted greeting them, not accustomed to silent stuffed animals.

Lu passed the kitchen area and headed to the bedroom door knocking. "Miriam, you here?"

Ford stood close behind Lu. "You missed the meeting, Miriam. Are you okay?"

Lu grabbed the door handle, sliding it sideways into the wall. Miriam's body lay sprawled out on her bloodstained mattress, multiple stab wounds in the woman's chest. The average person would have reacted wildly to the scene in the bedroom. Her withering face was pale, her light blue eyes opened. Ford and Lu found themselves admiring the murder scene first, mourning the loss of their group leader second.

Lu shut the door. "The slasher has been slashed."

"Should we let this unfold naturally?"

"Yes, no cops tonight. I'm sure somebody will eventually uncover her body."

"We were never here."

"We were never here," Lu reaffirmed.

The slashers left the scene, discreetly driving away from the trailer park.

### **Chapter 5 - Mad**

Milo's trek through the haunting forest had begun to tire him out. The subtle growls of hidden creatures met his ears and he swiped webbing that clung onto the trees from his face. His feet shuffled against the dirt ground that was scattered with damp, decaying leaves. The bark of the towering trees was dark, most of the bare branches reaching downward as if they desired to snatch his head from his neck. He made his way through the thick fog that smelled like spoiled garbage, coughing as he fanned it from before his face. His quest through the fog brought him to a rusty, chain link fence. No matter what direction he traveled, fog lingered and a tall fence stood.

He grasped the fence, aggressively shaking it. "And we meet again."

Milo concluded the fence surrounded the entire forest area. If he could not go through, his only other option was to ascend over the fence. He began climbing, the rusty chains tearing at the bottom of his bare feet and palms. His curiosity of what existed on the other side of the fence drove him to climb. He continued climbing; droplets of blood coming from the palm of his hands and landing against the white t-shirt he wore. Milo gritted his teeth as he battled the aching of his tiring muscles. He paused, resting his face against the rough surface of the fence. After a few quick breaths, Milo resumed climbing.

As he peered upward, he spotted the peak of the fence. A smile of relief formed on his face, but quickly faded as he noticed the top was laced with barbwire. The sleeves of his shirt were short and he only wore dark boxer shorts, his flesh fully exposed to the dangers that awaited him. Milo had come too far to return to the forest ground. He continued up the fence, reaching the top. This nightmare handing him no easy obstacles, he noticed the barbwire was razor sharp. No rust had gathered upon the wire, unlike the chain fence.

Milo cautiously reached over the wire, gaining a few scratches upon his bicep. Next, he reached his right leg over, the fabric of his boxers becoming tangled in the razor wire. He tried to maintain his balance, shifting all his body weight toward the direction he wished to travel. The wire tore through his shirt, Milo wincing as the blades moved across his abdomen. He knew the longer he attempted to crossover, the more pain he would experience. Milo cast himself over the fence, his body experiencing more painful slices from the barbwire.

As he fell, he attempted to grab onto the fence. Instead of rust, the opposite side of the fence was slippery. No matter how many times Milo tried to prevent his fall, his hands would instantly lose grip. His body landed against stiff, royal blue matting, instantly his ears being greeted with the sounds of a roaring crowd. Milo sat up to discover himself confined inside a cage, the fence black. Outside the cage sat a crowd of rabid clowns. He stood from the mat, cupping his sore rear.

The audience shouted cuss words at him. A few of them used their own breaths to fill balloons until they popped loudly, chewed on bloody cotton candy, and dug mucus from their rubber noses. Milo found the sight of the crowd comical, yet revolting. The scent of burnt popcorn met his nose and circus music that sounded as if it was being performed by a mediocre grunge band played loudly. A door on the opposite of the cage opened and a yellow haired clown, his tattoo-clad torso exposed his rubber shoes decorated with miniature spikes, entered to a loud ovation.

As the clown, the poorly applied paint on his face peeling, raised his arms in the air, the crowd went wild. He laughed, sticking his fungus stained tongue out at Milo. A female clown tore open the polka dotted blouse she wore, pressing her wrinkled breast against the cage. Milo turned his head away from the unpleasing sight. The yellow haired clown blew a kiss at the female clown and yanked at his crotch. He refocused on Milo, delivering a pair of downward turned thumbs.

A villainous laughter sounded throughout the arena and declared, "Death match!"

The clown charged toward Milo and rammed his head into the dreamer's torso. Milo went crashing against the cage. The endless journey through the forest and climb over the fence left his body exhausted. His opponent delivered multiple punches to his abdomen, his chuckling growing louder after each punch. Milo delivered a desperate knee to the clown's face, blood spurting from its red nose. The clown tore off his own nose, muscle and bone hidden beneath it.

An audience member tossed a machete into the cage, its handle decorated with frilly yellow and silver garland. The clown quickly rushed over, picking the weapon up from the mat. He licked the blade, sending the crowd wild once again. Milo stood against the cage, using it as support to keep himself from collapsing. The clown aimed the machete at Milo and winked his bloodshot eye. As if he was pitching a baseball, he sent the machete flying at Milo. No strength to dodge, he watched as the blade spun towards him. Milo smirked and waved at the clown, knowing he was prepared.

His alarm clocks sounded. He powered off each alarm and reset them for the following morning. Milo glanced left to the area of the bed where Serena usually slept. She had still been staying at her parent's house. Her first day away, she phoned him regularly, but the number of calls had decreased. He was far too busy working to call her himself, but planned on visiting her at her job today. It was his day off and a trip to the gym and a haircut was on his list of things to do. He glanced at his bruised and bloody palms, deciding it would be a good idea to start his day with a shower.

After freshening up, slipping on some clothes and grabbing an apple, Milo flipped on the living room television. He turned to the local news. The blonde anchorwoman, whom appeared to be fully awake no matter what news hour she hosted, went through the daily headlines. A local woman had been found stabbed in her trailer, a rumored alien spacecraft was spotted in the area, and a few athletes suffered heart attacks after injecting nuclear steroids. The expected mad headlines. Milo's cell phone rang, interrupting his morning. The caller ID informed him it was the local police department.

He answered, fearing a local disaster. "Hello."

"This is Captain Austin. I need to meet with you."

"I'm scheduled to be in tomorrow, will that be soon enough?"

"I need to see you immediately."

"Is something wrong sir?"

Captain Austin grunted. "I'll tell you when we meet."

Milo stood from the couch. "I'll be there within the hour."

He hung up his cell phone and powered off his television. Naturally, he wondered the reason of the meeting. He



slipped on a pair of sneakers and headed out to his car. This morning he drove quicker than usual, not wanting to keep the captain waiting, but also anxious about what they would discuss. He arrived at the precinct, parking in the lot reserved for employees outside the white, stone building. Milo took off up the stairs that led to the precinct entry. He spotted his partner Addison leaving through the set of mahogany doors in uniform. They met mid-way on the stairs.

He found it odd she was working, both usually scheduled as a pair. "What are you doing here?"

She rested her hands on her hips. "I was called in."

"Yeah, so was I. What's going on?"

The autumn winds blew back her blonde hair. "I've just learned we're no longer partners."

The news did not bother him. Their connection was nonexistent. "I wonder who will replace you."

"I don't know but hopefully my next partner understands the meaning of team work. I picked that lock Milo and I should have been the one to head to the top of the tower. That moment just stuck in my mind and has been nagging at me ever since. This was a short partnership and I am glad for that."

"That's your opinion." Milo smiled at her words, not letting them faze him. "I'll see you around."

They headed their separate ways, Milo entering the precinct. He flashed smiles at his fellow officers, heading directly towards Captain Austin's office that was located on the first floor. The door wide open, Milo knocked against the outside wall of the office and let himself in.

Captain Austin sat, portions of his gut resting against the desk before him. His desk was littered with snack food wrapping papers, three coffee mugs, and a laptop that was messed with crayon markings. Milo figured the children in the family photo that hung on the office wall provided the graffiti on the device.

Captain Austin nodded as he rested his plump forearms on his desk. "Have a seat."

Milo took a seat in the cushioned chair placed before the desk. "Good morning sir."

"You're the only person in this building who believes that."

Milo lounged back in the seat. "What's happening?"

"There's a new attorney general and he's not a fan of lawsuits. He's been taking a look at all the government agencies in town, combing through every file and chatting with those considered authority figures. His visit here this morning has led to a lot of changes that won't concern you because I'm suspending you."

"What," Milo softly replied. "Why?"

"You were the officer who confronted Mindy Valley atop of the park tower, correct?"

Milo nodded as he recapped the moment for anything that would earn him a suspension.

"The footage was caught on the news, it was horrific."

"I haven't seen any footage but being there was enough for me to know it wasn't a pretty sight."

"Milo the woman was mentally unstable. Her husband even confirmed that and some believe the feathers she carried were the woman's attempt to make herself fly. In your report you mention you tried to negotiate with her, even asking her how she would react if you grabbed her. Some believe those words encouraged the woman to jump while she had the chance. Milo, the entire situation was poorly handled so do to pressure from the local press I'm suspending you but mainly to satisfy those who want somebody other than the woman to blame for the scenes on the news."

Milo decided to play his role in this citizen pleasing game. "How long am I suspended?"

"I suspended you for a week, but the attorney general terminated you this morning."

Milo surprised himself, the news delivered no impact. "I'm fired," He reaffirmed.

"He wants the best on the force and this event has just stained your records." The Captain placed a box that contained Milo's items on his desk. "We cleaned out your cubicle."

Milo rose from his seat, collecting the box. "Sir..."

Captain Austin rubbed the bridge of his nose as he sighed. "Just call me Greg, Milo."

"Greg, I enjoyed serving as an officer." He spoke the words only out of courtesy.

"As of this moment, I'm not." Captain Austin raised all his fingers. "I have to do this ten more times today."

Milo positioned the box under his left arm. "I'll never forget your tough lectures."

The Captain chuckled as he began typing. "I'm going to be honest with you Milo, you were too great for this place. I think the attorney general is a fool for getting rid of you. You were all about helping the people no matter what and in the end some political hack, who wants to make himself look powerful, has cost you your job. Leave proudly, you were a good cop."

Milo nodded at him and left the office, his head held high. He had just been fired, but was flushed with relief instead of anger or grief. The captain's last words guided him to the idea that maybe he was too good to be just a police officer. A half-smile formed across his face as he left the building. His day-schedule had just been cleared indefinitely. He did not let the worries of money and bills enter his mind, his new found freedom dominating his thoughts. No longer would his days simply revolve around getting up for work.

He joined the police academy directly after high school and never got the opportunity to explore the idea of simply existing. Though his nightmares held him captive during sleep, while awake he was now responsible for shaping each moment, nobody to answer to. He placed his box of items in the back seat of his sports car and drove downtown to visit Serena.

A short distance away, he arrived at 'Palmetto', the locally owned clothing store his girlfriend managed. He parked and headed inside the shop that was squeezed onto a block of other businesses. Inside he discovered a crowd who sipped from wine glasses, wore silver party hats and that made him feel underdressed. The store was decorated

with pink and white party streamers and balloons. A massive cake with the word 'Congratulations' written on it in silver lettering was placed on the checkout counter. Milo stood in the entryway, a few posh and flirtatious glances directed towards him.

Serena, who wore a black cocktail dress, emerged from the crowd. "Milo."

He furrowed his brows. "What's going on here?"

She approached him. "It's a surprise congratulations party."

"Who is it for?"

"Me." Serena walked from the shop.

He followed her. "What are they congratulating you for?"

"The company is expanding. They're opening a west coast location."

"That's great. I remember when this place first opened."

"Yeah, me too. Anyways, they want me to manage the new location."

Milo let out a soft laugh. "Funny, I lost my job and you gained another."

Serena slapped him against the chest. "No way."

"Yes, I was terminated for reasons that aren't important."

"Are you upset? How did your co-workers react?"

"I'm fine and I didn't really speak with anybody. I just left."

Serena rolled her eyes. "Typical."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm just saying you don't cherish any of the relationships you form."

"That's not true, I like you."

"Yet, you barely call me."

"I was busy, plus you stopped calling."

"Because I got tired of doing all the calling," She shouted.

Milo motioned at himself. "Why are you yelling? I'm the one being attacked."

"I'm just telling the truth, you don't care about others."

"Yes I do. I'm even good to strangers, my neighbor for example."

"No, you're just searching for a new person to replace the others you've forgotten about."

Milo found himself searching through his past for any long-term relationships that could prove her wrong. He had stopped talking to his high school friends; most of them moved away or were now consumed by their early marriages or kids. He failed to make a connection with his former partner and didn't develop any relationships with the other officers outside of the workplace. The more he attempted to dispute her words, the more he proved her point.

"Fine, I don't attach myself to others. I'm not needy."

"No, you treat people like objects or victims waiting to just be rescued by the 'great' Milo."

"I don't treat you like an object."

"Listen, I'm accepting the new position and I'm leaving Draper." Her eyes became teary. "I was planning on doing this later tonight, but I believe we've approached our end. I deserve somebody who genuinely finds me interesting. I'm tired of the bored stares you deliver when I attempt to tell you about my day or how you mock me. Yet, the moment I stop listening to your tales about your insane nightmares or saving kittens from a tree you accuse me of being rude. You're a nice guy, you're amazing arm candy but you need to start appreciating those in your life. It's been fun, but now it's done."

Serena returned to the store, walking away from their relationship without glancing back.

Milo returned to his car, sitting as he observed the downtown foot-traffic. He lost his job and his girlfriend, yet lacked the will to fight for them. A day like today would lead many to tears or borderline suicidal thoughts, but he had no desire to reach those places. He liked Serena, but the moment she revealed she wanted to end their relationship, he set her free.

Milo did not fear what obstacles came next; he experienced worst in his nightmares. He needed to speak with the one person who was best at deciphering his emotions and inner thoughts, his sister.

He started his car and started journeyed towards her house. She resided outside of Draper in a town that consisted of various fields with grass and marshes, Gooseville. It took a great distance of travel for those who resided within the town to visit neighbors or the downtown district. His sister relocated to the area after publishing her first book, away from all distractions to focus on writing her second. She was known in many literary circles as one of the greatest Hispanic authors of the new century. He took a trail hidden between moss-covered trees that led to her massive farmhouse. Milo parked in the dirt lot and headed to the dark painted, front door, knocking.

His sister answered, leaning in the doorway. "Milo."

Her agelessness always surprised him. "Hello, Artee."

The heavy-eyed Artee pursed her thin lips. "And what do you want?"

He laughed. "I came to visit you."

"Milo, you're not the type that visits friends or family."

"I'm not the one who moved away from society."

"Society stunts my creativity. I sacrificed it all for my writing."

"May I come in?"

She stepped outside, closing the door. "I'm currently brainstorming and don't want to alter the amazing vibes inside. We can talk out here."

The siblings took their seats on the porch stairs.

Artee adjusted the straps of the flower printed dress she wore. "How's life?"

"I lost my job today and my girlfriend."

"That's horrible."

"Yeah, but I can do more than just be a cop. The captain said so himself." He focused away from the non-issue. "As for Serena, the moment she wanted to leave me I let her go. It's strange because just like my high school friends, I know I'm going to forget her. Is it a bad thing that I can so easily let people go?"

"I don't think you've met the right people. I'm more comfortable around my family of course, but also those in the literary world. It took me awhile to learn that. Maybe you'll be more comfortable around those who are victims of the mad world. There are a lot of you who have to deal with the madness in your everyday lives and others like me or Serena will never understand. Yes, you had a great relationship with Serena but maybe there was nothing there to create a strong enough bond. Seek out the mad."

"I'm actually excited at the thought of doing that." Milo smile and nodded. "You're good, Artee."

She patted him on his back. "And you're hired. I'm your new boss."

"And what exactly is my job title?"

"Life-Advisor."

He laughed. "And my duties are?"

"You live your life and visit me with tales of all the exciting things you've done and people you've met. Maybe some of those heroic acts you were talking about earlier. We live in a mad world brother and its good there's somebody out there like you who wants to change that."

"Amazing, but it sounds like a ploy to get me to visit more often. Are you lonely?"

"Your nephew goes to boarding school in Milan. I'm not lonely, I just miss my family."

His sister was a sexual deviant before becoming consumed with writing. It was tough attending school, knowing most of the seniors and nearly every school athlete had done inappropriate things with his older sister. She eventually got pregnant at the age of fifteen, the identity of the father still unknown.

"How is my nephew?"

"Bisexual and Buddhist. As long as he's happy, I'm succeeding as a parent."

"He just turned nine, right? I didn't even know what bisexual meant at the age."

"My child is informed and knows what he wants from life. I raised him well."

Milo stood from the porch. "I'm going to work Artee."

She smacked him on the rear. "You better and no slacking off."

Milo waved goodbye, climbed into his car, and commenced his new job.

### **Chapter 6 - Crush**

Sidnee spent the spare time she had preparing for her physical exam for women's group. She trained endlessly in the gym located in apartment complex activity center, jogged every morning, swam laps at a pool located in the inner city and drastically changed her diet. In a few days, she would know if all the miles she ran, laps she swam, weights she lifted, and veggie heavy meals consumed were worth the hard work.

Her workday took away from her training regimen occasionally, but her income was priority like most of those who desired keeping a roof over their head. She checked her make-up the rear view mirror of her parked car. Sidnee applied gloss to her plump lips and bounded her dark hair in a ponytail using a rubber band that she was sure would become tangled. She took the rear employee entrance inside.

Once inside the break room, her manager and the small business owner Edwin entered, using the back of a pen to scratch at his dark, bearded-face. He carried a clipboard in his other hand. Edwin was a manager who didn't allow his position of authority to influence him to treat those who worked for him as a lesser. He wore the same uniform as all the other staff members, khakis and burgundy shirts, the collar of his laced with gold thread.

The short man approached her, glancing down at the clipboard. "How's everything going?"

"Great, it's an important week for me. I'm trying out for this women's group."

"You mean you have to sing and dance?" He did a subtle shuffle. "You're into the arts?"

"No, they're a group of young women who bond with nature in athletic ways."

"Shit," Edwin let out a sigh of disappointment. "I thought you were a singer."

"Not at all, I'm horrible. My father didn't even let me sing his own church choir."

"It's fine. I'm searching for a front woman for my band, you would've been perfect."

Sidnee had no interest in a musical career, but was curious why she was considered. "How so?"

He raised his thick brows, eyeing her up and down. "Because you're gorgeous."

Sidnee tugged at her unsightly, burgundy, uniform shirt. "And now I'm embarrassed."

"No, no, no," He quickly responded. "I'm sorry for springing that awkwardness on you."

"It's not awkward, but you never know the reasoning behind a guy's compliments."

"I have a girlfriend," He beamed. "Yes, you're gorgeous but I love her."

Sidnee playfully pouted. "That's so sweet."

Edwin's plump cheeks grew red. "If you don't let me change the topic, I will fire you," He joked.

Sidnee struggled to keep a straight face, forcing back laughter. "You have my full attention boss."

He returned his attention to the clipboard. "Daniel called out today. You're working with Ann."

"Is Daniel okay?"

Sidnee was aware some demonic forces were strong enough to harm their host. This was the first shift that she was scheduled to work with Daniel following the night the demon within him tried to run her car off the road and end her life.

Edwin shrugged. "He threw in a couple of fakes coughs, I don't believe him."

"Any idea why he would pretend to be sick?"

The motive of the question was of selfish reasons. Afraid he had begun to avoid her.

"Because he's human I suppose. Plus Ann needed the extra hours, works out for everybody."

Sidnee glanced at the clock, their conversation running longer than she thought. "Anything else?"

"I would suggest you don't attempt to cozy up to her," He warned. "She hates you."

Sidnee only recalled meeting Ann the day she came in for an interview. "Why?"

Edwin winked. "Because you're gorgeous." And left the room.

Reaching the midpoint of a routine workday, Sidnee's lunch break came around and she ordered a chicken salad. She usually wasn't such a cautious eater, but the thought her of physical exam led to her settling for something healthier. Once retrieving her own order from the kitchen, she took a seat in the area she waited. She sat alone in a cubicle, eating her lunch. Her meal nearly done, she was joined by Harriet.

Harriet sat as she pointed down at the mahogany table. "Is it okay if I join you?"

Sidnee fanned her hand at her. "I don't mind."

Harriet's phone rang. She angled herself away from Sidnee as she answered. "What is it Ford?"

Sidnee watched as Harriet attempted to keep her composure. The woman removed the phone from her ear and delivered a few eyes rolls. Each time she attempted to respond her words were cut short. Sidnee noticed the skin on Harriet's neck was peeling and discoloration around her finger nails. The sleeves of the red dress the woman wore did a poor job of hiding the scratch marks on her shoulders. Sidnee drew her eyes away from Harriet, focusing on a neon sign of a hamburger that was mounted near the entry door.

"I know nothing Ford," Harriet shouted into the phone. "Stop calling me about her."

Sidnee returned her attention to Harriet as the woman hung up her phone. "Is everything okay?"

Harriet carelessly dropped her phone on table. "My son is harassing me about my ex-wife."

"And it's obviously driving you crazy?"

"Yes, I care nothing about my ex's dramatics."

"What do you mean?"

"She has show business in her blood and regrets retiring till this day. The main reason we decided to retire was the competition. As each month passed, our crowds became smaller and our competitors upped their raunchiness. She and I were much too old to compete. We moved here, both blaming each other for not being good enough. That's a road I don't want to travel down, but just in case you're wondering I could hold a tune much better than her."

Sidnee laughed. "I'll believe you."

"I sense a little doubt," Harriet accused. "At my party you'll hear me sing."

"I look forward to it."

"Anyways, back to my ex-wife. We moved here and she needed a new stage, the streets. She's known as the crazy woman who does drugs and does the unthinkable with anybody. The spotlight is all on her when she walks the streets, no matter the reaction she receives. My ex-wife knows it's better to have people talking about you, instead of not talking about you at all."

"And this moment proves that," Sidnee pointed out. "She's the star of my lunch break."

Harriet nodded, "Yes, exactly. Apparently she's acting out one of her favorite acts."

"As in..."

Harriet dramatically revealed, waving her hands in the air, "She's disappeared for the millionth time."

"To where?"

"I don't know, but my son has been calling constantly about her whereabouts. Searching for my ex-wife is the last thing on my mind. I have a party to plan, I'm gaining weight like crazy, and my body is just falling apart. My dermatologist is just baffled about the rashes." Harriet closed her eyes, took a deep breath and blew out. She reopened them, starting directly at Sidnee. "I'm sorry for making your break all about me and my private matters. How's your life?"

"I'm fine. I decided on a paint color, yellow."

"And hopefully my son would stop stressing about his mother and paint your place for you."

"Hopefully, also I have a physical exam for this women's group approaching."

Harriet clapped. "I'm congratulating you early, because I know you'll be successful."

Sidnee executed a seated curtsy. "Thanks."

Harriet glanced over Sidnee's shoulder. "Ann's working the day shift?"

"Yeah, Daniel called in sick."

"Poor guy, what's wrong with him?"

"Edwin believes he's not really ill and I agree. I think he's avoiding me."

“What happened between you two?”

“I got angry at him over something he could not completely control.”

“And an apology wasn’t enough?”

That moment Sidnee realized that night she left Daniel alone in his car, abandoned on the dark road. There was a bit of guilt swirling around as she recognized how uncaring she came off to a victim of undeserved madness, Daniel. She was so focused on preparing for her physical exam; she never took the moment to clarify her feelings toward him. He probably sat home believing she was upset at him. Sidnee could not allow him to continue believing that.

Sidnee stood from the table. “I have to talk with him.”

Harriet’s cell phone rang. “Good, now I have to take this call. It’s the caterer.”

Sidnee mouthed ‘talk with you later’ and returned to work.

The remainder of her shift passed quickly. A few others employees arrived, Sidnee learning from them where Daniel lived. He resided in a nearby trailer park. The moment she left work, she drove to visit him. As she arrived to the area, she recognized it from the news. A woman had been found murdered in her trailer.

Sidnee drove down three rows of tattered trailers, spotting the murder scene surrounded with police tape. Daniel’s bicycle, chained to a poorly constructed chained link fence, caught her eye. She parked her car before his trailer, made her way up to the front door and knocked.

Daniel answered, immediately livening up as he recognized it was Sidnee. “Uh hey.”

“Are you busy?”

“No,” He quickly answered. “Just an ordinary sick day.”

Sidnee laughed. “Are you really sick?”

Daniel let out faint cough. “Yes, as sick as a dog.”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t believe you. You can be upfront, I won’t tell.”

“I just really needed a day off.” He shoved his hands into the pocket of his jeans. “I lied.”

She pointed inside his house. “Is it okay if I come in?”

He stepped aside, her request like music to his ears. “Absolutely.”

She walked inside his trailer, the place tidily cleaned. A blue couch was placed in his living room, a laptop resting on the mahogany coffee table and flat-screen television mounted on the wall. She made her way further into the lemon-scented trailer, taking a seat on the couch. A quick glance at the laptop screen revealed porn.

She smirked as she pointed at the pornography. “What are you watching?”

Daniel rushed over, shutting down his laptop. “I clicked the wrong link. I was studying.”

She let out a soft laugh. “That excuse will work this time around. You’re in school?”

“Yeah, I want to be a teacher,” He beamed. “My parents also teach.”

“That’s amazing. I wish I knew exactly which career I wanted pursue.”

He sat down beside her. “I feel bad for lying about being sick. I didn’t expect anybody to visit.”

“No, I’m not here for that. I’m here to let you know that we’re good.”

Daniel’s eyes widened and he formed a half-smile. “Yeah?”

“Yes, I don’t blame you for what happened between us that night on the road.”

He placed his hand against his chest as he breathed a sigh of relief. “You’ve made me so happy.”

“This isn’t something I share often, but I’m an exorcist Daniel. Instead of keeping you in the dark, I should let you know that you’re possessed by a demonic force. He’s trying to use your emotions for me as a weapon. I left you to deal with this all alone, but because I fear helping will only make things worse.”

Daniel held his scrawny arms outward, staring at them. “I don’t feel possessed.”

“Listen, he’s there. The possibility of a possession is the reason I turned you down, not you.”

“This is great to hear, but also terrifying. How do you handle all this demonic crap?”

“This is a common issue in my life. I’ll be fine but this conversation is about your survival.”

*“He won’t survive bitch,”* the demon hissed.

Sidnee placed her hands on Daniel’s shoulder. “Relax Daniel.”

He sat still, her behavior only making him uncomfortable. “What’s wrong?”

“The demon spoke,” She revealed. “He has yet to leave your body.”

*“You’re officially introducing me to my host, I’m charmed.”*

“Shut up,” Sidnee shouted. “Leave him!”

Daniel scooted back, removing her hands from his shoulders. “Are you serious?”

“Yes, the best thing you can do is remain calm.”

Daniel’s face swiftly started to redden. “Saying that is making me do the opposite.”

*“And today on the mad dating show my host will be rejected once again because he’s a sap.”*

“You’re humor is a miss with me demon,” Sidnee snapped back.

Trails of sweat raced down Daniel’s face. “I don’t know what to do,” He panicked.

“I won’t let it hurt you,” She promised. “Focus on something calming.”

The demon laughed, *“He’s focusing on you, how pitiful. He wants you bad.”*

“You’re the pitiful one demon.”

*“I just enjoy playing with fools in love, lighten up. Why do you care about him anyways?”*

“He’s a nice guy and I won’t let you hurt him. I know what pain you demons bring.”

*"A lot of nice people are possessed and die as of result every day."*

"I can't save everybody."

A phrase she recalled her mother speaking after many exorcisms ended with death.

The demon let out a phony yawn, *"I'm ready to have some fun."*

"How exactly?"

*"Instead of the porn, Daniel deserves a taste of the real thing."*

Daniel lunged forward, tackling Sidnee to the couch. He grasped her wrists with his warm palms, forcing her down. Sidnee cringed as he grinded against her and kissed her on the neck. She struggled to free herself, but the demon's influence added to his strength and aggression. Daniel freed her left hand as he unbuttoned and buried his hand into her khaki shorts. Straining, Sidnee reached for the laptop that was placed on the coffee table. She managed to grasp the device, swung, and smacked Daniel across the head. The attack made it possible for her to knee him in the crotch.

Daniel fell backward, groaning in pain. "What is wrong with you," He shouted.

"I'm sorry Daniel, I had to do it. You attacked first."

The reddening in his face started to fade. "Did I faint? I don't remember anything."

Sidnee stood from the couch, buttoning her shorts. "I told you, you're possessed."

Daniel placed his palm against his forehead. "I have a horrible headache."

"Daniel all of this is my fault. This crush has to end."

"I can't help it okay, I like you Sidnee," He declared once more.

"And if you continue to like me this demon will destroy your life."

He dug some cash from his pocket. "Fine, perform an exorcism on me."

She believed this could be solved without the extreme actions. "You can still fight this on your own."

"And that involves me abandoning my crush?"

She nodded. "Yes, please."

Daniel lounged back on his couch, staring up at his low ceiling. "I can't."

"You're a loser who watches porn alone in his trailer."

He laughed. "I won't fall for the mean act."

Sidnee felt foolish for even attempting it. "I'm leaving Daniel. Please, forget me."

She left the trailer knowing her role was done. The remaining battle with the demon lied with Daniel. His love for her only strengthened the monster within him. Most weren't lucky to know of their possessions, but her providing him with that information gave him an advantage.

Daniel had to understand that every thought of her fueled the demon. The harder he fought against them, the weaker the demon would become. Her boyfriend in the past fell victim to a possession, she believed Daniel would overcome it. She could not let this situation distract her from her own life; she had a physical exam to prepare for.

### Chapter 7 -Safe

It had been days since Ford had spoken to his mother. He was accustomed to her disappearing from his life during her drug binges, but never for a period this long. During those dark moments of her life he would spot her wandering the streets in a daze. He would never approach her. Ford was aware of her drug use, but preferred not to forwardly deal with it.

He needed to locate his mother and apologize. Though their last words to each other were harsh, he did not mean them. He didn't have the ability to read minds, but he hoped his mother's words were also delivered out of frustration.

He narrowed his search down to the inner city. The area once was the home of thriving manufacturing industry, but those buildings were now mainly occupied by the homeless or bulldozed to make room for government housing apartment complexes. It was where most of the violent and narcotic related crimes took place in Draper. He started his search early in the day, hoping the daylight would make it easier to spot her. Ford parked his car before a thrift store and searched by feet. He made his first stop at a soup kitchen.

The one story building was crammed with long lunch tables, a buffet area, and a small kitchen. Most of the staffers were from the local college. A few homeless dined on hot soup, bread rolls, and fruit cups. He approached the buffet and used his wrapped hand to gently knock against the stainless steel top. A young brunette server with various face piercings exited the back kitchen.

She slipped on a white apron. "I bet you're hungry."

"No actually."

"It's not a crime to want a free meal, we're here to serve. I'm Tara."

Ford shook his head as he explained, "I'm not homeless. My mom is. I'm looking for her."

Tara's eyes became full with sympathy. "I'll do my best to help. What's her name?"

"Valarie."

Tara tugged at a strand of her hair. "Valarie...sharp tongue, dark hair like mine?"

"Yeah, have you seen her around lately?"

"No, I'm sorry."

Ford rested his head against the buffet top, feeling defeated.

"Maybe..."

He quickly raised his head. "Maybe what," He eagerly responded.

"She usually hangs around Melvin. They eat here often."

"I've never heard of him."

She raised her hand about half her height. "He's a small guy. I believe they're dating."

"Her boyfriend," Ford chuckled under his breath. "That's unexpected."

"No matter financial your status, your heart still seeks love."

"True." He now had a lead. "Do you know where I can find Melvin?"

Tara thumbed over her shoulder. "He usually sleeps in the alley of 'Cluckin' Ducks'."

Ford furrowed his brows. "I'm positive that ducks quack."

Tara laughed as she removed her apron. "Supposedly their duck taste just like chicken."

"I'll stick with chicken itself and thanks so much for helping me out."

"No problem, good luck finding your mom."

They exchanged polite smiles, Tara returning to the kitchen and Ford exiting the building. He walked down the block searching for the restaurant. The majority of the buildings in the area were defaced with graffiti and parking meters had signs attached that revealed they were out of order. Most of the town's budget income was invested into the college campus, downtown shopping area or the mayor's salary. The infrastructure and schools in this inner city received below average funding.

He spotted Lu jogging down the cracked sidewalk toward him. "You jog," He spoke aloud.

She approached him, jogging in place. "I have a black dress to squeeze in. It's a date night."

She wore skimpy red shorts and a sweat drenched, white tank top.

"I think you look great."

"You gentleman. What are you doing in my part of town? Are you buying crack Ford?"

"No," He quickly responded. "I'm looking for my mom."

Lu checked her watch. "I would help, but I have to go. I'll see you tonight, right?"

"Tonight?" He motioned at himself. "Am I your date?"

"No," She laughed. "I'm stopping by the group meeting first, are you going to be there?"

"It depends on how I feel."

"You have to; it's sort of a memorial for Miriam."

He was sure if the roles were reversed, she would've attended his memorial. "Fine, see you there."

Lu kissed him the cheek and jogged away.

His mind immediately refocused back on his search for his mother. A few blocks down, he arrived at the restaurant that had a large yellow sign that displayed its name. There was a hand painted photo on the sign of a duck biting into a fried chicken wing. It only made the name of the business even more odd to Ford. The alley of the restaurant was blocked off by a fence. As he approached, he noticed a hole, cut into the chain-linked fence, making it possible for him to slip through. His jeans and t-shirt were caught on the exposed tips of the fence, but only his shirtsleeve gained a tear.

He ventured down the alley that was arm's length wide. The enclosed space was warm, the burnt grease scented air thick, and the ground below his feet scattered with bits of broken glass. A cough up ahead prompted him to increase his pace. Ford discovered a bone thin man with dingy flesh. The man held in tattered book in his hand as he stood posted against the wall, smoking and reading. His beady, blue eyes glanced away from the pages of his tattered book as he stared at Ford. He eyed him up and down before returning to his reading.

Ford pointed at him. "Are you Melvin?"

"Listen," The raspy voiced man snapped. "I'm not sucking or licking anything today."

"No..." He couldn't believe the yellow toothed man actually got those request.

"And I'm not letting you put anything in me. I have enough smokes to last me the day, come back tomorrow."

"I'm not here for anything," Ford explained. "I'm looking for my mother."

"I'm a little busy here. I'm reading a good book."

Ford bit down on his bottom lip, redirecting his frustration. "Please, only a few questions."

Melvin shut his book and sat it on the dumpster near him. "Three questions, that's it."

"Do you know Valarie? Somebody told me you do."

"Yes, we sometime split motel rooms. I trust her not to steal my shit and she trusts me."

Ford motioned at himself. "I'm her son. Have you seen her around lately?"

"Nope, one more question." Melvin crossed his arms that had a few bruises. "Make it good."

"When is the last time you saw her?"

"A couple of days ago." He shoved Ford away. "Now I have a story to finish, get."

Melvin was the only possible connection to Ford's missing mother. He needed more information and had to attain them his way. Ford charged at Melvin and used his left forearm to pin him against the stone wall of the alley. He applied force against the man's chest.

Melvin delivered a few weak punches to Ford's forearm. "Are you insane," He choked out.

"Where is she?"

"I told you, I don't know."

"Please, I need info. I need to talk to her."

Melvin's dingy face hastily reddened. "I have no reason to lie to you. You're my friend's son."

Ford's eye welled up with tears. "I just need to apologize to her."

As he began to let his guard down, Melvin grasped his injured hand, squeezing.

Ford let out a scream as he snatched his injured hand away and used his left to smack Melvin to the ground. He stormed from the alley, his injury aching. The sun was setting, with dusk approaching, his natural search light not present for long. Ford returned to his car and sat. He rested his head backward and blew out a sigh. The slasher had done far worse, but he was embarrassed about his behavior in the alley. He allowed built up emotions to control his actions. Ford could not go home and deal with Rubble's mouth. He fired up the car's engine and drove to his other-mother's house.

Her car was parked outside, but upon entry, he learned that she had guests. A well-groomed male couple, a woman wearing an excessive amount of makeup, a graceful man with shoulder length bleached-blond hair, and his other-mother sat in the living room. Ford stood, awkwardly staring at the crowd.

Harriet, dressed in all black, nearly no skin exposed, stood. "Ford, we were just talking about you."

All eyes were on him, her guests all wearing a grin. He raised his injured hand at them. "Hi."

"Oh my," The wild haired woman worried. "Baby, what happened to your hand?"

"I slammed it in a car door."

"Sounds painful," The nasally blond man betted.

"I'm surviving."

Harriet pointed at the couple. "Do you remember Terry and Lenny?"

He stared at the two men who sat beside each other holding hands. "I'm trying."

Harriet pointed at the bald member of the couple. "That's Terry."

"I'm Lenny," His partner revealed. He wore a gold silk shirt, jeans, and knee-high leather boots.

Ford lightly smacked himself against the forehead. "I feel horrible for not remembering."

Terry laughed as he brushed at his purple blazer. "It's okay, you were only an infant."

"We were your babysitters while your parents worked," Lenny revealed.

Harriet laughed. "They used to fix your hair and dress you in flashy feather boas."

"And Valarie hated every bit of it," Terry recalled as he over-dramatically rolled his eyes.

Ford got knots in his stomach at the mentioning of her name.

"Don't make my son a homo," Lenny exclaimed, mimicking Valarie.

They all broke out laughing, Ford, far too upset to genuinely join in. He noticed Harriet appeared to be delivering a phony laugh. She barely could maintain a smile. Ford's eyes met with his other-mother's and he nodded towards the kitchen. As he walked away, Harriet excused herself from her guests and joined him. The moment Harriet was out of the sights of her guests she buried her face into hands.

Ford pulled her hands down to her waist. "Not tonight. I need you more"

"I'm breaking down Ford." She raised her sleeves revealing a rash. "I'm all itchy."

It was as if she didn't hear his plea. "Other-mom, please. I need you."

She took a deep breath. "Okay, I'm listening."

"I was really mean to Valarie and now she's missing. The guilt is driving me insane."

"You're too young to worry. She's fine and I'm sure she's forgiven you. Val is tough."

"I can't just rely on your words, I need her to admit that herself."

"She won't. Val is not for a fan of emotional confrontations."

"But..."

"Ford please," Harriet stressed. "I spent most of my life with her. I know her."

"You're telling me, no matter how harsh my words were that she'll forgive me."

"Valarie and I have been through so much together, yet I can still call her a friend."

Ford crossed her arms. "You two aren't friends."

"It's an unspoken truth. We both created you, you bond us. She'll resurface."

He still worried about her whereabouts, but Harriet's words helped. "My hand hurts."

Harriet tugged at her dark hair, removing a few strands. "And I'm falling apart."

"Have you been to the doctors?"

"Yes and they have no answers." A tear strolled down her cheek. "It's terrifying."

"And I bet your guests aren't making it any easier, huh?"

"They're great friends, but I can't handle them right now." She paced the kitchen. "They traveled here for my party and more will arrive in the next few days. I just want the hotel shuttle to come pick them up tonight and take them away. I need a nice warm bath and a big fucking bucket of wine."

He stopped her from pacing, hugging her. "You'll be okay. I'm staying over tonight."

Harriet used his shirt to wipe her tears. "We can rent movies."

"Yeah, but I have to meet up with some friends first." He released her from his grasp.

Harriet did her best to collect herself. "You have friends?"

He let out a soft chuckle. "Yeah."

"Actual friends as in non-imaginary?"

"I'm not a psycho." Just a little mad, he admitted to himself.

She kissed him on the cheek. "Have fun and stop stressing."



"I'll try." He thumbed over his shoulder. "I'm going to take the back door."

"You don't want to tell everybody goodbye?"

He was not interested in anymore embarrassing tales of his childhood. "They're your guests."

Harriet kissed him once more and returned to the living room.

Ford left the house in better spirits. He was concerned about his parents, but knew he was limited when it came to helping them. Doctors could only solve Harriet's recent health problems and he could only keep his eyes open for Valarie. He wished he could stop by his apartment and change into something more acceptable for the memorial, but did not want Rubble to bestow any negativity upon him. Instead, he headed directly to the community center.

