# The Last Consort

Adaptation

BOOK II

Lauren Schultz



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THE LAST CONSORT : ADAPTATION

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# From the Author

Adaptation is the second book in a three-part romantic suspense series. The topics explored in the series may trigger circumstances for some readers. These topics include violence, language, suicide and drug abuse. As this series has been written in a forward moving plot line, I strongly suggest reading books in sequential order as the storyline builds from past books.

I wanted to create a story with redemption and forgiveness as underlying themes. Much of this can be found in the character development. Additionally, I continue to provide a large cast of characters to tell this complicated story using multiple POVs.

If you enjoy this series, I’d love to engage with you in my Fan Club. This series specific webpage contains a wealth of fun downloads, character bios, access to a character inspired game and chances to play a few series specific contests. Simply visit my website: [www.laurenschultzauthor.com](http://www.laurenschultzauthor.com). You can request access to this special page.

I hope you enjoy Adaptation! Thank you for reading!

Lauren

To all those who tried, failed, fell flat on their face, and have the audacity to do it all over again. Keep being awesome

# Prologue

“PIPER IS DEAD. HE’S the one who killed him.”

 Strange. He couldn’t remember a thing. Eric had no recollection of his pulling the trigger after squeezing the life from the throat of the jockey-sized man he could never stand. Why couldn’t he remember?

 The darkness of his memories surrounded him in the presence of James Evans and his company of crooks as the day slowly died. A pulsing pain on the top of his head slowly commanded notice, forcing his eyes to heavy. Why couldn’t he remember? Why was taking someone’s life foreign still when those surrounding him spoke with biting conviction?

 James Evans commanded the room with his very essence. Would he seek vengeance?

 “You’re making things difficult for me, Eric. What am I supposed to do with you?” asked James.

 “I don’t know,” he answered. His head pulsed with his words. The darkness ensued. The pulsations sickened. He couldn’t escape from the confusion of lack of control, and the unforgiving irony of not recalling the ultimate wrong.

 “Albert says you don’t remember a thing.”

 He looked directly at James. The last thing he recalled was Piper’s pink swine-like face hovering right above him and piercing pain in his back and feet, then his own unrecognized pleads. Suddenly, there was nothing, as if a burst of darkened energy caused his world to suddenly cease to exist.

 “No, I don’t.”

 “What the hell?” said Albert. “I watched him. I was right there. You don’t believe this shit, do you?” James silenced Albert’s ranting with a commanding wave of his hand and removed a gun from the bowel of the desk, sliding it across the top of the surface toward Eric.

 “In your madness, you displayed a necessary talent,” James began. “Do you see that painting of the hawk behind me? Shoot the bastard in the head. Then its right foot.” He leaned back in his chair with a sickening impression of confidence. “Shoot anyone in this room instead, Eric, and Albert will counter with a bullet to the back of your head.”

 “James…” pleaded Allen, the lesser-statured partner to Albert. He looked like a character actor who could only be cast as some doting, loud-mouthed woman’s sappy, puffy husband touted around like a puppy in a handbag.

 “Shut up Allen,” commanded James, unmoved, ready, waiting for his point to be taken. He loved it when he made a point. Eric felt every eye in the room watching each for different reasons as he raised the gun. The sixteen-year-old lifted the weapon, its weight against the cool of his skin. He focused on the image of the majestic bird, its eyes dissecting its anticipated prey. Brethren. Then he fired, rearing back a bit from the echoing sound of the power from the chamber and again into the correct foot as demanded. James Evans leaned back and observed the target, still commanding the astute chocolate-colored leather chair he had refused to leave. “Give me the gun. Looks like we overlooked what you can actually do, Eric.”

 The silence didn’t drown the sounds of his heartbeat squeezing against his throat. He had killed a man and couldn’t remember. Was it better that way? Perhaps Piper couldn’t haunt him during the lucid hours. James stared into his soul, his eyes glaring into a place he never knew was there, awaking a hidden demon, silenced and suppressed. How had he known? “Albert, you’re with Eric. We’ve found Piper’s replacement. But he can’t fire with fear.”

 “James, you’ve got to be kidding me. You’re putting this freak in Piper’s spot?”

 “He probably should have been there in the first place. I saw what you saw.”

 “Yeah, but…”

 “Al, teach him. Eric goes with you next week to Mexicali.”

 Allen glared at Eric, a long pull of sheer hatred, echoed by Albert. He continued his expression until they both forced themselves from the office, the anger lingering heavily. There was no feeling of relief with their departure, just a dreadful doubt carried for years.

PART I

Your secret is your prisoner; once you reveal it, you become its slave

* Ibn Gabirol

# Chapter One

THE DARK CASE HAD BEEN sitting on James Evans’s desk for a few hours before anyone approached it, an unanticipated delivery from an anonymous giver didn’t seem romantic in any sense. James was planning on opening it when support surrounded him in case it was filled with bees, rabid, toxic, Africanized ones.

 “What’s with the gift?” Mitch asked.

 “Gift? Haven’t even peeked,” James said.

 “We’ve got a problem, then.”

 James looked at the desk. The box sat near the edge, close enough to teeter from its place, fall into the trash can near his desk as if he were just an office manager and not a man with more secrets and handshakes made with the wrong folks instead of the board.

 “Did you get Dominick’s message, James?” asked Allen. “He wants to hear if you accept his offer.”

 “Yes, I got his message, but something tells me it wasn’t complete,” he said, staring at the box.

 “You still haven’t opened it yet?” asked Allen.

 “Doesn’t feel right.”

 Allen shrugged his shoulders and headed toward the desk. “I’ll do it for you, otherwise we’ll keep staring at it until it gets up and sprouts legs. Hell, if it’s a bomb, we would have all been dead anyway, you think?” Allen pulled the top from the box, peered inside, and grimaced.

 “What the hell is this?” He lifted a heavy plastic bag, a pink fleshy bit resting in a pool of deep red, blood at the bottom. “Is this a fucking tongue?”

 “Please say it isn’t human,” Mitch spoke.

 “It’s too big to be human, Mitch. Probably a bull or a horse. But it’s still a damn tongue.”

 “You need better friends, James. Whatever happened to chocolate?” asked Mitch.

 James lifted a handwritten note from the box, untouched by the contents. It was a note from Dominick. He had always been dramatic about his delivery; this was no detour from the usual. His offer was clear, the variant Diablo James Evans had access to for a generous cut. He was going to rescind his offer if not approached soon. Dominick didn’t have all day.

 “So, what are you going to do, James? Dominick pays well. You can put this all behind you, maybe focus on your son and Pamela, leave this alone.”

 Rochelle had access to Eric. Selling what he had would end any prospect of ever seeing Vixen come to play. After all, he was right there at a turning point.

 “You can leave anytime Mitch. You’ve run a good race.” Mitch had been there through the thin and the thick of his journey. Time was beginning to wear negatively against him. James could tell. Just recently, new additions were not sitting well with Mitch or even Allen and Albert had long been gone from the conversation, even before he decided to run off and be killed.

 “It’s not that James. It’s just that it has been years. Eric isn’t going to give you Vixen. Why would he? All this time and you think he still has it? You’re running out of resources. Maybe Dominick has perfect timing.”

 “I put a shit load of cat litter over that tongue in case it opens up and stinks up the alley back there,” said Allen after he returned to the office.

 “Man, what are you doing with a bunch of cat litter?” Mitch asked.

 He wasn’t failing at what he had been planning and delaying because of one failed attempt of a team member, a rebellious, unanticipated mistake.

 “Give me a minute. If I don’t have what I need in the next thirty days, then Dominick will have a deal. Maybe.”

 “C’mon James. This is foolish. You really think Eric is going to give that to you?”

 “Not to me, to someone else.”

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A piercing scream echoed in the background, a sound of suffering causing reaction in the face and in the lower stomach region, right in the middle. Garrett pulled the phone from against his face for a second, only to quickly return to his call. He watched his friend from against his car, the heat of the desert sun tickling the top of his head, the rays of heat an aura dancing in rhythmic beats against the dark asphalt. Screams, belonging to someone, died to a pathetic whimper in the background. He watched as William cowered his tall frame near the showcase in the jewelry store just ahead of him.

 “What the hell are you doing to that guy?” Garrett asked.

 “Nothing. Just breaking him in, giving him a peel.”

 “Literally?”

 “Some people need more discipline than others.”

 “I guess. It sounds painful.” He stared ahead.

 “It was just a finger.”

 William had vanished from his sight, the wide showcase window showing nothing more than a white countertop and the cursive white writing of the store’s name elegantly aligned in the center of the pane. Garrett didn’t want to step foot in the shop after having a foul encounter with the woman that ran the place. He was better leaning against his vehicle in the warm sun talking to a person of growing suspicion as he tracked another man who had no idea that a plot had formulated against him right in his own face. He was supposed to know only what friendship ushered, not a few mysterious tidbits that made Garrett wonder why he had been doing what he had been doing in the first place, or who the person really was leaning over a glass case in a jewelry store on a Thursday afternoon.

 “She wants to see you, wants an update.”

 “That old bat can’t ever just tell me to my face. It feels like it always has to go through you now,” Garrett puffed.

 “What are you, jealous?”

Garrett exhaled as William appeared again, this time in the doorway to the store then beginning toward him. He was always the guy flirty women smiled hard at, twirling the edges of their hair, or leaning forward to show off the top of their breasts, likely pushed way up by some sort of miracle bra when they spoke. He found it funny how William never reacted. It was annoying as hell. Garrett guessed it was that damn dark gash on his face that enticed an impression of mystery, darkness that drew them into him. Yet William loved Patricia more than anything in the world. Garrett could see that.

 “I’m running into Smith’s to take a leak. Did you want a coffee?” William asked from a distance.

 “Yeah, thanks. A vanilla latte with soy.”

 “Soy?” The voice on the other line asked, with a mocking laugh. “Doesn’t that give you man tits?”

 “I wasn’t asking you. I’ll reach out to her majesty and call you back.”

 It had been a headache, for the last few months. Months of barbeques and baseball games, a few good laughs that always ended with an unspoken sense of mistrust. William didn’t trust anyone, not even himself, which made it all so much more difficult to befriend him, be invited to his home, come to know him. It was Patricia who welcomed him with open arms. Perhaps she held onto that desire for a normal existence. He knew something remained caged there, hidden in an obvious refusal on William’s part, forgiven by Patricia, a whole missing segment he would never be made privy to, the same refusal understood by others. But not him.

Garrett tried to play with the obvious misdirection, realizing that it didn’t matter. Garrett simply needed to finish what someone had prided him in doing. He was growing tired of checking in with a person who had convinced him of their cause and had begun to question if he was working in the right direction months before. Garrett had finally determined that his employer probably wasn’t the person who called the final shots.

 Growing tired of the sunbathing, Garrett casually walked toward Smiths, the popular coffee shop tucked between a clothing store for women curvier than he found flattering and ironically a Pilates studio. He never made it inside. The door swung open with William heavily leaning toward two white cups in his hands, his hair a mangled mess.

“Let’s go,” he quickly said. Garrett noticed the blood coming from his nose and a few reddened scratches against his knuckles.

 “What the hell happened?”

“Here,” William said, passing over the cup to Garrett as he rushed back to the car, looking over his shoulder. That’s when Garrett noticed his eye.

 “Will, what happened?”

 “I’ll explain later. We just need to leave, now.”

 Garrett’s thoughts began a marathon as he drove off with William leaning his head forward, a few brown napkins from the coffee shop pressed against his nose. Silence settled about him, one of his best qualities. Garrett stopped at a light and leaned into the steering wheel, vying for his friend’s attention who seemed distanced.

 “It’s later, Will. Are you okay? What happened?”

 “Some guy was angry in the restroom. We had a disagreement.”

 “Did you know him?”

 “No,” William quickly answered.

 “You didn’t know him, and you just left him there? You let a stranger do that to you and then you just left?”

 “He wasn’t available to talk. He’ll be fine.” Garrett pressed on the accelerator as the light turned green. It was the man who had left someone on the cold bathroom floor that silenced William. He wondered who looked at him back in the mirror during those moments of contemplation.

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William slowly eased his hand into the ice filled to the lip of the plastic bowl. The cold felt good against his sore skin, better than he had anticipated. He wished he could numb more than his fist, tame the incessant throbbing of his thoughts as he scrambled to find an answer to give Patricia once she walked through the door. He should have gone some other time, but Garrett had insisted on his tagging along. Ironically, a man he thought he’d never encounter again found reason to indulge himself with a dry scone and a cup of coffee right when nature called. Had it been a random coincidence at all? How long had someone else been watching? He picked up a piece of ice from the bowl and crunched it between his molars, slowly crushing, as his thoughts raced about. Allen. With his knuckles the color of an heirloom tomato and his right eye like an eggplant, he figured to listen to his active psychic intuition going forward.

 His physical encounter with Allen, the sticky shadow of Albert who for years controlled much about him, had William uneasy. It had been a surprisingly quiet year since he’d had his left lung as a subject of conversation and a new scar added right in the middle of his chest. Too quiet. So quiet that William had to keep checking his pulse. Just what had Allen wanted?

 A move easterly to Arizona had been an easy decision for him, convincing Patricia to continue making a journey with him had been another battle. She was so used to Southern California, had been for years. Uprooting and starting a new way of living with him and their daughter, Gwenn along with Alex and Lisa had taken some major adjustments.

 What was he going to tell her? Everything was fine, an obvious lie? Or, he had no clue what was happening, which was probably worse than the lie.

 The house was still as he contemplated, generating an unanticipated fear, one that he had forgotten as time passed without bringing attention. He had grown way too complacent.

 Allen.

 There was the whimper from Jake, the excitable mixed-up tan dog pressed into a long body like a dachshund. They had no clue what hodgepodge of canine Jake was; he was just an unwanted pup they found in a box marked: FREE by the local grocery store. It felt like a family thing to do, bring an unwanted puppy home to a house with three kids he had never changed a diaper for. William reached down and pet Jake, who responded with a tender lick against his bruised hand. He smiled at the dog and the reality that his life was different, welcomed. Eric, a disenfranchised, broken participant in James Evans’s cause had a mid-sized mutt who cared about him enough to comfort his sore skin.

 There he silently sat in the kitchen of his three-bedroom, two-bath home in a family-oriented neighborhood in Arizona, a park at the corner, a vegetable garden in a raised bed in the yard with three bicycles carefully leaned against the wood fence he had helped the neighbor Jose to build on a Sunday afternoon. On the refrigerator posted center, was a corkboard and calendar Patricia had insisted on following, her handwriting with its delicate lifted edges highlighted in color-coordinated syncopation: blue for Alex, pink for Lisa, and yellow for Gwenn. They were trying to create the idea of family. Allen was trying to change that life to what once was, from what he thought he had escaped.

 A sudden mechanical hum of the garage door alerted Jake as he sped off to greet his favorite person, Patricia at the door. He chuckled as he returned his hand to the ice.

 “Gwenn, get the ice cream in the freezer, please. Then you can grab the vacuum and start in the living room. Alex, Lisa, go get your laundry ready, just like I said in the car.” Patricia directed as she made her way to the kitchen. Gwenn walked in behind her, swinging a blue reusable shopping bag speckled in purple flowers onto the countertop.

 “Did you find the shoes?” William asked, keeping his face closer than was comfortable to the bowl. The cool of the ice radiated toward his chin.

 “No. If it wasn’t the right color, then they didn’t have the right size,” Pat started as she headed toward the cabinets. “What’s with the bowl, Will?” William looked up just a bit to answer only to find Gwenn standing right next to him. The kid was beyond stealth at times.

 “Oh my gosh! What happened to your eye?” Gwenn asked.

 “What?” Asked Patricia as she neared the table. “What the hell happened?”

 “I’m fine.” Patricia reached over and grabbed his hand from the ice water and observed his discolored skin. Then came the internalized compulsions she wanted no one to hear.

 “Gwenn, go get the vacuum.”

 “But mom-”

 “-now Gwenn,” they both instructed. Patricia slowly placed her left hand against her hip and planted herself in the middle of the kitchen.

 Allen.

 He had no idea what it meant. When Albert was killed in Nevada, his quest died with him. William had never learned of who Albert had been prying information for. That nameless face could have been anyone for Will. Patricia’s alleged mother, Rochelle had continued whatever secrets she carried. That is why he insisted on the move, having no ties to where they were over a year before. He knew that James Evans would never let up, however. Not until he had made his biggest point. Allen could very easily have been part of that system.

 Buying time, a limited amount of it, William filled up a glass of water from the filter and leaned into the counter. Patricia remained unflinching like a subject in an oil painting. He disliked when she did that to him for reasons more personal. He couldn’t ignore the mental pull that drew him to her. He saw her knowledge of that, reminding him why she was the only woman who did what she did and why.

 “I don’t know what you want me to say, Pat. I don’t know what to tell you.”

 “What happened?”

 “I went to get coffee. I left with two cups and a sore eye.”

 “Okay fine, who…who did it?”

 “Allen, a guy who worked with Albert Wright. He asked me if I was ready right before forcing my face into a urinal.”

 Allen was a tag-along, always had been. He was more dependent on Albert than a wet, toppling calf struggling to reach its mother’s teat. There was no chance that an encounter, if it were intentional planning, would be something he had planned or even wanted. Arizona had been without incident. For the first time, he had gotten used to typical routines like taking the kids to school and walking Jake, waving to a neighbor like he was a normal person and not a man who carried a deadly secret that was slowly killing him in his blood.

 “Are we alright, Will?” What if it was the start of events worse than Whiteridge? What if circumstances that haunted him became reality from Allen’s meeting?

 “I don’t know what any of this means. I had to say something only because it’s not Halloween and you and Gwenn saw my eye.”

 “What?! Has this type of thing happened before and you didn’t say anything?” Random patients when he lived in Southern California and an encounter in an alley, and a time he was approached with a gun and its owner at a train station. Arizona looked mighty nice. They had all been events leading to no traces for Pat to worry about.

 “Maybe? It’s under control. I’m fine. I’ll make us fine.” Suddenly, her angered face transitioned to a face of sorrow. Then came the tears.

 “That mad man had my children. He almost took you with him. I can’t watch you die again, Will.” The hum of the vacuum cleaner started in the background, overlapping the mental soundtrack of his popping flesh as a fragment of glass pressed his chest, a sound he’d never want to revisit. “Then there’s Gwenn.”

 “What about Gwenn?”

 “Something is wrong with her, Will. She won’t say anything to me.”

 “It’s not…” His voice faded as he watched Patricia silently deflate even further. “It’ll be fine. I’ll make this fine.” They remained, saying nothing. Words. Words would only talk them into deeper concerns. They settled on a welcomed silence instead.

# Chapter Two

WILLIAM KNEW HIS INTERVIEW WITH two women from the hospital’s administration team had not gone well. His last remarks would likely get him into trouble with his own boss. William had made encounters with one of them before and sensed she had it out for him. The whole event was a failure when he saw their faces and he sat down in the interview room with one of his eyes puffy and purple.

 William slipped on a pair of Ray Bands and left the office after following the directives to close the door behind him. The mid-morning sunlight irritated his sore eye, just as he left the building, even with the shield of the shades. The morning couldn’t get any better. Allen sat on a bench flipping through a thin local newspaper, as if a natural happenstance.

 “Allen? What the hell are you doing here?”

 He looked up, revealing an indigo colored bruise beneath his left eye and another on his forehead.

 “Eric. I’m sorry.”

 “You’re sorry now? What do you want?”

 “I need to talk to you.” William snatched the glasses from his face and leaned toward Allen.

 “Why the change of heart between today and yesterday?”

 William didn’t trust him. He had a feeling his objectives had suddenly changed within the last few hours.

 “Please, Eric. You might want to hear what I’ve got to say.”

 What if he was genuine? What if he went forward and pulled the bandage off with a quick pull by talking with Allen? What if he was wrong about the whole thing?

 “Walk with me.”

 “I’m going back to my motel room. I’ll walk with you there,” answered Allen.

 William shrugged his shoulders. He figured he had nothing to lose with a quick walk if he kept his distance, made no promises.

 Allen had never been a direct adversary. However, he had always been pasty and easily swayed. He had never been true to James Evans out of fear and had always been way too complacent of Albert’s often unreasonable demands. His sappy personality offered nothing to William, even after he had done for Allen with nothing in return. With his partner in crime Albert dead, William wondered who he played allegiance to. Allen walked with a slight limp on his right side, his arms covered by a light, black jacket, unnecessary in the warmth of the day.

 “Thanks for deciding to talk to me,” Allen began. “You’re the only person who would really understand.”

 “Why?”

 “Because of what you are.”

 William silently walked ahead, waiting for where Allen’s conversation was headed.

 “You are a unique man, Eric. You’re a natural weapon just waiting for the bullets with a kid he knew nothing about.”

 “I don’t like where this is going.”

 “I know. I’m trying to be on your side here.” They neared a motel, the kind that always smelled of antiseptic, the walls thin enough to hear the television playing while a couple had loud sex. “Albert is dead. I got a hunch you knew about that, and James might know about the little girl who has gone missing with genetic ties to you. I’m tired of working with James. I think he’s losing it. He’s working with a creep who enjoys killing folks now. Any folk, including us. Help me, and James learns nothing about her being with her father.”

 “Are you threatening me?”

 “I’m trying to make a deal.”

 “I took a life for you. Years later, you threaten me? I can’t believe this, Allen.”

 “What choice do I have, Eric? Trust me, you’re going to be screwed in a few weeks, maybe even dead. You gain an alliance now and you have a better chance, you’ve got an ally.” Allen started to fan a square business card before him, a rich navy background with a monogram M in its center, refusing to hand it over.

 “What’s that?”

 “First I want a commitment from you. A handshake and Vixen.”

 William stared at the card, trying to read the contents with his movement, the anger building as Allen’s audacity commanded the moment. His sudden desire was selfishly motivated only for William to be stabbed in the back and left face down in the dust.

 “You’re kidding me, right? You left me, willingly. The only reason I wasn’t killed was because they want what you do. Now you want me to shake your damn hand and give you Vixen?”

“Your call.” He put away the navy card and took out his key card, tapping it in the air before the dark blue paneled door of the motel room.

“Go to hell, Allen.” The pudding-like man turned and opened the door.

 “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” Allen stepped into the room and immediately fell to the door jam, then to the ground from a gun’s fire. William felt the splatter of blood hit his face.

 He stared face-to-face with a man he couldn’t recognize, the gun still in his hand. The stranger smiled and cocked his head. “Well, I’ll be damned. Hi Eric.”

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Garrett glared at his cell phone once more before putting it in the center cup holder of his car. He couldn’t stand Christine’s use of the little emojis like she was a nineteen-year-old college student. Despite his irritation, he entered one last heart and pulled his seat belt taught against his chest.

 He was on his way to give William a lift to his car being serviced at a nearby mechanic. It worked out perfectly as he was on his way to another clinic to drop off a load of paperwork. He was what was always dubbed a team member, which most people hated being called, especially when he couldn’t stand half of the folks he had to work with. They all pretended every day. Garrett simply hid his pouts behind a mug, showed up on time, and couldn’t wait to see if things he had never anticipated would work out for him in the end.

 Garrett had played that part with his connection with William. However, it was quickly becoming difficult. William was quiet, never opening much about anything, and told the worst jokes but he appeared to be a good guy, that person who always seemed to pay it forward, gave a little more, said something when things weren’t right. That’s one reason why Garrett had to shower the shit off every day, especially before he looked at Christine.

 Garrett pulled up near a parking structure for a medical complex, the mid-day sun rays peeking through the metallic awnings of the adjacent building. William was right at the curb’s edge as Garrett swooped by and swung open the door to his A6. Will folded his long body into the passenger’s seat like a neatly folded towel.

 “Hey. Thanks for the lift,” William said quickly, giving the seat belt a pull. He wore a crisp white shirt and smoke gray slacks, the cuff and collar stained with a few obvious drops of scarlet; the formality of it all reeked of a funeral or interview, except for the droplets, that was something else. He peaked with anxiousness in the passenger-side mirror, right before he started to unbutton the shirt.

 “Where are you coming from?” Garrett asked.

 “Interview. Looking at options off the floor.”

 “Administrative stuff? I thought you hated that.”

 “I do, but it seems like I get into too much trouble.”

 “Yeah, I guess that is how you came to meet me. Maybe a change would do you good. Do you think it went well with that shiner?”

 “Oh, my eye? I don’t think they noticed,” he said, then smiled.

 William by this time had taken off his shirt, finding more ease with his undershirt. Saying nothing about it, even though Garrett knew he knew he saw the stains.

 “Was that blood, Will?”

 “Blood? No, I just feel like I’m coming from a funeral,” he said with sincerity, his face without any trace of anything. “You can turn right at the light.”

 To Garrett, William was born as a twenty-something nursing student whose beautiful companion, Patricia he’d run in front of a train for and a daughter who looked remarkably like him that he claimed he was still getting to know. Garrett knew William’s past which he kept quite shrouded was as mysterious as the afterlife. Garrett only knew what he knew about him through Patricia and the mysterious bits provided to him from a source he could never admit to Christine, all distorted images like a funhouse mirror. Even though Garrett was voluntarily existing in a shitty situation, he was still grateful to William and would always be. It was an obligation for those who save other people’s lives.

 Garrett pulled into a spot outside of the auto repair shop, Juan’s. William’s Highlander was still prepped up on the lift a few feet off the ground.

 “Thanks again,” William said, opening the door.

 “Hey, Christine wanted to know what Gwenn wanted for her birthday.”

 “Oh, yeah. Saturday. I’ll ask Patricia.”

 “C’mon Will, she’s turning thirteen, take a guess.”

 “I don’t know. This is the first birthday I’m ever spending with her.”

 “Wait, why? I didn’t know that.”

 “It’s just a complicated situation Garrett. We’re careful with what we say to Gwenn. We love her to death but we’re still getting to know her. We’re all playing catch up.”

 “Catch up? Where was she?” William looked toward the shop just in time to watch his vehicle coming down to the ground.

 “Looks like we’re just in time. Let me go see the damage. I told Pat not to put that crap gas in it from the station with the hand that looks like it’s flipping you off. That’s a sign to not even go. I’ll see you later.”

 Just a few weeks. She would have what she wanted in just a few weeks; it would be over. The pulling and tugging would subside if he played circumstances correctly. If he hid behind it all with a friendly smile, a pat on the back. Then he’d have to deal with the guilt. What that looked like was still questionable. He thought of the blood speckles on William’s shirt, then activated a phone call.

 “Call Russell.”

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That Friday evening, William had insisted on ordering out Thai food from the restaurant a half a mile away, despite Patricia’s plans for dinner. He was stubborn like an old, riddled car that refused to stop running, no matter how many years passed. But she loved him more and more with each stretch of time granted and faded. He made her smile when she didn’t think she had reason to smile, a smile that continued below the surface, in her thoughts.

 William slipped into the kitchen wearing a freshly laundered black polo shirt from the dryer, two brown bags he carefully placed on the counter before giving her a kiss on her cheek, his daily routine.

 The kitchen quickly started to bustle with the energy of all of them gathered, Alex questioning everything scooped onto his plate, while Gwenn replied with her often questionable sense of humor, only to silently settle back to her previous actions, without a word. She was eerily like William in some ways. Personalities seemingly were laced in the genetic code as well.

 Patricia settled next to William who had busied himself picking the dried peppers from Lisa’s plate with a pair of chopsticks while instructing Gwenn to stop looking at her cell phone and to give Alex a fork instead of the chopsticks he tried to use with two small hands. He had taken to his committed role as a father to Gwenn and extended it openly to Lisa and Alex without argument, seemingly finding an ability he didn’t know he possessed. Most people never knew until that moment suddenly appeared. For Will, it was a journey he’d probably never anticipated. Yet he dove in. William had not been mentally present during the first few minutes of dinner that evening, despite the busy activities of picking peppers and instructing children. He hadn’t looked at her.

 “I got extra peanut sauce for you Gwenn,” said William.

 “The chicken isn’t as dry as it was at that other place.”

 “No, you really liked that sauce, Gwenn,” Lisa responded. “I saw you.”

 “Be quiet,” she snapped. William twisted the side of his face in an averted laugh while Gwenn opened the lid to the Styrofoam container, the brown sauce leaking from the sides against the white.

 “How’d the interview go?” Patricia asked.

 “Oh, that…it went nowhere. Some woman from administration interviewed me. She hates my guts. Didn’t anticipate that. I’m going to lay off for a sec while this heals. Maybe call off tomorrow.” He glanced toward her before quickly turning his head.

 “Makes sense.”

 Patricia noticed William’s plate, a lone spring roll on the edge, and nothing in the middle. “You’re not eating?”

 “No,” he said in a long breath. “I had a long day. I’m going to walk Jake while you guys finish up dinner.”

 The kitchen slowly gained a new feel, as if a slow suction of energy had gathered near William’s chair as he left the room. It was uncomfortable, the realization that darkness had suddenly lifted, a darkness unnoticeable until William exited the room. She silently absorbed the moment and looked toward Gwenn, who returned the gaze, after pouring additional sauce on her chicken satay.

 “Something is wrong,” she said, casually pulling meat from the stick with her teeth.

 “I hope not, sweetheart. I really hope not.”

# Chapter Three

FRIDAY NIGHTS IN THE DESERT created an excited buzz, the sky even seemed like there was just a bit more starlight, a bit more sparkle for the violet and mahogany tint of the sky, its low belly impregnated with blinking spirits that leaned heavily into the sporadic serrano cactus sprouting from the reddened sands.

 William tugged on Jake’s leash as they neared the edge of the sidewalk and jostled his pocket for his cell phone. He quickly looked to his right, feeling the sudden presence of sound from another person. His nerves were so far on edge they had nowhere else to go but make a suicidal plunge. Allen’s blood remained on his shirt carefully folded at the bottom of a trash can filled with pre-sorted recyclables to be dumped that Monday morning.

Patricia had wrapped her arms around him that morning as he buttoned up the cuffs. “You look exceptionally handsome when you dress up like that, Will. I admit I’m really tempted to make you late, really.”

“Really?” he asked.

“Yes, really.” She smiled without revealing any teeth, smoldering wickedness plainly sexual all encapsulated in her gaze.

What was he thinking? The house, the kids, the seven-seater SUV parked in the garage, and the dog carelessly sniffing the multi-colored rocks spread out in the patch of ownership in front of a neighbor’s home were all part of the existence he was struggling so much to play a part in. He wanted to be William so much, but Eric wouldn’t have almost been shot dead.

She loved him. He saw it every night and every morning when the sun kissed her face, the light hitting at just the right angle, capturing her like a photograph for him to mentally carry throughout the day. Then he placed a call.

“Will?” answered Hunter, his father. There was a distracting pulse from a hypnotic drumbeat paired with an electric guitar screaming in the background.

“Where are you, a club?”

“No…birthday party. I’m almost drunk, just three more drinks and I’ll be there. Whatcha doing calling to mess up my fun, Will? I got a chick here, Sue or Suzie, she’s something. I’m going to have a very nice…”

“…Dad, please.”

“No formalities here, not playing responsibility with this conversation, especially right now.” Perhaps one day he’d fully act to the title, he hadn’t been too keen on committing.

“I have a problem. Allen Cox, do you remember him?”

“Yeah, the guy who is like one of those annoying puffy jackets? Always lingered around Albert?”

“Yes, that’s the guy. I had a bad encounter with him the other day. Now he’s dead.”

“I told you about the responsibility thing, Will. I don’t think that news will sit well with Patricia. Do you need to come back to So-Cal? I wouldn’t do that but…”

“I didn’t kill him. I need to know the real reason behind why Allen was here in Arizona and who the guy was that shot him. Allen all of sudden wanted to make a deal, a deal concerning Gwenn.” Sound in the background suddenly ceased. Then came a FaceTime request.

“Man, you let Allen do that to your eye?”

“I didn’t let him.”

“No, you let him. What did I tell you when you said you were trying to make this family thing work when you moved?” William recalled every word, every bit of a reflection shared as Hunter, his father shared his advice leaning into the wall of his old apartment, vicariously exploring his own remedied decisions through his words and scenarios. William hadn’t wanted him to be right. A year later, news of Gwenn showing symptoms and his old self, Eric finding a need to gain consciousness again, he admitted Hunter was probably correct. “You got a hell of a lot of shit surrounding you, shit that doesn’t disappear just because you do.”

“I know, but I need to make this work. I have no other choice.”

“Maybe I can give you some info tomorrow. When I’m sober.” A tall, narrow glass filled to the rim slowly appeared near Hunter’s shoulder, and a fair-skinned burnt red-haired woman leaned in and kissed his cheek, a kiss as if they’d known each other as long-lost lovers. “Suzie, Suzie, say hi to Will.”

William watched as the red-haired woman leaned into the lens and poured out a boozy induced, “Hi Will. Oh man, what happened to your eye?”

“He had a rough day yesterday,” Hunter spoke. “Listen, Will. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Be responsible.”

“Shawww,” Hunter teased and ended the call.

A few long blocks separated him from his family finishing up Thai food at the kitchen table. William kneeled, squeezing Jake by the scruff of his neck in a playful gesture, then rubbed behind his ear. Jake leaned forward and licked his cheek.

“I’ve got to make this work, Jake. Are you ready to go home?” Jake yawned and pulled William back into the walk for the evening.

“Will?” A voice fell from nowhere. Christine greeted Jake with a good rub. “What are you doing this way?”

“Just taking Jake for a walk. I didn’t realize I’d gone that far.”

“My apartment is right that way.” She pointed over her shoulder. “You’re almost a full mile away from the house. Poor Jake.”

“He’s fine.”

“Are you? Pat told me about what happened.”

“Of course, she did.” Christine ignored his remark and instead looked at him, a look like he was supposed to respond with further details, a mental sort of trick he guessed. “Where are you going? I obviously stopped you.”

“I’m meeting Garrett at this new art gallery. You would probably appreciate it. I’ve seen some of your work, it’s very nice, Will.”

“Let me guess, Patricia?”

“We’ve always been close, what do you expect? Plus, why would you hide a talent like that?”

He silently walked in the day’s shadow with Christine, the electric hum of the streetlamps buzzing in the scene with the hallowed clunk from the heel of her suede boots. Christine had followed her sister to Arizona having ties to no one in Southern California. She loved the desert and quickly found companionship in Garrett LeBlanc, the guy who seemed to never have a bad day, always responding with a yes sir or no ma’am to anyone with an inkling of gray or white on their scalp. Will tried to accept Garrett, as Garrett called himself a good friend, but hated how Garrett always felt too friendly and a friendship with Will was like a slowly simmering candied concoction. Getting too close would burn and once things cooled, the results would shatter. Either way, it was all a big mess that with his luck led to a hole in the head. He would have rather avoided it altogether.

“So, Garrett said you have no clue about what Gwenn wants.”

 “I picked up her present from the both of us but it's sentimental. Honestly Chris, I am still struggling here. A year ago, I knew nothing about her. Suddenly, I have a twelve-year-old daughter.”

“Yeah, Pat told me about that too.” She looked at Will. “Her feelings, Will. Nothing about you.”

William nodded and paused as Jake slowed near a tree well. He could have been dead, again. Another close encounter with the afterlife. He wouldn’t be able to shake his dreadful feeling off before he returned home, before he had to tuck the kids in bed, lay next to Patricia, and hear about her day, all while he replayed the sound of a gun’s firing and the distinct sound of Allen’s head hitting the door jam, the cool of another man’s blood against his face. Why had he taken the walk?

“Hey, William!” Garrett greeted as he and Christine neared a well-lit structure attached to a coffee shop. The light emitted a warm glow from the showcase window onto the street. “I didn’t expect to see you! And you’ve got my buddy, Jake!”

“I ran into Will on my way over,” explained Christine, wrapping herself in Garrett’s embrace.

“You okay, man?” Garrett asked. William locked eyes with him, finding something there outside of his usual jovial nature. Then he quickly averted his attention to Jake’s leash.

“Long day.”

“Will, you’re sure that you’re okay?” Garrett insisted, a strong hand on his shoulder.

