

Developing and Enhancing Believable Characterization in Fiction

A Thesis Submitted to  
The Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By  
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June 24, 2023

*To anyone who has ever had sorrow nipping at their heels.*

## Acknowledgments

Upon the last week of completing manuscript edits for my thesis, my already small family shrunk by one member. The break hurt worse than I ever expected. Life, it turns out, is much more fleeting than one would hope. My mother lost a sister. I lost an aunt. My uncle lost a wife. And I was left sitting at my laptop one afternoon, crying, reminding myself that God's timing is never my own and there are silver linings, a greater plan, and purposes behind everything that He does. I hand over the tears, He collects them in His bottle.

But here I sat, in shock. I'd never been shown life's brevity before. Now I was thrown in the deep end—and I was flailing.

Olive and Hadrian's story instantly took on a new meaning. Olive struggles with herself and life around her, the meaning of family, and facing fears. She recoils from loss and would rather distance herself, sabotaging her own, instead of letting relationships, pain, and growth progress naturally. She would rather isolate than feel. Cut off than console.

In reviewing the manuscript, I found it difficult to read the parts I had written about death. Now, I was bathing in the agony Olive was feeling through the entire story, and I didn't even know how to handle it. How could I struggle with the very thing my main character was going through? How was I supposed to produce a believable character arc, with someone who learned to at least *handle* this pain, when I couldn't navigate it myself?

Maybe that was the point. Everyone handles suffering differently. Everyone has a different shadow that follows them. Here, I thought I'd removed my own monster from my closet long ago. As it turns out, he never left, only changed skin.

Still, this has shown me that no day is promised, no path is linear—or expected—and to continually follow God’s finger.

Because in the midst of awkward silences, sorted paperwork, cleaning supplies, and distractions from the loss, I met a distant family member, whom I never would have met had she not passed. He started asking me all the right questions—about my writing, the characters, and their purposes. There were queries volleyed at me that I had never once considered, yet I found myself answering with a fervor I didn’t know existed. That hour and a half shoved me into a final realization: no one can write the stories I have to share—not like I can. So I find that I must.

With that being said, I would like to give a short note of gratitude for the people who have helped me along the way, because in many ventures, it takes a village, and this journey was no different.

To my husband, because you listen to my ramblings over food, through closed bathroom doors, car rides, and midnight ceiling-staring episodes. I don’t expect this to change anytime soon, so I thank you in advance, too. You’re not only married to me but also *all* the tiny people talking in my head that I must write stories about. I’m sorry there are so many of us.

My parents. More ramblings, history tours, and random questions that would surely stop traffic if taken out of context (“Do you think it would look suspicious enough if someone died in their kitchen floor...?”). And of course, you two raised me. I say *thank you* multiple times over for such a task, and I only hope I did your efforts justice.

My twin brother, because you’re just too cool.

Professor Smith and Professor Anderson for guidance—*thank you thank you thank you*.

To Him, because You are the reason I’m here.

And to Shadow. This whole thing started because of you. I hope you’re happy now.

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## Artist Statement

### INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVELLA

*Sincerely, Yours* is a genre-bending, light horror novella based on creative work I completed during my Fiction and Nonfiction workshops for my MFA. This story follows Olive Fredrick as she wrestles with a monster that lives not only in her closet but in the darkest parts of her mind. Her father's death is her breaking point. She leaves her family's sprawling historic estate in the hopes of finding herself, shadows in tow. But when she returns after her mother's devastating diagnosis, she finds that these evils are stronger than before. Worse still, she finds she might want them to stay.

While this novella is equal parts creepy as it is raw, I hoped to play with the intricacies of characterization most of all. The idea of creating a slightly unlikable, but believable, set of characters has always intrigued me. And so, my main characters began to form. First, Olive, an innocent child, grown to be an unstable young woman. Second, Hadrian, the lonely monster that has watched her grow up, who first holds small intent that turns concerned. He is largely a representation of mental illness and the time it takes to overcome those issues. At first, personifying him was a way to close a chapter of my own trials. This then grew into a desire to create an antagonist that was just as developed as the protagonist, where instead of working against one another, they are inadvertently stuck to each other.

### PROCESS FOR THE WORK

The process for my work started in early March 2022. I burn through writing projects on a bi-monthly basis, and I was tossing around a few novel ideas. I tend to lean into my love for fantasy, but for years, there has been something missing within my work that I was unable to

place. Like an itch I couldn't reach. One afternoon, I was listening to a podcast called *Spooked* about a haunted museum renovated from a historic mansion. In the early 1900s, it was inhabited by a straitlaced brother and a frivolous sister (Washington 9:10). Their ghosts are said to haunt the museum where tension can presently be felt.

The gears started turning as soon as I finished the podcast. Could something typically found in horror be clean enough for what I was comfortable writing? Would it even be considered *typical* horror by then? Was there a way to bring my budding interest in historical hauntings into a novel, too? I soon spiraled down a rabbit hole on our local historical society's website—after all, I was always told to “write what you know,” and Fincastle has been my home since childhood. I stumbled upon the booming latter half of Fincastle's 1800s: when it was the county seat and ordinaries, taverns, and hotels supported large government business dealings (McCoy 192). The Hayth Hotel caught my eye. Before I had a chance to gather enough historical research, a plot was forming, and I was on my way.

I started my novel, *Given Haste*, after two more months of research. While the novel based loosely around the family that owned the hotel in 1892, my characters grew into their own as soon as the main plot point was evident: the old proprietor's son haunts the hotel in present time, and a young woman begins a job at the hotel as a marketing assistant. She starts to experience things, and the plot goes from there. I wrote the novel once, then twice, then a third time, immersing myself in the trenches of historical estates, plantations, and so on.

During this time, I began to personify my mental health battles into one character for my nonfiction workshop and vaguely named him Shadow. The two projects didn't touch until the ghostly aspects of *Given Haste* started to grow like mold in the back of my mind while writing



my nonfiction work. Suddenly, Shadow began to insert himself into conversation with *Given Haste* characters.

Whilst researching Fincastle for *Given Haste*, I started to hoard any historical fact I came across as I researched. My notes ranged from county fairs, jockey races, to Lt. William Clark and Julia Hancock's plantation home, Santillane, and the expedition journals that were written there (McCoy 65). This community and its story, both real and forming in my mind, began to set a place at the table for something else involving Shadow. A story came to me: what if there was a little girl with a monster that lives inside of her closet?

I fidgeted with the idea. Could horror be introspective, a push and pull between thoughts and decisions that weren't clear to the reader until the end? Some of the most terrifying things I'd ever witnessed were thoughts in my own head—that I couldn't control or get rid of. Instead of the horror being an external force, what if it was birthed from the very thing that was supposed to save the story: the main character?

*Sincerely, Yours* was then written in a flurry and given, piece by piece, to my mom and husband to read. The audience watches Olive grow up and struggle with the death of family, a manipulative first love, and the monster that breathes within her closet walls. As an adult, this monster—Hadrian—is still with her. Not only does she learn to accept him, but the slightest part of Hadrian comes to love Olive, just as she comes to love him.

Olive was easier to build than Hadrian. The reader follows Olive from the time she is six and into her early adulthood. Through her eyes, the reader sees the yearn to be accepted, to feel needed, and her gradual descent into thinking the world is easier when she finally distances herself from others. Hadrian, however, was a different story.

His purpose is to play with Olive. Within the first chapter, Olive is speaking to her dolls and asks, “Wanna play?” Unknowingly, Olive opens a door for him to slip into her life. Hadrian’s position, and purpose, made it increasingly important to develop him in a way that would shape him into something more than the average boogey-man. I wanted to give the reader parts of Hadrian slowly and build him up in an almost teasing manner, kind of how he treats Olive. The reader doesn’t get *all* of Hadrian. He is secretive and uninclined toward emotion. This was also considered when picking the narrative point of view as first person (through Olive’s eyes) rather than third person limited or omniscient. I wanted the audience’s perception to be as clouded as hers is.

I also wanted to make sure the reader had a first-hand look into Olive’s personal struggles since they aren’t as obvious from the outside. This made the process of developing Hadrian difficult. Since the reader doesn’t hear Hadrian’s thoughts—just interactions with Olive—I had to make sure his word choices were intentional. That the moments he chose to appear to her were purposeful. Because of the nature of what he is (an embodiment of mental illness), Olive could never see Hadrian in his entirety. This also helps with the characterization of a “monster”—once the monster is revealed, some of the intimidation is taken away, which I wanted him to always have a shred of.

To make Hadrian believable, I focused on his word choices and delicate display of emotion. This made his dialect important. Hadrian is old, so his speech needed to represent that. His word choices were purposeful, though few. This was also a tip off to the reader that since Hadrian is intentional with what he says, he also *means* the things that he tells Olive. This becomes especially important when he finally decides to show any emotion. By the end, the reader can see the change in his responses toward Olive and those around her—*showing* that he

has grown connected to her, which would make him more believable to the audience. Of course, to solidify his true moral compass, Hadrian deliberately tries to lure Olive into hurting someone else at the very end as an act of revenge. This gives the reader a sense that Hadrian *isn't* good, but there are parts of him that have changed over the course of the novella for the better.

## VISION FOR THE WORK

The vision for *Sincerely, Yours* boils down to the simple point of expressing struggles. I have always found it difficult to thoroughly communicate my feelings with others, and having found a way to express those thoughts has been liberating. I want to enable other people to do the same, to show that these battles *do* exist, you are not alone, and there *are* people who understand.

Olive's struggles transform for better and worse throughout the novella. The essence of the work is to show that while some may expect someone in Olive's position to do a complete turnaround, it is still growth to come to a point of acknowledgement and acceptance of one's circumstance or feelings. Olive exemplifies the ability to come from a place of loneliness and learn to accept oneself, while Hadrian demonstrates the ability to change for the better and to come to care for others, while also showing how mental health can change over time.

Through their story, I hope to convey a raw and touching way for people to confront the darkest parts of themselves. Olive's journey isn't linear. There are uplifting moments as well as ones of trial, as many face in their own lives. Ultimately, Olive makes it through. However, the larger point of the work is Olive's internal transformation and how her value of time and life changes. She has no choice but to accept the change that happens around her, and I hope to show that if Olive is given the liberty of being human, then we are allowed to have that, too.

Though not the protagonist of the story, Hadrian is also used to show changes of a person's fear over time. I have found that many antagonists are flat, with simple, trope-like

motivations backing them that give the reader little to stand on. The Evil King is evil because he's *supposed* to be. Captain Hook is evil because he's trying to stop Peter Pan. Often times, I found myself gaining no personal attachment to these villains. We aren't shown why Captain Hook might have anger toward Peter Pan or why the Evil King was so angry. The postmodern perspective of evil shifted from evil being defined as the cause of suffering to the act of the suffering itself as evil (Ziarek 198). This contrasted briefly within both Olive and Hadrian, where Olive saw the cause of her suffering (presumably Hadrian) to be evil—whereas by the end of the work, she has realized that the suffering she's been through itself is what is “evil.”

This opens the door for characterization comparisons in other similar works, too. One could compare Beatriz from *The Hacienda* to the entity that haunts the hacienda itself. Beatriz is an example of a character that was given backstory, motivation, and intention, along with relatable aspects to connect to the reader. The entity haunting the home is not developed—in typical, pre-Enlightenment fashion, the entity is bitter and evil for the sake of being so. This helped me conclude that I wanted Hadrian to be developed so the reader believed in his motivations, too.

As my novella progressed, I realized I had similar feeling when recently starting the novel *One Dark Window* by Rachel Gillig that I hoped to bring to my own audience. The main character in *One Dark Window* has a monster living inside of her thoughts as a separate entity. Watching the main character and the monster's relationship for the extent of the novel created conflicting emotions for myself as the reader. Gillig gave tethers for the audience to grab in order to sympathize with both the good and bad sides of the main character and monster's relationship. I hoped to portray this same type of conflicting, yet impactful, relationship through Olive and Hadrian.

Olive grew into a representation of myself as a child and adolescent, had I not taken the path I chose in life. While struggling with insecurities in my childhood and teens, they were the darkest in late high school years. Both Hadrian and Olive have become symbols for that time period, but the progression of their relationship turned into something I've felt only recently with my mental health: acceptance and fondness in a way I never thought possible.

Though this novella branched from separate works, I'm pleased with the vision finally coming to be. The most touching works I've ever read, listened to, or watched—whether it be a movie, lyrics, or novel—have always been the ones that pull back the curtain. They never sugar coat. They build up all areas of the story and leave no room for the viewer to doubt an origin. They are honest. Though it's been a little painful digging down so far, this has become a work I wish *I* had been able to read. Instead of looking for one any longer, I'm glad I finally decided to write it for myself.

## LITERARY CONTEXT FOR THE WORK

Horror is a large enough genre to be recognized by the common reader if brought to attention. While the common response is typically to the effect of, “Isn’t that, like, what Stephen King writes?” there are many different subgenres to pick from. However, there is a hole where something like *Sincerely, Yours* would be placed. There are works like *The Hacienda* by Isabel Cañas that are set within history and pull from the common issue of a haunted home. Still, I have yet to find something within the same wheelhouse of a *person* being haunted, themselves, by their own battles in monster form that none others can see that falls within a lighter horror space, that encapsulates internal monsters as well as external ones. This leaves the perfect space for something like *Sincerely, Yours* to exist.

While there is a gap for *Sincerely, Yours*, there are still aspects of this novella that would help place it alongside other popular titles. For the 2022 Goodreads Choice Awards, which is one of the most popular end-of-year awards for readers who track their yearly progress, clocking in at 5,779,854 votes across all genres, *The Hacienda* was nominated for Best Horror and managed to land in second place. In the same category, taking third place, *What Moves the Dead* by T Kingfisher was also nominated—and comes in at a mere 165 pages, with an estimated word count of 40,000. Another successful author within the same category is Jaime Jo Wright. One of her works, *The House on Foster Hill*, won the 2018 Christy Awards within the mystery/suspense genre, though the novel also deals with supposed ghost stories that surround an abandoned, historic home.

*The Hacienda* captures history lovers and places them within the aftermath of the Mexican War for Independence. There, Beatriz follows her new and unfamiliar husband, Rodolfo, to his countryside estate. Cañas amassed popularity for her eerie settings and tenacity for subtle horror, which causes some readers to lean the novel toward “fiction” instead. Paired with atmosphere and unfavorable circumstances she places on Beatriz, it is difficult to not enjoy *The Hacienda* as a classic, low stakes horror that straddles the gothic fiction line.

While Cañas leans mainstream, Jaime Jo Wright spins a nail-biting tale told in dual perspectives within the Christian Fiction space: a story based in 1906, with a second timeline told during present day, intertwining the dual POVs with the same home, family secrets, and lore. Wright’s attention to detail creates an unnerving atmosphere and a love for all of the characters, past and present. The theme of hope can be felt throughout, as well as the arcs of main characters clear and picturesque.

*Sincerely, Yours* encapsulates similar yet unique aspects of all of these popular works. I want to hold the atmosphere and desperation of *The Hacienda* and the theme of hope and growth that is shown in *The House on Foster Hill*, while inching into the niche of shorter horror that *What Moves the Dead* has proven popular. As Manusos gave a generous breakdown for on *BookRiot*, speculative novellas are becoming more popular and publishers are propelling more short fiction into production. It gives a chance for the reader to experience open endings, different character projections, new story structures, and may even give aspiring authors more avenues to publish their work.

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TOPIC AS A CHRISTIAN SCHOLAR

The significance of this novella to me as a Christian scholar is creating something beautiful out of darkness. A key trial for Olive is worry—of her looks, herself, and opinions of others. In the CSB, Matthew 6:24-27 says, “Therefore I tell you: Don’t worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Isn’t life more than food and the body more than clothing? Consider the birds of the sky: They don’t sow or reap or gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren’t you worth more than they?” I want the ultimate message of this novella to show Olive breaking away from this harrowing habit of doubt and fear, and beginning the process of doing things for herself and loving who she is. Though the character of Hadrian is more of a metaphor, I wanted another point of the novella to be that Hadrian is never solidified as an actual monster—he doesn’t insinuate what he is until the end. He is simply a personification of what plagues Olive. I hope that readers can also see Hadrian as a voice of change and that all have a chance to turn from their old ways and into something new—whether or not they take the path is up to them.

*Sincerely, Yours* is a love letter to my fears, my worries, and my hardships that I have overcome. It reflects my sin of anxiety and the time it has taken me to let go of the crippling hurt I have caused myself. Like Olive begins to do, I have finally accepted myself as I was created by Him. Hadrian may not be a *real* monster that hides in closets, but he may exist inside of someone who reads Olive's story. And if they find hope in her tale, I can only pray it leads them to the same love that Christ has shown me.



## Developing and Enhancing Believable Characterization in Fiction

Readers escape into a new world by reading fiction. This may be in the form of an assassin traveling a failing nation, a mom accidentally hired to be a hit woman, or a teenage girl who decides to solve a local mystery for her Capstone project. Fiction suddenly becomes reality. To do this, the author needs to create believable characters—particularly, main characters that strike the reader as real, developed, and believable.

Believable characterization can be achieved by the author giving foundational character information, defining a character’s reliability, and setting context and relatability within the story.

### SETTING THE FOUNDATION

Car accidents are common on the interstate. Many people witness this driving home after work. An initial reaction is typically shock. The first questions asked are usually, “Are they okay?” and “I wonder if someone was injured?” When the driver leaves the scene, the accident is then forgotten. The driver knows nothing about the victim; they may feel bad, but that feeling leaves within moments because the accident does not directly affect the onlooker. However, the same accident might show across the evening news. This time, the driver from the accident is identified with an image in the corner of the screen. That same passerby recognizes the driver as a neighbor. *Now* the onlooker cares because there is a slight foundation to the story.

Writing fiction and characterization is similar. Sol Stein, author of *Stein on Writing*, may have compared it best when he said: “I am convinced that *we need to know the people in the car before we see the car crash*. The events of a story do not affect our emotions in an important way unless we know the characters” (Stein 50). Stephen King made note of this in his memoir *On Writing*, “Book-buyers aren’t attracted, by and large, by the literary merits of a novel; book-

buyers want a good story to take with them on the airplane...This happens, I think, when readers recognize the people in a book, their behaviors, their surroundings, and their talk. When the reader hears strong echoes of his or her own life...he or she is more apt to become more invested in the story” (King 160).

Characters are to feel like real people. To create foundations toward believability or enhance what an author has already penned, Jessica Brody mentioned in *Save the Cat! Writes a Novel*:

“You simply give them [the main character]:

1. A problem (or flaw that needs fixing)
2. A want (or goal that the hero is pursuing)
3. A need (or life lesson to be learned)” (10).

Brody’s first point—an issue to fix—could be something as common as needing money for bills or gaining a parent’s approval. Whatever the problem may be, it immediately gives the reader a reason to believe this main character isn’t above every day issues. As an example, Jason Rekulak swiftly demonstrates this in his horror novel, *Hidden Pictures*. The reader knows from the line, “A few years back I was running out of money so I volunteered for a research study at the University of Pennsylvania” (Rekulak 1) that the main character, Mallory, is broke. In two more pages the reader learns she was an addict. Within only four pages, the reader knows Present Day Mallory is now drug free. Rekulak has created the foundation of a believable character through an issue, a desire to fix said issue, and the start of a theme.

Rekulak also used K. M. Weiland’s suggestion about memorable initial character investment. Weiland made note in her work *Creating Character Arcs* that a memorable moment, such as Mallory blatantly being desperate for money because of a drug addiction, can also be used to reveal the character’s moral compass, further solidifying their central wants and needs. Weiland gave a similar example by making a compassionate character run across NYC traffic to help a crying child, or showing a character’s bravado by having him pick a fight with five others and win (Weiland 51). An author may have given their character a moment like this, but reinforcing the desperation of the point, as Weiland gave an example of, would only heighten the connection of the main character to the reader.

Francine Prose touches on Weiland’s second point—a character want—in her book, *Reading Like a Writer*. The author can demonstrate a main character’s desires through the eyes of secondary characters. Whilst Kleist was developing a young lady within a work, Prose notes, “...Kleist creates his characters...entirely without physical description. There is no information, not a single detail, about the Marquise’s appearances...We assume that the Marquise is beautiful, perhaps because her presence exerts such an immediate and violent effect on the Russian soldier...” (Prose 115).

Rekulak does this when Mallory interviews for her first job after rehab. The mother of the family looking to hire a sitter welcomes her in. Mallory connects with the child immediately; however, the father tells Mallory after an intense interview, “I worry you’re too much of a gamble” (Rekulak 32). Rekulak uses expressions and responses from the husband and wife to build their characterization as well as Mallory’s external characterization for the reader. Since the novel is told in first person POV, the husband and wife might be able to see things about Mallory that the reader can’t since they only hear her thoughts and opinions.

*The Hacienda* by Isabel Cañas uses this tactic a bit differently. The main character, Beatriz, is introduced to her new husband’s Hacienda San Isidro in 1823. Beatriz states her desires, and this is built on by other character’s reactions. Cañas writes, “It was not quite what I expected, having been raised in the verdant, lush gardens of an hacienda in Cuernavaca, but it was my new conquest. My salvation. *Mine*” (Cañas 6). Beatriz is then aware of other’s reactions and opinions around her, saying, “In the end, Fernanda’s behavior meant that I had a golden husband, and her daughters did not” (Cañas 8). This builds believability through others—not only is the reader experiencing the other character’s thoughts, but Beatriz’s characterization is then deepened by how *she* responds to the opinions.