As he expected, he arrived underdressed. The room was decorated with white flowers and a portrait of Miriam was placed upfront. The middle-aged woman held a gnome in the photo, mocking the grumpy face of the lawn décor that she held. He greeted a few of the group members he recognized, all properly dressed for the unfortunate occasion. The buffet table was more crowded than usual and somebody had even brought a punch bowl.

Though he was in the company of his own kind, he felt like an outsider. They rarely socialized outside this room and as Lu reminded him often, only shared lies within. Ford approached Lu who wore a form fitting mini, black dress and matching heels. She stood before the portrait of Miriam sipping red punch from a clear plastic cup.

Ford arrived beside her. "She was nice."

His mind instantly drifted back to the moment they discovered Miriam's body as his focus remained on the portrait. The police only injected a week's work into her murder case before setting it aside. After the lonely woman's death delivered little evidence or possible suspects the cops labeled her as another slasher victim.

Lu sighed. "Is that all you have to say about her?"

"Yeah."

"That's sad."

"Can you do any better," He challenged.

"She was..." Lu thought about it, "Really nice?"

"You're so poetic," Ford joked.

Lu nudged him. "Thanks for coming."

"No problem, what time is your date?"

"It started an hour ago." She nodded back at the buffet table. "I'm dating Bravo."

"Bravo?" He browsed the crowd around table, not fitting a name to the face.

She pointed out the towering blonde. "Yeah, he's the hotty deep-throating the hotdog."

He blended with the crowd, but Ford recognizing him. "Isn't he a slasher?"

"Yeah, he shows up every once and awhile. He's amazing."

Ford diverted his eyes away from him. "I thought I was the only cute slasher."

"Yes, but he's a hotty. You're cute like a brother."

"So you would also sleep with your brother?"

"I don't have a brother Ford." She stared at him as if he crazy. "Are you sure you're not on crack?"

"I'm trying to prove a point," He specified.

She finished off her punch. "Ford, jealousy is so elementary."

"I'm not jealous." Only a little. "I just found it odd you didn't mention he was a slasher."

"I label my dates based on their sexual performance; he's a five-star ride."

"And what about me?"

"It's been so long, I don't remember."

"Bullshit."

She fanned her hand in the air. "Um, let's go with three-star. Happy?"

"No, but I don't care." He did.

Bravo joined them, throwing his arm around Lu. "Hey Ford."

"Bravo," He responded as if he always knew his name. "How's it going?"

"It's alright. I'm on a date with the lovely Lu and enjoying the hotdogs."

"We're going to the movies," Lu announced.

"Cool, I'm watching a movie with my other-mom later." He realized how lame it sounded aloud.

Bravo smirked. "Hey, I wish I had a mom. Mine's serving time for stabbing a preacher."

"She was a slasher also?" Ford asked.

"Nope, just upset with her boyfriend who happened to be a preacher."

Ford glanced back at Miriam's portrait. "I wonder who killed her."

"I wonder why she was killed, not by whom," Lu stated.

Bravo laughed. "We're starting to sound like the friends and family members of our victims. I'm pretty sure they ask themselves who killed their loved ones and why, often. The truth is they never get an answer, because that requires us to own up to what we have done. Tonight, we know how they all feel. We're asking questions that Miriam's killer will never answer."

It didn't take long for Ford to agree with his point. "It's agitating."

A female slasher burst into the room, dropping to her knees. "He's dead," She cried out.

Lu furrowed her brows as she whispered out, "Miriam was a woman, right?"

The dark haired woman rose from her knees, her hands shaking. "Donatello..."

"Ignore my previous question," Lu said.

The group of slashers gathered around the woman as she continued weeping.

"I went to his house to pick him up. We always ride together. He was dead."

"Dead?" A voice from within the group questioned.

She nodded. "Yes, a knife in his chest. Just like Miriam."

Her connecting the deaths drew gasps from the crowd. Immediately Ford could see confused stares turn into ones of panic. A second slasher had fallen in the same fashion. This was no longer starting to look like a random occurrence. He watched as Lu and Bravo tightly gripped each other's hands. Ford could only shove his left hand into his jeans pocket.

Lu turned to him. "I think we're going to go now. Keep in touch Ford."

"Yeah, I will."

Bravo nodded at him. "Try to make it home safe tonight."

"You two do the same."

The couple said goodbye to the other members and left.

Ford's cell phone rang. He answered the unidentifiable number. "Hello?"

His ear was met by static and an extended beep causing him to jerk the phone back.

He stepped away from the crowd of slashers, backing out of the room. "Who is this?"

"Val...I love..."

Those were the only words he managed to hear through the excessive static. It was his mother's voice. She was alive somewhere probably using a cheap payphone to call him. He smirked as he tried to listen for more, but was satisfied with what he had already heard.

Ford shouted back into phone, "I love you too mom, please come back."

The call was disconnected. A weight had been lifted from his chest. The moment the background chatter related to the two slasher's deaths dominated his mind once more, a new weight made its presence known. It was possible somebody was harming slashers specifically. He had a sudden urge for safety and security. Ford exited the community center, heading back to his other-mother's house with haste.

### **Chapter 8 - Retreat**

Sidnee used the back of her hand to wipe sweat from her forehead. She had been running at a steady pace on a treadmill for nearly an hour. It was the final task of her physical exam. The examination commenced with a medical checkup performed in the same trailer. The other portions of the exam took place outside.

She swam laps in the nearby lake, raced against the clock as she climbed up a ridged stone wall, and lifted heavy barrels to test her strength. A few other women participated in the process, one on the treadmill to her right and the other to her left. There was a fourth woman, but she went home following a wrist injury.

Instead of chatting, Sidnee and her fellow runners kept their focus on passing their stamina test. The photos on the walls of the poorly arranged, heated trailer inspired Sidnee to keep her legs moving. Each photo highlighted past events hosted by the 'Uphill' group. There were a few shots of them serving at a soup kitchen, meeting the mayor, competing against cops in a baseball game, and many others that featured happy faces. Sidnee knew happiness was much harder to achieve, but moments like the ones pictured provided it in small but much needed doses.

Shamantha, wearing a white tennis skirt and pink shirt, entered. "I love the sight of hard work."

She carried a clipboard in her right hand and used the other to tug at a whistle around her neck.

"I can go all day," The toned, deep voiced woman to Sidnee's right, bragged.

Shamantha sat on the edge of the desk before them, crossing her oiled legs. "Nice to hear."

The woman on Sidnee's left, her hair shaved low, nodded forward. "What's on the clipboard?"

"I was just about to get to that Nadia. Your checkup results are in."

"Any good news," Sidnee asked.

"You're all healthy." She glanced at the runner to Sidnee's right. "Diana, you're the healthiest."

Diana, her boyish haircut matted to her sweaty forehead, pumped her fist in the air. "Sweet."

Shamantha focused on Sidnee. "But you surpassed them both in the athletics fields."

Sidnee's hard work paid off, she could not hide the joy in her face. "That's incredible news."

"*That bitch,*" A feminine voice insulted.

Sidnee nearly tripped over her own feet as she jerked her head from left to right.

Shamantha motioned at Sidnee. "Are you okay? If you're tired you can stop."

"No," Sidnee regained her focus. "I'm fine."

"*Damn, I badly wanted you to fall and snap your neck,*" The voiced fantasized.

Sidnee knew whom the voiced belong to, a demon. The tough question was whom it emitted from. It could be any of the women in the room, Shamantha, Diana, or Nadia. Shamantha had sparked a conversation, but Sidnee was too concerned with the emerging possession to focus. She was used to the demons interjecting themselves into her love life, but now her social life was supposedly at risk.

Shamantha stood from the desk, blowing her whistle. "And this ends your exam."

The trio each powered down their equipment and stepped down to the floor. Nadia used a towel to wipe sweat from her olive toned arms, Diana executed a few stretches and Sidnee took a sip from a bottle of water that she had

resting in the cup holder of her treadmill. Shamantha sat her clipboard down on the desk and opened one of the desk drawers. She removed three dark green folders from the drawer and passed them out.

She stepped back from the heavily panting 'Uphill' hopefuls. "The decision is no longer in my hands. If you're interested in joining the group, you just have to show up to our next event. Many of the new members get nervous and never arrive, but we're all nice. We're not monsters." She laughed at her statement, her audience too busy flipping through their introduction folders to return the gesture. "Each folder contains the links to the online profile of every member in our group. I suggest you add them all and see if you share any similar interests with them."

"I don't do technology," Diana stated. "I make friends the old way, face-to-face."

Shamantha nodded at her. "That's fine with me." She raised her index finger. "And finally..."

Shamantha opened a gray file cabinet in the room, revealing various packs of the official, forest green t-shirts. She grabbed a few in her arms, passing them out to the women. They all swapped back and forth until they found the size that fit them and returned the remainder to Shamantha.

Shamantha put away the shirts and formed a proud smile. "Welcome."

They applauded each other and shared a few congratulations.

Shamantha opened her arms wide. "How about a group-hug?"

"It's going to be a sweaty one," Nadia warned.

"That's why showers exist," Shamantha countered.

Shamantha wiggled her fingers as the girls came in for a group hug.

"*I can't believe I'm touching this prissy bitch,*" The demon complained. "*She has to die.*"

The threat prompted Sidnee to pull away from the hug first. As the girls parted, she checked their faces at any hint of negative stares only to discover tired eyes of those who had jogged along with her and Shamantha's pearly white teeth. Somebody in this room had a demon within who wanted to kill. Everybody gathered their belongings and left the trailer. It was located on the same property of the main building near the lake and a campsite.

As she headed to her car, she noticed a couple of fliers promoting an overnight camping retreat. It was scheduled for tomorrow. Sidnee badly wanted to attend it and meet new people. The demon had already done its job; it started to halt her participation in the group. She could not give it an easy victory. The demon was within one of the three women from the trailer. She could simply avoid them during the camping retreat or try to discover what about herself awoke a demon within whomever it possessed. Sidnee arrived to her car, sat the folder and shirt in the passenger's seat and drove home.

The next morning she dressed for work and packed an overnight bag for the camping trip. She still worked often with Daniel, but he kept things casual with her. He rarely spoke with her and all his flirtatious behavior had faded. She was proud of him. He took her advice and started battling the demon within, ridding himself of any romantic feelings for her.

Her work overshadowed by her excitement for the camping trip. Sidnee, busying herself with a register recount, spotted Harriet dining alone. The woman looked stressed and wore a wig that was slightly crooked. Sidnee made plans to greet her once she was done with her current task. The moment she shut the register closed, she noticed Daniel approaching Harriet. He leaned over giving her a hug. Daniel used the close contact with the woman to discretely readjust her wig. His actions brought a smile to Sidnee's face.

The moment warmed Sidnee's heart. She continued watching him chat with her. Harriet laughed at whatever words came from his mouth. Sidnee had never been so attracted to Daniel. She admitted to herself for the first time that she liked him. Sidnee quickly redirected her eyes as Daniel waved goodbye to Harriet and made his way in her direction. A few moments ago, Daniel was just her co-worker who was battling a demonic force within. She no longer saw him as that, but instead a guy she wanted to know more about.

As he passed, Sidnee complimented, "That was sweet."

He stopped before her. "Huh?"

"I saw what you did for Harriet."

He shrugged off her comment. "Oh."

"*He still thinks about you,*" The demon informed her. "*He's weak-minded.*"

"You're the weak one demon," Sidnee insulted.

Daniel blew out a defeated sigh. "He's still there, huh?"

Her newfound attraction made conversation with him awkward. "He who?"

"The demon," He responded as if he was addressing a confused child.

"Yeah, sorry," She stuck out her tongue. "My mind drifted for a quick moment."

Daniel ran his hands over his hair. "I'm trying to get over you. It's to stop liking you."

"I understand that now. It's not so simple. I was being so insensitive before."

"What do you mean by you understand?"

"Attractions come out of nowhere and when you have them their hard to shed."

He raised his right brow. "You like somebody?"

She could not hint that it was him; it would only strengthen his crush. Sidnee could easily now reveal her newfound attraction to him, but didn't expect the demon to just submit and leave them alone. Daniel had to completely rid himself of his inner voice first. Sidnee now found herself playing this demon's mad game, hoping Daniel could suppress his attraction to her. She could risk Daniel never liking her again and it would be a mad consequence she

would have to suffer with.

"Nope," She lied.

"You're talking like you're experiencing an attraction yourself."

"No, I've just been reading a lot of romance novels lately."

He drummed his hands against the checkout counter. "Oh," He sighed out.

*"You just stepped on his heart,"* The demon laughed out. *"This is just embarrassing."*

The demons words made her feel horrible. Daniel was suffering.

Sidnee noticed the time on the register monitor. "I've got to clock-out now."

"Are you doing anything after work?"

"I'm going camping, you?"

"I'm trying out speed dating. It's all a part of the process of getting over you."

She wished for his failure, selfishly wanting him single. "That should be fun."

He walked away as he let out a lifeless, "I suppose."

Sidnee headed to clock-out, mentally banging her head against a wall. This was the first guy she liked in a while, but a demon complicated things. It was frustrating being her at the moment. She could not enjoy the new people in her life. Demons were running amuck, no matter where she attempted to spark a social life. She had to power through, not give the demons any victories. Sidnee changed out of her work uniform into jeans and her official 'Uphill' shirt. She combed her hair in the bathroom of the restaurant, headed to her car, and drove to the campsite.

As she arrived at the group's headquarters, a couple of the members were packing drinks into coolers and carrying boxes of food items to the campsite. She parked and immediately joined in, carrying two packs of hotdogs and setting them into a cooler of ice. Shamantha had pulled her aside and explained as a part of tradition she herself would be bunking with newest members: Diana, Nadia and Sidnee. The exorcist had no choice but to uncover which of the women could be on the verge of possession and contain it if she wanted to achieve a good night's rest.

Sidnee returned to her car to grab her overnight bag, encourage herself to face the demon and not flee. She arrived back at the cabin to discover Nadia polishing her toenails on the lower bunk placed on the left. This was the perfect moment to spark a conversation and to get the possible demon within her to make an appearance. Sidnee unpacked her bag, placing her belongings in the top drawer of the lone mahogany dresser in the room. She claimed the lower bunk placed on the opposite side of the pine-scented cabin.

"Is there any significant behind your shaved head," She asked Nadia.

"It's nothing major."

"Are you in the mood to share?"

"Well," She blew at the red polish on her toes. "Hair made me look too much like my sister."

"I like it. It enhances your eyes."

Nadia stared at her with her exotic, green eyes. "Are you hitting on me?"

"No," Sidnee laughed.

Nadia winked at her. "I'm just teasing. You're also very pretty."

This helped Sidnee narrow down her list of suspects to two. Nadia was friendly. She harbored no detectable hatred against Sidnee. The complete absence of a demon assured her even more that Nadia was safe. She decided to redirect her focus to the remaining suspects.

"Thanks." Sidnee stood from her bunk. "I'm going to go look around."

Nadia resumed polishing her nails. "Have fun."

Sidnee set eyes on the dawning sun as she arrived outside. She took a moment to glance up at the orange sky and leafy pine trees. It was a sight that made her want to sprint through the forest. The campsite was crowded with members chatting and joking around. A few members played a game kickball and others sat in a circle on the dirt ground playing cards. She spotted Diana lugging around logs, one of her two remaining suspects.

Sidnee jogged over to her. "Do you need any help?"

"I'm good, but thanks so much for offering."

Diana dropped the logs to the dirt ground, neatly stacking them. "What's up?"

"I'm just enjoying the nature."

"Yeah, it's gorgeous out here. I can wait to sleep to the sound of the crickets."

"I can't believe I out performed you in the physical parts of the exam."

Diana laughed. "I was burnt out. I spent the previous night in the gym."

"I worked out for my exam also, but slept the night before."

Diana flexed her thick biceps. "I'm a gym-rat, as you can see."

"You lift a lot of weights?"

"It's an addiction."

Sidnee had forgotten the main reason of this conversation, to lure out a demon. So far, Diana had been extremely kind. The demon from the day before had yet to make its presence known. Sidnee started second-guessing herself, maybe it was paranoia or her self-conscious. The voice was possibly a figment of her imagination. She spotted Shamantha talking with a group of listening campers.

"I'll talk with you later Diana. I'm going to see what Shamantha is talking about."

She headed over, joining the group. Shamantha was discussing a daring, late-night hiking trip. The crowd grew

larger, Diana and Nadia eventually joined in. Shamantha explained the route they would take and suggested what items they should travel with. Sidnee started getting a headache. She realized she had not eaten since lunch. Shamantha's audience disbanded as she informed them the hike would begin in fifteen minutes. Sidnee had planned to join them, but grabbed a bag of potato chips, a ham sandwich, and popped a pain reliever from one of the many first-aid kits included in each cabin.

The majority of the campers, carrying flashlights and wearing backpacks headed into the forest led by Shamantha. After consuming her meal by the fire, Sidnee headed back to her cabin to rest for a while. Shamantha was her last possible suspect. Knowing Shamantha was out leading the hiking trip, made it easier for Sidnee to drift off to sleep without worrying about her life being threatened. She would continue her investigation later.

Sidnee awoke as she struggled to breathe and choke on the air. She opened her eyes to discover darkness. An excessive amount of heat and smoke filled the cabin. She sat up to discover the front area of the cabin up in flames. Sidnee's heart raced as she jumped from bed. She used the white sheet from her bed to attempt to calm the flame. Her arms grew tired as she continuously flapped the sheet at the crackling fire. It was too late. It had grown too strong.

Sidnee dropped the sheet to the floor and approached the lone window in the room, located in the rear of the cabin. She strained as she attempted raise it. The warm and thick air quickly caused her energy to deplete. Her survival becoming desperate, Sidnee removed one of the drawers from the dresser and sent it crashing through the window.

She climbed from the window; the shards of glass that remained in window frame tore through her t-shirt and at her flesh. Sidnee dropped from the burning cabin to the forest ground, gasping for the fresh air. She crawled around front, using the little strength she had to hoist herself to her feet. As she arrived to the campground area before the cabin, she discovered Diana watching the scene.

Sidnee coughed. "I don't know how it started."

"You're still alive, damn."

She gained a clearer view of Diana's face in the night to learn she was snarling. "Are you okay?"

Diana shrugged her broad shoulders. "She's a little possessed, but I feel spectacular."

Sidnee stood upright as she realized it was full possession. The inside voice now had a vessel.

The demon removed some matches from the pocket of her shorts, dropping them onto the ground as she glared at Sidnee. "I've been preying on envy for decades. I must say this possession was my simplest task. You see Sidnee, Diana has an extremely competitive nature. The fool thinks she's the best in the world at athletics. Until a scrawny runt like you out performed her. She barely slept last night as she obsessed over your unfortunate accomplishment. I'm forever Diana. I even fooled you during our little chat earlier, you dumb bitch."

The demonically controlled woman leaned her head back as she let out a cynical laugh. This demon nearly ended Sidnee's life; she would suffer the wrath of the exorcist. Sidnee charged forward, anger her fuel, and speared the demon to the ground. She mounted her, placed her palm over the demon's stolen face, and dug deep for strength as she pinned the demonic force to the forest ground.

"I'll kill you bitch," The muffled demon threatened.

"You will leave her body demon. It does not belong to you."

"Never," The demon roared.

A blood came from Diana's nose. Natural exorcisms were risky. Sidnee lacked the proper tools.

"I said leave her," Sidnee demanded.

"I hate the sight of you exorcists, nags."

Sidnee's irises grew dark as she leaned closer to Diana's reddening face. "You heard me."

"I'll be back, somewhere, some day."

"And an exorcist will be waiting and will say as I told you, leave!"

A strong wind passed through, ruffling the leaves of the towering trees. Diana started to seize, Sidnee struggled to keep the possessed body still. If she had the proper oils and demonic-trappers this moment would have been less frightening. She was risking Diana's health, but the longer she was fully possessed, the less likely the true her could ever return. Sidnee noticed many of the campers returning from the night hike, mouths agape as they witnessed the fire. Diana coughed up blood, Sidnee quickly turning her onto her side to prevent her from choking.

Shamantha ran over. "What is going on?"

Sidnee glanced up at her, her eyes reverting to her original shade. "We need to call help!"

Shamantha took a step back. "What did you do to her?"

"I'm an exorcist. Diana was possessed by a demon. I was its target."

Shamantha held her arms out as she took in the information. "But your eyes were darkened."

"If you don't believe me, you can ask Diana if she survives. Does that work for you?"

"This will be investigated," Shamantha threatened. "I don't tolerate violence in 'Uphill'."

"You do that." Sidnee nodded back at the burning cabin. "Call the fire station and an ambulance."

Shamantha snapped her fingers. "Of course, I'll send somebody to make the call."

She rushed off and delivered the command. The services arrived minutes later, containing the flame before it could spread and transporting a barely conscious Diana to the nearest hospital. She did gain enough strength to utter the phrase 'thanks' to Sidnee who stayed at her side during the wait for the ambulance. Diana's words were welcomed, but Sidnee was still upset about the entire situation. She nearly died tonight all because she was born a target of many demons, an exorcist.

The camping retreat had been postponed, Shamantha alerting the women to return home. After helping to pack up the campsite, Sidnee salvaged whatever of her belongings that survived the fire. After returning them to her car, she was pulled aside by Shamantha. They sat together on the wooden stairs of the group's headquarters.

Shamantha crossed her legs. "I've decided 'Uphill' isn't right for you."

"I did nothing wrong. I saved a life tonight. Your investigation will prove my innocence."

"Maybe it will, but I don't want any possible repeats of this situation. You're a risk."

"I can't help the fact that demonic forces are endlessly after me."

"I know. That's why I made this decision. You put those around you in danger."

"Diana will be fine, I handled it."

"But what if Nadia was also in that cabin tonight or anybody else?"

Sidnee nearly had the strength to save herself from the fire. If somebody else was inside a possible death could have taken place. She now understood the decision Shamantha made. It would hurt her to walk away from something she hoped to enjoy, but had no choice.

Sidnee stood, fighting back her tears. "I understand."

Shamantha placed her hand against her chest. "I was glad to accept you; it hurts to send you away."

"It was nice meeting you."

Sidnee speed walked to her car, allowing her tears to flow. In the end, the demon was truly victorious.

### **Chapter 9 – Showtime**

Sidnee felt defeated, the demon had won. The entire night she dreamed about that moment Shamantha expelled her from the group, the voice of the demon hysterically laughing as she relived the memory. That morning Sidnee forced herself from bed, planning to attend Harriet's party this evening. She drew all the blinds in her apartment close, the vibrant sun outside clashing with her gloom state. She hated this feeling, the battle of constantly fighting back tears and avoiding the urge to throw a tantrum. It reminded her of past moments when she felt this way.

Her first love was Harvey. He made her laugh. It was the sole factor that drew her to him. She was fifteen, him one year older. He was not like any of the boys at her school, the majority of them obsessed with video games and action movies. Harvey was a writer and spent his weekends cleaning horses. She never believed his life story until their first date. He had taken her horseback riding, though she spent the majority of her time screaming and climbing down from every horse she attempted to mount.

They were happy together, until a study night. A voice had met her ears, a demon within her love. This demon transformed Harvey into an angry person, crushing the soft spirit that had dwelled within him. His love for the art of writing was replaced by drawing. He drew dark photos, some featuring a nude caricature of her in unpleasing positions. His evenings weren't spent cleaning horses, but instead sparking fights. The demon eventually gained full control of Harvey. The night Sidnee made the heartbreaking decision to split up with him, he kicked her down a set of stairs.

Her mother interfered moments after the violent act, performing a dangerous possession that left Harvey paralyzed in the hands. Sidnee's father phoned his parents and emergency services. She never saw Harvey after that night, his whereabouts today still rumors that originated by the gossipy girls in her school. For months after the loss of her first love, she felt defeated. A feeling she hated, a feeling she experienced as she sat watching television this day.

After imagining how hurt Harriet would be if she skipped the party, Sidnee willed herself to get dressed. As she opened her closet her eyes landed on a gold, cocktail dress she owned. She took a shower, applied natural toned makeup, slipped on her outfit, and headed out the door.

Harriet gave subtle directions, mentioning her home was located beachside and that the party decorations would highlight it. The majority of the homes along the beach had neatly kept gardens and infrastructures. She spotted a home, its front door decorated with silver and red balloons. A hotel bus was parked and many vehicles before the home. A sign that read 'Enter' pointed towards the backyard. Sidnee parked across the street, primped her curled hair in the rearview mirror before joining the party.

As she advanced into the backyard, her ears were greeted by classic rock. The yard décor mirrored the color scheme of the balloons on the front door. A dance floor and performance stage had been set up, along with round tables, a bar and a buffet table. There was a bartender and servers, dressed in black, on staff. The party attendees wore colorful, expensive outfits. It was as if she had just stumbled into a fashion show. The majority of the outfits she had never seen in any clothing store. The local attendees she recognized were dressed a lot more casual than those visiting from Las Vales.

Across the yard she spotted Daniel chatting with a few of their co-workers. The sight of him instantly reminded her of the demon within him. She could not approach the man she liked, because it was the only way she could protect him. It was unfair, but it was her life. She needed to free her mind of her mad thoughts. Sidnee headed to the bar and grabbed a random drink from the counter. She chugged the green liquid, the alcohol burning her throat and the green apple flavor quenching her thirst. The demons still dominating her thoughts, Sidnee treated herself to more drinks.

Her mind raced and she ended up on the dance-floor. She danced with a flamboyant man who sported a silver suit and rhinestone rimmed sunglasses. Sidnee lasted four songs until her mouth started to become dry, prompting her to have another drink. Her dance partner had abandoned her on the dance-floor, Sidnee searching the yard for somebody else to two-step with.

Her search ended, the exorcist's eyes focusing on Daniel. He wore a smirk as he watched a woman stuff her mouth with shrimp. Sidnee wanted to hold him, kiss his lips. She knew the demon was constructing a brick wall

between them. No demon would control her tonight; she would crash through the barricade.

A tipsy Sidnee clumsily strutted across the yard, pushing aside those in her path. Her heart raced as Daniel's attention turned to her. The smirk he wore faded as she continued toward him. Sidnee could see the fear in his eyes, she hated that it was there. Her presence and the madness that accompanied her brought that fear into his life. She had no cares tonight. The exorcist would abandon the strategic game with the demon and express what she felt. Sidnee grabbed Daniel by the shirt.

He quickly removed her hands from him. "What are you doing?"

"*Yeah bitch,*" The demon insulted. "*You're hurting your little friend.*"

"Shut up demon," Sidnee shouted.

"Sidnee, are you drunk," Daniel asked.

"A little, but I'm fine."

"Are you enjoying the party?"

"No."

Daniel laughed. "I think its fun, so many different people."

"Yeah, but none are as interesting as you."

He pointed to his left. "Have you not seen the shrimp woman? She ate about fifty."

Sidnee placed her hand on his shoulders. "I like you Daniel."

"*And you just reversed all his hard work,*" The demon stated. "*Makes me happy.*"

Sidnee slapped Daniel.

"Hey," He snapped. "Why did you hit me?"

"It was for the demon not you; he thinks he's winning now."

"He's not. It's hard to take you serious right now, you're drunk."

"I told you, only a little." Sidnee struggled to stand up right. "I like you."

"No you don't."

"Yes I do."

"*The more you say it, the more the sap believes you.*" The demon laughed. "*This is great.*"

Daniel stepped away. "I have to go."

Sidnee leaned in for a kiss, stumbling to the ground instead. She reached her hand out only to discover Daniel had left her. Her reaching hand was accepted by another. A young man with low dark curly and luring brown eyes stood over her. He yanked Sidnee to her feet. She dusted grass from her knees, the stranger aiding her.

She formed a phony smile, an attempt to mask her embarrassment. "Thanks."

He let out a soft laugh. "Are you okay?"

"Besides the tripping, I'm fine."

He wagged his finger at her. "Nope, too much apple martinis. I can smell it on your breath."

"Fine, I'm drunk...just a little." She thumbed back at the bar. "I blame the open-bar."

"I have no idea how my other-mom could afford an open-bar or even this party."

"Your other-mom?"

"Yeah, she tends to spend big when trying to impress others."

Sidnee poked him in the chest. "Rewind, your other-mom?"

"Harriet," Ford answered slowly. "You know. She's the host."

Sidnee snapped her fingers and excitedly jumped up and down. "You're her son?"

"Yeah Ford, why are you so excited about that?"

"Ignore my craziness, I'm a little drunk."

"You've mentioned that and it's obvious."

She placed her index finger against his lips. "Hush. I'm Sidnee."

He jerked his head back, away from her finger. "Yeah, and?"

"You work for me. I hired you to paint my apartment."

"Oh, then it's finally nice to meet you."

Sidnee rested her hands on her hips. "What days are you free?"

He shrugged. "Honestly, whenever."

"How about you stop by next week?"

"Any specific time?"

"My door is always open after my day shift."

Ford laughed. "That sentence makes you sound like some kind of prostitute."

Sidnee repeated it in her head and burst out laughing. "You're so funny."

"Yeah, somebody told me I should be a comedian. I'm not that good though."

"Is that person your girlfriend?"

More like his murderous stuffed-bear. "No," He answered, his cheeks growing red.

Sidnee eye's drifted to the buffet table. "I'm going to eat, Ford and hope it sobers me up."

He nodded. "You definitely should. I'm going to go find my mom. Her performance is soon."

"I'm going to search for your online profile later so we can keep in touch."

"I don't have one," Ford revealed.

"Then you must be hiding something or from someone. Are you some kind of killer Ford?"

"Yeah, I kill people with laughter."

Sidnee stuck her tongue out at him. "You're so silly." She let out a loud burp.

He held his breath not wanting to smell what came from her mouth. "I'll catch you later."

Sidnee drunkenly waved at him and stumbled off to the buffet table.

Ford maneuvered through the crowd as he walked toward the home, nodding and smiling at a few of his other-mother's longtime friends and newer friends she had made through the time she spent volunteering at the local theater. He made his way into the kitchen searching for his other-mother. She had yet to make an appearance, but he was sure she was attempting to be fashionably late. He stepped into the living room to discover Harriet checking her teeth in the mirror.

"Are you feeling okay?"

"No," She snapped. "I'm getting worse."

He noticed how tight the black dress she wore fit. "Other-mom, can you even breathe?"

She took some quick breaths. "I swear this dress fit me perfectly a few weeks ago. Not only did I plan this party to perfection, but my entire wardrobe and performance. It's all falling apart. I'm gaining weight like crazy, rashes appearing all over my body, and I shaved this morning."

"We all shave, men and women."

She motioned at her face. "I shaved face stubble. I paid a lot of money not to do that anymore."

"I think you should contact the doctor who did your surgery."

"I did and he's not taking any responsibility."

"And you visited local doctors?"

"Yes and they all prescribe antibiotics. None of them work."

Ford crossed his arms. "I'm scared for you other-mom."

She approached him, her eyes teary. "I told you not to stress."

"I know, but it's hard. Your sickness, mom's absence..."

"Valarie isn't here," She questioned, eyes widened in shock.

"No."

"But she never misses a party, especially one with an open-bar?"

"I did get a phone call from her, I barely could make out her sentence."

Harriet scoffed, "She's probably in some cheap hotel sniffing or injecting something."

He did not want to envision that. "Other-mom, don't say that."

She snobbishly turned up her swollen nose. "I'm just stating the truth."

"You want the truth, you're a mess." He instantly regretted the insult.

She smacked him. "You're so cold sometimes."

Ford clenched his jaw, his cheek stinging from the slap. "I know. I'm sorry."

She fanned her hands at her armpits. "Shit, you're making me sweat."

"I hate fighting with you and mom, I..."

"Ford," She stated, cutting his words short. "We're family, fighting is healthy."

A man holding a microphone rushed into the room. "Harriet, the stage is set and the crowd waiting."

She snatched the microphone from his hands. "Thanks Mike. It's time."

The stagehand nodded, scratching at his goatee. "Just hit the power switch on the side."

Harriet looked at Ford, repeating, "It's time."

He smiled, excited for her. "Yeah, your return to the stage."

"It's time," She let out once more, her voice shaky.

"Don't be nervous, you own the stage," He assured her.

"I've always performed as Harry, not Harriet."

"Harry lacked grace," Ford joked. "Harriet on the other hand, quite graceful."

She smiled, revealing a few missing molars. "It's time."

"Harriet," Ford shouted, hoping to get the message through. "Stop stalling and hit the stage."

"Not until you're in the audience, then it will be time."

"Alright, I'm leaving. Don't make us wait."

As Ford arrived outside Mike informed the crowd to gather before the stage. Ford took a spot on the front row. He glanced over his shoulder to discover Lu and Bravo arm-in-arm. His mother only met Lu once, but that didn't prevent her from inviting anybody who she had ever cross paths with to the party.

Ford spotted many faces from the burger restaurant his other-mom regularly ate at and staffers from the boutique where she got her hair and nails done. Applause started, prompting him to return his attention to the stage. Harriet made her way to center stage, gripping the microphone as if it was her lifeline. His eyes met with his other-mother's and Ford winked.

A disco track played and the crowd shuffled to the beat. Harriet sung into the microphone, Ford instantly recognizing the song. As he reached his teen years, his mothers allowed him to attend their shows. He enjoyed watching the audience reactions to their performances. The lyrics of the song remained the same, Harriet belting out the parts she originally performed and Valarie's. Ford hoped Valarie would surprise the partygoers, joining Harriet on stage



in an elaborate gown. He knew it was a fantasy and settled for what he was given.

His attention drifted away from his other-mother's performance as he observed the crowd. He caught a few of the guests whispering to each other and glancing at his other-mom in disgust. Her physical flaws were outshining her performance. His attention shifted back to Harriet as he noticed she missed a few of the lyrics and started to experience pitch problems.

He paid attention to her eyes. She would glance at those who were whispering and quickly shift her attention elsewhere. Harriet nearly tripped, drawing a few gasps. Ford was nervous for her. She was bombing.

Her big finish approached. In the original show Harry and Valarie would stare into each other's eyes and let out a high note of perfection. The stage pyro would sound off, the crowd would erupt, and the curtains would draw close. Harriet breathed in, stared up at the sky that was painted with an orange hue and let out the note.

The crowd covered their ears, winced, and a few turned their heads away as she poorly brought the song to a close. Harriet fainted to the stage. The unsatisfactory with her performance was instantly replaced by concern. Ford discovered agility he didn't know he possessed as he leaped from the yard ground to the stage. He rushed over to his unconscious other-mom and dropped down beside her.

He rested her head on his lap. "Harriet, are you okay?"

He noticed the skin on her right cheek peeling away.

Mike the stagehand leaned over them. "I'm going to call the ambulance."

Ford nodded. "Please."

Lu and Bravo climbed on to the stage. "Is she going to be okay?" Lu worried.

"I don't know," He answered, annoyed at the question. He had no idea what to do.

"Is there a pulse," Bravo asked.

"I honestly don't know how to check."

Bravo squatted down beside him, resting his fingers against Harriet's wrist. "She's alive."

His words made this moment less frightening.

Bravo took a closer look at her hands. "She's missing her fingernails."

Ford could not bring himself to look at Bravo's discovery. "She's sick."

"How exactly?"

Ford held his mother closer to him. "Nobody knows."

Bravo rested his hand on Ford's left shoulder. "She's going to survive."

"How do you know?"

Bravo stalled to answer. "I-I-I don't."

"Then don't say shit like that. You're a slasher, you only know about death."

"He's just trying to help," Lu stated. "And your slasher comment is bullshit, you know that."

His other-mother was his only concern. "Please, just stop talking...both of you."

He sat in the same position until he heard the sirens of the ambulance. The paramedics rested Harriet on a gurney and supplied her with oxygen. Ford followed them to the nearest hospital giving him enough time to reflect on the comment he made to Bravo. That moment as he held his other-mother in his arms, he was not an ally of death but instead an indirect victim.

He now knew how the family members and friends of the few he slashed in life felt to learn of their loved one's death. It was a hurt he no longer wanted to unleash onto the world. His injury would not prevent him from slashing momentarily, but the reminder of tonight was a long-term solution.

The moment his mother arrived to the hospital, she was rushed away, leaving Ford to sit in the waiting room. He sat alone, a few nurses walking through on occasions. The room was decorated with pale colors and old magazines were scattered around. It was as if they purposely attempted to make it depressing. His night of uncertainty transformed into a morning, still no update about his mother. He made himself a cup of coffee and watched the morning news. There was a death that night. He recognized the victim, a slasher from his support group. The revelation nearly caused him to spill the hot cup of coffee on his pants.

"This is not good," He spoke aloud, staring at the photo of the victim on television.

"You're right, it's not good but at the same time you should be thankful," A male voiced stated.

Ford directed his eyes to the voice to discover a bald doctor. He stood up. "Excuse me?"

"Your mom's condition," The doctor clarified.

"Any idea of what's wrong with her?"

"I can only suggest bed rest and antibiotics."

"She's tried antibiotics, nothing works."

The doctor passed him a pink slip. "This is a prescription."

Ford grabbed it. "For?"

"The strongest antibiotic on the market. She can leave the hospital after a few more tests."

Ford returned to his seat, putting the prescription away. "And I'll be here waiting."

"Remain strong young man, you both will survive," The doctor encouraged before walking away.

Ford would survive this, but with slashers dying often, he was expecting opposition.

### **Chapter 10 - Stay**

Milo spent his days traveling the road and nights sleeping in cheap motels. His electrical and battery powered

alarm clocks remained at his bedsides. He met new people, most of the strangers entertaining. He listened to their tales and laughed at their jokes. Milo attempted to seek out the mad but it was a lot easier said than done. He always anticipated arriving at his next destination and next encounters with new people.

He stopped at a diner to learn from a trucker that a major accident backed up the highway he planned on traveling. Milo took the warning and opted for a shortcut. His GPS provided little assistance, repeatedly redirecting him to the same highway. The world his to adventure, he powered off the device and used his own eyes to guide him.

He drove his car down a narrow trail surrounded by towering trees. The album he played had looped through its track list twice as he continued down the long path. A loud pop, followed by hissing, brought his vehicle to a stop.

He exited his vehicle to learn his front tire on the driver's side was split open. Milo ran his hands over his head as he blew out his unnecessary anger. He was not in a rush to get anywhere. This flat would be repaired and he would continue his adventure, he reminded himself. His former girlfriend endlessly reminded him to purchase a spare, but he was either too busy working or at the gym to visit a repair shop. He removed his cell phone, it barely picking up a signal, and dialed his insurance agency.

"Yeah, I'm Milo Amos. I have a flat."

"My name is Karen Davis," She responded with a heavy dose of enthusiasm.

The woman requested some more info before asking, "And may I have a location?"

"I'm on some random trail."

"As a customer, your insurance card has been outfitted with a traceable chip. It's one of the many exclusive services we provide. We should be able to trace your location, and contact you via your cell phone, to alert you when your spare tire is minutes away from arrival."

Milo could overhear other agents in the background and rapid typing against keyboards.

"Yeah, I'll be here waiting. Any idea how long?"

"Sir, we'll phone you once your location has been pinpointed with an estimated arrival time."

Milo laughed to himself at her scripted response. "Fine."

"Have a nice day sir."

She quickly ended the call before Milo could wish her the same.

He put his phone away in his pocket and sat on the hood of his car. His phone beeped warning him that it's battery life was low. Milo searched his car for his charger, not finding it. He took a moment to recall the last time he charged his phone. Milo cursed under his breath as he realized he forgot his charger at the motel he slept in the night before. He was close to calling his sister just to alert her of his whereabouts, but decided to conserve the little energy his phone had left just in case the insurance agency contacted him.

"Are you lost," A male voiced asked.

Milo glanced left to discover a dark haired man approaching from the trees. "Yes and no."

The stranger wore pressed khaki slacks and a white buttoned shirt. "How's that possible?"

"I'm not exactly heading to a specific destination, so technically I'm not lost."