“I’m fine. I’m okay, thanks,” he snapped.

“I’m sorry, Will. It’s just that a person is not randomly attacked like you were. Let alone be fine the next day. You’ve got folks who care about you. We want to make sure you’re good.”

Was his uneasiness that obvious? Perhaps it was beyond his capacity. What if the gunman had shot him instead once the door had opened? What if it had been a setup and the guy had a sudden change of mind?

“I just need some time. I’ll be okay.”

“Alright man, let us know if you need anything.” William used the next hour to get home, thinking of ways to make his remarks true, all in the business of the bustle of the Arizona night.

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The kids had settled on the couch with the glowing pulse from the television by the time he had returned with Jake. He slipped Jake’s leash onto the hook on the wall and watched as he waddled into the room with his play time crew where he was greeted with a warm call of his name from the three. Without a word to anyone, William slipped into the garage, using the entrance from the front hall area of the house.

The circumstances at hand were starting to build and he needed to keep his promises. He stared in weighted dread at the cabinet against the wall in the garage, staring before he finally unlocked the door, removing a case with a gun parked inside. It had been a blissful blink of existence not within his grasp. Allen. Evans. Fuck.

“Will?” called Patricia from the door. “You were gone for such a long time. What’s wrong?”

Her presence in that brief moment of silence brought the realities of the current situation to mind and triggered questions he had ignored.

“The guy I ran into yesterday is dead. He was killed right in front of my face. It could have been me.” Her silence remained for a lingering moment like a heavy smoke in the room. “The shooter, he…he knew who I was.”

He couldn’t look at her, hadn’t been able to all evening. He couldn’t watch her process what he had just admitted after holding onto the situation for the duration of the day.

“I figured something was going on. What did he want from the list?”

“From the list?” he asked, still staring at the wall, distancing himself. “I don’t know for sure. It’s such a long list.”

One day it would all surround him, no matter how much he had tried to avoid matters. He couldn’t help but realize that it would be the outcome. He had to fight. He recalled when Patricia announced her enlistment without hesitation. It was her determination that kept him focused. They had both committed to battle not knowing exactly where or how, just that they would hold arms. Then he had conveniently tried to go AWOL, without admitting much to anyone, especially Patricia.

There was so much more she didn’t know. Things he had never said, only waiting for the right moment, hoping that it never came. Allen’s death was just the beginning of the unraveling of the tightly knit work of the day-to-day lives of the happy couple, a stable unit they were still in the process of creating. He only hoped it wouldn’t undo the whole thing.

“Allen mentioned Gwenn. Someone may have keyed your father in on her.”

“Oh my God.”

“Yeah...yeah I know.”

*You’ll be screwed in a few weeks.*

Allen hadn’t been his idea of a partner in a time of potential crisis. He needed to find out what Allen had wanted in the first place, and why he suddenly had changed his mind.

# Chapter Four

THOUGHTS HAD NEVER PASSED BEFORE as they did for Garrett there in the parking lot of the coffee shop. A new experience of worry, fear, and anxiousness had blended into a creature that seemed to linger wherever he had gone that morning. Likely because of the significant decision he was about to make. Intricate lines ran along his thoughts all connected to William who shared a significant connection to Christine. He was like a brother to her, Garrett noticed it very early on, his supportive nature paired well with Patricia’s. They were a trio, tightly knit, so tight that it strangled Christine when she slept. Rochelle Evans had no clue who any of them were, just that she wanted to keep abreast of Eric’s whereabouts.

 “He’s trouble. Trouble that I’d like you to keep watch of,” Rochelle had said in a near whisper.

 Garrett had been so entranced by her when she first walked into his shared office space, her very presence intimidating and pulsating, a trace of sovereign dignity in the way she sat before him. She was still stunningly beautiful in her aging, her silver locks of hair held upward in a swath of twists held together with a single red band of fabric. Rochelle had been excellent at her delivery, so much that he had found himself completely encapsulated and ready to join her cause. He didn’t consider the potential or the eventual when he reached out and shook her hand. Garrett continued to ignore the reality that the trouble he had already encountered had saved his life, but he in return would lay paths leading to destroy his.

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Garrett had just settled into the top of the desk area, leaning with amazing comfort after preparing a cup of green tea, no sugar, nothing added, just straight like a true tea connoisseur. He smiled, handing over a cup to Sharleen, the new addition to the nurse’s station who had found a likeness to him through his blog, Ask Mr. G. He awakened his laptop from sleep mode bringing the device to life to show Sharleen his latest outpour his readers were able to digest in a quick ten-minute read. Feeling an unanticipated bout of pride as his blog was slowly leaving the tarmac instead of where it had been, stuck with the engine purring and pulling. Perhaps he had finally done something right. It hadn’t been his track record. He was tired of barely making it, holding his head above water as he struggled in an awkward acrobatic spider-like crawl beneath, only to find that he had missed something midway, had to turn back, do it all over again. He smiled to himself and took in a long slow pull of earthy tea.

“I really enjoyed your last article, Garrett. I think you should do something personal next time around.” Sharleen suggested. She sipped from her mug and disagreed with the experience inside the handled purple chamber with a quick shake of her head. “I need sugar. I’m not into this like you.” She rolled the chair to the other side of the desk, stuck her arm in past his view, and recovered a small packet of sugar. “There.” He laughed and casually took another pull of his tea, a moment of calm before he heard an angry yell of his name from across the room.

Randy, a stocky carrot-colored haired frequenter of the emergency room for the past month started toward him.

“Randy’s back? Did he hit the neighbor’s kid now?” Garrett asked as Randy continued forward, the anger firing up on his jaw and forehead. He could see the tiny beads of sweat lining below his brows, which paired the circumstances with a cranberry red tint and blotches of the same on his cheeks as he came closer than Garrett was comfortable.

“You made them take my little girl! You’ve only made things worse!” The guy had been there enough to question every reason for his being there. The last time had been the final straw. His little girl looked like she had been someone’s punching bag. Garrett had been asked to qualify the circumstances that afternoon, unfortunately having reason to suspect the worst.

“Randy, just a moment. Just calm down so we can talk.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down! I can’t believe they listened to you!”

“Randy, listen to me. Take a breath.”

“I am breathing! You call yourself qualified to help?!” He hissed, the words ending in a sprinkling of frothy spit from the corners of his mouth. Garrett stood against the desk area and tried to calmly convince the guy methodically coming towards him to think otherwise. Randy stepped in closer suddenly with the stride of an attacking pit bull. His pulse quickened as he tried with desperation slowly creeping into the edge of his voice.

“Let’s talk, Randy, let’s relax. I know you're angry.”

“Damn right I’m angry!” It happened so fast. Randy had moved swiftly before the desk, pushing everything off in a successful sweep from the top and glared at Garrett, pressing one hand against the top of the desk, the other behind him. “You’re going to pay.”

“I’m calling security,” Sharleen said.

“Hey, he’s just doing his job and you’re making a scene,” another voice interjected.

“I’m going to kill him! He ruined my family!” Randy shouted, lunging toward Garrett. He could only see Randy, the burning anger in his eyes, and a hint of pickle on his breath like he’d scarfed down sauerkraut right before he’d decided to make his way to kill him. Then Garrett saw the knife coming from Randy’s back pocket.

 “Hey!” The nameless nurse who had interjected stepped in front of him and grabbed the angry man. He quickly pinned Randy against a wall nearby.

Garrett watched as Randy struggled with the nurse. “Put it down and stay still. Where’s security?” he asked. His tall figure leaned into Randy as a few of the nurses poked their heads toward the ruckus. “Drop it!” The nurse commanded. Then Randy spit, a nasty, frothy foam up toward the nurse’s face. Garrett watched as the nurse closed his eyes in disgust and punched Randy right in the middle of his face, just as security finally arrived and Randy dropped the knife.

 “Are you alright?” he asked as Randy was ushered from the room. Garrett’s rescuer wiped his face with a napkin handed to him by Sharleen. Garrett was still scared shitless, overwhelmed by the reality that he could have died. The nurse stood tall and confident, a deep scar on the right side of his face, a tattoo of a dragon on the inside of his right arm, and his left arm cuffed in a dark Shinto-styled water print.

“Yeah, I’m good. I just need a moment. Thank you.”

“Shit Garrett,” said Sharleen. He didn’t feel comfortable speaking, nausea suddenly hitting him. A minute to recoup was what he needed, better yet ten. “Someone was looking out for you. Will, Dr. Benton just called you.”

There was something about the guy that signaled to an inward impulse.

“Thanks for saving my ass.”

“Tell that to Administration when they suspend me or better yet, make me have to speak to you for a few weeks.” He walked off, tossing Randy’s remnants into a trash receptacle.

“That nurse, what’s his name again?” he asked Sharleen.

“Your subject for your personal experience piece?”

Garrett chuckled and needed to hear something outside of his thudding heartbeat still very actively sounding in his ears, forget the nervous jitter from his hands. “Yeah, him. I don’t know him.”

“That’s Will. I don’t know if I’d have done that for you,” she laughed and went back to her desk, picking up items from Randy’s recent burst of anger. Garrett tapped the counter in a quick nonverbal form of thanks and allowed his thoughts to take command. Then he grabbed his laptop, forgot his mug, and made his way to the office down the hall, locking the door behind him.

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William stirred creamer into his second cup of coffee since sitting down at a coffee shop. He used the time off from work as a chance to recover his thoughts, which for obvious reasons couldn’t stop racing as if an animation flipbook in an editing loop. Sleep had abandoned him at two that morning. He’d been up ever since. His routine had quickly evolved into that of the volunteer family taxi driver, dropping off the kids to school and Patricia to work right before sitting down at The Coffee Spot, a local coffee bar, the newest trend among the new local restaurants and thrift shops selling used shirts at high-end prices and hand-blown glass mobiles made by a twenty-something entrepreneur.

He waited for Garrett who had texted him earlier with a sudden bout of urgency. William figured he’d wanted to chat about something but seemed to delay the conversation following his recent days of troubling affairs. He had become unable to suppress those thoughts that created unwanted lines on the forehead, his continued face rubs, and the occasional chew on the lower lip.

“I won’t take much of your time,” Garrett quickly said, pulling a chair up to the table. He startled him with this introduction. William was off on his game, had been for a bit, even before the recent incidents.

“Garrett, God, you popped up on me.”

“You’re not okay, Will.”

“You just…never mind. I’m not investing in anything, not a damn dollar if that’s what this is.”

“No. No investment,” he said with a chuckle. “I wanted to get your advice.” He looked up with the call of his name from the counter and quickly returned, balancing a large white cup, a white swirl like a far-off galaxy floating on the top of the warm brown foam. Garrett was excitable, filled with a restlessness that reminded him of Lisa’s third-grade class. “I’m thinking of proposing to Christine.”

William leaned back in his seat with his announcement. “Thinking or going to?”

“Going to. I want her to marry me. I’d be honored to get your input.”

“Haven’t you guys been dating for just a few months? Isn’t that a bit early?”

“My father married my mother four weeks after he met her at a church barbeque.”

“Really?”

“Yes, thirty-five years next May.”

“Well, you LeBlancs go for it early.”

“No, we believe in moving when we know we’ve got the best thing that’s going to ever happen to us.”

William leaned a little toward Garrett, squinting as his last statement finished its biting. “What the hell is that supposed to mean? Is that a below-the-belt comment, Garrett?”

“No. No, I didn’t mean it like that. Not at all. We all have our different walks.” Waking up from darkness to find her beside him, her hand sheltering his. Patricia’s very essence dancing with a light mist of warm summer rain, her scent, her voice, he couldn’t live without her. They hadn’t yet taken those steps. He had not taken those steps. “I really love her, and I want her to be there for the rest of my life.”

“Honestly, I think you're nuts. But if you feel that way about her, then go for it. Maybe it's like what you said, you know the best thing for you, or person, I should say.”

“What if she says no?”

“She might. Then she may say yes. I don’t know, Christine is a special person. Take care of her.” Garrett sipped from his cup, wiping the bit of foam with his index finger in a quick pull, the moment of wordlessness instead becoming a stare-off. Garrett’s unwavering view met him.

“I’m going to go ahead and ask this because Chris is really…you two were never involved, were you?”

“Involved? You mean like a relationship or…no. Not at all.” Garrett lingered above his coffee, idling as if waiting for more information without opening his mouth. Christine and he worked well together, the same mental pull game. “Why, Garrett?”

“You’ve got a connection, I’ve seen it. She has nightmares. You’re in them and she doesn’t tell me much more.”

“Both she and Patricia have been through some trauma.”

“What, starring you?”

“No.” William pulled against the skin on his face and rubbed the back of his neck, looking up as another customer walked into the shop. Garrett settled his cream-colored face into his palm and looked at him, again, studied him for a few minutes.

“There’s an obvious secret between the three of you. There’s a hell of a lot you don’t share, Will. I’ve got a feeling my long fishing trips and old college friends turned Broadway sensation are quite uneventful compared to you.”

He smirked and slowly leaned in toward Garrett. “This has nothing to do with my opinion, Garrett.”

Why suddenly did Garrett decide to prod? He had never been obligated to talk much about anything. They had been very good about keeping up appearances.

“No, it doesn’t. It’s just that there’s a deep kind of darkness that possesses her, a dangerous kind and you are somehow a part of that. I don’t want to lose her because of it.”

William stared across the table at Garrett. How little had Christine even admitted to him? Really? “You’ve got a lot of nerve, Garrett. Maybe I should have let your angry buddy give you a scar.”

“Look, I’m sorry. I thought you’d tell me what it was. That’s it.”

He wasn’t going to tell Garrett a damn thing. “You know very well that has to come from her.” William unnecessarily moved his near-empty cup of coffee as Garrett continued to linger. “Have you ever really been there, Garrett, the dark? I mean, you talk to people every day, but you listen. You’ve never really been to that place, have you?” He could tell Garrett pondered for a moment.

Garrett had probably never seen anything outside of his own bubble, the person who just drove past the bad parts of his grandmother’s neighborhood, heard of the kid getting shot in a back alley, and felt the anger of hearing that news. He wasn’t privileged, but he had no clue about those back ends that few really see and touch and commit to forgetfulness.

“No, I don’t think I have.”

“Just give her light. When she’s ready to explain that place, she’ll do so. Do that for her and she’ll say yes, maybe not now but…. eventually.”

“Have you been to the dark, Will?”

William chuckled, the uncomfortable sort of huff that is pure reaction, lacking any emotional connection.

“I…I struggle with that one. Honestly, I’ve never left. But I do need to stop shielding my eyes.”

 Garrett took a final drink from his white ceramic cup, long and intentional. “Hmmm. I think I’m good. Thank you for not slugging me. I don’t want you to be the first person who hits me in the face. I’ll let you know what happens.”

 “I’m sure Pat will tell me before you do,” he said. “So, how are you going to do it?”

 “I’ve got it all planned out.”

 “Dinner and a movie. Then you pop the question in front of that fountain with the dancing lights in the Playa del Rocco open area,” said William.

 Garrett stared at him with a look of stupid on his face. “How the hell did you know that?”

 “I was kidding, Garrett,” William laughed. “Oh my God, I guessed it?” They both erupted into laughter. He needed the humor more than he admitted. The location had filled with more patrons by the time the two had reached the point of the conversation. William had not abandoned the fact that his so-called friend had tried several times to pry in areas never touched. He didn’t understand why his questions had foamed to the top of his agenda as they had.

 “I’ve got a meeting to get to in an hour. Thanks, Will. I’m going to scat.”

 Questions. Questions resulted in damage to him, because it stung, it burned, and it tortured. He watched Garrett leave through the glass doors to the building, the last bit of caramelized coffee at the bottom of his cup reacting to his movements. It was then that William finally acknowledged the text message he’d ignored earlier from his father.

*Might have something for you. Grabbing lunch, then we’ll chat.*

# Chapter Five

“PUSH THAT SALSA OVER TO me Malachi. You’re hogging the whole container.”

 The boy forced the plastic container closer to Hunter, his cheeks rounded, a bit of onion falling from his lip onto the yellow paper right beneath him.

 Hunter shooed away a fly while he generously poured the green sauce over the top portion of a burrito, the afternoon sun casting its power against the clear blue of the autumn sky. Malachi, the twenty-year-old kid he’d been helping, sat next to him on a dirty park picnic table, seated not far from a couple of salt and peppered haired gentlemen playing dominos and uttering complaints about the current Republican Congress and how they were just making things worse. They’d be completely oblivious to their conversation.

 The kid lived in a room with a window and a bed, a laundry area on the bottom floor, and a communal restroom, belonging nowhere in particular and going no place faster than he should have. He probably only ate foods wrapped in paper without the use of a fork or knife and smoked marijuana like it was his daily vitamin.

 “Chips Malachi?” Hunter asked, shaking a greasy brown bag. The boy nodded and poured a serving over the soiled yellow sheet that had once covered the burrito. Malachi ate with a nod of the head as if synthesizing and bopping to a melody only heard by him. His oddly colored hair appeared unkempt and messy with purpose, one side covering his enlarged earlobes. The kid was a misguided mess but had keyed Hunter in on his living situation, which so happened to be run by Rochelle Evans. “So did her majesty stop by this morning?”

 “No man. She had some guy stop by and talk with Melanie at the front desk. Dark hair, tatted, dressed really sharp. Looks like he can fuck up your face.” Hunter took a swig of soda from a foam cup and wiped his teeth with his tongue as he listened. “I think she messes with folks or maybe she has him do it, or something covert. They’re doing something to them.”

 Them. He had once been one of them, years before. A naïve nineteen-year-old, feeling lost in college, unfit, and forced into a square puzzle when he was obviously the wrong shape, more curved and blotched. He wasn’t his father, a dedicated military vet who wanted his sons to follow suit. His only brother chose the same path, died in some tiny, dusty city in a country where he wasn’t wanted and was treated like branded cattle.

 Hunter had found a way to make a change through James Evans. That is, until he realized that it had all been a mistake. He later found his love dead from a gunshot wound, a bullet shattering her gracious heart, her toxic blood spilled and shared with his two sons. They became Evans’s tools for his cause. He had been too weak to stop it.

 “Did you get what I asked you for?”

 “Of course,” answered Malachi. The boy pulled a flashcard from a pocket in his wallet and handed it to him. “Just don’t get me kicked out for doing this kind of shit for you.”

 Hunter crunched on a few chips from the bag, directing his attention to the sound instead of Malachi. “Hmmm. I wanted to show you something,” the boy said, taking out his phone. Hunter wordlessly prompted Malachi to keep on with his conversation. The kid reminded him of his own son, William. Perhaps it was just the part of him that missed those years with his sons, the occasional lunch or discussion over coffee. Malachi was simply a lot oilier and possessed the ability to live with satisfaction in his convictions. He had made his bad decisions because he had taken advantage of the power of choice.

“Here it is.” He shared the screen. “Got a hold of this shit from Rochelle’s office. I think someone was threatening her with it.” Hunter watched a shaky video of a video, the image blue and not easy to make out. Desperate pleas sounded over the scene of what appeared to be a teenage kid. Hunter moved Malachi’s hand to get a better look at the scene. Then the figure suddenly moved; voices activated in the blue. The kid looked like he was aggressively punching another man, right before he reached backwards. Then a bright flash, a gunshot took center of the darkness.

“He killed him. You saw that right?” Hunter kept staring at the phone, thinking he knew exactly what he was watching. Why did it suddenly appear in Rochelle’s office in her cover-up do-gooder hotel for the unwanted? The boy’s face returned front and center, a look of desperate helplessness lingering long enough for anyone to see that what was happening there was wrong. Then Albert Wright’s face neared the camera’s lens to shut it all off. The face belonged to one of his sons.

 “What was she doing with that?”

 “You tell me. I just saw a murder,” answered Malachi.

 “Don’t show that to anyone. In fact, send it to me, and delete it.”

 “What the fuck, man?”

 “Really, look kid. I’m not going to screw you, but I am going to keep your nose clean enough where others don’t suspect you of having a cold alright? I don’t want you to suffer as someone else has.”

 “Your son?”

 “Yeah him. Both, but more him.” Hunter never could shake the look William gave him during his moment of vulnerability, pleading for his protection.

 “You’ve got footage for the last month. It’s gotten busy around there. Look, I’ve got to have to find another place soon too. Rochelle keeps eyeballing me, hinting that it’s a temporary living situation.”

 Hunter chuckled, “You stopped fucking the front desk chick?”

 Malachi tapped the ceramic table with his fist. “Her, uh, Marine boyfriend surprised us one afternoon. Came right into Rochelle’s office.” Hunter nodded as he stuffed his trash into one bag.

 “If you need a place to stay Malachi, you can stay with me. It’s just me and this damn squirrel that sits on my balcony. The thing is starting to creep me out. I think it likes to watch this show on Hulu.”

 “Cool.” Malachi balled up his stained paper from his meal and threw it like a basketball pro into a metallic barrel of a trash can a few feet away. “I’ve got to get to my gig. Thanks for lunch. Just give it some popcorn.”

“Thanks for the info.” Hunter watched as the kid rolled out a skateboard ahead of him, jumped on its back, and skated away. He had a good reason to believe that who he was looking for was the star of the show at Rochelle’s act of charity or at least connected to it all, obvious to only a few people what he was doing and why he was doing it.

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“A hotel room?” William asked into his phone.

“Yeah, only two folks enter, Rochelle and Allen. He looks like he was visiting twice a week most recently.”

 “And the other guy who is not going to the room, what does he look like?”

 “Never seen him before. Shorter, dark hair, sort of stocky, tattoos all over his arms and his neck.”

 “No, this guy was tall, no tattoos. I can’t seem to pinpoint where I’ve seen him before or if I ever have.”

 “Will, how are you doing?” Hunter asked.

 William sat in the parking lot of a multi-use store, the kind of place where consumers could buy a seasonal piece of clothing and the laundry detergent needed to wash it. The day was passing by at an eerily slow pace as if counting down to disaster. He weighed Hunter’s question carefully before he admitted the truth.

 “I’m a new kind of overwhelmed.”

 “What’s that like?”

 “It’s Gwenn. She might be showing symptoms.”

 William had to pull some strings to maintain a relationship with a doctor he trusted down in Mexico. He was the only physician he allowed to touch him outside of emergencies. He’d remained as one of the only connections to Evans he willingly kept. Dr. Young had confirmed an anomaly in Gwenn, she simply hadn’t reacted the same way as he. They were not too sure of the medical explanation why. William hated the reality that he had doomed another person and that he could still doom another.

 “I don’t know how to deal with this. I’m damn adult and I still struggle with myself. How am I supposed to deal with a kid? The Allen incident couldn’t come at a worse moment.” William remained locked in the surrounding quiet of his family’s vehicle, admitting discomforts he had not anticipated sharing. Events were no longer only about him. He had made a promise to a defenseless child, his own child, a promise that he hadn’t anticipated being as monumental as anything he had ever committed to. He was never made for parenting. Whoever was, but him?

 “Will, when I found out that something wasn’t right with you and your brother, I didn’t tell your mom. Then she found out. That’s how I lost her and the two of you. Talk to Patricia, talk to Gwenn. Then talk to yourself. She’ll be okay.”

 “Okay? I don’t know that. I can’t protect her from something she can’t help, that I can barely help. I’m supposed to protect them.”

 Silence danced on the other end of the phone. It lingered for a good moment. “Will, take care of the Allen issue. You must know that something is stewing, we’ve just got to figure out what window the stink is coming from. Just embrace Gwenn, catch up on lost time, she’s your kid. You’ll make it be okay.”

 He hated how his father often found a way to be right in certain circumstances. Perhaps this potential trait coincided over time. The journey he had never before planned continued. Accepting its nuances had been a challenge. When he first took her hand in the burning cabin, had he seen the glow of the sunrise against her face, felt her lips against his skin in the confines of a hospital bed? Had he ever imagined looking at her in his own child?

 Stretching his eyes upward and allowing a fresh gulp of air into his lungs, he revealed a genuine, thank you to Hunter.

 “Dad...it’s dad, Will. My six-dollar cup of coffee is getting cold. I’ll call you in a bit.”

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Evening settled quietly that evening. The new building tensions took a back seat in their affairs but still peaked over shoulders, tapping the driver. William had been vying for normal, helping Gwenn with homework and then taking the lead in getting Lisa and Alex to bed, usually her routine. Patricia had often been awakened hours later, having fallen to sleep with both Alex and Lisa wrapped in her arms, a loved end to a day and beginning of a new one. That evening was different.

 “Lisa, Alex is already asleep. He beat you to snooze land,” she heard William say.

 “I can’t sleep yet. Can you tell me the forest story?” Lisa asked.

 “Sure, which book is that?”

 “It’s not a book, it’s the story you made up.”

 Suddenly enticed by the conversation taking place, Patricia decided to lean against the wall adjacent to Lisa and Alex’s room. She listened as William told Lisa a tale of a boy in a forest kingdom under the influence of a Frog King who ruled with ferocity. But the boy often dreamed of the forest top where another kingdom with sparkling towers enticed him from the forest floor. The Frog king did not let the villagers leave the kingdom for fear of their departure for good. Only after he performed a special quest for the king did he earn the opportunity to visit the other kingdom using starlight. Lisa had added in sections he had forgotten to put in from a time before. She heard her interjecting with a few comments like no, then he said and…. then she said and giggles in between.

 Patricia lingered after she heard the words: the end, absorbing the moment. William was an anomaly of a man. The same man who she watched intimidate her ex-husband and comfortably wield a weapon was the same creative, loving person who loved whispering stories in her ear while wrapped in his arms and then delivering a whimsical tale of frog kings and sparkles. It made her smile and laugh to herself outside of her children’s door.

 “Can you help me draw the star kingdom tomorrow? I think it should have a river with sparkles in the middle of the town.”

 “Of course, Leese. I’d be very happy to help you. You are spot on about the sparkles. What color?”

 “Hmm…I think purple,” her voice sounded like she was about ready to close her eyes, dreaming of a kingdom in the forest.

 “Purple it is. Goodnight, Leese.”

 “Night. I love you.”

 There was a long pause. “I love you too.”

 Patricia thought of the boy in the forest, wishing to get to another kingdom under the pressure of the Frog King and wondered how much of that story was factual, William as a boy wanting to be anywhere but where he was, hoping to be a part of another kingdom, another life.

 William left the room, his face averted.

 “That was lovely. You don’t fail to surprise me, Will.”

 “Hey, I didn’t know you were standing there. I thought you were doing something for work.”

 “You weren’t supposed to. Listening to that was much better than sending a bunch of emails.” Patricia said. “Thank you for doing that.”

 William hovered in the middle of the hallway. In moments like the one in their possession, she felt he was who he wanted to always be, inspired, playful, aside from that darkened person who stormed within, the person he never displayed but saw himself being.

 “She likes that story, especially the sparkles, which she added.”

 “Of course, she did,” Patricia responded with a smile. “You mean a lot to them.”

 “They mean a lot to me too.”

 The intensity in his glance often lead to moments where words had no place, only the conversation exchanged right then and there, nothing hoped to memory, no promises or demands, he let her travel with him for a blink, just as he leaned towards her, prompting her to place a kiss against his dark brown strands of hair.

 “Thank you.”

 “You do that a lot. You must have a list of random mentions of thank you. You remember what each one means?” she asked.

 “Every single one.”

 “Are you going to tell me what that one is for?”

 “I will later if you let me.” His lighthearted nature slowly vanished, which it always did. “Can I show you something?”

 She followed him with an anxiousness quickly building as they made their way to the garage. Either it was something he didn’t want anyone to hear, or God forbid something locked away he had hesitated to show her before, couldn’t be welcoming. “You never asked anything about what happened in Nevada. You just went silent, so did I.”

 A long trek painfully awaiting to see her children ended with William bloodied and clinging to life, and a child she later learned was her own. It took months to adapt, for him to heal, for them to try to put together pieces that were never present. Say something about what happened? She couldn’t. She never wanted to.

 “Why would I ask? I wanted to forget.”

 “That’s fair, but it is still part of everything. Things that Albert was after, what Rochelle was doing. They are all part of what is happening now. They were never silent, even though we were.” William leaned against the cabinet as he flipped through his cell phone. “Look at this.”

 On the screen, she saw an image of a building in an area that looked familiar, Los Angeles, her old familiar setting. She could tell by the building next door to the structure that stood center in the frame.

“This isn’t good. God knows what is happening in the dark around us.” The beginning they had thought they had was quickly changing color, fading in its brilliance.

 William reached into his pocket and retrieved a key. “Gun. You know where.” He handed her the key. The small bit was frightening to her, what it all meant. Fighting looked very nasty. “Patricia, you and the kids mean so much to me. I’ll do everything I can to protect this.”

 “What does this mean? What’s happening?”

 “They know; they know exactly what’s happening. It feels suffocating. All we can do right now is protect ourselves.”

 Realities often silenced, weighted her feet, quickened her pulse. Those who created the evils of things never said but presumed were running rampant. It was just a matter of time before the walls William tried to build all came tumbling before them.

# Chapter Six

ROCHELLE UNLOCKED THE METALLIC box she kept hidden in another locked drawer in her office, removing cash. It felt like she was slowly paying a ransom for information she could have accessed herself, years before and another life. Every day she felt closer to finding a reason to abandon it all. Perhaps focus on what she pretended to do instead of the dark corners and inaccessible areas she had made herself privy to.

 In a slow, downward pull, she connected to the chair behind the desk, the dread thick and noxious in the room, taking pen in hand and writing a quick message across the stomach of the greeting card. Thinking of You…it mocked. She stuffed the bills, four thousand dollars, parked them in a small gift box, and taped the card to the top. “Melanie,” she called, taking the final steps to finish up her act.

 “Yes, Ms. Evans.” The round-faced girl stuck her head in the office, hiding her lower half. She was the definition of cute, like a cartoon princess, an example of world peace blended into one human from her golden complexion and island-like eyes and dark brown curly hair.

 “Please give this to Russell when he gets in. I won’t be in the office for the rest of the week. I’m going out of town.”

 “No worries, Ms. Evans. It’s his birthday?” she eyed the peach envelope.

 “No, I wanted to thank him.”

 “I love cards. They show you care.” She acknowledged in an innocent tweet and fluttered toward the door.

 Rochelle forced a smile as the girl floated from the office and closed the door. Then she decided to send a message.

 *ETA?*

 Ask Russell

 *I hired you. Why are you talking to Russell?*

 It's sticky. Might need a raise. I feel like you like Russell more.

 She couldn’t believe what she read. It was her fault that she had wanted him to conveniently disappear a year or so before, too afraid of the outcome of having Eric so close to Patricia. Her plan had failed miserably, and she felt guilty of the death of Patricia’s ex, Shawn who had nothing to do with anything, James, Eric, or the secrets that lie buried somewhere. Now she needed Eric, knowing he’d never come willingly to her aid.

 *I need to be talking to him within a week. No exceptions.* *Stop talking to Russell*.

She waited for a moment in silence, then came the emoji of a smiley face.

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That morning, the results of the last few days had still taken a pull on William. The heaviness that lingered in his presence had not ceased, not in the least. He was quickly retreating to the distanced, darkened person she had met in a crowded diner, averting his glances, and going emotionally missing for hours, his struggle an inward separation from anything outside of the lurking disaster only he could see.

 It was a morning of kids and breakfast with cereal being spilled on the table and lunches made up of perfectly cubed sandwiches and juice boxes. Gwenn stuffed a sandwich with pint-up frustration into a plastic zipper bag, which for some reason wouldn’t close.

 “Hey, you’re going to turn your sandwich into a flatbread, Gwenn,” William said, taking the bag from her and slowly closing the seams of the plastic. “There, you go.” She looked up at him, the frustration still very obvious, and took it back. “Wait, what’s wrong?”

 “Nothing. Why does something have to be wrong?”

 “Because I can tell that it is.” Gwenn favored William with the south side of her face hinting Patricia. She would turn out to be a beautiful young woman, Pat could see that and found reason to find the reality worrying; they had already taken the shopping excursion for pre-teen necessities.

 Gwenn leaned into a counter and started her admission. “I don’t feel well. I couldn’t sleep last night.”

 She watched William’s face, a look of sadness softened his mouth, loosened his shoulders into a desperate bout of frustration.

 “What did you feel like, Gwenn?” he asked.

 “My side kind of tingled for a while. Then later my leg and back seemed like they were burning, bad. It scared me this time. So, I couldn’t sleep.”

 “You felt like this before?”

 “Yeah, a few times, but I ignored it. It went away. This time was worse.”

 William looked away, as the confirmation hit him with a suddenness. It was like he had been hit in the chest with a medicine ball. He reached out and held her, held her close to him. “I’m going to make this right, Gwenn. I promise. I need to talk to you later today, just you and me, okay?”

She nodded.

Patricia slowly neared him and placed a hand against his back.

“Gwenn, Lisa, Alex, finish eating. We’re leaving for school in a few minutes,” William spoke as he exited the kitchen to the hall.

“Will-”

“This isn’t fair to her.”

“What if she isn’t like you? This obviously just started with her. You started having issues when you were a kid, right?”

“What if she is though? Or something worse. This evil kills. It killed your mother, Pat.”

“Wait, what do you mean?”

“The same crap that I have killed your mother, your real mother after she had been exposed. I’m not going to let it kill Gwenn.”

Patricia silently leaned against the wall to the open area of the hallway. Then she shrank to the floor. Not a sound left her defeated self, not a tear or a frustrated plea. William sighed and joined her.

“I’m sorry I haven’t told you. She wanted to protect you, she wanted me to protect you from your father. A few weeks later she was dead.”

“Just one of the many things you haven’t said.”

His admission explained a good amount in a quick instant. A big oh, now that makes sense. Rochelle Evans had been the only mother she had ever known. She had played the role well, barely allowing a moment for others, not even Patricia to question otherwise. It explained why Rochelle would allow her husband to poke at her; it explained her recent acts of treachery, but it didn’t express those moments when she encouraged her to move mountains when all she had was a plastic spoon or those moments Patricia would always treasure.

“She never said anything. All these years and she never said a word. I never suspected otherwise.”

“You don’t remember her?”

“No. I only remember Rochelle. Not a picture, not a remark about her, nothing.”

“You look a lot like her, your mother.” He spoke distantly, staring at the wall before them, his perfectly structured nose, heightening his profile. She watched as he used his tongue against the corner of his mouth, right where his scar concluded, where it pulled his handsome face into a faint frown at the corner of his mouth. It was as if he tasted those memories coming to life before her. “She was suffering, someone exposed her to the variant virus. She let it take control. I let it take control. I can’t let that happen to Gwenn.”

Patricia glanced at William; his long feet bare against the dark wood of the floor. He was quite casual in a pair of charcoal shorts and a dark t-shirt. He stared ahead, his head leaning slightly against the wall, the discoloration of his eye still prominent. In her admiration of him during the silent moment of admission, she saw him differently and shifted in the discomfort of it. Who was the man everyone else saw him as being? The person she couldn’t see, but everyone else knew. It couldn’t be. It just couldn’t be.

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Gwenn swiped the last bit of dark, sticky blueberry syrup off her plate and into her face. The kid had a good appetite, never seemed to leave a bit of food to contribute to the compost. William had allowed her a day off from school without anyone else knowing following their morning conversation. He figured it would be better that way.

 “That must have been delicious. I thought you were going to eat the fork.”

 “They were okay. The syrup is really good.”

 “You and sauce, Gwenn.” He smiled and took a drag of bitter coffee from the mug, the restaurant’s logo plastered in a checkered pattern all over the cup. “So, you feel okay now?”

 “Yeah. It’s not all of the time.”

 “I know.”

 “So, what is it?” How was he supposed to tell her that she was a carrier of a biological weapon and that terrorists would want her so they could achieve their mission of killing thousands of people if only they had what her father could give them? Great way to make her sick.

 “Gwenn, you have something that to my knowledge is a mistake that not many people know about. At least not good people. And apparently, it came from me because I have the same thing.” The child leaned back in her seat.

 “Am I going to die? Are you dying?”