James Scott Bell expands on Brody’s third point in his book, *Plot & Structure*. “What makes a plot truly memorable is not all of the action, but what the action does to the character...when a character learns something or suffers because he changes...it is an expression by the author about a larger canvas—not merely what happens in the novel, but what happens in life” (Bell 141). Reiterating aspects of life within a work build situational awareness, emotion, and tension for the reader and help them *believe* what is happening to the character(s). Brody adds, “The life lesson is the inner journey that your hero didn’t even know they were on, that will eventually lead them to the answer they never expected...This life lesson should be something universal...It’s what makes your reader feel like they’ve been somewhere, done something...and that their investment in the pages of your novel was worth their time” (Brody 15-17).

To create believable life lessons and perspectives, it is best for an author to always expand their wheelhouse and gain experience in all areas of writing and reading. Marta Maslej pointed out in her article *Creating Fictional Characters* that authors who read across genres over many years are more likely to vary character types (Maslej 488). If an author has experienced

more diverse writings—whether through genre, POV, or writing style—an author may find it is easier to create a character foundation.

## RELIABLE AND UNRELIABLE NARRATORS

Reliable and unreliable narration both aide in building believable characters because it reflects individuals in real life. This can be developed through POV choice, revealed information, and confrontation of moral issues. Because of this, the reader not only learns more about the character’s motives and morals, but reliability creates texture within the work.

A character may steal a dog from a tied tree. This man believes he is doing the right thing and saving the dog, but the reader understands that stealing is wrong. Through the enhanced foundational development spoken about previously, the reader understands why the character is stealing but would know he is not a trustable person.

Main characters like this man are not the typical hero or heroine. Rachel Gillig gives an example of two unreliable narrators in her novel *One Dark Window*. In Gillig’s opening scene, she shows Elspeth Spindle as a child running to hide from the Physicians. They have come to take her before the king because of an illness she carries, which was given to her by a monster that lives in her head she calls Nightmare. Gillig shows the moment Nightmare saves Elspeth by taking over her body. Elspeth admits this was the first time she stopped fearing Nightmare, even though she knows she probably should (Gillig 5).

An author can use Gillig’s opening scene as an example of when looking at John O’Connor’s journal entry. When teaching unreliable narrators, O’Connor asks:

1. Is the narrator too self-interested to be reliable?
2. Is the narrator sufficiently experienced to be reliable?

3. Is the narrator sufficiently knowledgeable to be reliable?
4. Is the narrator sufficiently moral to be reliable?
5. Is the narrator too emotional to be reliable?
6. Are the narrator's words inconsistent with his actions to be reliable? (O'Connor 49)

Elspeth's age, lack of personal knowledge surrounding a creature like Nightmare, and the emotional circumstance she finds herself in within the first few pages creates the foundation for an unreliable narrator. However, her responses are valid given her age, making it believable.

Gillig presents Nightmare differently than Elspeth; where Gillig shows Elspeth's thoughts, Nightmare's intentions are never clear. As the novel progresses, some actions show selfish intent. This makes him unlikeable. Though Nightmare's true purpose is murky, he shows enough compassion toward Elspeth to make the reader believe he might actually care about her, subsequently enhancing the reader's connection to him. Some might be frustrated that they feel any sympathy toward such a character. However, Joshua Mohr mentions to his students, "Concern yourself with not so much likability, but relatability. Though I'm not necessarily doing the things that this character is doing, I can understand why they're behaving this way" (Mohr).

Gillig even takes his narration a bit further by having Nightmare conceal information. Deb Caletti made note of one of the tactics Gillig uses within her *Writer's Digest* article. "When your character hints that he knows more than he tells, reveals the truth a little later than he should or has gaps in memory, your unreliable narrator can successfully shake the reader's trust." An example of this is shown through Nightmare's ongoing issue of hiding important information from Elspeth, and the reader:

*Did you know?* I gasped at the Nightmare.

*I had my suspicions.* [Nightmare]

*And you didn't think to tell me?* [Elsbeth] (Gillig 146)

Gillig creates a whirlwind of successful unreliability with both her protagonist and antagonist by giving both “human” aspects that make him feel real. Gillig disregards a common tactic of having the characters confront a moral issue, which is typically used to deepen characterization and relatability throughout a novel (Mohr). This further builds their morals and intent in a delicate, yet sly, way.

Author Jaime Jo Wright approaches reliable narration in a different manner. In her novel *The House on Foster Hill*, Wright uses third-person limited POV in alternating time lines. One follows Ivy in 1906, and the other follows Kaine in present day. Wright manages both character's problems, wants, and needs within each respective opening chapter. Ivy finds a dead body (the problem), desires to be remembered after death (her want), but finds reason to believe she's being followed (likely her lesson) (Wright 14).

Wright then does the same with Kaine in the present timeline. She tells the reader, “Kaine checked her rearview mirror. She'd made a habit of it as she traversed the country from the ocean-side walkways of San Diego to the obscure midlands of Wisconsin. No one believed her” (Wright 18). The reader can assume, given the narrator is not one of the characters, that the information being relayed to the reader is fact (Brody 286). Information is relayed differently within Wright's novel because of the change in POV, however Wright manages the secondary characters in both timelines to build the main character's rapport, similarly to how Rekaluk used the husband and wife to belittle Mallory's within his novel.

Within her third-acts, Wright typically does have both characters confront a moral issue. By the end of the novel, both Ivy and Kaine are presented with whether the killer was justified in their actions. Wright creates believability through rational thought—for example, that both Kain and Ivy believe killing is wrong and justice should be brought to the victims.

Aspects of believability could be tricky if an author may desire to create a character that boards villainous, taking it a step further than Gillig, into something similar to a negative character arc. Whereas Nightmare is questionable, Gillig never *solidifies* if he is a villain. In Wright's work, the villains are gradually revealed until they are met at the end and locked away.

Holly Jackson takes on a negative character arc for her protagonist in *As Good As Dead*. Since this is the third book in a series, the reader has had time with the main character, Pip. Pip's two previous tales followed her bringing justice to two murder victims. Her character development is at a pinnacle: Pip is the justice-bringer. In the third installment, Jackson twists Pip's "truth"—the town needs saving from killers—and the "lie"—that Pip is the only hero that can do the saving. This lie gradually warps Pip's perception. By using multiple moral conflicts, Jackson shows Pip's decent into a dark headspace, but her struggles are believable because the reader knows Pip's love for her family, town, and true desire: to save people from evil.

Pip begins to make increasingly worse choices and justifies any action she takes with no regard for her wellbeing. Weiland said the negative character arcs are likely the most uncomfortable for the reader but create the most memorable stories (201). Jackson took care into developing and enhancing Pip's characterization through trials, secondary character recount of her actions, desires, and her move toward goals. This sets her up ideally to then take these goals and twist it so Pip falls into a bad spot, then an even worse spot, and so on—making this decent into becoming the villain believable.



## CREATING CONTEXT FOR BELIEVABILITY

Circumstances surrounding the characters and their reactions also aide in believability within a work. James Mole made a note in his article, “...the author may think if they have an intriguing title and hook for the reader within the first few paragraphs, that [this] will be enough to keep the audience’s attention” (Mole). In order for the story to feel real, context must be constructed around the characters to make their reactions authentic. Context could be information surrounding the time period, a character’s origin, or an issue that precedes the beginning of the novel.

Abbie Emmons, in a “Science of Story” video, broke down misconceptions that can be created about a character due to lack of context. She used the main character in *Captain Marvel*, Vers, as an example.

Vers experiences traumatic nightmares throughout the first half of the story. However, the audience doesn’t know what these nightmares are, why she’s having them, or if they’re dangerous until over halfway into the story (Emmons). Holding information—character motivation, desires, or knowledge—until the midpoint does nothing but separate the audience from the character. This leaves the character feeling stagnant (Emmons) where Mole advised, “After you throw the line to draw the audience in, this is where the information is supposed to be given to keep the audience engaged.” Until this point, Vers’s actions and words have only been portrayed as strong, blunt, and emotionless. This leaves the audience disconnected.

Withholding important context surrounding a character’s development would be different than the tactic Gillig used with Nightmare in *One Dark Window*. Elspeth acknowledges questions aloud to Nightmare. This lets the reader know she is aware of these holes in his narrative he is trying to tell her; he then refuses to comment. This continues building Elspeth’s believability

because Elspeth is openly worried about the same thing the reader is worried about. This act of withholding information, not context, simultaneously manages to construct Nightmare's questionable intentions.

Cañas avoided withholding context within *The Hacienda* by noting in the beginning of the work the place and time: the Hacienda San Isidro in 1823. Without this, the reader would be confused about the significance of Beatriz's marrying a successful man, her want to own something of her own, and the limits surrounding her ability to make decisions on her own because of the time period she was in.

However, lack of context should not be confused with a character that experiences no character arc. K. M. Weiland dives deeper into characterization and explains, "This simply means the character does not undergo a significant shift either through their mindset or personality" (265). Then, later, "There should still be a protagonist that wants something, who has a plan to gain that thing, encounters opposition, and learns new facts and skills along the way. The disbelief s/he holds will not be changed by the end of the story" (267). The believability of a character is not compromised because the character's internal beliefs did not change. Elle Cosimano demonstrates this in her novel *Finlay Donovan is Killing It*. The main character, Finlay, holds the disbelief that she is a terrible mother, square out of luck, and nothing good ever happens to her. Cosimano then thrusts Finlay through a series of unfortunate events, including having Finlay end up with a dead body in her minivan.

By the end of the novel, Finlay still believes she's a bad mom, square out of luck, and nothing good *has* happened to her. But she's learned new skills along the way (hiding a dead body included). Cosimano still gave the reader context surrounding Finlay's story. She lets the reader know Finlay was divorced with two children, has a rough relationship with her own

mother, and is in desperate need of money for her electric bill—all of this being information that was developed previous to the opening scene of the novel. Had this information not been included, the reader would be left wondering the significance of Finaly’s decisions.

Still, Finlay is given a problem and desire to fix this issue with a lesson learned by the end of the novel—Finlay is still perceived by other characters and her personality is portrayed well, her personal beliefs, or disbelief about the world, simply doesn’t change.

While no arc is necessary, Weiland still noted how it’s beneficial to the story to have one (268). If an author is not confident enough to remove the character arc, it would be best for the author—and reader—to keep it within the story. However, this may be a good tactic for an experienced author to widen their scope of work.

This research aided my own manuscript. While going through the editing process, the breakdowns of other believable characterizations from previously published authors helped me to revise my own processes. My main character, Olive, follows the points of Brody’s “Rite of Passage” where, “Death, puberty, separation, midlife crisis, adolescence” (Brody 103) and are the main themes of the work. Going by this gave me a path to follow in building Olive’s believability and the reactions, perceptions, and motivations she may have as she navigates her own issues toward her end goal.

Like Gillig showed through *Nightmare*, I developed Hadrian in a similar fashion. His intentions are never clear and throughout the novella, the reader is able to watch him change as Olive grows older. Weiland’s words fit into my crafting process when she mentioned, “When you think about an antagonist, you’re likely to focus on the ways in which he’s different from your protagonist. But some of the most important aspects of your story will emerge thanks to the ways in which the antagonist and the protagonist aren’t so different at all” (Weiland 252). I wanted

Olive and Hadrian to be an inverted mirror of each other: they see parts of themselves they always wanted to be in the other, while other aspects they despised. But I feel like that's the most intriguing part of taking contrasting characters—once you figure out how to build them up past the standard, intriguing characterization, they start to become flesh inside the reader until this character that's been developed is a part of them. Authors can enhance a character's believability by the revealed foundational character information, reliability, and the context surrounding their circumstances. In practicing this and keeping a broad horizon to new techniques, even the most seasoned writers will find new ways to craft characters.

*Sincerely, Yours*

Chapter One

*6 years old*

The first time I saw a marble, I was disappointed. The glass was clouded and milky. Cartoons always showed them as shiny with sparkles in the sunlight. Mom said they looked like stained glass, but this one was none of those things. The surface wasn't buffed. Instead, it reminded me of a bit of Play-Doh rounded into a ball and rolled across a dusty floor. It was the color of soot, too, which wasn't a pretty color at all.

I watched it, cross legged on my bedroom floor. The marble eased over the uneven floorboards before it came to a halt and swirled once, then twice, in place. It stilled.

I didn't move amidst my pile of dolls. One or two were missing clumps of hair. Daisy—my fairy princess who was currently screaming at her sister for taking her blue ballgown—was aloft in my right hand. She dropped, in hand, to my side.

I waited one, two, then three seconds. The marble didn't move again. Instead of wondering where it came from, I wiggled in place. Mom said marbles were only for big kids to play with. If there was one in my room, surely that meant I was a big kid now.

"Look, Daisy," I said. I swung her to the marble. "Wanna play? Are there more?" I scanned my room. "You can't have just one. Regina needs one too."

I glared at the sister doll. She was flat backed on the floor by my leg. "Do you like marbles, Regina?"

She probably didn't. But she still stole Daisy's things all the time. She even took Daisy's friends, if she had any, and left her to play alone, just like the kids at school did. Mom said that was mean so Regina was mean, too.

I liked Daisy more than Regina. But if I took Regina away, Daisy would be alone, so I kept Regina around.

I turned back to the marble. My room was silent. Somewhere downstairs, the clatter of pots and pans echoed from the kitchen. The TV murmured to my father the latest news—something about a presidential election which then rolled into a weather report.

I huffed and pushed up from my cross-legged position. The walls rattled with encroaching thunder. Summer nights were musty and noisy in this old house.

"Let's see what we can find, Daisy," I told my doll. I scooped up the marble. "That one's not pretty. Maybe Mommy had marbles hidden and didn't tell us."

There was clicking in the hallway. A shadow loomed in the open door.

My head snapped up with a grin. "Belvy! Come here Belvy! You have a nose. You can help me find something."

Belvedere was a tank of a dog, something like a miniature pony. On Saturdays when Dad didn't have to go into work, the three of us would take a walk down the driveway, Harrington Estate looming in the background, until we hit the dirt road. Belvedere didn't play rough like other dogs did. He let me do whatever I wanted him to.

"He's a good boy, Olive," Dad said a lot. "A big dog to protect a little girl."

"Big dogs are like ponies," I told him. "Ponies don't protect girls like me."

"Why not?"

“Because ponies take little girls to magical lands and bring them back before dinner,” I said. I remember I hugged Belvedere’s neck while he lumbered along. His wrinkles were soft against my cheek. “Belvy isn’t just a dog, Dad. He’s my pony.”

“Well then, I guess he’ll be your pony until you’re too big for him.” Dad’s face was handsome when he smiled.

Now, I grabbed Belvedere’s collar and pulled him into my bedroom. Pull might have been a bit exaggerated—Belvedere *let* me lead him into the room. His black coat shone in the lowlight of my single pink lamp. His jowls drooped so much they pulled at his eyes, which were rich in chocolate and attention. His breathing was wheezy, deep, but even.

Belvedere was eye level with me. I held the marble up between us.

“Look, Belvy,” I said. I pushed it into his nose. “There’s only one but I need another. Regina needs one. She can’t take Daisy’s because it’ll make Daisy sad and then she’ll cry when she’s alone.”

At first, Belvedere pulled his head back, those cropped ears swiveling. He glanced around the room before I managed to stick the marble in his nostril.

“Sniff it.” It was a command.

Belvedere tensed. He didn’t sniff the marble.

I tried once more to push it into an open nose hole. I just stuck it inside, mouth open to exclaim something of a declaration when he straightened. At full height, Belvedere stood two inches above me.

He huffed. The marble fell into my hand, now covered in moisture. Something in his body’s stiffness told me to leave him be. The dense hairs between his shoulders stood on end. His lips ballooned with each breath.

A low, dark growl started in the depths of his chest. He huffed at my hand, the marble clutched in my palm before he leaned from my grip on his collar, so I released him. He took one lap through my bedroom, around my nightstand, the rocking chair, my dollhouse, and came to a halt at my closet door. Belvedere inhaled against the floor.

“Belvy,” I hissed. He was making me nervous. Dad always said Belvedere was a *good* guard dog, but he’d never got like this unless he spotted a squirrel. Once, he’d shown teeth to a man Dad worked with, but the man never came back, so I figured Belvedere had done his job.

“Belvedere,” I said. My voice shook no matter how much steel I injected into it. “Stop it. Come here.” I patted my princess pajama bottoms.

Downstairs, Mom turned on the kitchen faucet. The TV blared an infomercial.

The dusty pinks and peaches of my bedroom walls, the décor, looked grey right then. Belvedere’s stubby tail was pointing straight. Then his lips peeled back from his teeth. An ascending growl rippled between his teeth.

The closet door was closed.

Then it opened with a *snick*.

Belvedere started barking, teeth flashing, at the crack in the door. I dropped the marble and Daisy, a scream lodged behind my tongue, and made a break for my bedroom door.

“Daddy! Mommy!” I bellowed. I swung around the banister at the top of the stairs and tripped over my own feet to get to the bottom. The old railing bent with my weight as I barreled to the first floor. Behind me, the dog was snarling and barking in my room.

The remote clattered to the floor as Dad stood up from his recliner. His glasses were askew on his nose—he straightened them just in time for me to smack into his knees.

“The closet!” I screamed. My joints shook.



“What’s going on? What’s wrong?” Mom exclaimed, hurrying into the living room. The dishrag was tangled around her hands as if she was going to whip someone with it.

I pushed from Dad’s knees and grabbed her shirt hem. There was already spaghetti sauce splattered over the eggshell fabric. I craned my neck back. “Something’s in the closet! It moved! I saw it! So did Belvedere, he barked at it, it *o-opened!*”

Mom’s eyes—my eyes—widened to bottomless pools. Her eyes cut to Dad. “Charlie.”

Dad sighed. “What?”

She cleared her throat.

“Oh—*oh*, uh, Olive, honey?”

I barricaded myself behind Mom’s legs when I looked back at him. Dad dropped to a squat, elbows propped on his knees. Upstairs, Belvedere’s barking quieted to incessant growling.

“Can you show me what you’re talking about?”

I shook my head. My chest heaved. “No.”

“Why not?”

“It wasn’t me. There’s something in the closet.”

“What were you doing when it happened?”

So I told him about my game, how Daisy and Regina had been fighting over their ballgown, and the marble and how Belvedere had saved me.

“You said he’s a guard dog, Daddy,” I said. Now, I stalked up to him, my hands fists at my sides. “If Belvy was upset, then that means something is wrong.”

It had to be true. Belvedere wouldn’t bark at nothing.

Dad stood with a sigh. He wiped a palm over his clean-shaven jaw and gave my mother a look. “Let me go check.”

And he did.

Mom had gone back to the boiling pasta. I sat on the arm of the couch and watched the closed captions pop up along the bottom of the muted TV. By the time Dad returned, Belvedere was at his side.

I sprung from my spot. “Did you find the marble I told you about? *Did you find it?* Or the person in the closet?”

He gave me a slight, gentle smile. It was a sad thing. “There’s nothing in your closet, Olive. I promise. I checked. The door was closed.”

My stomach dropped to my toes. “What?”

He shook his head. He handed me Daisy and Regina instead. Belvedere eased to the fireplace. With something like dejection, he dropped into the memory foam dog bed.

“Go play, honey. Dinner will be ready soon. There’s nothing in your room.”

I took my dolls. Dad patted me on the head.

As soon as the TV’s volume turned back on, my shoulders slumped. How could he have not seen anything?

I squished my tongue against the roof of my mouth and clutched both dolls in one fist. I waited until Mom and Dad were focused on their tasks before slipping into the sunroom. As I pulled up the wicker chairs to start my fort, classmates voices began to tumble through my head.

*Ew, Ivan, don’t play with Olive. She’s weird.*

*Her hair looks funny. Are you really gonna play Double Dutch with her?*

I sighed as I sank to my haunches. Rain began to patter on the grass and against the screened walls.

For the first time, I wondered if the kids at school were right.

## Chapter Two

*12 years old*

I held Daisy out in offering. “We can always play Horses. Daisy has a pony and I have another rider if you want. We can set up something here around the firepit—”

“That’s stupid, I don’t want to play with *dolls*,” Savannah sniped.

The words died on my tongue. We weren’t too old for dolls, were we?

I looked to Daisy’s permanent ponytail held together by a bread tie and her chipped, painted blue eyeshadow. She wasn’t the prettiest, but I didn’t think she was stupid.

Savannah looked around our backyard and zeroed in on the sand pit down the hill. It was huddled between two oak trees; the tree on the left twisted at an odd angle, similar to a lounge chair that finally decided to grow straight into the sun. It was perfect for climbing, but Dad said there was poison ivy on it somewhere, so I didn’t touch it.

Dad knew everything. Just like how Belvedere probably had a sprained leg from jumping out of the truck the other day when he started walking funny.