He laughed. "Now I understand. You're just enjoying what the world has to offer, huh?"

"Yeah," The dreamer answered before inhaling the forest air. "How about you, are you lost?"

"No," He thumbed down the road. "I live nearby. I'm Andy."

"I'm Milo."

"This forest isn't safe. There's a rumored wolf-man roaming the area."

"And you're out hunting him?"

Andy shook his head. "No, I'm not that brave. I'm making my way home after a short stroll."

Milo patted the hood of his car. "I'm waiting on a spare tire."

Andy raised his dark brows. "I'm going to be honest; I won't feel right leaving you out here alone. I don't want to take my stroll tomorrow and find your blood and guts spread all over your car. You can come down to my house and first thing in the morning you can come back to your car."

"I just want to make sure my tire gets changed."

"I'm sure a repair man can change a tire without your guidance. It'll be dark soon."

As a former officer, Milo knew you could not base trust off appearance. He had to decide between staying over at a strangers or possibly encountering a wolf-man. The insurance company had yet to call him back and it was indeed getting dark. He had his battery power alarm clocks handy in case he decided to sleep in his car, but was not comfortable sleeping without his set of electrical powered clocks backing them up. Milo opened the back door of his car, removing the duffle bag of clocks.

Andy motioned at the dark bag. "What's in the bag?"

"Clocks."

"Clocks?"

"I suffer from living-nightmares," Milo revealed.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"It's okay, we all have nightmares."

"True, but you'll never experience another good dream."

Milo couldn't remember the last time he woke up from a dream satisfied.

Andy trekked down the road. "It's time to get going."

Milo followed after him. He found himself trying to recall his last good dream. The crunching sound of their feet against the earth was the only present sound. Milo had become agitated, only remembering nightmare after nightmare. He would never dream of winning the lottery or making love to his dream girl. It surprised him that this bothered him so much. The realization that he abandoned the idea of a good dream made him realize how much he differed from others.

“We’re here,” Andy announced.

Milo read a sign they passed, aloud, “Welcome to Smith’s Town.”

Andy led him into a suburban neighborhood. It was neatly built. Milo felt as if he was touring a model town. The few people he spotted stopped and stared and were all dressed exactly like Andy. Milo immediately felt uneasy, keeping his eyes opened for any other oddness.

“You made it sound as if you lived alone,” Milo mentioned.

Andy laughed. “I do live alone, but I reside in a town of many.”

“Why are you all dressed alike?”

“It’s the law. In the future it’ll change perhaps. I wouldn’t mind wearing jeans at some point.”

“I’m a former police officer, I’ve never heard of this law.”

Andy glanced at him. “It’s Smith’s law.”

“And who’s Smith?”

Andy stopped before a house. “He’s a former man of the badge like you.”

The home was painted white and had light blue shingles exactly like the others.

Milo stood, looking at the home. “Is this your house?”

“No, it’s Smith’s. His door is always open and he likes guests.”

“I thought I was staying at your place?”

“You can, but I’m sure Smith wants to meet you first. He meets everybody,” Andy affirmed.

Milo felt as if he had no choice but to introduce himself. He made his way up the porch stairs.

“And as I said, his door is always open.”

“Are you sure?” Milo asked as he looked back, only to discover Andy walking away.

He returned his attention to the door, stalling before letting himself in. Milo entered the neatly kept home. There were a lot of dark wooden furniture, hardwood flooring, and a lack of decorations. He glanced left to discover a man with a dark mustache covering his upper lip, dining and chatting with two children and a red-haired woman. They all wore khakis and white buttoned shirts, the man who sat at the head of the table sporting gold ring on his index finger.

He acknowledged Milo with a smile, his family instantly growing silent. “I’m Smith.”

The man had a thick southern accent.

“I’m Milo. Andy told me to let myself in.”

He nodded. “I love Andy. He’s my son. I have many sons.”

“He’s nice guy. I’m staying over until the morning.”

Smith pushed out his bottom lip as he stared at Milo, narrowing his eyes.

Milo motioned at himself. “Is there a problem?”

“I’m curious, what’s in the duffle bag?”

Milo slightly raised the bag. “My clocks, I suffer from living nightmares.”

“Interesting...” Smith shrugged. “You can stay.”

Smith continued dining with his family as if Milo was no longer there. Milo waited around for a few minutes before exiting the house. The sun had gone down, nobody in sight. As he made his way down the porch stairs, Milo realized he had no idea where Andy lived. He wandered around, the maze of identical homes only confusing him. His phone beeped and vibrate twice indicating it had completely lost all battery life.

“Have you met Smith,” A female voice questioned.

Milo turned to the voice to discover a woman with bleached-blond hair. “Yeah.”

She made her way off the porch of the home she left. “And you’re allowed to stay?”

Milo nodded. “Yeah.”

He noticed she was not dressed like others in town. The women he spotted were plain, no makeup and dressed like the men. The woman before him wore dark eyeliner, a figure fitting gray sweater, matching leggings, and leather boots. He nearly became lost in her blue eyes.

She smirked at him. “I was told the exact same thing.”

Milo laughed. “I’m leaving in the morning.”

“No, you’re not,” She quickly responded.

“Who’s going to stop me?”

“Smith,” She plainly answered. “And his followers.”

“You have a dark sense of humor.”

She led the way up the porch stairs of the home she exited from. “This town is occupied but a bunch of weirdoes who sit around doing arts and craft and singing about how much they all love ‘paradise’ and can’t wait to venture there. The food is shit and there’s no fucking alcohol here. I wish I was joking.”

He followed after her. “What’s your name? I’m Milo.”

“Kara. It’s a little chilly out here, come inside.”

A soft chilled wind blew. Milo's sleeves short, he rubbed his exposed arms. "I'm right behind you."

She led him into the home that looked exactly like Smith's home. Kara flopped down on the burgundy couch located in the living room. Milo set his bag of clocks beside the couch and joined her. There was no television, just a photo of Smith mounted on the wall.

Kara angled herself toward Milo. "About a week ago, I was walking along the road where I met Andy. He explained to me there was a wolf-man on the loose and I would be safer at his house. I arrived here and met Smith. He granted me permission to stay even though I didn't plan on it. I want to leave, I've been trying, but they won't let me. They gave me this house and some unsightly clothes that I refuse to wear. You arrived on the wrong day, because tomorrow they all die. I'm sure they won't exclude us."

Milo attempted to remain calm, her words making him slightly dizzy.

"This place is some kind of cult and Smith is their leader," She revealed. "Tomorrow they all plan on traveling to this 'paradise' place together. I don't know how, but I plan to escape the moment the mass suicide goes down. I guess you'll be joining me. If not, I'm sure your corpse would look great in a pair of khakis."

Her words explained everything he witnessed and encountered upon entering the town. "Yeah."

"Then it's a plan." Kara smiled, titling her head to the side. "So, who are you?"

"I'm just a guy traveling and exploring."

"Are you running away from someone or something?"

"I'm searching for the extraordinary. What's your story?"

"I suppose I can say the same, traveling."

Milo and Kara's conversation stalled.

Kara brushed her hair behind her ears. "What's in the bag handsome?"

Milo chuckled before answering with a lingering look, "Clocks, I suffer from living -nightmares."

"That must be shit to suffer through."

"Yeah, but my sister says it makes me extraordinary."

"It does, even though it must be terrifying."

Milo let out a yawn. "Is there a spare room, I need to set my alarms?"

Kara rose from the couch. "No, but we can share."

"Are you sure?" He responded to her inviting words.

She brushed her hand over his left shoulder. "We're both adults, right?"

"I'm a rough sleeper."

She walked down a hallway, seductively looking over her shoulder. "I like it rough."

Milo smirked at her words as he rose from the couch, grabbed his duffle bag, and followed her lead. Kara waited for him in a bedroom that contained a bed covered with a white blanket, two end tables at its sides, and a mahogany dresser. She flopped down on the bed and watched with interest as Milo unpacked each alarm clock and set them.

He kicked off his shoes and lay down beside her. "What's the plan for tomorrow?"

"We run. If they try to stop us, we kill them."

"I can't just kill somebody."

"You say that now, but once they try to do the same to you, the circumstances will change."

He only shot one criminal, damaging the man's shoulder. The action weighed on him for weeks.

"What shall we do tonight," She wondered as she bit down on her bottom lip.

"This is a nice bed. We can jump," He joked.

Kara mounted him. "We're not children at a sleepover."

He placed his hands against her waist. "That doesn't mean we can't play and misbehave a little."

"I believe Smith's followers practice celibacy. I say we let them hear what they're missing out on."

Kara removed her shirt, revealing her white bra and a tattoo of crossed knives near her waistline.

"Those are nice," Milo complimented as he dug his fingers under her bra strap.

She smiled, leaned forward and kissed Milo.

Milo opened his eyes to find himself sitting in a classroom, at a desk amongst many, nude. He assumed he had drifted off to sleep into a nightmare after an entertaining night with Kara. A bell rang and a crowd of students rushed into the classroom, nobody reacting to his lack of clothing. They all took their seats, in unison sharpening a pencil and placing it in the center of their desk. An elderly woman wearing a brown dress that went down to her ankles and black loafers made her way into the classroom. She slammed the room door shut and locked it.

She stood before the blackboard. "Good morning class."

"Good morning Mrs. Payne," The class responded, trance like.

Milo had yet to be harmed, but being back in high school was frightening enough.

The woman snarled at Milo. "And where's your pencil?"

He looked around his desk. "I don't think I have one."

The female student to his left took her pencil and jammed it into his arm. "There."

"Son of a bitch," Milo blurted. "Are you insane?"

Mrs. Payne stamped her left feet down. "Milo, it's called sharing."

He winced as he yanked the pencil from his bicep. "She could have placed it in my hand."

A trail of blood drained from the hole left behind where he was stabbed.

“Today’s lesson focuses on...” Mrs. Payne wrote the word ‘Algebra’ on the blackboard.

Milo groaned. He had forgotten all of algebra the moment he received his diploma.

Mrs. Payne pointed at Milo. “Since you did not submit your homework, only you will participate.”

“In what exactly?”

“I will write a few equations on the board. For every wrong answer given, you will be punished.”

The entire class picked up their pencils and focused on Milo, wearing evil grins. They aimed their sharpened tips at him, ready to punish him. Mrs. Payne wrote the equations onto the blackboard, whilst Milo began panicking, knowing he would feel the tips of those pencils puncture his flesh. The equation she wrote took up the entire space on the board. He took a few quickened breaths, mentally preparing himself for the hurt to come.

Mrs. Payne slapped her hand against the board. “Answer,” She shrieked out.

Milo opened his eyes as he was smacked against his chest. He sat up to find himself back in bed, the morning sun rising. His alarms still had another hour before they sounded. Kara tossed his clothes from the floor to the bed. She was already dressed in the same attire from the night before. The blood from the wound in on his biceps stained the bed sheet.

He slipped on his boxers. “What’s happening?”

“I was making some tea and Andy stopped by to let us know the ceremony starts within the hour.”

Milo finished getting dressed and packed up his clocks. “You’re an early riser?”

“Not really. The anticipation of escaping this place made it impossible to sleep.”

Kara exited the room and Milo anxiously went after her. He watched as she dug in the kitchen drawers revealing a small knife. She shoved the knife into her pocket and peeked out of the blinds. From where he stood, Milo could see outside the window that a white podium had been set up and the inhabitants of Smith’s Town had all gathered. He took a quick moment to wet a cloth at the kitchen sink and clean the blood from his arm.

Andy entered the home, grinning. “It’s a glorious day.”

Kara moved away from the window, standing beside Milo.

Milo faced Andy. “I think I’m going to head back to my car now.”

“Yes,” Andy assured. “But after you participate in the ceremony.”

Milo was sure there would be no after. “I don’t want to intrude.”

“You’re not.” Andy pointed outside. “Smith wants you both to join us now.”

Kara nudged Milo. “Hey, let’s just head outside okay?”

Andy went outside as Milo turned to Kara. “I guess your plan is the only option.”

Kara began to follow in Andy’s direction. “No matter what, don’t leave my side.”

This was new partnership for Milo and one where he was simply the sidekick. It was an odd role for him. He searched for that moment to be heroic, but today had to settle with following the lead. Milo collected his duffle bag and caught up with Kara who waited on the porch.

A few followers passed out white cups of clear liquid outside. Many of the followers shared hugs and chatted with each other. Milo and Kara kept to themselves, holding the cups handed to them with no intention of drinking from them. Smith exited his home wearing a white robe. He touched the forehead of each person he passed and all bowed as he made his way to the podium.

He grabbed a cup that rested on his podium. “Today is the day we have prepared for. Soon we will crossover to paradise and meet our souls. I’ve been given the role of leading you all into paradise. Those we refuse to follow me will forever reside in this mad world and suffer after death. I’m thankful for your confidence in me. We will truly know the meaning of who we are once we meet our souls. I’ve enjoyed the laughter and conversations we have shared.” Smith raised his cup, the crowd mocking his actions. “I’ll meet you on the other side.”

The majority sipped the liquid from their cups. Milo noticed that those who waited, including Andy, Smith and a few others, watched him and Kara. Andy mouthed the word ‘drink’ as he pointed at the cup in his hand. Those who had yet to drink slowly made their way towards Kara and Milo, snarling as they raised their cups in the air.

Kara dropped her cup the ground. “And now we run.”

Milo followed her lead, dropping his own cup.

Smith pointed at them and yelled from the podium. “Stop the abandoners!”

The bodies of those who drank quickly dropped to the ground, Kara and Milo leaping over them as they made a run for it. A bearded male follower stepped in their pathway. Kara reached into her pocket, removed the knife she brought from the kitchen, and sliced the man’s throat. The blood from his neck wound spurting onto Kara as she kicked him from their path and continued running.

A few more of Smith’s surviving followers attempted to stop the duo, him and Andy watching the escape attempt from near the podium. Kara used her weapon to eliminate anybody who hindered their escape and Milo swung his duffle bag of clocks, knocking those who approached to the ground.

Sirens sounded as police cars sped onto the property. Milo noticed Smith and Andy without haste abandoned their cups and ran away from the scene into the forest that surrounded the remote town. Police officers, their weapons drawn, ran past Milo and Kara, chasing after the two men. Kara tossed her knife aside and fled away.

Milo quickly grabbed her hand, stopping her in her tracks. “It’s okay, we’re safe.”

She wrestled her hand away. “Speak for yourself.”

“What are you talking about?”

"I'm not good with cops."

An officer approached the duo, aiming his weapon at Kara. "Down on your knees."

"No, we're not with the cult," Milo explained.

"I know that," The officer responded. "But she's wanted for murder."

Kara raised her hands. "Just arrest me and get it over with."

The officer put away his weapon and cuffed Kara. "You're my first slasher."

Kara rolled her eyes as he led her away. "Congratulations," She sarcastically stated.

During his time in the police academy, Milo was educated on slashers. They blended in with society, undetectable. It was considered a major accomplishment to arrest a slasher. He simply viewed them as monsters, but after his time spent with Kara, it was not as simple.

A female officer approached him. "Do you have an ID?"

Milo removed his wallet. "Hey, do you know anything about the slasher arrested?"

"Yeah, she slashed ten men. Apparently all her victims abused their wives at some point."

He passed the officer his ID card. "She was a slasher with cause."

"Yup, but murder is still murder." The woman viewed his information. "And you're the hero."

"Excuse me?"

"Milo Amos. Your phone call to your insurance agency made it possible for us to track down this town. We've been searching for Smith for nearly two years. The agency asked us for assistance to trace the tracker they put on your membership card. We also happened to detect your tracker device and a second signal within this town. The second signal was connected to a cell phone that happened to be registered under the name of 'Mary Higgins'."

"Who's that?"

"She was reported missing by her mother a few months ago. Mary's mother told us how her daughter started dating a new gentleman who changed her. The mother happened to have a picture of the man, Smith. We figured, if Mary was out here in the middle of nowhere, she was either buried or hiding away with Smith. If you have never made that call to your insurance agency, we would still be searching for Smith's Town. As for the slasher, we received information on her last week. That cop who arrested her obviously recognized her first from the mugshot we have hanging in the station. I'm jealous."

Milo knew if he were still an officer, he would also arrest Kara. His role in life was different now and so was his view of slashers. Kara wasn't the monster he believed all slashers were. He managed to alter his view of slashers and mistakenly uncover a cult. The true hero of today was Kara in his mind. He was told by his sister to seek after the mad. He found the mad and lost her.

### **Chapter 11 - Strength**

Harriet's condition was worsening. Ford had spent the weekend over at her house. She recently lost her right ear, developed athlete's foot and spent hours coughing up blood. Ford found himself on her computer often, researching her symptoms. It was nearly impossible to pinpoint her illness his mother had yet to resurface, he needed her help.

Though they were both divorced, as his other-mother had mentioned, he was sure some form of friendship existed between the two women. Valarie, if she fought her urge for the streets, she could possibly be great help when it came to watching after Harriet.

Ford knocked on her door, peeking into her darkened bedroom. "Hey, other-mom?"

"Ford, my head aches. You can't imagine the pain."

It only made him feel helpless when she would complain. "It'll get better."

"I'm so exhausted," She sobbed out.

He could barely see inside her room; sure Harriet was buried under a blanket. "Try to sleep."

"Are you leaving?"

"I'll be back tonight. I have to go check on my apartment and get some clothes."

"I'm going to try to sleep, okay?"

"Yeah, but do you need anything before I leave?"

She stalled to answer. "No, I just want to be me again."

He debated his follow up, but couldn't resist. "A man?"

Harriet's soft chuckling turned into coughs. "You're mean."

"You put that one there for me, I couldn't let it slide."

"It did make me laugh, but I'm really going to sleep now."

"I'll be back later."

He cautiously closed her room door. Ford quickly slipped on his sneakers, he loved his other-mother but was excited to get away for a moment. He rushed from her house, the warm sun a nice change from the chilled temperature of his other-mothers home. Though he was only inside for the weekend, the entire town felt new to him again. He drove through the downtown area, a few students bolting across the street without looking in both directions.

Their careless actions usually drove him crazy, but at this moment it made things feel a part of society again as he continued to the apartment complex. He kept an eye out for Valarie. A few homeless hung out near a bus stop, his mother not a part of the crowd. He arrived home glad to be back at his own place.

He stood in the center of the apartment and relaxed his muscles as he sighed. "I missed this place."

"And you're back," Rubble announced.

Ford headed to his refrigerator, grabbing a soda. "Yeah, did you miss me?"

"You know I did, I needed somebody to cut on the TV."

Ford leaped over the back of his couch, flopping down on the cushion.

"Where were you?" Rubble questioned.

"I was at my other-mother's."

"I expected a response not as pitiful."

Ford chugged his drink. "She's sick."

"He cut off his penis, of course he's sick."

"That's not funny. And it's she, not he."

"You should be a little more tolerant of my opinion."

"You're a teddy-bear," Ford reminded him.

"I was made in America; I have the right to practice freedom of speech."

Ford laughed. "I actually missed listening to your bullshit."

He grabbed the remote, powered on the television and flipped through the channels.

"Stop," Rubble shouted. "Go back one channel."

Ford flipped back and landed on a reality show about aspiring models. There was a panel of judges critiquing the bone-thin hopefuls. A flamboyant man spoke, wearing a hat of fruit on his head. Once he was done, the woman next to him started. She had stylishly cut blonde hair, green eyes that popped, and was aged like a fine wine.

Ford glanced down at Rubble. "Do we really have to watch this?"

"It's her," Rubble softly spoke.

"Her as in whom?"

"The bitch that trapped me in this stuffed-animal. My former love."

Ford took a second look. She appeared normal, but he knew looks were deceiving.

"How can she live with herself," Rubble wondered. "She ruined me."

"Are there any other options to returning to your human form without murdering a child?"

"I can't do research because you cut off my limbs."

"Yes, you tried to kill me," Ford recalled.

"Because I wanted to be human again," Rubble shouted.

Ford refocused back on the panelist. She was pompous, harshly judging those who stood before her. He didn't know much about the woman, but she didn't carry herself pleasantly. Ford managed to muster up a little bit of pity for Rubble. This woman was obviously overdramatic, judging by the way she expressed her words and hand gestures. Ford figured Rubble's punishment did not fit what act he committed against her.

"You broke her heart. How exactly?"

Rubble laughed softly. "I slept with her assistant."

Ford snarled at the television. "That doesn't give her the right to basically end you."

"Are you taking my side?"

Ford shrugged, finishing his drink. "Sort of, this woman is obviously a bitch."

"A bitch that deserves a good slashing?"

"No," Ford stressed. He raised his right hand that was cased in a cast. "Plus, I'm injured."

"You frustrate me."

"I'm sorry, but I know how it feels to be on the other side of death. It hurts."

"But we all die, it's expected. Your role is to enact the inevitable."

Ford rose from the couch, trashing his soda can. "I came close to liking you."

"I will not lie to be liked."

"You're stupid."

"That was mature. Are you going to give me a wedgie next," Rubble taunted.

"You don't wear underpants, toy."

There was a knock on the apartment door. Tired of Rubble, Ford was glad to answer. He opened the door to discover Lu and Bravo standing arm-in-arm. The couple both wore jeans and white t-shirts. Lu's shirt read 'I'm With Him' with an arrow pointing towards Bravo and his read 'I'm With Her' with an arrow pointing towards Lu. The wide grins the couple wore, frightened Ford a little.

"Hey," Lu exclaimed.

"How's your mom," Bravo asked.

"She's on an anti-biotic."

"Listen," Bravo stated. "We thought it would be nice to take you out."

"It's like a triple-date," Lu explained. "And no, it won't end with a threesome."

Ford was not in the mood to play the role of third-wheel. "I'm kind of busy."

Lu peeked over his shoulder. "You're watching 'Mega Model'."

"Yeah..."

"Ford, do you masturbate to 'Mega Model,'" Lu asked with concern present in her eyes.

"No," He snapped back. "First you accuse me of buying crack and now that, seriously?"

Bravo glanced at Lu. "Plus that's why they have the internet now, honey."

"I just don't understand why he would be watching that show. It's incredibly shallow."

"It just happened to be on that channel," Ford explained.

Lu grabbed him by the arm, pulling him out his apartment. "You're not busy then?"

"I was going to clean and job search."

"We can help you clean later and job search as we walk downtown," Bravo suggested.

Ford was convinced the slasher-couple would not leave without him. "No, let's just go."

The slashers left in Bravo's four-door car. Ford sat in the backseat listening as the couple sang songs from the radio. He had no idea how the relationship still lasted. The short time he was with Lu she was either constantly horny or yearning to slash. She and Bravo appeared to be a normal, annoying couple. He saw a set of lovebirds when he looked at them, not slashers. They arrived downtown near the beach. Bravo parked before a shop that could double for a house. The sign above the door read, 'Blue Dragon'.

"A tattoo shop," Ford stated.

Lu excitedly clapped. "We're getting matching tattoos."

"You and Bravo?"

"And you."

"Nope," He protested. "I'm not into the whole body-art scene."

Lu and Bravo exited the car, Ford following their actions.

"It won't hurt," Bravo assured him.

"I don't care. I don't want a tattoo and that's final."

Lu threw her arms up in frustration. "Fine, no tattoo for you."

They headed inside the shop. The walls were plastered with photos of dragons and some of the tattoos the artist had inked onto the flesh of his customers. The tattooist sat at the checkout counter playing a game of dominos against himself. He was shirtless, revealing all the art inked onto his scrawny torso and his curly hair and beard were dyed dark green.

Lu approached the checkout counter. "My boyfriend and I want tattoos."

"I'm Terry. Which one is your boy?"

Lu thumbed back at Bravo. "Tall and blonde."

Terry nodded at Bravo. "What's up man?"

Bravo nodded. "I'm cool."

Terry focused on Ford. "Are you afraid or something?"

"I prefer not to get a tattoo."

"What do you have against tats?"

"What do you have against my decision not to get one?"

Terry stood from his stool. "I'm not going to bother with you dude. I don't do drama."

Ford took a seat on a low, leather couch. "Then we have something in common."

Terry pointed at Lu and Bravo. "Who's up first?"

Bravo raised his hand. "I'll go. We want the same thing, crossed knives near our waistline."

Terry nodded. "I've done that a couple of times before. What does it mean?"

"It's symbolic," Lu quickly answered.

Terry laughed. "The last person who got that said the same thing. I won't prod."

Terry made his way to the back of the shop and Bravo followed after him, removing his t-shirt.

Lu took a seat on the couch with Ford. "It means we're slashers."

"Huh?"

"The crossed knives tattoo is code."

"And what if that code is exposed. You're basically letting the world know you're a killer."

Lu pointed at her waistline. "That's why it's usually tattooed in hidden areas."

Ford's opinion did not change, it was a foolish tattoo. "What do you like so much about Bravo?"

He wanted to know if it was possible for two slashers to bond over more than just slashing.

"Besides the sex, he's just an honest guy. I think he's the only slasher who isn't a liar."

"What do you mean?"

"He admits when he slashes, something you, me and many others don't do. He hasn't used a blade in nearly five years."

Ford fought off the thought of his last slashing. "I don't slash anymore."

Lu smiled at him. "That's nice. I wish I could say the same. I slashed a homeless man last night."

Ford cringed, imaging his mother becoming a victim of a slasher. "What if Bravo finds out?"

"He knows. I wasn't alone, Bravo drove me."

"I thought you said he doesn't slash?"

"He doesn't, but he understands that I still struggle."

"He's aiding your behavior."

"No, he's allowing me to make my own decisions. He doesn't try to control me."

Ford furrowed his brows. "That doesn't make sense."

"He allows me to make my own decisions and then we discuss it afterwards. It helps when I can sit and talk about



what I've just done and how I feel. He's allowing me to learn from my mistakes. It's the same method you use with your mother. You know she's a drug addict. Instead of putting her in rehab, you allow her to continue her lifestyle and make mistakes. Just like your mom, one day I will see the light and defeat my addiction."

Ford ignored his mother's addiction because he was afraid to face it, not teach her a lesson. His opinion of Bravo changed. The slasher was still aiding Lu's behavior, but at the same time was brave enough to address it. Ford felt cowardly compared to Bravo. He lacked the strength to sit his mother down and address her drug addiction.

Bravo returned, removed the covering from his tattoo and revealed the crossed knives.

Lu rolled her shirt halfway up, revealing her flat abdomen. "I can't wait to have mine done."

The couple exchanged a peck on the lips, Lu heading in the back and Bravo taking her spot on the couch. He eyed his new tattoo a few more times, before slipping his t-shirt back on. Ford met Bravo before many times at their group meetings, but they rarely exchanged words. He had no known slasher friends. Ford believed that two slashers equaled double the trouble. He tried many times to minimize Lu's presence in his life, but she would not leave him alone. It took him a while to accept that Lu was one of his few friends. He now wondered what role Bravo would play in his life; he and Lu were glued to each other. A friendship with her now included Bravo.

"Hey," Bravo softly called out.

"Yeah."

"I know you and Lu had something in the past."

"Yeah, but it was short relationship." He flicked the air. "A blip in my memory."

"But do you understand why I would like her?"

"She was the first slasher I ever spoke with. I just thought she was fun. ."

Bravo smirked. "Exactly. She brings excitement into my life."

"Sometimes too much excitement."

"The tattoos were her idea." Bravo pointed at Ford's waistline. "She really wanted you to get one man."

"I know, but she can't always get what she wants."

"She talks about you a lot. Do you know you're her best friend?"

Ford never had the opportunity to hold that title. It felt good though he tried to hide it. "Really?"

"Yeah. I thought it would be appropriate to ask you for her hand in marriage."

"Isn't that her father's decision?"

"She hates him. You're the most influential male in her life."

Ford now wished he wasn't her best friend. She came with too much responsibility.

Bravo nudged him. "Yes or no?"

"A slasher wedding?"

"We won't put that on the invitation, but yeah."

"I say go for it. Ask her to marry you."

Bravo let out a heavy sigh. "That was nerve wrecking."

"You're kidding me right? I'm just me, a normal guy."

"She's told me about your mothers, you've gone through a lot. You're not normal, you're tough."

"My parents' issues don't make me tough."

"My family crumbled when my parents got divorced, I wish we had your family's strength."

Ford's thoughts rarely ventured to the dark side of divorce. He was momentarily upset when his parents split, but they were both still present in his life. It wasn't hard adjusting to them being separated. He couldn't imagine not having them in his life. Bravo was right; his family had the strength to maintain their bond. The conversation encouraged Ford to dig for that strength he didn't realize that dwelled within him. His other-mother would improve, his mom would return, they were strong enough to make it through whatever life threw at them.

Lu returned from the back, showing off her tattoo. "And we're done."

Bravo stood up and hugged her. "I bet you cried."

"I cried when he was done, I missed the pain. It was pleasurable."

Terry returned to his seat behind the checkout counter. "Alright, who's paying me?"

Bravo passed him two twenty dollar bills and in exchange, Terry handed him one of his business cards. After the tattoo parlor, the trio headed out for burgers. Ford learned a lot about Bravo. He grew up out of state and moved here to attend the local college. His education and working-out were the main two factors in his life that kept him from slashing. After the meal, Ford just wanted to pack; head to his other-mother's and rest his eyes. The couple dropped him back off at his apartment.

He entered his apartment, mentally packing for his stay at his other-mother's.

"How was your day out?" Rubble asked.

"It was okay."

"Who was the blonde guy with that Asian chick?"

"You know Lu's name and the guy was Bravo. He plans on marrying her."

"Her," Rubble responded in disgust. "She's trashy."

Ford grabbed a backpack from the hallway closet. "At least she has all her limbs."

"And I bet she does disgusting things with them."

After packing some overnight items and clothes into his backpack, Ford returned to the living room to spot a

'breaking news' banner on the displayed across the bottom of the television. He grew nervous as he waited for the blonde anchor to start speaking. This story could be related to his mom's whereabouts, a discovery of a new illness that his other-mother possibly contracted or another slashing.

The anchor reported on the discovery of a body found in a porta-potty near a local construction site. She explained the corpse was discovered nearly twenty-four hours after the death, a knife driven into the heart. It was speculated it was connected to recent murders. They showed a clip of a weeping, elderly woman holding the photo of the victim, pleading for the cops to catch the murderer. Ford's fear was realized as he recognized the victim. She was a member of the slasher support group, the same woman who broke down the night of Miriam's memorial after discovering another slasher's body.

"Shit," Ford hissed.

"That came out of nowhere, what's wrong?"

"I knew her." He waited with her for a locksmith one night after she accidentally locked her keys inside her car. "Actually, I knew all of the victims of this slasher."

"I'm lost, there's a slasher on the loose?"

"Yes and so far all the victims are from my slasher group."

Rubble burst out laughing. "This is classic stuff."

"I could be next Rubble."

"Then slash this genius before you're six feet under."

"I don't slash anymore."

"I would like to hear you say that when there's a knife darting at your heart."

Ford slipped on his backpack. "I could be wrong, maybe all the deaths are a coincidence."

"And now you're in denial, you definitely want to die."

The truth only frustrated him. "Please, stop talking."

"You're right; I'll save my words for your eulogy."

"Rubble," Ford screamed. "Shut...the...fu--"

His cell phone rang, interrupting his rant. He quickly answered. "What?"

"Ford..."

A deafening beep and static cut the caller's words short.

He remembered the same noises from Valarie's previous call. "Mom?"

"I..."

"I can't hear you, but please come home. Harriet is sick."

"Coming..."

"Mom, I miss you," He shouted into the phone.

His ears were met by the dial tone, the call disconnecting.

Ford could barely put together the few words he heard. He heard 'coming', hopefully she was.

### **Chapter 12 - Entertainment**

Valarie once again found herself strapped to a chair as her captor enjoyed her memories. It sat in a metallic silver armchair beside the seat she was confined to, staring at a projection screen that clearly displayed past events of her life. Her captor wore a white, leather body suit, had milk toned flesh, shaven head and sky blue irises.

Valarie could not determine her captor's gender but it was the least of her worries. At the start and ending of each of these nightly sessions her captor would inject her with a clear liquid that relaxed her into submission or caused her to lose consciousness.

In its bony hand, it held a white remote control. After each click of the blank, round, white buttons the equipment attached to Valarie's head and the tip of all ten fingers would aggressively vibrate. Some nights it left her with a headache and numb fingertips. Her captor hit a few of the buttons on the remote and relaxed back in its seat as the projection that covered an entire wall space of the oval room revealed a scene from Valarie's own private memories and thoughts:

*Valarie sat in the passenger's seat of the vehicle with her family, her head resting against the window. A moving van containing their furniture and personal items trailed the family. Through Valarie's eyes, the small town was bland compared to Las Vales; she already missed the neon lights, flashy cars arriving at five-star hotels and the strange characters who walked the streets. She blew out a heavy sigh, drawing laughter from her son who sat in the back seat.*

*"I think it's pretty obvious you hate this place mom."*

*"Ford, leave her alone," Harry interjected.*

*"Dad, she's making it known. She's huffed and puffed the entire drive."*

*Harry glanced over at his wife. "You'll grow to like it."*

*His brown eyes could convince her of anything, but not that she would like this place.*

*"Yeah mom, I'm sure they have some kind of theater here that you can perform in."*

*"It won't be the same. I miss my makeup team, my production staff..."*

*"But you still have your talent," Harry reminded her. "We're still great."*

*"Then why did people stop buying our tickets?"*

*He shrugged his boney shoulders. "Times are changing; we and our act are outdated."*

*"I look good for my age." She confidently brushed back her dark hair. "I'm a hot mom."*

Ford laughed. "The words 'mom' and 'hot' don't belong in the same sentence."

Valarie glanced at her son in the rearview mirror. "I'm going to spank you."

"I'm not a kid anymore."

"Fine, cook your own meals, clean your own bathroom."

He crossed his arms. "My lips are sealed."

"I want a house beachside," Harry pined.

"Me too dad. Imagine having breakfast on the beach?"

"I rather have breakfast in a nice hotel on the strip," Valarie mentioned under her breath.

Harry turned into a parking lot of a soft yellow painted home. The house looked exactly like it did in the photos. Valarie was sure Harry saw this as his suburban paradise, but this was her prison. Her family rushed from the car to tour the new home, Valarie barely could move her legs. She finally got the strength to enter the home, it was constricting. There was a kitchen, two bedrooms, laundry room, and the backyard had a plot reserved for a garden. Harry made his way through the house, excited over the walk-in closet and how larger the bathrooms looked in person.

"Imagine how much of my clothes I can fit in here," Harry exclaimed.

"You're such woman sometimes." Valarie stepped the bedroom they would share.

The first week in the home was torture for Valarie. They were family dinners, the time that was usually reserved for their performances. She loved her family, but lost the other passion that fueled her existence. Valarie was half the woman she once was. She could not continue to play the role of fulltime mother and wife, she wanted to sing and prance around on stage.

Valarie awoke one morning to find Ford in the kitchen staring at a knife. He was trapped in a trance; maybe this place was making him suicidal, she thought. Her son was a great kid, but incredibly private. If he was feeling trapped here, she had to let him know it was okay to admit it.

She snuck up behind him. "Ford."

He quickly dropped the knife into the kitchen drawer and slammed it close. "What?"

"Are you okay?"

He turned to her wearing a smirk. "Yeah, why?"

"The way you were staring at that knife...."

"I was just looking at my reflection. A girl called me cute at school. I'm vain now," He joked.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, why is it such a big deal?"

"I know this is incredibly awkward, but I thought you were contemplating harming yourself."

He laughed. "I'm not a cutter mom, why would you think that?"

"I thought you hated Draper."

"No, it's okay. You're the one who hates it. I'm fine mom."

She kissed him on his forehead. "Have fun at school."

"Thanks, and get a life mom."

Ford grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl on the kitchen counter and left.

She tried to find a hobby, auditioning for a few local plays. Twice, different directors asked her to play the role of a mother or grandmother. She was a star and would not accept roles reserved for aging women. She fought hard for the starring roles, but the directors repeatedly informed her she was a mature performer. It hurt her; knowing the word 'mature' was business talk for too old.

Harry worked as a stage coach, Ford was occupied with his education and after-school activities that sometimes kept him away from home until late and Valarie just had her memories. She sat home all day, reminiscing about who she once was.

Her new life remained stagnant, until a late night conversation changed it all once again.

Harry joined her in the kitchen, opening up a bottle of wine. "We need to talk."

Valarie poured them both some red wine into the glasses on the table. "About?"

"I've made a decision about myself."

"Okay."

A tear strolled down Harry's cheek. "I want to become a woman."

Valarie laughed, wishing this was surprising news. "So, dressing in drag finally sunk in?"

"No, I always knew I wanted to be a woman. I'm just now admitting it."

"I thought you were a gentle soul, but I noticed your feminine ways. This is a major change for us."

"And that's why I'm so scared. I won't be Ford's father anymore."

"Yes you will, no matter how you look."

His hands trembled. "And what about you?"

Valarie loved Harry. He was her husband and best friend. "I will always be here for you."

"I just don't think our marriage will work anymore. Do you want to be married to a woman?"

"I have nothing against that, but no. This is confusing, because I still love you."

Harry chugged his wine and held the glass out to her. "I need more."

Valarie refilled his glass. "How far do you plan on transforming?"

"I want the complete transformation. It'll take a few years, because I'll have to plan financially for it. I still have

a son to raise and mortgage to pay. I do start taking hormones next week. I also think we should start the process for our divorce before I receive any major surgeries. I don't need any unnecessary distractions during my transformation."

Valarie nodded. "Yeah, but what about Ford?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you think he should stay here doing all of this?"

"He's not staying with your sister. She's way too caught up in the modeling business."

"And he can't stay with your brother." Valarie lowered her voice, "The slasher."

"Then we have no choice but to let him tough it out. He's a strong kid, right?"

Valarie rose from the table. "I hope so."

Harry glanced up at her. "Are you sure you're okay with all of this?"

"Yeah, it might inspire me to fight harder to find my own happiness."

Valarie headed to bed, leaving Harry to finish drinking alone. She stopped by Ford's room. He slept peacefully, his arms wrapped tightly around his pillow. She noticed his favorite stuffed animal mounted on his dresser. Her sister claimed the bear was once owned by a popular super model who decided it was time to move on from it. Ford had damaged the bear greatly, all of its limbs gone, but he still kept up with it. Valarie headed to bed, feeling alone that entire night even though she slept beside her soon to be ex-husband.

Harry had moved out a month later, leasing a house near the beach. She was happy for him, but at the same time envious. He was living his life to the fullest, hers still unchanged. Valarie was at a dead end, she needed to visit a friend, an old friend she abandoned in order to save the career she once had and balance motherhood. The news did various reports on the rise of prostitution and drugs in the inner city of Draper. It was a clear indicator of where she could find her old friend. Valarie drove to the area and it didn't take long until a random stranger came up to her car window and knocked. She lowered her window.

"You look lost," The male voice stated.

"I'm looking for a friend." She could barely see the stranger in the night.

"Yeah, how does your friend look?"

"She's white."

He chuckled. "I can get her for you for about twenty-five."

Valarie removed two twenties from her pocket. "You can keep the change."

He passed her a small bag of a white powdery substance. "Here's your friend."

Valarie put the bag away in her glove compartment. "That's her alright, thanks."

The stranger sprinted away from her car and Valarie sped off.

She arrived home, her purchase inside her jeans pocket. Inside the living room sat Ford on the floor snacking on popcorn and a soda, watching television. The house was dark, the little light provided from the television. Valarie wasn't expecting Ford to be home. Tonight was his night to sleep at Harry's place.

"What are you doing here?"

Ford kept his focus on the television. "Dad doesn't have cable."

"And what did you just have to watch, something for school?"

"Nope, a movie."

She rolled her eyes, expecting a more specific answer. "Which movie?"

"'Bloody Beach Bash'."

"Blood and gore melts your brain, trying reading a book sometimes."

He fanned his hand at her. "You know what they say, 'boys are boys'."

"It's 'boys will be boys'," Valarie corrected.

"Mom," He shushed her. "I can't hear the television."