 “No, you’re not going to die.” He watched her process what he had shared. He was going to make this right. Evans had the nerve to steal life from him, life from Patricia, for his personal gain. How did Albert even get his hand on her in the first place?

 “You don’t have allergies, do you?”

 “No. I wish I did.”

 “I have to take something every day?”

 “Every day.” Gwenn contracted her body toward her center, her face lowered and hands slowly slipped away from the table. Her sobs were the trigger for him to shift beside her, comfort her with a fatherly embrace and in silence.

 “I’m not normal. Mom didn’t know about me. You didn’t know about me, so I was made? Was I made to be this way? He told me that. But I never felt anything and now I do. But I was made like…like toothpaste?”

 “Shhh. Gwenn, you are a part of me, okay? You are a part of your mom. You were born to be here, with me and your mom, who both love you, alright?” She sniffed and dried her eyes, just as he looked up past the window to the restaurant just in time to see the nameless stranger who shot a hole in Allen’s head leaning against a black Charger.

 “I think it’s time to go, hon.”

 William beckoned for the waitress as he took out his wallet and waved his bank card as an indication that they were indeed ready. He studied the guy for a moment from the sheltered cool of the restaurant. Who the hell was he and who was he working with? He wondered how long the guy had been following him around and if he had planned on killing Allen beforehand or if it had been a change of heart.

 William rushed ahead to the car, keeping Gwenn closer than usual. Gwenn’s expressions remained sullen and withdrawn, more so than her usual ways. She would have to deal with issues that were not commonalities with anyone else. He hated the whole reality that the reality of his being a father had been marred by the very danger that pulsed through his veins. “We’ve got a few hours to kill. Where to?” William routinely checked the mirror and was disappointed to find the same black Dodge behind him.

Shit. He’d been through similar issues before. The last time it led to a concussion and a ruined shirt. “Gwenn, change of plans. Listen. I don’t want you to worry, but someone is following us. I need you to do everything I say, alright?”

 “Okay.” He noticed her pull on her seat belt.

 He signaled right onto the main street leading to a neighborhood. So did the guy behind him. What did he want? William slowed for a stop sign, stopped, passed through, and continued down the neighborhood at a regular speed. So did the guy. There was no traffic on the street in the late morning hours. Then he quickly pushed his breaks. The truck lurched forward with a squeal. “Gwenn,” he said, switching the gear into reverse. “When I leave this car, you take my seat. You drive to the nearest gas station and scream for help if I don’t come back in ten minutes or if anything happens. There’s one straight ahead.”

 “Okay,” she said quietly as the Highlander moved back into the Charger. He stopped the car’s movement.

 “C’mon. Look at my feet. Stop, go.”

 “I’m scared.”

 “Don’t be scared. You can be scared after you drive if you need to.” William opened the door to the SUV and stepped away from the vehicle to his new fan parked behind him.

 “What the hell are you doing?!”

 “Are we exchanging information, Eric?”

 “Who the hell are you and what do you want?”

 “I just wanted to say hello. Greet the person everyone is vying for. I don’t see the big deal. Never have.” He was posing a threat to everything he had worked for. Five minutes before Gwenn he hoped would follow through and pressed on the gas. Anger swelled, quickening his breath, tightening his face. What was he doing? Hit him in the face? Pull him from the car?

“It’s funny about the desert heat, sometimes it makes things harder to see. Thought you could move out to hell without demons following you, Eric?” He slipped something out from the visor above him. “I’ve got a proposition for you.” He handed him what looked like a ticket to a club, Silks, a bar code at the bottom and the date printed, a week away, Tuesday night. “Join us for a few drinks. Bring your girl. Ignore the generous invitation Eric and you’ll be one family member short. Take your choice. I’ll see you around, Eric.”

He watched as the vehicle pulled backward and into the other lane. The invitation was a friendly hello and drinks with a couple of demons, great. What bothered him more was how casually the man called him by a name he had abandoned.

 Gwenn sat nervously in the driver’s seat, her hands still locked on the steering wheel when he opened the door.

 “I don’t have to drive?”

 “No kiddo. Good work. Listen, if anything ever happens like that, ever again, you do just like I told you. And if you ever get stuck in a car against your will, you try to get out when it’s safe, go, okay?” Gwenn slid over to the passenger’s seat and buckled up when he noticed the glove box open. He’d slipped a weapon earlier that morning there and knew Gwenn had just seen it.

She looked at him silently, then asked. “Is that always there?”

“No. Don’t tell your mom you saw that.”

“I won’t. So, are you really a nurse?”

William absorbed the situation, the reasoning behind her question as he started the car. Poor kid had just been exposed to a potential crime and keyed into her physical challenge all before the morning had even ended. “Yeah, I’m sorry but I am a nurse.”

“Oh good,” she sighed, leaning her head against the seat.

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Patricia gently encouraged the screen door with her foot as she carefully balanced two plates in her hands, the delicate, decadent waft of the chocolate cake she proudly served like an excitable contestant on a bake-off series whose other life outside of an office was a fondant ninja. William had already poured two glasses of Merlot and settled himself at the outdoor patio table, the sky violet and sparkled with stars.

“So, this is what Gwenn was raving about this evening,” he said as she placed the plate before him.

“I had to stop her from going for a third slice,” Pat admitted, settling herself next to Will. He nodded and started in with the cake, analyzing in long deliberate chews and a nod of his head.

“Oh man, Pat. This is awesome. I see why she wanted thirds.” He looked up at her from his rapidly vanishing dessert, then silently looked toward the bricked wall of the yard. “I feel guilty, sitting here eating cake, next to a beautiful woman under a sky of stars while there is something rancid smelling so close by.”

Patricia reached for a glass and pulled it toward her lips, the smoky essences tickling her nose. “Why didn’t you tell me, Will? About my mother?”

“I’ve had issues with Rochelle since I can remember. Just when you think she’s done the worst, she does something different. You don’t know who she’s serving. I heard them torture a fourteen-year-old girl. They stole from you. She did nothing to stop it. But you call her mom, Alex and Lisa call her grandma. I didn’t want to take that from you. So, I didn’t tell you.”

William pulled from his glass in a fast down of the contents. The moments with him were always an exercise of discovery. He knew her way more than she did him and it embittered at times. It wasn’t fair that mysterious events or forgotten faces were vivid and prevailing to William. Had she never come to love him the way she had, a stranger of sorts would have been privy to a history unknown to her, unspoken by Rochelle and buried with a mother she never knew.

“You’re angry,” he said.

“No. I’m more frustrated. You know things about me I never knew, but I don’t even know if you had a middle name.”

“Warren.”

Patricia leaned in toward William and squinted. “Warren?”

“No, I’m just kidding. I don’t have a middle name. Never have,” he smiled his handsome smile that commanded one side of his face as Patricia pushed his shoulder in a bit of play. “I don’t think anyone ever fully knows another. We’re still discovering ourselves. Did you know Shawn?”

“Will, it’s not the same thing.”

“Yes and no. Did you?”

“I thought I did. But in the end, I didn’t. I didn’t know us.”

William rested his long fingers against his forehead and studied the last bit of cake with an examining prod of his fork. “Don’t you think that it is better to know us? Not you, me, but us?

“I know,” he said, pouring another glass for the two of them. “It’s not completely fair, you’re right. Let’s play secret or question. I’ll tell you a secret or you ask me a question, then it’s your turn.”

“How do I know if your secret is real?”

“You know I would never lie to you.”

He stared at her for a moment, his gaze immediately solely for himself as processes initiated. She couldn’t imagine what he hid so deeply, what made him the way he was. He often silenced when truths became realistic projections for others to see, especially her. He always retreated, tucked into his own darkened alleys admitting to no one his own misery.

“Remember the time you told me you were allergic to peanuts and then two days later you offered me peanut brittle from a half-eaten box?”

 “No, I explained that one. I didn’t want to hurt your feelings when you offered me your homemade peanut butter, which I can’t stand. I hate the stuff. Not yours, just peanut butter in general.”

 “And what about your middle name, that doesn’t exist?” she asked.

He smiled, a slow pull of his face, revealing no teeth. “Okay, you caught me. You didn’t like my joke.” He was so handsome to her. His words were delivered with a sense of seduction. That look that only he could deliver still made her smile as the thoughts danced into memory. The memories were filled with heated bits of interaction where that kind of smile from him led to coveted inhibitions involving heat, panting, her welcoming his hands into places forbidden.

“Secret,” she coaxed, taking a drink from her glass.

He nodded his head, slowly held her hand, and wrote a number with this finger. “You asked me before how many people. It was that and they haunt me every day. One, I can’t remember a damn thing, still.”

“I did. I appreciate that. It’s your turn. Are you asking a secret, or do you have a question?”

“Question,” he said. “What the hell are you doing here with me?”

Patricia laughed at first to herself, then let it build to a low chuckle, slowly shaking her head as the warmth of the air and wine combined. She only loved him for everything he didn’t see, and obviously didn’t know. Them. She was coming to love them.

“Come here. Sit with me so I can look at you.” Patricia straddled her legs over his lap and faced him, leaning in for a soft kiss with the flavor of cherry and oak against his lips. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders. William stared into her eyes and placed his long fingers against her arms, slowly moving them upwards to her shoulders. She felt him press into the inward side of her right arm, where he rubbed in a circular motion. His glance darkened for a quick instant, something she had never seen before and couldn’t understand. Then he moved his hands back down her arms. In the cooling air, the kiss of a welcomed breeze racing between them, he stared at her once again, “I want to make love to you. Right here under the stars, I want to make you-”

“—Will,” she quickly said, hushing his bout of sexual energy as Gwenn silently slip behind William.

“Gwenn is behind me, isn’t she?”

Patricia nodded.

“Yes, Gwenn,” they both chimed.

“Uh…Alex just laughed and puked milk through his nose. I didn’t know he even had milk. But it was milk.”

“Thanks, sweetheart,” Patricia said as they both laughed. “So much for the movie set as a distraction. Let me go take care of the milk.”

“I’m right behind you,” William responded. “Question,” he asked.

“I already had a turn.” She watched as he looked down into his lap.

“You’re right. I’ll ask later.”

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A killer wasn’t the image one would have connected to the cargo short sporting midsize SUV driving person he’d shared an invitation with hours before. He took a few minutes to prepare himself for a satisfying run on a treadmill planted next to another where an old flame squeezed into an exercise short and top, the kind that purposely hugged each curve and nook for those looking to show off their efforts huffed along. He noticed the lines of her taut thighs moving against the force of the machine, her breasts tightly pressed into the small top rising enough to show off her abs. She loved the attention, and he gave it to her every time.

“Hey Russell,” Dianna purred as he leaned into the machine. He intentionally faced in her direction, took in her sexual power and seductive drawl as he tied up his laces and stretched out his calves.

“Hey, Dianna.”

“Are you still lonely?”

“Why do you ask if I’m lonely?”

“Because every time you’re here with me, you take a long time with your shoes, ogling at my ass.”

“What? You don’t want me to?”

“Of course, I do,” she coaxed.

He stood there, his mind racing in other directions, and took advantage of the view, an open invitation from Dianna, and started his run.

At half a mile, Eric came back into his thoughts. He never left; Dianna’s ogled tight ass simply hovered for a moment pleasantly replacing the obvious. Miguel thought he could use him to get Eric’s bitch. Russell hadn’t learned about her until recently, thought it was all about Eric. It was still very much about him as Miguel had no clue about what was inside of him. Russell never liked him, saw him as a problem right before James Evans lost control over his enterprise before Russell moved on. Not all was lost however with Evans. Russell took a deep breath, wiped the sweat from his neck with a small towel as he reached one and a half miles. Dianna had finished her round on the machine and took a moment to cool down on a foam floor mat right before him. She bent over to stretch, her ass outlined by the pink fabric of her fitting shorts, complimenting her sunbaked bronzed skin. Russell slowed his run and did what she wanted, what he wanted.

“Damn it, Dianna!”

“What? I’m stretching.”

“I’m trying to think here.”

“About what?”

“About me. I’ve got a lot to consider.”

“Is it Chanelle, again?”

He’d tried to make his current desire to destroy Eric about her, what was taken away, what could have been. He admitted a part of it was. But the outcome, a huge payout for Vixen admittedly a nasty destructive poison that could kill thousands he heard was right at his fingertips. He’d be set, not James Evans, not Miguel, but him.

Russell looked around the gym. A few of the usual folks routinely went about, a retired Real Estate Broker who was trying desperately to keep beautiful and the stamina for his wife fifteen years younger, the lesbian couple who gave way too many vocal encouragements to each other with physical touching and kissing between reps and the over-pumped guy who no one understood when he talked. No one would say anything when they heard Dianna’s moans from the shower. He needed to release the tension anyway right before he took a few important visits.

# Chapter Seven

“SPRING. THEY WANT TO GET married in a few months,” Patricia announced. Christine spent a whole half an hour describing the ring and the plans ahead of them. The excitement was contagious, Patricia admitted later. Her baby sister set to marry the man she would grow with through thick and thin, fat, broke, successful, sick, and everything in between. They were a cute couple, playful and infectious in their interactions.

Garrett had been a surprise connection as William seldom did anything outside of work and home. Garrett had been so keen on Christine that he wouldn’t have had it any other way.

“I’m a matchmaker, what can I say? I might have a gift,” William kidded.

“You’ve got many gifts Will, but matchmaking is not one of them.”

“Oh, you know I was determined to get Garrett to talk to Chris,” he laughed.

“No, you were determined to get him to stop interrupting your lunch,” Patricia said just as she turned the flame to the high setting on the stove. She felt his stare, the draw that initiated the biological craving of another. She had been missing the connection with another for years, if not ever experienced before and it was wonderful and delicious to her level after level. William had wrapped his long arms around her in a playful yet wanting move, delivering a kiss to her temple, then reached over sneaking a strip of red pepper from the cutting board.

He remained in the kitchen, leaning against the cabinet. The spot was his usual place for their discussions, the official place for decisions, next on the menu items. It was just a counter, but he had made it his own special place of contemplation. Every decision with weight was made at the same exact location. She wondered if there was an invisible force planted beneath the flooring. “Garrett keyed me in on his plan a few days ago.”

“And you didn’t say anything to me?”

He smiled in silence then quickly snuck another pepper as she swatted his hand.

“Uh, there’s a police officer at the door,” Gwenn announced from the doorway. “What happened?”

“I’ll explain later. Get your brother and sister and take them to the den. Pat, maybe you should go with them.”

“I’m coming with you, Will.”

The heaviness she felt in the space of their kitchen returned with a readied determination. Had he told her the whole story of what had happened?

“Yes?” William answered behind the closed door.

“Mr. Heaton, Glendale Police. I have a few questions for you. I won’t take much of your time.” William looked at Patricia, a moment of silence just before he opened the door.

“Sir?”

“I’m Lieutenant Leonard Wilcox and this is Lieutenant Holding. We’re investigating an officer-involved shooting. Can we have a few moments?”

She noticed William’s glance as he studied the officer standing next to the gentleman doing most of the talking. His gaze was unwavering as he closed the front door behind them in a deliberate slow move of his hand.

“Mr. Heaton, this involves you directly. Can we talk in private?”

“Anything you say to me, she can hear.”

“Fine. I’m closing off an investigation on the incident involving Officer Russell Marin a few days ago. He said you were there at the scene. Is that correct?”

“Yes.” Patricia watched the exchange. William’s glance was cold and analytical. His answers were quick single worded responses. A sinister presence had taken its place as an uninvited onlooker. The neighborhood was always quiet, but for that moment in the dying warmth of the day, the silence swelled to the point where it blended into a sickening vibrating lull. She leaned into William with a heavy sense of desperation as the lieutenant’s words fell from his mouth in a rebuttal of sorts. The other lieutenant remained wordless. Something was sour, a putrid stench from it all radiated between the incident and Will.

Realization slowly took root deeply in her thoughts. She had a disturbing notion that something was about to change between them. How fast would it happen? When would it happen and from what direction? It pushed with force against her. She took a deep breath, her eyes fogging from unknown tears fighting to fall from her thoughts.

“Ma’am. I’m just asking questions. No one is in trouble here.”

“I understand that sir.”

“Are we done, Lieutenant? Did I answer what you needed?” William asked as he took her hand into his. The lieutenant was analytical, square in the face with a slight gap between his front teeth. He continued to pinch his mouth shut between words, lowering his head, and lifting it in a quick nod.

“Here’s my card,” he said, handing over the small rectangular bit of paper. William accepted it with a nod, his opposite hand still tightly clasping Patricia’s. William watched tall, unwavering from the porch as the uniformed men walked down the driveway and a kid sped down the sidewalk on a bicycle.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“I’ve got a bad feeling Will. I just don’t know why.”

“Marin, Officer Russell Marin. He’s been following me around. The guy who killed Allen is a cop.”

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The heat was so thick that late afternoon, he could smell the temperature in the air, just the right bit to inspire Russell during his evening rendezvous with Ahmad Larkin. Ahmad had served like he did, U.S. Army. They had shared dry heat in a world far away from home, the nights warm and questionable about the reality of another morning sun rising without personally knowing the other. Ahmad suffered from his own pride, so strong that it had caused a bitterness, even more than Russell’s, which was often hard to swallow. That pride made him join James Evans. They had forged a friendship and a hatred, a balance between the two. Russell lit a cigarette, leaned the cardboard box toward Ahmad, offering a slow death, and leaned into a dusty old wooden frame standing in front of the abandoned house on the outskirts of town.

It was Ahmad’s father’s place and had gone up in smoke two or so years before. It had been empty after he died, and empty while he lived, his father suffering from untreated depression, confining him to a single room and the rest of the house stripped of any memory of any life he had lived before. The kitchen had at one time been stripped to a mere refrigerator and necessary cabinets. Depressing in its own right, Ahmad used it in his favor and in Evans’s. After a bunch of teenage knot heads snuck in to enjoy their meth fix, the house went up in flames, the rest water and smoke damaged so badly it had no value but the ground on which it stood. His father didn’t give a shit about Ahmad, his only son before the depression, and hadn’t willed the thing over to anyone. Died intestate. Ahmad was two years into probate with no money of his own to do anything.

Ahmad blew a puff of white smoke into the air and stared at the darkening sky. Russell was tired of his old stories of their being like brethren, his brother. Russell already had two, one was dead and the other one wasn’t a meaningful connection. Didn’t matter. Didn’t do anything for him but trigger pegging questions wrongfully placed and wrongfully directed. He was sick of people and couldn’t help but see a rightful place in James Evans’s empire, where he could be crowned. The other shit was for the regular folk, the do-gooders and I hope one-day saps who he couldn’t stand. It had been a journey to get to the point where he stood in front of a graying house and a worthless pal.

Is it Chanelle? He recalled Dianna’s question.

It started years ago when he saw him. When Eric killed her. Russell hadn’t forgotten that night or the person who changed his life, turned him into the mess he had become.

Russell extinguished his cigarette and pulled a little on a heavy ring he wore on his right index finger. He looked over at Ahmad. “Hey, I’m sorry man.”

“Sorry about what?” asked Ahmad.

Russell fired a bullet into Ahmad’s head. Then he lit another cigarette, dragging a deep pull of smoke into his mouth and emptying it through his nose.

# Chapter Eight

A PLEASANT BREEZE KISSED ROCHELLE’S face as she stepped from her vehicle. California’s cool salty hint from the Pacific Ocean in the early fall helped to depressurize the tensions slowly building. She didn’t need this anymore. Never did. Weeks away from certain death and her freedom from professional claims tied to James, Rochelle knew she was counting down her days. He had charmed her years before with his perfect smile, charming kissable lips, all masking a murderous sinister controlling man hinged on revenge and harming others. She once loved him more than anything. Then came the distrust and his vow to kill her.

 James was still handsome to her, even though she hated him to the very cellular level and wouldn’t mourn for him if the news ever came that he had finally made his way to hell. James’s full shoulders and height armed him with physical intimidation when flexed. He wore his soft hair, now salt and peppered like the 80’s Billy D. His scent was still the same spicy blend of vanilla and black pepper.

 “You're visiting more and more often Rochelle. Feels like you’re desperate.” James spoke as he stood front and center of the open area of a warehouse. She was no longer privileged enough to enter the office. Now she was reduced to being a mere informant provided with a few minutes in the open area.

 “I need to talk to you, James. You don’t give me any time.”

 “I don’t need to give you any time, Rochelle. I’ve given you enough of that anyway.”

 “Russell needs to disappear. I don’t want him around anymore.”

 “Don’t tell me what to do.”

 “He’s dangerous James. He’s going to bring attention to where it doesn’t need to be, and I don’t trust him.”

 James neared her, his power buzzing, intimidating her with its heated push. It was slow torture, making her miss the years they spent together. The years when his laugh made her heart skip and stomach dance with an innocent flutter from the newfound so-called love. She missed those times. She had grown so cold, like an aging tree in the forest floor, watching its brethren slowly all around her. Her roots were still ground, but her shape had been forced by the call of the wind, the heat of the sun, subject to the elements and no longer her own will.

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James looked out of the small window from the small attic area of the craftsman-style home. There was barely enough room for the both of them, his wide frame hunched as his face angled just enough for her to see the strength in his jaw. “I can’t believe he will just walk away when I saw him kill him. It isn’t fair, Rochelle. It just isn’t fair.”

 Rochelle kneeled beside him, the bit of dust from the forgotten wooden floor of the storage area coating her dark denim jeans struggling to find the right words to comfort her love’s sudden sullen and darkening nature. He hated everyone that afternoon coming from the courtroom where a man was turned free to society after having killed his father. Self-defense. James’s father had been unarmed, the man violently charging toward him as his father demanded that he leave his property. His father suffered a head injury, one that killed him three days later. All because another felt that he had the power to demand of him when there was no demand in play.

 “You know if the tables had been turned, Chel. If only the tables were turned, my father would be in jail for murder. But that fucker gets to go home to his wife. He didn’t even belong here.”

 “No, he didn’t. I’m sorry, James. We don’t all qualify for equal justice. You know that.”

 “I know. But it doesn’t mean I should just let it happen.”

 He suddenly shifted from the window and started back toward the small opening on the floor, making his way back into the welcoming pull of his family’s home. His face grayed; his eyes slowly became possessed by a storm she couldn’t see but could feel with a powerful force. “Would you love me if I tried to change things?”

 “James, I will always love you. I’d try to fight right by your side.”

 “I’m not talking about picket signs Chel,” he said. The darkness ensued as he lowered himself from the room. Rochelle rocked back to a seated position and looked out the window from where James had been staring. Slowly she placed her hands against her midsection, sheltering their child who was slowly taking form within her womb. “You’ll help him to be strong. I know you will.”

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Rochelle’s eyes drew downward in a submissive pull. Why was she there? Really? To beg for forgiveness, plead for his love after years deadened? James took her by the face, the strength of the bridge of his nose barely meeting her lips.

 “Why do you keep punishing me, Chel?”

 “Because I know you’re still there, somewhere.”

 “What the hell are you talking about? I don’t think you ever cared to really know what this was all about.”

 “No, I do,” she felt her eyes slowly fill with unwanted tears. All the years, all the dying, the secrets, her burdens carried without release. She had watched in the background like a committed crew member, James on his deadly tour as he plowed aggressively through souls, breaking them, molding them into empty shells bending to his cause, not the cause of others he so claimed. His threats garnished his recent consort and had caused his most coveted victim to betray him years before. Rochelle watched him torture the twins. He beat them into pawns until one vanished and the other sought long and sour revenge that caused his greatest plan to screech to a halt, his masterpiece. Rochelle had closed her eyes to it all, focused on raising two girls she never birthed, but he had sired.

 “So, you came here to make a demand of me?”

 “You can call it whatever you’d like, James. We’re all in danger with Russell. He disappeared before. He’s always been in it for his own purpose. This is no different. If you want Eric like you claim you do, Russell needs to go.”

 “Why? He’s got connections with Miguel.”

 “He’s following his own agenda. He'll kill Eric before you have what you want from him.”

 James crossed his arms and stared at her just before he shifted his glance toward something that only he could see. Russell was an angry, revengeful cold soul who had provided her with enough grief. His last piece of information about the man James needed so desperately to complete a mission she felt he was slowly growing leery of had steered her to believe that Russell was there for a purpose not shared with her. He wanted Eric dead without knowing anything about how valuable he was, especially to James, or maybe he did. Russell wanted more than what James had offered. He wanted to watch Eric die by his own hands.

 “He’s leaving, headed down past the border in two days. He’ll be out of your hair. Don’t think that this means you can disappear and screw me over, Rochelle. You owe me, remember?” James held her close to his chest, his hands tightly gripping her arms.

 “No, I already paid my dues. So have others.”

 “You better not be talking about Eric. What the hell are you doing?”

Eric was the one person who held so much power, power over James, without his even having a clue. She never forgot his face when he commanded her to never return. It spoke of uncertainty to James; she saw James’s demise in the boy’s glance. He was a mistake that James quietly saw as a fortune; a glorious and frightening point that he could make using the boy as its igniting force.

“I’m doing what needs to be done for me. This is all over James. Time to shift. You’ve ruined it by bringing Russell back. Mark my words.”

“What the hell do you think you’re pulling off? Tell me what you’re doing, Rochelle! This is mine! My point, my fortune!”

“Not if you’re dead James. Tell Mitch to take a vacation while you go to your girlfriend younger than your daughter! Tell her your wife saved your ass again.”

“Damn it, Rochelle!”

Rochelle walked past James, leaving him with enough anger for a team of folks. Perhaps Mitch would hear it.

“Rochelle! Rochelle!”

# Chapter Nine

PATRICIA PEEKED INTO THE LIVING room just in time to watch William talking to Gwenn with a black box in his hands. It had been his idea to give her a sentimental token of love in the form of a necklace with five gems, each one symbolic of everyone’s birthdays. She chose to play witness, leaving the moment between the two of them, even though she had seen William look up toward her during the exchange.

He was trying so hard to create what she wanted so badly, what the kids needed, but knew what was furiously beating against the back door. Why did she think otherwise? It had been a hope that she could love someone who loved her in return, someone she could share with, grow old with. But she couldn’t shake the suffocating reality that she never saw William growing old. Patricia just couldn’t watch him die again.

She swirled the last bit of icing on top of the last of the cupcakes she had baked for Gwenn’s birthday celebration. They had agreed on a simple small gathering with a few of her friends and Christine and Garrett. She admitted to the foreign feeling to William, being that they had never celebrated a birthday with their own flesh and blood. Gwenn was genuine but a bit rumpled in the corners, very similar in ways to William. She loved movies from the ‘50s and remained silent about her last few years with Albert. It was uncanny, the likeness between both she and William. It only made her realize that childhood had not been a pleasant experience for either. At least Gwenn had a chance at making circumstances different.

“Shhh. Here’s your mom,” she heard William say as he entered the kitchen with Lisa in his arms. “Nightmare,” he admitted peeking at her. Lisa’s face was wet with tears as it pressed into William’s shoulder. He peeled her off and ushered her into a kitchen chair. “It was just a dream. You’re okay.” He tapped the edge of his nose with hers. “Remember what I told you?”

“Kick them as hard as I can and scream like a crazy person.”

William lingered, hanging with a hand against the table as he leaned in toward Lisa. Patricia slowly wiped the frosting from her fingers and made her way to comfort Lisa as William admitted, “Oh my God. I did say that. What else did I tell you?”

“You will never let anyone hurt us.”

“Never.”

“Go wipe your face lady bee,” she said, kissing her daughter’s forehead. Lisa had been having nightmares since the past year after having been confined in Albert’s tool shed with her brother. Patricia admitted to her continuous regret of her having to witness anything.

“That’s the second one this week. It must be my eye.”

“Will, you’ve been different. We all see it.” William leaned against the stomach of the cabinet, his gaze solely belonging to him, in a distanced journey. It was that place he often went to where she was never invited. The place she glimpsed briefly into when she saw him leaning into Albert, squeezing his neck.

Patricia had taken that deep dive while holding her breath when she first pressed her lips against his and gazed into his eyes. The realities of beginnings yet birthed knowing in a quick glance in that same place, confirming that she was not wrong in her decision to love him.

She knew what William was capable of. She knew what he wrestled with. Knowing that made her fear that one day the feeling of dread she experienced would probably return. They were teetering on the edge of a cliff just months after a desert rescue trip and her retrieval of information William had hidden for good reason. She still questioned his motive for retaining the information. What secrets he had kept of his own that prevented certain disasters from evolving to reality, and the company he kept in the dark.

The doorbell rang. They both activated.

“I’m not so keen on having guests right now.”

“I know, Will. It’s just a couple of her friends and maybe their parents. You’ve met them all before.”

“I’m sorry, I’m trying. I’m really trying,” he said before leaving the kitchen. “Hey, I bet it’s the clingy kid with the mom who likes to hug and the dad who stares at folks. He even gives me the creeps,” he said from the hallway as he walked toward the front door. “Nope. It’s Chris,” he announced.

Christine was in the kitchen with a huge Mylar balloon tied to a gift bag within two minutes, carrying a whiff of a sweet fragrance with an underlying note of peaches and lemon. “Where’s the birthday girl? Where’s the music?”

“Yard,” Pat announced with a kiss on her sister’s cheek. “The last of the cupcakes need to be put out with the candy table out back. It’s not like hell today so we’re enjoying the yard.”

“That’s one of my biggest misses, the beach,” Christine said. “Don’t know why Will chose to have heat stroke every day by moving here.”

“Where’s Garrett?” Patricia asked.

“He wanted to bring something,” Christine answered with a roll of her eyes. “He’ll be back. Will is playing doorman?”

“Of course. He is the only person who ever opens the door. Especially since...” They both lingered for a moment, as the doorbell rang again. “So, let’s see the rock!” Patricia changed pace.

Christine smiled a huge grin, wrinkling her nose like an excited puppy, and fanned her left hand in the air. “It’s gorgeous! Why don’t we do something special to celebrate? Champagne brunch?”

“Oh no, Pat. What if William doesn’t want to.”

“He’ll be fine with it. Invite Tammy and your other friend with the old woman’s name.”

“Charlotte?”

“Yeah, Charlotte.”

“Patricia is not so millennial either,” Christine joked.

“Rightfully so. Get them to come together, that way William will have to open the door only twice,” she kidded.

“Is he okay?”

“Yeah, he’s…he’s fine,” she said, an attempt at convincing herself.

“It’s just that, Garrett asked me something about Will. Something he doesn’t talk about, ever. I know there’s a lot there.”

“What did he ask?” Patricia understood what Christine was speaking of, but why was Garrett investigating?

“Straight through the door,” William announced as he stopped beside Patricia. Twin curly-haired redheads walked by, one taller, one shorter, and a thinning dark-haired man with a clean shave walked through the kitchen.

“Gwenn! Happy Birthday!” she heard.

“It’s the hugger. I’ve already been violated.”

“You’re sure she’s not just wanting to hug you, Will? I didn’t get a hug. You see Mr. Hugs. Doesn’t seem too huggable,” Christine responded.

Patricia used the moment to take advantage of a laugh and a squeeze of William’s hand. He lingered for a moment, stealing an awkward glance right before the doorbell rang again.

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William leaned his hand against his face as Mr. Alexander Cox boasted about his recent accomplishment of meeting the mayor of Phoenix at a conference the year before regarding renewable energy. A mid-sized firm outside of Oakland had invested in his company, a small outfit he had dreamt up after having too many glasses of wine not many folks could afford, and he would never try with an attorney friend whose kid was about to graduate Summa Cud Laude at a UC in California. A few local celebrities were endorsing his dream in their Twitter feeds, so was the Governor of California and all the stars honored at the Emmys earlier that year. The guy annoyed every hair on his arm and his glands in his throat. He hated pretending. If he had to hear one more minute about who Alexander knew or how he knew them William felt he was going to reach out and hit him for no reason in the middle of his face, just to remind him that he bled red like everyone else.

 He felt Patricia’s glance hit him from the side, heating his cheek, while the wife, the hugger kept smiling his way, laughing at anything he said.

 “So, what do you do again?” Mr. Cox asked William.

 “Nursing.”

 “You’re a nurse?” he asked with a slight smirk. “Our neighbor’s a doctor at Highland Memorial, maybe you know him.”

 “No, I don’t,” William said.

 “Oh, that’s great. You must help a lot of people,” Mrs. Hugs praised.

 “What happened to your eye?”

 “You wouldn’t believe this.” He put on a bit of a show. “The other day Dr. Saenz, you know the T.V. doctor, comes on at odd hours in the morning, walked into the ER, pointed at me, and had this terrorist from Kentucky who is part of a group that wants to wreak havoc on its own citizens force me into a bathroom unprovoked face-first into a urinal,” he laughed and took a long pull from a glass of Sauvignon Blanc. He felt his foot move under the table from Patricia who started up a fake laugh. Then the hugger started in, and finally, Mr. Cox. “Good one huh? No really, I got it for free with a cup of coffee. I’ll be right back. I think someone else is at the door.”

 He took advantage of the moment and slipped back into the kitchen, leaning into the lip of the sink to run the cool water against his arm. It wasn’t real relief at all, but the sound was a bit soothing as he dealt with a creeping pain beneath the dragon on his skin, which quickly raced to his back. He’d been very good at covering up his issue over the last few weeks, so he thought. He hated that Gwenn had to deal with the same thing. He moved only when he heard another ring of the bell, then started through the hall to the front of the house, continuing his routine of checking the front porch from the glass of the window from the heavy entryway door, a distorted and disoriented image of a person paying no attention before he opened and welcomed them with a handshake and a forced smile.

With a cop following him around, it was just a matter of time before he learned about where he lived, probably already knew. A new sense of discomfort had settled at the base of his skull and hadn’t moved anywhere but to a throbbing in his temple.

 The weather was oddly tolerable, Arizona’s translation of fall felt like a dryer on high without the cool down cycle. He noticed a black Audi parked across the street, the driver still behind the wheel, their light browned arm out for a good vitamin E session with the sun pressed against the open window, Garrett. He was about to dismiss his friend and return to the house until he heard something in his conversation.

 “Does Rochelle want me to pack him up in a box? Deliver him to her doorstep? She was never specific as to how this was going to work. Not much support.”

 Suspicion slipped itself upon his being like a viscous syrup. It settled raucously in his shoes, one of his favorite pairs.

 You’ll be screwed in a few weeks.

 Pieces were moving around him without his request to even join the league. Eric. He felt his old self scratching at the base of his rib cage.

 William remained still against the frame of the door and continued to stare at the distinguishable Audi with its loud red stripe on the roof and hood as Garrett stepped outside.

 “I don’t even know anymore. Hey, why hasn’t she set you up to meet me? Anyway, I’ve got to get to his kiddo’s birthday party…Okay, I’ll tell him,” Garrett chuckled.

 Patricia. The kids. Life as William Heaton, an RN with a membership to the local gym, the same one attended by the local pastor of the church with the huge billboard on the side of the highway, neighbor to a third-grade teacher was forced to deal with Eric’s mistakes. Maddening. There would never come a day where he felt that his current existence made any sense. In a hurried rush, he closed the door behind him and stepped into the gallery, leaning against the heavy front door. He felt his face twist into a bit of anger he had been gratefully distanced from with the pleasant hustle of the morning and helium balloons, fresh-baked cupcakes with gold and royal blue frosting.

 For once, he felt completely vulnerable to the elements, having no clue where to look, only admitting to a pulsating punch in his gut that trust was not for him. Had they made the right decision to start a new life or had they simply left out crumbs for the wolf to follow? Who else knew about Gwenn?

 He wanted to take a drive off somewhere, but the company in the yard still lingered for another few hours. A snake had slithered into his garden and drinks with a demon as Russell so gracefully termed himself were pending in a few days. William slowly opened the front door, exposing the full view of the front lawn and Garrett.

 “Hey,” said Garrett. “You’re leaving?”

 “No.”

 “Then you’re psychic. I didn’t even ring the doorbell.”

 “Who were you talking to?”

 “Geeze Will. You’re still way on the edge.”

 And then there was Garrett. William took in a deep drag of air, an attempt at refreshing his mannerism before the annoying tendencies Garrett had recently adopted with a new ferocity began to peg at him. “I’ve respected your incessant questioning, so respect my so-called neuroticism.”