“I don’t care what we play,” Ivan whispered beside me. He twirled his hands into a knot. His glasses were crooked on the bridge of his nose, just like Dad’s always were, and his top lip was mustached with sweat.

“Really?” I whispered but Savannah said, “Well *I* do.”

Whitney grunted and sat down in the closet patio chair. We were outside before the sun hit noon’s high. Dad was supposed to set up the sprinkler after he brought Belvedere ere back from the vet.

I pulled at the hem of my shirt. Savannah would look fine in a bathing suit. She was long legs and pretty skin. Whitney was tall and athletic. Which left me.

The idea of either of them seeing me in my sunflower bathing suit made my throat burn.

“*We’re* gonna play in the sand pit,” Savannah crowed, finger pointed down the hill.

“I don’t think that would be a good idea,” I started. I looked to Whitney, but she was poking around the firepit, only to nudge Ivan and point to an ant hill around its base because, you know, priorities.

“You’re always so boring, Olive. Don’t be a party pooper,” Savannah said. She grabbed Whitney’s shirt sleeve and pulled her into a stumble down the hill, directly toward the trees.

Ivan squatted next to the ant hill and watched the tiny specks dance around their home. When he looked up at me, his nose wrinkled.

“I can play Horses with you,” he said with a snuffle. Ivan nose ran at a constant drip. He claimed allergies. “I think I saw poison ivy down there and my Dad says it would make football harder. It itches if you’re allergic and I don’t need anything holding me back.”

Ivan only came because his mom was friends with mine. He’d overheard Mom say something about Whitney and Savannah coming over and felt like he might be missing out on a party. When he showed up, he asked if it was my birthday. I’d said no and he’d looked sad.

If I were him, I would have been disappointed too.

But now I was kind of glad he came.

“Have you played Horses before?” I smoothed Daisy’s hair. Tugged down her shirt. It only sprung back into place.

“No, I haven’t,” he admitted. His russet hair stuck in all directions when he glanced down to his sandals. “But you can teach me.”

I picked at a place on my forearm and stood. It started bleeding, but I didn't care.

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I pushed my lunch around on my plate. If I separated everything into small enough piles—the chips on one side, the peanut butter and jelly on another, and the cherries on a napkin—it almost looked like I had eaten a little of everything. Usually, I slipped Belvedere some of my food. That way no one knew I didn't eat it.

The lights were off and the doors were propped open. Sunlight touched most corners, but not all. I made sure to keep my back to the hallway. Sometimes I caught reflections in the window across from me when I sat at the table, but I tried to ignore them.

Across from me, Savannah wrinkled her nose at her sandwich. I couldn't help but note her collarbones. Mine didn't show like that.

Whitney emerged from the kitchen, both hands full of chips.

"This isn't white bread," Savannah said. She pushed her plate away.

"Looks like normal bread to me," Ivan whispered from the head of the table. He squinted at his own bread.

"That's because you're poor," Savannah shot back. She peeled her top slice off and showed me the insides. "This is brown bread. My mom says brown bread is gross. I only eat white—"

"I'm not poor," Ivan cut in.

"Are too."

Ivan looked to me, then Whitney, who swallowed her chips. "Do you guys think I'm poor?"

Whitney snorted. "No."

Savannah puffed like a strutting turkey.

“I don’t,” I said, low. I didn’t think he *was* poor—from the way Mom talked, Ivan’s family was better off than a lot of families were—but I didn’t want to make Savannah mad at me either, especially if I had to wear a bathing suit in front of her.

“Are we gonna get the sprinkler out?” Whitney said with a braid flip. She came to hover next to me.

“When Dad gets home,” I said. “Which should be soon.”

There was a creak from upstairs. Savannah was too busy glaring at her bread while Ivan mumbled under his breath.

Something moved in the window reflection.

I stilled. So did Whitney.

Slowly, slowly, I glanced over my shoulder. The hall was empty.

“Did you see—” I started.

The front door opened with enough force to make us all jump. Dad entered first, Mom tight on his heels. His glasses were missing, his USC t-shirt was crumpled, and his eyes were red. Mom followed while pulling off her gardening gloves, her words low.

“Charlie, please, just slow down and start from the beginning.”

They disappeared somewhere down the hallway. A door shut. Their voices traveled like hitchhikers through the cracks in the floors and the paper-thin walls.

“I had to put him down, Marie. They said there was nothing that could be done and you didn’t answer your phone and...he’s in the backseat of the truck. How are we going to tell Olive?”

I didn't cry. But my father did.

*Belvedere had cancer, honey*, Dad said in his office. I wasn't sure how we got there or if Whitney or Savannah or Ivan said anything, if the door was opened or closed, or if Dad was sitting or standing when he told me this. All I knew was my ears rang and my blood hummed.

I think Dad took my lack of questions as shock. Something about a tumor on his spine. That was why he'd walked funny. *Already aggressive, already wrapped around his vertebrae, already in his kidney, already...*

Then Dad and I were walking back to the dining room. Mom gave me a hug—she smelled like potting soil—but her words were for Dad when she said, “Do you think I should call everyone about picking them up—”

My throat threatened to close. The answer blurted from my lips before Mom finished the sentence. “No.”

“Olive, I know you're upset—” Mom started, but I interrupted.

“I don't want them to go home.”

Her blue eyes were frosted. If they left now, what would I do? I would be alone tonight. Belvedere usually slept at the foot of my bed. His grey face separated me and my closet.

There must have been something like desperation in my eyes because after a few hushed exchanges and a question or two to Whitney and Savannah, my mom conceded.

That night, after Belvedere's blanket wrapped body had been buried under the willow tree and we'd painted a headstone for his grave, we watched a movie. Mom was talking on the phone in the kitchen while Dad passed a large bowl of popcorn between the five of us.

I feigned taking a handful and popping it into my mouth before handing it to Savannah, who refused it all together. Whitney took two scoops onto her paper towel before passing it to Dad. He offered more to Ivan.

“No thanks,” Ivan said.

Dad shook it. “You’re growing. Already taller than Whitney. You need it like a flower needs sunshine.”

“Dad said I shouldn’t take seconds at someone’s house,” Ivan said.

Dad’s jaw twitched.

Just as an RV went careening across the TV screen, Mom appeared in the juncture between the kitchen and living room. “Ivan?”

We all looked up.

“Are you okay staying tonight?” she whispered, but how did you keep a secret when everyone was sharing a rug?

Dad’s eyebrows shot to his hairline. Savannah elbowed Whitney and whispered something. Whitney paused, hand halfway to her mouth and glanced at me. Savannah giggled.

“Staying?” Dad asked.

Ivan sunk further into the loveseat. Dad was sitting below him on the floor, popcorn bowl still held in offering. She gave a breathy laugh. “Annalise just asked if he could stay.”

Ivan shriveled.

I locked my attention to the TV instead of staring, because Savannah already was, but the screen was blurry and my ears were tingling at attention. Mom took Dad back into the kitchen (but, again, the air was shared), and I strained enough to hear, “I offered. Sounds like Mike might be—having a rough one.”



Ivan had good hearing too, because he shook the popcorn bowl and coughed and that was the end of that.

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“You can ask. I know you want to.”

Mom made sure everyone had a toothbrush, blankets, pillows, and pajamas. Savannah and Whitney were already in my room, sleeping bags on the floor. They were talking in excited whispers—something about playing truth or dare.

I hovered just outside of my door, one hand gripping the doorframe, Ivan hanging outside one of the guest rooms. Our main light source was the blue flicker from downstairs.

“Ask about what?” I prompted.

Ivan’s cheeks were high and hollow from shadow, his shoulders straight. It didn’t occur to me until that moment that he kind of looked like a young man.

“About my dad,” he said.

“Olive!” Whitney cackled. “Come here, look at this!” Giggles turned to screeches.

“You don’t have to tell me anything. It’s your family,” I said.

His hand curled to a fist at his side. “I’d rather you ask than gossip about it with them.”

“I’m not going to gossip about you,” I whispered, borderline offended.

Ivan picked at the door frame. “He drinks.” He swallowed. “And hates when I’m home.”

I didn’t know what to say. My Dad never drank. He also never told me he hated it when I was around him. Thoughts started to bubble, of raised voices, angry faces.

“Oh.”

Ivan nodded. A pregnant pause hovered between us.

“Goodnight, Olive.”

“Night.”

I waited until Ivan closed his bedroom door before heading to my own.

My single pink lamp was on. Savannah sat on my bed, Whitney atop the sleeping bag closest to it. This left the sleeping bag by the closet empty and available.

“Your bed is comfy,” Savannah said.

A knot started in my throat. Panic. Her towel, toothbrush baggie, and clothes for the following day were already perched at the footboard, as if she’d taken residence and wasn’t about to move.

I kept my back to the closet as I sat down. “Uh...thanks.”

Whitney looked pained.

“Did you notice anything different?” Savannah asked. Her smile was so wide she reminded me of the Joker. “Take a nice little look around.”

Whitney gave a halfhearted chuckle. “Maybe we should—”

“Shut up, Whitney,” Savannah hissed.

I glanced around my room. My books were still in the shelf, my sketchpads and rocking chair still in place, until—

My doll hung upside down from the back of my desk chair, her foot caught in a shoe string. Her arms were straightened as if she were dangling from a bungee jump, swinging from one side to the next. Her head was popped off on the floor below her.

Savannah broke into a fit of laughter.

“Okay, I don’t think it’s funny—” Whitney began.

“Calm down, it’s just a joke,” Savannah said. “Something to make her laugh since the dog died today.”

Tears bristled behind my eyes.

Without speaking, I picked up Daisy, pushed her head back into place, and untied her ankle from the chair back. I smacked open a desk drawer, tossed her inside, and slammed it shut.

“Don’t get your pants in a knot,” Savannah said.

This was ridiculous. This was my room, my things, my *bed*, and now I had to sleep in the floor. But the kids at school—if I said anything to her, how many of them would know about Daisy, about Ivan staying because of his Dad, about Belvedere dying? How many laughs would there be?

With a slap of the light switch, we plunged into darkness. A heavy silence hung between the three of us. I crawled into my sleeping bag.

“Do you want to play would-you-rather, Whitney?” Savannah asked.

I think Whitney conceded. I wasn’t sure. I just pulled the sleeping bag up to my chin and stared at the closet door. There was a sliver of black that separated the door and the floor, so I focused on that until my eyes grew heavy and their voices finally faded when the grandfather clock sang midnight.

My joints loosened. My mind emptied until all I heard was tinkling dog tags and puppy breathing. Because Belvedere was supposed to be at my footbed with me in it, but he wasn’t.

A tear cut a path over the bridge of my nose and fell onto my pillow.

Everything ached.

Outside, wind whispered against the windows. I curled into myself, tighter, tighter, until I was a ball on my side, blinking against the darkness and wiping at my face.

*Pathetic*, a voice hissed. *No one will ever want to be friends with you. Not really.*

My lip wobbled. That’s when I saw it.

Something moved under the door.

My lungs froze. I didn't dare breathe.

Seconds passed and nothing happened. It looked like a shadow, maybe, but I wasn't sure.

The harder I stared, the more the darkness seemed to dance. Was I dreaming?

Whitney grunted in her sleep. My fingers itched to touch her shoulder, just to make sure she was still there.

What felt like an hour passed. I finally calmed my stuttering heart to a slow thrum when I heard it: another creak, like earlier.

Then a rolling marble—identical to the one six years ago—rattled across my bedroom floor from the closet door crack. The marble wobbled to a stop. The door popped open with a crying whine, just enough room for a hand to slip through, but everything was still.

My body trembled. It was a dream, a dream, a *dream*. This was not real. Dad had searched my room that day and there was nothing in my closet.

The voice was soft, old, and deep. It tangled around a single word.

*Oliiive*, it whispered. A roaring started in my ears. My face went numb.

Five smokey fingers curled from the dark recesses. One hooked in a come-hither motion. My teeth chattered. Then I shook my head.

“Go away,” I breathed.

The fingers snapped back into the closet. The door shut.

I stared for what felt like hours, but nothing moved. The marble was still. A tickling sensation started at the back of my head. *No one else will play with me. We are the same*, it said.

That night, I prayed until my words ran into each other, until the sun peeked through the curtains, until I realized the marble was gone and it all must have been a bad dream.

## Chapter Three

*17 years old*

A pencil eraser poked the back of my shoulder, right on the bone. I bit the inside of my cheek and continued to squint at the front of the classroom. It didn't help that Mr. Raymond's desktop was glowing like LED headlights. *Virginia AP History* arched across the whiteboard.

Another poke. I shifted away, my tailbone stinging from sitting so long.

"Hey, Fredrick," came a hissed whisper.

I kept my attention forward. Scribbled some more notes. We were covering trade goods through South Carolina, and it had always interested me the history surrounding the old plantation homes. Especially one's like our home, Harrington. It was crazy to think that so many families had walked those same floors—

*"Fredrick."*

To my right, Parker's head shot up at my last name. His jaw was clenched and his blonde strands were oddly blue in the darkness. "Shut it, Kenneth," he said to Ivan behind me.

I rubbed my eye. Did young men always have to refer to others by their last name?

Ivan shifted forward. I felt the heat of his body near my neck. "Mind your business, Glowell," he said over my shoulder. "I just need some notes."

I *felt* Parker's eyes flit to me. I didn't look up from my paper.

"What's wrong, too many concussions?" Parker sniped back. "Too stupid to—"

"Parker, stop it," I said through my teeth.

"Yeah, Parker," Ivan parroted. *"Stop it."*

Parker collected his lanky limbs and bent back over his paper. I made sure Mr. Raymond was absorbed in his desktop before I swiveled around.

“Do you mind?” I asked.

Ivan’s russet hair was unkept, but in an intentional way now, so much different than when he was younger. With the classroom lights off, I could just make out the rim of his contacts around his green irises. It was frustrating how clear his skin was for how many sports he played.

“What?” I pressed when he didn’t speak.

“Think you can help me with this later?” He grinned a bit.

At the back of the room, Savannah’s pencil stilled. It was a shame Whitney wasn’t in our AP State History class. She probably would have pushed Savannah out of her chair by now.

If I said no, all Ivan would do is complain in front of his friends how I didn’t help him. But if I did, he’d only come back next week and ask again. Not that he already didn’t do that. And I would be lying if I said it didn’t give the slightest bit of satisfaction that I was needed.

I steadied myself through a wave of lightheadedness. “I have to pick up my project after school.”

“I can drive you home.”

I balked at the offer. “I don’t think that’s—”

“No, it’ll be easy.” There was the tiniest flicker of warmth in his eyes. “I’ll help you take it home. If you take the bus, you might ruin it.”

I hesitated. He was right. The tri-fold had taken six weeks for me to put together. Mr. Raymond had even boxed up the little plantation exhibit I’d made to make sure it didn’t get hit with students moving in and out of the room.

I'd taken care to replicate Harrington Estate as accurately as possible for our final exam, from the front portico pillars, to the carriage drop off that Mom and Dad had renovated into a sunroom. The last thing I'd want is for something to happen to it before they got to see it.

"Fine," I whispered, "but don't say I never helped you."

---

A hand landed beside my locker exactly four minutes after the final bell rang. I recognized the green, twine bracelet on that golden wrist.

"What, Parker?" I asked, exasperated.

"Why are you skipping groups today." Not a question: a demand.

I glared. His hair was close to the sides of his head and a bit long on top. Whitney said he reminded her of a too-lanky Fabio.

"I have to take my presentation home," I said as I spun my locker combination.

He glanced around and whispered, "I'm serious, Olive. I'm not trying to—"

"Trying to what, Parker? I don't *have* to go."

His eyes narrowed. Fingertips drummed next to his head. "I still think it's a good idea."

"What, so everyone can talk about their feelings? All four of us?" I'd already planned on skipping group today to take my presentation home, but Parker needling me about it only reared something ugly inside of me.

"No, so you have an excuse to ditch Kenneth."

"His name is Ivan," I corrected. I stuffed my essentials in my bookbag.

"Yeah, and my name is Parker," he said, sarcastic. He gave a brittle laugh and smacked the locker twice, drawing four sets of eyes from the other end of the hallway.

My neck already was heating. It was such a terrible feeling—that bubbling, searing sensation that came with embarrassment. With attention.

“I’m sorry. You know I think he’s a jerk.”

I shut my locker with a screech. “I know—”

A single slip of paper fluttered to the tile hallway floor as the door shut, killing the end of my sentence. I was going to leave it, but Parker bent in retrieval and was unfolding it in seconds.

I snatched it before the words bloomed. “Just throw it away. You know it’s nothing.”

His nostrils flared, and his laugh was bitter. “What does it say this time?”

“Don’t you have a group to go to?” My fingers trembled as I stuffed it away.

“Stop ignoring me,” he said.

“Stop *talking to me*,” I snapped. My vision blurred with another headrush—even my joints ached when I held myself up against the locker wall, blinking. “Go away, Parker.”

A giggle jerked my head up like a puppet string. Savannah.

“What’s wrong, Olive? See something that spooked you?” Her pink lips sneered as she shouldered her way passed. A couple of laughs followed.

I hated the way her arms were limber, her shoulders angled, her face full but her neck slim. I hated that she was perfect without trying and I hated that she knew that I wasn’t.

*It will feel better if you hurt her*, a little voice said. It was warm. Inviting. It wound around my throat and squeezed like a hug.

“Never mind,” I choked. The hallway was closing in around me, strangling the air in my lungs. I needed my project, I needed Ivan, and I needed to leave.

Parker reached for my wrist. “Olive, don’t listen to—”

I stalked toward Mr. Raymond’s room, the checkered tiles still swaying.



I dug a nail into the soft skin by my elbow and picked, picked, picked.

—

I just made it out to the back parking lot, tri-fold board and plantation home display balanced in my hands and against my chest, when I spotted Ivan's truck. Dad was so excited to see the final product—it'd been the only thing he asked me about every night this week.

The parking spaces were mostly empty, save for a few stragglers. Some trickled like ants over the hill to the soccer field.

March was uncharacteristically warm, making my shoulders bunch like a preening bird's as I walked toward the truck, which roared to life as soon as my foot stepped off the sidewalk.

"Watch where you're going, Fredrick," someone barked.

A shoulder slammed into mine from behind. I tripped over my own ankle.

The box fell first. The display shattered on impact, all splintered wood and tiny cut outs. I caught myself in the middle of the round-about just before my face ate the pavement, but the tri-fold board scissored my chin, sending a shooting pain through the front of my mouth.

A truck door slammed.

"Oops," the voice said.

I glanced up, heat pouring down my chin.

Todd Platt, a varsity football starter, trailed a blonde. He reminded me of a bulldog on a good day, and right now he was too busy grinning to see Ivan climb out of his truck, burning fury like oil on a fire pit.

"Hey!" Ivan shouted, neck veins bulging.

Todd stilled. "What you say, Kenneth?"

"You think you're funny?" Ivan snarled. He made to grab Todd's shoulder.

“Don’t think you can touch me, pretty boy,” Todd snapped and shook him off.

Savannahs turned, eyes dancing.

I couldn’t help but count how many times I heard the school doors clank open in those fifteen seconds. Once, twice, three times, then four. The sound of footsteps slowing.

I pushed myself up, hands peppered with tiny rocks.

Ivan’s eyes were flat. He mumbled something under his breath that I didn’t catch. People were slowing, watching, waiting.

And then—Todd spat in his face.

Ivan’s punch sent blood spraying the pavement.

Rising exclamations broke with the slapping of shoe soles on concrete. I glanced up just in time to catch Whitney break through the double doors. The sound of a body hitting the pavement pushed her to a run.

“You wanna do that again?” Ivan roared. I wobbled to a kneel as Ivan bent over Todd, his hands curled into his shirt collar, their teeth bared. Todd was bigger than Ivan, but his nose was crooked and his teeth were pink. Ivan’s cheeks were freckled with blood.

“Stop it,” I coughed. I wiped at my neck. Red came away, seeped into the tiny cracks between my fingers. “Ivan. *Stop.*”

They were spitting words back and forth—until Todd shoved up and his forehead cracked Ivan’s nose. Todd tried to pull him down, but Ivan slipped an arm around his neck, and he squeezed.

“Hey, hey, hey!”

Mr. Raymond came barreling passed me and hauled both young men away from each other. Ivan went stumbling into the hood of his truck, his arms braced on either side, while Todd crouched with his hand cupped over his nose. Blood dribbled in offering.

“Enough! Right now!” Mr. Raymond’s reminded me of a wood chipper.

Everyone froze.

“You.” He pointed to Todd. “Inside. Right now.”

Todd grumbled something intelligible. Mr. Raymond snarled, “*Now*, Platt. Inside.”

Todd did as he was told. Mr. Raymond sighed, braced his hips with his hands, and turned to Ivan.

“Mr. Kenneth,” Mr. Raymond said.

Ivan straightened, which only elongated the blood that seeped into the front of his shirt into a drag strip.

“Can’t stay,” he said, clearing his throat. He wiped his face. “I’m supposed to take Olive home.”

There were some terse words that I couldn’t hear.

“Are you okay?” Whitney grasped both of my shoulders.

“I’m fine,” I whispered. That ringing started again, a hum, and I was tingling all over. I examined the shattered remains of my project.