She continued pass the living room into her bedroom, shut the door closed and locked it. Valarie made her way in the dark towards her bed and flopped down. She crawled toward the upper edge and reached out, powering on her end table lamp. She dug the bag of her 'friend' from her pocket. It had been a long time since she had spent time with her friend, but instantly the connection returned.

She poured the white powder from the bag onto her bed, drove her nose into it and sniffed. Instantly the dreadful walls of her suburban-prison faded. Valarie was on a stage, a ruckus crowd shouting her name and reaching for her. She was a star again, she was happy.

Her captor chuckled as it let out a monotone, "Entertaining."

Valarie shut her eyes, the ending of the memory not a proud moment. Her captor entertained itself that night with many more of her life adventures until it finally rose to its feet and injected her with an unknown substance. She later awoke in a human-sized cage, another woman in the cage to her left.

The two women had lost track of time. Valarie knew she had been held captive on the ship for days, but Tonya reckoned she herself was held captive for years. The women had bonded, sharing their life stories. It was now a bond Valarie was ready to break; she wanted to escape this ship. She was tired of staring through the bars of her cage at the metal steel walls of the bare room they were contained in.

Their captor would visit occasionally, dragging a kicking and screaming Tonya from the room. Valarie would use the time alone to use a stolen cell phone she had on her during the time she was abducted to phone home. The connection was so poor that the calls were pointless and it wasn't long until the battery had died. Valarie vowed the

next time she would speak to her son it would be in person, especially to apologize for disowning him.

“Tonight’s the night,” Tonya declared in a low whisper.

The woman was thin, her brown hair stringy and eyes as if she was constantly in shock.

“Are you sure?”

Tonya revealed a sharpened tool from the sweat pants they were given to wear. “I have it.”

Valarie narrowed her eyes as she took a closer look. “A surgical knife?”

“The asshole used it when it examined me. I stole it from the medical room.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

Tonya picked the lock of her cage, the door popping open. “That.”

The woman quickly excited her human-sized cage, stepped before Valarie’s and unlocked it.

“Thank you,” Valarie stated as she stepped from her cage.

Tonya crept from the room, armed with the surgical knife. Valarie followed close behind her. The halls of the ship were narrow, the steel floor vibrating against their bare feet. Valarie had no idea where Tonya led her, but the woman had more experience outside of the cage than her. She just kept her eyes opened for any sign of their captor. The women crept into a white room. A silver tube sat on a glass pedestal in the center of the room.

Tonya scoffed. “This isn’t the room.”

“What room are we looking for exactly?”

Tonya paced back and forth. “Another, there’s a red light above its door.”

“Okay, but why that room exactly?”

“There was a fire on the ship one day. It drugged me and took me from my cage, into that room. I was half-conscious, but I saw it seal the door shut, protecting us until the ship used its own emergency system to eliminate the flames. I saw a sign in that room. It read ‘Transport’. The injection took over before I could get a better look. That sign could have meant anything, but there’s a chance it’s our escape from this ship.”

Valarie kept a positive outlook, that room was their escape. “Then let’s keep going.”

Tonya started out of the room.

“Wait,” Valarie shouted after her.

Valarie made her way to the center of the room, grabbing the silver tube.

“What are you doing with that,” Tonya question.

Valarie hugged the cold device to her chest. “Stealing some shit to pawn.”

An alarm sounded, prompting the women to run from the room. Many times Valarie found herself fleeing from the sound of an alarm with a stolen item in her hand. This time she was running toward something, her hopefully escape back to home. They continued running through the ship, fearing each turn they made would lead them into the arms of their captor.

Heavily panting, Tonya pointed forward. “There!”

Ahead, Valarie noticed a red flashing light above a door. “Go!”

“Stop,” A deep, monotone voice sounded.

The women glanced back, their legs still moving, to discover their captor pursuing after them.

“I repeat, stop,” It droned out. “I have done you no harm.”

Valarie and Tonya passed through the door with the red light, slamming it closed behind them. Tonya mumbled to herself as she pulled down a handle, shielding the door close. Their captor beat at the door as Tonya pointed at the sign that read, ‘Transport’, her mumbling continuing.

“What are you saying,” Valarie asked.

“Sorry, I was just trying to remember everything. This is the room.”

Valarie turned the handle of a hatch that was located beneath the sign. “And this is our escape.”

She pulled the hatch opened, revealing a tube shaped, cramped space.

“There’s only room for one,” Valarie panicked. “Shit.”

“And I’m that one,” Tonya declared. “I’ve been here longer and planned this escape on my own.”

“I was trapped in a cage; there wasn’t much I can do to help.”

Tonya pushed Valarie aside, their captors ramming its body against the door. “I’m leaving.”

Valarie stepped aside. “Fine, you go.”

Tonya focused her attention on the hatch. “I will always remember you.”

“You will indeed remember me...as the woman who knocked you out.”

Valarie smacked Tonya in the head with the stolen tube, the woman dropping to the floor. She climbed over Tonya’s limp body into the hatch. There was no steering wheel, just a lever and window that revealed outside space to Valarie. She took a chance and pulled the lever.

The door of the transport device shut closed and it rocketed it away, vaulting Valarie’s body forward. She smashed her head against the window. As her vision blurred she could see a distorted image of a green and blue planet in the distance. The exciting chance of arriving home could not prevent her from fainting.

### **Chapter 13 - Anger**

Sidnee arrived at the bar Edwin’s band was performing. Her boss had invited all those from work who were interested to attend the event. As she shopped for an outfit, she spotted many fliers promoting tonight. The fliers explained the band who called themselves ‘Sister’ was performing and attendees’ first drink were free. After her

behavior at Harriet's party, Sidnee made the decision no alcohol would touch her tongue. The extended line outside the bar proved the band's advertising was successful.

The wait in the line consisted of persistent college students flirting with her. She had managed to give out five false phone numbers to guys who wore too much strongly scented body spray and hair gel, before arriving inside the bar.

The heavy traffic inside explained why four bartenders were on duty tonight. A second line inside had formed at the bar, everybody immediately looking forward to their free beer. The majority waiting in line made the task of her finding an empty table an easy one. She sat alone until she heard her name being shouted over the rock music that played from speakers on stage.

Sidnee noticed Edwin wearing a shirt displaying his band's name waving her over to a table full of her co-workers. At the table sat Daniel sipping on a beer. She had not worked with him since the party. Sidnee wondered if he took her confession simply as drunken rambling and nothing more even though she knew she meant it. The moment she arrived near the table waving at her co-workers, Daniel stood up and walked away. She didn't take it personally; separation between them was a good thing.

Edwin passed her a band shirt. "This is for you."

She unfolded it, her co-workers all sporting theirs. "Why is your band called 'Sister'?"

"My band members and I realized we all grew up with a lot of sisters."

Sidnee slipped her shirt over her dress, showing her support. "I suppose that makes sense."

"All the songs on our first album are about or related to our sisters."

"That is actually pretty interesting. It's more than an album, but an autobiography."

He nodded excitedly, somebody understood their vision. "Our first single is titled 'Let Me Win'."

"Who's sister is that based on?"

He nodded back at the two hipster members of his band who were setting up on stage. "It's about how even if your sister is wrong, it's nearly impossible to win an argument against her. The song is just really loud and aggressive, but has this soft submissive end to it. I don't care how quick you are with your tongue, no man can win an argument against his own sister or probably any other women in his life."

"I can't wait to hear that."

A stout woman with glasses joined them, wrapping her arm around Edwin. "Who's this?"

Edwin kissed the woman on her forehead, nearly knocking off her glasses. "This is Sidnee."

Sidnee smiled. "Hey."

"And Sidnee," Edwin continued, "This is my girlfriend Lori."

The couple blended well, both stout and dorky.

"I've heard about you, Edwin has confessed his love for you. You're lucky Lori."

Edwin's plump cheeks grew rosy. "I haven't told her that yet myself Sidnee."

Lori returned a kiss to his lips. "I knew you loved me the day you bought me tampons."

"Lori that's a private memory that we should keep between ourselves," He awkwardly laughed.

Sidnee covered her ears. "I didn't hear anything. The music is pretty loud."

Edwin playfully rolled his eyes. "Sure, nice cover. I have to go help with the setup."

He joined 'Sister' on stage, Lori and Sidnee continuing to chat.

"As I said earlier, you're really lucky to have him. He's a nice."

"*I'm loving your words exorcist,*" A dark voiced expressed. "*You're hitting her buttons.*"

Sidnee came for the performance, not any demonic games.

Lori formed a phony smile. "And do you have boyfriend?"

"No, I'm single at the moment. I'm interested in somebody though."

The demon snickered, "*She thinks you want her boyfriend. This is good.*"

Sidnee had to distill the brewing madness within Lori. "It's Daniel," She revealed.

She noticed how calmed and relaxed Lori's posture became. "He's cute, educated, and so sweet."

"*You're wise exorcist; hopefully someday we'll meet again.*"

It was a simple, yet proud victory for the exorcist. She managed to stabilize the madness in Edwin's girlfriend without having to strap her down and extract a demon. The exorcist wish the mad situation with Daniel was as controllable as this one. "I think my chances are ruined with Daniel. I made a drunken fool out of myself a couple of days ago. I said something that was best kept to myself. He walked away from me that night and tonight."

"I'm sure he understood you were just having a little too much fun."

Sidnee wished that was the only obstacle between the two, the demon true issue. "I hope so."

"Edwin has gotten drunk after his shows on many occasions, but we're still together."

"And what makes you forgive him," Sidnee asked.

"A simple apology is enough."

"I might put your advice to use in the near future."

"You should." Lori grabbed Sidnee's hand. "They should be starting soon, lets grab a spot upfront."

A chant of the band's name erupted as the crowd waited for the performance to begin. There was a false start as the guitarist learned his strings were off key. The moment he made the proper adjustments to his instrument, he struck a cord and the performance began. Sidnee and Lori danced and cheered Edwin on who had gained enough courage in

himself to do the vocals. They played their new single and once the performance was done the crowd showered them with praising words and applause.

A sweaty Edwin leaped off stage, joining Sidnee and Lori. "How was I?"

"You rocked," Lori shouted as she wrapped her arms around him. "And now you stink."

Sidnee laughed. "You're band is going to go far, I'm framing my shirt."

Edwin smiled at Sidnee, but before he could speak was rushed by new or longtime fans. He held on tight to his girlfriend as he did his best to sign autographs. Sidnee decided to let him enjoy the moment. She waved goodbye to her remaining co-workers and headed for the exit. At the bar, hunched over the counter with a beer before him, she spotted Daniel. She thought about what Lori had told her, a simple apology was enough.

She redirected herself to the bar, approaching him from behind. "Daniel, I apologize."

He slowly slipped off his stool, his back to her. "I think its best...that you stay away from me."

"I know, but I just had to let you know. I'm sorry."

"I said..." He raised his voice, "Stay away!"

His words caught the attention of the nearby crowd. He gripped the stool before him, swung it around, and whacked Sidnee with it. She fell to the bar floor, her head pulsing and vision blurred. The commotion surrounding her was muffled to her ears and could not feel the lower half of her face. She felt strong arms around her, but could not identify the person holding her. Sidnee was hurt but she felt more pain for Daniel's suffering. The exorcist was involved in a mad war with a demon and she was witnessing Daniel be destroyed during the process. She could not resist them; she could not resist her tears.

After a blurred ride to the hospital, she found herself sitting on a medical table, her senses slowly returning. Her head still pulsing and the drugs the doctor had given her made it nearly impossible for her to stay awake. She wanted to be home, in her room, hiding from the world. The demon had gained more control of Daniel and she knew it was all her fault. He was fighting hard to resist her and she reversed the process. She had to be more careful, her carelessness was the reason she sat in this bland hospital room.

The gray haired doctor entered the room. She carried a clipboard. "Your friends were worried."

She had cried the entire ride to the hospital, Edwin the driver, his girlfriend along for the ride.

"My head is killing me, when will it stop?"

The doctor wrote on her clipboard. "I'm going to prescribe some pills that should help with the pain. You have a knot on your forehead that should heal within the week, a busted lower lip and some discoloration on your neck and right cheek from bruising. There's no neurological damage though he did strike you very hard."

Sidnee gently touched the right side of her face, it numb and swollen. "It happened so quickly."

"Do you know you're attacker?"

"Yes, he's a co-worker and a friend."

"Any idea why he would attack you?"

"You wouldn't understand doctor."

The woman sighed. "I deal with domestic disputes often here."

"It's nothing like that. I forgive him and now I want to go home."

"Are you saying you have no plans to press charges?"

"No. I know it sounds crazy, but trust me...he's innocent."

"*She thinks you're naive,*" A voice revealed. "*I just think you look deformed.*"

Sidnee didn't expect the doctor to understand her; she did not take it personally.

"If you say so." The doctor handed her the prescription slip. "You can pick these up tonight."

She retrieved the pink slip. "At any drugstore?"

"Yeah." The doctor smiled. "I hope you feel better."

The woman left the room and Sidnee, her right arm slightly stiff, followed. Edwin sat in the waiting room alone. The moment he spotted Sidnee he got up and approached her. She could tell by the way he was surveying her, she was a mess.

"Are you feeling okay," Edwin worried.

"*Don't fret,*" A raspy voice said. "*He's seen more degusting images in his life time. Nah, I'm just fucking with you.*"

Another demon who couldn't resist making its voice heard.

"I feel numb and my head aches," Sidnee answered. "He hit me hard."

"I saw it, it was brutal shot. I wished I could've stopped it."

"You've done enough getting me here." She glanced over his shoulder. "Where's Lori?"

"She has an exam in the morning, her friend picked her up."

"Thanks for waiting up for me. I know it's late and you must be exhausted after your show."

They walked at each other's side towards the elevator.

"I figured you would need a ride home."

"Also to the nearest drugstore."

He nodded as he pressed the 'down' button. "Alright, drug store and then you just direct me to your apartment."

They stepped into the waiting elevator and Edwin hit the button marked 'L' for 'Lobby'. The descending elevator made Sidnee want to hurl. It was an endless ride to their destination. The moment the bell dinged and the doors parted

she rushed out, glad to be on steady ground. She took a few quick breaths in an attempt to fight off dizziness.

Edwin placed his hand gently on her back. "It's going to be fine."

"I'm used to the abuse. My high school boyfriend kicked me down a flight of stairs."

He kept close to her as they left the hospital. "You drive men crazy, huh?"

She let out a contained laugh. "You have no idea."

"Daniel... I can fire him. I can't believe he attacked you."

Edwin's car was parked out front. He was kind enough to open the passenger's door for Sidnee.

She groaned as she slowly slid into the car. "He didn't do anything."

Edwin climbed in the car, starting it. "I saw him with my own eyes."

"Yes, but you did not see what was within him."

He furrowed his brows as they pulled away. "What?"

"You know how the world works, how it tends to be."

"Mad."

"Exactly."

He stalled to ask, "Are you going to give me specifics?"

"The further you're away from the situation the better. I'm protecting you."

He glanced at her and forced a smirk. "I guess I should thank you."

"*He's pissed,*" The demon within him revealed. "*He did so much and yet, you give no insight.*"

She rested her head back and shut her eyes. "I owe you."

A nudge from Edwin woke Sidnee. They were parked outside of 'Save-A-Bunch', a drugstore. The bright sign displaying the store's name in red, bold letters lit the parking lot. After reading over the prescription Sidnee learned only she had permission to submit it to the pharmacist. Edwin offered to join her inside, but she did not want the voice within him to accompany them. She headed inside the store. It was opened twenty-four seven, attracting all the midnight shoppers.

She advanced toward the back of the chilled store.

"*Disgusting.*"

"*And I thought we were the monsters.*"

"*That's how I like my exorcists, mutilated.*"

She turned around to discover a group of teenagers flipping through magazines. They were attempting to be polite, but she noticed the lone girl of the trio eyeing her from the side. She didn't mind the stares, it was expected. Their inner demonic voices were out of line, but she would be foolish to think demons would take pity on her. She continued down another aisle. An old woman was digging through a bin of half price stuffed animals.

"*Hey exorcist, looking good,*" The demon within the woman taunted.

"Asshole," Sidnee hissed out.

The woman turned to her. "Excuse me?"

"Nothing," Sidnee said as she rushed passed the woman.

"*That's right exorcist, keep running you raggedy bitch.*"

Sidnee cringed, she hated how cowardly demons were. They hid within the innocent. She badly wished once extracted; she was given the opportunity to wrap her hands around demons' necks and squeeze until their heads popped like a cork. Her mother told her she would become accustomed to the demon's behavior, but she did not feel close to reaching that point.

She arrived at the pharmacy counter and slid the prescription to the pharmacist on duty.

He was pale as if he belonged in a vampire film. "May I have identification?"

She removed her ID from her wallet. "There."

He typed at the keyboard, entering her information. Once completed he stepped away from the computer and starting shuffling around in the many rows of medicine. She read a couple of magazines as she waited in the designated area before the checkout counter. Those shopping would continue to discreetly stare and their inner voices to taunt her.

"*You're as swollen as a pumpkin.*"

"*I wish I could've subjected you to that beating, shame.*"

"*Dear exorcist, don't tangle with us. You'll always lose.*"

Sidnee returned the magazine to the rack and stood. Her headache had gotten worse, but she could not tolerate the inner voices in the store. She raised her voice as high as she could, braving the pain. "I know you're all wondering why I look the way I do. Your curiosity has awakened something within you and it's driving me insane. I thought you all should know I was attacked tonight. I blame myself, for reasons that I rather keep private. You now know why I look the way I do. So may you all focus on your late night shopping and not my presence? As for your inner voices, please shut your damn mouths."

The customers who heard her speech only looked at her as if she was mentally unstable before heading the opposite direction. She could overhear the teenagers in the magazine aisle laughing and mocking her. It hurt, but she would rather be ridiculed by teenagers instead of their demonic voices that had gone silent.

The pharmacist cleared his throat. "Here's your medicine?"

He held the bag of medicine out to her. She snatched it from his hands. "I'm not crazy."

He smirked. "I know. I heard them also. I'm a part of the club, I'm an exorcist."



She smiled for the first time following her attack, somebody understood her speech.

Immediately after Edwin dropped her off at her apartment, Sidnee took one of the pills. She lay down on her bed to rest before a shower, but ended up falling to sleep. The next morning she woke up and her headache was gone. She was still experiencing numbness on the right side of her face, but it was tolerable than any pain. After a shower and breakfast, Sidnee turned on the morning news to learn another stabbing had taken place. The cops spoke as if they were close to catching the killer.

"It's a slasher," She spoke to the television. "You idiots never catch them."

There was a knock on her apartment door.

She set her food down on the coffee table and answered the door to discover Ford. "Hey."

He did his best to contain his reaction to her facial bruises as he nodded inside. "I'm here to paint."

"Today?"

"You told me your door was always open."

She stepped aside and let him. "I was drunk, remember?"

"You said you were only a little drunk; you sort of knew what you were saying."

She closed her door, locking it. "Fine, I guess you can start with the living room."

He approached a bucket of paint that sat in the corner. "How do I open it?"

She laughed. "You're the painter; your mom said you were good."

"I haven't painted since elementary school. My other-mom lied to you."

"It's okay. She was just looking out for you I guess. How is she?"

Ford came here today to take a much-needed break from his other-mom. "She's fine."

"So she's healing?"

"Yeah," He lied. "I need a hammer or something to crack this paint can open."

She raised her index finger and headed to the kitchen. Sidnee got a hammer from a drawer of tools she had and returned, handing it to Ford. He struggled a bit to open the paint can, his injured hand making the process more difficult. Sidnee interfered, easily opening it.

Ford chuckled at his failure. "Now I need the paint brush."

She pointed at a pack of brushes resting beside the paint can. "And eyeglasses." She joked.

He grabbed the bag and tore it open with his teeth. "I think it's time to begin my masterpiece."

"Yeah, but if you stain my carpet it's coming out of your pay."

He focused on the bare white walls, searching for a spot to begin. "I hear you boss."

She returned to the couch, watching television. As time went on she had become drowsy. She didn't know if it was the paint fumes or that her medicine was still in her system. Besides the television chatter, the apartment was silent. She turned her focus away from the television, watching Ford. There was something different about him. It took the inner voices of those last night seconds to pester her. He had been in her apartment for over an hour and no demon appeared to exist within him.

Ford turned around, prompting her to quickly look away.

"My arm was getting tired anyways, I can finish whenever."

"That's fine."

He picked at the paint stained gauze on his hand. "Shit."

She stood up from the couch. "Sit down; I'll fix that for you."

"Are you a nurse or something?"

"Not close, but I have an old shirt I can use to rewrap your hand."

He took a seat on the couch as she fetched the shirt and a scissors from her bedroom. She returned and cut away the stained gauze on his hand. The flesh beneath the wrapping was pale and damp. Ford moved his right hand around a bit, it no longer aching as much. She cut up the red shirt she had retrieved, wrapped his hand, and used some hair clips to bind the cloth together.

She observed her work. "Is it too tight?"

"Nope, it's perfect."

"If you don't mind me asking, how did you injure your hand?"

"I smashed it in my car door," He lied. "What happened to you?"

He was curious after all. "I was hit with a barstool last night."

Ford started to laugh, but stopped himself. "I'm sorry."

She smacked him in the arm. "You're mean."

"I'm sorry; it's so over the top. I guess your attacker is behind bars?"

"Nope, I'm not pressing charges. It was my fault."

"That you have to explain to me."

She shook her head. "It's complicated...mad."

"I know complicated and mad."

His words made her speculate more. Sidnee stared deep into his eyes. She attempted to contact the demon within him, but there was nothing there. He couldn't be your average human. There was something different about Ford, mad as he hinted, but she couldn't uncover his mystery. She decided to take a risk. Ford knowing about her could possibly lead to him also sharing more about himself.

“The guy who hit me was possessed and I know that because I’m an exorcist.”

Ford nodded. “You’re saying a demon caused him to go all hardcore wrestling on your ass?”

She burst out laughing, it worth the slight headache she was getting. “Yeah.”

“Then why blame yourself, and not the demon?”

“The more this guy falls for me, the more control the demon gains. He was doing great until I got drunk at your mom’s party and revealed to him how much I actually liked him. I strengthened the demon within him. I should have been more responsible.”

Ford grabbed her hands. “Promise me, you’ll move on from that self-anger.”

She nodded. “Yeah, but why does it mean so much to you?”

“I didn’t slam my hand in a car door; I smashed it under my couch on purpose.”

“You lied.”

“I have to borrow your words and say, it’s complicated and mad. I mainly did it out of self-hatred.”

He was definitely hiding something, she was sure. “And why would you hate yourself?”

“I hate a part of me.”

“I know you’re different Ford. You have no inner demon.”

He stood up from the couch, releasing her hands. “I have to go.”

“You can trust me. I know how the mad world works. I’m a victim of it.”

He rushed from her house, slamming the door behind him.

“Ford...” She called out.

She wanted to know him; she wanted to know what madness dwelled within him.

#### **Chapter 14 - Murder**

The thought of being exposed frightened Ford. He made the decision the moment he left Sidnee’s apartment that he was not going to finish the painting job. A few moments together and the exorcist knew there was something unnatural about him. She claimed to be trustworthy, but he was sure the statement would have little meaning the moment she learned he was a slasher.

It was the part of him that made him a possible target for the new serial-slasher terrorizing Draper. All the known victims were members of his slasher support group. He was sure it would be the topic of the meeting today. His cell phone rang late last night. He answered fearing it was unwanted news related to one of his parents, but instead Lu. She informed him this emergency meeting had been scheduled and that all slashers concerned with their lives should attend.

He arrived at the community center and headed inside. The meeting room was crowded with faces of slashers he had not seen in months. It was clear; the slasher community was in peril. They were being eliminated and nobody felt safe. He made his way further into the room, maneuvering through the crowd. In a corner, staring at a silver ring on her finger, he spotted Lu.

She noticed him as he approached, lowering her hand. “You came.”

“I want to live.”

“The same.” She raised her hand to his face, revealing a ring. “Bravo proposed to me.”

He smirked, imagining Lu in a wedding dress, armed with a knife. “How did he do it?”

“He’s not a romantic. Bravo passed me the ring box this morning at a drive-thru.”

“He might not be romantic, but that’s a pretty badass proposal.”

“I said ‘yes’ because he promised to pay for my double-cheeseburger.”

They both started laughing, but quieted down the moment attention too much attention was drawn.

Ford looked over his shoulder. “Where’s Bravo?”

“He went to the bathroom.”

“Who called this meeting?”

“I did. I have a wedding to plan. This slasher is a distraction.”

Ford’s other-mother’s illness was the distraction that occupied his life. He never took the moment to sit down and ponder on whom could be the serial-slasher. Hopefully this person would be discovered before they had an encounter. It had been long time since he had slashed and planned on never committing the act again. He still wore the red cloth around his hand that Sidnee wrapped, knowing it would slow him. The slasher targeting them had an advantage over Ford, he was in danger.

Bravo returned, standing beside Lu. “Baby, have you shown him the ring?”

“I saw it,” Ford wasn’t a jewelry fan so he settled with a standard compliment. “It’s nice.”

Bravo patted his jeans pocket. “I spent every dime in my name on it.”

“Lu is amazing,” Ford assured him. “Its money well spent.”

Lu fanned her hand at them. “I swear I feel like so itemized right now.”

“It didn’t mean that way,” Ford explained before he was accidentally bumped into from behind.

Bravo noticed the crowd growing restless. “I think you should start Lu.”

“You’re right.” Lu kissed him. “I’m getting stage fright.”

Bravo led her to the center of the room. “Just pretend only I’m here.”

Ford raised his hand, following them.

“And Ford,” Bravo added with a smirk.

Lu stood in the center in the room. “Alright everybody, gather around.”

She clapped her hands together, capturing everybody's attention. The slashers ended their conversations and gathered around her. Lu glanced over at Bravo, who stood beside Ford. Her soon to be husband nodded at her and winked.

"My name is Lu. We're all in this room because we share something, we're slashers. I think we all know the reason of this meeting, we're being killed off. The main suspect could be in this very room at this moment. If so, the only thing I can ask is why? You've been slashing your own kind, your equals. At first I thought of it as a punishment, but we've all slashed, including you. It's not fair that you're making us suffer for behavior you practice yourself."

"You're better off talking to a mirror," A grouchy male voice stated.

Ford noticed Bravo's face tense up.

Lu searched the crowd. "Who said that?"

A short man, wearing a dingy baseball cap, stepped forward. "That was me. I'm Hank."

Lu faced him. "I'm better off talking to a mirror, huh?"

"That's right, because you're the main suspect."

Lu let out a baffled laugh. "I'm the one who called this meeting. I..."

"You're just trying to throw us all off," He interrupted.

Bravo crossed his arms and a vein appeared in his neck as he focused on Hank.

"You have no proof," Lu argued. "Maybe you're the guilty one."

He laughed, scratching at his pointy chin. "I want you to promise me something little lady."

"What?"

"The truth."

"I'm offering the truth. You're..."

Hank raised his hand, cutting her short once more. "Have you ever been to Miriam's trailer?"

Lu stalled to answer.

He clapped his hands before face. "Are you trying to come up with a lie?"

"No," She snapped.

"Then answer the question."

"Yeah, I've been to her trailer."

Hank let out a chuckle as he nodded at the crowd, a few of them encouraging him to continue. "I believe you, because I saw you. I left the meeting early after Miriam no showed and I was out taking a smoke on my porch. I saw you driving away from Miriam's trailer that night. It was the night she didn't show up for the meeting. I actually saw two of you." The man pointed at Ford. "He was there. I saw the both of you leave that night after probably cleaning up any evidence."

All eyes were on Ford and he could not come up with an explanation. "No, we weren't."

"I know what I saw," Hank shouted. "You're both busted."

"We were there," Lu confirmed. "But not because we killed her."

"That's what I meant with my response," Ford stated. "We weren't there to hide evidence."

A set of wrinkles formed on Hank's forehead. "If you didn't slash her, why keep quiet?"

Lu looked back at Ford. "Because..."

"The same reason you did about us being there," Ford finished. "The fear of becoming the next victim."

"No." Hank aggressively shook his head. "That still doesn't clear your names."

"I've done nothing," Lu said. "And Ford hasn't either."

"You're a lying bitch," Hank shouted before shoving her backward.

Bravo charged from where he stood and punched Hank to the floor. He mounted the man and rained down a series of punches to his face. Lu watched with her hands over her mouth as she witnessed a side of Bravo she didn't know existed. Ford had never seen a pair of fists move so quick. Bravo's attack had become bloody, his knuckles stained red. From the crowd two men rushed and pulled Bravo from a moaning Hank. Bravo delivered back elbows, taking his restrainers down.

Lu ran up to Bravo, grabbing at him. "Please stop."

"Move," Bravo shouted in her face and stormed from the room, pushing those in his way aside.

She cried after him, leaving those in the room to tend to the bloody man on the floor. Ford noticed a few eyes glance at him and whispers of his name meet his ear. Anger had a strong presence in this room and he did not want any of it directed at him. He decided to make his exit before another slasher decided to interrogate him. They were all foolishly going to focus on him and Lu while and he was sure the serial-slasher would take advantage of that. Ford left the community center, a suspect in the eyes of many, still a possible victim in the eyes of the true killer.

Ford neared his car that was parked outside of a coffee shop.

"Ford," A voice called.

He glanced over to discover a man with vibrant green eyes approaching.

"Do I know you?" Ford's guard went up, unsure who the stranger was.

The man's low-cut brown hair blew in the autumn breeze. "It's me, Colm."

"I'm sorry man. I'm trying to remember you, but I'm having a tough time."

Colm laughed as he stopped before Ford. "Think back to your first week of high school."

Ford remembered wanting to slice open his homeroom teacher. "Were we in a class together?"

“No, but for the entire first week we ate lunch together.”

A memory resurfaced within Ford’s head. He remember sitting across from the green eyed, twitchy kid. Colm was so nervous he could barely hold his spoon. They rarely talked much; their friendship was simply based on the fact that they were both outcasts. He didn’t recall them having anything in common besides that. The Colm of the past was nothing like the Colm of today. He appeared confident.

“I remember you, you’ve grown up.”

Colm laughed. “Yeah, we all kind of have to.”

“Whatever happened to you? You vanished after the first week.”

“It was tough being an outcast, it nearly drove me insane. My mom eventually made the decision to let me move with my dad. He lived in a smaller town and the kids were a lot nicer. It all worked out for me after that. The main reason I remember you though is because I felt guilty for leaving you alone. Many nights I dreamed about you sitting at that lunch table, eating alone.”

Ford managed to survive, a school film club providing him with new lunch buddies.

“Hey, it’s okay. So what are you doing back in Draper?”

“I’m here to visit my mom and heading to a dinner party now. An ex of mine is hosting it.”

“Cool.” Ford motioned at his car. “I’m probably just going to go home and squeeze in some TV.”

Colm’s smile grew wider. “You can be my plus-one. It’ll make my ex-boyfriend jealous.”

He couldn’t deny a free meal. Ford laughed. “It might be fun to ruin somebody’s day.”

“I met him during a summer I spent here. It’s been a pain trying to erase him from my life.”

“It’s hard to let some people go though, no matter how they affect you.”

“I suppose.” Colm thumbed over his shoulder. “Do you want to ride with me or follow?”

“I’ll follow. What are you driving?”

“The white four-door with the screwed up bumper,” Colm pointed out across the street.

He followed Colm a few miles north of downtown. A lot of the homes in that area belonged to politicians, vacationers, and the elite citizens of Draper. His most recent trip to the area involved him sneaking into a teenage party and ending the life of the host. Colm pulled into a parking lot that contained a few other vehicles and Ford parked beside him. They made their way to the door, Colm knocking.

Ford stared up, surveying the castle like home. “Whose house is this?”

“A friend of my ex. Her family rents it during the winter.”

“I barely could afford to rent my apartment and I live there year round.”

Colm laughed. “I’m glad you came. Your humor will be needed. I warn you, they’re snobs.”

A blonde woman in red opened the door. “Colm,” She calmly stated.

“Vanessa,” He replied.

She eyed Ford up and down. “You brought a guest and he’s in jeans.”

“It was a last minute invite,” Colm explained.

“Jared won’t be happy you brought a guest.”

“This is your house, not Jared’s.”

“But he’s hosting the party.”

“Ford and I can leave if you want us to.”

Vanessa stepped aside smirking. “No, come in. I anticipate the drama.”

Colm and Ford followed her inside the home. Instantly their noses were greeted by various herbs and spices that came from the kitchen to their left. Vanessa glanced over her shoulder, wearing the same smirk of trouble on her face. She led them to a dining room where the three other attendees waited. Seated on the left was a man sneering at Colm who sat beside a toned woman with curly dark hair. Vanessa took her seat on the other side of the table beside a man who wore a lavender bowtie and matching thick-rimmed glasses.

Colm took his seat beside the guest who still sneered. “What’s wrong with your face Jared?”

Jared turned his focus away from Colm to Ford. “You brought a date.”

Ford took his seat beside Vanessa. “I’m not a date.”

“Then who are you,” Jared snapped. “Colm’s retarded cousin?”

“I’m Ford Fischer.”

“Ford, what’s up with the fashion statement on your hand,” Jared questioned.

Ford raised his wrapped hand. “It’s injured; I slammed it in my car door.”

“I see the others have arrived,” An elderly woman stated as she entered the room.

Her appearance instantly grabbed the attention of all of those in attendance. The woman resembled an aging sewer rat, with saggy pale skin, and curly red hair. She wore a grin as she took her seat at the head of the table, revealing the lone, enlarged tooth in her mouth. The jewelry she wore around her neck clattered against the edge of the mahogany table as she pulled her seat closer.

“Yes, everybody is here,” Vanessa said.

The woman eyed those around the table with her dark eyes. “I’m Tatu.”

“That’s an odd name,” The dark haired guest interrupted.

Tatu raised her hand to her. “And what’s your name?”

“Shamantha.”

The woman cringed. "It's unpleasant to the ears."

The man in the bowtie laughed.

"Elliot do I have to make you eat your ugly bowtie," Shamantha threatened.

Elliot tugged at the accessory. "I would break your fingers, this is silk."

Tatu slammed her long, bony hands against the table. "As I was saying, my name is Tatu. I've been invited here tonight to deliver one of my most popular services, a game of murder. Tonight you all will experience the rare treat of battling to death. I will simply call on the madness and command it to separate your souls from your physical form. You will feel no pain, experience no true death. The moment your heart has stopped, you will return here to your physical form. This game will continue until only one survivor remains. The victor will leave this party knowing, they're a survivor."

Ford did his best to hide his excitement. He could slash without the dreadful guilt.

Tatu snapped her fingers. "Shut your eyes, open them at my command."

The moment Ford shut his eyes, he got lightheaded and his spine tingled.

"Madness," Tatu called. "It's me, your child. Tonight a collection of your children have gathered to play a cynical game. I ask of you to release them from their physical state, allow them to participate, in a game of murder. You're not welcomed death, not tonight. It's time to let your children play without consequences. I ask you all to pry your eyes open. The game has begun."

Ford opened his eyes to find himself standing in a hallway of a home. He made his way to the nearest window to discover his car and the vehicles of the other dinner guests still parked outside. Tatu's game of murder was real. He turned away from the window, his first instinct to find a weapon.

The screams of females met his ears, followed by tumbling and silence. He headed the opposite directions of the screams, opening each door he passed in the hall. Most doors lead to empty bedrooms and another to a closet stocked with large picture frames. He opened the door across from the closet to find a panicking Elliot inside a restroom.

Elliot fiddled around in the medicine cabinet. "Wait, I'm not ready."

He threw a bottle of pills at Ford, missing.

Ford laughed. "Is that all you have to offer?"

"It's not fair; I had to start in the bathroom. There's nothing in here."

"I see plenty of murder weapons."

Elliot looked over his shoulder. "Really, like what?"

Ford charged into the bathroom, wrapping his hands around Elliot's neck. They battled for control, Ford managing to knock his opponent's glasses to the floor. Ford slipped his right leg behinds Elliot's legs and tripped him backward to the bathroom floor. Ford used the strength he had to drive the back of his opponents head against the floor and smashed it against the toilet. Elliot's body went limp and vanished before Ford's eyes.

He stood up panting. "Your environment is one of the most useful weapons asshole."

Ford noticed the smile he wore as he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror positioned over the sink. He missed the thrill, the rush of a good slashing. This game had provided the stress relief he needed. He tore the handle of the towel rack from its holder, arming himself. Ford exited the bathroom with his weapon in his hand. The minute he entered the hall he discovered Colm standing at the end.

Ford made his way toward Colm. "Is it just me and you? This is pretty fun."

Colm stood still and silent.

Ford stopped in the middle of the hallway. "What's wrong with you?"

"Ford run," He quickly shouted.

Jared stepped from the left, standing behind Colm and slit his throat open. A spurt of blood came from his neck wound and his body vanished before it could hit the floor. Jared stood, holding a shard of glass in his hand, laughing proudly.

Jared pointed the glass at Ford. "Actually it's me and you left."

"What about the Vanessa and Shamantha?"

"They were distracted fighting and I shoved them down a set of stairs. I'm good at this game."

"Apparently you are, is that due to real life experience?"

"No," Jared narrowed his eyes. "Are you trying to say I'm some kind of demented freak?"

"You're obsessive."

Jared took a few steps down the hall toward him. "And why would you say that?"

"Colm told me that you left him, yet you still keep him in your life."

"I'm not obsessed with Colm. He's just a part of my club of exes I enjoy keeping track of."

"Then you won't mind learning that I plan on sleeping with him tonight."

Jared gripped his weapon tighter, blood dripping from his hand. "What?"

"I said..."

"Shut up," Jared shouted. "You're not even his date, you said so yourself."

"I was just attempting to spare your feelings. You don't own him, he's mine now."

Jared screamed as he charged toward Ford. The slasher simply side stepped and tripped Jared to the floor. He was sure Jared was good at this game, but Ford had lived it. Not wanting to be fooled by arrogance, Ford decided to use a few, previously spoken, false words to weaken Jared emotionally. The slasher didn't believe the relationship between

Jared and Colm was a friendship, but a form of ownership. Ford stood over Jared as he turned onto his back. He stomped down on Jared's chest to pin him down and drove the towel rack into his skull.

Ford's eyes snapped open, his ears being greeted by a slow clap.

"And the winner is..." Tatu waited.

He glanced over to her. "My name is Ford."

She continued, "Ford. The winner is Ford."

Jared aggressively rose from his seat. "You're a cheat."

"What a sore loser," Colm said as he watched Jared leave the room.

Tatu stood from the dining table. "I must be off; I have to open my shop in the morning."

"This was fun," Ford's stomach growled. "The murder part is over, now where is the meal?"

There was no combination better than a murder and a meal.

### **Chapter 15 - Interested**

Ford couldn't stop smiling, he was simply relieved. The game of murder provided him with a spark he was missing from his life. His breaths felt less constrained and his worries didn't cloud the majority of his thoughts. He now understood that the best he could do was relax and tackle his problems individually.

There was a serial-slasher out there; he would face the monster if they ever met. His other-mother was ill. He could not heal her wounds but simply nurse them. His mother rarely contacted him, the two conversations they'd had were heavily distorted. Ford would still search for her as he traveled the local streets, but wishing for her safety was as much control he had when it came to her absence.

He sat at Harriet's bedside, his smile still present. "I'm going to change."

Harriet had begun to lose her flesh and had lost all her hair. "Not all change is good."

He gently applied some ointment to her dry, peeling flesh. "This is a positive change."

"I think your positive energy has stopped my back aches."

"Maybe you're getting better?"

She let out a faint laugh. "If this is getting better, it's a damn slow and painful process."

He put the tube of ointment down on her end table. "I'll always be here for you."

Ford hoped that always wouldn't end with her death. He was optimistic, he had to be.

"This is so strange, seeing you smiling. Ford, what happened?"

"I went to this dinner party, played a great game and won."

"And you're still high off of your victory?"

He nodded. "Yes, it's an amazing feeling other-mom."