 “Really, Will? I had a phone call. Plus, I don’t like that guy with the solar thing. He’s an arrogant ass-hole. His wife missed you, kept asking when you’d be back.” William ignored Garrett’s attempt to lighten the mood. It wasn’t working in the least bit. Too much was in the back of his mind to allow anything to shift. “You’re different, Will. That’s all. I’m just trying to be a friend.” William forced a smile, pulling the skin in a tight pull against his face.

 “Thank you for caring, Garrett. Thank you so much.”

 Garrett looked up at him as he started past him and made his way back through the long hall. “That was hard for you, wasn’t it?’

 “Very,” he breathed.

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It was close to a new morning by the time William had settled himself for the evening. Patricia had fallen into the bed in an exhausted plunk after Gwenn’s party. The sore feet were worth it, just to see the joy on Gwenn’s face. William had remained distant, an obvious sign of anxiousness adding to his darkening mannerism, like a late afternoon, the sunlight slowly losing to the dark shadows of dusk. He tried to fight it off but had been struggling.

 “Gwenn finished shopping with her Lill’s gift card. Had to remind her about tax.” William said as he lowered himself onto the bed. He kept his back turned from her. His arms were like strongly defined pillars standing beneath the white cotton t-shirt in preparation for sleep. “She had a great time. You made her day very special, Pat.”

 Patricia moved toward him with a slow crawl, wrapping herself around him to show off a few pictures she had taken on her phone. She smiled at the images, Gwenn and a few friends, Gwenn putting the icing on Lisa’s nose, and finally, the family shot taken by the deemed hugger. She’d opened her arms wide for a goodbye at the party’s end, Gwenn squeezed first, then she squeezed herself around William’s stiff frame. He softly smiled at the device in her hands.

 “What’s wrong?” Patricia asked.

 He sighed before he began. “Garrett. I heard him talking to someone on his cell phone. He was so casual about it when I asked him as if it was nothing to him. He was talking about me like he’s been partnering up with someone for Rochelle. I think he’s got an agenda just like everyone else.”

 “What? What about Chris?”

 “I don’t know who he was talking to. Chris will have to make her own decision. If things go as planned, you’ll get a brother-in-law who I handle with a very long, spiked stick. A person I’m done with right now.” He admitted. “I’m tired of others wanting so desperately to control something that I can’t. This poison has crept its tendrils into so many different areas, now our daughter. I can’t get rid of it, and it possesses others. I’m just tired.”

 Jagged scars covered by a mighty dragon’s tail and purifying waves of water remained a permanent reminder. His inhibitions abandoned following a promise, triggers connected by what lurked inside. Would it do the same thing to Gwenn?

 Patricia pressed her face into the side of his, as he reached upwards and brushed her cheek with his hand, cool, tenderly touching strands of hair falling from her head.

 “You scare me sometimes, Pat. How do you know what I’m saying when I’m not?” She pressed her lips against his temple in a loving kiss and slowly unwrapped her arms from his frame, the silence of the house peaceful, calming rarities embraced for a blink of a moment. She settled herself upon the comfort of the bed, William settling himself beside her.

 William carefully unbuttoned her nightgown and slipped his hand against her skin slowly moving to one of her breasts. He lingered, right before he carefully traced its center with his fingertips. She responded with a slow smile and moved to her back as he carefully bridged his body above hers. They communicated wordlessly in the silence, his eyes, lyrical pools of green swaying with hints of wonderment as his gaze sensually and longingly traced her chest, bare, vulnerable to his touch, his tender kisses along her skin. She loved how she responded to him, her breaths quickening. In the silence, their warm bodies connecting, her heart beating with a passion only he could tame, she broke the quiet whispers and uttered, “Will, oh my God.”

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Hunter’s phone call had just ended resulting in a long, contemplative staring match between his eyes and his iPhone. What was he doing? Why was he committing to a path he had abandoned years before at the rate where there was no thinking, no overthinking, just a quick nod of the head? He still moved forward with his personal satisfaction in mind after acknowledging the reality that he was indeed a grandfather. Connections were never to have been made when he handed over information to Albert Wright over a decade ago. Hunter never thought he’d actually look into the child’s eyes and see his son, a time he’d willfully abandoned as he endeavored pointlessly to plot against those who had destroyed everything he had ever loved, anything he had tried to care for. James Evans had preached of his revolution to a cause that made sense. That is, until the revolution failed Hunter.

 He had the opportunity to encourage, build up a son, at least one. However, there was a distraction that he couldn’t seem to shake. A deal, a deal that would make the life he had hated for so long a bit sweeter, a sunrise on an excluded beach with an exotic fruit freshly ripened and served on the fingertips of a beautiful woman, just as exotic as the fruit. He could die a happy man having had the moment. Compared to the other shit? The reality that he had failed miserably if he were to stay in the present moment, continue the path?

 Hunter gave a generous pour of whiskey into a glass, then he eased himself into his not-so-comfortable couch. It sighed heavily when he sat, reminding him of its age. Staring ahead at nothing, he confirmed with his internal clock that he’d hit the road the same time the next day for Arizona, an unexpected request from William who amazingly trusted him and him only with the mighty mites and Gwenn. It was easier to talk to him over the phone, the person-to-person interaction was going to lead to questions, Hunter knew it. But it was time anyway. Time for William’s suspicions of him to be realized, so he could get on with the deal, move on with his life. Hunter swallowed the contents in the glass in two gulps and a grimace and dialed his phone.

 “Hey, Hunter, any news for me?”

 “I just need a few days. That’s all I need.”

 “Do you have Vixen or not? My suspicions are tingling with you.”

 “I have access. I just have to convince him,” he spoke, pouring another bit of whiskey.

 “Remember I’m on a schedule. I can’t keep my word if you don’t keep yours. Just get me what you promised so we can set sail.”

 “Yeah. You’ll get it. I just need a minute. I’ll check in next week.” Willingness from the dead was pointless and impossible. Hunter had already realized that months before. There was always an alternative, even when he hadn’t found out exactly what that alternative would be.

# Chapter Ten

MITCH THOMPSON WAS FOUND DEAD in his Porsche Macan on the side of a road not far from James’s warehouse in Los Angeles, his throat cut open like a cow for slaughter. His girlfriend had called James in a panic admitting the news. Mitch was James’s shadow, always beside him and behind him. He had been part of his inner circle for over twenty years, the only person who would probably lay his life down for him. His consort was rapidly becoming vaporized with Mitch’s death. James was soon to become a lonely team captain with Russell as the only member vying to become a celebrity. Perhaps he finally realized that she had been right.

 Rochelle had just hung up with James, for the first time ever, a sense of defeat teetering on the edge of his words. Of course, he tried to hide it from her. His desire burned even more so now that three of his closest allies had met their fates. She had a sickening urge to relate at least two to a certain someone she had become increasingly leery of, having dreaded ever giving him any bit of information at all. She didn’t feel confident in her safety around him. Based on interactions with Russell and his swelling negative disposition toward Eric, she had felt compelled enough to give him a cash incentive of sorts to move on from her immediate circumstances there at what she called the Corner Lot, a temporary living situation for people under thirty. She had a feeling that James’s plans were rapidly going sour, and Russell was the lemon curdling the sauce. That’s why she needed Eric’s help. More reason for her to hate every bit of it all.

 She had no time and couldn’t rely on Garrett any longer, especially after hearing about Mitch. What if Russell went for Eric, finishing up the lot of James’s team? “Garrett, let me talk to Christine.”

 “Christine? What do you want with Christine?”

 “You’re playing a dangerous game with me, and it needs to stop. Put her on the phone.” Rochelle rolled her eyes as she tugged on the hard plastic case of her rolling luggage across the cold airport floor.

 “Shouldn’t you be talking to your subordinate? Giving me direction?”

 “Alright, fine. You’re fired. Garrett put Christine on the phone.”

 “What?”

 “You heard me.” There was silence for a moment. Then she heard something like a door being closed in the background.

 “I’m sorry, okay. What do you need with Chris?”

 “Where is her sister? I need to speak with her.”

 “Why didn’t you just say so? She’s out at a club tonight with Will. But Christine isn’t babysitting.”

 “And that matters because?”

 “It’s odd. She’s always the one to babysit. Even if it’s the dog.”

 Rochelle settled herself into the backseat of a cab, the interior smelling of flavored tobacco, strawberry, to be exact. The day was slowly coming to an end as the sun settled in the west and the east lived in the day’s past with a darkening violet cloak. She hated the reality that she was making a trip to a state she’d never wanted to visit all because of a nagging intuition that had distracted her sleep patterns. She couldn’t shake the feeling that she needed to find good graces with Eric faster than she had wanted to and by herself.

 “What’s the name?”

 “You’re lucky they talk too much, Silks,” Garrett said. “So, I still have a job?”

 “No. You’re still fired.”

Rochelle hung up the phone and stared beyond the window of the steadily moving vehicle, the silence of the hybrid Prius worsening her noisy thoughts.

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Silks was a local hot spot that many in the city found to be a cool hang-out spot and place for live entertainment from local internet music talents on the weekend. Weeknights were quiet rendezvous by local frequenters and still required a reservation to get in.

Patricia looked down nervously into her purse as she scuttled toward the entrance, William welcoming her hand in a silent stretch of his fingers.

“You’re nervous,” he spoke, in a hushed push.

“I think you are too.”

“No, I’m just having a hard time concentrating on anything with you in that dress,” he spoke into her ear. She gave a slight tickle to his hand and swung the strap to her bag over her shoulder. William waited for a few minutes after the bouncer scanned the ticket and radioed to someone on a hidden device near his collar bone. The guy with his large top half silently put out his hand and signaled for them to move to the side, when another gentleman, eye to eye with William, bald head and sunglasses in the dark signaled for them to follow him with a double swing of his index finger. They were led through a dark room with velvet purple curtains until they reached another intimate room already occupied by a dark-haired gentleman with tattoos covering his arms and neck and a bronzed heavy chested man with a neatly trimmed goatee in a tight muscle shirt and of course, Officer Russell Marin. Oddly among the three men sat a long-legged dark-haired woman wearing a dress that showed off her porno breasts. She hovered in her own world having two empty glasses before her, a large martini glass with a transitioning orange and red drink floating with her movements. The man with a goatee watched Patricia in segmented movement as she sat in the booth before him. He leaned toward the tattooed man seated next to him and whispered something, resulting in a nod and a smile.

“What are you drinking?” he asked.

“Nothing, thank you,” answered Will.

“Culo Barato,” said the goatee. “Tracy,” he called back toward the back of the room. Then he turned back and studied her, his eyes moving from her chin to her breasts then finally back at her face. “Bring the lady a red wine, Cabernet Sauvignon and for eggplant eye, an Old Fashioned,” he instructed right before he swallowed whatever was in his glass. “And another one of these.”

“That’s okay,” responded William.

“Tenías razón. No es una problema. I insist. We’re not drugging you. It’s just wine and scotch.” He said sarcasm laced his words. Tension was fierce. It wasn’t only her feeling the pulse. She noticed William’s unnecessary movement in the seat beside her.

“What is this about? This invitation of yours?”

“Vixen. ¿Es esta la chica?”

“Yup,” responded the tattooed guy.

“And a deal, a reunion of sorts.” His eyes met hers again. Uncomfortable with the wanting gaze from the man dominating the room, Patricia averted her attention to William. “La follaría en un minute.” The three men laughed as William looked toward the ground, his thumb pulsing against the back of his hand, an angry draw upon his face.

“Creo que el entiende,” said the tattooed man.

“Sé que él entiende,” responded the muscle shirt sporting person. She felt like the subject matter of a sick joke watching as the woman rolled her eyes in response. Patricia felt a sudden sense of suffocation about her. The waitress Tracy returned placing a wine glass before her, which she gladly accepted and took a long drink.

“You’ve met Russell. He thought it would be wise to have a face-to-face with you, extend a hand of partnership instead of straight out loading you with bullets.”

“I appreciate you granting me the opportunity,” William said.

Patricia slowly rubbed the top of the glass with her finger taking in the presence of four strangers who could very easily perform a harmful act, kill her, stuff her in the back of a trunk. She took in another gulp from the glass. It was the moment she pressed the cool glass against her lips that she admitted to the direct dysfunction of her being. Sitting next to a man who found commonalities with the criminally connected participants directly before her, aligned like an audience watching her performance, Patricia felt her breaths a bit stifled, suffocating in fact.

“You’re beautiful. Just like your mom,” the muscle shirt wearing man stood and changed places, this time in the open area of the imitation leather seat to her right, William to her left, sandwiching her between. He got close enough for her to feel the build of his muscular thigh beneath his slacks against her skin. The scent of his drink blended into the masculine scent he nearly bathed with. The man, still nameless, had bits of gray forming at the ears and more sporadically growing in his dark curly hair. He slowly leaned into her and put his hand on her thigh, slowly moving it toward her knee.

“You love him? Would you die for him? Would Eric die for you? Hmmm?”

“Miguel,” William spoke, slowly spilling the name from his lips and pushing the large hand away from her body. “It’s not fair how you’re not introducing yourself to her. You buy drinks before you even give your name. Pretty pushy, I must say.”

“How rude of me. I was so excited to see you, Eric. You can’t imagine my thoughts when I found out that you, my wife’s murderer, are fucking her daughter. Crazy.” His remarks triggered chuckles from the two men seated across from them, as the woman yawned and took a long drink from a red straw angled in her glass. Patricia slowly felt the stifled breaths, a tightness in her chest relieved only by her deep, soothing breaths through her nose. Everyone surrounding her elicited characteristics far from what she was comfortable with, a slow realization of what she secretly was part of. A connection to the dark facets she would never think to visit. “Tracy!” Miguel yelled, standing to his feet. “Bring Eric another and…and another one of these,” he pointed to his glass near empty. “C’mon. Loosen up, Eric.”

Patricia took another pull from the glass. She couldn’t help her deep breaths. They were attempts at keeping her nerve in the building tension of the dark room. William’s face had not changed regardless of the accusations and his drink remained untouched. Would this sporadic meeting end badly? Did William anticipate it as such? Russell sat at the edge of his seat, speaking nothing, wearing a slight smirk on his face like a secretly deranged person taking a video of a senior citizen being bashed in the face by a smug group of teenagers wearing Halloween costumes too small for them. He just took in the show.

“Eric, I learned that you have some valuable information that you can share with us. I see you have no more obligation to Evans. What good will it do for you? Hmmm?”

“You’re right, it wouldn’t do me any good. That’s why I sold it.”

Miguel moved a little, possibly to shrug off the liquor or maybe in reaction to what William had just said. She really couldn’t tell. By this time, William had finally taken a swig from his first Old Fashioned.

“To whom?”

“It wouldn’t sit well with him if he had more visitors than he is used to by my telling you, Miguel.”

Miguel rubbed his goatee like it was a pet goat and leaned toward William. “So, you want me to believe that you don’t have it anymore. Then what are you doing with her?”

William glanced at her as he quickly pulled his face downward before saying, “What do you think I’m doing with her?” Patricia put the glass against her lips and stared at Miguel as he smirked. “I can’t tell you where the info about Vixen is. It could be in hell for all I know.”

“So, I have nothing to do, but to kill you then.”

“I knew you were going to say that. That’s why I can give you something else. Take off the necklace, doll.”

Patricia eyed William who patiently waited for her to unfasten the clasp to the charm she’d been wearing off and on for the past year. Doll? Had he called her doll? Each prolonged moment in the room made her question more and more than ever before. She handed it over to him, as if part of the act and drained the rest of the contents of her glass down her throat.

“This is from Portia. She didn’t trust James and had information she was trying to hide. I don’t have a clue what it is, but she said you would know, a special date or code.”

Miguel looked at the charm. It was an oval-shaped gold piece with six numbers printed on the back, the front reading, Dearest.

“Why would she have given this to you? You probably stole it.”

“No, this was given. Really, what good does it do me?”

“How did you know that I was going to be here?”

“I didn’t. She wears it. It was hers,” he placed his hand on Pat’s thigh. “Portia’s daughter. It’s the uh... uh,”

“-the simplicity,” Patricia answered. “Remember I said that.”

“There you go,” William responded. “Simplicity.” Silence swelled in the atmosphere, the dark velvet fabric hanging around them heating the room. She noticed only three people were sitting before them, Russell had scurried off. Miguel studied the necklace.

 “Well, we thank you for your generosity. We should be going.” William rose as she followed suit.

Miguel watched her as he began, “Just wait, doll.” Patricia froze. “Why are you special to him, the enemy? Hmmm? You’re such a beautiful, good, hostage.” The darkness seemed to slowly gather around her in a suffocating mist. Miguel, deliberately stood to his feet, tall, balanced, his attention gradually shifting to William. Then he gave a slight topple and a stifled laugh. He shouted, “Tracy!” and sank back down into his seat.

Patricia followed quickly behind William. She wanted to leave just as fast as he did, wash the look of Miguel’s stare from her body. They left the shelter of the building in relative haste. William did not spend a minute on the conversation until they cleared the building.

“I’m sorry, Pat. Miguel is a troll without the warts.”

“That was so uncomfortable, Will. I can’t stop my hands from shaking, now.”

“Eric.” They both looked toward a voice coming from against the wall of the adjacent building. Russell. He extinguished a cigarette with his foot on the sidewalk and stepped off into the street. “You think you can embarrass me like that in front of Miguel? I’m not going to have some twitching fuck who killed my family screw me unwillingly in the ass and walk away with my money. You fucking sold it?! You expect me to believe that shit?!”

“There is nothing of value to me, nothing, including Vixen. Prove that I’ve got anything.” Russell reached toward William’s shoulders and tugged him forward as William quickly reacted and swung toward the guy’s face. Then Russell aggressively ran toward him in an attack. She saw William slink forward and his head quickly rear back, which got her to quickly run towards him. William staggered backward in obvious pain as Russell rubbed two fingers together, wet with the stickiness of William’s blood. Pat grabbed William who leaned into her.

 “Why would a man get rid of something directly linked to what makes him tick? You didn’t think I knew, huh? Your blood is different from mine, from hers, from everyone else here in this fucking parking lot! I better get a real answer from you or next, I’ll slit your fucking throat!” Suddenly, Russell stumbled from the swing of a revolver in the hands of a silver dreadlocks sporting woman, her so called mother, Rochelle. She threatened Russell with the heavy gun. “What the hell are you doing?” Russell hissed, stunned from the hit.

 “Let’s go,” she commanded, standing like an action star hero in the shadow of the streetlamp from behind them.

“I don’t think that was your intention, making him mad,” forced William as they moved quickly away from Russell, who stood in the same spot, rubbing his head, William’s face tightening in pain.

“Asshole. Luckily my Uber driver dropped me off at the far end of the club. If Russell takes one step towards us, I’ll fire. He knows that. His head is harder than I thought.”

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William awakened from an eerily darkened slumber, one without any dreaming. It took a moment for him to remember where he last was. His father casually leaned into the frame of the bed, his back to him, the familiar balding head of dark hair streaked with gray and Patricia opposite of him, casually swiping at her cell phone. His mouth felt like he had eaten sandpaper.

“Is it Wednesday?”

“Hey,” Patricia whispered, kissing his forehead. “Sorry, you missed Gwenn. The doctor says you’ll be fine. You didn’t need a stomach anyway.” For a moment, he hesitated, then he smiled an uneven smile on the left side of his face. “He wanted to kill you. I saw it.”

So did he. And in that instant that his death became real to him in that quick flash, he had recalled who Russell was. It would have been too late to even admit anything to Patricia. Rochelle, the most unlikely of all people to ever help him had ironically saved him from Russell’s potential deranged surgical act on his neck. Matters were worse than he had at first thought.

“You can’t seem to get enough of hospitals, can you?” His father asked, leaning against the thick plastic frame of the hospital bed.

“I guess not. Where are the kids?”

“Hotel with her mom,” he leaned his head toward Patricia in a quick shake. “So, what does this guy want with you?”

Russell had been a quiet onlooker some years before. He’d blended into the scene like a faded tree on an old backdrop used for production, hard to see from afar and not important to the players. He couldn’t recognize him when he silently played a power game in his car with his eyes, cold, dark. It was when he vengefully played with William’s blood on his fingertips, the glow of pure hatred rumpling his brow, the knife glinting in the light of the moon high above them that William had remembered.

“There was news of the variant out of the blue some time ago. Miguel and James were head-to-head in getting their greedy hands on something so James paired me with two of his goons on a trip down past the border. It didn’t go well, and people were killed. The same bit of information came back to me in Christine’s envelope after I spoke with another person of interest. It’s crazy, now I remember seeing him there.”

“Now he wants Vixen like Albert, like James like all of these fuckers hiding in the shadows.”

“This is something else, something more diabolical. I saw it. What happened there?” Patricia asked.

“Nothing good. It was a bad deal, no Diablo, only cryptic information none of them understood. It felt like a setup. Russell suffered from the outcome.”

“He’s obviously not part of the group. Miguel and the others said nothing about your special connection, Will. They were content with a necklace from a dead woman handed to them by the doll in the room.”

William leaned into the stiff hospital pillow. “I knew you would say something about that.”

“You guessed right.”

“Well, apparently this guy has a connection to your mother’s antics back in SoCal. I guess since her majesty has graced us with her presence for some reason all of sudden, she’s waiting to talk to you,” spoke his father.

Patricia silently looked at him. The look she gave when she stormed within. The look she gave when her personal ghosts possessed her. He hadn’t been privy to conversations between her and Rochelle as he was busy with a surgeon. Had she made a mistake by dealing with Russell who had obviously gone rogue? Why had she saved William’s life?

“I think something really nasty is happening or is about to happen, something she can’t control. She wouldn’t go into too much detail. But she desperately needs to talk to you.”

“Great,” he looked up to find two uniformed officers walking into the room. “Just great.”

PART II

Not every hidden bit is worth the full disclosure, especially if it kills.

THE COOL OF THE NIGHT HAD crept its way past the doors’ threshold. He had just tucked himself into the small space and turned on the light above him. His sacred escape. Eric leaned back and looked at the stars through the hole at the top of the shed. Why? That’s all he could ask, a simple word with so much meaning, so much depth, so many levels. It always came back with an empty reply if it even counted as a result.

“Eric,” he heard a familiar voice whisper. “I found him. In here.” Rosario, the woman who he had seen suddenly hanging around for the last few months, peaked her head into a shed and looked nervously behind her.

“She needs your help, please,” Rosario pleaded.

Eric shifted against the wooden bench in the shed as Rosario entered the space and ushered another woman inside. She slowly sat before him as if in pain, her efforts elongated like an elderly, arthritic woman. Her face was younger than what her movements proposed. Then he recognized her, Portia Myers Silva, James Evans’s beautiful before and afterthought. He had a few encounters with her over the years, cunning and behind much of the inner workings of what Evans was up to, she could turn heads and shatter hearts.

“How did you find me here?”

“We followed you. Please.”

“I don’t understand why you’re asking me for help.”

“Because you’re the only person who will,” Rosario said.

“No. I can’t help you or her.”

“They need help. Protect them. I need you to protect them, keep them safe, please. I can’t any longer,” Portia finally spoke.

“Who? The girls with Rochelle?”

Eric stood on the cusp of his own revolution, growing tired of his existence, and hoping for something outside of what he had been so used to. Protecting the daughters of the man he had started to loath?

“Why do they suddenly need protection? If he wanted them gone, they’d have done it years ago.”

“They weren’t a threat years ago, now they are. Please, Eric.”

“Why me? You’ve got the wrong person. I can’t do anything to help you.”

“No, you’re the right person. I’m dying like you, just faster.” Rosario laid a careful hand on her lap and took a deep look at Eric. “Diablo,” whispered Portia.

 Eric leaned into the cool wood of the wall immediately behind him. He probably should have been dead sometime before. Both he and his brother had served as a duo of upright lab rats long enough to find a concoction that at least slowed down the raging attack against his body, all his own. He dreaded ever having to find out how much worse it would get.

“I’m…I’m sorry. I really am. But I’m not planning on being here much longer.”

“Trust me, you of all people will never leave this, or James, not with what’s inside of you. You know damn well that you’re controlled by that. Please.”

Eric shifted, the heaviness of the sudden request causing a sudden onus outside of the norms for a seventeen-year-old kid.

“How do you think I’m supposed to protect them? I can’t even help myself,” he bit. “You just said it yourself.” Portia he later learned was the wife of Miguel Silva, a notorious lad with a significant amount of pull when it came to a drug cartel down in Mexico. Eric knew of the strange relationship between James and Portia, had seen them in way too precarious of circumstances over the last few years and the obvious connection with his two daughters he often allowed others to poke at for his own sick gratification he figured. How did she expect him to help?

He watched as she removed a necklace from her neck with two oval-shaped charms. She took his hand in hers and placed the charm inside the palm of his hand. She looked at him in a moment of desperation, closing his hand against the cool metal piece in his palm, holding it in place.

“He’s a kid, Rosario. He’s just a…” she flinched and closed her eyes. Rosario slowly rubbed her shoulder and placed her hand gently against her knee.

“My older girl. Please give these to her,” she patted his hand.

“No…No. I can’t. Have Rochelle do it. She’s always with them.”

“She’s just as untrustworthy. She’s one of them,” said Portia with a bite to the end of her words.

“I’m one of them.”

“No, you’re not. I’ve seen you. You’re not one of them.”

Eric opened his hand and studied the necklace in his palm.

“What is this?”

“A deterrent.”

Eric stared at Portia, struggling to find a response to her answer that quickly confused him, opening new channels of questions he struggled to find. “You can get away from this existence. But you will never escape from James. But they can. Get them away from here, away from him. This is what you’re going to do. But first, promise me.”

“I…”

“Promise me…”

“Why? I don’t owe you anything. I just want out. I can’t be responsible for others.”

“How then? What are you going to do? Tell me. You leave without whatever concoction of medication they’ve got control over, you’ll come crawling back, back to them or you die. You promise me and I’ll help you with a path. You help my girls, and they’ll help you in the long run.”

“How?”

“Promise me…”

Connected by her words, her gaze, Eric leaned forward and uttered, “I promise.”

# Chapter Eleven

“SHE FIRED ME, THEN HUNG up in my face. She’s just so warm and cuddly. No wonder snakes love her.”

Russell sounded something awful, a trace of cruelty mixed into his laughter as Garrett fumbled with the previously folded instructions for a shelf set he had been trying to put together for Christine. He was just about to call it quits and hire the guy next door who always tugged around a toolbox to his truck.

“So, you need a new employer?” Russell asked. “You should have been working with a better boss anyway. Someone who pays you more and offers more of a long-term solution.”

“Nah. I’m done. She got what she wanted anyway. Came straight for him in a mad rush.” He turned the instructions again, this time seeing the wordless instructions upside down, the dark, faceless figures still looking right side up in a strange circus act. “It was nice to have met you without having met you,” Garrett answered.

“Just wait a minute. You’ve got a major advantage. One I’d like to pursue, make you an offer.”

“No. Not interested. I shouldn’t have done this in the first place. Besides, I feel slimy. You don’t spy on your friend. Now I can focus on other matters.”

“Friend? Do you know why Rochelle wanted you to focus on Eric in the first place, what she’s really doing?”

“Yeah, that’s the thing. I’m ready to draw the line here. This was never for me. This all started with an article from my blog, nothing more.”

Garrett heard Russell laugh on the other end. “You’re already in Garrett. You’ve dined with the devil. You can’t go your merry way after you’ve befriended a killer.” There was silence. Then the mood quickly shifted to a darkened corner, where no one dared to sit. The haunted one, abandoned by any light or fathom of anything close to it. “She didn’t really tell you about him, did she? He didn’t either.”

The significance of empty answers behind a colossal conspiracy unknown by him suddenly became more troubling than a lie to a Girl Scout Cookie selling grandmother holding a well-read Bible. Who had William been pretending to be in his presence? Had it all been a cruel act? He ironically called him a friend even though he had been just as guilty, building a case, pulling information he didn’t know how to sell back to Rochelle Evans, information he didn’t understand of its value.

With a newly formulated impatience, Garrett waited for the text Russell had promised as he moved the dark wood of the shelf. He had by this time given up on for no reason other than frustration and pushed the worthless instructions aside. Hesitation dictated the moment, the moment he received the text. He took a deep breath and clicked the white arrow hovering above a frozen image on the small screen of his cell phone. Once the stillness animated to life his eyes were fixated, waiting for what? He didn’t know. Based on Russell’s conversation, what he would be watching would be a determining factor of his next steps. Then it happened, the scene turned frightening, a horrible nightmare all encapsulated in the compressed screen resting in his hand.

“Garrett,” Christine called. “I’m back.” He ignored Christine’s voice as the scene worsened before him.

“Oh my God.”

# Chapter Twelve

A COOPERATIVE ERIC WAS FAR from what Rochelle Evans had anticipated when she walked into the hospital room. Initially, he made it quite clear that he had no interest in conversing by providing no verbal acknowledgment. Instead, he watched with a weighted gaze. Thoughts took possession as she passed the caged bed and walked toward the mauve-colored chair resting beneath the window claiming ownership of the entire east side of the room.

 “Thank you,” he muttered, his gaze still not granting her a chance, still rejecting her connection, his face tight, the tension thicker than the distinct smell of hospital suspended through the halls and sticking to the skin, an unwanted perfume.

 “You’re too valuable to die right now, Eric.”

 “Oh, it wasn’t really because you cared.” He looked at her with only his eyes, as if turning his neck or face was too painful a feat.

 Rochelle sighed and leaned a bit into the frame of the bed before she fixed her gaze on him. He was still the same kid she once picked up from the ground after being struck in the face with the butt of a gun. The same kid who warned her about James’s sudden decision to kill her. The same kid who held a secret two men would kill each other for.

 “If you could be like others, have a normal life, for a promise. Would you tell me where Vixen is?”

 “I’ve given up on normal Rochelle. I don’t even know what that means. You and I both know I’m living on borrowed time and that I’ll take that information with me when the loan is paid in full.”

 She watched from a distance, the hall outside of the hospital room buzzing with an array of conversations, their existences so much more predictable than hers, so much more in control of normalcy than she could have ever imagined. Rochelle should have never loved him, never allowed James into her being where he had smothered and crushed and bruised. There would never have been an Eric; there would have never been a Vixen; an embodiment of a disastrous concoction that would trigger a monster with no solution, the monster Eric housed with a likely growing despair. She slowly focused on Eric who waited with bated patience and a prescient power in his glance. The scar she had started on his face but hadn’t finished quickened memories back to the forefront of her thoughts despite her years of purposeful amnesia. What did his loyalty to Patricia really entail? What had he told her during the darkened hours?

 “You’re the only person left aside from your brother. I think Russell is plucking folks off for his own reason I’m not entirely sure of.”

“I think we all can agree on Russell’s determination to kill me. So, what about you? What do you want?”

Protection from her own mistakes, from James, from Russell? Her misguided influence over the years had led to the moment where she needed to depend on the most embittered of enemies, Eric. She recollected her often cruel interactions with the boy, a misguided creation doomed from his very genesis and outright kidnapped as a trade between his desperate father and septic mother. Both he and his brother were treated as the subjects that they were born as, two miserable experiments for James to invest in his cause. She hadn’t helped, she had never brought forth the need to exercise their humanity, even when desperation from a child tugged at her consciousness. Rochelle had ignored it, focused on Patricia and her sister as her pledge to James, her safe house. Yet she was there in a hospital room with Eric staring back at her, confined against his will and in total command of her fate, more so than James.

“I need your help. The only other person who would have done anything is dead. And still, he wouldn’t have been the right person.”

“You mean Mitch? He’s dead?” he asked.

Wordlessly, she acknowledged his question with a quick nod of her head, her shoulders, and her stomach as they seemingly dropped to her intestines, all the weighted realizations hitting her like a person learning that they were fired after working for twenty years in the same mediocre job the same morning they had been told that they were adopted from a family of islanders never hearing of television. She attempted to avert his glance, only to find his stare unwavering. That damn stare of his.

 “James has a significant investment in a growing pharmaceutical company. He’s due for a decent payout if he gets his hands on Vixen, also his point made. He’s ready to wreak havoc for money and for his own ego. He’s solid with his thinking that Russell can get it to him. I think you’re the one person who can tell me if that’s true.”

 Eric wrinkled his face in a combination of confusion and perhaps pain, slowly maneuvering his long arms in an act to adjust his middle half, the random blue dots against the white of the issued hospital gown the same color blue mirroring the Shinto inspired tattoo cuffing his left arm.

 “So, what do you want me to tell you, Rochelle, really? You think I should talk to you, trust you?” The glance he shot back at her weakened her shoulders.

 “Who else can you trust, Eric? I’m trying to stop this, stop him.”

“And help yourself? Why do you need Vixen if you’re trying to stop him?”

“I’m sorry, alright? I’m sorry for all the shit I saw but did nothing about. I should have stopped this years ago, but I thought I could just….” She felt the tears of her vulnerability starting to pool at the edge of her eyes. “I thought I could adapt to it all, deal with my doings, with James, even after we lost our son. I still see his face, his precious little face.”

 “Sit down,” Eric said, emotionless and hollow. “Please, sit down. I can’t trust you. Either you are really desperate here or you think I’m willing to overlook the shitload of crap you have put me through and what you’re not saying.”

 She was alone with only the mechanical hum of her refrigerator to greet her. Even those days where she had tossed Lisa and Alex about in joyful articulation had abruptly ended with the stealthy departure of Eric and Patricia connected to those ties she had refused to cut. It teetered in the decision-making of the man laying injured, but far from weakened in the bed before her.

 “I don’t want to die. Not by James’s hands, not by Russell’s hands.”

 “What about mine? You trust that I won’t kill you?”

 “Portia trusted you for a reason, Eric. You want to stop James more than anyone else, for reasons different than anyone else. You have a different cause.”

 His gaze returned to the room ahead of them, the empty area a void of any additions, all a clearing for his thoughts she figured. He could have stopped him but never did, remained in the shadows while others took their marks. She knew it, but figured it was good for her, bought her time, bought her reasoning.

 “You don’t know anything about me. I’m just a product of you and your husband’s selfishness, so is Patricia. Don’t tell me about my cause. You let them steal life from Patricia. You knew what they were doing, and you did nothing about it. I saw you. You’re a deceitful liar Rochelle,” his voice rumbled. “Do not talk to me about my cause.”

Perhaps circumstances were turning against her. She slowly stood to her feet. “Sit down!” He snapped. “Please,” Eric tried to soften in a slightly apologetic tone. He wasn’t a monster. He was a victim, had always been. There in the small room, the afternoon sun filling the area just enough to cast shadows against Eric’s face, she slowly sat back in the chair, seeing him as that person James had refused to ever credit as such. She saw the abused, lonely boy she had shunned before her, his gaze directed toward the edge of the bed, distanced from her for the second time.

“They love you, I don’t know why, but those two children love you. I’ll be damned if I’m the person who takes that from them. I don’t know what you are going to ask me to do. Whatever it is, it won’t be because I give a damn about your circumstances. I’ll do it for Pat, for Alex and Lisa.”

 “What about Gwenn?”

 “She’s not your blood. They are not your blood,” he snapped, commanding the moment. In full control, his face lined with a determination of ferocity as his words now biting and painful embedded themselves into her psyche. “What do I get in exchange?”

 “First, let’s be clear about Adam, your father,” he looked at her with a quizzical look, quickly hidden by a swipe across the skin with his right hand.

 “What is there to talk about?”

 “Why is your father here?” Eric responded with nothing, turned on the cold he was so good at playing with, that impenetrable nature he possessed better than anyone she knew. She also knew that he had no idea. Poor creature. It suddenly hit her with a bit of sorrow, having been a part of his dismantling, his slow poison, and self-destruction. “I wouldn’t trust him, fair warning. But I’ll help you bury Eric for good. That’s what I can promise.”