“Are you sure? What hurts? You’re bleeding. Oh, no—Olive—I think you bit your tongue or your tooth broke.”

A whisper caught me last second. “I mean...the freak deserved it.”

I pinched my mouth shut to stifle the burn. Even then, the tears hit me before I climbed in the truck.

---

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to drop it.”

“Olive, that’s enough,” Dad said, curt, from the head of the table. He ran a hand over his face, knocking his glasses to the side. He straightened them just enough for visibility, but they were still crooked. Just like Todd’s nose. “I don’t care about the project—I’m sure it was lovely and you got a good grade and that’s all that matters, okay?”

After an emergency, but lucky, visit to the dentist’s office a mere twenty minutes before closing, the sun long had since set and blanketed the dining room in shadow. Mom’s eyes were drooping and she propped her arm on the table while she poked at her pork loin.

Over her shoulder, I could just make out the empty, dark hallway behind me.

“Okay,” I whispered.

This time, Dad sighed. “And you’re sure there’s nothing you want to tell us?”

I took a sip of water. It made my gums shoot with pain. “I can show you pictures of it—”

“That’s not what I’m talking about, and you know that,” he urged. He didn’t sound angry but there was a crispness to his words that made me look at him. He was already watching me.

“It was just a misunderstanding. You know how Ivan is. He just likes to pick fights with people.” I sat my glass down.

“If he’s anything like his father, I’m sure he does,” Mom said, eyeing my plate. The mashed potatoes. “Do they need salt? Or more butter?”

The perfect dinner: mashed potatoes, apple sauce, and ice cream, which was currently thawing on the counter, per the dentist’s orders. The thought of anything on my stomach made me want to eat a bottle of Tums.

I shoved a tiny spoonful into my mouth and smooshed them against the roof of my mouth before washing them down.

*Savannah probably doesn't eat mashed potatoes. Or have a fake front tooth*, I thought. I was exaggerating. It wasn't fake; but bonding meant half of it was.

The second voice was murky, almost faint.

*Admit it, dear, you enjoyed the attention.*

I coughed when something moved in the hallway.

It was tall. Like a person.

"Maybe it's best that you leave Ivan alone, then," Dad said, oblivious. "Not saying he's a bad influence."

Which was exactly what he was saying.

"I just don't want any more broken teeth, okay?"

The rest of dinner finished with little talk. My mouth started to hurt—Whitney was right, I bit my tongue (and broke a tooth), so it was a good enough excuse to refuse my plate.

I cleaned the dishes to fill the silence. Dad moseyed to the living room, and Mom took the stairs, so I followed when the final bowl was stacked in the cabinet. Her humming tinkled through the hallway like a beacon.

I found her perched on the edge of their bed, her pajamas already on and her hair twisted into a knot. She looked up from folding a pair of jeans and sat them on the chest at the foot of the bed. "What's wrong, honey? Do you need more of that pain killer?"

I floated by the door. Their room always reminded me of the beach: light blues, beiges, whites, and touches of dark brown here and there.

My mouth opened, then closed. I don't know why I was here instead of my room, but really, I did.

Something felt off. Like I wasn't *alone*.

"You know that club I said I joined?" I asked.

She hesitated. "You said Mr. Raymond has a history club, right?"

I nodded.

"What about it? Do you need help thinking of research ideas again?" she asked without looking up. She moved to the dresser and pulled out a sweatshirt. Her shoulder blades pointed underneath her shirt when she slipped it over her head. "You could always research lore around the house. There's so much you didn't even get into yet—"

"It's not about the house, Mom." Mom was a history nerd. It was part of the reason she and Dad bought it, even though she liked to say it was *too good of an opportunity to pass up*.

She turned to look at me.

*Parker asked me to join a therapy group*, I wanted to say. It was the rumors that would be swirling by Monday. It was the pitiful glances I would get from Whitney.

I needed someone to talk to—even if they weren't the talking type.

Mom's eyes flickered behind me.

*Talk about your feelings*, a voice said. *Tell her you notice the bones, dear. Even better, tell her about yours.*

"Is your Dad watching TV?" Mom asked. Her fingers traced absent circles on the lip of the open drawer.

"I think so," I said.

She blinked and shook her head. "Sorry, what were you saying, dear?"

“It’s a therapy group, not a history group. Parker thought I should go.”

“What do you need a therapy group for?”

A chill skirted down my neck, lower, lower, until it poked like a knife between my shoulder blades. I shivered. “I just thought it would be good for me. For things.”

Her laugh was brittle. “You don’t need therapy, Olive. I promise. If you’re worried about college, you still have time to come up with applications for different places.”

“I’m not talking about college.” *I’m seeing things*, I wanted to say, *I’m hearing things*.

“You don’t have a problem. You’re a straight A student, you’re in the history club, you’re taking advanced classes, and you have great friends! There’s nothing more you could ask for, dear.” More circles, over and over, until she pushed the drawer shut and shook her head with a scoff. “It’s a stressful time, I know, but I promise you’re overreacting.”

I felt like a door was drifting closed. “The history club was a lie I made up. I’m going to a group.”

“Olive. Honey.” Now her arms were crossed because, of course, barriers. “I think you’ve had a long day and I’m sure your mouth is hurting you so—”

“There’s a monster in my room,” I blurted just as she turned her back to me and walked to the bathroom.

*Olive*, it echoed. I stole a glance back.

The hallway was a trench. Empty and black with no end behind me.

My bedroom door moved.

Mom laughed, whipping my attention back around.

“You’re funny, honey.” There was something sharp in her words that made me look back at her. “Now go to bed. I’m serious. That medicine is strong, and I’d rather you sleep while it’s in your system than have it wear off while you’re still awake.”

The tang of metal spread through my mouth. I was biting down on something—maybe my cheek, while I stared at her.

She dissolved into the bathroom. The shower cut on. The door drifted shut, only part way, so she let me feel like she was taking me seriously. To leave the proverbial door open, too.

So I left.

When I shut my door, I left all the lights off.

She didn’t believe me. She thought I was joking. If I told Dad, would he say the same? Weren’t my parents supposed to tell me if something wasn’t right, even with myself?

Movement from the right of my eye caught my attention.

Daisy was hanging from the back of my chair, a shoe lace around her ankle. Upside down, arms stretched out, just as she did when Savannah put her there when I was younger. She swayed back and forth, back and forth, the sound of her plastic arms hitting the wood the only indication that I wasn’t hallucinating.

A part of me broke.

I stumbled forward and ripped Daisy from the chair back. Everything boiled under my skin, into my heart, and I threw her across the room. She hit the closet with enough force for an arm to fly off. The pieces clattered onto the floor and into shadow.

“Leave me alone,” I snapped. “I *know* you’re there.”

Silence met me.



Then a teasing, dark chuckle came from everywhere and nowhere. I made for my lamp, but tendrils of shadow flitted from under the bed. No, not shadows—oily fingers. Claws.

I jumped back, tripped over the foot of my bed, and scrambled backward on the floor until my spine hit the door frame. Moonlight haloed every bit of furniture.

There was something under my bed.

Gasping, I ducked down to check, but it was empty. With a sigh, I looked up, and saw it.

The glint of a black marble, right before it drifted under the bed. Shadows swallowed it whole, and then I was alone.

## Chapter Four

*19 years old*

I recognized a lot of the people here today. They floated between the porch pillars, into the foyer, passed the living room, before they settled in the kitchen and porch just beyond. There wasn't a single surface that hadn't been touched by an unfamiliar hand.

The single other person that *did* live here wasn't even *here* anymore.

Well, Mom was here. She was just hiding upstairs.

I didn't blame her.

Whitney stepped forward just in time to block another weepy-eyed visitor. I kept to my corner, halfway out of the sunroom, wrapped in my Dad's USC blanket, a cloud of frustration, and afternoon shadow.

"Ms. Orchan! Yes, I know, it's so nice to see you. Wish it was under different circumstances." Whitney's black braids were twisted into a thick donut at the top of her head. I focused on its center while her head bobbed with every word. "Thank you for your condolences. I'm sure you understand it's a sensitive time, so the Fredricks would appreciate if you left your dishes in the kitchen with the others. My mom can point you in the right direction..."

More people—a family that lived down the street from us—shuffled after Ms. Orchan. It was like a train station: one right after the other. I should have been thankful this many people loved my dad.

I wasn't.

They didn't love him. Not really. Not like we had.

Two kids, no older than eight and five, trailed their father. I tightened the blanket around my shoulders, catching the little girl's eyes, before her dad placed a hand atop her head and steered her past Whitney.

The father, Daniel, gave Whitney a nod. "Sure am sorry. Charlie was a nice guy. How are Olive and Marie holding up? I haven't seen—"

"Best they can," Whitney cut in. She shifted a bit and blocked me from view. "If you could follow Ms. Orchan with your dish, I'm sure my mom can still find a place—"

Memories rotated like a carousel, each one a bit more painful than its predecessor.

Dad bumping my head on the bedroom doors when he carried me to bed at night.

Dusting his chess trophies every week while he sang.

Sun baking mudpies from the backyard on blistering days.

I needed to get away from this. The murmured words that varied between condolences and memories. Every stare that landed on me felt heavier, lonelier, and I just wanted it to stop.

I pushed up from the wall and skirted the halls until I reached Dad's office, which was silent. I went in and shut the door behind me, hand hanging on the knob. Slowly, I backed away.

I stood, hands open at my sides, in the middle of the room. In only four days, a faint layer of dust gleaned the shelves. If I looked through his drawers, I knew I'd find a slew of pens, handwritten wills and a power of attorney, notes on the latest chess tournaments, and a few Polaroid pictures. His one drawer—he called it his Survival Drawer—had an old burner phone next to a first aid kit, a lock box that likely housed his Ruger, a box of ammo, and a few pictures from when I was a baby and when him and Mom eloped. The wardrobe behind his desk had a few of his father's old Army jackets and a single Grecian costume that he'd found at a thrift shop a few years ago.

Once a year he'd spontaneously emerge in it. A month ago, he chose the week I moved back from college for the summer. Something about needing to celebrate having me home.

I ran my fingers along the oak desk. Neat, just like he liked it.

He'd last touched it Monday. He left it as if he'd return that night and not get hit crossing the street. Both my father and the driver were texting; only the driver was in a vehicle, and my father died on impact. And now Mom hadn't left her room in days and I didn't know what to do.

I opened his wardrobe and fingered through the jackets, the toga, and a winter coat. They still smelled like him, with a tinge of old wood from being confined.

"Do you want us to keep them, Dad?" I whispered.

The air chilled. The voices outside the room seemed to fade for a split second.

*Just leave. They will not miss you,* the monster said. *Dear,* he added, almost like an afterthought.

I picked at a spot on my forearm. If I ignored it—*him*—he'd probably go away. He usually did. When I talked back, he usually talked more. Maybe it was loneliness that made me listen to him.

My gaze narrowed. I chewed my lip.

The sound of tires on the driveway tore my attention from the wardrobe. I brushed my hand on Dad's coat before snapping the wardrobe door shut. There. Problem solved.

An ashy hand shoved it back open and grabbed my wrist.

With a yelp, I jerked away. Claws scraped the skin but whipped back into the wardrobe's innards before I had a chance to collect my bearings.

The thing had touched me.

I jumped again when a door slammed outside.

Ivan, Trevor Baker, Warner Chan, and David Yew piled out of an SUV. Two were carrying vases of flowers while Mr. Yew carried a covered aluminum tray. It looked just like the three other pork trays in our kitchen.

I tried deep breaths to settle the racing in my chest. The desk corner bit into my hand, and I glared at a framed photo of my parents beside me.

“Why did you have to know so many people?” I asked.

Dad, in one of his striped polos, just smiled back at me.

The voice, again. This time it came from the wardrobe.

“Shame you do not know as many. At least these people liked your father,” he said. I inched away but didn’t so much as acknowledge him. Instead, I focused on Ivan.

The men approached the door with stiff movements. Dad had been the head of the chess club at USC, so the voice was right. A lot of people liked my dad. His students, the faculty, the guys from the lodge.

Mr. Yew led the posse, so he stopped at the door first and knocked.

From the back of the house, Whitney yelled, “It’s open!”

Ivan stood at the end of the group with empty hands. He was bigger than I remembered in high school. Football material. He looked like his father.

His gaze skimmed the house, the weedy flower beds, and paused when he saw me staring through the window.

The other three men entered. After those blues watched me for a beat too long, Ivan followed them inside. Not even seconds later, Dad’s office door knob jiggled. I only turned to stare at it.

“Olive,” Ivan whispered. “I know you’re in there.”

There was a scratch—*inside* the wardrobe.

*Olive*, the baritone voice mocked over my shoulder.

“Go away, Ivan,” I said.

I *felt* the thing in the wardrobe smile.

“I just want to talk for a second,” Ivan said. The sound of tangled voices, a ribbon of laughter, came from the rest of the house. I hadn’t talked to Ivan since graduation. The only person I really wanted to talk to was being buried tomorrow.

There was a thud like Ivan’s forehead had fallen against the door. He sighed. “Come on, open the door. Please.”

The air was heavy. Suffocating.

I held my breath. The tiniest part of me wanted to talk to him. He’d been annoying in school, but he was the only one besides Whitney who ever stood up for me.

I owed him at least five minutes. The knob was slick when I finally turned it.

Ivan slipped in, both hands in his jean pockets. His sage green shirt played against his tanned skin like a man hugging their lover goodbye. The image made me bite my tongue.

When I closed the door but didn’t turn, he cleared his throat. The room echoed with it.

“Why are you hiding in here?”

I still faced the door. “Because there are too many people out there.”

“Bit rude, don’t you think?” he asked.

A black marble seemed to roll around in my gut, then down, down, down until it splashed somewhere in my toes. “It’s rude to say they missed my dad when they didn’t know him.”

Silence.

“Why are you here?” I asked. Now, I did turn.

Ivan sat on the couch arm on the right side of the room, beside my dad's lamp. He dwarfed everything. Or maybe it was his breathing that made the room feel smaller, like his oxygen was bulky, like the idea of someone else being alive within these walls was almost a sin. "I guess I came to be rude like everyone else and say I'm sorry your dad passed."

Clouds passed outside, blocking the room in an ominous shadow. The wardrobe doors still weren't closed all the way. One hung ajar by an inch.

I chose to ignore it.

"I'm sure you have enough food to feed a small army," Ivan started.

I looked at the floor. What was I supposed to say?

Neither of us spoke for a while. Eventually, Ivan stood and examined Dad's office, the pictures on the walls, the books on his shelves. I should have felt defensive of his things, but for some reason when Ivan began reading the trophy plaques, I found myself waiting for him to speak again. I fixated on the back of his neck as he moved around the room.

He stopped by a hanging portrait, this one with me in elementary school and Mom and Dad holding my hands in front of an overhead banner, which screamed, *Congratulations, graduates!*

"How's your mom doing?" he asked. His voice didn't soften like others did.

"She's not," I said, choked.

"Figured."

"Why do you say it like that?" My fingers danced over my left arm, searching. I rubbed the knob of my elbow before wrapping myself in a hug.

"Y'all are alike. I guess. Don't know." He shrugged and eased around. He stopped in front of me. "How's school?"

“Better than Belleview.” I think I cried of happiness the day I graduated high school.

“No bullies?”

I shrugged.

His eyes narrowed. “You still let people push you around?” To the left of Ivan’s shoulder, the wardrobe door wavered again, like someone wanted to look out from inside.

“I don’t *let* people push me around.”

His arms crossed.

I squared myself. “Why? No one else to copy homework notes off of? Are you worried your old information plug will get tossed in a ditch somewhere?”

I’m not sure where the defensiveness came from. A writhing hole in my chest, surely. I knew there was no need for it, because everyone moved on after high school, and I had no reason to lay claim to even the tiniest of shreds of Ivan Kenneth. He wasn’t a safety blanket then; he didn’t need to be one now.

He was starting lineup on the football team, and I was a pressure-induced worrier.

Ivan reached out and plucked my chin with his index finger. “Maybe I don’t want to see you with a full mouth of veneers. Still got that fake tooth?”

“No, I grew a new one.” I pulled back, cheeks going hot. Then I sighed, “Of course, I still have it.”

He smiled but it was so close to a sneer that I looked to the rug. “Seriously. How’s everything been?”

“Wow, you care,” I sniped. When I looked up, his expression was flat. “I’m serious.”

“So am I,” he said.

Maybe he was.



The lining in my chest softened.

“Until Monday, everything was okay. I guess. What about you? How’s your Mom?” It was an unspoken rule that I didn’t ask about his dad. I only ever heard updates on his dad’s sobriety—or attempt thereof—through my own mother through town gossip.

“Ah, didn’t you hear? Old Analise is dead.” There was a halfhearted crack at a smile, as if it was a joke.

I froze. “What?”

“Yeah. Dad was drunk and killed her. I came home for Christmas break and she was on the kitchen floor. He was passed out on the couch with the gun in hand. Woke up saying something about not letting her leave. So I guess he just...” He held a fist to his head and dropped it in a jerking motion.

“The Stetson Herald didn’t get ahold of this?” I asked, referring to the local gossip rag.

“My uncle pulled a few strings, I think.”

The wardrobe door opened wider. Two inches.

Five tendrils curled around the door. Pointed claws, a thick palm, birthed from a blackness so thick I didn’t even see the jackets that hung inside the wardrobe.

It took a lungful of composure to slide my attention back to Ivan and say, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Everyone is.”

“Do you know why?” My voice was small. The faintest of flickers from my peripheral.

“She ran around on him. Can’t say I blame him.”

“She cheated on your dad so he killed her.” I picked at a place on my forearm while I said it, my attention threatening to drift back toward the wardrobe. I caught myself while Ivan was, but it was hard to listen when a hand had just emerged from a space it shouldn’t have.

“Then himself. Probably figured why not.”

I fought a recoil. Ivan was so—clinical about their deaths.

Something lurched, reached, coiled around me. Like I sensed a kindred, but it had a reflection I didn’t quite recognize.

“Don’t know, I guess she should have expected something like that from him. He’s never had a good fuse, so why push it, you know? She should have just left. But she didn’t. It’s her own fault.”

“But you stayed,” I whispered. I shifted my weight. “You can’t blame her when you did the same thing—”

“I’m not here to talk about what could have, should have, would have happened and all that, okay?” The rug whispered when he stepped forward. “I want to know why dear ole Olive is hiding in her dad’s office when you could have just called me to pick you up and take you out.”

The words *take* and *out* vibrated between us. Like they shouldn’t belong together when we were sharing the same six feet of space.

“Out,” I deadpanned. My eyes felt crusty with each blink.

A nod. “Yeah. That’s what I said. Not a bad idea—”

There was a knock on the door.

“Olive, your mom is asking—I’m sorry.” Whitney hung halfway in the door, mouth slack. “Ivan. You’re here.”

“Whitney,” Ivan said by way of greeting. The air was tense.

Whitney licked her lips. “Your mom is asking if you could come out for a minute.”

“She finally came out of the bedroom?” There was a twinge of hope in my words.

Whitney’s eyes churned. “Please?”

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“I just don’t see why we need to talk about this right now,” I snapped. “Why’s selling his truck—”

“Keep your voice down, please,” Mom urged.

We stood in the sunroom down the hallway and off of the kitchen. The door was closed, but that didn’t mean anyone wandering outside couldn’t hear us. The sun was making its descent into the trees, and there were still people in the house. Not as many as before, but enough to pluck my nerves. Every time I turned a corner, someone new was there, giving condolences and quite frankly, I’d nodded my head enough times that a crick was developing. I had no more tears to offer with even less patience.

Why couldn’t everyone just leave and let us cry at the walls in silence?

“The funeral is expensive,” she said. “I wasn’t prepared.”

“None of us were,” I said. It was a plea.

His voice again, closer: *She does not care about you, dear. Look at her.*

Mom swirled her wineglass with a deep breath. Her eyes were puffy, her neck was flushed, and she held onto a chairback for support.

For some reason, it made Ivan’s words dance. *Ah, didn’t you hear? Old Analise is dead.*

Mom didn’t drink often, but watching her like this made my blood curdle.

*Leave her,* the shadow whispered from the corner of the room, just over her shoulder.

I blinked, blinked again, but nothing changed. I fisted the hem of my blouse and pulled down.

*Let her wallow,* the darkness hissed.

“I don’t need you to be upset with me right now, honey,” Mom started. She pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead. The setting sun was the only color on her face. “Just—I’ll worry about it. Never mind.”

She waved me off and turned her back to me. The coffee table was littered with tissues, a newspaper, something that resembled a photo album, and a stack of history books, because Mom fact-checked when she needed a distraction.

She could have all of these things and still not need me, not when I needed her.

I swallowed the thorns growing in my throat and left. Straight up the stairs. It wasn’t until my bedroom door closed behind me that I gasped like I was drowning.

No—I *was* drowning.

The windows were still open. My lamp was on from the night before.

It was the same, yet different. The duvet and rug had changed since I left for college. The dollhouse long since was replaced with a desk and easel, the rocking chair now a bookshelf brimmed with novels I’d dogeared and highlighted.

I leaned against the door. Then looked to my closet.

I cleared my throat. In that second, I was a child again, screaming for my parents when that marble rolled from under the door. Terrified.