"A simple game has changed your view of your life?"

"I know it sounds crazy, but yes."

The idea of slashing without technically ending a life was genius to the slasher. It was as if he was able to eat whatever he wanted without gaining a pound. The major flaw of a true slashing was the guilt he would experience and the game had eliminated that.

Harriet winced as she adjusted positions in the bed she was confined to. "How will you change?"

"I'm going to enroll back into school and finish my culinary courses."

"I support any decision you make. Especially ones that'll improve your financial situation."

Ford laughed. "I think it's the right choice and paying you back should make you happy."

"I know what else can improve my mood?"

He would do anything to lessen her constant complaints of aches and pains. "Yeah, what is it?"

"I want you to cook me a meal. It'll be a good thing for both of us. I get food and you can test your skills."

Ford stood from the bed, excitedly rubbing his palms together. "Damn, so many meal options."

"I want something spicy. I'm tired of soup and fruit cups."

"I'll do a taco salad."

Harriet slowly licked her chapped lips. "I can already taste it."

Ford made sure he had his keys in his pockets. "I'm going to go buy the ingredients, I'll be back."

He entered the chilled store, the gloomy faces of the staffers not spoiling his joyous mood. An ad hyping an upcoming weekend sale played in a loop over the store speakers. Ford grabbed the ingredients he would need, beef, lettuce, cheese, and spicy seasonings that he could barely afford. He struggled with the items in his arms as he approached the checkout.

A magazine cover about alien abductions distracted him as he waited for the customer before him to finish paying. Alien sightings articles were always the same. He would be interested the day they actually interviewed abductees, not one of the many onlookers who simply saw the spacecraft.

"Sir, I said your total is eighteen fifty?"

He turned to the cashier, recognizing the red-haired, young girl.

She furrowed her brows and pointed at him. "Do I know you from somewhere?"

He shook his head as he read her nametag to himself, 'Ella'.

"I'm sure I know you."

He remembered her; they played a game of seven minutes in heaven.

She bagged his items as she glanced back over her shoulder. "Were you at Becky's party?"

He feared his voice would spark her memory. Ford responded with another headshake.

"Sorry, my boredom is making me delusional." She reached forward. "That'll be eighteen fifty."

He remembered handing her the cash, but after that, everything was a blank slate. Ford snapped back into reality the moment he reached his car. He rested his bag of groceries on the hood of the car and kicked his tire. The death of Becky came back to haunt him. He shut his eyes and searched for his happy place. Ford pictured himself murdering his two victims during the game and how relaxing it made him feel. He took a few moments to relish in that moment, it helped.

He opened his eyes and spoke to himself. "I slashed Becky. It was wrong, move forward."

The words were simple, but he had to hear himself say it. He would always feel the guilt of ending her life and those before her, but he could not allow the emotion to control his behavior. Ford put his groceries in the backseat of the car and started the vehicle. It stalled, the engine emitting a rough rumbling sound, and immediately powered off. He tried a few more times to start the car, only to experience the same result.

"Are you trying to ruin my mood universe? It won't work."

He sat silent as if he was expecting a response.

He opened his car door. "Fine, I'll walk."

Ford grabbed the groceries from the backseat and decided to walk toward his other-mother's house. He realized that it would take him nearly an hour to reach the beachside. The distance to his apartment was more convenient. Ford reversed directions. He managed to turn this negative into a positive, enjoying the night breeze and view of the stars and moon. Ford looked for his cell to call his other-mother, only to realize he left it back at her house.

He continued his walk to his apartment and heard a scraping sound, similar to tin foil being removed from a grill. Ford glanced over his shoulder to discover a shadowy figure following him, dragging a knife against the brick walls of the downtown shops they passed. His pace quickened and so did the sound of the scraping trailing him.

Ford sneered as if the universe stood before him. Its quest to crush his happiness continued. He would not give the universe the pleasure of watching him die tonight. The slasher made the decision to drop his bag of groceries and run. He took a quick left down an alley, climbing over a fence at the end. The shadowy figure continued to stalk him, ascending the same chain-linked fence.

Ford ran into a nearby wooded area, leaping over discarded shopping carts that were tangled with vines and a ditch. He spotted an abandoned warehouse and headed inside through a smashed window. The warehouse was stocked with water-damaged crates that were draped with clear plastic. He made his way to the second floor of the building, up the creaking metal stairs and hid behind a machine that was attached to a conveyer-belt.

He was the target tonight of the serial-slasher. Ford once again took a negative the universe threw at him and twisted it into a positive. He would eliminate the serial-slasher tonight. Delivering the death of the true killer could clear his and Lu's name. He wouldn't expect all the other slashers to instantly believe him, but he was sure after the bodies stopped piling up they would have no other option. His practice from the game of murder gave him the confidence to face off against his pursuer.

He removed a metal handle from the machine and searched the dark building for the serial-slasher. His search containing too much uncertainty, Ford changed the rules. His pursuer was sneaky. He had to lure the serial-slasher from the comfort of the shadows. Ford made his way downstairs and stood in the center of the warehouse.

"I'm right here you coward, come out and face me."

He took a risk exposing himself to a possible death by gunshot, but based on the previous deaths the serial-slasher's killings were authentic to their history. All the previous victims were found stabbed in the heart. Ford had no choice but to arm himself with a metal handle instead of a more comfortable weapon, a knife. He hoped the serial-slasher remained true to their title though and left the gun violence to the criminals.

"You liar," A deep voice spoke. "You're all liars."

"I'm not in a mood for a lecture."

"I'm setting things right."

Ford laughed. "I don't give a shit about your vendetta."

"I won't stop until you're all gone."

Ford paced in a circle, smacking the handle against his hand. "I'm driving this through your heart."

A cynical laugh came from the darkness.

Ford shrugged. "Well, at least you stopped with the lecture."

A steel chain dropped from the ceiling, landing near Ford's feet. It was followed by more chains, prompting Ford to place his arms over his head for cover. He glanced up to notice the chains that remained in place were being used to support the glass ceiling of the abandoned warehouse. Ford noticed a shadowy figure on an upper railing area of the warehouse.

The serial-slasher's position made the chains accessible for him to unhook and drop them to the concrete floor below. The chains no longer there to act as support, a section of the glass ceiling dropped down and shattered. Ford was being tested; he had the choice of braving the collapsing ceiling or fleeing. This was his perfect opportunity to end the serial-slasher's kill streak. Another section of the ceiling collapsed, bits of glass hitting Ford in the face. He brushed the specs of glass from his face, it leaving behind a few scratches.

Ford pointed up at the slasher. "Your blade will never pierce my heart."

"It will," The raspy voice shouted. "You better keep your eyes open."

Ford knew he was a sure target. He took the advice seriously. "I look forward to our rematch."

Ford dashed from the warehouse. He didn't want to risk the serial-slasher following him. Ford lightly jogged toward his apartment complex. It had gotten late and the majority of people he spotted were either homeless or seeking trouble. He paused on a street corner, growing tired. Ford rested his hand against an inoperative streetlamp located in the downtown area, nowhere close to his apartment complex.

He thought his ears were playing a sick game as he overheard a familiar scraping sound. Ford spun round to learn he ears had not lie, the serial-slasher still stalked him. Ford expected a rematch, but not this soon. He was exhausted from the feet travel. His body was not prepared for a fight. He gathered the little strength he had and took off running. A block ahead, he noticed the exorcist parked in the lot of a burger restaurant.

He ran up to her driver's window of her car and frantically banged against it. "Sidnee let me in."

She let out a scream and placed her hand against her chest. "Ford..."

"Yeah, it's me. Please, I need a ride."

She slightly lowered her window. "You scared the shit out of me."

He glanced over his shoulder, nobody insight, and refocused on her. "I'll reimburse you for gas."

She searched behind him, wondering where he came from. "What's wrong with you?"

He tried to appear calm. "Nothing, I'm fine."

"You're sweating and look as if you're about to wet your pants."

"You guessed right," He lied. "I have to use the bathroom."

"I don't believe you."

"Fine," Ford shouted at her. "Somebody's trying to kill me so open the damn door!"

She nodded toward her passenger's seat. "Alright, get in."

He ran around to the other side of the car and yanked on the door handle. "It's not opening."

She lowered the passenger's window enough to keep him from reaching inside. "It's locked."

"Wait, are you working with him? Is this how you knew?"

"Ford I have no idea what you're talking about. I'm not working with anybody."

"If not, then why is the door locked? He's going to catch up and kill us both."

She shrugged. "Not me, I'll just drive off."

"What do I have to do to get in the car," He hastily asked.

"Promise me something."

"Anything."

"You have to tell me what you are. I was honest and now I expect the same from you."

It was either death or exposure. "Deal."

She unlocked the door and Ford immediately climbed in. Sidnee drove from the parking lot wearing a victorious smirk on her face. His secret kept her wondering. After a long and stressful day of work, learning his true identity would make her night a pleasant one.

Ford buckled up. "Why does it matter so much?"

She continued driving. "Because I'm different also."

"Yes, but I'm nothing close to an exorcist."

"Good. I'm tired of average people and those like me. I want something new."

"I might be a new and shiny toy, but I'm also a scary one."

Sidnee laughed. "I talk to demons. I know scary."

Ford noticed she passed the entrance that was closest to his apartment. "You missed the turn."

"I know." She took the second entrance. "We're going to my place."

"It's late and I'm tired."

"You can leave once you tell me what you are. It's a part of our deal."

He unbuckled his seatbelt as she parked. "Are you sure you want to know?"

She powered off the vehicle. "You already know my answer."

They headed inside her apartment. Ford made sure the door and windows were locked once inside. He shut the blinds as Sidnee was in the kitchen running the sink faucet. She returned carrying two damp wine goblets in one hand and a bottle of red wine in the other. She took a seat on her couch and placed the items she carried on her coffee table.

Ford joined her. "I'm twenty. I can't legally drink."

"You supposedly escaped death tonight, I'm sure you can use a drink."

Ford lounged back on the couch and let out a heavy sigh. "This day started out really well. I woke up smiling, made a few life decisions and promised my other-mom a meal. I bet she's wondering where the hell I am. I was going to make taco salad."

"Are you going to call her?"

"Yeah, when I get back to my apartment. I have her number written down."

"You don't know your mother's own number?"

"Nope, it's saved in my cell phone. I never really memorized it."

"Soon our brains will be obsolete." Sidnee huffed. "The dangers of modern technology."

He sat up and ran his hands down his sore thighs. "I guess we should get this over with."

"Yeah, but tell me who else knows?"



“Only a few like me and a very close acquaintance.”

“So it’s something not accepted by society,” She asked.

“You can say that.”

“Are you afraid to tell me?”

He thought about it. “Not really. I’m afraid of your reaction.”

“I won’t freak out. I want this to be easy for you.”

“This would be easy if I didn’t have to tell you at all.”

“I’m going to be selfish Ford. You have to tell me.”

The statement was on his tongue. He had never technically said it out loud. Ford’s mind raced back to all his slashings, starting at the very first. He imagined the people that deserved to know his secret the most, his parents. They were so random he couldn’t even predict their reactions. The stalling only made his head ache. He had said to say it.

“I’m a slasher.”

Sidnee did her best to mask her mixed emotions, simply curling her lips. “A killer, interesting.”

“I’m not a killer. I don’t wake up wanting to harm others.”

“But you have killed, right?”

This answer was a lot harder than the reveal. “... Yes.”

“Why?”

“It’s like a drug. A feeling of harmony, but it doesn’t last. That’s why I’ve stopped.”

“No more ‘slashing’. If you don’t mind me asking, who was your last victim?”

“I won’t answer.” He couldn’t risk the exorcist possibly knowing the victim.

“It’s wasn’t a part of our deal so fine.” Sidnee grabbed the wine bottle and drunk from it. “My mom told me once that demons corrupt the corruptible. You’re already corrupted, you have no demon.”

Her words only made him feel like a monster. “That was uncalled for.”

“I’m sorry for saying that, but I never believed it was true. The night I was attacked, almost every demon decided to make their voice heard. The majority of people I crossed paths with that night had that mad inner voice in them. I met you the next morning and it was complete silence. I’m sure I’ve met others like you throughout my life, but after that night of constant attacks I finally noticed. I was relaxed around you. And I’m relaxed now even though I know you’ve done horrible things. We’re both victims of the mad world we live in.”

A tear streamed down Ford’s face, a small sign of release. “I feel reborn.”

Sidnee clapped her hands excitedly. “Yes, exactly. I feel alive.”

“I almost got killed by a slasher and you got beaten by a demon, our lives suck.”

A sensational tingle traveled through Sidnee’s body. “Finally, something new to talk about. Normal people are so repetitive. I’m tired of talking about work, television or their relationships. And there’s nothing more agitating than listening to them whine about how tough their lives are or how difficult it is for them to wake up in the morning.”

Ford placed his hand against his chest “We’re not heartless, just uninterested in their ‘problems’.”

“Yes, our lives are hard.” She raised her index finger. “No wait, our lives are mad.”

“My urge to slash is a tough addiction. An addiction to drugs or whatever is wimp territory.”

Sidnee rejoiced as she raised her arms in the air. “Your words are gold my friend.”

Their eyes met and their new, but strong bond overtook them. Sidnee climbed onto Ford and started kissing him. She thrust her tongue deep into his mouth. It was an amazing moment for her. She was used to demons’ commentary every time she attempted to make-out with a man. This moment for Ford was the perfect way to end his long day.

The thrill of sex was the only activity that came close to the thrill of slashing. He used his strength to hoist Sidnee up in his arms and stand. She kept her legs wrapped around his waist, gyrating her hips. He removed her shirt and dropped it to the floor. The slasher struggled, carrying her toward her bedroom, but accidentally slipped on the exorcist’s shirt. They tumbled to her living room floor, Sidnee body cushioning the impact for Ford.

Sidnee burst out laughing. “That hurt like a bitch.”

Ford unbuckled his pants and kicked them off. “Are you okay?”

“No, but keep going.” She reached into his briefs. “Okay, now I definitely feel better.”

He laughed as he helped Sidnee remove her khakis and panties. “My ego is now on the moon.”

The exorcist and the slasher consummated their enthralling friendship.

### **Chapter 16 - Visit**

Ford woke up on Sidnee’s couch nude. He immediately grabbed his briefs from the living room floor and slipped them on along with his jeans. After a quick trip to use her bathroom and splash some warm water on his face, he rubbed his growling stomach. He decided the perfect way to thank her was by making breakfast.

She basically forced him to reveal his true self, but she also saved him. The exorcist rescued him from the serial-slasher and from living with his mad secret. Sidnee was the only person who knew the true him that he considered slightly normal. Sure she could communicate with demons, but at least she wasn’t a stuffed animal or another slasher.

Sidnee, wearing sweat shorts and a t-shirt, stood in the kitchen doorway. “You made breakfast?”

He motioned at the set table. “Yes, eggs, ham and coffee.”

“You went through my cabinets?”

“Yeah.”

“You invaded my privacy.”

"Is that how you want to describe last night," He joked.

"You're not funny," She entered the kitchen. "What if I had something put away?"

"As in some kind of demonic repellent or souls in jar?"

She sat at the table. "Yeah, you can say that."

He joined her. "Fine, you can sort through my apartment. Maybe you'll find a dead body."

Sidnee couldn't get angry. She was too wrapped up in the freshness of their conversation.

Ford blew at his cup of coffee. "I'll replace everything I used."

She fanned her hand at him. "No, thank you. I'm sorry about my reaction but this is the first time in ages that somebody has slept over at my house. It's rare that I have a guest over who isn't accompanied by a demon. I love being around you Ford."

"I nearly swallowed this hot coffee when you said the word 'love'."

"I'm not an idiot; last night was fueled by discovery, not lust."

"So you don't like me?"

"I like you, but I'm not sure if I like-like you."

He shrugged. "I'm used to the single life, it's nothing new."

She started eating her eggs. "It's official, we're friends. Not a couple."

"If you want to we can be a couple. I think we fit." He honestly wanted a sure sexual partner.

"I'm in a bind though. There's another person out there who I can't stop thinking about."

"You're dating somebody? You cheated on him with me, awesome."

She shook her head. "No, he and I dating is an option but there's an obstacle."

"He lives out of state or something."

"He's battling a possession and the reason I'm all banged up."

Ford jerked his lips slightly to the left. "Damn, that is an obstacle."

"I wish he and I were as easy as you and me."

"I'm easy?" Ford questioned as he raised his brows. "Are you calling me a slut?"

Sidnee laughed. "It takes two to tangle, we're both sluts."

Ford finished the last bit of his meal, smiling. "I think you changed my life."

"I can say the same. It's much easier to live in the madness with somebody at my side."

Ford remembered he left his mother's side and had yet to call her. "Are you busy today?"

"I'm never busy, besides work. I work the night shift again."

"My car broke down yesterday; can you drop me off at my other-mother's house?"

She nodded. "Yeah, just give me a chance to shower and put on something decent."

"I'm going to go back to my place and do the same, I'll meet you here."

Ford cleared his items from the table and washed them in the sink. It felt good to be out of his head and be able to have a conversation with a person without worrying about his identity being uncovered. He had Lu and Bravo, but they were only a constant reminder of his messy slasher life. The exorcist was his escape. He slipped on his shirt, waved goodbye to Sidnee who still ate, and made a short walk through the complex to his apartment. Ford arrived to his place to notice the door was half opened.

He peeked inside and whispered, "Rubble?"

"Yeah," The bear responded loud and clear.

"Is it safe?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Why is my apartment door opened?"

"I guess you should come inside and see."

Ford rolled his eyes at Rubble's little game. He was prompted to knock on the door of the cop who lived across from him, but knew that would make the problem more complex. Unsure of the reason his door was opened, he had no choice but to play along with Rubble. He slowly entered the apartment, eyes scanning for anything out of the ordinary.

He glanced over to Rubble. "I'm inside now, what am I supposed to be seeing?"

"How much of a mess this place is. Didn't your screwed up parents teach you how to clean?"

Ford stormed over to where Rubble sat. "Asshole, why was my door opened?"

"You had a visitor last night. As you saw, your guest let themselves in."

The first person who came to mind was his mother. She broke into his place before. "Who?"

"A very stealthy stranger who carried a knife. He got upset once he learned you weren't here."

Ford flashed back to the night before. "The serial-slasher," He softly said.

"You're telling me I was this close to the person who's been eliminating the slashers?"

Ford nodded as he imagined the worst. He could have been slashed in his own apartment.

"I wish I could shake his hand. You escaped death once again."

Ford realized though he knew he was a target, the serial-slasher was still faceless. "Who is he?"

"I didn't see his face. It was dark and I barely could see with these plastic eyes."

"You're lying. I'm sure you're rooting for him. You both can shake hands in hell someday."

"If I had my limbs, maybe I could have killed him myself."

Ford kicked the couch, causing Rubble to tip over. "I'm not that afraid."

"Sit me up," A muffled Rubble commanded. "Now. This couch stinks."

Ford sat down on the couch. "I can't stay here anymore." He sat Rubble upward. "It's not safe."

"Where are you going to go?"

"I'm definitely not telling you." He stood up. "I have to go check on my other-mom."

"Wait, aren't you just coming back from her place?"

"No, I slept at a friend's last night."

"A boyfriend, did you guys do it anal?"

"I slept at a girl's house last night," He clarified. "She's amazing and knows I'm a slasher."

"My question remains the same. Did you and your girlfriend do anal?"

"No and she's not my girlfriend. She's more of somebody I can confide in and be myself around."

"But that's my role." Rubble managed to sound hurt. "I'm your go to bear."

Ford laughed. "No, your role is to annoy me."

"That too. We bond through silly banter and harsh truths."

Ford made his way towards his apartment door. "I have to go."

Ford just wanted to get away from his apartment, feeling as invaded as it was last night. He exited onto his porch and for a moment stared across to the apartment door of his neighbor. Maybe it was the right time to let the prodding officer into his life, Ford figured. It was a dangerous idea, but could provide him with safety. It didn't take long for him to abandon the idea, fearing the officer would label him a suspect and not a possible victim due to the slasher's long history of harming the innocent.

He headed back to Sidnee's; she drove him over to his other-mother's and dropped him off.

He entered the beach home, kicking off his sneakers in the living room walkway. "Sorry."

She glanced out her opened bedroom door at him. "I really wanted those tacos."

"My car broke down and I had to walk home."

"And you never called. I was scared for you."

"I was fine," His response not entirely true.

"That still doesn't explain why you didn't call, Ford."

He stood in her doorway. "Because I wasn't home last night."

Harriet narrowed her bloodshot eyes. "Then where were you?"

Ford did his best to fend off a smile, but the memories of him and Sidnee made it difficult.

Harriet slowly raised her arm, pointing. "You're not telling me something."

"I slept over at somebody else's place."

"Ford please don't say Lu. She's a nice a girl but gives off a creepy vibe."

"No, she's getting married."

"Her?" Harriet said in shocked.

"Yeah to this guy named Bravo. He's cool. He was at your party."

"I'm falling apart and she's getting married. Why is life so unfair?"

He knew she was at a low point, but could not tolerate her self-loathing. "You'll get better."

She fanned her hand at him. "Alright, now tell me about this new girl."

He did his best to make her sound as normal as possible. "She's pretty."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Ford, what makes her so special that you're still smiling?"

She knew the true him. "She supports my plan to cook." That's logical, he thought.

"Nope, it has to be something else. I bet it's the sex. It's always the sex."

"New topic," He blurted out. Not discussing his sex life with her. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes, but make whatever's in the kitchen. I don't want you abandoning me again."

He turned away from her room chuckling at her. Ford continued towards the kitchen and accidentally tripped on one of his sneakers. He placed his hand on the expensive mirror his other-mother had purchased for support to prevent himself from falling.

"Move your damn hand," Harriet shouted from her bedroom.

His hand still in place, he glanced back to discover her sitting up. "What?"

She pointed at him, snarling. "Your hand," She screamed.

It had been the loudest he heard his mom speak since becoming ill. The fact that she was sitting upward and making so much movement shocked him. She barely could sneeze without crying out in pain the day before. He looked at his hand that was still placed on the mirror. She must have really cherished the item to suffer through the pain of she experienced from movement to scorn him.

He lowered his hand and faced her bedroom. "It's just a mirror."

"If I said don't touch it, don't touch. You dumb shit!"

"Other-mom, calm down."

"No, I'm angry. You left me last night, alone and starving. You claim your car 'broke down', but I'm sure you made some selfish decision with your cock to go mess around with some whore. You're turning into your mother. You just care about yourself and nobody else. Are you going to disappear just like her? Go ahead; be just like the mother

that you truly love. I'm just other-mother, the one you don't even care enough about to give a respectable title."

He tried to get a word in, but her rant continued.

"If you're going to go around touching my mirror, you can leave my home. I don't want any of your cooking anyways. The last thing I want is a meal from a culinary school dropout. If you had true talent you wouldn't even need schooling. You're not a chef and never will be. I know what you really are Ford."

The dreadful wait for her next words made his heart race.

"You're a pitiful loser with no future. My mirror has more worth than you."

Ford rarely raised his voice to his parents no matter how much he wanted to at this moment. She hurt him over a mirror. He couldn't sit back and let her continue to verbally abuse him. After weeks of taking care of her, he couldn't believe she thought it was appropriate to treat him this way. He yanked the mirror from the wall and raised it over his head.

"I will kill you," Harriet cried out as she reached forward.

"I can't believe you right now."

Harriet dropped from her bed to the floor. She used her arms to start dragging herself toward him. The little flesh that remained on her body started to peel away and she left a trail of blood on the hardwood floor. Ford was disgusted with her behavior.

She coughed out blood. "I regret the day you were born."

"You don't mean that."

"I want my mirror."

"You can have it."

He slammed it to the floor, shattering it.

A dark fog emitted from Harriet's body as her head dropped to the floor. She just laid there silent as the fog trailed away into the shattered mirror. The bits of broken glass slid back into place, the mirror repairing itself. Ford returned his attention to Harriet to notice her flesh regenerating and her dark hair returning. He rushed over to her, dropped to his knees and flipped her over the moment her face healed and returned to normal.

Harriet reached for him, caressing his face. "I'm so sorry."

Ford missed his other-mother's face. "It's okay. It's okay mom."

She shook her head as tears flowed. "No, you don't have to."

"Yes I do. You're my mom, Valarie's my mom."

He helped her up and led her into the kitchen. Harriet took a seat at the kitchen table and Ford made her a cup of orange juice and toast. He joined her at the table staring at her in amazement. It was a moment he did not want to end. His mother was back.

She sipped her drink. "I feel so horrible."

"You're still experiencing pain?"

"I'm just a little dizzy but I feel horrible for all those things I said to you."

"I think it needed to be said. Some of your words were true."

Harriet shook her head. "Ford no..."

He laughed at himself. "I can cook, but it's not a passion. I don't want to go back to school, finish the classes and then start a career in culinary just because the money is great. I think cooking is fun, but I don't think it's that one interest that's going to get me up and inspired every morning. I don't want to disappoint you mom, but I'm not going to go back to college, at least not for culinary."

"It's called being young. You're at that age where you have the youthfulness and aspiration to do whatever you want and make mistakes. At your age I was a part-time actress, artist, dancer and even one day thought I wanted to be a music teacher. I even have a degree in clowning from a clown college." She softly laughed as she thought of the other career paths she had experienced. "A lot of children are set on one life goal, but I'm glad I raised a son who rolls over every day with new aspirations. That was the bitterness in me trying to crush your spirit. I did not want to say those words, I fought myself to keep them in but I couldn't."

This was why he loved his mother; she could fix anything with words. "I think it was the mirror."

"Why would you think that?"

"You were obsessed with protecting it and after I shattered it, you healed."

Harriet sat mouth agape. "The moment you smashed everything went dark for a few seconds."

"A dark fog rose from your body and back into the mirror. It's mad."

Harriet smacked her hands against the table. "I'm going to return it."

"No, I'll take it back for you. You need to rest. What's the name of the shop you got it from?"

She thought about it. "Tatu's."

The name, the madness, it connected like a puzzle for Ford. "Shit," He breathed out.

Harriet slowly rose from her seat. "I'm going to return it and tell the owner off. Don't bother trying to stop me."

She stormed off and returned from her room wearing a flowing purple dress and leather sandals. Harriet picked the mirror up from the floor, avoiding staring into it. She exited her home and Ford grabbed his sneakers from the floor and rushed out after her. His mother was already starting her convertible as he climbed into the passenger's seat. The mirror in the backseat, she sped away downtown to Tatu's.

They arrived at the shop, the name written on a piece of cardboard that was hammered to the shop's wooden door.

Ford followed his mother inside the shop. It was crowded with obscure objects. An entire area contained lamps, bicycles hung from the walls, and dream catchers from the ceiling. Harriet sat the mirror on the mahogany checkout counter and a hit rusting bell. A faint ding sounded.

Tatu appeared from a door behind the counter. "What is it?"

"I want to make a return," Harriet said. Her anger was apparent in her voice.

Tatu snickered as she looked at the mirror. "It took you long enough."

"It nearly killed me! I'm even considering pressing charges."

"It was only teaching you a lesson...a moral," Tatu explained. "None of my items kill."

"What do you mean a lesson? I'm a grown woman not a child. It turned me into a monster."

"This mirror has one purpose. Its role is to teach you that vanity is bitch."

Ford found himself agreeing. His mother had become obsessed with her new appearance.

"I want a refund."

The aging woman raised her hands in surrender. "Granted. I have way more important matters."

Tatu went back into the room she exited and returned with a hand full of cash. She counted it out and passed it to Harriet. His mother snatched the money away and left the shop swearing under her breath. Ford had never seen a refund handled so simply, especially one of such a large amount.

He approached the checkout counter. "Your shop must be doing really well."

"And why would you say that?"

"Most shops like these don't have return policies."

"Your mother's transaction wasn't an ordinary one. That mirror chose her the moment she stepped into this shop and now its task is complete. Your mother will forever be changed for the better. The madness sometimes takes harsh measures to deliver good."

"Not only do your items change lives, but so do you."

Tatu stared him into his eyes. "I suppose you're referring to my game of murder, slasher."

"Slasher?" He responded doing his best to appear perplexed.

Tatu smashed a roach on the counter with her palm. "I knew the moment the game ended."

"You knew what?"

"That you were a slasher. Many of my clients are. I offer discounted games to your kind."

He was definitely interested in the offer. "It was an amazing experience."

"So I've heard." She pointed at her shop door. "Now leave, I'm closed."

Not only did he have an alternate to actual slashing, but now at a discounted price.

### **Chapter 17 - Vibrant**

It could not be denied, the arts festival was a major draw to the downtown area. Artists traveled from all over the state to gather in Draper to showcase or sell their self-proclaimed masterpieces. The booths set up crowded the area, forcing all the downtown streets to be shut down.

Sidnee decided to park as close as possible and then traveled by feet. Many others, including tourist from all over the state, joined her on her trek to the festival grounds. She just wanted to enjoy her day off from work shopping for handmade jewelry and possibly some portraits to hang in her apartment.

She arrived to a booth of man who wore paint-stained overalls and was selling portraits of pompous characters. Sidnee noticed as she toured the warm booth, the eyes of the drawn characters followed her. The artist snickered, proud of the odd effect he managed to add to his work. It was creepy living alone at times and she was sure these photos would only contribute to that. The exorcist decided none of them were worth her money. She continued touring the festival, the scent of barbecued food in the air.

A woman grabbed Sidnee by the forearm. "Sweetie, your face is a canvas."

Sidnee gently freed her arm from the elderly woman's grasp. "Excuse me."

The woman reached for Sidnee's face. "I said your face is a canvas."

"Is that a compliment?"

"Yes, and I'm Petri."

"I'm Sidnee. So, do you paint portraits of faces?"

"No," Petri chuckled at the guess. "I actually paint on faces."

"How much do you charge?"

"Free. I survive well enough off my retirement. Please, may I use your face as a canvas?"

Sidnee had no luck shopping and she had hours to waste. "Yeah, where's your booth?"

The silver haired woman pointed at a crate covered by a burgundy towel. "I keep it simple."

Sidnee took a seat, the surface uncomfortable against her rear. Petri dug into a brown sack that was attached to the violet gown she wore. She removed a small, clear jug that contained a powder that was made up of a combination of red, orange and yellow. The artist dipped her thumb inside the powder and used the same finger as a brush against Sidnee's face. The exorcist found the process quite relaxing. As if she was partaking in an aggressive facial massage.

"The colors blend perfectly with the brownness of your skin," The woman said.

"What exactly are you painting?"

"The sun."

"Any specific reason?"

Petri grinned. "Most say my work tends to influence a person's anatomy."

"A sun, so I'll become warm. It's hot enough already, how about you paint an ice cube?"

"Your body temperature will remain unchanged; trust me you'll understand what I mean."

The woman made a few more circular motions with her thumb against Sidnee's cheek. She took a step back as she put away her jug of paint. The woman removed a small, circular mirror from the same sack and raised it to Sidnee's face. On her cheek was drawn a fiery sun. She liked it; the best work of art she received so far was free.

Sidnee stood from the crate, her rare slightly sore. "It's amazing."

The woman bowed. "And now you may show it to the world."

Sidnee waved goodbye and continued her day at the festival. The crowd grew thicker, making it a little frustrating to navigate from booth to booth. She arrived near her job to learn a table and grill had been set up. The head-chef was outside serving burgers. A sign on the table advertised mini-burgers as free and the regular sized burgers at the original price. She once loved the burgers but lost her craving for them after serving them so often. Sidnee took a quick turn only too bump into her boss' girlfriend Lori.

Lori eyed Sidnee up and down. "You look vibrant."

Sidnee motioned at the red tank top she wore. "I actually think this shirt lost its color."

"I'm referring to your skin, not your clothing. You must use some expensive lotion."

Sidnee used the cheapest lotion she could find of the shelf. She thought back to what the Petri had said. The woman claimed her work influenced those who wore it anatomy. Sidnee gently touched the artwork on her cheek, it possibly providing the added vibrancy to her flesh.

"Thanks Lori. Are you out shopping or just browsing?"

"I'm actually supposed to be studying, but Edwin insisted I had to be here."

Sidnee glanced back at the grilling area. "Where is he?"

"I don't know. I lost him in the crowd."

"How about we walk around until we bump into him?"

Lori pointed forward. "I heard there's a stage with dancing down this way, you interested?"

"Yeah, hopefully we don't get lost in this sea of people."

The women did their best to stay close. Lori stopped at one point to buy a handmade dress. She took advantage of one of the setup dressing rooms to change into it. It was mostly made from field grass and bonded together by pink cloth. Sidnee wanted to tell her the dress was one size too small, but kept her criticism to herself. They finally reached their destination, a dance performance wrapping up as they reached the stage.

Lori's cell phone beeped. She read the text. "It's from Edwin. He told me to come to the stage."

Sidnee searched the crowd around them. "We're here, but where he is?"

Lori pointed at the stage, mouth agape. "There he is, on the damn stage."

Edwin, proudly sporting a 'Burstin Burgers' promotional shirt, made his way center stage. A collection of whisps came from the crowd, most wondering why he was on stage. Most of the audience suspected it to be a promotional stunt. He held a microphone in his hand. Lori waved her hands in the air, making it easy for Edwin to spot her. He pointed toward her and formed a wide smile.

He raised the microphone to his mouth. "The show's coordinator only gave me three minutes to speak so I'm going to be quick about it. About three years ago I served a couple of nursing students and one caught my eye, her name is Lori. I went back to that table multiple times, anything just to look at her cute little face. I remember asking her if she wanted more ketchup and to give me her phone number. She said 'yes', to both. Today, I'm not asking you if you want more ketchup, but instead if you want to marry me." He got down on one knee. "Lori, will you marry me?"

She shrieked out, "Yes!"

The crowd cheered and applauded as Lori rushed for the stage. Instead of the stairs on the side, she crawled up onto the stage with help from Edwin. The moment she managed to set both feet on the stage, her outfit started to fall apart. Edwin trapped her in a hug, stopping the handmade dress from completely dropping from her body, and kissed his new fiancé. Sidnee was surprised to discover herself becoming teary eyed. She didn't know if they were tears of joy or of sadness. Edwin and Lori had each other. She wanted Daniel and could not have him.

The couple eventually left the stage and Sidnee congratulated them. She told them she had a headache and that she was going to head back home. The truth was that she was not in the mood to be around the two lovebirds, them only a reminder of her lackluster love life. She had Ford, he made her happy but was not the answer to the feelings she had for Daniel. Sidnee eventually arrived back at her apartment to discover that she had a guest. Her mother stood at her apartment door, waiting.

Sidnee approached her. "Mom, what are you doing here?"

"I'm in town for the festival. You look vibrant."

Sidnee motioned at the artwork on her face. "I know. It's the face paint."

"It's cute. Now open the door please, my legs are killing me."

Sidnee let her mother inside. Many said the women looked similar. They were both tall, but shared more than their appearance. They both could communicate with demonic forces. Her mother relaxed on the couch as Sidnee prepared her a glass of water. She joined her mother in the living room, passing her the glass.

She took a sip. "This is the best glass of water I've ever had."

"You must be really thirsty then, it's from the faucet."

Olivia placed the glass on the table. "It's so hot and my feet ache."

Sidnee laughed as she eyed her mother's footwear. "Nobody told you to wear heels."

"I wanted to test them out and now I know they're horrible when it comes to comfort."

The stereotype was that women loved to shop, but her mother was obsessed with it. To make matters worse she was a bargain shopper. They spent many evenings visiting various stores until she found the cheapest, but most glamorous outfit. Sidnee was sure her mother spent less than twenty dollars on the golden blouse and dark pencil-skirt she wore. She and her father always took a separate car to church, her mother fashionably late for every of her husband's sermons.

Sidnee kicked off her sneakers. "How's dad?"

"The same as he's always been. Still reading and praising the Almighty. How are you?"

"I'm ok," She sadly let out.

"Sidnee," Olivia pursed her lips. "What's wrong?"

"You know what's wrong."

"A demonic issue," Her mother assumed.

Sidnee nodded.

"I've dealt with it all, give me some specifics."

"I recently met a guy. He's a slasher. This guy is handsome and so far has really come off as a great person. The major plus is that he brings peace and silence to my life. There's no inner demon trying to tear us apart. It's a great comfort."

Olivia narrowed her eyes. "I'm not sensing a problem."

"The problem is I only like him as a friend, even though romantically he's much simpler than the guy I really like. His name is Daniel and works with me. At first I didn't really care for him, but I'm drawn to him, mom. Daniel is so sweet and innocent, but a demon is corrupting him. The more he's drawn to me, the more the demon gains control. I wish this love-triangle I've trapped myself into was my only problem, but it appears the demons have become aggressive lately. They're not only meddling in my love life, but also my personal one."

"I understand," Olivia said with a smirk. "This is very similar to your father and I's relationship and I think the demons' new aggressive nature is connected to this issue with this Daniel person."

"I'm desperate for some mad motherly advice."

"You can settle for a simple relationship with this slasher, but it seems you're perfectly happy just being his friend. There's a moral behind your father and I's relationship, love is worth fighting for. The more time you spend away from this Daniel person, you're only letting the demon win. You have to fight back the only way us exorcists can."

"An exorcism?"

Olivia nodded. "Yes." Her reminiscent smirk remained. "I remember your father's exorcism."

"But what if I hurt Daniel?"

"What if you don't?"

"No, he can fight this demon on his own. He just has to get over me."

"Has he been winning?"

Sidnee flashed back to him attacking her at the bar. "No and mainly because I made it worse."

"Sidnee if he's losing this battle on his own, you need to step in and help him. If you do the exorcism, yes he might be injured. But if you wait too long and this demon gains full control you know the situation will become life threatening. Not only will this exorcism help Daniel, but also send a message to those demon's meddling in your personal life. Ignoring them only encourages them to continuously nag you because they know you'll never make them suffer. In the end, expelling a demon will right a lot of wrongs in your life at the moment." Olivia rose from the couch. "I'm driving back home now. I suggest you prepare yourself to perform an exorcism. It has to happen soon."

Sidnee stood and hugged her mother. "I messed this up so bad."

Her mother laughed. "It's okay, us exorcists have to learn as we go."

"How do you live such a normal life mom? How do you keep happy?"

"I have your father and I accept every battle. The more you fight the better you become."

"I will fight mom."

After letting her mother out, Sidnee headed for her laptop. She was glad for the visit; it gave her much needed clarity. Ignoring the demons only encouraged them to continuously pick at her. Her mother made it all sound so simple and Sidnee could now truly see it was. She had to make them fear her. The only way she could do that was by expelling as much demons as possible from the world.

If she wanted to make this exorcism as safe as possible, she needed the proper tools. After a quick search online she found a local shop that carried most of the items. She slipped back on her sneakers, headed into her car and drove as far as she could toward downtown. After parking, she had to make her way back through the art festival crowd. She fought her way through the maze of people until she arrived at the door of the shop, 'Tatu's'. Sidnee made her way inside the cluttered shop, most of the items sold apparently used. She approached the counter where an elderly woman attached price stickers to pieces of jewelry.

She glanced up at Sidnee. "You're glowing, it's the face paint."

"You're the first person to get that correct."

"I'm a fan of the artist's work, we have tea sometimes."

“She’s really good. Anyways, I need to perform an exorcism.”

Tatu laughed. “I think you should leave that up to the exorcists.”

“I am.”

“Then I’ll shut up and grab a kit for you.”

Sidnee laughed. “There’s an exorcist kit, does it come with an instruction manual?”

The woman wagged her finger at her. “There’s nothing funny about demons.”

Sidnee thought about all the suffering they put her through. “Sorry, you’re right.”

Tatu headed left and dug under the checkout counter. She returned carrying a brown paper bag of items. “This should be everything you need. There’s some oil to keep the subject calm. I also included a demonic repellent pendant and a jar specifically crafted to contain a demonic force. I suggest you give the pendant to somebody in your life that you want to keep demons from corrupting. This also includes some bandages if things get violent.”

Sidnee grabbed the paper bag. “How much?”

“Four hundred dollars.”