 “Maybe I don’t want to die.” He leaned back into the pillows propped behind his head. “Can you hand me that?” Eric pointed toward the rolling tray, a plastic cup filled with golden apple juice sitting next to a pink pitcher, the plastic kind commonplace with hospital visits. Rochelle stood, finally gaining his permission, and handed the plastic cup and straw to Eric. “So, what is it?”

 “I have a problem and I need you to solve it. You’re the only person who has what everyone else wants. So, I imagine that my problem can only be solved by you. Before Russell gets to it.”

 “Diablo?”

 Rochelle felt herself cringe with the sound of the name she had nervously spoken about to men she pretended to contend with. Men she had consistently convinced of her experience, her indifferent ease touched in conversation and lies. They had all been lies. She thought of Lisa’s wise advice to her once, you should smile more, why don’t you smile? How could she smile when she knew of all that she had seen and kept in silence? Eric sat before her, his gaze hovering on her next response, she felt the weight of the years she had refused to recognize slowly push against her.

 “Yes. You don’t have long. I’ve got a notion that Russell is headed to Maximo in Durango, Mexico, on a detour.”

 “That’s Miguel’s connection. I thought you said Russell was working with James.”

 “That’s the problem. I think Russell has his own agenda and somewhere in the middle it involves you.”

 Eric quietly contemplated, slurping down the remaining juice in the cup, swallowed by his hands, and took a long look toward the window area of the room, longer than she needed, or wanted. Perhaps it was justifiable. Then he returned a stare, sharp, stabbing.

 “You need to tell her. Tell her the truth, tell her why she had to run.”

 “Oh, you’re innocent, now? You convinced her that you were? Afraid that she’s accepted you only because she hasn’t seen what you’re hiding, who you are? Unless you have another reason for being with her.”

 “You know why Portia died. And I don’t have to justify my relationship with Patricia to you or anyone else.”

 “You don’t think I know what Portia did, and why she picked you?”

“Are you nuts?” William snapped.

“I know what she has, William,” she bit at his name.

 “Do you want me to help you or are we done here?” he snapped. “Just remember, we’ve both murdered, the length of time it takes doesn’t matter.”

 “No, she died only once.”

 “You can leave!”

 Rochelle straightened her spine in a quick reaction to his words, lifted her head with a proclamation of audacity. She took a deep breath, readied her tongue, and stopped just as Patricia walked into the room.

# Chapter Thirteen

REFUSAL, DEPENDING ON ITS STRENGTH had the power to kill a man. Eric was as stubborn as an overzealous evangelist in pursuit of salvation at a porn expose. He’d watched that audacity years before, lurking in his glance as James tried desperately to tame it, pushing the boy against the rigidness of a tree, and driving a knife into his flesh. Yet, it persisted. He knew that he wanted to crush him. It was just that Eric wasn’t going to allow it to happen, which angered him more.

For years, James had worked so hard to build his own empire in his own regard, something great, something unforgettable, and Eric had destroyed the opportunity. All the years deadened, silenced, forgotten, remembered, and restated.

Rochelle had been surprisingly loyal and committed, a direct response to his threats, buying time, buying persuasive permissions which he had extended, even though he hated her, hated her to her bone marrow like oil to water, a polarity that had not ceased. Yet she still kissed him good night, smiled in his dreams. He didn’t trust her; in fact, he couldn’t trust her. He couldn’t help the inner pull that spoke truthful words of her deceit and a secret tug she possessed linked to him, Eric, and the two daughters he wanted out of his hair like lice.

 James casually leaned into the strength of a wallpapered wall in the reception hall of a small church, chewing slowly on a rich piece of cheese between his molars. Mitch loved cheese, the stronger the smell, the better. He smiled at the memory slowly swelling to thought.

 Veronica, Mitch’s long-term girlfriend leaned in toward him. Her face was puffy, most of the swell around the eyes likely from the constant wiping and dabbing over the last few days. Twenty years, a daughter, and no ring, yet a long commitment from which Mitch never found a detour. Veronica had been the beginning and end of Mitch’s day. Mitch had been the only person James Evans had ever truly trusted. He trusted him with his life. Now he was gone, and he had to explain why to Veronica. Out of everyone, including Albert and Allen, Mitch was the only person who knew his truth. The others were no more than self-indulgent assholes who pretended to follow instructions and still lied about it to his face, disloyal, conniving men he wanted to get rid of but found too much of a threat to do so. They had connections, ideas, made the ship run, but they were slowly fortifying their own walls for their own purposes. One slip of the tongue with folks like Albert and his prospects were gone. That’s what made Eric different, he screwed Evans for reasons beyond himself.

 “James, Mitch told me to expect a show for the holidays. Fireworks, he said. He’s been saying stupid shit like that for years. Now that he’s dead, he better have been right.”

 “Mitch said a lot, Nicka.”

 “Yeah, all because of you. He trusted you James, believed like you. Now he’s gone.” He admitted having no confirmed identity of the person who would have slit Mitch’s throat. Assumptions were high. James thought of Rochelle’s comments, Mitch taking a vacation. What if he had listened to her? Would he be wishing him a good afternoon instead of trying to find the right thing to say to Veronica?

“If it’s that mistake of a person who killed Mitch, I want you to personally put a gun in his mouth and pull the trigger.”

He admitted that slicing had never been Eric’s style. He was a shooter and very good at it. In fact, James doubted Eric’s callousness. He was always distant; his glaring stares a form of mental escapism from the present. Albert complained of Eric’s weak stomach, pairing with James’s other assumption that no one had ever been a willful target with him. Except for one. Which was why he always fighting his resistance.

“I doubt it was him. But I’ve got another plan for Eric when he’s found.”

“People like that won’t let you find them. You’ve got to take them.”

“Oh yeah. I’ll take him, others will too.”

*He’s following his own agenda.*

 His to-do list was filling up faster than he had at first anticipated.

“I’ll find out who did this, Veronica. Mitch was my brother.”

He pictured Mitch’s tall, wide frame leaning into the doorway the last night James had seen his friend alive. He had been voicing concerns about Russell, the man Mitch claimed was too good looking to be trusted, and of quiet whispers from Miguel regarding Diablo. James saw his desire to successfully expose a bunch of unknowing Angelinos to a viral entity while he saw an increase of cash in his accounts as his point taken, his masterpiece. He’d show them. He’d show them all. Deals with dirty folks, connections made were all becoming dangerous, the shade slowly pulling away to bring about unwanted exposure, limited resources, as Mitch explained. With the group of participants slowly vying for the same thing, Vixen was becoming a nuisance, one he could easily eliminate if Russell came through. He had new doubts that he would, however, as he stared at a picture of Mitch. His friend was memorialized on a two-foot by three-foot rigid board beside his crumbed ashes in a silver urn. His largeness was confined to mere rubble.

Others were mocking, including his vested team slowly vanishing. Russell was supposed to have been a value and he had made a mistake with Eric from the very moment he pushed a gun across the desk and asked him to show him his best shot.

Was it all a mistake? The journey itself, a miserable adventure at sea to nowhere in particular? Had Russell been the person to slice Mitch’s throat? Would he do the same to him? No. Vixen would have its entrance and race its course. He’d lost too much for it not to. It had been manifested and all manifestations were to come to term, refusal was not in his favor. Russell. He’d deal with him personally after he followed through, especially if he had been the last person Mitch had seen.

# Chapter Fourteen

“THIS GUY, RIGHT HERE,” HUNTER spoke leaning into the thick plastic of the bed frame.

 William still felt less than exuberant, more in the direction of if uncomfortable had a face, he’d be staring at himself in a mirror. His midsection tingled, accompanied by a dull pull like a cramp radiating to his back coupled with his ongoing physical issues. Anything normal to him would be quickly diagnosed as something more and he was doomed to a longer stay… at work.

 He took a long slow pull from a straw, allowing the cold water to make its way over his tongue, the only bit of relief he could find. He savored it like one would an exotic elixir. He didn’t think his body could take much more of a hit. He’d gone beyond the nine lives qualified by the feline persuasion.

 “Are you alright?” his father asked.

 “I was stabbed by a person who wants to do worse. And probably about to lose a person once I admit to something I’ve been hiding. I’m swell.”

 “Did you want one of those get-well balloons with teddy bears from the gift store to raise your spirits, Will?”

 He leaned heavily into the pillows and stared at the ceiling. Three days in a caged bed all because of a person he had difficulty remembering, and who took all their energy to recall every bit about him and a mistake he could never take back. His past mixed into a nasty, sticky brew with the introduction of Rochelle and now his father all placing bets, all wagering for or against him.

 All he wanted was to worry about being to work on time, telling Patricia how beautiful she was and figuring out a math problem with Lisa or Alex, imagining how much Gwenn was quickly resembling her mom, not obsessing over what pulsed in his veins or the plot quickly materializing as his father showed off video footage on his cell phone. Wallowing in one’s own pity was never what he did, never had done, but being so close to something normal only for it to be painted over in his own darkness was becoming a cruel burst of frustrations in need of unleashing.

 “What did you expect, Will? I bet you won’t walk out of here and admit to anyone a damn thing about yourself or where you’ve been or what you have for the sake of mental release. So, suck it up.”

 “It’s starting to make a hole.”

 “Of course, it is. I’ve got a gaping one, but I keep my hands clean by not poking at it. You need to do the same thing. Especially right now with this shit happening.”

 William stared at his father, indifference on his brow.

 “You asked for my help. You need to see this.”

 William stuck his hand out for the phone in a bit of refusal. She had been too desperate. He watched the video his father had been trying to show off a few minutes before, a very clear image of a figure limping across the lobby area of a building. They swung a backpack over their shoulder and made their way up an elevator. Then the footage cut to another scene, it looked like the same person this time walking past the front desk area only to fall against the ground in a fit of pain. Then another scene, another floor it seemed, a person laying listlessly on the carpeted floor, another person running to their aide. It seemed way too familiar.

 “Diablo. That’s why she’s running from him.”

 “These two guys are dead, Will. It killed them.” Gwenn. What if… “Allen knew what was happening here. Remember I told you that James Evans was ready? This doesn’t just casually involve you; it is you.”

 You’ll be screwed in a few weeks, maybe even dead.

 “You think James was going to let you get away with anything that belonged to him? Time doesn’t matter.” William fumbled with Hunter’s phone and stared at nothing exactly toward the end of the bed. His back began to tense in a sudden unanticipated pulsation. “Will?”

 “What?”

 “What? What do you mean, what?”

 “That’s what I meant, what,” he snapped.

 Hunter sat heavily into the hospital chair for guests near the window, the furniture making a definitive grunt with the contact. The window seat was becoming a spot for others’ frustrations during their contemplative moments. A variation of the virus was killing folks at a rapid pace and Rochelle had access to its power. Her actions were minor compared to what was happening in Durango he imagined. Enemies were finding ways to eliminate competition with the stick of a needle and not a gun. But the supply was limited unless they accessed information not privy to their cause.

 “So, this is where it all starts,” William started, focusing again on the surface of his father’s iPhone. “Evans can’t do anything more extreme without Vixen. Otherwise, it’s a bunch of dying folks attributed to what they think is poison. That doesn’t answer Russell’s role,” William said.

 “They’ve got a way to get it from you, Will. You don’t want to find out how. Come back to L.A. with me next week. I might have a guy who can give some incite.”

 William stared blankly at the edge of the bed once more. He only hoped Allen’s words were not prophetic.

# Chapter Fifteen

WITH A HARD PLOP, RUSSELL settled into the hard wooden seat in the dimly lit bar smelling of damp wood before Stephen, a greasy-looking so-called entrepreneur who focused his endeavors on nothing at all legal. His kind of guy. He wore his dark brown hair in a ponytail, always had ever since he first met him years before. Stephen likely took his time on it and nothing else, dismissing the shave or even ironing as matters of importance. In a raucous tap against the wood of the table, Stephen rapped the handle of a knife he had obviously used for a lime he carelessly sucked, the corners of his mouth turned in a pout in response to the sour citrus. The tap slowly blended into the moment, a rhythmic undertone.

 “This better be good Russell. Last time you had something to share, I ended up plucking cactus needles out of my nuts for a whole weekend.”

 “This is really good. You might even like me.” Russell watched Stephen gulp down the golden liquid from a glass, his Adam’s apple moving with the contents. His neck glistened with sweat and a few reddened blotches, even though his face was dry. Russell scrolled through a few images on his phone and stopped on a still image from the video he had gotten hold of the incriminating evidence of Eric and his true self. “Remember him?”

 Stephen stared into the digital image, a revisit to the purposely forgotten past, ignoring the waitress nearing the table. Russell mechanically ordered the same thing as Stephen without the lime. “Yeah, I remember him. Evans’s disaster, right?”

 “Yeah.”

 “What do you want with him? I remember Miguel butting heads with him after the fiasco in Mexicali.”

 “Right. The bastard killed my girl.”

 “Oh man. She was one of …”

 “Yeah, she was.” The waitress settled two cold glasses of bubbling liquid before the two men, overpriced cheap beer, looked well dressed in an ice-cold mug. A quiet moment allowing the cold beer to slip onto his tongue was savored, right before he got down to business, continuing his moment to convince Stephen that his journey was one for the many and not a sole mission of destroying one man. It really wasn’t. Revenge was for melodramatic saps. This was an investment in his future, Eric was simply a strategic acquisition who he hated more than a nightmare in a stranger’s bed.

 “So, what about him? I heard he vanished. James is a lost cause, a bunch of old farts with an old bat he lost interest in fucking years ago. What good is he?”

 “He’s the whole damn equation.”

 “No, that can’t be possible. The virus?” Stephen leaned in a bit toward Russell, his face right over the mug, his sweaty neck just inches away from adding a bit of salt to the beer.

 “He’s got it, literally.”

 “Vixen?”

 “The whole equation. Every bit.”

 Stephen leaned back in his chair, then snapped forward again in a sudden bout of energy. “Fuck.”

 “James hid a lot of shit, including that one there. Damn Eric has left a trail of shit behind him for others to clean up including that Diablo mess running rampant in Durango. Evans thinks he has a deal with some androgynous fuck from Brazil and wants Eric in a box in the next few weeks. Yours truly is going to do what James Evans can’t, while setting up my own endeavors. James, Miguel, those two are going to have to answer me when I’m done. And Eric, I want to fucking peel his ass.”

 “Peel? That sounds brutal.”

 “What, you’ve never peeled someone?”

 “You’re a sick fuck, Russell.” Stephen drained the remaining beer from the mug and leaned in again towards him. “So, what do you need me for? Besides peeling folks, that I don’t do.”

 “Besides coming for a ride, I’m sure you are still friendly with your old girl at Xavier Pharmaceutical. Folks were killed last year at Jameson.”

 “I heard about that.”

 “Well, part of that equation is a solution. Only a few folks have a hint of there being a cure. Miguel’s cold wifey, the infamous Portia Silva, well, her daughter most likely has that info and she’s accessible. Eric’s fucking her.” Stephen finally leaned back into his seat with a slow choppy chuckle, pressing into the chair and looking toward the ceiling with his laughter. Irony was a bitch. “I’m making this an enterprise Stephen, there’s money in curing people, but also in keeping folks sick.”

 “You think Eric is going to let you get to her?”

“I’ve got a plan on how to solve that one. It goes nicely with James’s. I’m going to make the last few days of his life miserable.”

“Then you set off Vixen and bring in the profits?”

 “Bingo.”

 “And if there is no cure? No solution?”

 He shrugged his shoulders, “I get Vixen and I still get to peel a guy.”

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William woke to a dotted ceiling. There was a cold hum of a machine nearby, striking the realization that his pleasant dream had been just that. Rarely did he dream in pleasantries. It was because of her that those thoughts had existed. He missed her already. He had become thankfully accustomed to the welcomed mornings, Patricia leaning into a propped-up pillow, her presence enveloping the moment in a pull never shared by anyone else but her. She’d smile a sensual smile, the tiny mole teetering in a seductive dance on the edge of her lip, her breasts lifted in perfect balance, a subtle eroticism in her stillness and sexuality. Consciousness graced him with levels unseen or unheard by others in those moments, bizarre but welcomed moments he couldn’t explain to another. They were elating, fleeting. Then his physical need to touch her, feel her in what defined her womanhood, hear her voice when it changed to something secret to only the two of them, when she breathed his name. Four days without the delight of waking up next to her.

He sat up and rolled to the side of the hospital bed having noticed a tray with breakfast already in place.

 “Good morning, William. Dr. Anderson says you likely can be released today. I bet you’ll be off the floor for a few weeks. So I won’t be seeing you around these parts for a minute.” Marla, one of the older, seasoned nurses he’d worked with on many occasions spoke as she helped him from the bed, moving the tubes and wires that plugged him into the wall like an error-prone computer. “How are you feeling?”

 “Fine.”

 “Liar. I can tell.”

 “I’m tired, Marla, really tired. I’m ready to go home. I’m spending too much time at work,” he kidded.

 “That’s it, Will, honesty will get you more sugar than shit, at least with me. How’d you get stabbed anyway?”

“I said the wrong thing to someone.”

She made a confusing mashup with her forehead and upper lip. “Will, you’re too quiet. I wonder about you. And don’t think no one noticed your eye either.” Marla handed him an envelope. “Some regal-looking woman dropped this off when you were sleeping. She smelled expensive.”

He took the envelope in hand.

 “It’s your lucky day Will, you can take a shower. Eat your breakfast. Kim will be by to change your sheets and I’ll be back to help you clean up.”

 “Thanks, Marla,” he said as she left the room. The envelope rested on the tray beside the eggs quickly losing heat and the overly crisped bacon. His agreement which seemingly served Rochelle solely was going to open a significant number of closed roads with Patricia. He knew it. Surprisingly, it hadn’t hindered his slumber, but it had settled itself like an additional guest in the room as he picked through the melon pieces in a small bowl. With Russell taking foreign trips to people long since distanced, he had to intercept. Just whose side was Russell on if any side at all? How long had Allen been visiting with Rochelle at her new project with precarious ties to James?

 William had not admitted to his role in Rochelle’s current endeavor, a personal deal with Maximo Gutierrez that had temporarily ended a medication drought and created a direct pathway to Rochelle Evans’s access to a variant of a virus, more aggressive than what pulsed through him. Only the purpose behind it changed and Vixen remained as a missing link in the puzzle.

 Old enemies were rapidly becoming the subject matter behind a conversation and a call. If he told her the truth…William rubbed the skin against his jaw as he battled with the disturbing recollection of why her mother died. What Portia had been hiding and the connection to Russell’s itinerary recently made apparent to him by Rochelle soured the sweet fruit between his teeth.

 “Hola, Dos Lunas Hotel,” a friendly voice spoke as he leaned into his phone.

 “Hola, I’m trying to speak to a guest. I’m not sure if he is staying there.”

 “I’ll be happy to check sir.”

 “Gracias, Maximo Gutierrez,” William grimaced as he sipped his lukewarm coffee. The voice paused for a moment as a pleasant tropical-themed melody graced his ear, right before the voice returned confirming that the guest was indeed there. Old habits were incriminating. Maximo spent more time at the Dos Lunas than he did in his own home. The hotel offered a great view, great food, and a chance for Maximo to make deals in the dark while attending mass with his wife on Sundays.

 “Maximo,” a rusty voice answered. He sounded weaker than he did years ago, sickness in his voice.

 “Maximo, hola. Este es Eric. Veo que no estas muerto.”

 “Eric. Long time no screw.”

 “Hey, you screwed me, Maximo. You lied, handed over what I gave you right back to where it shouldn’t have been, Rochelle Evans.”

 “You have no proof of that Eric.”

 “Don’t need it.” William eyed the envelope, still sealed. He had a reason to be speaking to Maximo and it wasn’t soured milk. “How’s the coffee, Maximo?”

 “Fine as always, Eric. Fine as always.”

 “You’ve got a problem. Someone might be asking about Vixen, then slicing your throat.” William heard a slight chuckle from Maximo. He hated folks like him, people who carried no allegiance to anyone but an inanimate god, money. His soured deal years before would have avoided Rochelle’s current project funded by James; Russell never would have been influencing James’s sick legacy. Who benefited? Maximo? James? It sure as hell had not been him.

 “And why are you being so kind as to give me fair warning, Eric?” Maximo was a direct connection to what Portia had been trying to hide, why James wanted the two of them dead.

 “Because I’m not like you Maximo. Tell Mrs. Gutierrez I said hello.”

 “Go die in a ditch, Eric.”

 “You’re welcome.”

 William stared at his phone as if doing so would prompt a conversation with his consciousness, console him, get his thoughts to make sense. Russell was working with Miguel, hired by James Evans, and taking a visit to Maximo. The trip to Mexicali years before had started off badly and ended even worse. Albert and Allen had ended up abandoning him after an episode following days of no medication and a mishap in Arizona. William vaguely remembered seeing Russell run to a woman’s aid, right before darkness ensued. My family. The other gentleman, who Albert had taken down, had been confirmed as Dr. Gregory Schwartz, no connection to his knowledge to Russell Marin. Unless the woman had been…My family.

 William thought of Patricia, Gwenn, Lisa, and Alex. She had been right. Russell’s quest was more than just Vixen, more than James, it was a combination of the wrongs of James Evans’s systems plus a personal vendetta against William, the person who had killed his family, which included Russell’s unborn child.

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The small mustard-colored house, its exterior standing out from the few shabby cubed houses surrounding it on either side, sat on a small lump of dried earth. The warm glow from the setting sun created a picturesque backdrop. Russell remembered the house from years before, tossing down a few cheap beers in the yard accompanied by some guy with a name he had forgotten celebrating the news that Chanelle had shared with him, that she would be giving him a son. He hadn’t thought he’d be back two weeks later vowing to kill the kid who’d killed them both.

 Russell tapped at the door and waited with weighted breaths, studying his feet. The damn dusty roads of the rustic locale were ruining his shoes, logging rocks into his heels. He looked to the side just in time to see a woman with long black hair down to her ass, wearing a well-fitted pair of jeans. She watched with a sharp stare as she removed a few light blankets that had been placed out to dry when the day was younger, hotter like her.

 “What is it?” a man demanded from behind the door.

 “I’m here to see Maximo.”

 “He’s not here.”

 “I’ve got something for him.” The aged door opened with an airy creek, a strong whiff of tobacco and wet mud rushing through the door when he opened it. “What the fuck do you want with Maximo?”

 “It’s about la esposa del diablo.”

 The man stepped from the house and walked him past the girl to a rickety-looking shed that was the same mustard color as the house. A few metal sheets were carelessly strewn across the top and there was a rusted screen door. The inside looked nothing like what the exterior interpreted. It was small, but not confining. Three fluorescent lights hung overhead, a cold cement floor, a single-wheeled chair, a metallic desk, and a file cabinet all against the wall. The meaty man who had escorted Russell swallowed the air in the room with his form, taking charge of the mood with his crossed arms.

 “What do you want?” His perfectly rounded shaved head glistened in the fluorescent lighting. He’d never seen him before and couldn't make out his mood.

 “I would prefer to talk with Maximo.”

 “Well, you can talk to me today. Who are you?”

 “A negotiator in a sense. I think I have a valuable proposition and I was in town.” The nameless man slowly tightened his already crossed arms into his chest and leaned back his head, planting his feet. Russell tipped his head, as his thoughts quickly settled into a single little pocket in his mind, like dice in a Yahtzee cup labeled something ain’t right. He’d made a mistake coming back to a past he’d forgotten, people he’d lost purpose with, colors faded.

 A loveless kiss of a gun’s barrel cooled the back of his neck while the round-faced man smiled. He knew the kind of smile; he used it himself. He might have just fucked himself.

 “Got word that someone might be poking around. We were waiting for you. Who are you working with? Someone else to screw us. Think about what you say.”

 “I’m here for myself.” He watched as the man stared long and hard.

 “I’m going to let you leave without a hole.”

 Maximo, who had been replaced by the hefty too many fried foods fellow, so it seemed had at one time offered Russell information about the details related to Portia and her cryptic leftovers all leading to a daughter who knew nothing of her. He had grown tired of dealing with puzzle pieces all somehow touched by Eric and what he had rightfully called his trail of shit.

 Even though he had no direct proof that the circumstances at hand were linked to Eric, he had a strong intuition that it indeed had that special connection, giving him a pulsating hatred in the back of his throat, just ahead of the gun still pressed tightly in place.

 “I’ll go. Take my business elsewhere.” Suddenly, he was pulled out of the small room and forcefully thrown against the hard dirt path leading to a dwarf lemon tree and nothing else. Hearing the laughter from the men. Fucking Eric. Fucking Evans. Frigging life that kept on giving so much that it hurt. The kind of hurt that crippled. All for what? What would life look like when he finally moved James out of the way? When Vixen finally took a life? Would it fill the void that Eric had taken? Even if he had the chance to slit Eric’s throat and watch him struggle to breathe, kill his girl in front of him. Would it bring Chanelle back? Would he hear her laugh again, name his son, hold him?

 Russell reached Stephen who had parked a few good paces away from the house and sunk himself into the passenger’s seat. “What happened? It doesn’t look like you bring forth good news.”

 “I have a feeling that damn Eric happened. I swear, I’m going to make him suffer.”

# Chapter Sixteen

A WEEKDAY AFTERNOON, 2:00 P.M. to be more exact could not arrive any faster for William. He eagerly waited to see her pass through the wide door to the hospital room, then he could get back to some sense of expected normalcy. For him, that was joy enough, distanced from the ever-pulsating reality of the events building from the heavy bricks of the past, never resolved. Russell was one of those bricks.

 Instead of Patricia, Christine marched through the doorway, her sandals announcing her entry with a light click as they contacted the blue flooring.

 “I heard someone is going home today. His lovely partner in love insisted that I accompany her.”

 “Partner in love?”

 “Guys break up with girlfriends. She’s better than a girlfriend, Will,” she said just before giving him a kiss on the top of his head. “How are you doing?”

 William methodically tried to pull a sock over his foot from a low chair not far from the hospital bed. He’d abandoned the thing the moment he confirmed that discharge papers were forthcoming. A grimace was his only response to Christine’s question. He had not felt that he completely benefited from the effects his medication had promised for the last month or so, which made him nervous. He was leery over matters that he shouldn’t have been, only because he knew what it all could mean. He’d already excluded the notion of it being stress, only pointing to more problematic reasons. Patricia hadn’t been told. In fact, no one had.

 “Not that great, then.”

 “I’m alright, Chris. Happy to go home. Where is my partner in love?”

 “See?” she said with a smile. Christine carried energy with her that invited others, a burst of happiness like a Skittles commercial and a children’s show with bugged-eyed puppets. Especially after she committed to Garrett. He admitted to finding her pleasant but annoying tendencies as a value unearthed after admissions she had hidden from the world including Patricia, and had very quickly become family, a connection that had been lacking for so long. That’s why she was the perfect person for a special task.

 “I thought you could use this.” She handed him a bright pink paper with a white back like a sticker with a single quote, the heart pulses truth. William stared at her, then back at the card its bright red font and pink background feeling very much like Christine. “Those are great huh? I carry them with me and hand them out to folks who may need one.”

 “So, apparently, I need that one, right now. You’re a swami.”

 “Stop poking fun at me. I’m trying to help others. Plus, you always need one, Will. There are probably at least eight of them just for you.” They both laughed in the moment, William still struggling with his stupid sock. Christine quickly opened her hand and wiggled her fingers, the command apparent in her face. “You seem to be struggling, hand over the sock. I’ll help you.”

The perfect person. A sock suddenly had more meaning. He watched Christine slip the fabric over his foot, then the other. He remembered watching her face as he untied her hands in the strangeness of Albert’s prison of sorts in Nevada. Patricia loved her, couldn’t be without her, just like he couldn’t be without Patricia.

 “Thank you, Chris. And thanks for the sticker.”

 “It’s not a sticker.”

 He smiled. Then started from a place finding it the right moment, the perfect person right there before him.

 “Can I ask you something?”

 “What, you want me to switch the socks?”

 “No. When Garrett asked you to marry him, how did you feel?”

 “Surprised, excited, happy. I know you’re mad at him.”

 “Pissed. But that’s not why I’m asking. Your father and I are on the opposite side of the spectrum. He hates me for obvious reasons, and I have reservations….”

 “He’s a monster,” she spoke.

 “Yeah...and your mother is…”

 “Which one, the liar or the cheat? What are you going for here, Will?”

 “I want your blessing.”

 Christine’s face quickly lit up, the excitement filling the room. She put her hand over her mouth in a quick bout and hopped onto the unmade hospital bed. “Check out chivalry! Oh my gosh! I’m so excited!”

 “Don’t say anything. I don’t know when I’ll ask.”

 “But you will! You want to! You know you are actually likable Will? You just don’t want to be.”

 “What are you talking about? I’m not sociable. It’s not that I don’t want to be likable.”

 “Same thing, isn’t it?”

 William looked at Christine’s card again. Maybe she was a bit of a mystic with her pink cards and random quotes. He let the words sink in and laughed to himself, careful to not let Christine see. She was an example of a person who had made a purposeful movement towards healing. The only person he thought to express that bit of so-called chivalry in a hospital room dealing with a stab wound directly linked to his problem of why being sociable was not on his to-do list.

 “Chris, you annoy me. In a good way,” he quickly responded. “That’s why I expressed what I did. I value you.”

 Christine watched silently just before Patricia finally entered the room. She was quickly ambushed with her sister’s rebuttal.

 “I annoy him?”

 “You annoy me, Chris.”

 “You see? Pat, tell her it’s a good thing.”

 “You’re my sister. That’s your job. Take Will’s offense as a compliment.”

 “There you go,” William said.

 William locked eyes on his partner in love, his everything, her welcoming presence very apparent, a welcomed dominant aura he couldn’t wait to feel. She placed her hand softly against his shoulder, which he countered with a reach over his shoulder, gracing her fingertips, then her hand.

 “Perfect,” he heard Christine say.

 “Hey, Chris gave you one of her inspirational stickers?” Pat asked.

 “That’s what I called it.”

 “It’s not a sticker.”

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A patient wait in the driveway of Patricia and William’s home quickly became challenged by Garrett’s newly developed concern about William, or Eric. He didn’t know who he was anymore. The air conditioning acted as the only sense of soothing in the warm desert air and heated realization from the sites of the video Russell had sent to his attention the afternoon before. He hadn’t been able to show it to Christine, not the right moment. Not until he could get a piece of the answer William had refused to relinquish while sipping their last cup of coffee. That had to come from her. He waited, images of the quick flash of a gun’s explosive voice and William’s face in a quick burst played in a disturbing replay in his head. What had he done? Why had he agreed to Rochelle Evans’s arrangement? He wished he could return to the cool hum of his office, struggling with a personal drive that seemed far less threatening than what he had accidentally stumbled into when he shook William’s hand and passed on a bad joke. Garrett would have never run into her after an unanticipated lunch on a warm spring afternoon. Just what had really happened that haunted Christine?

 With impatience beginning to formulate, Garrett shut off the car and journeyed to the front door like everything was normal. As if he had never been shown the truth that William had murdered another man. He wasn’t surprised when an overly casual William answered the door. He looked far from great, his right eye still discolored, the purple had turned more into the color of a ripened strawberry but now paired with its counterpart, a cradled puff lining both eyes from lack of sleep and an odd parting of hair on his face as his scar fought through the tiny bristles on his jaw vying for space.

“Garrett, what do you want?”

“How are you feeling?” Garrett asked.

“I’m upright.” He followed whom he had called friend silently down the long walk to the kitchen area. Garrett could hear Christine’s voice before he reached the room, a boisterous burst of laughter rushing from the area.

“Garr,” Christine welcomed. “What are you doing here? I’m not in trouble, am I?” she kidded.

“No, just checking on you. Keeping you from danger.” The room silenced, the house silenced even with three kids and a dog. For Garrett, the silence paired with a sudden slowing of time. Each move was taken with long deliberation. Patricia crunched on a few grapes from a bowl dead center on the kitchen table, her focus on him and the words still lingering from Garrett’s mouth, words he knew would work against him. William had brought his attention to Garrett from the countertop after he had popped a couple of pills into his mouth.

“A long, spiked stick,” William muttered. “Danger, I’ll show you danger,” he said, moving his way from the counter.

“He’s just kidding, Will. I was going to bring her home, Garrett. Are you timing her now?” she chuckled. “Want something to drink? I’ve got fresh lemonade. Here, have a seat.”

“The hell he will,” William responded.

“No, thanks. I hate to stop and rush but we have to go.”

“He’s made much better jokes before,” William spoke.

“C’mon Will, have a seat,” Patricia encouraged as the discomfort challenged his departure. No matter how hard he tried, it wouldn’t dissipate. He felt like a bad dream, one where a thirty-year-old self was trapped in the body of a pubescent teen forgetting their lines on a stage with a mouth full of peanut butter. William made it so much worse. At least he was seated, a sudden sense of exhaustion taking command, Patricia drawing her full attention to him, her hand gently touching his. Garrett had difficulty looking at him, couldn’t control the thoughts of William standing in a dark room delivering a bullet to the middle of his face.

“I guess we’ll see you guys later. C’mon Chris.” Matters quickly became an issue of three against one. Christine lingered near the table, six eyes staring back at him in a silent unified effort he had no way to really battle, at least not by himself; not until he had communication with Christine about the darkened avenues she rarely spoke of, where William walked as Eric.

“I’ll see you later, Chrissy,” Patricia spoke. “Thanks for coming with me.”

“Thanks, Chris,” William said.

 It was a slow struggle to the front of the house, Christine behind him, disagreement very apparent on her face. Neither Patricia nor William had offered an escort to the door.

 “Garrett, what’s going on? What the hell happened?”

 “Just get to the car, Chris.” Garrett had been Rochelle’s fool, tagging along for the sheer sake of satisfaction for another person’s gain. He had never asked the true reason behind his duties. There was no longer a duty in a sense, there was a bond, a friendship he had grown to find a welcoming companionship, still shadowed with purposely diverted explanations when prompted.

 “Christine, Will wasn’t born William Heaton, was he?”

 “Why are you asking that, Garrett?” They had made it from the neighborhood and into the bowels of street traffic, the dark sky ahead bottomed by a staggering bout of speckled red and yellow taillights, an unnatural hodgepodge postmodern design. Christine had not allowed her face to soften, return to her light-hearted playfulness he loved so much.

 “Because Christine, most people don’t change their names, unless it’s a sex change, or they had a really shitty childhood or…well, they’re criminals who don’t want to be found.”

 “Where is this coming from? A few weeks ago you were having coffee with him.”

 “Chris don’t play stupid here. You strung me along with this whole façade while I was hanging out with a murderer. What if he had turned on me? Killed me like he’s done another person?”

 “What the hell, Garrett? He saved your life for goodness’ sake. If you are doing something Garrett, we’re going to have problems. Please don’t do this to me.”

 “Do what Chris? I have every right to feel this way. You don’t know what I saw. What I saw him do.”

 “Where? Who gave you this? What do they want? No. I’m not doing this again. Wait, are you with me to get to William?! Is that why we’re together Garrett?!” Her face quickly twisted into an angry pull, her mouth linear and tight, eyes in matching fashion. He quickly diverted his attention to the road and started through a green light, the traffic heavier than he admitted to being comfortable, nearing a hotter argument with a festering Christine beside him.

 He loved her, a mistake in his initial purpose still, but a fabulous find in his journey, a friend he could not find in anyone besides her. Touching her hand just to do so, laying with her on the floor of her apartment in a swath of pillows, crying over spiced hot chocolate in the heat of an Arizona summer with her about losing his longtime friend, a chocolate Labrador, Pete, never would have happened. She was the best thing that had ever happened to him. He was trying to steer her away over a sudden error that had been in existence all along without his admission or willingness to question. Christine started to pull the ring from her finger.

 “No, Christine, please. I love you. I swear, don’t do this. I would never do that to you.”

 “I’ve been here before Garrett, and it only ended badly. William nearly died and Patricia’s ex was shot dead right in front of me doing something very similar to what you are, stopping a dangerous William. People wanted me and my sister dead, and they are still out there. I trust Will, Patricia trusts him. He’s the last person we need to be kept safe from.”

 Garrett bit down against his jaw, clenched down just when he felt a response gurgle from his gut. Then he was silent.