I would never see my father again. It felt like Mom was floating out to sea minus a tether to hold her to shore.

Dying sunlight oozed over the floors.

There would be no walks down the aisle. No Christmas as a family, no more crooked glasses on the bridge of his nose while he leaned in the recliner. He wouldn’t be singing, poorly, to Mom while he arranged his trophies and I dusted.

I curled my hands at my back. A shudder wracked my chest. The sob bubbled so easy.

I sank to the floor.

*Take it away*, I thought. How many people would be talking about our family now?

Would they whisper about us like people surely whispered about Ivan's parents?

The voice was faint. Familiar like a worn pair of bedroom shoes.

*Selfish thing, aren't you*, he said.

Shudders wracked my shoulders.

"He's gone," I said through tears. "My dad is dead and I'm not even—I can't even—"

His voice was everywhere and nowhere. I sunk into a ball on the floor, because sitting upright left the softest parts of the body exposed.

"I offer a bottle for your tears," the shadow said, and I couldn't help but note the irony of his words. Was he saying he could collect my pain?

The idea was enticing.

"Make it go away," I choked, squeezing my eyes shut. The floor ate into my hip bone.

"Make them all *go away*."

*Such faith in what you know not*, he said.

If I could sink into the wood, the pain would go away. All of this—this hole opening beneath me, the hollow echo in my chest, in the porous hovels of my bones. It would vanish.

"I don't want to do this anymore."

A hiss morphed into a growl. Teeth snapping together.

*Clack...clack...clack.*

There was something comforting in the way the room grew cold and how the little hairs on my arms stood at attention. For once it felt like I had someone listening to me.

Or maybe it was the idea of having something so sinister in my corner that I almost felt protected. It made my muscles loosen, if only a little. So I blinked—and for the first time, I saw him.

Two eyes the color of citrine stared back at me. They were upturned at the corners, catlike. My heart beat wildly, like I was watching a reflection but it didn't move when I moved.

*Weak, he growled. Admit it, you enjoy the attention.*

"I've never wanted any of it," I said to the floor.

*You wanted me. It excites you when I visit.*

My molars ground. He was taunting me. Maybe an attempt to distract me? Or was I welcoming a distraction myself? "I'm not afraid of you."

Oily teeth glinted in a smile. They were jagged, long enough to be the length of my fingers. *You cannot lie to me. I can hear your heart beat like a frightened bird's.*

He pulled himself from beneath the bed. Muscled arms slunk forward. His skin was grey and textured with sharp bones around his face. The flutter in my chest quickened.

It felt nice to believe it, if only for a moment, that this dark thing was talking to me. That feeling from before began to grow; and I knew it was desperation. Was I truly so desperate for acceptance, for companionship, that I would entertain such a thing?

We stared at each other.

I decided I was. I just needed him to prove himself—that this wasn't a hallucination.

"You're make believe," I murmured. I kept my hands tucked, my breathing light.

He grinned. *I am real.*

A pause. "You aren't."

*You speak to me. You let me in. That is how it always begins, dear.*

This time I didn't argue. There it was—more warmth in my chest. Hope?

"You've...always been here," I said, more to myself.

He halted just at the foot of my bed. A hand with battered, shredded knuckles reached out and flattened on the floor. The skin looked like partially picked, almost healed. Like my arms.

Could a monster struggle with self-worth, too?

"What's your name?" I croaked.

*Hadrian.*

"What are you?"

*You already know what I am.*

I pushed up.

*You will be a burden for her here*, he said. It was unnerving to hear his voice inside of my head, to see his lips move faintly, but the sound wasn't audible. *You know this.*

My lip trembled. I bit down on it.

*Burdens grow tiresome.*

A single tear fell. He was right. I would be a burden to her, eventually, if not already.

*I can carry you, if you wish.*

His eyes were relaxed as they watched me. Inviting, almost. My hand unfurled against me. Slowly, I let my hand shift closer—just a bit.

Hadrian pulled himself up, closer, dipping low so his shoulder was revealed. His head tipped at an odd angle to maneuver a set of curved horns around the footboard of the bed.

*The saddest part of all*, he started, but a snarl his words turned audible. "Is that no one—"

His words were in my throat.

"—would believe you—"

In my chest.

“—if you told them about *me*.” The last word ended in a rumbled *meeee*. “But you have already tried that, have you not...dearest?”

We were two feet apart. The smell of dank rooms and dust and earth filled my nostrils. My chest heaved.

“Haven’t you?” he asked, forceful. The longer I looked at Hadrian, the more solid his silhouette became.

I nodded.

“I can be a lot of things for you. I scared away that little girl all those years ago. Why do you think she never came back?”

My body went lax. “What are you talking about?”

“I have already been with you longer than you know.” His teeth parted. Those nails scraped across the floor just like Belvedere’s used to. “You should not be rid of me, Olive. I can help everything hurt less.” When I didn’t respond, he went on. “I could have hurt you long ago. I have not. Do not turn a cheek to someone who has lived through loneliness and loss and death far more than you. It is a shame to watch a young woman struggle through these things—alone. No one cares about your feelings, child. I can help you. Through everything.” His expression softened the slightest amount.

Flutters.

No one had told me that before.

I wiped my chin. “And you’ll help me?”

“Of course, I will. You do not *need* anyone else—no one else but me.”

## Chapter Five



*21 years old*

Autumn was the hardest.

It wasn't seasonal depression. I long past accepted I had something more chronic. I think what ate around my chest, my lungs, the most was the reminder of time's passage. I liked the cooler evenings, the multicolored leaves that emerged one afternoon seemingly out of nowhere, but I hated looking at the calendar and remembering my father's laugh and knowing I wouldn't hear it again. That I probably wouldn't hear my mother's, either.

I glanced to the grandfather clock in the corner of the store. The hour hand was just now inching passed five o'clock.

No, the hardest part was when the air changed a few days before my birthday. When dew turned to frost for the first time and the nights dipped below fifty. It wasn't merely a reminder that I was getting older. In a span of twenty-four hours, and the week prior to my birthday, I was reminded of all of the things I hadn't done. Of all the things I would never be able to do again. All of the firsts and lasts I experienced that I didn't even know about yet.

"But think of all the firsts you're still yet to have," Whitney told me once over coffee. "What about those times?"

What happened when you were too far from the surface to see them?

"Are you sure you'll be okay closing?" Meredith asked. She was an older woman, with espresso skin and deep eyes. Too deep because she saw everything.

She plucked her jacket from the coat rack just behind the counter. "I can wait to give you a ride. If I'd known you had your car in the shop, I wouldn't have asked you to cover."

I tightened my apron. "I skipped today anyway. My professor canceled last minute."

“I’m talking about the walk, not you missing class.”

“It’s not far,” I assured her, fidgeting with the keyboard until it was aligned with the monitor. “And I like working close.”

“Too far to be walking alone,” she corrected. “And it gets dark to early now.”

“There’s still daylight at close. I’ll be fine.”

Those perfectly arched brows inched toward her hairline. “Mmhm. You’re the only young woman I know that would take a shift on a Friday night.”

“I don’t mind, you know that.”

She scoffed and eased around the corner of the check-out counter. “You should be enjoying your last year, dear.”

That word. *Dearest*, he echoed.

I combed my hair back from my face, neck sweaty. I flicked a few stray strands away.

“It’s a lot of people,” I said, which wasn’t a lie.

*Meredith’s* wasn’t busy. That was the allure of working here. That, and the namesake didn’t care if I did my homework during slow hours.

She made another nondescript noise before finally shuffling toward the door. As if reading my mind, she said, “Well, there’s a football game down at the high school tonight so you probably won’t be too busy. Get that homework done, girlie. And *call. Me*. If you need a ride.” I busied myself with the donation jar at her finger wag.

“Yes, ma’am.” I wouldn’t.

Meredith was a sweet woman. She usually made it easier to forget. Then there were other times that the sunshine beneath her skin made breathing that much more painful.

The door jingled closed in her wake. My shoulders sunk with a sigh.

I was alone.

The refrigerator whirled from the backroom.

*Meredith's* was a quaint shop. In Stetson, there was one stop light. The only places to frequent were this gift shop, Lottie's Diner, and *Dosi-Do's Ice Cream* across the street.

On cue, their sign flickered and flashed before the last two letters in *Dosi* went dark. *Do -Do's Ice Cream* now blazed in the dying evening sun.

I retrieved the disinfectant wipes from below in their cubby and started to wipe, per my usual pattern: cash register, counter, then onto the front display tables. They were filled with fall trinkets, mugs, dishes, and cookware. Aprons screamed "Kiss the Cook!" and "Poke the Chef!"

I swiped over a dining room set up before moving on to the assortment of coffee bags. They were stacked four rows deep inside of an old, refurbished China cabinet Meredith had salvaged from a place in North Carolina. She'd gotten her grandson to haul it for her and set it up the next day. Something about, "It just *cannot* wait, Olive, you'll see."

Overhead, the radio whispered a sugared country lullaby.

It crackled with static.

I kept wiping.

Night circled outside. Every now and then, the darting shape of a bat made me look up. My reflection began to follow me in the windows. The only pinpoints of light were a trio of street lamps that illuminated the intersection and the occasional passing vehicle. Over the course of thirty minutes of disinfecting, the stoplight flitted between green, yellow, and red a total of forty-six times.

The radio crackled again.

The hairs on my arm stood on end.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and rounded the check-out counter. If someone would just come in to buy something, then I wouldn't be alone with—

The cubby beneath me lit with light from within. I jumped.

Hand over my throat, I closed my eyes and counted to ten. It was just my phone vibrating. Someone texted me. No big deal. The Clorox wipe dripped in my right hand while my phone blinked with the first text: *Meredith called about u not having a car?*

In a rapid-fire succession, three more followed:

*Am I picking u up?*

*Why didnt u tell me?*

*Need to know ASAP.*

The screen fell asleep after a minute. It was then that I saw a towering shadow pass in the back hall that tunneled to the breakroom.

There but not there. If I gave him a moment, he would be.

Standing, Hadrian was much taller than I expected. His eyes were heavy, tracking from the hallway corner, as I tossed the wipe into the trash. Like every movement meant something.

*Aren't you going to answer?* he whispered to me.

"I wanted to walk home," I said.

*Mm.*

I glared at him. He reminded me of a deep spot within a lake. Had I not been looking for him, he may have blended easily, but that familiar shoulder slope, the curve of those tall horns, and slitted eyes were hard to miss after once.

"Interesting," he said aloud. Then Hadrian sneered and chattered his teeth.

My skin prickled. It was always unnerving to hear him speak to me.

I started sorting through the counter again. I straightened the card reader and then dumped the paperclip jar out so I could start sorting by color—

“Dearest.”

My voice shook. “I have to start closing, Hadrian.”

“She keeps a short leash,” he said simply.

My Mom had a lot going on—or that’s what I told myself. I craved those silent moments like a land stranded fish did water. But Meredith’s concern hovered over the backs of my hands, saying, *too far of a walk, even for you.*

“Maybe.”

“I would say you’re old enough to make your own decisions. A woman above twenty is long since capable.”

“I know.”

I moved on to the pen jar after a long moment of silence. Once the pens were sorted by color, I began placing them within the jar by order of the rainbow.

The whirring of the refrigerator only intensified.

*Good,* he whispered. *I will follow, if you do.*

Over the past year and a half, I recognized a pattern. He whispered to me when he was unsure. Tentative. He spoke when he felt more comfortable with me.

“I know you’ll always come with me,” I said.

He inched forward. “Do you, now?”

There was a hint of something in his words. Goosebumps traveled up to the back of my neck. It reminded me of love, but not quite. It’s distant cousin twice removed, maybe.

I wanted him to talk to me. Hadrian was...always there. But his question made me still.

“You said as much.” The last of the pens fell into the jar. I placed it back by the monitor.

This made him laugh—and sneer. “Ah, an adventure. This could be grand.” He clacked his teeth together one last time, then licked his lips. His skin looked soft despite the push and pull of sinew around his neck. “Leaving would be good for you. You deserve it. To be out on your own. She can’t expect you to stay forever. She needs to learn to stand on her own, as do you.”

My chest ached. To not have to answer to anyone. To come and go as I pleased. To not have to deal with the sobs in the middle of the night, or the bitterness during the day.

*Just act like you have some sense. I’ve been through enough the past few years.*

*Get a grip, Olive. The world isn’t sunshine and rainbows, you know. You can’t be upset about things all the time.*

The irony of her words never ceased. Hadrian, it seemed, knew this too. He was the one that came and went in the midst of the fathomless silence.

One afternoon, Mom was working on the dregs of a wine box. The conversation had started with a side comment about getting home late. Then came the yelling, and something was said about my graduating early.

“Do you not think I did a good job?” I pressed.

“It should be expected, since all you do is sit at home!” she exclaimed, face flushed, hovering in front of my father’s recliner.

A heat had fallen on my side, just around my ribs. A warning when Hadrian was feeling particularly frustrated. “*Angry*,” he’d snapped in my ear. “Do not let her speak to you like this. She has jealousy in her words.”

“You’re just jealous,” I’d fired back.

She’d anchored herself on the stairway railing now. “Excuse me?”

Growls rippled over my skin.

*Protect, protect, protect*, he'd seemed to whisper.

"You're jealous I have choices and you've locked yourself in this bubble. I can leave and you can't," I'd said, venom inching into my words.

*This is why we do not like people*, Hadrian said from the living room corner. *All they do is hurt you.*

He was right back then, which meant he was probably right now.

A muffled voice broke my train of thought.

"...don't think it's a big deal," the first voice said. A hazy silhouette walked by the front store windows on the phone. The next thing I knew, the doorbell jangled.

"—asking that you just—did I say that?"

Hadrian vanished to smoke and I whirled. A man walked in. The top button of his flannel was fastened one notch below his collarbone. He glanced up, froze, phone pressed to his cheek.

I knew that head of hair anywhere. I'd stared at the back of it for years in class.

"Let me call you back," he said. The phone disappeared in his pocket a moment later.

Every nerve in my body was on fire. I hadn't seen Ivan since my Dad's funeral. Whitney was the only person I talked to on a semi-regular basis, and usually she called me first in an attempt to get me to hang out (which also happened once since my Dad's funeral).

Human interaction was hard. When I knew I wouldn't see someone again, it was easier. Otherwise, the knobby, slender fingers that lived around my throat would tighten, waiting to strangle me before someone else's words did. I knew it was a problem—that perpetual fear of talking to people, being judged, or later being rumored about.

But there was also a desperate, bleeding part of me that wanted a friend because being alone was draining, and having the thing from your closet befriend you was a sad kind of solace to accept.

“You look familiar,” Ivan said, eyes already roving the display stands. A few glistened with cleaner. Until they settled back on me. I couldn’t tell if he was being serious or not.

So I did the only thing I knew to do: deflect.

“Can help you with anything?” I wiggled the mouse around, typed into the search bar a bunch of nonsensical words, deleted them, then started again to make myself look busy.

Ivan already left a cookbook—lying on the display table, out of place—and moved through the other stands toward the coffee bags. He picked up a pour-over drip and blew out some nonexistent dust.

“This is that All-Hambert brand of coffee, right?” He held it over his shoulder, logo facing me. It was a duck with a sailboat hat on and the slogan, “All-Hambert, All-Ways!” smiling beneath.

“It’s local,” I said, as if that explained everything.

Ivan’s hair used to be shorter, but now it stood on ends in a few places, and his skin had darkened a bit with sun.

“I don’t know if this is the one she wanted,” Ivan sighed, rotating the bag.

I gripped the edge of the counter, debating if I should answer.

In the back of my head, Hadrian huffed. *Always so concerned over other’s opinions of you. How many times have I told you to keep these nitwits at arm’s length?*

In other words, Hadrian didn’t want me to care. I probably shouldn’t care. But I’d grown up with Ivan. It would be a lie to admit the lack of acknowledgement hurt.



Ivan sifted through a few more before shaking one, apparently decided.

I was sweating. Why was I sweating? I dumped the paperclip jar out on the shelf below the register and started sorting them by color—again. After a few minutes of awkward silence and Ivan perusing, a clatter echoed from the backroom. His head jerked toward the hallway. Mine did not. Things happened that were unexplainable, and ignorance created the smallest pocket of bliss.

Ivan was suddenly in front of the counter, two coffee bags and a pour-over held in his arms. I dropped a few of the paperclips.

“Meredith still here tonight?” he asked.

“Sorry, she went home,” I said with a slight bite. Maybe Hadrian’s way was best.

The curve of a shoulder appeared in the hallway. The only two light spots were a pair of yellow eyes, as if he could sense a hint of my admission.

“Thought I heard something back in your—”

“Don’t worry about it,” I cut in. “The refrigerator’s been acting up. It’s fine.”

Never was it actually a broken refrigerator or a rat problem or mice. Just like the time my father didn’t find the marble, or Hadrian, in my closet, I’d noticed things other people missed, so I wasn’t sure what unsettled me more: the fact that Ivan heard the clatter, or that I was okay with concealing it even though he *had* heard it too.

His chin tilted down when he sat the coffee bag on the counter. “Mm. Still one for playing defense, Fredrick?”

“So you do remember me.” I tried to mask my irritation with a tight smile.

Outside, the traffic light flitted from red to green. A car eased by. No one else walked the street. *Dosi-Do’s* still winked *Do -Do’s*.

“Hard not to,” Ivan muttered.

I swallowed against my dry tongue and scanned the bags individually. Then I wrapped everything, including the dripper, into brown paper.

Another noise—this one lighter, more muffled—cut through the radio static.

I glanced up in time to see a shadow dissipate behind the stock room curtain.

Ivan’s shoulders turned that direction. “I’m going to check—”

Hadrian snarled, *Make him leave.*

“Why are you here?” I blurted. “Or did you not recognize where you’re at, either?”

He stalled. “Excuse me?”

Maybe that had come out a bit harsh. I tried again. “You’re home for the weekend. From Duke?” I punched in the total and watched the curser twirl. “Someone said something about you starting. I shouldn’t be surprised. But you’re here. On a Friday night.”

Apparently talking in full sentences wasn’t in my repertoire this afternoon.

“I was transferred to USC. Left Duke.” Ivan withdrew his Visa. I made an effort to keep my fingers from brushing his when I took it.

“Weren’t you playing football?”

The older men around town clearly liked to inflate Ivan’s crisp, heroic story—a young man rises from an abusive household and snags a coveted starting position on a D1 football team. They also said something about him getting drafted, but the question mark between Ivan’s brows told a different story.

The card reader beeped. I offered it back.

“Still am,” he said. This time, his fingers brushed mine. I tried to not jerk away. “Nosy?”

My brow pinched. “No.”

“Why are *you* here, Fredrick? Don’t you have more important things to do, like people’s homework? That’s what you’re doing for college, right? Whitney said you were in some fancy history program.”

My spine fused. I stickered the shopping bag shut. “Some people *do* work while in school, or have you never tried that before?” I shot back.

The slight smirk in his words brought something bitter to the surface. “Just as crotchety as before, huh? How’s that fake tooth treating you? Or do you have more now?”

I pushed the bag forward. *Protect, protect, protect* he whispered against my hair.

“Ego doesn’t look good on you, Ivan,” I said.

“Broke *and* snippy. No wonder you work on the weekends.” He wrapped the paper top down until it looked like a loaf of bread. “The roommate kick you out because they can’t stand your tongue?”

He wasn’t *quite* wrong. It wasn’t that people in my classes couldn’t stand my tongue—I didn’t do enough talking for that. The chattering laughter, the sidelong looks. It was easier to ignore it. The key to gossip prevention was to stay out of sight, out of mind, and to not contribute. So I didn’t. In anything.

“I commute. It’s cheaper,” I said, which was the truth. I picked at a spot on my elbow.

He grunted. “Can’t commute without a car. Didn’t see yours out back. What’d you do, walk?”

“It’s in the shop, if you have to know. Is there anything else you’ve got to pick on me about? Because I need to start closing tasks and I can’t do that with you loitering.”

“You check the back yet? Make sure your fridge isn’t running away?”

“Yes, and it’s still hog tied to the wall where I left it. Please leave.”

“You’re a bad liar, Fredrick.”

My tongue grew barbed. “Fine. The building is haunted and it was a ghost. Is that a better answer for you?”

The curtain wavered slightly. Any trace of sunset vanished by this point. Now the windows were mirrors, replaying all of my movements back to me from three different angles.

“Well, you and your ghost”—his brows shot up—“can get a lift from me. Walking is for the birds, or did you never want your license after Todd pushed you off a curb that day?”

“Birds fly.”

“Excuse me?”

“Birds don’t walk. They fly.”

He leaned onto his elbows so he was eye level with me. Suddenly those blue irises shifted like lake water, his jaw was too sharp, and the way he was looking at me reminded me of a parent cornering a lying child. Like he was slowly peeling back every folder inside of my head, reading the label, and flipping through its contents.

“Let me drive you home,” he said, sincere.

Hadrian’s smiling face appeared over his shoulder within the shadows. No—that wasn’t a smile. His teeth were bared, not at the back of Ivan’s head, but at me.

*No*, Hadrian bit.