“Are you serious?”

“That pendant is rare as I said.”

“Fine, just sell me the oil.”

“It’s a bundle; you have to purchase the bundle.”

Sidnee passed Tatu her debit card. “You’re lucky that I’m desperate.”

The woman rung up the transaction. “It’s strictly business my dear.”

Sidnee responded with an eye roll and left the shop with her purchase. Instead of dealing with the various detours set up on the road, Sidnee walked to the trailer park where Daniel lived. She arrived at his trailer door and paused. This exorcism was important; she had to be sure Daniel would not be harmed. This feud between her, Daniel and the demon had been going on for awhile, today it would end. She knocked on his door.

“Who is it,” A faint voice answered.

“It’s me, Sidnee.”

There was a pause.

She knocked once more. “Daniel, may I come in?”

“Your choice, it’s opened.”

Sidnee opened the door and her nose was greeted by a rinky scent. She took quick breaths as she stepped inside the trailer. The floor was covered with garbage and wrinkled clothing. The dirty dishes in his kitchen sink were stacked high. His counters were stained and a few roaches scurried under the microwave.

She turned right to discover Daniel sitting on his living room floor in his underwear. His walls were plastered with photos of Sidnee. Most of the photos appeared to be taken with his cell phone while she was working. This was no sight of a man who was defeating his inner demon.

Sidnee used her forearm to cover her nose. “It smells like an armpit in here.”

“Maybe you should run a shower for me,” He responded without looking at her.

“Are you okay Daniel?”

“Is that a cruel joke? Your humor is shit.”

“It’s a serious question. How are you feeling?”

He scratched at his sweaty back. “I’m a mess and it’s entirely your fault.”

“I’m here to help you. I’m going to get rid of your demon.”

*“It’s too late exorcist, I’m moments away from full control,”* His demon celebrated.

“It’s over demon, today you leave his body. I’m prepared to extract you.”

*“If only I took you seriously. I bet you don’t even believe that bullshit coming from your mouth.”*

Daniel slowly stood from the floor. “You told me to help myself.”

“I was wrong. I’m an exorcist and it’s my job to expel demons.”

Daniel turned to her. His glasses were bent and eyes bloodshot. He formed a crooked smile revealing his yellowing teeth. The longer Sidnee stared at him the more guilt she felt. She failed him and had to set things right.

She opened the paper bag. “I need you to relax on the floor.”

He laughed. “I need you to get out of my home.”

“I’ll leave; right after your demon is gone.”

He took a step forward. “My demon stays. He’s a part of me.”

“No, he just wants you to believe that. He’ll destroy you Daniel.”

“You destroyed me,” He roared out.

Daniel darted forward and tackled her to the floor. He mounted Sidnee and stared directly into her eyes. His gaze left her still. She was not staring into the eyes of the man she wanted, but instead the monster she allowed him to become. Daniel screamed into her ear and ran from his trailer. She quickly stood and looked out of the door. The exorcist looked in all directions, he was gone. Daniel was on the run and a demon was only moments away from gaining control of him.

### **Chapter 18 - Cereal**

Harriet was back. Her recovery process was much quicker than expected. She had gotten rid of the majority of the mirrors in her home. A mirror only remained in her bathroom. She pranced around the house in a pair of golden



colored, mini-shorts and a white tank top. Ford tried to focus on watching television, but his mother walking back and forth was making it nearly impossible. She hummed a distracting tune and Ford decided to just turn off the television.

"Mom," He called out annoyed.

She executed a twirl before stopping before him. "What is it?"

"How about you sit down and relax for a second?"

She dismissively fanned her hand at him. "I have no time to relax. I nearly lost my life and now I'm taking it back. Somehow I gained weight so I enrolled at that new gym downtown. Also I'm making a return and taking a more direct approach to the stage. I'm directing, producing and writing a musical about my illness and starring in another musical a friend of mine is currently writing. He wants me to play a devious mother swan."

He was glad she spun her illness into a positive. "What are you going to call your musical?"

"It's a play-off of the phrase 'flesh and bones'. I'm calling it 'Flesh Dance and Bones'."

Ford laughed. "It sounds very gruesome and jazzy."

Harriet danced around and threw up jazz-hands. "It'll be the musical of the century."

"You're starting to remind me of my childhood, the best parts."

She sat down beside him, putting her feet on the couch. "And what are the best parts?"

"You know."

"I don't know. You rarely share what's going on in your mind."

Ford ran his hands through his low cut, dark hair and chuckled softly. "The best parts of my childhood were when I used to watch you and mom rehearse your acts. It's so warming when I think about how you both would laugh and how your bickering would always end with laughter. I loved knowing how your elaborate shows evolved from you two simply standing on stage early in the morning and creating it from your minds. It would be amazing to witness that again."

"That's possible. We just need Valarie."

"And it's impossible to predict when she'll return."

Harriet let out a heavy sigh. "I hope she's in rehab."

"I don't think she'll willingly go to rehab, she's too happy being what she is."

"I think we should host an intervention when she returns," Harriet suggested.

Ford had done well ignoring his mother's drug issue. "If we love her, we should."

"Are you putting some of the blame on yourself, Ford?"

"Yes, I did nothing to help her. Ignoring a problem only makes it worse."

"But she's the one on drugs; you're a victim of her behavior."

He motioned at himself. "I was the victim, but I'm an adult now. Ford the teenager no longer exists. I'm grown enough to understand that my mother needs me and I have the ability to help her. The moment she returns I'm going to confront her about her behavior."

Harriet pouted. "Now you're making me feel guilty. She's helped me during my transition."

Ford recalled Valarie complaining about how much money was being spent. "She did?"

"Yes, by willingly getting a divorce and supporting me."

"Then I won't confront her alone, we can do the intervention like you said."

"You talk to her. I have a better idea. A simplistic intervention won't change the complex woman."

"A better idea, huh?"

Harriet slowly nodded. "I'm going to offer her the lead role in 'Flesh Dance and Bones'."

Ford's eyes widened and sat mouth agape.

"I know it's risky but Valarie is incredible on the stage. You know that, I know that."

"You were serious about you both working together?"

"There's no tension between us, we've just grown apart. I married her because I loved her."

"I understand that you loved her then, but mom do you still love mom?"

Harriet thought about it. "It's a different kind of love."

Ford never knew where he got the idea that his parents disliked each other. He figured mainly because they were rarely around each other. They arrived to his high school graduation separately and the few times Valarie and Harriet were in the same room they bickered. His mom's confession of still loving his mom told him something he never had expected. The two women changed as individuals, but together were the same.

As a couple they spent their entire relationship working together and when not working, bickering about working. It was the stage that made them work; their love for the stage was the strength behind their relationship. The prospect of the duo reuniting made his blood rush. Harriet promising to hire his mother simply meant there was a strong chance of his parents getting back together in their own special way.

"It makes me feel better knowing there's something there between you both that isn't negative."

A smirking Harriet gently hit his leg. "So, are you going to tell me about this girl in your life?"

"You already know her. It's Sidnee."

Harriet squealed. "You're dating her? She's so pretty."

"No we're just friends. It's a special friendship."

"I'm sure special has some different meaning to you young people today."

"It's complex." He snapped his finger as he remembered some news. "I also have a job interview."

She softly clapped. "I'm excited for you where?"

"It's down in the inner-city at the soup kitchen. I saw the ad online and called."

"That's different. I never expected you to have the community service spirit."

He laughed. "Why not?"

"It's a very social job and you're not the most social person out there."

"Mainly because I didn't know any interesting people. That changed when I met Sidnee."

"And what makes the waitress so interesting?"

He regretted allowing the conversation to drift in this direction. Sidnee was an exorcist and he the slasher. He was sure like his secret, not very many people knew about hers. It would be unfair to possibly expose her, not wanting her to do the same in return. Ford stalled to come up with something that made them 'special friends'. He his lips parted to answer; only to realize it was a false start.

Harriet grew tired of waiting. "Just admit it, you're friends with benefits."

The unwanted conversation now became awkward. He forced a smile and quickly agreed, "That's it."

His mother excitedly clapped. "I hope you accidentally get her pregnant, I want to be a grandma."

Ford imagined how he would explain to his future kids that they had three grandmothers.

There was a knock on the house door. Harriet rose from the couch to answer.

As she opened the door she stepped aside. "Hello."

Into the home slowly stepped Lu. Her face was expressionless, eyes widened. "Harriet."

Ford stood from the couch and joined them. "Hey Lu."

He immediately noticed Bravo didn't accompany her, a rare image.

She hunched her shoulders and softly let out. "Hi Ford."

Her gloom demeanor, lack of Bravo, Ford didn't like this. "Are you okay?"

"No."

"I'm going to head to the gym," Harriet announced. "If you leave, lock the door."

Ford nodded at his leaving mother and refocused on Lu. "Is Bravo okay?"

A tear streamed down her paler than usual face. "That monster is just dandy."

Ford felt a weight lift from his shoulders. The serial-slasher hadn't struck. "A monster?"

She grabbed Ford's hand and dragged him from the house. "I need you to come with me."

She managed to get him outside. Ford quickly locked the door. "Where exactly?"

"Ford please, I'm hurt. I just need you to be with me."

He followed her to her car. "I need to know where we're going."

"Why Ford? Do you think I'm the serial-slasher? Did you forget we're both suspects," She shouted.

"I'm not comfortable traveling to remote locations with a slasher. I know how we think."

She stood at the driver's door. "If you don't get in the car I'll kill myself."

He approached the passenger's side, her threat lacking any sign of humor. "Are you that upset?"

"You have no idea."

Lu unlocked the doors and they both entered the dingy, white car. The entire drive she remained silent and fought back tears. Ford had no idea where they were heading, but his guard was up. He wondered if he was on the way to his grave. Maybe Lu was the serial-slasher as the other slashers had suspected. Ford knew her for a long time, but not well. She could have possibly taken him to discover Miriam's body just to use him as an alibi. Ford's speculating paused as she brought the car to a stop.

He peered outside his window to discover a row of houses. "Where are we?"

Lu pointed forward. "Do you see the yellow home two houses down?"

It was a standard home, one story, a kept lawn and blue car parked out front. "Yeah."

"That's Bravo's house."

"You don't want to move in with him?" He eyed the other homes. "It's a nice neighborhood."

"The neighborhood isn't the problem Ford."

He shrugged. "I don't understand. I've seen more tears than I've heard words, Lu."

"I'm not a crier. I feel broken."

He wanted to help her, but still lacked a problem to solve. "I'm going to walk home Lu."

She grabbed at his forearm, squeezing. "Please don't leave me."

"I will if you don't tell me what's going on."

"Bravo has called off our engagement," Lu whimpered out. "It's over."

Ford was right, slasher-love never lasted. He was sure the young couple was on the verge of defeating that stereotype. Ford now found himself in the awkward position of comforting her. He knew a hug or any of his words would not solve her problem. She sniffled as she sat there staring at him. He had to say something.

"What happened?"

"He said I was turning him into a monster," Lu explained, anger present in her voice.

"It's not like you were making him slash."

"He claimed that I was driving him to that point. His outburst at the meeting was the supposed start."

Ford still searched for the appropriate words for the moment. "It's horrible."

"Of course it is," She shouted at him. "Thanks for reminding me."

"I'm sorry, don't yell at me. Lu, I'm not good dealing with others feelings."

"Me either," She motioned at her teary eyes. "I'm a mess, look at me."

"I think you're heartbroken."

She dug under her seat and revealed a knife. "I need to stab something."

Ford backed away as far as possible. "You keep a knife under your seat?"

"Don't say that as if you don't have knives hidden away."

"I do but not in my car."

He had one under his pillow, in an old backpack he saved from high school, in gym sneakers he only wore once, wedged behind his microwave and under the clothes hamper in his bathroom. He saw knives as slashing weapons first and cooking tools second. No slasher left their weapons sitting in their kitchen drawers, but instead hidden.

She put the knife away. "No, I need some fresh air."

He lowered the passenger's window. "It's a good thing we're already outside."

She cranked up the car and speed off. "No, I need fresher air."

Lu drove away from the neighborhood and they arrived at 'Jackson Park'. The playground area was empty and a few joggers were starting to head home before dark. Lu and Ford made their way to the center of the park and took a seat against the statue of Thaddeus Jackson, a teacher famous for fighting public school funding during the seventies.

Ford and Lu sat side-by-side near the stone structure. She grabbed his right hand and smirked.

He glanced over at her. "What is it?"

"Your hand is healed."

He wiggled his fingers. "Yeah, I took the wrapping off a day ago."

"I lost my ring and you lost your wrapping."

He discreetly slipped his hand away. "Yeah I guess."

"May I ask you something Ford?"

He hoped she wasn't proposing getting back together. "Ask away."

"After your first slashing, what did you do?"

"I went home to do my homework and cried until I fell asleep."

"Cried about what?"

"I just slashed two people. The guilt drove me insane."

She leaned back against the legs of the statue, staring up at the night sky. "This is the very same park that my first slashing took place." She pointed out at the trees that surrounded the park. "I was hiding in some bushes. It was late and a woman was walking her dog and it ran off. The moment she came close enough I stabbed the woman in her stomach. I remember her cute little poodle barking constantly. I kicked the dog, dragged my victim's body deep into the woods and took the happiest stroll I've ever had back home. There was no guilt, just joy." She pointed at a small brick building that contained a set of bathrooms and vending room. "That's where I washed her blood from my hands. The water was freezing that night."

"So you never experience guilt?"

"A little, but I get over it. The joy outweighs the guilt."

"You're saying no matter the victim, your emotion afterwards is no different?"

She softly laughed. "Nope, they're all cushions for my blade."

"I don't see it that way."

"I'm a slasher and I was born to slash."

She simplified their existence. Ford did not agree with her view. He considered slashers and killers two different types of persons. Killers made it a choice to harm others, slashers had to constantly battle the urge or cave to it. Lu seemed to have not participated in the battle of deciding to slash and simply just killed because it brought her joy. Ford started to suggest it was time to leave until he noticed a dark figure approaching them, carrying a knife. The stranger in black wore a dark ski mask.

Ford stood. "It's him."

Lu focused on the approaching armed stranger. "Who?"

"The serial-slasher."

A snarling Lu stood and shouted, "You sick asshole," She shouted toward the stranger in black.

The serial-slasher simply waved as he continued toward them.

"Lu, we're going to turn around, head for the woods and split up."

She nodded. "I'll start dialing for the cops."

"He'll be gone by time they arrive."

"How far do we run?"

"Once we reach the woods, sing your complete alphabets then make a detour to the car."

"I'll still dial the cops."

"Fine," He quickly responded. "Now run."

The slashers ran the opposite direction of the serial-slasher. Ford was tired of playing on the serial-slasher's terms. He needed to find out the identity of this person and eliminate him. Ford had realized that he wasn't saying his alphabets. He estimated that he was either nearing or seconds pass completing them. Ford took a quick detour. The slasher slapped branches from the many trees in his path as he headed to the parking lot.

Ford arrived to the car to notice Lu wasn't there. He figured either he made it back too soon or that she had been caught. Ford yanked at the handles of the car doors, discovering they all were locked. He had to get inside and retrieve her hidden knife. It was a two on one battle; a weapon would give them an even greater chance at ending the serial-slasher streak.

"Ford," He heard Lu shout from over his shoulder.

He spun around to discover Lu sprinting towards him. The serial-slasher emerged from the woods after her. Ford pointed to over her shoulder, prompting Lu to spin around. The serial-slasher came to a quick stop and hurled the knife at her. It drove deep into her chest and Lu fell backwards to the ground. Ford made decisive steps towards her, but as the serial-slasher yanked the bloody knife from her chest, he turned away and fled. He once again found himself running away from the serial-slasher.

A grocery store was the place nearest to the park. He headed inside the store into safety. Ford slowed his pace and flashed a phony smile at the cashier who greeted him. He had no idea why, but he headed down the cereal aisle. Ford grabbed the first box of cereal he saw, returned to the checkout line and paid for it.

He just witnessed a friend be killed and the only thing he could do was eat dry cereal in the parking lot of a grocery store. Ford found it hard to feel any grief for a person who saw little value in the lives of others. The idea of murder and death brought joy to Lu. He wondered if she was enjoying it so much right now.

Ford continued walking and eating, his mind and body in different places. His body was exhausted but apparently his mind had somewhere to be. The slasher was so out of it that he crossed a busy street while the light was on green. He returned to reality as he realized that the honey-flavored cereal he ate was all gone. Ford took in his surroundings to learn that he managed to walk all the way to Bravo's house. He had to let him know. Ford dropped the empty box of cereal to Bravo's lawn, approached his door and knocked.

A panting Bravo answered the door. "Are you here to talk about her?"

Ford nodded even though he knew he should have provided more specifics for his answer.

Bravo stepped aside. "I had to end it Ford. She was changing me."

There was barely any furniture inside his home. A weight bench was placed in the center of his living room and a basketball game played on his mounted television. The table in his kitchen was crowded with empty beer bottles and his back patio door was open. Bravo took a seat on his weight bench and slipped off the lifting gloves he wore.

He nodded outback. "I'm going to grill some steaks in a minute. Are you hungry?"

Ford ignored the question, focused on finding the proper words. "She's gone."

"Yes, she's gone from my heart. I know you're friends with her, but I couldn't tolerate her craziness."

"No," A frustrated Ford shouted. "She's dead."

Bravo smiled then it quickly faded as his mind caught up with the words he heard.

"Bravo, Lu is dead." A woozy Ford paused. "The serial-slasher...he killed her."

Bravo lay back on his bench and aggressively pumped the weights. "I hate this shit!"

Ford leaned over and vomited the box of cereal he had forced down.

### **Chapter 19 - Motel**

The crowd in the bar mainly consisted of local construction workers and the furniture was nearly falling apart. Milo struggled to keep his balance on the wobbly stool as he dug for his wallet. He was exhausted from travel and just wanted a few drinks and a soft bed to rest in. The dark bearded bartender waited, impatiently tapping his fingers against the mahogany bar counter.

Milo removed his ID card from his wallet, showing it to the bartender. "There, I'm twenty-four."

The bartender narrowed his eyes as he double-checked the date. "Whatever, what do you want?"

"I'm not much of a drinker," Milo rubbed the back of his sore neck. "I'll have..."

The impatient bartender huffed, his alcohol smelling breath meeting Milo's nose.

Milo fanned the foul scent away. "I'll just have whatever you're having."

The bartender sat a shot glass on the counter and poured in some whiskey. Milo took the shot, it burning his throat a little. The slasher was still on his mind, he could not forget Kara. He was trained to view slashers simply as murderers, but she changed that outlook. She was a person, somebody who aligned herself with him to escape the cult controlled town.

"It's true," A female in the background slurred out. "I was abducted."

Milo glanced over his shoulder to discover a middle aged, dark haired woman at a table surrounded by men. She continued telling the tale of her abduction, most walking away from her or laughing behind her back. Milo was on a search for the extraordinary and interesting, he couldn't deny himself an abduction story. He slipped from his stool and joined the woman at her table. The crowd around her had thinned, most paying more attention to the replay of the football game on the television.

The woman picked up a garbage bag from the bar floor and set it on the table. "I have proof."

Milo smirked at her. "I overheard you talking."

"Are you here to crack jokes?"

"No, I'm interested." He motioned at the bag. "You said you had proof. Is this it?"

She nodded. "Yeah, but I'm going to pawn it."

"But this is your proof to your abduction story. That's what you just said a few seconds ago."

"I don't care; I just need money to get home."

“What’s your name? I’m Milo.”

“I’m Valarie. You know my story, what’s yours.”

“I’m just traveling the country. I lost my job, my girlfriend and now I’m on my own.”

“I’m not on my own. I have somebody,” Valarie barely could keep her eyes open. “A son.”

The bartender interrupted, glancing down at Valarie. “You’ve had enough. Pay up, thirty dollars.”

She grabbed her bag. “I’m going to pawn this and pay my tab tomorrow.”

The bartender sneered at her. “You think I’m some kind of dumb ass?”

“No, I’m telling you I’ll get big money for this. I stole it from the aliens.”

He slammed his hands down on the table. “You’re drunk and delusional.”

“Yes, I’m drunk, Lenny,” She paused and let out a burp. “But I was abducted.”

“My name is Larry not Lenny. I want my money or I’m calling the cops.”

“No, I can’t do jail. I’ve had enough of cages. I have to get home. I have to see my son.”

Milo removed some cash from his wallet. “I’ll pay her tab.”

The bartender fanned his hand at Milo. “No, this is her problem.”

“Yeah,” Valarie blurted out. “My problem and my tab that I’ll pay tomorrow.”

“I’m trying to help you,” Milo explained.

Valarie stood to her feet, nearly tumbling to the floor. “I don’t need your help.”

Larry pushed her back down to her seat. “You’ll leave when the cops get here.”

Valarie grabbed him by his hairy forearm and bit into it. Larry let out a roar like scream and backhand smacked her to the floor. Milo rushed from his seat and positioned himself between Larry and Valarie who slowly stood to her feet.

Milo placed money into Larry’s shirt pocket. “That’s more than enough for my drink and her tab.”

“I told you,” Larry shoved Milo. “This is her problem.”

“I don’t think you should put your hands on me.”

Larry gently patted him against the right cheek. “This is my bar, I do what I want.”

Milo managed to grab Larry by the arm and wrench it behind his back. He tripped the man and sent him crashing face first to the dirty bar floor. A crowd gathered, a few of the men sending some verbal support toward the bartender. Those too drunk to support the owner simply shouted for Milo to smash his head in. Milo released him from the hold, grabbed Valarie’s hand, garbage bag, and dragged her from the bar. They arrived outside, the moon full and the rain drizzling.

He passed Valarie her bag. “I suggest you find someplace to sleep.”

“You’re not my boss,” She slurred out. “Nobody tells me what to do.”

He forgot he no longer wore a badge, used to commanding around many out of control drunks.

He slipped a bill into her pocket. “That’s one hundred dollars, go home to your son.”

Valarie turned away, throwing her bag over her shoulder. The woman sung out to herself as she continued down the block, into the night. Milo needed more to drink, but knew he would not be welcomed back inside. He drove to the nearest motel, arriving inside the tobacco-scented lobby and his clothes damp from the rain. The woman behind the check-in desk was missing her right eye and had a hook in place of her right hand. She used the tip of the hook to key in Milo’s information and assigned him a room. After the payment was made, she passed him a room key.

He grabbed his alarm clocks from his car before heading to his room. It was located on the second story of the poorly constructed motel building. He had slept in so many motels that they were all starting to look the same. The televisions were always outdated and the beds always stiff. He setup his alarm clocks. A process that usually took a few minutes. Milo was relieved to get some sleep; his body needed the rest though his mind wouldn’t receive any. He knew, like every night, it was time for him to unwillingly venture into another nightmare.

Milo shut his eyes and it wasn’t long before he reopened them. He now stood in a middle of a field of yellow tulips. He was fully dressed, neglecting to shower before drifting off to sleep. His eyes scanned the field of flowers, waiting for the nightmare to begin. It was all too peaceful, the air sweet and the wind delicate against his tanned skin. He made careful steps forward. A dark snicker met his ears, the nightmare had begun. He decided to wait for the hidden stranger to reveal itself.

Milo felt something tighten around his ankle, prompting him to glance down. A pale gray hand, its cuticles peeling, grasped onto him. He kicked the hand from around his ankles and it quickly vanished. Milo searched the ground. He saw nothing but the stems of the tulips sprouting from the soil. Milo looked up from the ground and his eyes met with the emerald eyes of the possible creature who grabbed him. It stood hunched over; its bones apparent under its dying flesh.

The creature let out another snicker. “Are you amazed with my garden?”

Milo did not answer, not wanting to participate in the nightmare.

The creature reached for him, Milo stepping backward. “Answer.”

Milo remained speechless.

“My garden’s secret, I fertilize the soil with the corpses of my victims.”

Milo knew this place was only a figment of his imagination. There was no dead beneath his feet.

The creature pointed at him. “And now you will join them.”

Milo was sure he would make it out of this dream alive, but was not willing to suffer through any pain the

creature would inflict on him while trapped. He took off running, leaving the murderous-gardener standing and watching. Milo glanced over his shoulder to notice the creature was leaping toward him as if he was a grasshopper. It leaped high in the air, catching up with Milo. Ahead he spotted a cottage surrounded by a white picket fence. Milo gained a bit more momentum and hurdled over the fence.

He rushed into the cottage and slammed the door behind himself. Immediately, he knew he had to secure the place. He rushed around the small cottage, the inside reminding of the mock farms he would visit on elementary school field trips as a kid. Milo used a mahogany stand that held small cartoon figurines to block the front door. He continued through the house, locking windows and searching for a weapon. His plan was to simply contain himself in the cottage until he woke.

He took shelter in the living room and noticed a shotgun was mounted above the stone fireplace. Milo retrieved the weapon, it was loaded with shells. He took a seat on the couch that was placed directly before the living room window. It was an easy access point for the creature; Milo aimed the weapon at the window and waited.

Milo refused to lower the shotgun, knowing the creature was waiting for him to drop his guard. They were both waiting to see who would react first, the wait not working in the creature's favor. If he wanted to even attempt to harm Milo he had to act before his alarm clocks sounded.

In the distance he noticed the creature leaping across the tulip field towards the cottage. Milo smirked, him feeling a little victorious. He won the waiting game. Milo stood to his feet, the gun still aimed at the window waiting for the creature to leap through. It came closer, Milo's view of his pale opponent becoming clearer. The moment the creature took his final leap toward the entry point, Milo pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

The creature came crashing through the window into the cottage. He tested the trigger a few more times before giving up and simply driving the barrel of the shotgun into the creature's mouth. Milo applied extra force but could not send the barrel piercing through his attacker's skull. The creature dug its nails of his left hand into Milo's forearm and clawed at him.

Milo woke up screaming, his alarm clocks sounding. His left forearm displayed three scratches that bled. He powered down each clock and headed into the cramped bathroom of his motel room. Milo positioned his bruised forearm under the sink and ran some water onto it. His body was much more relaxed even though the bed provided little comfort.

He decided to take a quick shower, afterwards wearing the same jeans and slipping on fresh dark t-shirt. Milo sat on the edge of the creaking bed and powered on the television. He got distracted by a cooking show. It made him realize that he needed some breakfast. Milo packed up his clocks into a duffle bag and exited his room.

He was sure most fast food restaurants had just stopped serving breakfast, but he just needed something to fill his stomach. Milo arrived to the first floor of the motel and overheard some faint crying coming from a vending room. He headed into the room to discover a small boy sitting by the ice machine, his knees pulled to his chest and tears on his face. The police training in him made this situation impossible to walk away from.

He squatted down beside the boy. "Are you okay?"

"My mom and her boyfriend were fighting. I hate him."

Milo had an excellent relationship with his father. They rarely argued over anything. After Milo's mother's death, his father became withdrawn, their strong relationship becoming an afterthought. He and his father now lived similar lives, both were traveling the world. It was a trip also funded by Artee. Milo hadn't spoken to his father in more than two years. He last heard from Artee that the man was living in a small village in Thailand. As long as he knew his father was alive and healthy, Milo was glad for him.

"It's going to be okay, adults argue."

"But they're always fighting. He pushed her." The kid clutched his growling stomach.

"What's your name?"

"Hector."

Milo motioned back at the half-stocked vending machine. "Are you hungry?"

Hector's short, curly hair bounced as he nodded.

Milo stood upright. "Yeah, me too. How about we take a look in this machine?"

Hector rose to his feet and beat Milo to the machine. He pointed. "I want a chocolate bar."

"How about we start with something a little healthier?"

Milo surveyed the pathetic selection. There was the chocolate bar of course, salted potato chips, gummy bears, vanilla cookies, various packs of chewing gum, and powdered donuts. It was nearly impossible to find anything healthy in the machine. He glanced at the drink machine beside it to learn it was out of order.

He removed four dollars from his wallet. "You know what, chocolate it is."

He purchased two chocolate bars and a bag of chips. Milo handed the candy to Hector.

Hector immediately tore it open, took a bite, and swallowed. "It's my favorite."

"I never had it before."

"It's the best thing ever," Hector exclaimed as he licked his chocolate covered lips.

"I'm Milo," He thumbed outside the room. "I'm going to eat my food on my car."

Hector was nearly done with his candy bar. "I'll sit with you."

They headed out of the vending room, Milo eating his meal of salty chips and chocolate bar on the hood of his car. The kid was right, the candy bar was delicious. It had crunchy nuts and thick peanut butter in the center. Hector

skipped around the vehicle, not once taking a moment to sit down. It was obvious the chocolate had sent him into overdrive. He even did a few back-flips, Milo laughing as Hector wandered around dizzy from all the movement.

Hector sat on the hood of the car. "Are you rich?"

Milo laughed, "No, but my sister is."

He slapped his hands against the hood of the silver sports car. "Did she buy you this car?"

"Nope, I did after I graduated from the police academy."

"A cop," Hector exclaimed. "Then you can arrest Nathan, he's my mom's boyfriend."

"I'm not a cop anymore."

"But you can pretend to be one, scare him away."

"It'll only cause more trouble, plus I have to leave soon."

Hector slid from the hood of the car and let out a sad sigh.

"I'm sorry kid, but I'm sure they'll stop fighting eventually."

Hector sadly walked away, his head lowered. "Fine, I'll just sit with him in the room."

"Your mom isn't home?"

"No, he took her away but she'll be back."

Milo stood from his car and followed Hector. "Away?"

"You know. The silent town."

"No, I don't know."

Hector turned to him. "It's where the dead sleeps."

Milo now knew what the kid was referring to, an infested town. Not all were fortunate enough to be treated to a proper burial. Those left to die or abandoned on the streets soon rose and retreated to infested towns. Milo could not believe Hector mother's boyfriend was cruel enough to abandon a living person in the town of the dead. The way Hector spoke of the situation led to Milo believing he had done it many times before. This woman was in danger. The dreamer had to act; he had to do something heroic.

"Do you know where this town is," Milo questioned.

"Yeah, just head north. There's a red line painted on the ground where it starts."

"Have you ever been there before?"

"Yeah, Nathan took me one night when he left mom. I hate him."

Milo kicked an empty can across the parking lot. "Yeah, I'm starting to hate him too."

"Are you going to the silent town?"

Milo started toward his car. "Yeah, I'm going to pick your mom up."

"You don't even know how she looks."

"I'm sure she'll be the only living person out there." He climbed into the driver's seat.

"I'm coming too."

"No, you're not."

Hector opened the passenger's door. "I don't want to stay here with Nathan."

If Hector was willing to travel to an infested town instead of spend time with Nathan, the man must truly be a monster. Milo found it tougher to say 'no' the longer he stared into Hector's eyes that were begging for the response from the dreamer.

Milo opened the door wider for him. "Buckle up and don't move from your seat no matter what."

Milo drove off, heading north. Usually the boarders of infested towns were heavily guarded, but that wasn't the case for smaller remote towns like the one he visited today. There was one important rule about visiting an infested town, silence was key. If you disturbed the dead's resting place, they woke with vengeance. A simple mistake could turn Milo's rescue mission into an invasion of the dead.

Hector pointed forward. "There's the red line."

Milo brought the car to a stop, inches away from the line drawn on the ground. "Stay silent."

"Alright," Hector whispered.

"What's your mother's name?"

"Catalina."

He nodded. "Okay, I'll be back with her."

Milo exited the car, softly closing the driver's door. He took a deep breath before taking a step over the red line. The atmosphere became gloom. He continued into the town, his breaths as quick as his steps. Ahead he spotted a dark haired woman lying in the center of the street. She wore an oversized t-shirt and bunny slippers. Milo quickly rushed over to her and kneeled down. She was unconscious and her right cheek was bruised.

He eyed the abandoned buildings on the block. Milo knew what rested inside, the dead. He was tempted to peek but the quicker he left the better. He raised the woman into his arms. She hung lazy in his arm as Milo rushed toward the red line. They were nearing safety and his cell phone rang.

He struggled to grab it from his front pocket, not trying to drop Catalina. Milo overheard a few drawn out groans come from behind. He was much too frightened to turn around and face reality, he disturbed the dead. Milo rushed across the red line and rested Catalina on the hood of his car.

He answered the phone. "What?"

"Hey it's me Serena. I left your apartment key under your doormat."

Milo hung up the phone, not caring to talk with her. "Idiot."  
Milo wasn't sure if the insult was meant for her or himself.  
Hector exited the car and pointed forward. "I see them. Milo the dead is moving."  
Milo still could not turn and face them. "I told you not to move from the car."  
Hector glanced at the woman on the hood of the car and quickly returned to his seat.  
"What's wrong with you," Milo questioned.  
"That's not my mom," Hector shouted.  
The muscles in Milo's body went tense as the woman sprung up and lunged at him.

### **Chapter 20 - Ether**

Milo lay against the road, the dead mounting him and throwing wild punches. She let out a growl as she tried every possible attack to defeat Milo. Her oily, dark hair swayed against his face and dingy, chipped nails clawed at his forearms that were raised before his face. He knew he had little time to overcome her before the others from the infested town caught up. Milo delivered punches to her chest. The dead's growls grew furious. He used all his strength to toss her aside.

Milo rolled over onto her, wrapped his hands around her head and dug his thumbs into her eye sockets. He glanced forward at the hoard of dead that he woke up, limbs hanging from their corpses or dropping to the ground and a few savagely sprinting in his direction. Milo returned his attention to the fighting dead below him. He strained as he yanked at her head. A muffled pop met his ears and he managed to remove her head from her neck.

He stood from the ground, holding her head. "You scared the shit out of me."

Milo punted the head toward the hoard of approaching dead and ran into his car. Hector sat eyes widened, his back pressed against the cushion of his seat. Milo started his car and turned away from the dead and drove back toward town. He and Hector breathed heavily in unison and only the sound of his tires against the road could be heard. Milo slapped the steering wheel. He woke the dead. They would bring chaos and destruction to the nearest areas. He had to inform the local officials and explain he was the one to blame. Milo hoped their reaction to his grave mistake would be subtle.

The waking of the dead had occurred on many occasions in history. Nearly a decade ago a group of teenagers thought it would be fun to visit a nearby infested town and poke at the dead. Their actions led to the small town they lived in being savaged.

The military interfered and had no choice but to burn the town in order to send the dead fleeing back to their resting place. As for the teenagers, they were sentenced to time in a juvenile detention center and probation. The act of provoking the dead had been criminalized by the government, it today labeled as an act of domestic terrorism.

Milo's act of kindness and attempt of heroics had gained him the title of domestic terrorist. He could easily drop Hector back at the motel and leave town without turning himself in. Milo didn't know if his conscious could handle that decision.

Hector glanced at him. "Are you scared?"

Milo knew his job was to make Hector feel safe. "No, the dead is far behind."

"The fast ones will catch up with us." Hector bit at his thumbnail. "They looked angry."

"Are you scared?"

Hector glanced outside the window at the orange sky. "I more scared for my mom."

"If she wasn't in the infested town, where would she be?"

Hector shrugged. "I don't know. That's why I'm afraid for her."

"We're going to find her. It'll be okay."

"The dead is chasing us and my mom is lost," His voice cracked. "Are you sure it'll be okay?"

"Yes, the police will handle the dead and we will continue searching for your mom."

"In school they told us waking the dead is a crime. The police will put you in jail."

Milo cringed at the harsh truth. "Maybe, but not if I help fix the problem I caused."

"If people die, everybody will be mad at you. Are you afraid that they will be mad?"

Milo had a long history of being the hero; it was a role that fueled a lot of his life decisions. During his years on his high school football team he usually scored the winning touchdown and caught the much needed interceptions. Milo now figured his days as a hero were numbered. Milo narrowed his eyes as he stared at himself in disgust in his rearview mirror. He should have been more focused in the infested town; he should have noticed the woman he lifted in his arm was dead.

"Milo," Hector called out. "Are you listening?"

He broke eye contact with himself. "Yeah."

"Are you afraid that everybody will be mad at you?"

"They have the right to be. I'm not happy about it."

"You're my friend, I won't be mad at you."

Milo smirked and glanced over at him. "My friend?"

"You were nice to me and tried to help me. Those people in Manning never try to help me. I would ask for help and they would send me back to the motel. The police stopped showing up when my mom and her boyfriend would fight. Nobody cares about my mommy and me, but you did. You care because you're my friend Milo." He lowered his head and sighed. "It's okay if you don't want to be my friend."



"I'm your friend." He laughed. "You're a cool kid, you're strong."  
Hector flexed his bony arms. "I can lift my bike."  
"You're strong on the inside also. You saw the dead walk and didn't shed a tear."  
"I'm not going to cry." He giggled. "I cry sometimes when I laugh too hard."  
"I like when that happens. Still, you've been a great sidekick."  
Hector nudged him. "Because you're an awesome hero."  
Hector was making it difficult for Milo to feel like a domestic terrorist. He had somebody rooting for him. It took a kid to uncover his confidence that he was close to losing. Milo continued his drive back to town and noticed a woman in a faded green shirt, jeans shorts and worn down sneakers, lazily walking on the side of the road.  
Hector pressed his hands against the passenger's window. "That's my mom," He excitedly shouted.  
Milo lowered the passenger's window as he slowly pulled up beside the woman. "Ma'am?"  
She stopped and faced the car. "I'm not some kind of roadside skank."  
"Mom," Hector shouted. "Are you okay?"  
The woman's lips were chapped, her face dirty. She rapidly blinked. "Hector?"  
"Yeah," He bounced in his seat, "Mom it's me."  
Milo brought the car to a complete stop. "Ma'am, I'll give you a ride instead."  
She yanked at the door handle. "Hector get out of the car now."  
"No mom, he's my friend and he came to save you."  
"Hector," She screamed. "I don't care what this man has told you, he's not your friend."  
Milo understood how inappropriate the situation appeared. "Ma'am..."  
"It's Catalina," She interrupted. "And I'll kick your ass if you did anything to my son."  
"I didn't do anything to him," He assured her. "I just fed him and came to search for you."  
"He's telling the truth," Hector vouched. "And he fought the dead."  
"The dead," Catalina said in shock. "He woke the dead."  
He took her son and unleashed the dead on her town. Milo knew he made a bad first impression.  
Catalina banged on the back door window. "Unlock the door, let me in right now," She stressed.  
Milo unlocked the door and the woman quickly climbed in.  
She ran her hands through her fuzzy, dark hair and kicked the back of Milo's seat. "I can't believe you woke the dead. That's a crime, you know?" She continued, not allowing him to speak a word. "I don't like you, but I think you did the world a favor. Manning is full with corrupted leaders and addicts. It deserves to be wiped off that map." She sniffed and flicked at her nose. "Trust me, I know."  
"That wasn't my goal. It was an accident."  
  
"He thought one of the dead was you," Hector said.  
"I might look dead, but I'm alive and kicking."  
"You're kicking; I felt it against my seat." Milo restarted the car. "The police will solve everything."  
Catalina burst out laughing. "The police are failures."  
"I know from personal experience that all men and women of the badge are well trained."  
"Are you saying you're a police officer?"  
"I 'was', past tense."  
"No shit? A police officer who woke the dead, which proves a badge doesn't equal brains."  
Milo heard the insult many times on the field, it didn't bother him. "No cussing around the kid."  
"He's seen and heard worst."  
"How about we don't speak until we return to town," Milo suggested.  
"If you're taking us back then..." Catalina's words drifted away as she stared out her window.  
Milo caught on to her instant silence. "Catalina, what's wrong?"  
She thumbed over her shoulder. "That was 'Erickson's Bar'."  
"This isn't the time to think about drinking though I'm sure it would help."  
"No, Erickson's Bar is miles pass town."  
Milo floored the break, his tires screeching against the road. "Then we're heading the wrong way?"  
"You missed a turn way before you caught up with me."  
"I continued this direction because it's where you were walking towards."  
"Hector cover your ears," His mother commanded.  
He did as she ordered him and he hummed an upbeat tune.  
She leaned in close to the front area of the car, resting her arms against the seats. "I wasn't coming back to the motel. I had enough okay. The arguing and the beatings, I couldn't take it anymore. I needed a new life, a new start. My boyfriend dropped me off in that infested town and I decided, no more. You made a mistake coming to find me."  
"And what about Hector?"  
A few set of tears trailed down her worn face. "He's amazing."  
"You were just going to abandon him?"  
"No, Nathan would take care of him."  
"You honestly can't believe what you just said. You're his mother, his only mother."