 “What have you done, Garrett?” Christine asked. “What have you done?”

# Chapter Seventeen

“DAD, WHAT WAS IT LIKE when you died?” Gwenn asked, seated next to him on the couch in the den, Lisa asleep pressed into a cat-shaped pillow against his lap, Patricia doing the same on the far end of the couch without the pillow and Alex tucked in a comfortable bundle between his sister and Patricia. They had all sat down to watch a movie, but exhaustion had taken its toll. William hadn’t been too far off from nodding off before Gwenn had asked her question.

 “I didn’t die, Gwenn.”

 “Mom said you did. I saw it too. Were you scared?”

 He sighed and turned from the television screen painting cinematic reds and greens against Gwenn’s cheek. It was still crazy to him how much he saw himself in her, so much it haunted.

 “Why? What’s wrong?”

 “Everything,” she exploded into tears.

 “Gwenn, come here,” William pulled her toward him in a welcoming pull of his left arm. Her tears continued, starting to saturate the fabric of his shirt, wetting his skin. “C’mon,” he ushered, realizing that it was rapidly becoming a moment he needed to spend with only her. The quickly evolving abilities of parenting became a new superpower revealed only when the moment arose. They walked to the household counseling office, the kitchen. Patricia was wearing off on him better than he had acknowledged. “Your mom likes tea in these instances,” he said, going into the cabinet for mugs.

 “Can I have ice cream instead?”

 “Ice cream it is.”

 William served a generous serving of Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough ice cream into an oversized candied apple red mug Patricia often used for her drag to work mornings, when too much caffeine and lack of sleep made her a strange combination of angry and goofy and a migraine sufferer. Gwenn sniffed again; a new sound combined by a slight hiccup just as she spooned a large mound into her mouth. He watched her just as he settled himself across from her at the table.

 He wanted so badly to keep her safe from what he had suffered from for most of his life, the desperation was very noticeable in his child’s eyes, it was so obvious that it commanded the pull between the two of them. William had never thought of his ever-staring eye-to-eye with his own, recognizing more of his own characteristics as she took another scoop from the mug. He had to make a way for her to not have to experience the sleepless nights, the control the virus took so quickly over its victims.

 “It happened again, when you were in the hospital, the tingling. Mr. Wright told me that people would want me, want what’s inside of me. But he got mad when I told him that I didn’t feel sick, I didn’t feel anything. Now I do and I don’t like it.”

 “I’m so sorry, sweetheart. I don’t know why this is happening all of a sudden. Wright was a rotten, wicked person who didn’t deserve you. You don’t deserve whatever he did to you. I had no idea he had you.”

 “He hated you.”

 “It was a mutual feeling,” he mumbled. “You remember what I told you, Gwenn?” She nodded as he adjusted his frame and leaned in toward the child. “You’re very special and not because of what’s inside of you. I’m going to share something with you, something I don’t share with anyone, not even your mom. But you and I are very much alike so I think you should know.”

 “Okay,” she struggled.

 “You may have very tough days. I’m not going to lie to you, Gwenn. I’ve had times when I felt so bad that I couldn’t move. Medication makes it a little better, but it doesn’t make it go away.”

 Her face bunched into a wrinkled, array of skin, her golden complexion brightening into pink blotches on her forehead and cheeks. Frustration was obviously at-bat.

 “Have you ever wanted to die because of this?”

 “No,” he lied. “This isn’t fair, I know. Really bad people took pleasure in creating misery in others and want to do worse to a lot more. But you can’t let it conquer you, Gwenn. It is not in control.”

 She studied the cup’s bottom in an act of distraction. What she searched for, he didn’t know, nor did she, it simply felt better as the silence grew dense, but welcomed to William. He could hear his thoughts, anticipate his next response to his daughter’s questions.

 “Bad people want what is inside of us. I have to take a pill the size of a Mentos every day or I’ll feel like the crud on a shoe. Sounds like it is in control to me.”

 “No. I’ve seen what happens when it does have control, Gwenn. People die. They die Gwenn and I will not let it do the same thing to you, or to me. I’m in control, just like you’re in control. You adapt to it.”

 “You mean to let it win.”

 “I didn’t say that. You may be in a situation because of what you have where you need to adjust.”

 Why was he trying to bullshit himself? No matter what he did, he realized he had no control, no control over what he housed or when it decided to remind him of its presence. Gwenn puffed as he reached across the table and covered her hands, her fingers cold from the freezing ice cream in the mug.

 “Gwenn, you’re not alone, okay? Always remember that you are not alone in this. I’m right here. Your mom is right here. You’re not going to die from this. I promise.”

 “We all die.”

 “Yes, but I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

 “Okay. You promise?”

 “I promise.”

 “What about you? Will you be there when I graduate from college?” I’m dying just like you, only faster. He admitted only to himself what death’s face looked like. It was dark, unforgiving, and singular, at least for him. With Gwenn there was suddenly a future he wanted to greet with open arms. He wanted nothing more than to fill that emptiness apparent to him during those encounters he had delayed, only intercepted by a voice, her voice, their presence. Or had it been them at all?

 “Gwenn, I can’t…”

 “Yes, you can. You can try.”

William sighed and studied Gwenn before he said, “Okay, I’ll try.”

She smiled. “I love you.”

 “I love you too,” he said as Gwenn slipped against him in a warm embrace. William wrapped his arms around her narrow frame and squeezed, nothing but a growing worry overwhelming the moment.

# Chapter Eighteen

“SO, WAS IT A FOUR-STAR show?” Russell asked into the phone, the red line of lace covering very little on the lower half of the bronzed body of a stripper before him on all fours, moving like a feline in heat on the area before him, slow, sensual strides, getting a slight smile against his lips. Russell enjoyed his distraction as he delivered a plan of action to Garrett over the phone. He’d never met the guy but needed to use his convenient connection to Eric and his beloved family, most of all, his girl. Russell had watched him hover near her in Miguel’s presence, his eyes had hardly left her as if taking them from her radiating energy would stop his heart.

He was out of time, finding Rochelle moving against him and fewer of Evans’s team members to eliminate and protect him, especially the last one, a beast of a man who had not quite given Russell the easiest time, his back still ached like hell from the encounter. It was time to make the last catch. But it wasn’t going to be easy. Not him. Probably because he was likely always looking over his shoulder, knowing the slightest absurdity could result in a bullet in his head. He anticipated his death, knowing it was coming from some angle. Russell understood it well. He was exactly the same. Running a knife into Eric’s neck that evening was all he had wanted to do, but he couldn’t. Just not then.

The woman before him moved into a provocative stance against the metal pole on the small stage before him, giving him a show, the smoldering cat-like presence continuing in her gaze, licking her red painted lips in a deliberate draw.

“I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to talk to you anymore,” Garrett spoke.

“Why not? You’re scared of him, aren't you?”

“No,” he said almost immediately. “I just don’t.”

Russell leaned back into the seat and summoned the woman toward him with a quick tickle of the air with his finger. She narrowed her gaze and walked towards him, her gaze immediately a smoky essence, the dark mascara encircling her brown eyes intense and sexy in the red, warm lighting.

“Look Garrett, I need what you have. I need access to Eric. I need his girl. You don’t work with me, I lose that.”

“Find someone else.” He felt her hands against his thigh and watched as she slowly rose between his legs, adding more snake to her cat. Russell was becoming just a little pissed with his conversation.

“I can’t just find someone else Garrett, it’s not that simple. I thought we had an understanding.”

“No, we didn’t. I made a mistake talking to you and to her. This isn’t for me.”

“No one backs out on me, Garrett. I don’t think you take me seriously. I’ll tell you what. I’ll show you. I’ll show you how serious this is.” Russell ended the call, leaned back in his seat, and took on the view of two breasts rising and falling, then her face again nearing his crotch. He reached out and ran his fingers through her sun-kissed blond hair slowly, then he pulled.

“Damn it, Russell!” The woman revolted. “What the hell? Chuck talked to you about putting your damn hands on me!”

“Your face was in my crotch, Vickie. I was getting into it. C’mon, I’m paying you for a show.”

“Fuck you, Russell,” she said standing in a position of opposition. He smacked his tongue and threw six fifty-dollar bills on the floor in front of her.

“Bitch.” Russell leaned toward the edge of his seat and pulled long on his Scotch and Soda from the tall glass, just before looking at his phone. It was show time and Garrett would soon join his cast because of it. He didn’t know he had no other choice.

# Chapter Nineteen

SUNDAY AFTERNOON HAD PROMPTED CHRISTINE to request Pat’s presence. The pull and suddenness were suspicious. Patricia had figured it had something to do with Garrett’s sudden admonition, most of it directed toward William. Their last encounter was admittedly awkward, and William had been convinced that everyone outside of those sleeping within twenty feet of him was rapidly taking on enemy status.

 Patricia casually pulled her purse strap over her shoulder, just before peeking her head in the kitchen area toward the bustling voices from the kitchen.

 “Three eggs Lisa, not two. We’re doubling the recipe,” spoke Gwenn.

 “Wait, Gwenn, you mean four eggs, not three,” William instructed. “What’s with the odd math?”

 “Some YouTuber said that too many eggs for this will make it taste like, well, egg.”

 “What?” he asked.

 “That’s stupid,” remarked Lisa. Alex ignored the conversation and turned the instruction page for a Lego set, then snapped a wheel to the bottom of a blue, thin piece.

 “Gwenn, maybe you should listen to your mom about cooking and not whoever it is you’re watching on a screen for likes or views or whatever it is,” he said, handing Lisa another egg, steering his attention to Patricia. “Where are you going?” he asked, oblivious to the white dusting of flour against his dark shirt, a red plastic spoon in his hand. The domestic touch of his look was quite contrary to most moments.

 “I’m going out for a minute with Christine.” Shifting his shoulder in a bit of frustration, his face mirroring such feelings with a tightened pull of his lips, William put down the spoon and left the kitchen where she followed. The mood shifted, something disconcerting etched upon his face.

 “You didn’t tell me you were headed out alone.”

 “Will, I’ll be fine.”

 “Pat, this isn’t a good idea. What if something happens to you? There is still a major problem here.”

 The past five days had been far from what she had been used to. With William in the hospital, Hunter had changed guards in a sense, camping out in the den, having no reservation whatsoever to the pantry or the fridge. They were all waiting for William to be cleared from the hospital, waiting for Russell to make some kind of move. There was no clue, waiting, just waiting. She couldn’t live that way.

 “Do you want me to give you my itinerary and the time frame, William? What are we supposed to do here? Just wait, what, for some disaster to happen again?”

 William’s face shifted into a softer sense of understanding, as he leaned his right hand against the wall beside her. Every day since he had admitted to having witnessed the demise of an associate of her father’s doings had been a slow, yet steady pull back to those anxious days where she sat in anxious anticipation for a stranger to commit to ending her life, pulling the trigger.

 He had returned from the hospital distanced from everyone, even his own personal gains. The storm brewing was rapidly becoming more and more frightening. “No, you shouldn’t have to sit and wait. But we can’t be complacent. You and I both know that our situation is not like everyone else’s.”

 “I understand that. I also know I said I’d fight. But this, this having you watch me everywhere I go. I feel like I’m stuck here, like a…” she quickly stopped what she was saying. “I can’t do this, Will.”

 Patricia watched as his gaze took possession, the deep intensity of his penetrating gaze whispering the unspoken, the look he so often shared with her during their quiet moments of secret admissions. He slowly graced her cheek with his hand and pushed her chin with his thumb right before he pressed his lips into hers. Patricia closed her eyes and slightly parted her mouth, taking in his scent, a masculine mix of spice and basil. “Do you remember when I thanked you, that night I brought you a gift?”

 She thought for a moment, recalling an impromptu weapon lesson, his arms around her, the frustration and tension thick and overwhelming between the two of them. “Yes. I remember that.”

 “I wouldn’t be standing here if it wasn’t for you. That Glock locked up? I had it in my lap, ready to put it against my head, pull the trigger. But you called. You saved my life, Pat. You have no idea how much you mean to me. I can’t deal with much of anything if something were to happen to you, or to them.” He stared at her for a moment as if searching, then he disconnected his gaze. “Just check in please.”

 “I’m going to the store for next week and grabbing a bite with Chris. I’ll drop her off at home right after.” He nodded and straightened his frame, as Patricia reached out and gently brushed the flour from his chest. They stood in silence right before the sound of pots clattering to the floor erupted from the kitchen.

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Christine clumsily pulled on her seat belt, her cheeks tight from laughter following a much-needed connection lunch with her sister. Her spirits had been lifted for the last couple of weeks with her newly incorporated piece of jewelry on her left hand. She admitted to her anger when Garrett had admitted to his doings with Rochelle and a mysterious man he had never met. Events had rapidly become a recollection of random phone calls, meetings in the shaded evil of locations she vowed never to return to, commitments sealed in blood, and the souls of creators of cherished memories that had driven her, shaped her. Garrett didn’t understand how much of her life remained unspoken and the darkness that silenced her from opening to him. Nor did he understand that his admissions to her about his previously undisclosed connection still not admitted to William would define his connection to him as a foe.

 The two were nearing her apartment complex, the trunk filled with the results of their shopping excursion. Patricia had excitedly shared her plans with her about the upcoming brunch, veering far from the underlying fear that remained obvious during the afternoon. She had continued to check in on her phone and had used humor as a desperate cover to her wounds. Chris knew her too well.

 “Are you sure about next week, Pat? I know Will is probably still recovering.”

 “No, we’re going to have a nice time. We need a celebration, I told you this at the restaurant. There’s too much tension right now. I need something normal.” She spoke as the car idled at a red light. She silently stared ahead, a tension slowly building. Christine watched her sister as she battled with an internal pull that needed release. Then came the bowed head, the slight sniffle, then the tears, slow and full over her cheeks. A horn blazed behind them from another vehicle as they looked up at the stale green light.

 “Pat,” Christine called.

 “I’m sorry,” Patricia spoke, wiping her face as they entered the parking structure to Christine’s apartment.

 “Don’t be.”

 “I don’t know Chris. I saw something evil in that man’s eyes when he stabbed Will. But I felt something similar from him. Not the same thing, but it was intense and heavy and it’s still there. And Garrett, I can’t believe he would do what he’s done.”

 “I was angry when he told me. I can’t get around to telling him everything is okay. It’s not. Mom is wicked, I mean Rochelle, she’s why Shawn is dead. She’s doing it again with Garrett. I’m sorry, Pat. I’m so sorry.”

 “He loves you. And he made a huge mistake. He didn’t know. She knew what she was doing. Convincing Will is another story. I hope to God he doesn’t face the same fate as Shawn.”

 Christine gave her sister a long, thoughtful exchange without words. She knew William carried secrets darker than most, scarier than most. She’d grown to appreciate him, recognized a deep connection and love he expressed for her sister unlike anyone else she had ever seen. Even his kindness towards her had always been genuine and kind. Forgetfulness had never set in as she remembered those darkened pieces about her never admitted to anyone else but Will. But what admissions crossed the line?

 “I don’t know how much of the dark I can take, even if I held his hand,” Patricia sighed and smiled an exhausted smile. “It was a nice lunch. I’m stuffed. I think I can nap now.”

 “I know who is going to eat my key lime pie,” Christine kidded as she raised the small pink box from her lap and opened the car door. Normal. She just needed something to feel normal. What did that look like for them?

 Christine blew a kiss to Pat and made her way up the elevator to the fourth floor. A man not much taller than she had slipped his way into the elevator on her way up. He stared ahead without speaking to her or making any small talk. Chatty strangers never appealed to her. She peeked over at his neck, a tattoo with a large, dark skull almost reflecting at her, its empty sockets moving with his breathing. His left hand was covered from the knuckle to under his short sleeve shirt in a variety of reds, blues, greens, and black making up a sea of more tattoos. She thought nothing more about it as she shifted her purse and her pie just as the doors opened to her floor. The tattooed man stepped off with her and walked toward the end of the hall, a slow walk with his head lowered, a swing to his shoulders.

 Garrett greeted her with a sweet kiss, a slow press of his lips into hers. “You brought me pie?” He asked as he took the box into his hands.

 “No, that’s mine, but I’ll share,” she joked. “Oh man, I forgot my water container in Pat’s car.” Christine settled herself into the living room when she noticed Garrett leaning proudly into a newly constructed bookshelf just as there was a knock at the door.

 “Chris! Your water bottle!” she heard Patricia from the door.

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Patricia started up a text message to William as the elevator door slowly closed, suddenly stopped by a man trying to get inside. She had made an unexpected run to Christine’s apartment to give her a metal water bottle she always towed around. He looked directly at her and let his gaze hover, right before settling himself in the corner of the metallic room, his face drawn in a downward pull. It was the same man from the club, the guy with the tattoos on his neck and arms.

 Panic hit her stomach. The cold sense of fear quickly stiffened her fingers from her beating pulse as she texted William.

 The guy from the club is in the elevator with me.

 *Where are you?* William immediately responded.

 Christine’s

 *I’m on my way.*

 He’d been right to worry. Patricia stared straight ahead, trying not to reveal her hands as they began to shake from fear, her pulse quickened, and her nose oddly enough started to run. What did the man want and how long had he been following her?

 As the elevator stopped, movement seemingly ensued, the scene swelling, pulsating with each anxious step. She slowly walked toward her car, trying to remember what to do if it came down to her facing off with a man larger than she, probably armed. She wished she had listened to William about carrying a weapon. She would fight, she would fight if she had to. If she had to. If she needed to. What if William didn’t get there?

 Toward the back of the parking

She was barely able to type; her hands couldn’t stay still.

 *Ok.*

 Patricia walked forward, afraid to look backward, when she saw another man walking quickly towards her. She stopped as her heart pounded harder in her chest, as emotions burst wide into huffs, as she started to run.

 A heaviness suddenly struck from her behind, feeling herself falling forward toward the ground. She tried moving, freeing her movements unsuccessfully.

 “Stay still. You’ll make this easier.”

 “Let me go!”

 “Shut up and listen,” the voice of the man behind her commanded. Her face was pushed against the cold pavement. “El Diablo. Where is it?”

 “Please, I don’t know what you’re talking about.” The person forcefully hit her head against the ground and held her there. Her chin burned from the force.

 “Drag her over there, Felix.” Patricia tried to pull away, feeling a hand against her scalp, pulling against her hair, dragging her against the ground.

 “Please, please,” she pleaded, feeling her body quaking. The two men watched her, the tatted individual, Felix, pushed into her chest and slowly brushed a gun’s barrel against her jaw.

 “I’m going to ask you one more time. Don’t make me make artwork against the wall with my paintbrush here.”

 “I swear, I don’t know.” She couldn’t control her mouth as her lip quaked. “Please.”

 “Shit, she’s not talking. Just take her. Have Russell convince her,” the other man spoke just as Felix was pulled away, his weapon falling to the ground. William swung fiercely into the man’s face right before standing him up and forcing him into a cement pillar in the parking structure. The other man had started to run off.

 “Get his gun Pat and point it at him like he did you.” William’s face was drawn into a darkened pull, his brow tight as he leaned his strength into the man’s chest. She followed his direction and pointed the silver weapon toward Felix. “There you go. Now give it to me.”

 She handed William the weapon as her breaths doubled. William pushed harder against him. “I’m going to shoot you. Depending on what you say to me, determines if it’s fatal.”

 “Cops are probably on their way.”

 “Probably right,” William spoke, his face still emotionless. “Russell or Miguel. Quick!”

 Felix shook his head in silence, a stupid refusal. “Answer me!” William demanded pressing the gun against his chin.

 “Russell. Your bitch has got something linked to this shit. She’s got Diablo. You fucking lied.”

 “You didn’t ask,” he said as he fired into the tattooed man’s leg. Felix yelled and tried to deal with the pain in a quick pull jerking his body, blood quickly darkening his jeans. “Tell Russell to back the fuck up, find another source. I’ve got nothing for him. She’s got nothing for him.” Felix leaned heavily into a wall, slowly melting into a crying wad, cradling his leg. “Let’s go.”

 Patricia slowly settled into the front seat of the Highlander, a cold silent fear slowly settled itself into her stomach, adding a nauseating contraction. She leaned her head into the seat, just as William reached far across the middle section to buckle in her seat belt.

 “Are you alright?”

 She nodded, in a quick yet indecisive bob. “I don’t know what happened. I…” the tears started falling. She couldn’t help but let them have their way.

 “It’s okay. You’re okay.”

 “What was he saying? What the hell is Diablo? This isn’t just about you, about what you know. Oh my God.”

 She thought about the meeting with Miguel. He had called her hostage. What the hell was William hiding from her?

 Patricia watched him, feeling a building distance between them. She loved him, but how much could she accept? How deep did forgiveness go? He stared ahead then parked the car in the bowels of the garage. The hum of the mechanism of the garage opener served as background noise to his words.

 “I remember telling you that you didn’t want to be like me. This is rotten shit on so many levels. I’m afraid that the rotten stuff will drive you away from me. So, in a sense, I am holding you hostage. You’re just now realizing it.”

 Patricia looked past the windshield toward the eggshell white wall of the garage, the bottom of the wall covered in chalkboard, a sketch of a fairy with fluttering wings William had worked on with Lisa.

I’m not proud of my past.

Loved, she felt so loved by him. That person he fought against, that person he forced to look at in the mirror couldn’t be what others proposed.

 “Please tell me Will.”

 “Your right arm. There’s a tattoo, not a birthmark. Your mother, Portia knew about the virus, knew about the potential variant Diablo, some folks call it, and about Vixen. She was a major part of your father’s plans to unleash an attack against others. This was all linked to a group of folks in Durango, Mexico. That’s why she hid from her husband, Miguel, why she was always with James, and why he wanted the both of you dead. The fearless became fearful, so she stopped trusting him. He knew she was hiding something but didn’t know what. And if Miguel knew about you two, two girls, not his own, daughters of the man he swore to wreak havoc against, it would have ruined any prospect Evans had in his whole shitty mishap with a damn virus fallen into the wrong hands. Now they know which one of you has the clue, you.”

 “And you knew I had it this whole time?”

 “Yes, Pat. I did. I’ve known this for years.” William lowered his head. “I’m going to check on the kids,” he said, slowly dismissing himself from the car. “I’ll walk down to Chris’ and pick up your car once you’re settled.” In the silence of the vehicle, she began a staring match with the car’s ceiling, a dramatic barrier set between her thoughts, her hopes, and a future she had thought she had seen in his gaze rapidly shifting into a dark, cavernous void.

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She had not spoken a word since she had returned to the house from the garage. At least, not to him. William had a feeling that certain admissions would leave behind scars, very noticeable scars. Who had he been fooling? It had been just a matter of time before he had to tell her, tell her the information she had suspected but he had not been ready to share.

 William had started counting down to the very moment the afternoon Rochelle Evans walked into the hospital room, delivered her message, made her arrangement and laid the tracks to the railway for his derailment from his connection to Patricia. She had sulked into the house, hugged the kids, and closed the door to the restroom.

 “Is she okay?” asked Gwenn.

 “I’m not sure,” answered William.

 “What happened?”

 William stared ahead at the closed door, Gwenn beside him. “A shit storm, Gwenn. I’ll be honest.”

 “Are you going to make it stop storming…shit?” she asked. William looked at the child and absorbed the moment, feeling a slight smile on his face from her remarks. He had to make things work. Without her, he was back in the company of a pill bottle and lucid dreams, a floating fleeting feeling of temporary separation only to awaken still alone. She changed that for him. They changed that for him. But admissions had power, weight. Why would she love the very person who was directly related to her struggles? How could he expect her to? Why did he continue to hold her hostage?

 “Pat?” William asked before the door.

 “Yes?” she responded, defeated.

 “May I check on you?”

 Silence followed. He heard her sniffle a few times before she finally uttered an affirmative. The cool of the restroom invested from the fixtures and tile triggered a slight chill when he stepped inside and closed the door. Her black flats had been carelessly strewn against the carpet before the sink and Patricia shrank herself in a tight ball seated helplessly on the toilet seat. William leaned in toward her, gently touched her face, a bruise forming right above her left eyebrow.

 “I would have never known, Will. Never knew that I was a target and have been all along. I’m the reason we had to run.”

 “No, no you’re not. Your father is the reason. A lie is the reason, not you.”

She looked at her arm.

 “Not this?” She stared at him, a mixture of confusion and anger on her brow.

 “He didn’t know about that.”

 “But you did?” Her gaze penetrated past his defenses, through to his thoughts with her cutting stare. “What else Will? How many secrets? What else haven’t you said?”

 “Don’t do this, Patricia.”

 “Why, Will? What do you want me to do? Ignore what’s happening and what you don’t say?”

 She wanted to never stop possessing his thoughts, love him, and allow him to love her deeper and stronger. Was that too much to ask?

“Understand that I can’t let you into places, where I don’t want to go. I can’t do that. I don’t want to lose you. God knows I don’t.” Patricia slowly unfolded her body, hanging her head, the silence overwhelming, discomforting. He closed his eyes, seeing her smile, hearing her laughter. It felt so good, she did so much. But had it been the same for her? Was he indeed holding her against her will in his secrets, his admissions unspoken, his direct connection to the current circumstances surrounding Russell and James? “I don’t want to hurt you. I can’t ever hurt you. Please, Pat.”

 “Will, how much deeper can I go before I suffocate?” Her words weighed him down as he gained his height. It would benefit neither of them if he admitted having to check in on a contact Rochelle had provided him, or Russell’s apparent street team hiding in places unknown to him.

 Wordlessly, he drew Patricia a bath and left the room in a silence burdened by years of unspoken darkness, one she had unexpectedly become privy to and one he could no longer hide. There existed a darkness that was rapidly taking hold of what he once thought he could control.

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# Chapter Twenty

GARRETT HESITATED AS RUSSELL’S PHONE number displayed against the screen of his cell phone. Exactly one hour had passed since his last conversation with the person rapidly becoming madder and madder than he had at first anticipated. It had been a simple matter of intrigue with his first conversation, then it became confusing, wondering why suddenly Rochelle Evans could no longer trust him with his information despite the dying months and hours of his communication with her, following a man he could at first find no error with, no problems beside the typical day-to-day struggles, rapidly changing into something much more disturbing and dangerous like a person in an aluminum hat in a lightning storm lingering under the branches of an oak tree.

 William was chatting with Christine in the doorway to her apartment. Patricia had been attacked in the garage area of Chris’s apartment, nearly killed.

“What is it?” Garrett asked.

 “See what happens when you say no? Eric’s bitch could have died. Next, it’s her sister.”

 “You can’t threaten me like this.”

 “I’m entertained with finding out how you’ll stop me. I’m serious Garrett, I’m not like that damn bitch, Rochelle.”

 Garrett sat at the edge of Christine’s bed and nervously looked around the room, searching for some sort of tactic, anything, a notion from nowhere. Suddenly, his error with joining Rochelle hit him. It was dangerous, had been all along. He had been wrong to think it was worth what she had promised. Now he was nearing the cause of another man’s demise, a person he had come to know, despite the history far from his.

 “I’m calling the police. You need to stop calling me.”

 “I am the fucking police!”

 A heaviness out of the void unseen by most fell upon him, settling, stifling

“What do you want from me?”

 “To help me get what no one else can, so he can meet the unfortunate end he deserves. Simple.”

 Just as he listened to the bizarre confession on the other end of the phone, he heard Chris’s voice, a warm encouraging call to William, or Eric. Again, he didn’t know who he had befriended or if there was a difference between the two names. Perhaps there wasn’t. What if he had done what he had done to simply change paths, the bricks aligned the road still the same. He had saved his life, without any reservation, stood by him as a stranger, offered him encouragement, offered him an open arm for him to base his own presumption of William from a crazed, threatening maniac who continued to push the idea of hurting the woman he loved for something Garrett knew nothing about.

 “What do you want him for? What is this about? Hell, just do this yourself.”

 Russell laughed. “What kind of fool meets with the devil without knowing why? I don’t have to tell you anything. You should already know or better yet, talk to your friend, Eric. He’ll tell you why you killed your fiancé.”

 Garrett felt a sting on his face, a tingle in his eyes. Why had he done this? “Fine, fine. What do you need me to do?”

 “Meet me, face-to-face Garrett. I want to shake your hand. Houghton’s, 11:00 tonight. They make a decent whiskey sour.”

 “Fine.”

 “Tell Eric, and you're dead. Tell her, and she’s dead. See you at 11:00, wear a tie.” Garrett ended the call without words, only a click of the phone line. He didn’t know what to do. This had all been a major mistake, something he had only seen as an opportunity rapidly turning into one of the worst decisions of his life.

 “Garrett?” Christine asked from the doorway. “Who were you talking to?”

 “Crisis intervention.”

 “Okay. Can I talk to you for a minute? I’ve got hot chocolate in the kitchen.” He nodded his head in a desperate reaction, unable to determine what he should or shouldn’t do. Unable to even stand up from his position on Christine’s bed without stumbling following his conversation.

 “Yeah. I’ll be right there.”

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Russell sipped through a red cocktail straw in the dim of the room. The bar still buzzed with voices, laughter, the occasional burst from a guest mixed with soft conversation. He played with an old heavy ring he enjoyed wearing on his middle finger, a heavy silver bit with a square topaz interlocked in the center. His father’s ring after twenty years of service at a construction firm in Michigan. It was the only thing he ever gave him. He died the next year from a drug overdose. Russell learned that his father had been a functioning drug addict for years, only learned of it when he died. He still wore it, liked the weight against his hand, he figured he’d buy a dark single band when he killed Eric. Just to be a bit symbolic. Russell pulled from the straw with the thought. Just as a woman graced his left hand accidentally reaching toward an appetizer menu.

 “Sorry,” she said. Her delicate wrist lined with multiple-colored bracelets retracted quickly. She brushed her thick dark hair away from her face looking at the printed rectangular menu.

 “That’s alright,” he said watching the room, waiting for Garrett, the only person walking into Houghton’s with a tie around their neck.

 “Hey, would you like to share a guac and chip? I can’t eat the whole thing. I’d hate to waste it,” she asked. She emitted sexuality, a bedroom, dreamy look in her eyes that radiated with the tropical warmth of a coconut’s skin. Her perfectly painted cherry red lips still shimmered from whatever she had applied earlier. She was hot, he admitted.

 “You go around sharing food with strangers all of the time?”

 “Please, isn’t that what a date is? What are you drinking?”

 “Whiskey Sour.”

 “I’ll have the guacamole and chips and a whiskey sour,” she ordered.

 “The drink is on me,” Russell responded. “You know how to get a guy to pay too.”

 She smiled and pushed away from the bar, extended her slender wrist again, her fingertips painted a seductive burgundy color. “Gina.”

 “Russell,” he said. Russell pictured her eyes rolling into the back of her head, her breasts heaving as she rushed her red fingernails against his chest. “What brings you here Gina?”

 “I was stood up,” she looked up at the bartender who slid a drink in front of her and the receipt in front of him.

 “C’mon, who would stand you up?”

 “My date obviously. And you?”

 “I’m meeting someone.”

 “A fuck?”

 He smiled. Damn, she was hot.

 “No, a deal.” He looked up and saw a crisp white shirt wearing, cream-complexioned man with a dark blue tie enter the bar. It was Garrett. “There he is. Listen, I like our conversation, Gina. Save my seat? This won’t take long,” he said, slipping a twenty-dollar bill on top of the receipt and walking toward Garrett.

An arrangement closer to what he needed to get done and a possible good night sweat session with the piece at the bar? His prospects were in his favor. “Garrett!” he called. Garrett looked like a girls’ soccer team coach, a neatly trimmed beard, his body on high alert, as if nothing around him was sanctified, an unholy bit of treachery even down to the very skeleton of the building.

 “Nice to meet you. You’re squishier than I thought. What the hell was Rochelle thinking?”

 “I’m here, okay?”

 “Just relax, Garrett. Stop making our connection look bad. Sit down. Have a drink.” He spoke as they both slid their bodies into the wooden chairs at a small table and a waitress leaned into the center, setting down two thin cardboard coasters. Another one of the appetizer menus sat in the middle, inciting unnecessary hunger. He smiled a bit, thinking of Gina, and wondered what she tasted like.

 “So what do you need me for? I don’t kill people,” he bit, leaning in toward him, while moving his eyes about the room.

 Garrett was way out of his league. Their conversations were always brief, but he had talked a good bit, talked a lot of shit. He was closer to Eric than anyone other than his bitch or her sister. That intimacy was what Russell needed. He needed what Eric refused to give, what others were after but couldn’t figure out. If Russell couldn’t get what he had vowed to get back to Evans he would move on and take the second-best prize of all, the woman Eric loved. Russell saw it. It was obvious. It was a familiar sign to those who shared similar journeys.

 “Listen. You work with troubled folks, Garrett. Eric is one of those people. I need you to convince him to give me something. Something really important that he stole.”

 “I can’t do that. What the hell do you think this is?”

 “You don’t understand. If he doesn’t give me what I’m asking for, I’m going to kill your fiancé and take Eric’s lovely fuck on a long trip where they’ll kill her. You can do this. I think he’ll talk to you then, open up like he’s never done before.”

 “What is it? What does he have?”

 “Something worth dying for and something more worth his killing over. That cargo short wearing babysitter is all for show. He’s killed more than in that video I sent you.”

 Garrett leaned in toward the table’s center and swallowed his drink in a few gulps. His plan had to work. Russell was right where he wanted to be, on the cusp of getting what no one else could. Once Vixen was in his hands, he would show them. He would eliminate James, Miguel, the old school wannabes who had become meaningless players in a profitable game where people were mere pieces on the board. And he’d have her, Portia’s daughter, the missing link to it all.

 Russell leaned into his seat, pulled the liquid from his glass into his mouth, and savored it for a moment. He looked back at the bar. Gina was still there.

 “You’ve got five days Garrett. You make the call, it's either his side or my side. Pick wisely.” Russell left the table and Garrett and made his way back to Gina. She smiled a sultry smile without teeth wiping a bit of green guacamole from her lower lip.

Still hot as hell.

# Chapter Twenty-One

THUNDER CLAPPED IN A SUDDEN call, a fall storm from a significant weather system from the belly of the Pacific. The darkened sky elicited a memory from years past. Warm, like the dusty little Mexican town surrounding a secret. James Evan entered through the lobby area of The Corner Lot, Rochelle’s finalized contribution. The open area reeked of her. There was a set of classic-styled columns, dark against a sand-colored tile, an oversized clock at the back of the wall. Just as the doorway opened to a spacious check-in area, the colors contrasting, just like her.

 “May I help…” the woman started and stopped once she studied his face, a sense of recollection. He’d met the young woman only once before and didn’t understand how Rochelle would have hired such a PG-rated, airy, fluttering college kid. “Mr. Evans, Mrs. Evans has gone out of town. She didn’t tell me to expect you.”

 “I don’t need to make appointments. Where did she go off to? A rendezvous with a fling?” he smirked.

 “Of course not. She wouldn’t do that to you. She went to visit your daughter in Arizona. I think it was an emergency.”

 James produced a blank stare. The girl, still nameless to him remained unflinching and responded back with a deliberate bat of her eyes, the long eyelashes fluttering like the wings of some insect, revealing the dark purple eyeshadow meticulously painted on each lid. “Can you let me into her office?”

 “No sir.”

 “Fine, can you take me to room 319?”

 “That room is occupied, sir.”

 Ms. PG was rapidly changing faces into a controlling laconic android. “Well, can you set me up in a room for the night?”

 “We’re not the Wynn Mr. Evans. I’d be happy to call and set a reservation for you elsewhere. And I do mean elsewhere.”

 Stiff little emotionless, bitch. He couldn’t do what he wanted to do to her in the open lobby. James returned the blank stare; she returned the favor adding the eyelashes. She knew it too.

 “You’re being more difficult than Rochelle. I just want a room. I’ll pay.”

 They continued their standoff in silence right before she went to a computer, typed something in, and produced a sheet of paper and a plastic card.

 “Room 523. There’s a great view of downtown from that room.” He signed the sheet with a checkmark and headed to the elevator. “Mr. Evans, please do not interact with the residents.”