“No thanks. I’m sure you have a busy evening since it’s Friday—”

“You’re still holing yourself away, aren’t you? Live a little. One day you’re going to look back and wish you’d taken opportunities you’ll never get again. Or are you still worried you’ll hurt your parent’s feelings like you were in high school?”

The back of my neck started to tingle. Hadn't Hadrian said something similar? I needed to be able to make my own choices?

It was just a ride. Ten minutes.

"Come on, Fredrick. Old times sake. If I don't take you, someone else will push you off the curb when I'm not looking." He tossed his keys onto the counter and leaned in. Our noses were inches apart. He smelled like cinnamon and dirt and leather. "You drive a stick before?"

"No."

"Well, you are tonight. I'll wait out back."

He left not long after, and I stood, jaw locked, at the counter for a solid ten minutes. It had been two years since I'd seen him. He was different than before. But why?

Another huff in the back of my head.

I texted mom with shaky fingers. Curiosity, it seemed, was a weak point of mine.

*Ivan Kenneth stopped by. He said he can bring me.*

*Good,* was her reply.

From then until close, I felt eyes on my fingers and between my shoulder blades. In the softest part of my chest, a bundle of dread built like a lie. Every corner was shadowless because Hadrian was not there. It shouldn't have been odd: he came and went as he pleased all the time.

And I had a sick feeling that I done something wrong.

## Chapter Six

The truck lurched forward not two hours later and stalled in the middle of the road. I flung my hands up and stomped the floorboard. My cheeks felt hotter than the face of the sun.

“I can’t do it,” I spat, unbuckling myself. “I don’t know why you’re making me—”

“Just chill out for a second—” Ivan started from the passenger seat.

“Do you see this? Stalled. Again.” I motioned to the steering wheel while glancing forward and backward to make sure there wasn’t a set of headlights barreling toward us. We were in the middle of the road, not even five minutes from my house. I reached for the door. “You drive. I can’t take this anymore.”

He reached over me and yanked the door shut. “Olive, *stop*.”

The truck walls were pressing closer, pressurizing the heat crawling up my neck. This was too much at once.

I hadn’t seen Ivan in two years. The first thing he does is try to embarrass me? Is this funny to him? Is it a childish way of flirting, or is he trying to humble me because my silence might come off as haughtiness?

I would be lying if I said there wasn’t a slight hope that he’d spotted me through *Meredith’s* shop window. Embarrassment built like a wave. Of course, this had an ulterior motive. Just like everyone else had in high school. And in typical Ivan fashion, he had to build his superiority by showing how his time was valuable. In this case, by teaching me something that I didn’t know for no reason than to make me struggle.

“Just—just take me home,” I said.

His eyes narrowed. “Why are you making this a big deal?”

“Because—” *I want you to think I’m fun to be around like when we were young, but I’m ruining my only chance.*

“The truth. Right now. Spit it out,” he said.

I glared at him. “Can you get us out of the middle of the street?”

“Turn the truck off. Try again.”

“Ivan.”

“You don’t get gold medals for giving up,” he said.

Something in his words sparked tears in my eyes. He sat back, a chill replacing the heat of his presence. His knee was a breath away from the shifter. He pointed to it.

“Last time. I promise,” he said. The radio hummed between us.

I did as he instructed.

“Good. What next?”

I sighed, throat thick. “Clutch?”

“Is it in neutral?”

I tried to wiggle the shifter. It didn’t move. Ivan covered my hand with his and nodded to my foot. “Press the brake then the clutch.” As soon as I did, he knocked the shifter into the middle notch. Our tangled hands wiggled it back and forth. His voice was gruff when he said, “Good. What next?”

“Start it?” Somewhere ahead of us, I saw a set of headlights swing around a bend.

“Yep.”

The truck roared to life. My shirt clung to my back. The car was gradually approaching, and here we sat.

“First gear,” he urged. Our tangled hands pushed the knob to the left, then up. “Ease off the clutch, give it some gas.”

His hand was still atop mine. I did as he said, but briars were growing in the roof of my mouth. The headlights from the approaching vehicle swung from left to right around the bend.

As soon as the RPM hit 1500, I released it completely and pressed the gas—but not enough. We lurched forward again.

This time, Ivan didn’t protest. I was already climbing over the shifter and into the passenger seat by the time he rounded the front of the truck. The driver door banged shut. Without a word, he cranked the beast again. The other vehicle—an old pinto with a couple in the front—swerved around the bend and passed in a brush of wind just as the truck roared to life one more time.

They probably saw the whole thing—were probably laughing at the girl pouting in the passenger seat, the one that couldn’t get out of first gear, that stalled for the fourth time in a five-mile stretch from work to home.

“Didn’t have to make it a big deal,” he grunted. He popped the clutch, hit the gas, and we were on our way. I cranked my window down.

What I didn’t want to admit was that my hand was burning from where he’d touched it. That my entire right side was aflame. That my heart—it was fluttering. It had been so long since I was around someone and felt normal.

*Just like in high school. You can’t seem to tell him no,* the little voice whispered to me. Not Hadrian—this one was gentler. Younger. *You want to impress him. You want to be needed, don’t you?*

Ivan snapped his finger. “Hey. Cut it out.”



I stared at my reflection in the side mirror. The mirrors were square and chrome and reminded me of an old silver serving platter. It made me look like I was in a fish tank, from the rain spots that were long since dried, and how the retreating pinto in the reflection swung a path, back and forth, with their headlights. If I blinked fast enough, I was a head floating on black water. Or maybe that was a few tears I was trying to blink away.

He grabbed my hand. “Olive. Everyone stalls out when they learn to drive stick.”

I pulled away. “Yeah, well, not three times in a row.”

“You were shifting fine earlier—”

“Once, Ivan. Once. Now stop talking about it.”

We rode in silence until my house came into view. Harrington was too big for two people, but Mom didn’t want to sell it. She’d rather sell Dad’s truck than sell the house, even though the rooms were cold and the floorboards didn’t creak with guest footsteps anymore. Now, they only creaked when the weather changed or when Hadrian visited me.

The angel oak trees surrounding the driveway arched in welcome. They bordered the drive, curved from above, almost as if they were trying to hold hands with the oaks on the opposite side of the gravel. In the summer, when the sun hit just right, the light fractured into hundreds of ribbons through the dangling leaves. But now, in the darkness, they were nothing more than cobwebs swaying in the breeze.

Ivan turned in. I didn’t look over until he braked. He shoved the shifter into neutral and pulled the brake.

“Spill. What’s going on?” He turned in the seat and kept his left hand on the wheel. The other bent over the back of the bench seat.

My thoughts tangled, whirled, tightened. I finally whispered, “I don’t know.”

Ivan sighed. “Yes, you do. Who am I going to tell, Olive?”

I swiveled. “Why do you care? I haven’t seen you in years. I don’t *need* to drive a stick, let alone have reason to embarrass myself in front of you anymore than I already—why are you even here? Why don’t you tell *me* what’s going on?”

The free hand moved to his hair. He stared at me. That prickling feeling started in the back of my throat again.

“I’m sorry for earlier,” he said, voice low.

I moved my attention to the closest tree trunk. A set of yellow eyes blinked from the shadows behind it, then vanished. Hadrian was watching us.

My gut tightened. I shouldn’t have been surprised. Still, he wasn’t usually so...present.

“I thought you’d heard about—I assumed. I was wrong.”

“About what?”

“There are some things from Duke that were said about me. I can’t talk about much of it, but it’s been...hard.” He scrubbed his palm over his face and this time when he looked at me, it looked like he was pleading with me. “I thought you’d heard. I don’t know. I haven’t talked to you in a while and I thought maybe you wrote me off like other people had.”

Ivan was worried I didn’t want to talk to him anymore?

“I didn’t do that when you couldn’t go home because of your dad,” I said. “What’s so bad that I would have done that now?”

He shrugged. “Rumors can be nasty.”

My mouth turned to cotton. What could have been so bad that I wouldn’t want to talk to him anymore?

Just as I was about to press further, he said, “Whitney said you’ve been avoiding her. What gives?”

“I’m just—frustrated,” I whispered. “About a lot of things, I guess.”

“Tell me.” There was a moment of silence, but it wasn’t uncomfortable.

“You talked to Whitney?” I whispered.

“On campus. I asked about you, and she said you’ve been off.” He gave me a once over, attention lingering along my neck. “I get it, you know. Losing a parent. It’s hard.”

I scoffed. “I don’t—it’s not my dad—”

“A version of it. Your mom is probably missing him. College sucks, because let’s be honest, you’ve always hated people, but Whitney talks to a thermostat if you let her, so she has plenty of people on the side to hang out with but still bugs you. So you’re probably doing what you did when we were kids and you’re talking to her just enough to keep her at bay, but you don’t want to see her, let alone anyone else, so you commute. You need as many excuses as possible to get out of social events, so you work in Stetson. Freaking *Stetson* but you go to USC, Olive, I mean—come on, how obvious can you be? It’s a thirty-minute drive you could avoid by being on campus.” He nudged my shoulder. “Are you even taking any of your meds?”

My eyes widened. “How do you even know I’m supposed to be—”

“I saw the Lexapro in your bag.” He shook my purse strap next to my thigh. Sure enough, the orange bottle, labeled with eight refills and dated three months ago, sat face up on top of my wallet.

He moved forward, so close that I could see the flecks of gold in his irises and the stubble along his jaw. It was hard to believe this young man was the same boy that sat in my backyard and said he didn’t want to get poison ivy so he’d play horses with me in the heat of June.

“Do you know how frustrating it was to watch you shrink into nothing while we were in high school? Do you know how many times I heard someone making fun of you because you didn’t talk? Because you just—you—”

His face blurred behind a film of tears.

Was Ivan doing this on purpose? Was he saying that everything he’d done, the teasing, the fighting in high school was because he cared?

“Stop wallowing and let someone help you.”

I took a deep breath. The cab of the truck was undeniably small.

Yellow eyes blinked near the truck cab, just behind a split tree trunk. I couldn’t help but note that he was moving closer.

I picked at my forearm. Hadrian wouldn’t do anything. He couldn’t. He was only keeping watch, that was all.

“I’m not wallowing. There’s nothing to wallow about.”

*Protect*, Hadrian’s ragged voice snarled.

Ivan grabbed the top of the seat until the leather crinkled. “Don’t do that. You can redirect with other people, but you can’t do that to me.”

Was he right? Was I intentionally isolating myself?

*Isolation keeps you safe*, Hadrian snipped. *You do not need them, dearest. He does not care. He never did.*

*But he’s here*, I whispered back, *doesn’t that mean something?*

“Listen,” Ivan said, his tone turning earnest. “The best thing I ever did was get away, even for a little bit. I know your mom can be—she was tied to your dad. But if she can’t get her head above water long enough to see that you’re drowning—in depression, whatever—then you

need someone that can be there for you.”

“Are *you* going to do that for me?” I asked. As soon as I said it, I wanted to take those words back.

The truck was silent. My window was down, bathing us in chirping tree frog songs and rustling grass.

Ivan settled back. “I could. If you want.”

The world stood still.

I was suddenly in a lion’s den with no ladder out. And he was offering a hand.

“Just think it over. Okay?” he said.

“Okay,” I croaked.

He started the truck again. We eased up the rest of the drive until the house came into view, its outline illuminated by the left over moonlight that wasn’t swallowed by the clouds.

*I could. If you want. Just think it over.*

We pulled to a stop in the curved driveway. The front porch light was off.

I waited. So did Ivan.

*He cares*, that little voice said—my voice. *He cares. This is your chance. He listens. He understands.* My heartbeat whispered, *I promise, I promise, I promise he cares. He has to.*

His profile was rigid while we sat in silence.

“Someone rear ended my car a few days ago,” I said.

It took him a moment, but then he realized the fishing line. “Are you asking for a ride?”

Not technically.

The corner of his mouth tilted. “What are you saying, Fredrick?”

My heart fluttered. “I’m saying if it’s not too far and you aren’t living on campus, you could pick me up. If you wanted to.”

“No rental?”

“Extra money I don’t have.”

He laughed. “Sure. Just be ready when I pull in the drive and I’ll take you wherever you wanna go.”

“Do you need my number—”

“I’ve got it. Whitney gave it to me,” he said.

I already had the door open, my bag strap knotted in my hand, when I looked back. Something like solace settled around me. “I’m sorry for tonight.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for.”

I gave a small smile before shut the door. He lingered until I closed the front door behind me to the foyer. I watched through the living room window until his taillights vanished back down the driveway.

It wasn’t until the curtain fluttered closed that I realized every light was off except for the one over the kitchen sink.

Mom wasn’t home.

## Chapter Seven

I jumped when my bedroom door slammed shut behind me.

Moonlight outlined my nightstand, the corner of my bed, and my wayward desk chair. I needed to reach for the switch, but as soon as I shifted, the air changed.

Hadrian stood in the corner behind the door, two feet from my left side. His face was contorted to show the root of his canines.

“Who is he?” he snarled. A thin sheen of sweat covered his thickened neck; this was no longer a spindly monster from a child’s nightmare.

I curled back against the door. His sooty silhouette was almost solid when he lumbered forward, the smell of wet earth and old wood surrounding us.

“You mean Ivan?” I asked.

His teeth flashed. “Ah, yes. No wonder he smelled familiar.”

I tried to control my breathing. “What do you mean?”

“I thought you got rid of him a while ago.”

I dropped my bag onto the floor and kept still as he approached, like a rabbit frozen in the face of a coyote. “I didn’t get rid of him. He left to play football at Duke.”

An ugly, nasty sound came from his throat. “Yet he’s here. *Get rid of him.*”

Hadrian was never like this. “Why?”

We were inches apart now. The floorboards groaned. “Oh, child, you know *nothing.*”

I bristled. My neck craned back so I could keep eye contact. His horns surpassed the door frame and his breath was puffs of vapor through his nostrils. “What are you talking about?”

He lifted a hand and touched the point of a claw to the crown of my head.

Hadrian had never touched me before.

Every nerve in my body lit on fire. There was an instinct to pull away and put distance between us, but I found myself fixed with my heels rooted to the floor. Adrenaline made my breathing shallow. *He won't hurt you*, I promised myself. I repeated his words like a chant: *protect, protect, protect*.

"You bend at another's will so easily."

"He's a friend. You've seen him before," I said, as if to reason.

"Ignorance, dearest, is never becoming."

My mouth flattened. I stared into the center of his chest instead. After a measured inhale and a clench of teeth, I stepped around him. "You act like you know something I don't."

"Do not be childish."

I stopped in the middle of my room and looked over my shoulder. He stood in the same place, his hand hanging at his side.

"I'm not a child. I can make my own decisions. You're the one that wanted me to get out of the house. It just so happens that I run into someone I went to school with."

"I said it was best to leave home," he corrected. He shifted to face me. "People only smother. Or do you like to torment yourself with the presence of others?"

He was right—we'd been talking about this before. High school should have been enough of a reason to bubble myself off. But Ivan had been there for me in high school. He'd been a pain sometimes, but he helped me, and if what he said was true about people at Duke starting things about him, there was no question as to why he'd been guarded earlier.



Hadrian's head tilted and mouth opened as if my thoughts were scrolling across my forehead and he was devouring them. The points to his cheeks sharpened and a row of points encircled his horns.

With a step forward, his eyes changed from slits of yellow to rings of black.

"You promised me," he said with a sneer. "That I would protect you."

My body lit up like a Christmas tree. That same pressure from earlier started around the side of my neck and under my ribs, pressing, pressing, pressing. It dug into my lungs and extracted the air, cold and hollow and evil and alive.

Then his voice was in my ear.

*You cannot break your promise with me.*

## Chapter Eight

*23 years old*

Two pillars of stucco grandeur towered above a throng of people. Each were bundled in their warmest coat, huddled in groups, with smiles and glances over shoulders. The house looked similar to my childhood home, though the east and west wings weren't as sprawling, the front portico not as large. There was an old carriage drop off to the right, just off the west side of the house. Someone had converted ours into a sunroom long ago. Mom said it erased history to renovate things like that, but I know her plants didn't complain.

Whitney was beside me as we continued to follow the guys up the driveway.

My throat pinched. The windows were dark to the parlor rooms. Would Hadrian like them, too? Or would he gravitate to his usual tight spaces?

Ivan laughed at something Trevor said.

"You sure you've got it?" she asked. "I don't want you to stop answering me again."

I made a point to retrieve my phone from my pocket, open the contacts, and tap on Trevor's face. "See. Already replaced your face with his."

Trevor, Whitney's boyfriend, had broken his third phone. Whitney made him a deal that she'd give hers to him, wipe her info, and upgrade her plan so he wouldn't have to buy a new one. In turn, he would take her to a haunted house.

Trevor took her up on the deal, despite his vocal distaste for Halloween activities that involved anything outside of the innocent realm of pumpkin patches. My pendulum swung the same way. Hadrian was enough to deal with—the last thing I wanted to do was invite something else into my life that would torment me more than I already tormented myself.

Ivan's russet head swiveled to find me. "You gonna keep talking or keep up?"

I walked a bit faster.

"I think you need a bigger bag," I whispered at the same time Whitney mumbled, "Can't slow down for two seconds," while rummaging around for something.

The chatter of voices grew louder, more muddled, the further we walked up the driveway. Trevor slowed to wait for Whitney and I while Ivan stalked to claim a spot in line.

I liked Trevor. He played football with Ivan at Duke before Ivan transferred and met Whitney not long after during a rally. They'd been dating since, and while he kept to himself for the most part, he had a penchant for bad luck, which was another reason Whitney said it was better to get him a phone free of cost than have to inevitably replace it in a few months.

Ivan waved me to his side.

I took his hand behind a group of high schoolers. One of the guys shoved another, a string of laughter broke, and a girl shrieked, "Guys stop, that's not nice."

I didn't like Halloween. I also didn't like the people. Ivan liked both, so we were here.

Trevor turned to bump Whitney once they caught up. She snatched his hand just as he leaned forward and whispered, "Your place is haunted, isn't it, Olive?"

"Not that I know of," I said. It wasn't a lie. It also wasn't the truth.

Hadrian wasn't a ghost. But some days it felt like he haunted me.

"Probably is," Ivan said. He shifted behind me to separate Trevor and I. "You said you heard stuff when we were kids, right?"

I kept my attention to the streaks of blue in the girl's hair a foot ahead of me. From the edge of my vision, the curtain on a second-floor room fluttered not once, but twice.

I cleared my throat. "Uh, maybe. It's been so long I can't remember."

“Oh, please, of course things happened,” Whitney said. “Remember when you said you found that doll hanging by its foot back in high school?” Her teeth were stark against her brown skin, and her eyes wide with excitement.

“You mean the time Savannah—”

“No, when we were older,” she cut in.

Trevor’s attention volleyed between us. Then he paused and jerked his chin to Ivan.

“Didn’t you and Savannah have a thing when you left Duke?”

This made me pause. Ivan and I had been dating for two years at this point. He’d never once mentioned anything about dating Savannah to me.

Whitney swatted a bug away but managed to elbow Trevor at the same time. “She moved to Florida before she graduated. I think you’re thinking of someone else.”

I tried to keep my expression from faltering. He’d officially transferred in September that year—that means it could have been any time previous, but from the way Trevor spoke, he made it sound like it was *during* the move. Right when he came back and started dating me.

As if he sensed my thoughts, he squeezed my shoulder until the bones pinched. “Think you’ve got your people wrong, Trev,” he said. “I never dated at Duke. She was with someone else back then. Had to wait for the right time to snag Fredrick,” he teased, rubbing my shoulder.

Trevor scrubbed the edge of his beanie over his forehead. He reminded me of my dad when he squinted like that. “Oh. My bad.”

After dancing around topics for fifteen minutes, we’d moved closer to the back entrance and took perch under a willow tree. Ivan didn’t elaborate when Trevor asked questions, but mostly he answered for me. I didn’t mind. It took the socialization stress away from my shoulders.

Somewhere in the distance, an owl cooed over a trickling creek bed, and I couldn't help but think of home. Of how long it had been since I'd sat in the backyard and talked to Belvedere, swung in the tree swing, or played in the dirt pit that was surely weedy and covered by now.

At some point, Whitney complained about needing to find a restroom.

"We'll be back," Trevor said. Then they meandered around the side of the building.

Ivan and I stood in silence. He nudged me. "Don't get all tense," he said.

"You know I don't like places like this," I said. But now it wasn't the house. It was Trevor's words that were circling my thoughts.

"Your mom's house is just as old," he said, stuffy. He tightened his grip on my shoulder.

But this place wasn't mine. I'd never pushed the boundaries visiting other estates or haunted houses for fear of what I would see. Of what I would hear. Hadrian just *existed*; I never doubted whether he was there, he just always *was*. He wasn't a ghost or something unseen, and I think that was what scared me the most about an unknown place. Would it be empty, or would something more sinister be there? Or was all of this in my head?

I didn't know if I wanted to find out. Because if I did, how would I convince myself that I was good if something so menacing could come from my head?

I shivered at the thought. What if someone else found out? What would Ivan think?

"If you'd put on some weight, you wouldn't be so cold," Ivan whispered. He hugged my shoulders and a part of me died a little.

"I'm sorry," I said.