She sat back and looked away. "I never asked to be a mother."

In this world of madness, it was sometimes hard to remember the other trials and tribulations out there that everybody had to battle. Catalina's abandonment of her son was a prime example. The dreamer was sure no matter what happened after today Hector would have to struggle through the hurt of being the unwanted child.

Milo removed Hector's right hand from his ear. "You can listen now."

Hector glanced up at him with his brown eyes. "Are we going to turn around?"

"We have to," Milo answered as he checked the road to make sure it was safe to turn around.

"What if it's too late," Hector asked.

"Even though they'll most likely fail, call the police now," Catalina suggested.

Milo grabbed his cell phone from his pocket and dialed. His ear was met with a busy signal.

"Any answer," Catalina said from the backseat.

Milo attempted to contact the police once again, no success. "The line is busy."

"They're either fighting for their lives or taking one of their forever lunch breaks."

"Then I'm turning the car around."

A convoy of military vehicles sped by in the opposite direction, trailed by a pair of sixteen wheelers.

"It's pointless now," Catalina said. "The military is on their way."

"How are you so sure they're heading back to the town?"

"The sixteen wheeler has the 'DS' logo on the side."

Milo thought back to his police academy training manuals. "Dead-Sweep."

"You should've noticed that. You're getting rusty officer."

He didn't disagree; his basic policing skills were becoming an afterthought. "It's former officer."

Catalina made her way out the car, let Hector out and slammed both doors closed. She grabbed her son by the hand and dragged him away with her. Hector glanced over his shoulder at Milo and waved goodbye. Milo was not like the boy's mother, he couldn't just abandon him in the middle of nowhere.

Milo sprinted from his car and caught up to them. "I can't just leave you two."

Catalina pointed forward as she continued walking. "There's a town a few miles up, Hackshaw. My new start."

"You mean 'our' new start, as in you and Hector."

She chuckled. "You know what I mean asshole."

"I can drive you both, it'll be dark soon."

"You go home and don't worry about me reporting you. As I said, you did the world a favor."

"It's still my fault," He shouted after her. "I broke the law."

Hector stopped and turned to Milo. "Sometimes you have to break the rules to help your friends."

"Yeah, but..."

"You got my mom back for me and now I'm moving to a new town, away from Nathan."

"Still..."

"Don't be hard on yourself," Hector continued. "It was an accident. I have to go now."

Hector ran to catch up with his mother and Milo stopped following them. It was an accident, but a massive one. He wouldn't feel right pursuing his adventure across the country knowing many possibly died today because of his accident. Milo decided he needed to return home. He started back towards his car but not before taking a last look at Hector and his mother. They were far ahead, shadows in the distance.

It took a full tank of gas to get Milo back to Draper. The town looked the same as it was when he left it. Nothing appeared to have changed, it was demoralizing. He arrived to his apartment, the only positive of returning so far that he would not have to sleep in a cheap motel bed tonight. Serena no longer around to chat with, he powered on his television instead. The news was airing, discussing the death of a woman who was found stabbed in 'Jackson Park'. He switched the channel to music videos.

Milo had no idea what to do. He answered to his basic needs, a meal, a shower and some fresh clothes. Milo took out his laptop and decided to do some job searching; the idea of being heroic appeared to be much more difficult following his recent grand failure. There was nothing there, job after job...nothing offered what he sought, the extraordinary. He decided to watch some porn, but two minutes into the process his computer caught a virus, which made it impossible to use.

He shut down his laptop and paced around his dark apartment. "I have nothing."

A music video came on that showed a middle-aged man watching television with his family. The lyrics began, a raspy voiced artist singing about how his life was a void and had lost all hope in achieving his dreams. Milo understood how the main protagonist of the music video felt. The video switched to a new scene with the family man sneaking out and heading to a bar. The songs instrumental grew aggressive as the family man started to party and drink. The singer went on repeating the hook 'party and drink'. Milo nodded to the song, not only an instant fan of the artist, but his advice.

He never considered himself a 'party-animal'. During his youth he drank, but sharing beer with an entire football team meant you usually got one bottle and no buzz. He was sure being drunk would help the ordinary appear extraordinary to him. Milo slipped on his sneakers, sprayed on some cologne, turned off his television and drove downtown to the nearest club.

He arrived at 'Palm Spree', a club he visited many times as an officer to calm drunken fights. It was popular with the college students and the young women had a tendency to eventually go topless. The club was dark, green and yellow strobes lights swaying from corner to corner.

He approached the bar that had a water fountain constructed behind it. As he waited for the bartender two young women climbed over the bar into the waterfall and explored each other's bodies with their lips. Those witnessing their wild actions snapped photos and the drenched, young women eventually rushed from the water fountain and back onto the dance floor.

The blonde bartender, wearing a silver bikini top and leather pants, approached. "What are you having?"

"I want the two strongest drinks," He shouted over the music.

She poured him two glasses of a green liquid. "It's called Ether."

He drank them directly after each other, his chest burning. "That's intense."

"You're supposed to sip it," She laughed. "You're a daring man."

Milo had already started to feel woozy. "I barely can sit up straight."

"It's the Ether. I know you from somewhere."

"I probably arrested you once."

"No, but I saw you on the news. They showed your picture because you were that officer who asked out that woman who jumped from that tower."

"That got me fired even though I wasn't a bit serious about taking her out."

"That's some bullshit."

"Plus my girl dumped me the same day."

"You're too cute for that treatment. I'm Nora, the head-bartender. Yes, I'm bragging."

"And I'm Milo. You're cute." He pulled her bikini top strap. "I love your tits."

"Boundaries, Milo." She bit her bottom lip and stepped back. "And you're the first guy to say that."

"Are you serious? They're adorable."

She tugged at her hair. "They usually make some crude comment about blondes."

"No appreciation for your other great features."

"I'm not even blonde. I wear a wig for the tips. I made nothing as a brunette."

"I like blondes, but I love brunettes."

His constant compliments were just to lure her in. He liked her the moment he learned she was head-bartender. A woman's appearance mattered to Milo, but not as much as her strength. He had a thing for women who were in control. In high school he always pursued the girls who were head of the school cubs. He recalled dating the head cheerleader, the head of the yearbook club and the student body president. His ex-girlfriend Serena was attractive, but once he found out she was a manager at her job and not just a sales representative, he wanted her.

Nora rolled her eyes. "And now you're just trying to hook-up with me."

He raised his hands in defense. "I came here to drink because I have no future."

"I've changed my major nearly four times and I'm thinking about dropping out. My future is also gloom."

"I wanted to be a hero. I know it sounds crazy but now I know that it is."

"It's not crazy, a little unrealistic though."

He shrugged. "It doesn't matter, I'm over it."

"If all fails either get a job or start school."

"School?"

"Yeah." She motioned at herself. "Become a student, like me. Join me on my quest for a major."

"I'll think about that okay, how about another drink?"

He lied; the idea of college would never cross his mind again. Milo was never a fan of learning, mostly excited about school to just play football. He barely graduated and knew college wasn't for him after none of the offered majors excited him. He could not imagine himself as an accountant, graphic designer or etcetera. He was a failure at the one thing that excited him most, heroics.

Nora poured him another drink and he gulped it down. His night became hazy. He danced wildly with a bunch of nameless people and drunk a lot more drinks. A fight broke out in the men's bathroom and he remembered helping a scrawny young man shove another man's head into the urinal. Nora's finished her shift and they ended up kissing on the hood of his car.

"Your lips are amazing," He complimented.

She dug her hands into his pants. "Wait until you see what else they can do."

The cops showed up, which led to Milo inviting Nora back to his place. Milo undressed her, she undressed him and they finished what they started on his living room floor. He found some flat beer in his refrigerator and they both sat on the kitchen floor drinking until it was all gone. Once they ran out of beer they decided to get back to having fun with each other. Milo eventually drifted off to sleep on top of the bartender, his alarm clocks not set.

### **Chapter 21 - Reunited**

Milo opened his eyes to find himself lying nude in his bed. His mouth tasted like beer and he had a slight headache. He had no idea how he ended up here. His alarms clocks sounded adding insult to his hangover. Milo aggressively smashed at the clocks with his fist. That method only sent most falling to his bedroom floor. He unplugged the clocks from the wall and lay back down. His growling stomach urged him to head into the kitchen and he prepared

breakfast.

Milo rose from his bed and made his way over to his dresser drawer. He opened the top drawer where he kept his underwear to discover it was empty. Milo checked each drawer, beneath his bed and inside his closet, only to find no clothing.

He dropped down on the edge of his bed. "I got robbed."

He shook his head as he laughed at himself. Milo had been taking a quick route back to becoming a civilian. No man of the law would be so careless when having a stranger over and falling to sleep without letting their guest out.

He never expected the bartender to be a part-time criminal. Luckily, he knew her place of work and that she was a student. After he found something to wear he would head out and search for her. Milo stood and wondered if his neighbor wouldn't mind lending him some clothes. He left his bedroom and entered into an elegant ballroom.

Milo went numb. "No."

The windowless, high ceiling room was crowded with those from his life and from his nightmares. They all wore black, sipped wine and socialized with each other. He covered his private with his hands as his high school football team made their way past him in suits and dark football helmets covering their heads. Milo reached back for his bedroom door knob only to feel nothing. He peered over his shoulder to discover a painting of rotting fruit hanging where his bedroom door once was.

Milo tore the painting from its frame and wrapped it around his waist, covering himself. He scanned the room, noticing two men with their eyes and lips stitched shut, guarding the lone exit. He rushed across the room, the guarded door made from dark metal. The moment he arrived to the door, the two men on guard forcibly pushed him backward. He nearly tumbled to the marble floor of the ballroom only to be caught by a clown.

Milo quickly stepped away. "Don't touch me."

The clown, his wild hair darkened and black tears painted on his face, scoffed. "I was helping."

"You tried to kill me last time we met, why help me now?"

"I'm very competitive in the fight cage. I just want to enjoy this evening."

A fresh glass of wine appeared in the clown's hand as he walked away.

Milo's ears were met by whispers. He turned toward the source to discover a tight nit crowd of strangers in black, rose petals scattered around their feet. Milo noticed Serena stood within the circle of the robed strangers, laughing and chatting with them. He made his way over, grabbed her by the forearm and yanked her from the crowd.

She jerked her arm away. "I was talking and you almost caused me to spill my wine."

"Serena, you're in one of my nightmares."

"Milo stop whining, I just want to enjoy this evening."

"No, you have to wake up and get to my apartment. I didn't set my clocks."

She shrugged. "You're not in my life anymore. I don't care."

He yanked up at the crumpled portrait wrapped around his waist. "I will die."

She laughed. "And that's what I call a perfect evening."

Serena rejoined the crowd and resumed talking. Milo was doing his best to keep his calm, but the reality was that he had no escape. He made a life-threatening mistake. Milo figured the only way he could wake up on his own was to flee from this room, but those two guards made it nearly impossible. He spotted Kara wearing a black jumpsuit and carrying a knife in her hand.

He ran over to her. "I need your help."

She nodded at the knife in her hand. "Who do you want me to slash?"

Milo pointed toward the exit. "The two men guarding the door. I need to get out of here."

She laughed as she dropped the knife. "But I want to enjoy this evening."

"No," He placed his hands against her shoulders. "There's nothing to enjoy here."

"But there's free wine. I don't get wine in prison."

"I will die if I don't find a way to wake up," Milo stressed.

"Then if you're going to die you might as well go out in style."

Kara tore the portrait from his waist, leaped onto Milo and wrapped her legs around him. She started aggressively kissing on his neck and running her hand through his low-cut hair. Milo would enjoy this moment under different circumstances, but he had his own life to save. He shoved Kara from him, causing her to drop to the ballroom floor.

She whimpered as she stood and grabbed her knife. "You kill-joy. I'll enjoy this evening alone."

Milo tried to salvage what remained of the portrait, but it wasn't enough to cover himself. He got over it; he was exposed to the eyes of every person in the ballroom. That was a minor problem compared to his impending death. To his left he recognized a couple of citizens from Smith's Town dancing to an absent beat. Nora danced along with them, swinging her phony blonde hair from left to right and wearing a dark bikini. As Milo approached her she grinded her body against his.

"I love this song," She screamed out.

"Nora, I have to tell you something about myself."

She spanked his rear. "I bet it's something naughty."

"I suffer from living nightmares."

"That's turning me on."

"No, it's dangerous. If I'm not awake within six hours I'm going to die."

“That’ll make this evening more enjoyable.”

“No it won’t,” He angrily shouted. Milo took a few quick breaths. “Listen...”

“I am listening,” She winked. “And groping.”

She reached between his legs and he quickly slapped her hands away.

“Nora it’s possible you’re still in my apartment. You have to wake up.”

“Never, I’m having way too much fun this evening.” She danced away.

A group of kids ran passed Milo, a giant emerald-eyed beast hopping after them. The children would turn and throw their pencils at the beast only for him to slap them away and continue hopping after them. The chase continued passed a very familiar set of people. Catalina stood holding Hector’s hand as they were talking to Artee. If anybody was willing to help him, he knew his sister would come to his aid.

As he approached the trio, Hector and Catalina ran away. A set of the dead, dressed in tattered formal wear, chased after the family of two. Milo was quick to attempt to help them only to witness Hector and Catalina stopping and dancing with the dead to the beat that was still absent to his ears. He shook his head at the strange scene and continued toward his sister.

She hugged him. “You are looking spectacular this evening.”

“I’m naked Artee. It’s kind of embarrassing.”

“We were all born that way and you get to die that way, poetic.”

“I’m not going to die in this nightmare.”

“You’ll leave this world in the same fashion mom died, once again, poetic.”

“Artee,” He shouted. “You’re my sister. I expect you to care.”

She motioned at herself. “I do care that’s why I’m here this evening.”

“And what’s so grand about this evening?”

“It’s your funeral. Your nephew wished he could be here, but school is his priority.”

Milo’s eyes became teary as he paced. “I don’t want to die here.”

“It’ll end the empty void of a life you have. You’ll be happier dead.”

“My life isn’t a void.” He had a hard time believing that himself.

“Did you even ‘thank’ anybody for being here this evening?”

“No, because I don’t want them here. I want them all to wake up.”

“We’re all wake,” Artee explained. “Much too busy living our meaningful lives to care for yours.”

“How can you all be awake, but in my nightmare at the same time?”

She shrugged. “There are a lot of unexplainable things in the world. Why is water wet?”

A tear streamed down Milo’s face. “I can’t believe this shit. I’m not ready to die.”

“You’re not doing anything great with your life. My brother the fired cop, failure of a hero.”

“I can do great things.” He pointed at the floor. “Being here isn’t fair.”

“I suggest you enjoy the free wine and our company while you can.”

“Attention,” A deep voiced echoed throughout the room. “It’s time for our main attraction.”

Milo noticed the doors were no longer guarded. He searched the room for the guards to notice neither of them was in sight. This was the moment he figured, his last chance to save himself. He dashed toward the door. The crowd became thick, slowing him.

He used all of his strength and drive to live to continue fighting his way to the door. Slowly, he noticed the doors starting to close. He cried tears of agony as he continued his struggle. Milo reached for the doors, only for them to slam shut. The crowd thinned out and the two guards returned.

He sat on his knees and slammed his fists against the floor. “I can’t die here!”

He looked up to discover the two guards standing over him. They lifted him from the ground and dragged him backwards. Those in attendance formed a crowd around a relentlessly fighting Milo, clapping and cheering. He glanced over his shoulder to discover a mahogany casket placed in the center of the ballroom. Milo fought and kicked as he tried to free himself from the guards’ grasp. His heart raced and sweat rained from his pores. Kara stepped from the crowd and sliced at his cheek.

“You should have screwed me one last time,” She shouted at him. “Die bitch!”

He could feel the blood from his face wound drain pass his lips. The guards stopped and turned Milo toward his casket. They snapped their fingers and the casket went up in flames, drawing a gasp from the audience. A few of them removed cameras and took pictures of the flames. Only the crackling sound of the fire could be heard in the ballroom that had grown extremely warm. The guards nodded at each other and lifted Milo from his feet. They raised him high in the air over the casket and sent him crashing down. Milo screamed but stopped the moment he felt a tap on his shoulder.

He opened his eyes to find himself lying on his living room floor. His sweaty face was stuck against the hardwood floor and he had a headache much more intense than what he experienced in his nightmare. The entire room felt as if it was spinning out of control and he his vision was blurry. Milo used all the strength he had to turn over to his side. He flinched as he spotted his neighbor squatting down beside him, staring at him with concern.

“Are you okay,” Ford asked. He motioned at Milo’s cheek. “You’re bleeding.”

Milo thrust his nude body forward and hugged Ford, causing him to tumble over. “You saved me.”

Ford groaned as he did his best not to touch Milo. “You smell horrible and you’re naked.”

Milo let out a faint laugh. "I know."

Ford managed to free himself from Milo's grasp and slid away. "What happened?"

"I went drinking and just survived death. You saved my life."

"Were you choking on your own vomit?"

"No, I suffer from living-nightmares. I was a second away from the end of my death cycle."

Ford didn't quite understand. "That sounds frightening."

"You have no idea." Milo groaned as he sat up. "What are you doing in my apartment?"

Ford motioned at the entry. "Your apartment door was wide open."

"Nora..."

"Who?"

"A bartender I met last night. If she felt like me right now, I understand her forgetting to close it."

"Do you need some water and...uh pants?"

Milo nodded as he lowered his aching head.

Ford poured him a glass of water and passed him his jeans that were under the kitchen table. Milo chugged down the water as if he had just been rescued from a never-ending trek through the desert. His headache was still out in full force, but the room had stopped spinning.

Milo glanced over at Ford. "I'm so thankful that you're my neighbor."

"Yeah?"

"I owe you my life. You're my hero even if you dislike me."

"I don't dislike you," Ford explained. "You're kind of a prod, the nosey cop next-door."

"I'm not a cop anymore." An embarrassed Milo smirked, "And I was kind of aggressive, huh?"

"I would literally run when I see you. When did you leave the force?"

"A couple of weeks ago. I got fired, my girlfriend dumped me and I went on a bittersweet road trip. I learned a lot. For example, we have cult towns and that slashers are people. I met this amazing woman who was a slasher. That brief encounter with her changed my opinion greatly about the blade wielders." He laughed as he pointed at his cheek. "In my nightmare she did take a slice at me though. As for the bitter part of my trip, let's just say my chance to play hero was a failure. I'd given up on the dream but after facing death, I'm going to continue striving for it. I'm not going to abandon the one thing that keeps me going."

Ford was a lot more comfortable knowing his preconceptions about Milo were wrong. "I'm sorry."

Milo fanned his hand at him. "You did nothing to me."

"Yeah, you tried to be kind to me and I pushed you away for no reason because..." Ford held his words.

"Because of what?"

Ford attempted to laugh off the question. "Nothing."

"You're such a mystery to me."

Ford took a seat on the floor beside Milo. "I'm just a guy with crazy parents."

"How crazy are they, part-time jugglers?"

"My mother used to be my father and just survived a mad curse. My other mother is missing."

"I wasn't expecting you to say any of that. I can help you search for your mom, I owe you."

Ford shook his head. "Nah, she'll show up eventually."

Milo massaged his sore neck. "You called me a prod. What don't you want me discovering?"

"I don't believe I'm hiding anything."

"I can sense the paranoia. After pulling over many people pretending not to be hiding weed under their car seat, I've become pretty good at sensing it. I don't want you to be on guard around me. You saved my life and to repay you I'm offering you a judgeless response to whatever you're hiding. No matter how twisted or mad."

Ford found himself once again with the opportunity to reveal his true self. He wasn't as guarded around the dreamer after the way he spoke of the slasher he recently encountered, but still careful. Milo understood that slasher didn't equal murderous maniac. It was also a plus that the neighbor he spent so many months avoiding was actually a decent person so far. Ford thought about the news stories he watched about Lu's death. She died alone, a mystery.

Nobody came to identify her body, her parents deceased and most of the slashers probably not prepared to explain how they were connected to her. Ford and Bravo included. If his mother's weren't around, Ford wanted friends to be there to identify his body. He was sure that he'll eventually be able to count on Sidnee, but adding another person to that list couldn't hurt.

"I'm a slasher." He said, avoiding eye contact.

Milo let out of a soft laugh. "Man, slashers are everywhere."

"Yeah, but it's not popular letting world know you battle the urge to slash."

"I understand that, but people like you and Kara have changed my opinion on your community."

"Thanks, but there are some out there who slash simply for the joy of it." Lu, he thought to himself.

Milo nodded. "There are always a few spoiled apples in the bunch."

"Only if the entire world understood that, we're strictly monsters to the masses."

"I've seen monsters, real monsters in my nightmares."

Ford stood up. "I'm going to head out."

"Yeah, I need a long shower." Milo glanced up at him. "I think we should talk again, soon."

Ford felt free. "Yeah. This was interesting."

Ford couldn't stop smiling as he headed back over to his apartment. It was a relief knowing that he would never have to rush inside to avoid his neighbor. He could actually stand on his porch now without worrying if Milo was spying on him. It was even more relieving that he and his neighbor were both victims of the madness in the world and understood each other's struggle.

Ford considered himself fortunate to be a slasher; he had the power to determine if he wanted to harm another. Milo on the other hand had no choice but to face his nightmares every night. Ford returned to his apartment to discover Valarie sitting at his kitchen table.

She stood and loudly announced, "I'm back!"

He rushed into her arms and lifted her up. "Where have you been?"

Valarie waited until her feet returned to the ground. "I got abducted then escaped."

"And now you know how it feels to have something stolen from you."

She wiped a tear from her eyes. "I missed you and even Harriet."

"The same. It was so nerve-wracking at first, but I knew you would come back."

"They kept me in a cage like an animal and invaded my memories, but I survived. I'm home seeking change."

"I don't have any money, sorry."

Valarie rolled her eyes. "I'm referring to personal changes. No more drugs, sleeping at bus stops, fighting men twice my size or sucking off kid's your age for cigarettes. I'm getting help, finding a job and the government is providing me with an apartment. I just have to stay clean and pay the utilities and I won't end up back on the streets. Most importantly, I'm ready to be your mother again. I came over because I want you to help me move in."

Ford's life went from a low to a high within hours. "Definitely."

"And how are you doing? I saw that Lu girl died. Tell me you're not involved in that shit?"

"No," He lied. "They say she was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I'll miss her."

"Yeah, the best thing you can do is to keep living."

He didn't want any slasher discussion clouding this moment. "So, no more drugs?"

"And no more stealing. I have a new hobby, I'm taking up dumpster diving."

Ford formed a phony smile. "Uh...cool."

Valarie rushed over and grabbed Rubble from the couch. "How about we toss this out?"

"Why?"

"I've seen better stuffed animals in the garbage. Plus, you're too old for this."

Ford pointed at her. "Mom that bear has been in my life for over a decade."

"Yes," She sneered as she eyed Rubble. "It's time for you to move on."

"It's sort of my security-blanket. It comforts me."

This was the first time Ford came to that conclusion, Rubble helped him in his own way.

"You have me and Harriet."

They couldn't help him with his slasher related problems. "Yes, but he still matters."

Valarie dropped Rubble back to the couch. "Fine, keep your silly bear."

"I understand that you've accepted change into your life, but I'm still in the slow process of doing the same with my own life. I'm glad you're getting yourself together. I need that bear more than you can understand right now." Though Ford stared at his mother, he directed his words to both her and Rubble. "I will set that bear free the day I find others who understand the parts of my life that you don't mom. As of now, I still need him in my life."

Valarie raised her hands in defense. "Alright, calm down."

He let out a heavy sigh. "I just had to get that off my chest."

"I'll be back tomorrow Ford. I can't wait to move into my place."

He hugged his mom once more before she left.

"Thank you," Rubble said the moment Ford locked the door. "You saved me."

"And I hope you're prepared to do the same for me."

Ford grabbed his laptop from the kitchen table and headed into his room.

Rubble sat alone on the couch, he was prepared.

## **Chapter 22 - Life**

Harriet and Ford stayed close as they walked through the complex where Valarie's apartment was located. In her hands Harriet carried a set of lamps and Ford carried the last box of his mom's belongings. He had done most of the heavy lifting; the pit area of his t-shirt stained with sweat.

The eyes of the other tenants watched them the entire morning as they helped Valarie move in. Not a single person volunteered to help or greeted them. The collection of cold stares made Harriet and Ford feel unwanted in the complex of redbrick buildings.

They spotted several on duty police in their parked vehicles, making them both feel a little safer. The complex was located in the same area Valarie used to come and score her drugs. Ford hoped she would be able to overcome her past in such a tempting environment. They arrived to her apartment that was located on the first floor of a building that contained three other living spaces.

Harriet sat the lamps down on the living room coffee table. "That was uncomfortable."

Ford placed the box he carried in the kitchen. "I'm sure they're all just checking you out."

Harriet let out an overdramatic, phony laugh. "I'm not interested."

Valarie exited from the lone bedroom. "I'm in heaven."

"No, you're in the hood," Harriet said.

"The outside might be a little rough, but I love my apartment."

The space was suited for one person, its layout simple. On the right side of the apartment were the kitchen and bedroom, the left side the living room and bathroom. The appliances were up to government standards and the tenants received free cable television. Valarie was responsible for paying the electricity, water, and any other services she added. It was made clear various times that she would be subjected to random drug testing and could not leave the state without informing the landlord.

Ford toured the place. It was smaller, but nicer than his apartment. "I like it."

"I'm not saying I dislike it," Harriet added, "But the location is dangerous."

"We can't all live beachside," Valarie said. "I'm happy with it and that matters most."

Harriet dismissively fanned her hand. "I won't visit often, for my own safety."

Valarie approached her. "Why can't you pretend to be happy for me?"

"I am. You have no idea how excited I am that we have you back." Harriet rubbed Valarie's arms.

"Then tone down the negativity. Once I'm on my feet I'll find a safer neighborhood."

"Are you sure you don't want to stay on my couch?"

Valarie narrowed her eyes. "Do you honestly want me living with you?"

Harriet nodded.

"I dumpster-dive."

"Since when," Harriet questioned.

"It's a new hobby and I would need a place to keep my findings, perhaps your bathtub."

Harriet accessed her acting skills. "I love your new apartment and the neighborhood is just so daring."

Valarie went along with the act. "The realtor described it as ghetto-fabulous."

Ford drifted away from their playful banter as he recognized the purple and white striped couch. He took a closer look to notice most of the furniture was the same from their first family home in Draper. It brought back so many feelings, especially his first urge to slash.

He couldn't resist a smile as he ran his hands against the couch. "I remember this."

Valarie had begun unpacking the box he brought in. "You remember what?"

"This couch. I watched a lot of slasher flicks on this couch."

Harriet stood beside him. "I bought this online. I didn't even notice it was the same couch."

Valarie stood holding a few items from the box. "Yeah it is. I hated it, but it's a minor issue now. After I sold the house I put most of our furniture into storage. I pawned a lot of the other furniture for cash and gave away whatever I could to the owner of the storage lot in trade for the unit space." She placed the items in her hand on the kitchen table and joined them by the couch. "It brings back a lot of memories."

"I was a man when we got this couch."

"And I hadn't tried crack or meth," Valarie added.

"I was still in high school." And had yet to slash anybody, he thought.

Harriet took a seat on the couch. "What happened to us?"

Valarie joined her. "What do you mean what happened to us?"

Ford climbed over the couch and flopped down between them. "I think life happened."

"This is the first time we've sat down as a family since my surgery."

"That's shockingly true," Valarie said. "That statement scares me."

"Why," Ford questioned.

"Because we allowed life to win," Valarie answered. "We allowed our lives to drive us apart."

"Not anymore, we're back," Harriet declared. "I had a sex change and you became an addict, but we're here now. I nearly lost my life and you were abducted by aliens, but we're still here. And Ford you stood by us through all of that like a champion. You're the strongest person I know, son."

"You are," Valarie agreed. "We raised a champion."

A champion struggling in a battle against a serial-slasher. "Thanks moms."

"I have an idea," Harriet said. "We should have family dinners."

"That's a good idea," Valarie agreed. "But not every night. I have a life."

"How about twice a week," Harriet suggested.

"That works for me." Valarie glanced at Ford. "Is two nights of us enough?"

"Yeah," He answered. "And we can have the first dinner here."

"I'll bring dessert and a gun for safety," Harriet joked.

Valarie glanced down at her, wearing a phony grin. "Another one-liner, how fun."

Ford decided not to let their bickering evolve. He stood from the couch, let out a yawn and stretched his arms out. "Alright mom, Harriet has to drop me off to pick my car up from the shop and then I'm going home to take a much needed nap. I like your apartment, it's awesome and I can't wait for our first family dinner."

"A nap sounds amazing," Harriet also stood. "I'll do that and then my hair."

Valarie remained seated and let out a heavy sigh. "I'm going to try not to get high."



Harriet and Ford left. Harriet dropped off Ford at the repair shop where he picked his car up. It took him four unemployment checks to pay for the repairs. The mechanic informed him the damage under the hood appeared to be done by hand. Ford knew the one person who would sabotage him, the serial-slasher. He returned home that evening and headed up his apartment steps.

"Ford," A female voice called after him.

He stopped on his porch to discover Sidnee sprinting upstairs. "Hey."

She joined him on the porch. "Your mom is a savior."

"Which one?"

"Harriet. I was trying to find your apartment and called her for directions."

"She wants me and you to have children."

Sidnee laughed. "I got that vibe from her. You told her about us?"

"Yeah, but not everything. We're simply two normal friends."

"I don't mind people knowing what I am Ford. It's a part of me I have to embrace."

"I wish I could say the same. They're very few positives about being a slasher."

She gently touched his arm. "It brought us together."

"You're right about that."

"Just remember, my ears are always available when you're having a tough time."

Ford was glad to know he had an outlet for venting. "I will."

"Ford, I really need your help. It's related to Daniel, the friend I'm interested in."

"Alright. It's not like we're a couple or anything."

"I know, but I need you to help me track him down. It has been stressful dealing with him and his possession. I honestly have myself to blame for this situation. Instead of fulfilling my role I tried to ignore it and the problem became worse. Now I believe he's on the verge of a full-blown possession. I have to track him down or he'll forever be gone. Plus the longer the possession goes on, the more dangerous the exorcism. I have the proper tools to perform it, I just need him."

Ford barely could keep his eyes open. "I have no skills in tracking people down."

"An extra set of eyes will help. I'm going to start downtown."

Milo made his way from his apartment carrying a dark garbage bag in one hand and a duffle bag in the other. He set down the bags he carried as he noticed his neighbor along with a visitor. "Hey Ford, is this your girlfriend?"

Ford motioned at her. "No, this is Sidnee."

She softly smiled at Milo. "Hi."

He returned the gesture. "I'm Milo. Is everything okay?"

He could see the sadness in her face. Milo couldn't resist offering help.

"Her friend is missing," Ford explained. "He's possessed by a demon."

"I'm an exorcist," Sidnee revealed.

"Interesting. I suffer from living-nightmares."

Sidnee raised her brows. "My mother lost a friend to that when I was young. It's dangerous."

"I almost faced the same fate, but Ford saved me."

"And to end your speculations, you both are free to acknowledge that I'm a slasher," Ford gladly clarified.

"A slasher who saved my life," Milo said.

"That's wonderful, but now I have to focus on saving my friend," Sidnee stressed.

Ford turned over at Milo. "He's a former police officer. He can help you more than I can."

Milo thumbed towards Sidnee. "I was going to hit the gym, but I'm all yours."

Ford took backward steps toward his apartment. "And I'm going to nap, I had a long day."

Sidnee and Milo focused on each other as Ford headed inside.

"I was going to start my search downtown. I just need to restrain him and perform an exorcism."

"That sounds simple enough. Are you driving?"

Sidnee nodded and sprinted downstairs. Milo followed her. They made their way through the complex back to her apartment where her car was parked. Sidnee made her way into the driver's side of the vehicle and Milo the passenger's. Milo noticed a picture of a man in glasses resting on her dashboard as she started the car and pulled out from the complex.

He grabbed the photo. "Is this him?"

"Yeah, I printed that from his online profile. His name Daniel."

"Dane?"

She lowered the volume of her car radio. "No, Daniel. He's my co-worker."

"I get the feeling he's more than a co-worker?"

She pulled out from the parking lot. "I want him to be more, but this damn demon."

"The madness goes through great lengths to mess with us."

"It's frustrating, but I can't complain. I have the opportunity to gain control."

Milo let out a soft laugh. "I guess you won't trade me for my nightmares?"

"I hate to be blunt, but never."

As they headed downtown Sidnee caught Milo up on the tale of Daniel's possession. She chose downtown to start

the search because it's where the majority of bars were located. She was sure the nightlife and drunken college students would attract the demon. The setting was perfect for causing trouble and chaos.

The exorcist and the dreamer walked the streets of downtown searching for Daniel. They checked inside the most crowded bars and showed a few night-owls his photo. A loud scream caught the attention of those in range. Milo and Sidnee turned toward the source of the scream to find Daniel aggressively dragging a drunken young woman across the street. He wore all black, his silk shirt buttoned halfway, and no glasses. Sidnee was disgusted at what the demon had done to him.

She slowly advanced towards him. "Demon," She shouted.

He stopped and turned to Sidnee. "Yo exorcist, how are you?"

The drunken young woman the demon clung onto spat at him and ran away.

He wiped the saliva from his face. "She'll suffer for that later."

"There won't be a later," Sidnee threatened.

"I'll snap your neck where you stand exorcist."

Milo took a step before Sidnee. "That won't happen."

The demon smirked. "Is this your boyfriend? He's pretty."

Milo clinched his fists. "Your fun is over. I consider this theft."

The demon rolled his eyes at Milo's words, not dignifying them with a response. "You won't extract me exorcist."

"I'll do it by force if it comes to that," Sidnee shouted. "I'm prepared to end your sad existence."

The demon took slow backward steps. "I can no longer listen to this bullshit."

The demon took off running into the night, Sidnee and Milo chased after him. The exorcist did her best to keep up, but found herself trailing after Milo. She was amazed at how invested he was in helping her even though they had just met. It was obvious that even though he no longer wore a badge, he still lived his life to serve and protect.

The demon had led them further downtown toward the school district. Sidnee witnessed the demon sprint across the front lawn the high school and with ease dived through a front window. Milo climbed in after him, but waited for Sidnee to catch up. He helped Sidnee inside. The shards of glass crunched beneath her feet as she paused to catch her breath.

Milo headed towards the opened door of the dark classroom. "He went this way."

Sidnee took quick breaths as she followed Milo into the halls of the school. The building was dark and only the clocks could be heard ticking. Milo was having flashbacks to his youth, him graduating from this school nearly six years ago. They quickly walked the halls searching for any opened doors and turning knobs, most locked. A photo in a trophy case caught Sidnee's attention. It was of a football team and it included Milo holding the game trophy.

"You were a jock?"

He smirked. "Yeah and proud of it. How about you?"

"I did volley ball, but was mostly known as the preacher's daughter."

Milo laughed. "I bet you weren't invited to many parties?"

"Nope, apparently my presence made everybody feel as if the Almighty was watching them."

"Yeah, I was epic when I used to walk these halls."

"I barely know you, but I think you should be proud of who you are today also."

"It's tough. That version of me holding that football didn't know the definition of failure."

Sidnee turned another doorknob, it locked. "You're not failing me."

"You don't have to say that. I'm just doing you a favor, a good deed."

"I think you should start your own operation."

He laughed. "You mean I should become a private investigator?"

"You're doing it now. You can charge people for helping them instead of simply favors."

He thought back to infested town. "And what if I fail?"

"At least you tried. Not every case will be a success."

Milo found himself falling in love with the idea.

"This demon is an asshole for coming here," Sidnee hissed. "Daniel wants to become a teacher."

Milo peeked into the cafeteria to notice an emergency exit ladder had been lowered. It was placed against a wall that was decorated with posters promoting healthy eating. The ladder led up to an opened hatch in the ceiling. Milo headed up first, Sidnee climbing up after him. The autumn wind was much stronger on top of the school's roof. Sidnee and Milo discovered the demon standing on the ledge of the building, his back to them.

"Why are you torturing him?" Sidnee questioned.

The demon faced them, his face scarred and shards of glass in his hair. "It's simple fun."

"You're messing with an innocent person's life."

"I don't care exorcist. You had your chance to save him."

"True, but I'm here now and not leaving without Daniel."

He laughed. "It's far too late, I win."

Sidnee reached into her pocket and removed a necklace. She passed it to Milo.

He eyed the necklace, a spiky key pendant attached to it. "What's this?"

“It keeps the demons out. It’s very valuable, wear it. I’m performing this exorcism.”

He slipped on the necklace. “What do you need me to do?”

She glanced back at him. “I need you to keep him on this roof.”

Milo nodded as he focused on the demon. “I can do that.”

Sidnee removed the oil from her pocket, moving towards the demon.

He pointed and laughed at her. “Are you serious exorcist?”

“I’ll ask nicely, leave his body please.”

“Never.”

“It’ll hurt you a lot of less if you leave at your own will.”

The demon sprawled his arms out. “I like pain.”

Sidnee poured the oil on her right hand. “You’re sick.”

“I’m a demon, we don’t get sick.”

She reached her oiled drenched hand out toward him. The demon tore off his shirt and poked his chest out, begging for her touch. Sidnee hand was inches away from his chest only for the demon to toss himself backwards from the roof of the two-story school building. Sidnee slipped forward, but Milo managed to catch her from behind. She blinked and the moment she opened her eyes Daniel’s body hit the concrete stairs below. The blood rushed from the back of his split skull.

Sidnee wanted to scream, Sidnee wanted to cry, but she couldn’t. She could only reach out to somebody who was no longer there. Milo kept his arms wrapped tight around her, pulling her back slowly from the ledge. He failed her; once again he failed to help.

They were both silenced by their defeat. Sidnee turned to Milo and hugged him tightly. He could not look at her; he did not want to see the tears on her face. She could not look him; she could not let him see that a single tear did not grace her face. The demon strengthened her, prepared her for the many others she would face. Its heartlessness spread to her. The human in her shrunk and the exorcist in her evolved.

### **Chapter 23 - Death**

The cemetery was located furthest away from society. Nearly a decade ago a group of mothers won a battle to move all burial grounds out of eyesight. It had become a place where teenagers would sneak off and perform mad acts: communicating with dead, attempting to awake those who rested, etcetera. The family members of the deceased lost the heated battle mainly because they lacked the proper funds to campaign against the wives of doctors and lawyers.

Sidnee took the long drive from the church toward the cemetery, Ford in the passenger’s seat and Milo in the back. The men both wore their best slacks and tie, Sidnee a dark dress and matching flats. It had been a silent ride. She turned on some music only for a pop song to blast, the peppy tune not fitting any of their moods. The exorcist immediately powered off the radio.

Ford did not know the deceased, but he decided to come along to support Sidnee. Though he sent some to their graves, this was the slasher’s first visit to a cemetery. Another slasher death took place the previous day and he knew another rematch between him and the serial-slasher was on the horizon.

He had to discover the identity of the monster. The only lead he had was being held inside the mind of a stuffed animal. He rested his head against the passenger’s window and watched the trees alongside the road.

Milo found himself trying not to drift off to sleep. He fought to stay awake during the church ceremony. The dreamer sat up all night debating a decision. He still had the power to save others. His sister could fund his private investigation company. The problem was if he was ready to handle failure.

He was on a hot streak of defeat as of today. The reason they drove toward a cemetery was mainly because he failed to keep the demon confined to the school roof. Milo’s head dipped forward, but he quickly shook himself awake. He badly wanted a cup of coffee, but also an answer to a question. He wondered if he had the strength to once again serve and protect.