 It was just like Rochelle to attempt to usher a command in a place unfamiliar, whisper a word to a stranger who willfully moved when she uttered a word. Not him. That had ended years ago, never had been in fact, even though she believed differently. The halls he walked with their rich wooden flooring and light wainscoted walls were because of him, his plans, his doings, and it would all continue that way. She thought she could continue pursuing another goal outside of what was discussed. A visit to his daughter?

 James exited on the third floor and sauntered down the hall. He happened upon two folks, a dark maroon skinny jean wearing kid with hair the color of some made-up concoction of junk in a bottle, not quite blue, not quite white, something strange in-between with streaks of gray despite his age and his ear lobes enlarged by a black disk. The boy stopped his conversation with the lanky pallid girl pressed against him, stared at James, and wordlessly commanded the girl to follow him back into the room behind them. James watched the lingering essence of the moment just as he passed before room 319.

Russell had turned his promises into concerns. He had a notion that Dominick’s offer may have been the best solution. With his consort a memory, the isolation and quickly evaporating resources Mitch had reminded him of weeks before settling into his reality, he realized that it had been just that. He returned to the elevator to make his way to his room instead. To his dismay, the doors opened to reveal the bitch receptionist, her mouth turned into a downward arch like an animated creation. Beside her stood a wide, stocky security guard.

 “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

# Chapter Twenty-Two

PATRICIA AWAKENED TO THE BLARING sound of a car alarm from the next-door neighbor. The horn honking and whistling sound accompanied by a road with a sign she couldn’t read and a feeling of floating, a strange dream. She stared at the stationary ceiling fan above her bed, just as the alarm died. Her eye still ached a bit from the recent event in Christine’s garage area, a slight burn and throb that seemed to come and go, especially when all was still such as that moment in the crowning of a new day. Another attempt at living, one more go ahead, trying to do things right, trying to find the right thing to say, only to wash it all off for another go if granted.

 William lay still asleep beside her, his mouth slightly open, a tension on his brow as if nightmares painted what was visible only to him in a place unspoken. His dreams were controlled by darkened thoughts hindering throughout the day. She knew this and could see it in the silence between words. They were patterns that possessed, poisoned, and stigmatized.

 She slowly pulled his hand toward her, studied the muscular strength in his arm, the tattoo covering a past that still caused aches, tension, and diversion. She could see the line in the dragon’s tail, a green shade against his bronzed flesh, a slight indentation in his skin amongst the shadows. He covered so much. Was she wrong in loving him? She kept hearing the word, hostage. But she had never seen what she had seen before in any man’s gaze besides Will’s. That split moment in time…but what if it had just been her imagination, the desperation of falling into his arms, what she had been missing for so long? What if it was just a thought, one of many, random pulsations, synapses, electronic bursts of responses?

 Patricia leaned into William’s side, and softly placed her hand over his chest. The sky had just started to slightly lighten, a new day beginning, its light slowly peeking through the blinds of the bedroom. She closed her eyes in his warmth nearing her face, his heart beating against her skin as she slowly returned to sleep.

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The early sunrise felt good that morning, the air still cool and not a sickening desert heat. He’d watched her fall back to sleep during the first moments of the light of the new day, her hand against his chest. William crossed the street with Jake in tow, a quick moment for Jake to make his random deposits, the same familiar spots, marking what he found to be rightfully his territory, a familiarity he tried daily to repeat.

 Just as he passed a cluster of mailboxes, a reminder of where he lived, and the neighbors who he seldom saw except Sunday afternoons when he tried to take in the activity, the car vacuuming and weed removal from the rocks on the lawn as opposed to mowing, William heard the quick alert from a police cruiser. He tightened his grip on Jake’s leash and took a step backward, finding Russell proudly in uniform behind the wheel. He tipped a pair of sunglasses as if being welcoming and slid them to the top of his head. “You’re out early. I hate the domestic touch about you. It’s deceiving, downright irritating even.”

 “What are you doing here? Didn’t you get my message?”

 “Oh that, fuck you,” he said. “You’re nothing Eric, nothing. Your message is bullshit, you are bullshit and anything you say to me is considered the same. You’ve got less than a week. So, enjoy your mutt, your damn cargo shorts, and fuck your bitch as hard as you can. Unless you hop in the cruiser, have a conversation.”

 “You must be out of your damn mind.”

 “Are you threatening an officer, Eric?”

 William stared at Russell, his face tightening from anger as Jake waddled casually to the curb and let out an educated, woof! Nothing threatening, but loyal, William figured as he keyed into his owner’s sudden challenge before him. What was he planning to do? There Russell flaunted his power with his uniform and cruiser parked midway in the street, his lights flashing like he was chastising a wanted man caught during a pursuit. But wasn’t he that anyway?

 “Is it Vixen or is it me?”

 Russell glared at him again. “What the hell? Why are you asking stupid questions you already know the answer to?”

 Jake let out another educated woof and added a more distinct growl. “Your mutt is worse than the damn cargo shorts.” He continued standing at the curb’s edge as Russell turned off his lights and slowly drove on. A week? William looked back toward his neighborhood, recalling his conversation with Gwenn just a few days before over a giant-sized mug of ice cream. You’ll be screwed in a few weeks, maybe even dead.

 A deep breath was not enough to settle his nerves or the obvious answer to his stupid question. It was both, but between them, Patricia remained. Russell knew that too.

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William checked the side view mirror several times before turning into traffic as if searching for something only he could recognize. They had tried to continue the normal routines since he had been released from the hospital, except the tensions were nearing a breaking point, a slight crackling sound echoing in the background and refusing to cease, no matter how much she tried to discount. They were leaving Alex and Lisa’s school, on their way to drop off Gwenn that Friday morning.

 “Is everything okay?” Gwenn asked from the back seat.

 “Yes,” Patricia said, just as William spoke the opposite. She looked at her child in the rear-view mirror, her reaction was a confused twist of the mouth.

 “Okay, you guys don’t agree. That’s a problem.”

 Just as Patricia started to respond, the phone rang through the convenient hands-free mechanisms of the vehicle, Garrett’s phone number blazing against the screen. Patricia reached over and ended the call.

 “No that’s not true, we just don’t want you to worry about anything,” Patricia responded.

 “So you lied to make me feel better?”

 The phone rang again. She did the same thing. William looked at her with a discouraging gaze as she started her rebuttal. “Of course not.”

 “Yeah, you did. You said yes and dad said no.”

 “Gwenn I…” the phone rang again.

 “Damn it,” William bit, answering the call. “Garrett, I can’t talk. I’m dropping off Patricia and Gwenn, we’re all in the car.”

 “Oh. Sorry. Really quick. I need to talk to you. Can we get a cup of coffee in an hour?”

 “Fine. Just text me where.” He ended the call without waiting for a response. “Gwenn, parents lie all the time. It’s because your mom loves you, it’s not to make you feel better.”

 “What’s happening? You’re not saying something.” William’s eyes did not detour from the scene before him. His voice changed slightly as if telling a story to himself, the tip of his tongue touching the corner of his mouth, as he did in the hallway of their home confessing memories of her mother.

 “I’ll explain what I can, later. We just need you to go into school and blend in. You don’t get in anyone’s car at the end of the day but this one or your mom’s car. Not your aunt, not your grandfather, not Garrett. And if it comes to it Gwenn, you do like I showed you. Do you remember what I showed you?” His eyes finally moved to the rear-view mirror. She nodded in silence. They sat in silence for a moment at the front of Gwenn’s school, the car humming, a mechanical undertone to their conversation. “You can’t trust anyone right now but us…Okay. Have a great day.”

 “I’ll try, I guess.”

 Gwenn hopped out from the back seat and ran off past the gates.

 “Love you, hon!” Patricia called out of the window, Gwenn waving back, wearing a weak smile. “What the hell was that Will? What did you tell her to do?”

 “Same thing I showed you.”

 “What? Fire a weapon?!”

 “She already knows how to fire a weapon. I was her first target if you don’t recall.”

 “So you told a thirteen-year-old girl to kill someone?”

 “If she needs to, yes. Yes. I said that to her.”

 “William, just because you have turned off sensitivity to killing others doesn’t make it right for you to tell our daughter to…”

 “What the hell do you mean turned off sensitivity?! What makes you think I’m okay with that?” He steered the car into traffic, pulled his hand in a quick wipe across his face. “I’ve got folks who want to kill me over a potential terrorist act, others who want to kidnap you, and a monster I can’t kill but can possibly kill our daughter! What the hell do you want me to tell her to do?!”

 “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

 “You think I’m okay with…with that? You’ve thought that about me?”

 When he first told her about that part of him, she couldn’t find it as fitting. But William elicited shadows not familiar to his own shape, colors of the contrasting nature, those pieces he selfishly cowered and hid. They were parts of his nightmares where only he knew of the origin and feared returning to without escape.

 “No. Of course not, Will. I…I don’t think a child should be put in that position.”

 “No, they shouldn’t, but she can be, Pat. These people are not out to intimidate or hurt, they are out to kill. To kill us.” He stared ahead as he pulled in front of her office building. “I know you want to do this brunch, something normal. You want me to tell you things. It’s not that easy. Telling you things puts you in the way of a bullet and I’d much rather have that directed at me. Pat, there’s nothing normal about our situation right now.”

 Simple paths, straight lines leading to an outcome had been covered with singed earth, disorienting her. But had it all been delayed? Had it been a matter of time? She had never admitted to William how she felt staring into Gwenn’s face, knowing she had never felt her move inside of her, but another woman had. A piece of her plucked and implanted into another without her knowing, without her consent. Her silence was just as deep and distanced as his. They were moving forward to where? To what? And it frightened her. Playing puzzles in the shadows with a squinted view, still loving him, and in a way fearing him.

 Patricia sighed, just as a tear fell unexpectedly. She tried gathering her purse and tote, wiping her face, hoping he hadn’t seen.

 “No, it isn’t. This isn’t normal.”

 *I’m looking at you, but I don’t want you to see.*

 He had never wanted her to see the heavy aura consuming, stifling. The world he saw but would never share, a world where she too played a part, but her story still locked away and granted to her in pieces, at his will. “We’re not normal, Will.”

 “Pat…Patricia,” he spoke as she opened the door to the car.

 “I’ll see you later today.”

 The sky darkened to her in the brightness of the morning Arizona sun. How much of the obscurity could she really take?

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Garrett watched past the coffee shop window, the parking lot starting to fill with a wide assortment of vehicles, the randomized personalities quickly stopping in for their morning fix. He took a quick sip from the white lid covering his horchata latte, an overly sweetened warm brew that would surely get his sentences to speed up unwillingly and unnoticed until he was told, still watching the front entrance, watching for William. His last conversation had been terse, the obvious annoyance beginning and ending William’s responses. Garrett grabbed the second cup sitting before him, untouched right when he finally saw him, and headed out toward the exit. He was rapidly running out of time.

 “Will, hey,” Garrett greeted. He handed over the white cup wrapped in a cozy brown heat shield.

 “Hey,” William responded. “Thanks.”

 “You’re always treating me. I figured it was my turn.” Garrett began. He watched William open the lid and peer inside. “Can we walk?”

 “Alright,” William began. A look of mistrust immediately applied to his face. Garrett could see that his conversation was going to be difficult if anything. “What’s so urgent and secret that you need to stroll the pavilion with danger?”

 “Will, I…I made a mistake. I’m sorry. That’s the main reason why I wanted to talk to you.” Garrett felt William’s stare hitting the top side of his face. What was he trying to do? Garrett was not prepared for the conversation in the least bit. A cup of coffee would be the remedy he was so desperately seeking, a reason to prompt William to openly disclose a hidden knowledge he’d probably never breathed to another. Hell, not even himself. Bull shit. Garrett’s demise had started once more to feel way too realistic, closer than comfortable.

 “Christine is excited about Pat’s invitation. She enjoyed lunch with her. Too bad it ended sourly. Is she okay?”

 “She’s okay. Thank God.”

 William went silent, taking a long drink from his cup. Garrett waited uncomfortably in the wordlessness, filling in the awkward hush with an even more poorly executed shake of his white disposable coffee cup, a bit of the contents soiling the top and jumping to the ground landing on his shoe. What if he simply came clean with him; filled him in on the danger, Russell’s threats? He could admit to having made a mistake from the very genesis of his connection with Rochelle Evans. Garrett couldn’t ignore the pulsing anticipation quickly causing new twists of the mouth and a furrowed brow from the man who could obviously do more physical harm to him than he could in return.

 “Chris is uh…she’s worried about you and Pat. She told me about what happened last year and a bit about why that happened. That was blood on your shirt, wasn’t it?”

 “What the hell do you want?” William snapped.

 “Just to keep her safe, do things differently, now. Treat you differently.”

 William frowned.

“I mean, I said that incorrectly. I didn’t mean…” Garrett tried to correct himself pointlessly once more, finding his efforts clouded by the images of William’s face appearing in the dark scene on the cell phone, the flash of the gun.

 William possessed a stare that immediately made him uncomfortable, kept it, abused it in the front of the stores aligning the parking lot. There was a nervous skip to Garrett’s once normal heartbeat when he looked his way and a sudden need to swallow nothing.

 “She was worried, sleepless even when you came by and told her about what happened.”

 “I’m not the one Garrett. I can see clearly through your bullshit and whatever it is you want to say but can’t say for fear of me doing something I’ll regret later. I don’t want to have to explain to Christine what happened to your face.”

 He was down to four days. Would Russell pop up on this doorstep one morning instead of the group of active stay-at-home moms who were seemingly always hosting a car wash or cake sale who only remembered his name when it came to their causes? Their annoyances would be welcomed over Russell. He’d rather pretend in front of their unified grins, give a guiltless no thanks, and watch them all walk off in their leggings and exercise pants instead of watching the coldness in Russell’s square face and intimidation flexed there in the cool bar.

 “I’m in trouble, Will. Actually, we all are. I made a huge mistake, and I don't know how to fix it.” He watched as William calculated. His eyes seemingly searching for something only he knew. His silenced thoughts making internal discussions.

 “Months, it took you months to tell me that. Who?” Garrett looked up toward William’s reddening face, just as words abandoned his mind. “Who, who are you talking to?” William leaned in toward him in an angry growl.

 “An associate of Rochelle Evans, Russell. Russell is his name.”

 “You...you led them here. Now Russell is cruising around my street. We trusted you. I trusted you. They can kill Pat, the kids. All for you to get something out of it?!”

 “It’s not like that, Will.”

 “Yes, it is like that! It is just like that!” Garrett for the first time had been privy to what William looked like when anger took control. His carefully lined moments of control had rapidly become jagged lines, crisscrossing, hatch marks. The build, each passing moment resulted in a tighter and tighter pull toward the center of his face, his mouth tight, pulling against the scar on his skin, his lips darkening. Then he suddenly started in the opposite direction.

 Garrett followed William, still desperate for some type of resolution or something close to it. He had screwed up badly, but William was the only person who could stop the impending disaster rapidly approaching his own doorstep, a man he had just seen once, never would have exchanged words before Rochelle touting a cause that seemed more to him than it turned out to be, a meaningful cause had turned out to be merely a pretext.

 “Will, please. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I made a mistake. I don’t know what to do,” he said, tapping his shoulder.

 “Don’t fucking touch me, Garrett!” William’s voice exploded. “I’ve got too much right now to have to deal with your selfishly derived mistake. I swear I’ll kill you if anything happens to them because of you. You’ll have a hell of a lot more to worry about than Russell.” Garrett watched with a quickening pulse in his ears as William walked away, angrily stuffing his coffee cup into a trash can. Four more days.

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The aromatic bursts of the smell of onion and garlic had started their sensual dance to the adjacent hallway. Patricia had continued a bottled silence since returning from work, the ride in the SUV a looming tension played out in her diverted attention and biting responses to his bits of conversation. She continued with cooking, the tension seen in her face as she stirred vegetables into the large pan on the stove, assigning Gwenn to spinach duty with a colander and the kitchen sink. He hadn’t been welcomed.

 William finished up a text to his father who would be accompanying him that evening on a trip out to Los Angeles, a response to not only Rochelle’s envelope but an update directly from a connection with eyes right where they needed to be, at least as far as Diablo was concerned. Russell on the other hand still bothered him more than the dull pain that still reminded him of his last direct encounter in a dim parking lot. He had no idea where Russell would show up from, or how many crew members he was working with to assist with William’s demise or Patricia’s capture. He pulled his right hand across his face right before stuffing a few items, a toothbrush, comb, and an unloaded weapon into a backpack.

 “Will,” Patricia began from the doorway. “Do you have a minute?”

 “Of course.”

 “I need to hear something from you. Not from someone else.”

 “What is it, Pat?”

 “My mother, Portia. What did she want you to do? What did she tell you? Why did you really help us?” What did he want to relay to Patricia? He felt a current of energy from her, like nothing before when she held his hands in a diner, the coffee too cold on the table to drink. The real reason he helped as a pulled teenage kid mixed up with James Evans’s desires of disaster had been based on what Portia had said in exchange for his promise. Then it became a stronger purpose. A pulsing that he couldn’t explain but that drove him, nonetheless. Guidance from the spiritual that worked with him swiftly.

 The word hostage returned to his mind. Events in the past all painted a different picture from what he wanted to comprehend. It was the right thing to do.

 “Patricia….”

 “No, Will. Don’t do that. I asked you a question.”

“I don’t want you to think I have anything to do with what they wanted, that I have an underlying reason. I thought you knew me better.”

“You didn’t take Vixen to stop them, did you? You took it for something else, for someone else. And you refuse to tell me.”

 William slowly sat on the bed, the day dying along with a glimmer of hope he had clung to that she would remain, the life he thought he could live would remain. When he vowed to protect them that night, he had no idea how much that protection entailed. How much more it involved; how much more it defined him.

 “I wanted to leave, like my brother. But your mother Portia had other plans. She convinced me to retrieve it. I thought I could make my own path later. But I never did. I’ve just been hiding in the dark.”

 “With a hostage. You stole this Vixen shit and whatever Diablo is and you killed her. You killed her, Will.”

 *Please let me see it.*

 “Pat, I tried to stop her. She wanted to die. I tried but she…”

 “I forgave you. But I can’t forgive this, your secrets that aren’t yours, they’re mine. They are mine, Will. Secrets you control.”

 “I thought I was protecting you.”

“I can’t live as your path, as your reason.”

 “My…. no. Why would you say that? Do you think I don’t care about you?”

“I deserve the truth, Will. Especially if it means some creep can interrogate me with my face against the pavement! If it means that I’m in danger because of what I have, and my children can be hurt because of it.”

He watched Portia fall from her greatness to her last moment, a desperate plea as she closed her eyes, forced his hand. Or did she? Had he wanted her dead, along with everything else around him?

“I didn’t kill her. But I couldn’t stop her. Yes, they are your secrets. But some of them are mine too.” He stood and pulled her toward him, his arms wrapped around her top half, her soft, brown eyes staring into his, a pool of tears gathered right before one vanished along her cheek. “I love you, Patricia. I cared about you when I pulled you out of that closet when we were kids, and I knew I loved you when I sat on a coffee table and saw what Shawn did to your face. You are my reason, but for something entirely different and I’m sorry if I was too afraid to tell you about what I never said. Now I understand if the feeling isn’t mutual.” He stared into her eyes, waited for words he knew would sting. “Just, tell me what you see. Tell me that I’m using you for my own purpose and I don’t give a damn about you, that I’m what everyone else sees. Tell me that. Tell me that you see that.”

 She looked toward the floor, her connection withdrawn, pulling away from him. Patricia pushed against his chest; her glance still averted. “You were right. This was a mistake, leave.”

“Tell me.”

“Go. I need you to go, Will.”

 “Tell me, Patricia…”

 “No. No, I don’t. But I need you to go, Eric. Please, go.”

# Chapter Twenty-Three

WILLIAM SWUNG THE DOOR OPEN to his silver Highlander, welcoming Hunter who was ready to get back home, despite the weighty circumstances settling at the back of his head, like a wet, sandy towel on a beach loaded with folks not too fit to sunbathe in any shirtless circumstance. It was much more of a kinder beast, sleeker than his dependable old Chevy resting comfortably in his garage back in Los Angeles. Malachi had filled him in on recent visitors at the site, one guest in particular, James Evans.

 Hunter noticed almost immediately the expression on William’s face, more withdrawn than his usual stoicism.

 “What’s wrong?”

 “Nothing. We’ve got a long ride. We’ll stop at the gas station before we hit the highway.”

 “You look like someone stabbed you, again.”

 Hunter stopped his words following William’s expression, focused his attention on easily distracting necessities instead including a long drink from a plastic water bottle. His son’s demeanor made him feel that the ride ahead would be long and silent. It was not an opportunity to convince him that his errand to Los Angeles would benefit not only Hunter, but the miserable mess of folks James had decided to screw with, a new group of individuals who knew nothing of what ends they would meet by their being there at Rochelle’s gift of charity and eventually Gwenn.

 Hunter hadn’t convinced William before, but he was sure that this time around would be a different song. He didn’t realize that it was all much bigger than he and his secrets buried with the name Hunter had given him.

 He watched with a heightened sense of frustration past the window. It was the end of the Arizona journey opening to the California border, the day still at its end, the warm pink and orange hues an uneasy and surreal blend of ends and beginnings, fitting for the moment spent in the company of his son. Hunter reached toward the center of the dashboard, aimlessly pressed at the buttons of the vehicle in a search for sound from the car’s speakers. He pushed, absorbed, rejected, and started the process all over again, then again, and again.

 “You want to stop doing that?” William asked.

 “Ah, so you speak.”

 “What rule says I need to have a conversation with you? Especially after that.”

 “The long ride with your father one. You’re pissy. More so than your usual chipper engaging self.” In obvious irritation, William huffed and tapped the radio to a jazz station, one Hunter had passed over during his communication with the technology of the vehicle.

 “There. Sound.”

 Hunter listened to the tickle of a piano’s keys for a moment then started up his conversation. “Man, I hate the trumpet. There was some song featuring the damn thing when your car went down the side of that freeway. I hate it more now. I’d never been in an accident before. I’d successfully avoided that for years.”

 “You’re going to do this, aren’t you?”

 “Your mom on the other hand loved it, loved jazz. I think she thought she was from another time, she’d escape into the sound, use it as a time portal, especially when she started with symptoms.” William took a deep breath through his nose, the results getting his shoulders to rise and fall, just as the lights ahead reddened, traffic slowing to a disappointing lull. Hunter knew his reminiscent comments would do more than just fill the void of the vehicle, even with the music. But they were surprisingly honest. Tina had been so much more than the princess he met on a run inspired by James Evans, a trek into the desert streets of Nevada in the cold of winter, so much more than the person who shared his dreams, mixed essences, added to his titles as a father. She had been it all.

 “You loved her; I can tell,” William responded.

 “God yes.” He looked out the window, made eye contact with a husky in a rusty-colored beat up truck struggling even in the sluggish traffic. “Didn’t take me long to realize what I had, what we had. I’m sure you know what I mean.”

William continued to look ahead, Hunter could sense the wall forming, the separation from admission, and from self. He performed the feat quite often. Hunter had seen it before. He never knew exactly what happened to his son during the darkened years that had defined much about him, what poisons James had infused in his mind.

“I still think of her. Especially during times like these when I face my mistakes made with James. People think he’s a lost cause. Far from it. You’ll see the mess that Rochelle has been dealing with when we get to LA.”

 “Which you’ve obviously been privy to before my phone call a few weeks ago. You’re not doing this to help your long-lost son, are you? I don’t feel like finding any surprises when I get there.” William reached over toward the passenger side vanity mirror and pulled on a white envelope, returned center, and tapped it against the steering column. “I don’t know if I should trust you, if your helpfulness is to satisfy your own agenda, still.”

 “Will, I don’t know what goes through your head, but the threat is real, has been. It never went away. And you aren’t the easiest person to get to work with other folks.”

 “I’m aware of that, but reasons change. They change quickly just like my own.”

 “What the hell does that mean?”

 William stared ahead, the envelope still resting against the steering wheel. “I made a mistake, many mistakes. I don’t want others to have to pay for them. I’ve been hiding so much; I’ve lost myself and I’m losing others in the process.”

 “What the hell are you….” he stopped as he realized what the coded remarks really entailed, what was just said. “Wait a second. What happened? Did Patricia…” William avoided eye contact and continued to stare five cars ahead.

 “I’ve got a long drive ahead with you. I’m not trying to turn this into something else.”

 “The irritation is just so subtle, with you, Will.”

 Hunter leaned into the seat, stared at the envelope still in his son’s grasp. He still didn’t trust him. Honesty had not quite been his best suit. Working with his two sons to destroy the pathway James Evans had paved over the years which was starting to buckle at the ends and the beginning had made him question if it was still worth the trouble. His arrangement with Brian Caldron would work for his own sake and others while helping his son with a few hurdles he constantly dealt with. He just had to get him to understand it too.

 “What’s in the envelope?”

 “A request from Rochelle, a result of one of my mistakes. I’m not convinced that it’s a good idea to put your hands in the jar of bait here. It's too easy to go anywhere but in the right direction with you.”

 “Seriously, Eric? You think I’m going to stab you like Russell?”

 “Not with a knife and not where he did. I’m not sure about who this person is, who you are so adamant about me meeting. If you don’t recall, I asked you what Allen had been in Arizona for in the first place. Now we’re meeting folks who can weigh in on areas where they shouldn’t.”

 “Fine, keep your damn envelope. And you don’t have to tell me why you’re still pissy. I think I figured that one out.”

 He turned his head back toward the front and faced traffic with a frustrated glance, the truck ready to break down merging into traffic before them with the husky smiling at him from the back window.

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She had never called him Eric before. He’d never heard of whom he’d tried so hard to separate himself from having any relation to her at all. For some reason, it was her saying his name that bothered him more than her telling him to leave in the silence of the cool of the bedroom, her words with measurement, with bite, more than other times. Probably because he loved her. Love, that word he had never expressed to anyone before. Such substantial honesty whispered in the dark, the blink of the moon’s aura spilling casually through the window of an apartment, sharing its glory with only them for that single moment in time. Patricia pressed into his chest, as he gently moved her hair from her face. Those thoughts possessed him as he laid upon the hotel bed, the bright distracting light from the parking lamps standing directly outside of his window casting shadows of those passing by against the back wall to the room. She was beginning to mean so much more, more than anyone, so much that it possessed him. A good possession, a spiritual connection that only she could understand, expressed in the silent pauses between words and whispered in the shadows. He’d do anything for her. He meant it as he vaguely remembered his words influenced by the power of a drug. God, it was scary.

 William sank back into the numerous pillows against the headboard to the bed. It had felt like a long ride, his father insistent on sharing information he had not yet been prepared to hear and his schemes. He was ready to speak to connections never encountered, feeling his involvement for the benefit of others than himself for the first time. The reality was strikingly absurd.

Go, Eric.

 That is what she made so clear to him. She had no idea that she had saved him from himself. No idea that he saw something that he couldn’t explain with any sense to anyone when he looked into her eyes. Go. He was trying to do so, but he couldn’t help feel that a part of him was struggling to get back to her.

 William carelessly turned on the television, staring blankly at the channels as he flipped casually through the selections. Why was he even doing what he was doing? Had he really been doing it for one person and not the thousands more that could be impacted by James’s doings? Had she really been a hostage? Was Miguel correct in his statements? William reached over to his overnight bag, a medication bottle lying with his other items, the usual traveling companions, a toothbrush and comb, a pair of underwear. He had made a promise to her. Perhaps it no longer mattered following her commandments to him. William held the bottle in his hands, gave it a shake and quickly hid it beneath a shirt, and turned off the television. The silence slowly opened the gate to the noises in his head, he looked at the overnight bag once more and thought of the bottle he had ignored, just as his phone purred.

 “Hi sweetheart,” he answered, Gwenn’s face dead center on the screen.

 “Hi, Dad. You made it okay?”

 “Made it just fine. It’s getting late, why aren’t you in bed?”

 “I am. I just wanted to call you before mom did. She’s worried, I saw it. And I know she’s mad at you.” William took a moment to sit up and prepare himself for what might transpire through the two small screens. Gwenn picked up on the nuances tucked into different personalities and could never miss when there was a problem. “I had an issue right after dinner. It was bad. I think it scared mom.”

 “Gwenn,” he watched as the tears started down her cheeks. “Gwenn, sweetheart. Don’t cry. Please.”

 “What’s wrong with me?” William, lost for words, held the phone in his hand in the silence of the room, feeling helpless, feeling angry. “I’m scared.”

 “I know. Gwenn, I’m right here, hon. I won’t go anywhere, okay? Even if you just stare at me over the phone. I’m not going anywhere.” She nodded her head while wiping her eyes. “Hey, did I ever tell you about the time I ate a moth?”

 “A moth?”

 “Yes, a moth, fuzz, wings the whole moth.” William watched a tired smile come to life upon his daughter’s face, the soft light of the room creating a calming effect.

“That’s gross. Don’t tell me you liked it,” she kidded.

“No, it was pretty bad.” He shifted his body, adjusting for a long conversation, prepping his phone. “So I was on my way to Mexico…”

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She was asleep by the time she had peeked her head into the room. Patricia admitted feeling absolute helplessness once she realized what was happening to Gwenn. The once welcoming feel of her kitchen had become attached to the realities of the deadly circumstances, a wicked manipulation of biology that lurked both inside of Gwenn and William. It crept its way inside of two special people and was mapped out by her existence, its purpose marking her skin, creating a path whispered between her birth mother and a teenage boy desperately trying to make sense of the absurdity of his years dictated by another man’s cause.

 What more had he refused to admit? How much about the unsaid had others already known about her? Patricia slowly covered Gwenn with a purple comforter, one she had picked with excitement that triggered a warm smile from William. It was the smile he shared in joyful moments where all else was silenced. Gwenn softly stirred as Patricia tenderly swept a loose twist of her curly hair from against her face. Patricia watched her considering the years stolen from learning and teaching, sharing, and praising. She wondered what words she had spoken for the first time and if she had been loved or sadly experienced the opposite. Gwenn was her child, though lost and subject to the building connection and lost years. To see her overwhelmed by a hidden monstrosity lurking within she had no control over hurt. It stung and it was frightening.

 Patricia moved Gwenn’s cell phone from the pillow. She’d intentionally left it last after having seen William’s call still connected, his eyes closed in a peaceful slumber. He had only been gone for a few hours, yet the reality of his absence and her last conversation with him made her contemplate much more than she had been ready to consider. His smile, his touch, his passion whispered into her ears, all elements of William started a call of his name as she watched him on the screen. Then the gray crept its way into her thoughts, the anger overwhelming in a quick instant. She ended the call instead, leaving the phone in darkness.

# Chapter Twenty-Four

THE TRUCK ROCKED JUST as the muscular Mac settled himself in the front seat of William’s vehicle. He was in good spirits and sported a silver band on his left hand.

 “Will, what trouble do you bring now?” Mac asked.

 “Nice to see you too, Mac. Where’s Mrs. Thompson?”

 “Probably shopping for the little guy with her mom. He’s due in November,” said Mac.

 “You didn’t tell me you had a kiddo on the way.”

 “Figured to save something for conversation. You look much better than when I saw you last. I swear you are part cat, or you have something really important to do here,” Mac spoke, settling himself in.

 “Maybe so,” said William.

 Sites revisited his memory as he steered the Highlander onto the street away from Mac’s vehicle. It had been over a year since he’d called the Los Angeles area home, the bustle of the busyness there a good excuse for a change. They drove in a moment of vocal silence, the forlorn call of a saxophone filling the void with its slow smoky voice. Mac was more than a past connection with an oversized top half, he was one of the only people William could call on. He was loyal, kind, and trustworthy. He was atypical of most others William had encountered over the years and his willingness to go beyond anything he’d asked was admirable.

 “Thanks for coming with me, Mac.”

 “Yeah. I’ll let you know how far I’ll go before I send the invoice.”

 William smiled at his humor.

 Rochelle Evans hadn’t filled him in on all the details of her covert efforts. He hadn’t expected that she would. If she didn’t fall victim to an unfortunate ending, the last moment of existence shared between her and the barrel of a gun, Russell still had a chance at committing her to that very conclusion, Rochelle would be Rochelle. Knowing how she was, he figured she’d wait patiently in the wings while the players took their marks. She was very good at waiting for the right moment without so much as a footprint in the soft sands.

 They approached a neighborhood, just outside of the downtown area, the sidewalks busy with folks. A fruit vendor settled himself on the corner, a large rainbow umbrella shading the area as he sat on a blue milk carton. William saw the bricked multi-storied building with its address 2137 obstructed by the vendor’s source of shade from the California sun.

 “There it is. A direct result of James Evans’s so-called consort. Crazy.”

 “A hotel?”

 “That’s for show. I’ve got info that points to what is happening in the deep dark corners.”

 Mac unfastened his seat belt and leaned his huge body toward William. “Will, what the hell do you have? You never go into detail and if this turns into anything like it did last time, I think I should have a good reason to tell Mrs. Thompson why I’m gone.”

 William stared at the structure standing out against the single-story stores, its presence becoming menacing and wicked. He had never imagined seeing the potential disaster in its present form. He never imagined what he hid coming to life among the thick walls of a corner building, a monster of brick, wood, and glass.

 He remembered hiding in the darkness of a cold room lined with metallic shelving. Its walls, cool and covered with large navy titles from the ceiling to the floor, a metal table with its thin legs stretching to the cement floor right in its center. She said it would be there. The blue dim light of the room seemingly pulsated as he moved against the wall. He froze as he heard voices nearby, uttering commandments in Spanish, only to temporarily fade. Almost there. According to what she had said, he was almost past the second set of doors Portia had described so vividly and with such clarity. It wasn’t long before he quietly entered the adjacent room, counted three desks, the farthest one to the right, and opened the top drawer. Eric moved his hand along the top inside of the cold space still hearing Portia’s direction delivered in the cold of the midnight moon, then he felt it, his thumb gracing the small raised area.

 “Maybe I should have never listened to her; left it all alone with my secret only. I’ll die with this, Mac.”

 “And remind me why I’m sitting here?”

 “People can die. We’re looking at a biological attack with a virus. And I have the missing part to make it contagious. I trust you. I can’t say that about a lot of folks, even those who share a relation.” William stared ahead at the building, wondering what misguided works were taking place beyond the walls, how many individuals were falling victim to Evans’s greed?

 “That’s a mouthful, Will. Not what I thought you’d say.”

 William continued to stare in solitude beyond the shelter of the vehicle. “Yeah, not what anyone would expect to hear.” They sat in silence, the mood quickly turning to a thickening tension between the two. A part of him wondered if Mac believed what he had just admitted or if he thought he was misdirecting him to serve himself. He had never admitted to anyone besides Patricia the weighted circumstances behind what he had hidden years before and what others would kill for. Mac had still taken a long ride into a desert state, defended Will as he struggled to breathe leaning next to a dying Albert Wright, and thoughtfully comforted Patricia and Christine in the aftermath all without knowing the full truth behind the whole fiasco.

 Giving him an answer as to why he sat with him once again right in the face of danger was the least of what William could offer. He looked up toward the rear-view mirror following the single note from a car horn coming from the vehicle just parked behind him. Hunter.

 “That’s one of those folks right behind me. Are you ready?” William asked.

 “With you, Will? No. But I’ll make do.”

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Hunter walked past the length of the silver-colored vehicle parked before him to greet his son after he casually moved from behind the wheel of his aged but trusted Chevy Caprice. He balanced right between a slow swelling sense of satisfaction blended with excitement that William was becoming cooperative with his efforts, perhaps right in time, as his face was shadowed by Will’s bear-like companion.

 “Mac,” Hunter welcomed with a look upwards.

 “Hunter, how are you fairing?”

 “Not bad. Will has already recruited you obviously.” Hunter recalled his first encounter with Mac, a towering guard in the doorway to a hospital room, his aversion a characteristic quickly expressed during Hunter’s explanations of his presence. Hunter studied Mac with this memory fading and folded a piece of sky-blue gum into his mouth.