He didn't mean anything by it. Ivan was blunt and blunt people hurt feelings on accident, that was all. In a way, it made me want to ask about Savannah. Ivan wouldn't lie to me—he never had—but if he thought it wasn't a big deal, would he cover it?

“Hey, Ivan?” I asked, low.

“Mm.”

“What Trevor said—”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “Just a bunch of rumors. You know how kids are.”

I did.

But a lot of times, some of the worst rumors started from a twisted kernel of truth.

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The first parlor room was bearable. The second was a bit more ominous. Hands shot out of corners and screams ripped from blind spots. To keep from screaming, I hid my face in Ivan’s shoulder and bit my tongue.

This was not fun. Anyone who said otherwise was delusional.

The further we wove throughout the house, the darker everything seemed to get. Strategically placed lights, lamps, and bulbs dangled and hovered in all of the right places.

Thankfully, none of them moved like Hadrian did.

Ivan led us toward a cloaked person, their face masked with a see-through panel of fabric. They barred entry to the second-floor stairway.

Pairs of individuals went up at a time—likely timed—so Trevor motioned Whitney up first. The cloaked person raised their hand for us to wait. Trevor wiggled his eyebrows at us before giving a two fingered military salute and following Whitney.

The chorus of squeals started not long after.

Finally, the cloaked figure waved us forward.

“Ladies first,” Ivan said in my ear.

“Can you lead?” I asked. I was already two steps up. “I really don’t want to.”

“No one’s going to get you.”

*The monster from my closet might*, I wanted to say.

“Ivan, please.” I tried to reach for his elbow, but his puffer jacket was slick and he pulled away. My fingers shook.

He gave me a severe smile and nudged my lower back. “Go. I’m right behind you.”

Another cloaked figure at the top of the steps motioned us to the left. This looked to be a child’s bedroom once; a wooden rocking horse magically swayed in the corner, frills of lace and chiffon billowed around two twin canopied beds, and a set of whittled Noah’s Arc figurines lined the mantel above an empty fireplace.

The door clicked shut behind us.

I reached back for Ivan. A circular mirror hung over the mantel across the room. We were completely alone, in the dark, but my reflection shown as white as a sheet.

“Where are we supposed to—” I started.

A clawed hand shot out from beneath the closest bed.

I screamed and clambered backward, right into Ivan. He grabbed my elbow to steady himself but tripped backwards into the nightstand. An ivory lamp with a shade that resembled a doily tipped back and forth.

He jerked me back in an attempt to catch himself, and I tripped backwards into the wall with a sharp *thud*. My teeth clacked together.

We both stood still for a second. The room spun a bit.

“What was *that*?” He grasped my shoulders and shook me.

“Someone tried to grab my ankle—”

“Don’t. Push. Me,” he snapped.

“I didn’t mean to.” I blinked in surprise. His face was too close to mine. The cinnamon on his breath was stout.

Ivan didn’t use to talk to me like this. But I knew I was more anxious lately because of everything going on at work; I suppose it translated to more than one facet of my life.

“I’m sorry,” I tried in a whisper.

He searched my face, then without a word, he took my wrist, and pulled me forward to the next room. I didn’t resist. At this point, it was probably best we just get out of here.

This one was also dark upon entry. A wardrobe sat in the corner of the room, similar to the one that sat in my father’s office. It’s left door was ajar. And behind the side of the wardrobe, in the murkiest part of the room, like a lurking black hole, was Hadrian.

His eyes weren’t the usual yellow; instead, they were golden waves that thrashed at a cliffside. His lips were a skeleton’s leer when he smiled.

*Dearest*, he crooned. The corners of his mouth touched from ear to ear. If this version of Hadrian graced my closet as a child, I might have died from fright.

I tripped into Ivan—again. As soon as my shoulder made contact with his, he whirled.

“What’s your deal?” he whisper-hissed.

Suddenly I was in high school, falling off the sidewalk. I was in middle school, sitting alone after everyone was told to pick partners. I was in elementary school and Savannah was on my bed and I was in the floor with claws waving underneath my closet door.

“I’m s-sorry—”

Hadrian made a sound that reminded me of the rumble of a waterfall’s base—like he was the cavern, and each breath echoed through the room. My body locked.

“Stop this. Whatever you’re doing.” Ivan continued to stare at me, oblivious.



“I don’t like these things,” I said with a bit too much bite.

Splotches appeared on the edge of my vision like devouring teeth. Ivan grabbed my shoulders and pulled me in—an onlooker would have thought he was comforting me, but only I could hear his word breathed against my cheek.

“*Quit* acting ridiculous. It’s not real.”

Slowly, I nodded.

We made it through the next room with little fanfare. I kept my eyes on the floor the majority of the time. If I did something else, would it make him upset? Or was he just frustrated with me for almost breaking a lamp?

By the last room, I heard a distant shriek of laughter that sounded like Whitney. My suspicions were confirmed when we came to the opened servant stairwell with an arrow and a thin weave of rope that led downward as an extra guide. Her throaty, thick laughter bounced up from below.

Ivan nudged me forward first. I hesitated with fingers on the railing.

Was Hadrian still here?

*Promise*, he’d said. *You cannot understand the things I can do to protect you.*

“Let’s go,” Ivan said.

I gripped the railing and stepped forward.

A hand emerged from the stairwell and grabbed me.

It was cold and warm at the same time, almost as if it sunk into the joints of my fingers. That same pressure I’d felt before, around my ribs and inside of my chest, intensified as I took another step. I squinted. Was he here? I didn’t see him. The hand was gone now.

Further down I went.

*You did not listen to me, Hadrian whispered. You promised.*

I took a curve in the steps. When I brushed passed, a claw trailed up my forearm, over the nicks in my skin and the curve of my elbow, like he was a lure waiting for me to fall. Panic started to eat at me.

He always came and went, but this one was different.

His words sounded like a threat. *You did not listen to me.*

I took the stairs two at a time.

He'd promised.

Could he break a promise? Whatever Hadrian was, would he hurt me?

Ivan tried to keep pace, but I started stumbling, running, because I needed the exit door, I needed to *get out*.

Ivan didn't say anything about Hadrian, didn't stop and question the change in the air or the brushes of a large body against the brick stairwell wall. I was the only one that saw him. Just me. Alone in my head, my thoughts, my bubble.

My pace turned frantic. I pushed myself off of the wall and tripped over my own shoe.

"Olive, slow down," Ivan called.

*Ivan is real. Ivan is a person. He is here, he listens, he isn't this—this thing, this monster that follows me since I childhood.*

I burst out the bottom door and into the moonlight. I immediately bent over.

"What was that?" Ivan asked, thrusting the door open behind me.

I faced the trees. Squeezed my eyes shut.

*It wasn't a threat, I told myself. Not real, not real, not real.*

I didn't realize I was hyperventilating until Ivan turned me around. My lungs were too shallow, the air was too thick, and I was going to die.

"Hey—what's wrong?" He held my face between his hands and turned my eyes to meet his. They were blue. They were real. They weren't—empty.

They weren't yellow.

Why did this time feel different? Why was I scared of Hadrian now?

"Talk to me. Breathe," Ivan said. He bent to meet my gaze.

I shook my head.

Footsteps swished over grass. My ears began ringing, like the moment after a gunshot. Ivan said something over his shoulder and tangled his fingers into the hair at my temples. My attention traveled behind him.

The servant door drifted shut, a final sliver of darkness dying. There was movement there. A flicker, like always.

*Time's up, dearest*, the whisper said, faint.

"Hey, hey, hey." Ivan took my chin. "Look at me. Breathe in. Out. Good. Do it again."

So I did. But even as my heart stabilized and the high of adrenaline started to fall, I couldn't pry Hadrian's voice out of my ears.

*Time's up, dearest.*

*You. Lied.*

## Chapter Nine

There weren't many days that I regretted moving out. This evening was one of them. When I opened my apartment door, all of my lights were off. I didn't leave them like that.

The keys rattled as I locked the deadbolt behind me. My hand flapped against the wall until I found the light switch. I smacked it up, then down.

Nothing happened.

"Barrow?" I called. The cats usually came running to greet me. Willow, who'd found me by way of the dumpster, was typically slow, crotchety, and screamed at me from a distance until I gave her a treat while Barrow trailed close behind.

Which made the silence that much more unnerving.

I tapped the flashlight app on my phone. My unfolded basket of laundry, opened laptop, and trio of coffee mugs were still in their same places from when I'd left in a hurry. I'm sure one of those mugs still had a film of decaf at the bottom.

MOM popped onto the screen a second before the phone started to vibrate.

I hit the speaker button. "Hello?"

"Olive! You answered." She sounded relieved.

"Sorry, I've been busy." Which wasn't a lie. Things were getting hectic at work with Thanksgiving creeping around the corner. A lot of the people in the office with seniority were taking vacation days, leaving me and my six months experience in my cubical, alone.

"Oh," she breathed. "Well, I was just wondering if you found out about next week yet?"

I dropped my purse onto the entryway table. I made sure to keep the back of the phone pointed outward like a shield so it illuminated part of the living room and half of the kitchen. Just in case a shadow that didn't belong to me moved. Like Hadrian.

My heart fluttered. *Not real*, I reminded myself.

"Olive?"

"Sorry, sorry, I missed that last part. What did you say?" I crept forward, partially squatting, as if that would help the lightness of my steps.

"I said there won't be anybody but us. Unless you have someone to bring?"

I froze by the couch. My hand curled into the pillow against the backrest. "Huh?"

"Well, I called Whitney to ask about her aunt's Tupperware party in a couple weeks, and she mentioned something about you and Ivan Kenneth going with her and Trevor to a haunted house tonight. That was tonight, wasn't it? I figured maybe that's why you hadn't been returning any of my texts—"

Something swooped across the end of the hallway, closest to my bedroom.

"You asked about who I'm seeing?"

"Well, no, it just kind of came up."

I straightened, my eyes locked to the hallway. It could have been one of the cats.

She must have taken the pause as my answer because she went on without a hitch. "You can bring him, if you'd like."

A yowl and scream ripped through the air.

"Yeah, sure, that's fine, great," I blurted. I hurried around the couch and down the hallway, knocking my elbow on a bookshelf I had just outside of the hallway. The sound of crazed hissing came from my bedroom. "Hey—can I call you back later?"

A pause. “Sure.”

I hit END without a goodbye.

I breached the bedroom doorway, phone light swinging. I just caught two puffy cat tails racing against each other—one black and white, the other a solid black—before they flew around my legs and into the living room. More distant scratching, a few hisses, and a meow.

“Just the cats,” I whispered. Nothing to be worried about.

The familiar sound of glass rolling over wood caught my attention.

I angled the light down in time to catch the glint of a black marble. I watched, holding my breath, as it rolled from the direction of my bed and stopped inches from the toe of my shoe. It lolled from side to side, then stilled, just as it always did.

“You play games with me, dearest,” he said.

My jaw clenched.

“You’ve run out of time.”

I flipped the light switch in my bedroom. It didn’t work either.

“I haven’t promised you anything,” I said. My fingers clasped the door frame. I tried to focus on the lingering smell of apples and cinnamon from the diffuser, not the way the smell of earth mingled with it.

“Liar.”

“I’m not a liar,” I pressed.

He laughed. Hairs stood along my neck, my arms.

Barrow’s petite meow echoed from the living room. I wondered how crazed I looked—standing in the doorway to my bedroom, talking to myself.

“What do you want, Hadrian? You’ve been in and out for months. You haven’t spoken to me. Why now?”

Silence.

“I didn’t promise you anything—”

He hauled himself from under my bed and lunged for me.

“*You did!*” he roared. For the first time, I held my chin high. I couldn’t look down at him, but I could try.

“What did I promise?” We were nose to nose.

“I am supposed to protect you. You will not let me.”

“From who?”

Saliva dripped from the prongs of his teeth when he hissed. His claws puncture the frame of the door and he leaned in until our breathes mingled. “*Him.*”

I stifled a laugh. “Hadrian. You’re jealous?”

“Never once have I been jealous of a pathetic human,” he said.

“You are.” I leveled him with a look of disbelief. “Is that what this is? You’re trying to bully me into breaking up with him?” A realization surfaced. “You want me to look crazy so he’ll leave me?”

“Do you know what will if you allow him to stay?” he snarled. A ribbon of black hair fell around his pointed ear and in front of his face. “You will suffer. Always. You are going back on your word. You are not letting me do as I promised.”

I guffawed. “You said I wouldn’t need anyone but you. That’s all I’ve ever had. *Now* he threatens this? Why? Is it because I have these—thoughts in my head—from you, myself, whoever, and I hate everything I am!” My voice rose with each admission. What more did he

want from me? “What am I going to do, huh? Tell someone I have a monster from my childhood closet that won’t leave me alone? That you’ve convinced me to leave my mom, that you convinced me to isolate myself, to ditch my friends? I hate everything I do! I hate people, I avoid people, I hate myself, I hate my job, my body, my brain, I hate—I hate—”

I raked my hands into my hair before pointing at his chest. “All these years, you’ve been lonely so you decided to pick some little, scared six-year-old and torment them because no one wants to be around you, haven’t you?”

We were both breathing heavy by now. I licked my lips.

“You are,” I whispered. “You’re jealous.”

“I have no room for jealousy,” he said.

“Prove it.” One of the cats brushed the back of my leg.

He tilted his head like a curious dog might. “Does it make you happy how he treats you? He speaks rudely in public, or do you convince yourself those words are out of love? That *he* shows protection by isolation?”

“Ivan’s been there for me since I was a little girl.” He had little room to talk. Ivan was different. That’s just the way he was. Hadrian was being obsessive.

“As have I. You even asked me to play with you. Do you remember those words, as a child? That very first day you took that marble?” He stepped back, the muscles along his neck tightening, and scraped a claw along the footboard of my bed until he reached the other side of my room. The pads of his clawed feet brushed the floorboards in a whisper.

“You invited me in,” he said. “You convince yourself that I care about you. You are the one to make a promise with me. It was you, child, that called on me.”



“You’ve never protected me! You’re delusional! What have you done for me?” I bit back. As soon as I said it, I thought of the fights between my mother and I, the evenings she’d claimed to be at work only to come home the following day.

I thought of the words he’d given me. The long hours he’d sat in the door jam, talking in low whispers to a young woman as she fell asleep.

*All they do is hurt you.*

*No one will understand you like I do, child.*

*You do not have to be alone. Not while I’m here.*

Hadrian retreated to the corner of my room and stood, waiting with peeled back lips and a glitter in his eyes. I didn’t recognize this Hadrian—this anger.

He had been there for me, in his own way. Why was it making me so angry now? Was it the emotion in his words, or because I knew emotion like this—possession—was ultimately birthed from fear.

And fear led people to do foolish things.

“You found solace in me when you had no spine to hold you upright,” he said.

“You don’t scare me, Hadrian.” This was a lie. He terrified me in more ways than one.

His claw tapped the wall. “It should not be I that you are scared of anymore, girl.”

He sunk into the corner of the room like water into a cloth. All of the lights in my apartment fizzled on.

I didn’t exhale until Barrow came trotting passed, tail high.

## Chapter Ten

*November*

I wasn't expecting a call. I watched the unknown number flash across the screen until it vanished to voicemail. The message left was simple:

"Hi, Olive? This is Harriet. I work for your mother." The statement sounded like a question. There was a pause, then, "Listen—I know you haven't been picking up your phone. I think your mom said she hadn't talked to you in a while, since you finished your last semester, I think? Well, long story short, there's been something that's come up."

She cleared her throat. Her next words were leveled. The tinge of disdain was clear through every vowel, every lilt, and she lowered her voice like she didn't want to be heard. "Listen, I'm gonna be honest. I know she's left one or two messages. And I know she asked you to visit and with your new job—I'm rambling. Anyway, something's come up and I think it best you come in early before Thanksgiving. I've been with her, but there are some things I think she needs to tell you in person. Tootles."

The voicemail buzzed as the line went dead.

With a pit in my stomach, I saved the number to my contacts. I shouldn't have been surprised I was getting a call; the guilt scratching around my insides should have told me enough. This is what happened when I didn't call my mom back. Now, someone *else* was calling.

*Selfish*, I thought and rubbed my eye socket with a fist. What if something happened? Did she lose her job? Did someone break in? It could have been anything. Things had never been

ideal between her and I, but I never wanted to see my mom suffer, no matter whether I knew how to handle it or not.

Then again, I didn't even handle my own problems very well. I could hardly boil water.

My phone buzzed in my fist. A text from Whitney lit up the screen.

*Hello – earth to Olive? Do you still wanna go to Charlotte after Christmas? Trying to make work plans. Need to know in time to ask for PTO.*

I locked the screen. My reflection stared back at me. It was scary, seeing yourself change over a few months—a year, even—and not recognize your own reflection. My skin had no color, my eyes were always puffy, I was breaking out constantly, my hair was thinning, and I was pretty sure my picking had escalated. The scabs on my arms had migrated to my legs and neck.

How was I supposed to reserve energy for other people when I didn't have enough energy for myself?

"I'll still have energy for you, though," I murmured to Barrow. He hopped up on the arm of the couch and butted the back of my arm with his head. I bent to scoop him. I managed a squeeze and kiss between his ears before he wiggled away, attention locked onto the corner of the living room. Above said corner, Willow glared from her hanging basket that faced the window. Her ears twitched the moment before a knock echoed from the front door.

I froze, perched on the arm of my couch, phone still cradled in my hand. As a child, I was told to never answer the door for a stranger. As an adult, that concept still held true, except now I usually waited an appropriate amount of time before checking the peep hole.

The knock came again.

The smallest of worries feathered in my chest. Cops visited when relatives died, right? Was this the moment I found out Mom was hit by an elderly man driving a van, just like dad?

I slunk up to the peep hole to steal a peek. The curve of a familiar Adam's Apple was visible. It was Ivan.

I swallowed a mix of relief and nervousness and immediately opened the door.

"Hey," I breathed. I brushed off my baggy t-shirt and noted the cat hair sewn through the fabric of my leggings. It would have to do. After dating two years, I would hope Ivan was accustomed to the fuzz.

Then again, some days he was, others he wasn't.

I scooted aside as he stepped through the threshold. Both Barrow and Willow glanced over before resuming their activities.

"You didn't answer my text yesterday," he said, jaw flexing. The smell of cinnamon danced around us. He took in my attire, attention lingering on my socks. I catalogued his flannel, dark jeans, and shaven face.

I fisted the hem of my shirt and tugged it.

"I'm sorry, work was a mess," I said. Instead of trying to recall his text, Harriet's voicemail swirled around my head. I rubbed the bridge of my nose, closed the door, and flipped the deadbolt.

"No group tonight?" he asked. He meant a therapy group I'd joined a few weeks ago.

"I didn't clock out until late." I gave a light shrug. "Everyone else took vacation time."

"Third night this week. You gotta be tired." Ivan's voice was gentle, but there was a river beneath it that made me feel like I was walking a rotted bridge.

"I guess." I scratched a scab by my wrist until it fluttered away. Best for a distraction. I didn't like the way he was watching me—like I was hiding something. "I have coffee?" I

offered. Before he answered, I was already beelining toward the kitchen. “Decaf, toffee nut, vanilla—”

“So no group, no texting me back, no texting *Whitney* back...” His voice trailed as he followed. He hovered a few feet away but it felt so much closer. “Next thing I’ll know, you’ll be on a missing person’s report and a tagline will be scrolling below an old picture of you at five o’clock.”

“Ivan, I’m fine,” I whispered. “I just needed a little bit of space to get things done. I’ll text her back tomorrow or something.”

“You’re missing the point. Whitney texts me because she’s worried about you. Either hang out with her or don’t.” He watched me with lowered lids. I filled the Keurig with a new pod and fished for his favorite mug in the cabinet.

The words were *right there*. But I knew if I said them, his temper would climb.

*You said you didn’t want me to hang out with Whitney because Trevor was bad news.*

“I’m handling it,” I said—more so suggested. I could feel the tension starting to radiate off of him in waves. What I didn’t say was that by *handling it*, I was sticking my head in the sand. Eventually, anything I didn’t want to deal with would all go away like it always did. Whenever something began to inflate my anxiety, I let it fall away on its own. This was where Hadrian’s advice about keeping people out of your life typically came in handy.

For example, people liked promptness, one thing which I made a point not to be, so invitations, dinner offers, or attempts to socialize beyond work boundaries fizzled into a nice afterthought. Eventually, everyone but Whitney stopped asking for me to go out.

She was a root from my childhood, much like Ivan was. Ivan tended to strangle, though. As if to make a point, he leaned against the counter closest to me while I searched.

“You don’t have to find it, Olive. Use a different mug,” he said. A trick question.

The hairs along my arm rose. Last time I handed him a different mug, he got frustrated.

“What’s this?” he’d asked, almost in the exact same spot we were in right now.

“It’s the blue one,” I said, offering it with my fingers around the rim. I kept the handle facing him for easy access.

He’d stepped forward, brows arched. “Give someone else the red one, huh?”

“What do you mean?”

“Thought I saw a text.” He didn’t elaborate. Instead, while I struggled for words with a wrinkled brow, he’d made to take the mug. “Don’t be coy,” he’d added with a huff.