Sidnee noticed the car before her turning left into a fenced in area. She followed suit and drove into the cemetery. The green lawn was crowded with headstones and a building containing crypts and another for bathrooms were constructed on the property. A guard on duty was directing traffic, instructing her to park in the gravel parking lot to her left. She took her given directions, parked and powered off the car. Milo was first to step from the vehicle, stretching his arms out before closing his door. Sidnee sat with her hands gripping her steering wheel.

Ford glanced over at her. “Are you getting out?”

She nodded.

“Then I’ll meet you out there.”

She responded with another nod.

Ford joined a waiting Milo. “She’s quiet,” The slasher said.

“I don’t think she’s mourning him yet. I expected tears that night, but there was nothing.”

“I’m not sure what to say about her reaction.”

“You don’t have to answer this, but after you slash do you mourn any of your victims?”

Ford shook his head. “They’re strangers to me, but the guilt is strong.”

“How strong?”

“I broke my own hand to punish myself and vowed to never slash again.”

“And how’s that working out for you?”

Ford raised his hand. "It's healed and my knives have no blood on them."

"That's good. I'm glad to hear that."

"How would you react if I told you I slashed recently?"

Milo shrugged. "It would be difficult, because I like you personally."

"If the moment ever arises, it's okay for you to express anger. I would understand."

"That moment won't happen, because you'll never slash again."

The serial-slasher was the lone man on Ford's hit list. "You have a point."

Sidnee emerged the car, pushing her dark hair behind her ears. They watched as she joined the crowd of mourners on their trek towards the burial site. Milo and Ford followed after her. As she walked, Sidnee recognized many of the faces. Lori and Edwin walked holding hands, Lori shedding enough tears for the both of them. Edwin's eyes met with Sidnee's, he nodded at her. She delivered a subtle wave and continued toward the burial ground.

As they arrived the crowd spread out and formed a circle around a mahogany casket in the ground. A preacher stood over it, gripping a crucifix in his hand. The grey haired man delivered words to the mourning crowd and Daniel's mother also spoke. Her brunette hair was messed from the slight wind that blew. The tale she told was about how much Daniel was possibly the only student in the world who saw teachers as heroes.

"*This funeral is dreadful,*" A dark voice insulted.

"*You bet,*" Another voice added. "*I want the red haired chick to rip out her titties.*"

"Silence," Sidnee shouted. "I'm in the mood to perform endless exorcisms."

All eyes focused on Sidnee.

"I'm sorry, but a few demons needed silencing. They're not welcome here."

Daniel's mother searched her thoughts for her words and once collected, continued her speech. Sidnee noticed the only whispers in the crowd were now coming from some of those in attendance. They weren't a fan of her outburst, but she did manage to silence the demons. Still the demonic pests still managed to make her look like a fool.

Her eyes to the ground, the exorcist stepped away from the crowd and rushed away. Ford and Milo followed after her; she led them to the women's bathroom. They stopped outside the gray painted door marked 'women's restroom' as Sidnee entered.

Ford slightly pushed the door opened. "Are you okay?"

Sidnee paced in the small bathroom. "I'm angry."

"Why are you angry?"

"Because I want to destroy every demon that plagues this planet."

"You can do that, but not today."

She laughed. "I can't believe I'm not crying."

Milo took over. "We all mourn in different ways."

"I know that, but I really liked him. He was kind. He deserves tears."

"You shouted at those demons out there."

She rested against the sink. "I know. They were being crude."

"That was badass," Milo said. "I'm sure Daniel was rooting you on for booting them from his funeral."

Ford smiled at Milo's twist on the situation.

"Anyone can shed tears," Milo continued. "You'll be the only one battling demons in his name."

Sidnee opened the restroom door, smiling at the dreamer. "That was amazing."

"I agree," Ford said as he patted Milo on the arm.

Milo cheeks grew rosy as he raised his shoulders. "I was just spouting off."

"But you're right," Sidnee said. "You're a natural at helping."

Her statement led to Milo heavily considering starting his own investigation business.

She stepped outside the bathroom, grabbing each of their hands. "I'm ready to get back out there."

They returned to the burial ceremony. A few more speeches were given from those Daniel grew up with and some of his classmates. His mother asked if any of his co-workers wanted a chance to speak. Edwin took the opportunity and even revealed they were naming a new burger after him. Sidnee decided to remain silent, though she knew the most about the true meaning of his death.

The police report claimed that he broke into the school while drunk and accidentally slipped from the roof. Sidnee figured no matter the reported cause of death, he was gone. She would keep the truth between her and Milo. The ceremony resumed and Daniel was buried and left to rest in peace. Sidnee drove back to town determined. She would rid Draper of every demon and then the world.

Ford requested that he be dropped off at his mother's apartment. He said his goodbyes to Sidnee and Milo and made his way through the rugged complex where his mother lived. Ford used the emergency key she gave him to let himself. This key wasn't only for emergencies only, but to keep her honest. She feared that having complete privacy would only loosen the rules for her and tempt her. He let himself inside the apartment to find her sitting on the couch channel surfing. She glanced over her shoulder at him and smiled.

"You look relaxed mom."

"And you look handsome."

He tugged at the dark blazer he wore. "I bought this yesterday at a thrift store."

"You don't own any suits?"

He joined her on the couch. "I never needed one. This was my first funeral."

"How was it, depressing?"

He shrugged. "I guess. What else can a funeral be?"

She narrowed her dark eyes. "I wonder if clowns have fun funerals."

Ford laughed. "Are you high?"

"No."

"You're talking like you're high."

She ran her hands through her dark hair. "My mind wanders now. So much free time and clarity."

"It's called life mom. It's very slow and dreadful. I suggest you find a hobby."

She pepped up. "I do, dumpster-diving. You want to see some shit I found?"

The last time she ended up finding him a nice laptop. "Yeah."

She headed into her bedroom and returned carrying a plastic bin of items. Valarie sat it down on the carpeted floor behind the couch. She got down on her knees and sorted through the items she had found. Ford joined her on the floor, a strong scent of dish detergent meeting his nose. He noticed some soapsuds stains left on a cell phone she found.

"Where did you wash these?"

"In my bathtub. They were covered in condiments."

He tried to power on the phone. "In what dumpster did you find this stuff?"

"A dumpster behind a burger shop. There wasn't much interesting."

He laughed. "It's a dumpster mom, a place for trash."

She let out a heavy sigh. "I know. I miss the cool shit I got from the homes I used to break into."

"But you've changed now. The life of drugs and crimes are in your past, right?"

There was a knock on the door. Valarie ignored his question and answered to discover Harriet. She stepped aside allowing Harriet to enter the apartment. Harriet carried grocery bags in her hands and wore a purple dress and dark heels. Harriet greeted Ford with a soft smile, strutted into the kitchen and unpacked the groceries.

Valarie tugged at the jeans cut-offs she wore. "You both are making me feeling underdressed."

Ford kicked off his dress shoes. "I'm only dressed this way because somebody died."

Harriet held her head high as she struck a pose. "I always look this good."

"Except a few weeks ago," Valarie reminded her. "I heard you barely had skin and hair."

Harriet gasped. "Ford you told her?"

"No." He cringed at the memory of his mother's mad condition. "I don't even want to think about it."

"Then how does she know I lost my hair?"

"That might have slipped out when I was explaining what happened."

"I'm just teasing," Valarie said. "Your situation was horrible and I'm glad you're fine."

Harriet continued unpacking. "Thank you."

Valarie joined her in the kitchen. "What did you bring to cook?"

"I bought store-made cupcakes, but we're making tacos from scratch."

Valarie retrieved a frying pan from a cabinet. "I'll start the beef."

"And I'll slice the vegetables and do the salsa," Harriet stated.

Ford raised his hands. "Mommies, can I help," He questioned in a baby-voice.

Harriet nodded at the table. "You can set the cups and the plates."

He stood up from the floor. "I'm an awesome cook though, I can do more."

"It's been years since I've made a family dinner," Valarie revealed. "Don't rob me of this chance."

He laughed. "But mom you hated cooking. The reason I started because you never would."

"I was either working or too high Ford. That is not the situation today."

He would let her do anything if it kept her from drugs. "You cook and I'll set the table."

Ford's task only took him a few minutes. He left his moms alone to finish cooking as he returned to the living room to watch television. The slasher wished this moment could last forever, but he understood reality was waiting. Not just reality, but a serial-slasher. He had to get this monster off his mind; he had to eliminate the serial-slasher. Rubble had long enough to speak up and reveal the identity of the serial-slasher. The waiting had to end; tonight Ford would get answers his way.

The scent of the frying beef filled the apartment.

"Ford," Valarie called out. "The food is done."

He clicked off the television and joined them. The lettuce and tomatoes were placed together on a plate, the green and red colors vibrant. He grabbed a taco shell from the plate they rested on and loaded it with beef. He topped the beef with cheese, lettuce and drenched it with salsa. The slasher could easily purchase a taco for a dollar at fast food restaurant, but a home cooked meal was priceless. This was the best meal he had in years. A meal prepared by the two women he loved the most in the world.

Harriet rested her arms on the table. "Are you okay Ford?"

"What do you mean?"

"You lost Lu and had to deal with our issues and your friend's."

He had no idea how he powered through. "I'm good mom."

Harriet pushed out her bottom lip. "I was just making sure. You can tell us anything Ford."

“Yeah,” Valarie added. “And you never told me about Sidnee?”

“She’s a girl that I know.”

“Are you sleeping with her Ford?”

“Yeah, all the time,” He sarcastically stated. “In fact, I’m sleeping with her as I sit here.”

Valarie kicked him under the table. “You’re such a smartass.”

He laughed. “It’s awkward okay; I’m not talking about my sex life with my moms.”

“I tell you about my sex life,” Valarie said.

“I don’t want to know though. I was conceived after you both hugged really hard. The end.”

Valarie took a bite of her taco. “Yeah, then I sniffed coke with Santa later that night.”

Harriet cleared her throat. “Alright you two that’s enough. I have a surprise.”

Ford and Valarie’s attention turned to Harriet.

She stood from the table. “I’ve officially finished the script for ‘Flesh Dance and Bones’.”

“Excuse me,” Valarie interrupted.

“It’s a musical about my illness and I want you to star in it.”

“You know how much I miss the stage; of course I’ll do it. I need the work and distraction.”

Harriet excitedly applauded. “Perfect but I have more great news. I’ve been making some calls to old friends. I think before I start the production of my play I need to experience one last hoorah. A major show performer is requesting vintage opening acts and Valarie and I have been invited to be in her show. I managed to land us an all-expense paid trip to the city of sin, spin, and win, our home turf, Las Vales and fifteen minutes of stage time.”

“My body is tingling,” Valarie exclaimed as she rubbed her arms. “And I have goosebumps.”

“I talked to your landlord and travel is permitted. I know Valarie is a ‘yes’, how about you son?”

Ford couldn’t deny himself a free vacation. “Yeah, sure.”

Harriet returned to her seat. “I’m in love with life right now.”

Valarie was nearly bouncing in her seat. “I have to start warming up my voice.”

Ford was excited about the trip, but did not want to leave and return the only slasher left in Draper. He had to set things right here before leaving. Anxious to confront Rubble, he rushed through his meal and dessert. His moms decided they would clean and head out on the town to celebrate their return to the stage. Ford had them drop him at his apartment. He made his way inside his darkened place, purposely leaving the door opened and sat on his coffee table, directly across from Rubble.

“How was the funeral?”

Ford wanted control of the conversation. “Tell me who the slasher is Rubble.”

He laughed. “You’re not in the mood for any small-talk?”

“The only thing I want to talk about is the serial-slasher.”

“I don’t.”

Ford contained his frustration. “Why won’t you tell me?”

“I’m not going to give away this powerful information for a simple pat on the back.”

“I’ll set you free.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Ford stood up and headed into his room. He returned carrying a plastic bag. Ford reached into the bag and removed a furry, stuffed arm. He removed a pin and a needle from the same bag and knelt down before Rubble. Ford spent many hours practicing the basics of tailoring for this moment. He sewed the limb onto Rubble. Ford returned to his seat on the table as he watched Rubble move around his newly acquired arm.

“Tell me, who is the serial-slasher?” He nodded toward the open door. “I offer you freedom.”

Rubble continued toying around with his new arm. “You’re desperate.”

Ford removed the remaining limbs from the bag and sewed them onto the bear. “I’m impatient.”

Rubble jumped up and down and ran from one end of the couch to the other.

“I’ve delivered more than enough. Tell me who the serial-slasher is?”

“I have limbs.” Rubble rubbed his paws together. “But you can easily take them away like the first time.”

Ford removed a folded sheet of paper from the bag. “I can make you human again.”

Rubble flopped down. “I just need a spell and a child. Are you suggesting slashing a child for me?”

“Never but I can restore you to your true self. The spell and child vessel wouldn’t be needed.”

He visited Tatu’s for answers. She informed him of another way to reverse the bear’s state.

“A simplistic option.” The offer was tempting to the bear. “Are you sure you want to know?”

“Tell me and then leave at your own will.” Ford leaned in closer to him. “Now Rubble, my life is in danger.”

“It’s the tall blonde, Bravo. He broke into your apartment that night; he’s the serial-slasher.”

“Fuck me.”

“It’s Bravo, believe me.”

Ford tossed the folded sheet of paper at Rubble as he stood to his feet. Ford had all the information he needed to end the serial-slasher. His mind raced as he did his best to uncover Bravo’s motive. The only thing he knew about him was that the slasher’s temper was explosive when triggered. He felt blinder now than he did before. His creaking apartment door snapped Ford back into the moment. He turned around to discover the door slowly moving closed and that Rubble was gone.

## Chapter 24 - Toy

Rubble sat on the edge of his bed watching live new year's specials celebrations across the country alone. It was a new decade and he had plans to tackle life. He only had a few months left in high school and the eighteen year old lacked the drive to attend college. Rubble wanted something bigger, better and instant fortune to support his mother.

He lay back on his bed as a tear trailed down his fair-skinned face. It was simple to talk big in his head, but he knew the true challenge would be facing his mother. He drifted off to sleep and was awoken early the next morning by his neighbor's lawnmower.

Rubble lazily headed into his bathroom and splashed some water on his face. He stared at himself in the mirror. The moment he stepped out his bedroom and confronted his mother, his path would be chosen. He took a deep breath as he left from the bathroom, through his messy room and stepped out into the hallway of the farmhouse. Rubble could hear the television in the living room, his mother was awake. He joined her in the living room the woman lounging on the couch, fading every day. It took lung cancer to convince her to stop smoking.

She glanced up at him. "All that fear for nothing."

"What do you mean?"

"They kept saying the year two thousand would lead to some kind of cyber meltdown."

"It was a scam. They wanted us to destroy all our electronics."

"-and then go out today and replace them," His mother completed. "A marketing scam."

He smiled at their coordinated view. "Mom I need to ask you something."

The boney, pale woman let out a faint cough. "More money? I spend everything I have on bills."

"No, it's about my future. I want to move to the Newark."

"I can't afford one of those fancy city penthouses. Just like the city, the prices are up north."

"I want to go alone; I'm going to try to find a way to make it then send for you."

She let out a sigh. "And leave me alone?"

"Then I won't go."

"Are you sure?"

"I was just talking crazy, believe me."

She laughed, her facial expression showing how painful the action was.

He was on the verge of tears. Her laughter confused him. "What's so funny?"

"You're just like your father. When you say 'believe me', you're lying."

"I'm not lying, mom. I'm alright staying here with you...believe me."

She continued laughing. "No, you're going. I won't deprive you of life."

He joined her on the couch and hugged her. "Mom I promise to make a lot of money and return."

"I believe in you Rubble. Imagine all the nice wigs you can buy me."

Rubble found a spunk he lost a long time ago. His father ran off and once his mother got ill, he basically handled the majority of the responsibilities and school. It was a tiring life. Immediately after graduation he hopped on a bus with one duffle bag and traveled to Newark. He had saved up enough cash from working part-time afterschool to checkout a room at a cheap hotel.

The young dreamer tried anything to become famous. He snuck into high-class clubs, auditioned for every play and sung on corners. Soon his cash started to run low and he had no choice but to get a job. He found a job at a coffee shop and after a long day of making drinks he stepped outside for some fresh air, away from the coffee beans.

A lanky blonde woman strutted passed the shop. She turned around and stopped before Rubble.

He eyed her up and down, the red dress she wore hugging her figure. "Is there a problem?"

She puckered her thin lips as she stared into his eyes. "Yes, you work here. It's a waste."

He tugged at his uniform shirt, shrugging. "I need the money."

"I'll give you two thousand dollars if you join me at my studio."

Rubble only heard the word 'thousand', no second-guessing. "Yeah, of course."

"I'm Eie Capri."

"And I'm Rubble."

She bit her bottom lip, as she bounced the name around in her head. "So rustic and unique. A perfect name."

"My grandfather's nick name was 'Rubble'. He worked in demolition and died doing it. Heart attack."

Eie led Rubble a few blocks to her studio. He was expecting a massive room above a warehouse, but they arrived at a towering skyscraper instead. Her name was plastered on the entry doors and those inside moved from her path as she walked. They took an elevator to the top floor and arrived to a room that included many models and photographers.

Eie snapped her fingers and pointed back at Rubble. Instantly he was rushed by three flamboyant men and a plus-sized woman with a makeup brush. They removed his work uniform, applied powder to his face and shoved him before a camera.

Rubble stood shirtless in his underwear. "What am I supposed to do?"

"All you have to do is be pretty and pose," The photographer commanded.

At first Rubble just stood there. He noticed the more photos he took, the more attention he attracted. That boosted his ego and convinced him that he could do no wrong as long as he just looked pretty and posed. He got more creative with his poses. The moment he was done with the photo shoot he witnessed Eie placing a check into his pants pocket before tossing it to him. He slipped his clothes back on and took a peek at the check that was for ten thousand instead

of two.

His career was launched that day. Rubble spent hours taking photos and doing runway shows. He attended every party with Eie Carpi that was hosted inside and outside the country. The moment he had some free time he researched the woman. She was a retired model who was well known in the eighties. Her predicted age was forty-five, but only she knew the true number.

Rubble became more than just her top client, but soon her property. They started sleeping together and once it leaked out to the press, became a power couple within the industry. She showered him with gifts on his nineteenth birthday and he even got to meet the president. Rubble always knew he wanted fortune but never expected he would become modeling royalty.

Nearly two months after his nineteenth birthday he got the horrible news that his mother had passed. Eie funded the funeral and had the woman buried in an expensive crypt. Rubble and Eie traveled away to her island following the funeral and spent a week there, allowing him to mourn.

During the time away from the fame and fortune he realized how alone he was. He did not love Eie and wasn't even attracted to her; he just loved the life she provided. This led to Rubble searching for somebody to be with and he didn't have to look far.

Kalinia tried to focus on typing Eie's schedule. "Rubble I'm sorry."

He sat on the edge of her desk. "I think we should go public about us."

"It'll put my job in jeopardy."

"But we've been dating for four months. I lost my mom and gained you."

"I'm not a replacement for your mother."

He laughed. "I know that. I think we should have dinner tonight."

She brushed her short, dark hair back. "No."

"Eie is heading out of town tonight; it can be me and you in the penthouse."

Kalinia thought about it. "Fine, but after tonight this ends. If Eie finds out, we're both done."

"She won't find out." He kissed her on her caramel toned cheek. "I'll see you later tonight then."

Rubble liked Kalinia because she had the innocence of a country girl, but also that fast-paced attitude of a city girl. Besides being Eie's longtime assistant she also edited a lot of photos. Their secret romance sparked after he sat up late with her editing some of his own photos. He was ready to take their relationship public and planned on giving her a ring to commemorate that.

He made dinner, chicken breast and pasta. They watched a movie after their meal and playful kissing eventually led to naughtier behavior. The next thing he knew was that Kalinia had stripped him down and was handcuffing him to the bed that he and Eie shared.

Kalinia lowered the straps of the yellow sundress she wore. "Are you having fun?"

He excitedly nodded, his feet and hands cuffed. "This is unexpected."

"Yeah, I felt bad about our conversation earlier. This will set things right."

He shook his head at her. "No, it's okay. I'm not mad. You're here."

"I don't care if you're mad or not."

He narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

She raised her dress straps. "I made the decision that my career mattered most."

Eie strutted into the room, snarling at Rubble. "You're an ungrateful child." Eie turned to Kalinia and dismissively fanned her hand at her. "And you're fired. I want you to clean out your desk, erase me from your mind and no, I will not now or ever write you a recommendation."

"What," She squeaked out. "Eie, no!"

"You're not allowed to sleep with my clients. You're done."

Tears rushed down Kalinia's face. "But...I..."

"If you don't leave I'll have you arrested."

Kalinia rushed from the bedroom leaving Eie alone with a trapped Rubble. She sat on the edge of the bed. "I created you. I turned you into an empire and you betray me for my secretary. I'm not surprised that you've cheated. There's a lot of tempting women in the city. Just because I understand doesn't mean I'm going to allow you to get away with it. If you want to stuff my staff, it's about time you feel how it is to be stuffed."

"Uncuff me Eie. We can both walk away from this without press drama. End our personal and business relationship."

Eie chuckled as she rose from her bed and opened the top drawer of her dresser. She removed an old book and flipped it open. "Your career ends here. If you want to return to the top you will truly have to fight and claw your way to that position." She stood bedside and positioned her hand over his chest. "From flesh to fluff, I bind you. Buttons for eyes, instead of blue. Eyes I trusted, with not a clue. From boy to toy, I confine you. All my rage, I give for this sweet revenge. I call on the madness, to bind you!"

Rubble felt weak and as if body weighed nothing. "What have you done to me?"

He could no longer feel the cuffs around his wrist and ankles.

She laughed. "If you toy with Eie, you become one."

She lifted him in her arms and faced him toward one of the many wall mirrors in her bedroom. Rubble nearly fainted as he viewed their reflection; he was a stuffed bear and she a scorned woman. He slowly moved around his new



limbs. Eie kept laughing as she moved him closer to the mirror. He stared directly into his black, button eyes. If it was possible he would cry, but he was simply now a toy.

“You can’t do this to me. People will wonder about my whereabouts.”

“No, you retired and started a private life. I was generous enough to release you from your contract.”

There was a knock on the penthouse door. Eie made her way through the lavish space, carrying Rubble with her. He hung lazily from her arms, upset at himself for reaching this point. He had everything, but chose his personal happiness over the material things. It was a decision he was comfortable with, but didn’t know it would cause such severe backlash.

His life would have been a lot simpler if had just been pretty and posed, earned enough money and returned home to his mother. Instead he allowed the fame to cloud his original goal. Eie stopped to calm herself and took a few deep breaths. She opened the door revealing a dark haired woman with plump lips and high cheekbones.

“Hi Bridgett. I thought you were heading out of town.”

“I’m on my way now but you asked me to stop by before I left town.”

Eie chuckled. “That was just me rambling. I say run from the city, go enjoy your family.”

“Now I feel silly.”

“No, I’m wrong for speaking just to speak. You have a nephew, right?”

Bridgett nodded. “Yes, he’s eight.”

Eie raised Rubble. “You give this to…”

“Ford,” Bridgett said. “His name is Ford.”

Eie passed Rubble to Bridgett. “You give this to Ford then.”

Bridgett smiled as she held him. “He’s cute, thanks.”

“No problem, have a fun trip.”

Eie closed the door once Bridgett left. Rubble was carried downstairs and stuffed into the model’s luggage. Bridgett made the long plane ride to Las Vales to visit her sister’s family. She arrived at the hotel where the couple currently resided. Her body sore from the plane ride, she barely could stand during the elevator ride up.

The couple was famous performers in the area. Bridgett had always been the pretty one and her sister Valarie the one with the voice. They were both lucky enough to put their gifts to use and achieve success.

Bridgett arrived at the hotel room to be greeted by Harry. “You look gorgeous,” He exclaimed.

Her cheeks grew rosy. “Harry save the compliments for my sister.”

“She’s been stressing about your visit, don’t tell her I said anything.”

Valarie appeared from the master bedroom and hugged her sister. “How was the ride?”

Bridgett sat her luggage down. “It was exhausting and uncomfortable.”

“You should nap now,” Harry suggested. “You’re invited to our show tonight. Tonight, I’m Marilyn.”

“It’s our best yet,” Valarie added. “I swear our acts get better and better each year.”

Bridgett laughed. “I bet you two are going to perform until you’re one hundred.”

The model envied their love. She could never tell if men wanted to date her or her career.

The couple laughed at her comment, inside hoping it would come true.

Ford rushed from his bedroom. “Auntie,” He squealed out.

She got down on one knee, eye level with her nephew. “I have a gift for you.”

“A paintball gun,” He shouted.

“Something less violent,” She laughed.

“Show me!”

She removed Rubble from her luggage. “He’s a very special bear.”

Ford held Rubble as he stared at him. “How?”

“Because he once belonged to the most beautiful woman in the world.”

He hugged the bear close. “I’ll take care of him.”

Ford returned to his room and sat the bear on the bed. “You need a name?”

“It’s Rubble,” He sadly let out.

Ford nearly jumped from his skin. “You can talk?”

Rubble placed his paw over his mouth. “Shhh, it’s secret.”

“So you are special?”

Rubble nodded. “Yes, now how about we go to the library?”

Ford wrinkled his nose. “Yuck, why?”

“I need to do some research.”

He laughed. “Why does a toy need to do research?”

“Because I can become a real person and then we can be friends forever.”

Rubble wasn’t so sure about the second half of that statement.

Most of Ford’s supposed friends were off acting twice their age. He wasn’t allowed to play with them.

“Awesome,” Ford exclaimed.

The next morning Rubble and Ford made that trip to the nearest library. The bear learned that he simply had to use a mad transition spell to enter himself into a vessel of a child. He would once again become human and get revenge on Eie Capri.

Ford was his easiest target, already gaining the boy's trust. After an attempt to kill him, Rubble had failed to obtain his vessel and immediately their promising friendship went downhill. Ford tore the bear's limbs from his soft body, imprisoning him for nearly a decade.

Today Rubble was free from the slasher and had his limbs. He simply had to say a name to gain the freedom he longed for. The bear sat, hidden under a bus seat that was heading for Newark. He read the paper Ford had given to him explaining how he can once again become himself. It simply revealed, 'kill the one who cursed you'. Rubble smiled. He was going to pay a highly anticipated visit to the woman who stuffed him, Eie Capri.

### **Chapter 25 - Unity**

Ford finished loading the luggage into the back of the rental car that was parked before Harriet's house. The task of stuffing everything properly into the trunk was a challenge, but he was sure the death of Bravo would be tougher. He still pondered the serial-slasher's motivation behind the series of slashing of his own kind.

It was obvious he targeted those who were members of the support group. The serial-slasher was good at what he did, but not great. He made a mistake any slasher would be ashamed of, he got caught. Ford still considered Bravo a flawless slasher, the stuffed bear only uncovering his identity because his unexpected existence.

Valarie walked from the house wearing a faded baseball cap, pajamas and bedroom slippers.

Ford smirked at her. "You're dressed to travel."

She rubbed her heavy eyes as she approached the car. "I plan on sleeping the entire plane ride."

"Were you too excited to get any sleep last night?"

He himself was up late planning the defeat of the serial-slasher.

Valarie let out a yawn. "Actually there was a raid at the complex last night."

"That doesn't sound good. What happened?"

"The police discovered the local dealer and raided her apartment. They had her arrested and decided to search every apartment. A hoard of officers were on the property and had us all line up outside while they searched our places. They made about six arrests and even discovered somebody had a gun. I did my best to get back to sleep, but ended up watching movies and old sitcoms until the sun rose."

"I'm glad you're changing mom. In a way that abduction was a positive on your life."

"I only used drugs to escape to a fantasy world where I was on the stage doing what I love."

"And who needs a fantasy world because it's now you're reality again."

"It's exciting." She opened the backdoor. "I wish you were leaving with us."

"I have an interview at a soup-kitchen. It's important. I'll board your plane during the layover."

He had his interview for the soup kitchen the day before.

Valarie climbed in the backseat.

"Why aren't you sitting in the front seat?"

"I also plan on sleeping on the drive to the airport. Your friend can have the front."

Sidnee was next to depart from the house, finishing up an apple for her breakfast.

"You ever been on a plane Sidnee," He asked.

She stopped before him. "No, my father drove us everywhere."

"Has your family ever been to Las Vales?"

"My father is a preacher, no. He would never take us to the city of sin, spin and win."

"I think we all need some time away to drink and gamble, especially you."

Sidnee let out a sigh as she thought about Daniel. "Yeah, thank you again for this."

"The hotel is paying for everything so I'm taking advantage of that."

She stepped closer to him and lowered her voice. "May I ask you something?"

He knew the conversation was taking a heavy turn. "Yeah."

"Your interview was yesterday. Why aren't you leaving with us?"

He trusted her. "I know who the serial-slasher is. I have to deal with him first."

"Why won't you tell your mothers who you really are?"

"I think it's tougher for those who don't understand the madness to accept a slasher."

Sidnee thought about it. "That may be true but you never know."

"My uncle is a slasher. He's never invited to any family functions. He's basically shunned."

"I'm sure your mothers love you too much to exclude you from their lives."

"I'm not willing to take that risk yet."

Sidnee headed towards the passenger's door. "I'll be upset if you die."

He witnessed the monster within Bravo. It was a risky fight to pick. "I won't die."

She pointed at him and winked. "I'll buy you a drink if you live."

"I'm twenty," He laughed. "I know that doesn't matter in your apartment, but it does in reality."

"I'll just pour wine in your sippy-cup." Sidnee joked before entering the car.

After a short wait Harriet stepped from her home and locked her door. Sidnee, who simply wore jeans and a pink pullover, and Valarie had taken a casual approach to their attire. Harriet instead wore white heels and a dress of the same color. Around her wrists and neck she wore golden jewelry and walked the stone pathway that led from her house as if it was a runway.

Ford motioned at her. "I think you're overdoing it."

She did a twirl as she arrived at the end of the stone path. "I'm arriving like the legend that I am."

"You do remember what vanity can result to?"

"I learned my lesson, but that doesn't mean I have to dress like a homeless woman."

He laughed. "Just promise me you won't become a stage diva once we get there."

"Your mother and I are legends. That diva behavior is below us."

"I'll see you later when I board, mom."

She waved at him, joined the others in the car and drove towards the airport.

Ford watched as they drove away. He realized this could be the last time he saw any of them. The moment the car was out of sight he went into slasher mode. The last time he visited this part of him it was just a game. He now had to prepare for a battle that would lead to an actual death, his or Bravo's. Ford entered his car and in his passenger's seat rested a knife with a dark handle. He glanced down at the blade that radiated in the sunlight, hoping it would soon be covered in the blood of the serial-slasher.

Ford started his car, drove to Bravo's neighborhood and parked a block away from his home. This slashing was simple yet difficult. Gaining entry to the targets house usually required planning, but a simple knock would gain Ford access to Bravo's home. Once inside he faced the challenge of battling against someone with a mind similar to his. It would be slasher versus slasher. Bravo's victims were proof that he was prepared to face his own. Ford was entering this battle as the rookie.

He exited his car and slipped his weapon into the pocket of his cargo shorts. He took careful steps to avoid stabbing his own self. His heart raced and the sights and sounds of the suburban neighborhood around him faded from his thoughts. He packed his mind with any fighting techniques he had learned or witnessed in life. Ford knocked on the house door and a sweaty, panting Bravo answered.

He used the back of his hand to wipe sweat from his forehead. "Hey man, what's up?"

"You're always working out," Ford pointed out.

"I care about my health and how I look."

"Important, but I'm here because I need to talk to you about something."

"Sure, come in." Bravo stepped aside. "Is everything okay?"

He gained access to the home. This part a success as expected.

"I'm having difficulty understanding something."

Bravo closed his door and took a seat on his leather-padded weight-bench. "And what is that?"

Ford stood before him, staring him down. "Why did you decide to end your relationship with Lu?"

"She was making me a dangerous person. I've trumped my slasher tendencies and I don't think she was trying hard enough."

"How did you overcome your urge to slash? It seems nearly impossible since I've started trying."

"I play a mad game. A woman named Tatu host it. It keeps me stable."

He had answers for everything, his tracks perfectly covered.

Ford kept his calm as he accepted each lie. "I have another question."

Bravo narrowed his eyes, observing Ford's tensed facial expression. "Are you okay Ford? This visit is sort of random."

"I'm fine. I just need you to answer one more question."

He motioned at his ears. "I'm listening."

"The serial-slasher, what's his motivation? Why would he target his own kind?"

"I don't know, maybe you should find and ask him."

Ford removed his knife from his pocket. "I am talking to him."

Bravo motioned at himself and let of a soft laugh. "I'm not him."

"I have proof, visual proof."

"Then that proof is flawed. I haven't slashed in years."

"No more lies. It's done." Ford raised his knife. "You won't harm another slasher."

Bravo stood, sneering at Ford. "I'm going to ask you once to leave my home."

"I'll leave once you're dead."

"I'm not a killer," Bravo shouted. He calmed himself. "But I'm willing to slash to save my own life."

"The same moral that has brought me here, slash or be slashed."

Bravo roared as he charged forward, snatched Ford by his shirt and smashed him against the wall. His hours of weightlifting came into use as he easily lifted Ford from his feet and repeatedly smashed him against the wall, a dent sinking deeper after impact. Ford used his knife to slice at Bravo's face.

The serial-slasher lost his grip on Ford as he caressed his face and stumbled backward. A bloody gash now ran diagonally across Bravo's face. He quivered in rage as he gawked at Ford, the viciousness in his eyes striking fear into Ford's heart. Ford kept a brave stance, his lower back numb and his heart starting to race from fear.

Bravo charged forward once more and delivered vicious punches to Ford's torso. The act of breathing became difficult and Ford barely could focus on a proper counter attack. Bravo delivered a punch to his face, drawing blood and causing Ford to blackout for a second. Ford kned the serial-slasher in the groin and shoved him backward.

Bravo stumbled, landed on his weight-bench and smacked the back of his head on the metal gripping area of his dumbbell bar. He laid spread eagle on his weight-bench, unconscious. His chance of a victory slim in this battle, Ford

took the opportunity to rush over and drive the blade of his knife into Bravo's heart.

He rested his head against the serial-slasher's still warm body, panting and forming a half smirk. He avenged those who felt the tip of the serial-slasher's blade in their heart and the others who lived in fear like him. It was narrow victory, but the result delivered much. A sore Ford yanked the knife from Bravo's chest. The conversation of what drove the serial-slasher to harm those who were the same as him would never be had. He along with his mystery was gone. After he was sure no eyes were on the house, Ford departed.

He arrived home to his apartment, no stuffed bear to share the tale of battle with present. The idea of making sure his door was locked didn't cross his mind, he knew he was safe. It was a great feeling and one he would share with the other slashers before he departed from town. He had little time to rest his aching lower back.

Ford took a quick shower, slipped on some comfortable jeans and a sweatshirt for the plane ride, and packed. After switching off all appliances, he left his apartment with his luggage to discover Milo leaving his own apartment carrying a duffle bag.

Milo pointed at Ford's luggage. "I thought you all left this morning."

"I'm taking a later flight, but it connects with theirs eventually. I had to deal with something here."

Milo raised his duffle bag. "I'm going to visit my sister for a month. My nephew is coming home."

"Any plans after you get back, we need to hang out sometimes."

"I might start a private investigation company. My sister likes the idea, I'm considering it."

"Cool." Ford headed towards the stairs. "I'm going to get going. I have a stop to make before the airport."

"Yeah I'm trying to head out before dark. I'm leaving right behind you."

Milo followed after him down the apartment stairs and they went their separate ways once they arrived at the parking lot. A slasher anonymous meeting was being hosted tonight and Ford felt they deserved to know their days of living in fear had come to an end and he was their hero. He arrived at the community center, parked before it and headed inside. The moment Ford stepped into the room the chatter halted. He had no time for the dramatics, immediately making his way to the front of the room as the other slashers stared him down.

"I'm Ford and I'm a slasher and today I slashed. I managed to eliminate the monster who gave us nightmares at night, the serial-slasher. His name was Bravo; most of you will probably remember him as the tall blonde who was engaged to a friend of mine and a once very active member of this group, Lu. I don't expect you all too immediately believe me, a person you consider a main suspect."

"Your words have no value," A voice shouted from the crowd.

Ford waited until the whispers following the outburst stopped, before continuing. "Hopefully, once you notice the lack of slasher deaths in town has come to an end you'll change whatever negative thoughts you have about me. This entire situation has been horrible to live through and I think to avoid it happening again we should change how these meetings are handled. Instead of showing up and lying about how innocent we all are, I think we should be honest with each other. I think we should become more than just a room of slashers, but a support system and a community. If we build a bond, it'll make it much easier to notice those who attempt to disrupt it. We all suffered together, we all should recover together."

A blonde woman cleared her throat, "I'm Carissa and last week I slashed."

"I'm Peter," A man wearing thick-rimmed glasses said. "And last month I slashed."

A young man with dark hair in the corner of the room raised his hand. "I'm Luke and I haven't slashed yet, but I like his idea. I've been coming to these meetings since I got my first urge to slash. It all feels so phony and I still don't really know any of you. I came here seeking help, but I only find myself bringing pizza bites and sitting in a corner until it's over." He motioned at Ford. "I'm with him. We need to be more than a group of slashers who gather to share lies and feed denial, but an actual community. And those who don't want to be a part of it should stop showing up."

Ford nodded at Luke. "Thanks for understanding, the same to you Casey and Peter."

Slasher after slasher spoke up and admitted to their most recent slashings. For weeks or even months many of them claimed to be innocent, including Ford. The more each person admitted their true number of slashes, the more included and understood they all felt. Many in the room still distanced themselves from Ford, but others were kind enough to introduce themselves and hear the tale of how he brought down the serial-slasher.

The mentioning of the game of murder surfaced and a member of the group decided she wanted to host one next week. Ford wished he could stay longer to chat and share how he dealt with the slasher within him, but he had a flight to catch and vacation to enjoy. He bid farewell to those not deep into conversation and left for the airport.

Tonight's meeting had been one of the most enjoyable slasher meetings a young Luke had ever attended. He wore a smirk on his face as he climbed through his bedroom window, the memories of tonight's meeting still lingering in his mind. He was way out past his set curfew, but tonight it was worth the possible trouble he could've gotten himself into with his parents. The young slasher kicked off his sneakers into the darkness of his room, slipped from his jeans, crawled into bed and let out a sigh of relief.

He carelessly embarked on a dangerous journey, but tonight he could rest peacefully. The moment he drove a blade through the heart of his first victim, his nights were spent tossing and turning, planning his next move of his grand plan of uniting the local slasher community. His grades started to falter, social relationships at school waned, the strain of balancing his slasher and personal life also underestimated.

The task of slashing the group's leader was simple, the kind woman simply inviting him into her trailer eager to help him sort out some of his 'troubling' slashing thoughts. He personally liked the woman and she was well respected

by all the local slashers. It was his core reasoning for deciding she had to fall first.

Luke was positive her death would unite them as a community and create that honest atmosphere he and the woman sought after within support group. Instead her death only drove them further apart and led to finger pointing.

Luke turned onto his side in his twin-sized bed softly laughing to himself as he thought about some of the more experienced slasher's he had managed to eliminate. His victories did not make him arrogant, the young slasher knowing he simply had luck and the element of surprise on his side during many of the encounters. Uniting them through fear made sense in his head, but it had grown into a frenzy he struggled to control. As he lay here tonight, his journey completed, he could once again give credit to luck.

Luke wasn't sure how Ford arrived to the conclusion that another member of their group was indeed the serial-slasher, but it didn't matter to the young slasher. He was freed from his true title tonight and his overall journey to unite them all was brought to a close by another. Luke's mind wandered on all the moments he lost sight of his vision, them now miniscule in his journey to the now complete portrait of slasher unity. He rested his eyes tonight, knowing slashing his own kind was worth the final reward.

A mad moral learned, in a mad world.

**-End-**

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