“I’m not being—”

“You’re lying,” he said. He took the cup with a jerk. Hot coffee spilled all over the front of my shirt, my forearm, and hand. I’d dropped it out of reflex. The mug shattered the remaining contents into a wet mix of ceramic over the tile, hot liquid searing the tops of my feet.

Ivan had jerked back, too—his hand hit my face in the process.

*I didn’t mean to. Are you okay? I got burned. It was a reflex,* he’d said later that night.

The red mug had to be here somewhere. I opened both cabinets, which were empty, then the dishwasher. There it sat, perched on the top rack—and dirty.

I didn’t look up while I removed it and turned toward the sink. Ivan’s mug was *his* mug, and if he used a different one, his jaw knotted and he usually said something about me being forgetful or that I needed to keep track of things better or be considerate to what he liked. All I was doing was avoiding. It was like when a child tried to convince their parent they were *just fine*, only to have it turn into a yelling match over the definition of *fine*.

The Keurig hissed as the water heated. I rinsed the residue out of the bottom of the mug.

“I’ve got it,” I said. It sounded like self-reassurance more than anything. “Not a problem.” I perched it on the hot plate and hit the middle button. Coffee sputtered in a stream.

“Don’t act like that,” he said, low.

“Like what?”

“That I’ll get mad at you.” Ivan straightened and withdrew a chair from my dining room table. Instead of sitting normal, he flipped it backwards so his arms draped over the top rail.

Ivan shook his head. “Sometimes I think you write me off as some jerk.”

My eyes widened. Bile burned my tongue. “When did I say that?”

“You know I love you.” He rocked back in the chair. Willow gave a grouchy meow from the living room. Barrow was still staring at his nonexistent cobwebs in the corner, tail flicking.

“You just—you think too much into things. Make up problems that don’t exist. Same with yourself. You know how I feel about it,” he went on, stilling as he spoke. “I think you make mountains out of mole hills. When your dad died, your mom was grieving. That’s okay. School stressed you out, so it was better to back away from it. Sometimes that’s the best thing you can do leave all the extra drama out of your life. Which means people.”

The clock above the dining room table went *tick, tick, tick*.

“Hey, Olive.”

I glanced over.

Some of the tension around his mouth eased. He swung out of the chair when the Keurig gave a final cough and took the mug before I could hand it to him. “Remember. It’s you and me, Fredrick. I got you, you got me. Right?”

I nodded. “Right.”

“So you’ll kill me when I tell you that your mom called me,” he said.

My mouth unhinged a bit.

He turned to the fridge, removed an ice cube from the freezer, and plunked it into his mug. “She asked to bring you home. I told her two days, max, because we’ve got things to do.”

“You told her that?” I asked, voice small. My heart sputtered just like the Keurig had.

He shrugged. “Yeah. Figured it’d keep her off your back for the next six months. Besides, you going with Whitney to Charlotte was out of the question, anyway. This will be a much faster, and easier, vacation.”

“Oh,” I murmured.

He chuckled. “Did you really think it was a good idea? You’d get mugged or something without me there.”

I nodded as he sipped his coffee.

Ivan was right. Two women in a city alone, and overnight, wasn’t a good idea. He was just taking care of the hard decisions for me.

It was nice not having to do the deciding, sometimes.

But I couldn’t tell if the knot in my throat was from comfort or something like forced acceptance. He didn’t ask what I’d wanted—but wasn’t it supposed to be romantic? Chivalrous, even, for someone to take care of things like that for you?

Dad had always done that for Mom. He’d planned dates for her, vacations, or family beach trips. She’d had them listed ahead of time, but this had to be Ivan’s version of something similar, that was all.

*Is it?* a familiar hiss said.

Willow stretched in her basket. Her attention jerked to the darkest corner of the living room an instant before the hair along her spine flared.



The shadows shifted.

I tensed. Hadrian blinked to life, stretched, and grinned. Barrow dipped his head and growled at the corner.

*Do you want him to see your mother? Or is that concern I smell?* Hadrian teased.

Ivan must have taken my silence as frustration because when he stepped in front of me, his tone had changed. “Come one, Olive. It’ll be fine. Besides, I need to drop by the courthouse for something, so I figured it’d be two birds with one stone. It’s for the better. I promise.”

Over his shoulder, Willow bunched her whiskers with a rumbling growl. She gave a light hiss in Hadrian’s direction.

*Home,* Hadrian whispered, *yes, dearest, bring him home.*

## Chapter Eleven

A stout, unfamiliar face peeked through the living room window as Ivan and I approached the front portico of my childhood home. The sheer, cobweb like curtains fluttered back into place. I knew before Ivan's fist connected with the door that the woman was waiting.

Upon the first knock, the door flung open.

"Why, hello, hello!" Her eyes—the color of moss and as wide as quarters—latched onto Ivan immediately. Even in the late November chill, I felt a bead of sweat wiggle down my spine. Maybe it was the anxiety of coming back home.

Maybe it was the way I had a gut feeling this woman wasn't acknowledging me for a reason. When she spoke again, she only looked to Ivan.

"Aren't you a surprise! Oh, you have bags—let me take them for you." She was already looping her arm through the backpack strap when she managed a first glance to me. Her expression fell. "You must be Olive."

I wanted to shrink away. Knowing someone didn't want to speak to you—or was and didn't bother hiding their distaste—was one of the most sickening feelings. I managed to offer a small smile and said, "Harriet? I'm sure my mom mentioned we would be—"

"She did," she cut in, mouth pinched.

The three of us stood in a stalemate. A breeze rustled empty tree branches together from above until they clattered like pencils falling into a bin upon each other. Harriet guarded the door like she was the one that had grown up within its walls.

"Didn't you say you had to use the restroom?" Ivan said, a hand at my elbow.

"Yeah," I whispered.

“Please, make yourself at home,” Harriet said. She was already walking out of the foyer and down the hallway, bag in tow.

Somewhere in its recesses, there was a chuckle.

Hadrian, it seemed, was already here. Some of the tension in my shoulders loosened.

The foyer was wider than it was deep, and led directly into the living room to the right. To my left was my father’s old study. The door was closed, as I remember it had always been after his passing.

“I’ll find your mom and say hello,” Ivan said. He headed toward the living room without looking back, and I slipped down the hall to the closest powder room. By the time I reemerged with damp hands, which I wiped on my pants, my ears were ringing.

A laugh came from the center of a wall, as if it bounced from somewhere else. The sigh I released trailed with a light chuckle. Home was no different than I had left it.

I rounded the corner and was immediately assaulted with deep, forest greens, beige accents, and russet browns. Passed my father’s recliner was the kitchen. Midday sun highlighted Ivan’s shoulders. Mom’s familiar tuft of red hair bobbed on the other side of the kitchen island.

“That’s wonderful! I hope all goes well, then,” she said, voice airy. “I’m so glad you two are here, I was beginning to worry that she wouldn’t make it. And it’s great to see you again, all grown up and—”

I shuffled around the couch. As soon as I saw her, I froze.

This was not my mother.

Her skin was jaundiced, her cheeks hollowed. The whites of her eyes weren’t clear as one’s should be—they almost looked buttered. She wore a baby pink blouse that used to hug her shoulders, but now draped her bones.

She was my mom, but she wasn't.

She was alive, but she wasn't.

Her blue eyes spotted me. Everything must have been written on my face.

"Olive." She breathed my name around a cracked smile and gave me a once over. It only splintered further. "Look at you."

Look at me? *Look at me?*

*Look at you*, I wanted to say. I wanted to scream it. Cry it. She didn't need to say anything. I already knew.

She was dying.

Ivan glanced between us, throat working. There was something hardened there. Maybe frustration, too. He cleared his throat. "Mrs. Fredrick was asking what you might like for dinner this afternoon."

She patted his shoulder when she rounded the island. I used Dad's recliner as a barrier. If she touched me, she'd break.

"I was telling Ivan that you used to love Watergate salad as a little girl. I can have Harriet make some and we can have burgers or salmon? I made sure to have the lemon pepper one you like."

"Okay," I croaked. My throat was clogging too quickly. I blinked back the burn and focused on her lips, because if I looked to her eyes, all I saw was how her eyebrows were thinned. How her hair was thinned.

"And you'll never guess—they're doing a marathon of that TV show, *Housewife Revealed*. Harriet said she would take care of everything and we could just spend some time

together,” she said, gentle, as she shuffled around Dad’s chair. I stepped back, shook my head, and looked to Ivan and back to Mom.

His eyes latched to anything but me.

“How long,” I whispered to her.

“Oh, maybe an hour and a half, two at the most. The burgers wouldn’t take long but it would give the salmon enough time to—”

*“How long, Mom?”*

She paused. Her lips parted then closed. Finally, she said, “Maybe a couple of months. Three to six at the most.”

A couple of months to live. Three to six at most.

And I hadn’t come home. I hadn’t called. I hadn’t done anything. I’d hidden.

Ivan slipped out of the kitchen, toward the sunroom, while something fragile splintered inside of me.

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The cancer was eating her pancreas. Only after we’d sat down at the dinner table did she tell me that it was already in her lymph nodes and her liver. The only reason it had been found was because of a stomach pain that hadn’t gone away after a supposed bout of food poisoning a few months back. It was stage four. It was killing her. And she didn’t want treatment.

Harriet dutifully noted that she was the one to recognize her skin change first. She’d been working at the law office with Mom, pre-diagnosis, and retired a few weeks after Mom received the news.

“Well, after I found out, I knew your mom was here all alone,” Harriet said over the boiling green beans. “Someone had to be with her.”

*And it wasn't you, she didn't say.*

Mom hired Harriet to help around the house on the days she needed it most—and right now, that was four days out of the week.

Harriet sat the plate of green beans closest to Ivan before fluttering back to the kitchen. He sat across from me, Mom at the head, and Harriet at his left. The chair beside me was empty.

My nose burned from crying. I'd sat in silence while *Housewife Revealed* played, debating whether or not the floors could open up and swallow me whole. Even now, with my back ramrod straight against the dining chair, tears blurred my vision until the vase in the center of the table merged with the oak finish. I bit the inside of my cheek and blinked them away. They only started to burn again.

She could have left a message. Visited me. Texted me. Emailed me.

*You didn't want her to, my thoughts hissed, you ignored everyone.*

The clatter of silverware on plates brought me back to the present. The three of us sat, spooning portions of candied strawberries, grilled asparagus, mashed potatoes, and choice of meat onto our plates. The only thing missing were the green beans, which Harriet scurried off into the kitchen to retrieve only seconds before.

“Pass the strawberries please, dear,” Mom said, so I did. Even her voice made my eyes water.

Something heavy, like a boot, tapped my shin under the table. I picked up a bowl of rice and sprinkled a half of a spoon onto the corner of my plate, ignoring the sensation.

“Remember, no one touches the food until we say grace,” Harriet called from the kitchen.

She returned with a platter of green beans clutched between two pot holders. She sat it down with pursed lips toward her end of the table. The sun was setting, bathing the beadboard in

yellows and reds and purples. Harriet plopped down next to Ivan with a grin and pushed her greyed hair out of her eyes. “There. Now everyone take hands.”

I took Mom’s. Harriet didn’t offer her hand to me over the table, and neither did I. Instead, she clasped Ivan’s with both of hers and dunked her head into a bowl so fast I was surprised her neck didn’t snap.

As soon as grace finished, Harriet reached for the salmon and offered it to Ivan. “Would you like some, dear?”

I swallowed. If she looked at his plate, she would have seen he already had taken some.

As if to answer my thoughts, there was another tap from below. Ivan was refusing the salmon, Harriet was looking at him with rapt attention, and Mom took that moment to slice up her asparagus. Which meant no one was trying to get my attention from under the table.

Unless they were.

I leaned back slightly and glanced down.

Five thick, sooty fingers tipped with black claws dug into my ankle. The table was wide enough, dark enough, to hide anything beneath. Then Hadrian’s eyes appeared, and he grinned. In that exact moment, I inhaled, choked on my own spit, jerked my knee out of instinct, and banged it on the table. Glasses went rattling with such violence water danced over their lips.

Everyone’s attention jerked to me.

I grabbed for my glass. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to.”

“Are you okay? What’s wrong?” Mom set down her knife and reached for her own glass. Water trickled down its side.

“Nothing. Spit went down the wrong way.” I cleared my throat, cheeks heating.

Harriet's drawn-on eyebrows arched. She murmured something to Ivan that I couldn't hear. He didn't so much as look at her; instead, he kept his eyes locked on me, a silent request sitting between us.

*What was that?* his eyes asked.

I loosened my shoulders. Gently, I sat my foot back down to the floor and gave the tiniest headshake. *Nothing*, I tried to say.

A cool finger trailed back around my ankle. Then another. One by one, Hadrian's fingers looped back into place. His touch seared through the fabric of my jeans.

"You sure?" Ivan said aloud.

I nodded. My tears were dry now. They were replaced with a thunderous heart and pressure around my ankle.

Harriet gave a *harrumph* and said, "Would anyone like some butter?"

Dinner progressed with minimal creative conversation after that. Harriet answered Ivan's questions about the law firm she'd worked at with Mom. As soon as Mom asked Ivan about his job, I stole a glance at those fingers around my ankle.

Hadrian's face pressed against my leg.

I stiffened.

*This is never what you wanted, is it, dearest?* He pinched his claws into the fabric, my skin. *First, he attempts to separate you from me, and now she attempts to stand in the way of your mother, too?* He maneuvered his head like a cat might around someone's feet until I felt a rumble in his throat. Not a purr, but a growl. *I can feel anger in you. You know it's there.*

I tapped the butt of my fork with a fingernail. It was like thousands of ants were crawling under my skin, pinching my veins and tendons, waiting.



*Tick, tick, child*, he said. The tip of a claw raked down my pant leg. *What are you going to do about it?*

She didn't want treatment—there was nothing left to do but wait.

Hadrian snapped his teeth. *There is more.*

My body was buzzed. Hadrian was so close to everyone, but they were oblivious to the thing beneath the table, the ugliness of his fangs, the fury I felt dripping off his skin.

A steady thrum traveled from the floor to the flat part of my foot.

*So can you*, he snarled.

“How long are you two staying?” Mom asked, breaking my trance. I blinked away from the cold plate, fingers still tapping my fork. Harriet made a noise in the back of her throat and took the lead.

“Visiting may be nice. The doctor mentioned it was best for your mother's schedule to stay as normal as possible, so disrupting that by having a guest stay might not be the *best* idea. But I'm sure you have a lot of work to keep up with at that agency you're working for, anyway, so visiting during the day once a week would be fine.”

Mom sat her napkin down on her plate.

*Tick, tick*, my monster hissed.

I sat my fork down. My hand curled to a fist next to my plate. “I can stay—”

“Only a few days,” Ivan cut in.

“That's quite alright,” Harriet said, voice like sugar. She patted Ivan's hand then turned to me, fork poised. “Your mother just wanted to tell you everything in person. This is a difficult

time for everyone. But I'm sure you understand the importance of extending normalcy as long as possible." Her eyes were a pale grey, just like her hair.

My lungs stilled. The room shrunk until it was nothing but a tunnel between Harriet and I. How could she refer to Mom dying as *an extension of normalcy*?

"That's enough," Mom interjected.

Harriet's shoulders squared, and she looked away to scrape the last bit of mashed potato up with her knife and fork. My hand tightened. The distance from the fork to her other hand was short enough to—

*Do it*, Hadrian hissed with a laugh. *All of it. I can hear it.*

I slipped my hand in my lap.

His grip on my ankle tightened. *I can smell it on her, dearest.* The s's in his words were drawn out in frustration. *Do not be so cowardly. She is spiteful.*

I jerked my knee up. It clipped his jaw. "Be quiet," I snipped.

Everyone's eyes snapped up.

"How ungrateful can you be, child?" Harriet said, the lines in her face deepening. "You haven't once tried to talk to your mother and she's been deathly ill, now you sit at her table and you speak to her like this?" Harriet's cheeks flushed.

A cold breeze wafted around my legs, followed by the familiar roll of a marble. It tapped against my shoe, then came to a stop. Harriet searched for the right words while wiping her mouth, her head shaking like a hubcap before it fell off a wheel.

I didn't need to look down to know that Hadrian had gone.

"Harriet, respectfully—" I said, but at the same time she blustered, "And you *will not* speak to me the same way you speak to her."

It was like every blackened thought, hateful comment, and whispered rumor snapped from their cellar I'd pushed them into. They all floated up from that locked place and crowded the ceiling to my heart.

*This is why you hate yourself, my thoughts whispered. Everyone sees the bad inside of you. So why don't you use it? Just a little bit.*

Ivan leaned back in his chair. He shook his head, as if to say *leave it*.

"I think dinner is over," Mom said. She gingerly pushed from her seat and took a swig of her water. With a sigh, she looked to Harriet. "Everyone needs to take a breather. Harriet, I need to speak to you in the other room."

The older woman jaunted up from her seat, head still trembling, forehead creased like an accordion. They retreated into the hallway and after two heartbeats, the front door smacked shut in their wake. Ivan and I sat in silence.

"You didn't tell me she was sick," I said, low, a bit of venom seeping into my words. He grew uncomfortably still at my words.

I bent to retrieve the marble. In reality, I needed to break eye contact with him.

*Hadrian*, I whispered into the void. But there was no answer.

The sun had set by now. The windows were nothing but mirrors, and in the one behind Ivan, I could only see myself and the shadowed hallway surrounding me.

"I didn't know she was," he said, flinty. "She didn't tell me."

I slipped the marble in my pocket.

"Don't pull this pity game on me."

"Ivan, please," I whispered. My words dropped like feathers. I needed to redirect this, and quick, before he started to spur too. I should have never spoken to him like that.

“I’m serious, Olive. Do I lie to you?”

I pinched my nose and closed my eyes, both elbows propped on the table edge. “I just—this isn’t how I wanted things to go.”

“Well, neither did I,” he said. He nodded in the direction of the hall and tossed his napkin on the table. “You really want to be around these two another two days?”

“Mom is dying, Ivan. I can’t just leave her,” I said, voice hardening with unused tears. I tried to bit my tongue but they were already resurfacing. Was he suggesting we leave sooner?

He leaned back in his chair, shook his head, then decided to stand as a last resort, as if the height difference would make me listen any more intently to what he had to say. “You’re not going to guilt me into this. And what’s this, huh? Some last-ditch sympathy thing?” He motioned to my plate, which was mostly untouched. “I thought you were trying to convince me you didn’t need therapy anymore? Or have you decided to not eat again? Waste away until you’re a bunch of bones?” He scoffed. “Olive, I swear on my life, you’re nothing but dramatic sometimes.”

I suppressed the strongest urge to cover my uneaten plate.

How was my mother *dying* dramatics?

“You should be thanking me for even bringing you here,” he said. “You’d still be in Wilmington, holed up with those cats if I hadn’t answered the phone.”

He was right. I would be.

I hated that. What kind of person did that make me? Was Ivan right? Was I only acting this way because I wanted the attention?

*No*, a tiny voice—my voice—protested in the back of my head.

He leaned across the table, hands planted. “If this”—he pointed to the plate again—“is for attention, you’re doing a poor job of it.”

“This isn’t about dinner, my mom is *dying*,” I snapped. Prickles started at my nape.

“Isn’t it?” he snarled.

Was he really trying to blame me for this?

He was already around the table and grabbing my shoulders before I had the chance to register what was happening. He shook me a bit. “Do you know how hard it’s been to be there for you? *I* was there to talk to you when you had no one else. You don’t talk to Whitney anymore; you don’t have any friends in your office—”

“You told me I didn’t need to be around Whitney because of Trevor.”

“Because *I know how guys think!*” he shouted. He took a step back, raked his hands through his hair, and tried again. “I’m trying to protect you. It’s all I’ve ever done for *years* and you think I’m the one that’s not good for you? Is that it? You want to start a pity show?”

Pounding started behind my eyes. Ivan was lying. But he wasn’t. I didn’t have friends. I had been avoiding Whitney.

But the jealousy in his eyes stirred a shadow awake in my heart. It stretched like an animal unfurling from hibernation. The chandelier above us cast a gold glow around the room, but Ivan suddenly seemed dull.

I knew what he was searching for—control.

A noise, so garbled and unintelligible, snaked through the air between us. It took me a moment to recognize that it was inhuman.

Ivan was still staring at me, his throat working. He cocked his head to the side and his brows slammed down in a harsh squint.

“What did you say?” he bit.

“I didn’t.”

His breathing was fringed and for the briefest of moments, I thought he might hit me. But Ivan's eyes flitted behind me—and I saw the reflection in the windowpane.

In the hallway, the silhouette of a large, black figure hovered against the wall, not twelve feet over my shoulder. He stood guard like Belvedere used to. His horns curved up the wall, but Hadrian's eyes weren't yellow anymore. They were a bloody gold and slitted like knives.

"Do you see that?" Ivan asked, breathy. Nervous.

I turned to look over my shoulder to make sure I was seeing him, too. My hands uncurled in my lap, my mouth opened slightly, like a child watching a parent pull in the driveway.

Hadrian blinked. *Clack, clack, clack* went his teeth. *Be rid of rot, dearest*, he whispered. *You know it is he.*

*Protect, protect, protect*, my thoughts sang.

So I turned to Ivan, with the straightest expression possible, and I said, "I don't see anything. Do you?"

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