 “So where is your resource?” asked William.

 “About that, I need to fill you in on something before you meet him.”

 William’s face immediately changed into the expression of a new meaning, a tightened pull of skin as he pressed a hand against his forehead and leaned back into the front end of his vehicle. The reassurance that Hunter’s process going forward which he had strived to maintain on his drive over to the rendezvous spot, just steps away from what he feared could be the cause for his son’s demise and countless others started to disappear. He had enjoyed the few moments shared with his own in the confines of a vehicle and a long ride, too much to tell the full story William had requested.

There was only one way to eat an elephant. He only hoped William would understand until they reached the tail.

“You keep doing this to me. I told you I didn’t want surprises. The whole ride over and you are just now…damn it.”

“Wait a minute, Will. Listen to me for a sec.”

“For what? For you to fill me in on your scheme and convince me that it’s worth it? I don’t want to do this anymore, get roped into someone else’s fanatical desires. I’m trying to stop something from turning into a disaster because of my mistake. That’s it.”

“I understand that, Will. This guy Brian can help.”

“Brian can help? With what? You want to get me in front of another greedy asshole who wants to cut a deal with you? You sold me off again, just like when I was a kid.”

William’s last remarks lingered in an absurd moment dictated by realities never meant to surface, never meant for another’s ear let alone Mac’s.

“Will, listen. Brian is willing to make a personal investment in stopping James, stopping your mistakes. His mom died from the variant virus about six months ago. Now his aunt is showing symptoms. He’s an ally. I’m trying to help you here. Just believe me.”

A fallen bird splayed upon the broken bits of glass, the single line of scarlet, a final bit of color against her pallid skin. Everything was lost in what seemed like an unanticipated instance. A blink. How many more to fall?

“Come here for a sec, Will. Mac, can you give us a second?”

Hunter retreated toward his Chevy, watching as William reluctantly followed. His refusal was present, fought off by his inner struggles, his movements sharp and angled much more than earlier. What Hunter had been working to complete had to work, William had to be in cooperative efforts to make it go as planned. It all culminated in William's final decision and Hunter’s closed deal with Brian.

“Will,” Hunter began. “I’m sorry, okay? I knew you weren’t going to be amenable to my idea on our way over. You pretty much shot me down. I know how you are. But you need to have his help, his resources.”

William crossed his arms; he could sense the impatience. “You know at one time I hung out with Albert Wright. I made friends with the wrong kind of guy. I knew him. I didn’t like everything he did, but I knew him. And I knew about Gwenn. I saw her in passing. Now you’re going to need help. More than you have right now.”

“What are you saying about Gwenn?”

“She’s not like you. She was exposed to Diablo right before you got her from Nevada.”

“What?”

Hunter watched helplessly as William absorbed what he had just learned. His child had been granted a death sentence he couldn’t control.

“Why are you just telling me this? Why did you wait all this time?”

“Will, I…”

“You’ve seen what Diablo does, it kills.”

“Yes, for those without a pill, William.”

Hunter looked at his son and tried to find a connection where he anticipated the opposite. He was angry and broken, a bit of frustration all combined in his expressions and movements. The connection was distanced as the sound of the traffic slowly silenced and Hunter watched the sadness swell in his eyes, the same haunting sadness that had overtaken Tina years ago when she watched helplessly as a three-year-old Eric cried in her arms from what raged inside. Hunter for a moment forgot about what potential deals could usher for him, forgot the angry frustration William had not relinquished since swinging open a car’s door and watched Eric, his son, a person he had failed so many times before as he struggled with the reality of what it all could mean. The hotel appeared just behind him with the sound of traffic pulsing with a new pattern. It could all end in disaster; he could be killed; William could be killed, and Gwenn become victim to the poison that lurked inside of her, a wicked gift from another who didn’t care how hard he fell.

“I don’t think you understand. I don’t think any of you understand. I wouldn’t wish what I have to deal with on anyone, and to learn that my daughter has to suffer? It hurts. Now to think how much worse it could be, what it does. I’ve heard of what Vixen can do. If it does happen, I’ll be damned if it’s because of me,” William spoke.

Hunter didn’t possess William’s tenacity or his willingness to correct the obvious errors that had been scattered in every direction. Oddly enough, he had expressed diversion to the very matters Hunter had tried diligently to get him to understand, better yet, bend to his own cause. He chewed like a carefree farm animal on his gum, still watching ahead, then a bit harder as the tension mounted, a tension all his own. He didn’t feel that William would detour much from his stance. It was all up to William; he’d done his best to convince him.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

“SO, WILLIAM, HUNTER TELLS ME you’re something like the knight in shining armor,” Brian spoke. He began his plea with accompanying generous pours of quality tequila into glasses the size of a small teacup, definitely not a shot glass and designed to make a night turn wild quicker than he had ever wanted. The waitress wearing a white blouse a size too small for her leaned past him, placing a hot plate of chili rellenos, refried beans, and hot corn tortillas before him, a sultry smile on her face. She made love with her eyes, the whole setting immediately feeling like a ploy. William reached forward and took a sip of the tequila and tightly closed his eyes with the hum hitting the back of his throat. He breathed flames before he formulated words. They were a party of four set aside in the privacy of a banquet room of Brian’s restaurant, the bustling crowd of patrons separated from the open and dangerous conversation taking place among the walls.

 “Good stuff, huh?” Brian asked with a smile. He took an intentional long gulp from his serving. Brian placed his large hands against the table, strong, worked hands, his thick fingers cradling the minuscule glass, and leaned in toward the table’s center. Seemingly talking to only William, despite the company of Hunter and Mac, he stared eye-to-eye. Not at all intimidated, William countered with a lean forward, dismissing the warm food with a scent dancing through his nostrils. It was all a game.

 “You know how Evans’s works and his plans,” Brian began.

 William finished the cup, now becoming a mug, and took a sniff, blinked twice. “A knight took orders from the king, right? I don’t take orders, Evans is far from royalty, and I don’t know what he’s doing or his real intentions. Not anymore.” He gazed at Hunter who went for another pour of tequila recalling his encounter with his father just before they entered Brian’s restaurant. He didn’t look forward to being shot over the wrong choice of words. “I want to be clear. I made mistakes. I’m not willing to make more.”

 “I sense a bit of reluctance.”

 “He’s got special interests, Brian. Very personal, special interests,” interjected Hunter.

 “I see.” Brian poured another drink, the dim light of the room adding a bit of a glow to the top of his dark, barbered, curly hair, meticulously styled against his scalp. “My mother died late last year after suddenly suffering from symptoms I’m sure you’re used to. She suffered from a seizure out of the blue in September, then it got worse, the pain, listlessness. Now it’s starting with my aunt, her sister.”

 “Your folks are down past the border?”

 Brian nodded while stabbing his refried beans with a fork. It had been some time since he’d had anything to do with a secret shared for his own survival. He never thought people would be sacrificed and selfishly he went on living. There he faced a mourner of the ghosts, some still haunting him.

 To William’s surprise, Hunter had been somewhat honest with his explanation, or at least their stories blended into a similar tale. Trusting anyone was difficult, especially when the wealth of what William had was worth blood and tore apart brotherhoods.

 He hadn’t counted on direct interactions with those who crossed lines he had crossed years before, bruised enough to not think twice about returning. Now, those lines would have to cross Patricia and events he thought were behind him.

 “Evans was never into fresh tortillas, Brian. So, why are your folks being targeted?”

 Two family members sharing a likeness with William could only mean that Brian had exchanged words with the wrong person, turned into enemies, or a debtor. An ailing aunt looked much less suspicious than a bullet to the chest.

 “Bad deal. A connection got into some new downers coming into some LA underground clubs. I didn’t know a batch had been tainted with Diablo. I also forgot that not everyone is into a good meal, or better yet, a friend. One of Evans’s guys screwed me over, now he’s dead and I’m on Evans’s list for payback.” Brian seemingly growing more at ease with those around him, poured himself into the comfort of the stuffed seats of the booth to the table and took another pull from his cup. He drank to recollect, his eyes following memories floating in the spiritual, hovering above. “Do you like the beans? It’s my mother’s recipe.”

 “They’re delicious, velvety,” Hunter chimed. He scooped a generous portion into his mouth and seemingly conversed with his plate, shaking his head in a moment of praise over the remaining serving before him.

 “What is it that you want me for, exactly, Brian?”

 “I know you need medication. I can work with my contact down past Mexico City. Get you what you need. If you can give me what I need.”

 “If you have a contact, why is your aunt suffering? That doesn’t happen for those with a pill, right?” William stared at Hunter.

 Then he watched as Brian made eye contact with Hunter. He had a notion that it was all for a prize he didn’t have an interest in. “Another worthless pill for Vixen? Perhaps you know your fix eventually doesn’t do a damn thing.” William pushed his chair from against the table. “I’m done.”

 “William…” Hunter started.

 “I said I’m done. Thank you for the meal, Brian.”

 Mac wiped his face with a cloth napkin and raised his enormous body from his seat. “Thank you for the meal. He’s my ride.”

 Taken. He had been taken yet again by his father to benefit something he didn’t care to understand. It was all about cash-out where human costs were not calculated in the result. A human cost that included Gwenn. He felt stupid for hoping that his own father would feel that he had been worth fighting for, that he had a purpose other than delivering bloodied news of an addition to a deal he had made a mistake over years before. If only he had walked away, if only he had buried himself as he thought he had done. They didn’t know what the final blows would result in, a painful path of destruction and death, and for what? For what? Vixen? James? Russell? He figured to let them have it all. Let them have the poison they wanted so badly that dictated his every day. But it wasn’t just about him. What about Gwenn? What about Patricia?

 “Will, what the hell are you doing? We talked about this,” Hunter started.

 “Why am I going to give him something that no one should have? No one! All over something that is no good to me?! I told you, Vixen isn’t happening because of any mistake I make.”

 “What the fuck are you talking about? You need meds and they are drying up.”

 “They aren’t helping me anymore!” William spoke in a frustrated drawl. For months he had been taking a pill only to result in events he hid from others, carefully drawing attention to other avenues when he was slowly suffering. William had a clear understanding of Hunter’s having abandoned him and his brother years before like junk mail with Evans years ago followed by a time of strange stalking in the shadows. He had tried to figure it out, abandoned the resentment, and attempted to accept his father’s presence. It had been a mistake. “I need a cure, not a fix, not something that makes it go away for a day.”

“Will, you of all folks know that there is no cure.”

“That’s not true.”

Hunter’s face caught wind to anger, the same huff that William had been exerting for much of the afternoon. He’d just revealed yet another unknown to Hunter. “If Gwenn has Diablo, we don’t have time for a patch up. I need the damn cure. Gwenn needs a cure. I can’t watch her die. And if Brian can’t do that, I’m not going to do a damn thing to help you.”

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William’s reason for visiting Los Angeles had not been to savor Brian’s mother’s beans or be enticed by yet another plan in exchange for medication. He remained angry with Hunter over his gradual inclusion of reasoning behind his support like a recipe, adding one spoonful of sticky batter at a time into a boiling pot ending with a disgusting bunch of sticky wet bread. He was there to take a visit to Rochelle’s creation, the key card still in his possession. Mac stood ready beside him while Hunter was likely back with Brian getting shit-faced at Casa De Calderon. William entered the threshold to the building and was quickly passed by a white-haired, thin young adult. Directly following behind, racing out past the streets ran the tatted Felix, the same asshole whom he had shot a hole in the leg. William moved quickly into the small area of darkness in the doorway to not be seen, just as a woman came running behind the commotion.

“Stop! Leave him alone! Please stop!” He watched as she desperately waited in the street before the hotel, her hands on top of her head in a panicked freeze, her fingers forking her thick hair.

 “Excuse me, miss?” William began, resulting in a startling jump from the girl. She was probably about the same age as the guy who had just sprinted before him. “I’m sorry, but what just happened?”

 “Eric? I’m sorry, are you Eric?” She asked, lines of confusion on her brow. William tried to look ahead on the sidewalk for the two men who had just raced past him.

 “Not anymore,” he answered.

 “Please, Felix will kill him. He’s dangerous. Please.”

 “I know,” he said, beginning back toward his vehicle. Mac walked quickly nearby.

 “What’s up, Will?”

 “Some guy is after someone. If he catches him, it won’t be pretty.” William quickly pulled into the street as they both buckled seat belts and prepared for an unanticipated rescue. “Kid is some YouTuber character looking guy, with bleached or light gray hair. He ran in this direction.”

 “Are you sure we can find him?”

 “No, but it's better if we do rather than Felix.” They continued past several one-way streets, the day slowly fading into orange and purple, evening hues. They stopped at a four-way stop sign, just in time to see the white streak of hair and Felix still running behind by a slight margin. William was impressed as he ran like he hadn’t had a bullet removed a few days before. “There he is!” William spoke, turning left. “Hey! Hey! Need help?” William tried shouting as he drove. “Get in!”

 He watched the rear-view mirror with unwavering concentration, vaguely seeing a figure as the back door swung open and then closed. The kid tried to catch his breath; his right hand pressed tightly against his forehead.

 “Thank you.”

 “Why is Felix after you?”

 “You’re Hunter’s son, huh? I’ve been helping him with info about what they’re doing there at The Lot. I saw Felix hanging near someplace. I grabbed something from him,” he said, still trying to catch his breath.

 “What did you grab?” William continued to steer the vehicle, meeting the hectic vein of Los Angeles traffic, distanced from the dark, quiet streets from the industrial area recently abandoned with a panting Felix. He raised a clear vial, the glass pressed between his fingers.

 William’s recent meal seemed to move to another side of his stomach suddenly unsettlingly, the reality of a monster he had faced since childhood floating unknowingly in a tiny vessel pressed between a strange kid’s fingers. It was the reason for the deaths of several people including Patricia’s mother. It had nearly killed him, threatened Gwenn, but it still wasn’t fully powered. He had no idea how much Felix had in his possession, let alone Russell. Rochelle had been right.

 “I hope that isn’t what I think it is.”

 “What the hell is it, Will?” Mac asked.

 “It’s a weapon, the same one inside of me, just worse.”

# Chapter Twenty-Six

RUSSELL WATCHED FROM THE DUSTY porch of the old, abandoned house, waited impatiently for an anticipated visit and a potential guest. Garrett had conveniently begun to ignore his calls; he must have thought that his silence would stop the clock. He’d just leave a message, this time around, then another, and another until he got the point. Russell was going to be the one to witness what no one else had, Eric, admitting to where Vixen was. He smiled as he reminded himself of his last encounter with Eric’s mixed-up dog on the corner of a suburban neighborhood. His cell phone had been overactive for the last hour. Russell answered the incoming call, hearing a huffing, airless Felix on the other end.

 “Your guy is here in L.A. He’s hanging around The Lot; rescued some skinny ass kid that’s been hanging around. Kid’s got my vial.”

 “Breathe man. You’ve been running track?”

 “Fuck you, Russell. See if you can get a track on him. I need to rest. My leg is burning.” It could have worked in Russell’s favor. Obviously, Eric had taken a long drive. Garrett probably opened his big ass mouth. That was fine. Felix could deal with him while Russell went forward with his plans, Eric’s kid and his fuck delivered back over to her step-father.

 A slight breeze picked up just as he walked toward the edge of the long porch, the afternoon slowly morphing into the evening. He smiled after he re-read Felix’s text. *I’ve even got a surprise guest in my trunk.*

 Pieces were coming together in a satisfactory conclusion. He was on the cusp of bringing it all to fruition. Eric was so close, with the information that separated himself from all the other members of James Evans’s team, minutes away from him, just one opportunity from mining the secret from him that kept him so valuable. There was no room for failure. Once Russell got his hands on him, he’d start Eric’s peeling, watch him twitch in pain while he watched his family in front of him. He’d finally get it, understanding the results of his trail of mistakes that resulted now between his pleas and Russell’s rendering a final verdict.

 Another ring of his cell, resulted in his pick it up without checking. It was likely a contact who had picked up on Eric’s vehicle. “Hey, Russell, I picked up a bottle of Chardonnay this afternoon and want someone to share it with. Are you doing anything tonight?” asked Gina, the guacamole-loving drink from Houghton’s. He thought of her soft breasts in the climate of her bedroom, the salt of her skin against his lips. A satisfactory conclusion, he smiled to himself.

 “I’ve got an old pal I’m helping out with and might have company. Can I be there later tonight?”

 “Sure. That gives me time to get another bottle.” His phone chimed again.

 “Let me talk to you in a few. That’s them on the other line,” said Russell.

 “Sure. See you later,” she said.

 “Russ found your guy. 1342 Highland. He’s parked at an apartment complex,” the voice said.

 “Thanks.” Russell kept at his phone and texted the address to Felix. He took a deep breath, the desert air still containing a dry warmth in October. Then he lit a cigarette, took a puff to chase the oxygen he had just added to his lungs. The calming quiet settled about him, no traffic, no more cell phone, just quiet. He figured it was a sign, just like when he made the decision to move on to Evans’s shortcomings. The same feeling had come to pass, a quiet calm as if the ethereal agreed with his request. Chanelle’s death would not be in vain, and the investment in a monster and its fellow wicked partner would pay off. He was right there.

By the time he had finished his cigarette, the fiery end crushed beneath his foot mixed in the bits of broken decomposed granite creating an unfinished sitting area in front of the forgotten house, a black Kia Sedona, its bottom dusted with a fine layer of brown sands rolled into the driveway behind his Charger. Stephan stepped out of the vehicle, loosened his hair as if the tension was too great, then pulled it back again into a ponytail and swung the passenger side door open. Russell watched as Stephan poked his head inside the rental vehicle, elicited a bit of a struggle, and peeked back at him as a hint. He understood his partner’s struggle, casually walked to the opposite side of the car, and opened the door to the back seat. There sat a girl with a golden complexion, curls falling carelessly across her face. Stephan had done an excellent job at stopping her mouth, the silver duct tape covered it as well as her wrists. Her tear-stained face looked remarkably like Eric’s.

 “Hello Princess,” Russell said.

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William leaned into the headrest as he waited in his parked vehicle in front of Hunter’s apartment. With Malachi having seen Felix in action, William needed a moment to carefully consider his next steps before running back face first into Rochelle’s Corner Lot location. Had Russell already accessed what Rochelle had wanted him to retrieve or stop or access? He still wasn’t entirely sure of her intentions. Rochelle’s presence in a hospital room continued to pulsate with an undisclosed disaster impacting her; her admissions serving as transparent opportunities to reveal her vulnerabilities often hidden from those around her.

 “Malachi, have you seen Felix there before?”

 “Yeah. He’s no stranger. He was tolerated. I think Rochelle is afraid of him, more than other folks.”

 “Go on,” William instructed.

 “Well, he was poking around the third floor like that prick James. They didn’t before. Whatever she’s doing is starting to pick up.”

 “They know it too,” William spoke.

 “So what’s the plan, Will?” asked Mac.

 “We go back. We watch for Felix who is bound to show back up and retrieve what you got from him, Malachi. I’ll take care of room 319.” William’s cell phone rang, the device dancing along the dashboard. Garrett. He studied the phone for a second, anger tightening his jaw. He snatched it into his hands and stepped out of the car.

 “What is it, Garrett?”

 “Will, Chris said she noticed a guy checking out your place earlier today. He was parked across the street. He was obviously there for a reason.”

 “Pat and the kids were supposed to go to Christine’s. Where are…” He looked toward his left as he spoke and was knocked to the ground, his cell phone falling to the pavement. He tried to move but found himself pinned between the cold street, Felix’s weight, and Felix’s anger. William couldn’t move despite his attempts. All he could do was look upwards, which was sideways in the confusion, where he saw a pair of heavy black boots, Mac, right in Felix’s path. “No! Mac, move!” Strikes from a tightly balled fist started against his face, his mouth, his head. He tried again to move his left arm, tried to get some kind of control, but Felix continued his brutal attack, the rage darkening his face. William watched as something dark came rushing toward him, just as he freed his arm, then blackness.

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The suffocating darkness of the car’s trunk seemed to drown out the sounds from the exterior. James had been forced into the small space an hour or so before. Circumstances had started to feel dire. He hadn’t had a moment where he began to come to terms with his sins and pleaded with God. Had he become that separated? So far-flung from the spiritual? His gut pinged from a pulsing pain, laying on his back for so long and having to piss were not in his favor. When the guy opened the trunk, he would make him pay. Tattooed creep. He should have listened to her, listened to Mitch. Now he was stuck in a trunk, the irritating smell of Armor All and rubber finally reaching the point of a nauseating mixture of far from edible creations. James frantically started to hit against the trunk above him, hard, heavy hits, then he heard shouting and a gunshot. The car moved in a bit of a jostle, but remained silent, no new move to another location. He hit again, maybe it was someone else. Still in a bit of a panic, he squinted and quickly shut his eyes, anticipating a swing toward his face when the trunk opened. The kid with the crazy hair hovered above, staring at him in a moment of scrutiny, which changed into an angry growl.

 “Didn’t work in your favor, did it?” the kid said.

 “Malachi, what is it? Let’s go!” another voice commanded.

 “I think I’m turning into a hero,” the young man said, reaching out a hand to help him from the vehicle’s rear pocket. James followed him, feeling achy, his hands twitching in an unanticipated reaction to his being crammed in a trunk for the length of a movie like a first aid kit, never being seen, tucked in the very back corner, forgotten. His trip to the Corner Lot had quickly taken a drastic new turn, the original purpose far from what had been accomplished. He still hadn’t been made privy to the location of what he was looking for, what Rochelle had planted. Admittedly, he felt disappointed in his own endeavors. All the years of planning and connective agreements had come to his being escorted into a strange SUV driven by a large bear of a man and a skinny emo-looking kid who probably needed to be carded when he bought a pack of permanent markers from an office supply store. James settled into the middle seat, a kid’s car seat in the center of the back seat behind him. Then his eyes settled on the passenger next to him. He was out like a stoplight after a major traffic accident. Evans focused on the deep scar that ran along the right side of his face. Eric. He could reach over and strangle him in his unconsciousness, finding a bit of satisfaction finally to his failed journey. Screw what he held. Did it matter anymore with Russell running amok, Rochelle taunting him, his consort destroyed?

 “Touch him and find a major consequence. Be a good passenger and be grateful someone saved your ass from the trunk,” the bear spoke. Just as the kid pointed a gun at him from the front seat. “We’re dropping you off ahead. You can make your way on from there.”

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“He’s not answering,” Patricia said. She had dialed William’s cell phone a third time, each moment anxiously waiting to hear his voice. Not hearing him and finding a bit of relief when she didn’t wasn’t where she wanted to be, never had been a place she willingly journeyed. Yet it was, a new feeling of bittering resentment continued to slither into her thoughts of William. Had he been just as guilty as anyone else in the saga that had been her existence?

 Christine had made a way to curl herself into a tight ball while settled into a kitchen chair. Her small kitchen afforded no additional space but for the necessities and the warmth of the room. A batch of cookies caused enough distraction for the kids. They watched a movie in the living room as the two of them processed through circumstances, Patricia being spied on, Garrett’s newly revealed connection, and William’s dismissal, which Patricia had not yet admitted to Christine.

 “Thanks for having us over. I know it’s a bit much with the four of us.”

 “Pat, what was I supposed to do? Even when Will gets back it’s not a good idea for you to be there.”

 “Will’s not coming back, not right now.”

 “Okay, why?”

 Christine silently leaned forward and waited; her gaze directly fueled by a potential response. She knew her sister and what particular looks really meant. Patricia’s demand had remained undisclosed to anyone. Not even the kids. A part of her wondered if William had done the same as she and kept their discussion as a personal journey. She missed waking next to him, every morning a moment of discovery with him as if he found something, a bit more, a tiny bit more of her with each sunrise, which he openly cherished.

 It all returned to the moments unspoken, the inconsequentially silenced patterns often overlooked because of their hidden limbs, the forgotten tendrils that grew and spread, unnoticed until their silence commanded sound. That is what pushed her to anger, despite all else.

 William was quickly becoming more in meaning than any man she’d ever found companionship, much more than Lisa and Alex’s father, Shawn had ever been. He was becoming commander of that reserved part of her heart where few were permitted to journey. She knew, however, that loving him carried repercussions. She was just beginning to fully comprehend after she had purposely discovered them as reconstituted afterthoughts.

 “There is a quote I read about secrets being poison. William’s secrets are actual poison. I’ve watched him suffer from it. And now I see it in Gwenn. To openly know the danger of what he is afraid to say, makes me wonder if I’m crazy to love someone like him.”

 “So, you leave him? You leave a person who needs you? You leave a person you can’t be without? And what if you’re—”

 “—I told him to leave.”

 “Patricia, our father is a domestic terrorist, and our mother is the same. Both mothers! You are not some kindergarten teacher who likes to travel across the country in a 1982 Volkswagen Beetle singing nursery rhymes to alligators in a zoo.”

 “I get it.”

 “No, you don’t. There’s stuff I never told you, what these goons are planning. William is a surprisingly good man who I screwed over royally because I didn’t trust him when I should have. Let his past be that, a past.”

 “Chris, Will’s past is not just a kid hanging out with the wrong crowd and he knows things about me that I never knew.”

 “He wants to protect you, Pat. Is it worth dying over? Leaving Lisa and Alex and Gwenn because you needed to know?

 “You remember that we’d be dead if he hadn’t been there, right? Others would be dead if he hadn’t been there and put himself on the line.” Christine paused and looked deep into her eyes. “I think you’re afraid. You’re afraid of loving him. Even though you know you do. There’s nothing wrong with loving him. Pat, I’ve seen you. You light up when he’s near you. I’ve never ever, ever, seen you happier with another person. You’d go ape shit without him. You probably are right now. Help him to put that past behind him because he can’t without you and won’t if you don’t.” Christine stared at her with an accusatory poignancy and made her way to the oven just as the timer hummed. Her petite frame hovered for a moment at the oven then back toward her as she moved a few items in a cabinet right above Patricia’s head, removing a dark blue plate. She buzzed about the small space for a moment as if she won in the conversation, a victorious kind of parade, right before Alex and Lisa ran into the kitchen.

 “Where’s Gwenn? She didn’t come back from the hall. Is she in here?” asked Lisa.

 “What do you mean she didn’t come back?” Patricia asked.

 “She was playing with us and went out to the hall, but now she’s not there,” answered Lisa.

 Panic struck Patricia. She quickly left Christine’s apartment checking the hall, then going to the elevator. Gwenn was nowhere to be found. Patricia leaned helplessly against the door to her sister’s apartment, placing her hands against her face in a prayer-like hand movement. She was gone. A piece of her was gone. Her heart thudded with a nervous push.

 “Pat? Did you see her?” Christine asked, a cell phone in her hand as she peaked outside the hall toward her.

 “She’s gone. Gwenn is gone.”

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The instant darkness ushered in an unanticipated anxiousness; a panic only briefly silenced in his inability to respond to his surroundings. William felt himself animate to life in a quick instance, throwing his hands in front of his face. He was surprised to find himself in the shelter of his own vehicle, Mac behind the wheel, his eyes meeting him in the small space of the rear-view mirror. Meetings back into consciousness often lead to updates of a disconcerting nature. He could not control the outcome. That time was not far from the notion of being out of his control, as he stared face-to-face with James Evans.

 William pictured waking to a dark room, Russell standing above him, James standing in the shadows, an uncertainty belonging only to him as others used him for their own gratification. He’d tried to suppress memories that bled into others where they had no place; push them deep down into a forced forgetfulness, but they always returned in his nightmares. Why didn’t he do like another and leave? Excuses, he needed them to feel normal, for the pulsations turned to the burning kiss of his body reacting so much out of his control. If James was stopped, what would happen to him? What would happen to Gwenn? What help was his father really referring to?

 James looked like he wanted to rip a hand right into his throat and pull, his anger a boiling fuel in his eyes. “That’s it. Get the fuck out,” Mac commanded. Evans kept his eyes on him. His head throbbed as he peaked up to see Malachi aiming a gun towards James Evans who wordlessly stepped out of the vehicle.

 William leaned his head against the cool of the window, his mind pulsing with a series of realties all stacking like uneven blocks. He could barely open his left eye and flinched in a bit of pain when he moved his hand. He could only move his thumb, the remaining fingers swollen and deep purple.

 “That was close. You don’t have a lot of friends here and you were out for a minute,” Mac spoke. “That Felix guy didn’t let up until Malachi here released his prisoner Evans from his trunk.”

 “God knows I don’t want to see myself in a mirror.”

 “Wouldn’t recommend that. I like you, Will. But I love my wife. This is more intense than I’m comfortable with.”

 Mac had gone way beyond his bonds of friendship. Uncertainty was simply that, full of unknown circumstances, including the biggest unknown of all, finality. William understood his decision belonged to Mac, the delicate lines drawn were never permanent, never had been. Perhaps his father had been right, just a bit.

 “I understand, Mac. Thank you for what you’ve done.”

 “I can’t leave you like this though. Not now. You’ve done for me too, Will.”

 The swelling in his face made him feel like he was frowning, the tight pull of skin and uncomfortable reminders of what more Russell wanted to do to him. He didn’t rush Mac who obviously needed a moment to weigh a significant-sized beast of a complicated situation composed of what William couldn’t say but Mac deserved to hear in exchange for what he did.

 “If you don’t go back to that hotel, what happens?” Mac asked.

 “Someone with very opposite intentions gets whatever is in there. They get to impose a painful death on a select few.”

 “Okay, we’ve got a problem, then. But you have a bigger one, you have to get back to Arizona. Your daughter is missing.”

PART III

Do nothing secretly; for Time sees and hears all things and discloses all." –Sophocles

HE HAD NOT TAKEN HIS eyes off the water, its calming power in full swing. She was going to miss the waves, the ability to change course and make it a beach day. That’s why they still sat, three hours later, still absorbing the crashing and sighing of the waves against the shore. There was a refreshing bit of rejuvenation about William, she’d noticed it before the waves. Perhaps it was the quiet interrupting the confusion that had become their existence months before or his encounter with death that graced his lips only to subside until another time. He had not said.

Lisa and Alex ran happily before them on the dark, wet sands, their little feet making wet imprints, Gwenn happily chasing behind them. William, still staring ahead, wrapped an arm around her, pulled her toward him, and held her in a loving tenderness as she slowly leaned into his chest.

“This is surreal, watching her. I never even thought. Never. And you...I...” Patricia looked toward him as he fought with expression. “I have been waking up alone for years. There’s no one to guide you, your bad decisions are yours and mine are many, and your thoughts are amplified. But when I woke up this morning and saw your face, I felt something I had never felt before. Hearing Lisa and Alex and seeing you in Gwenn, it all makes me not want to wake up alone again, alone with the thoughts, the feeling I couldn’t shake for years. Thank you for loving me.” Patricia squeezed his hand, as William lovingly pressed his lips against her forehead. Following his words, she too became taken by the waves, their relentless push against the shore, their determined spirits all powered by an invisible power, a system. They let the hypnotic call of the water hold each other in silence, enjoying that moment only to later realize the thoughts that William hated to wake up to would become just as relentless as the crashing waves before them.

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

PATRICIA STOOD WITH WEAKENED KNEES on the sidewalk gripping a throw from Christine’s couch messily hanging over her shoulders. She spoke to an officer with building suspicion and hesitancy, wondering if another person stared at her from the shadows and if her daughter was still alive. Helplessness consumed her, thinking of Gwenn, hoping that whoever had whisked her off in a quick instant had not harmed her in any way.

 She tried to remain from crying, tried to answer questions with clarity but struggled. She needed William. Fighting had been the wrong decision. Had she accepted William’s premonition when he tried to separate himself from her, stop her from journeying with him on an unknown path, one riddled with dangerous instances directly linked to him and to her unknowing being herself. What good was knowledge of danger when it returned more of the same?

 “We’ll get her back, Pat. She’ll be okay,” Christine tried to comfort. Patricia watched in building solitude at the police cruiser leaving the scene, on to another number, another instance.

 “What if they’re watching? What if he knows I just talked to the police?”

 “I got a hold of Will, he’s taking a flight back. C’mon back inside, Pat.”

 “She was right there and now she’s gone. He was right. I can’t go on like everyone else. We’re not like everyone else. None of us are. Now my child is missing, again.”

 “Pat, we will find her. I’m sure we can find her.”

 “What does Garrett know? Where is he?” She wanted her child back.

 “I don’t know, Pat. But what good are you to Lisa, Alex, and Gwenn if you’re dead?” Christine began. She anxiously looked around as she spoke. “We wait for Will or even the police.”

 “Hours Chris. That’s hours we lose that whoever has her can kill her because of who she is and what she is to William. She could already be dead.” She felt her eyes start to tear up again. “Where’s Garrett and that creep he sold us out to?”

 “Pat, please! I’ll call him. What are you really going to do? Face off with a man who probably wants you dead?”

 “My daughter is missing!”

 “I know. I know.”

 Patricia had no earthly idea what she was going to do. But she was damn certain that waiting as she had said to William was becoming a problem. Waiting as others watched her do so had only resulted in where she was at that very moment standing before Christine’s apartment with a thin blanket. Patricia recalled Miguel’s stares, his question toward her, all the pieces slowly being put together to reveal a dangerous plot wheeling her in as an unknowing character. It had to stop. If she couldn’t get interaction from Garrett and if William was thirty thousand feet above the ground in a vacuumed sealed airliner, she’d get an answer from who she suspected employed the asshole talking to Garrett in the first place, her so-called mother.

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“I need you to tell me the truth. Every bit of it.”

 Rochelle stared for a moment in disbelief at the level of abrasiveness forcing its way through the small speaker on the cell phone, so much that it made the rectangular plastic piece dance a little on top of the leather seats of the Uber driver’s back seat. Rochelle noticed their obvious awareness of the complexities of driving another around in the Los Angeles scene, bottled water in a black netted area hanging from the driver’s seat and a pack of gum, a container of Corn Nuts, not her preferred snack, and a granola bar, all items encouraging a mess. They rolled up with a neon pink sign in their front and back windows and played on their radio a smooth jazz station. She still wouldn’t tip more than two dollars, forget percentages; they took way too long to get to the airport. She felt like they took their sweet loving time, and not because the traffic was bad.

 Rochelle leaned into her phone with Patricia’s words hitting her eardrum. She was a person one loved to love or loved to hate, a balance between the two. Patricia could make enemies, strong opponents if she wanted, and only if she wanted. Rochelle had noticed that with her over the years. When she found out that Eric had found a special place there in her heart and between her legs, she was kidding no one, especially Rochelle, she knew that she needed to weigh her differences with Eric to her advantage instead of what she thought was the appropriate measure. She had been initially wrong. Then came James’s commitment to Russell, which only complicated Rochelle’s position.

 “I want you to tell me what you haven’t said. I need to find her.”

 “Where is William?”

 “On a flight back to Arizona.”

 “Where was he?”

 “Why?”

 “Because I’d like to know where he was.”

 “Los Angeles, he went to L.A.” He was such an obedient pawn. Rochelle leaned her head into the headrest of the backseat of the Acura, a slight hint of vanilla hitting her nose. They were really trying for that tip. She sighed in a bit of relief and admittedly the smell of vanilla.

 “I don’t know until I find out details, but it’s probably Russell who has her.” Then came the tears. She was an emotional train wreck, weaving from one extreme to another. “Patricia. Listen. You’re not doing anyone any good right now. Let me find something out.”

 Patricia muttered a thank you between her sobs. Then Rochelle placed a call for an additional favor, even if it cost her, and took the bottle of water from the Uber driver’s welcome bag.

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“Kid won’t eat,” Russell said.

 “She’s sitting in a half-burned house in a room that smells like smoke with two strange guys, you think she’d find that hamburger appealing?” Stephen asked.

 They set up in the kitchen, one of the only untouched rooms from the past fire’s fury that scorched the living room and hallway. Stephen had been kind enough to erect a card table in the center, and two folding chairs, the metal kinds often costing less than an average steak and burned the shit out of one’s skin in the summer sun if one were dumb enough to sit on it in shorts, or the nude. The kid would start and stop crying, random moments since she’d been put on the floor of a bedroom adjacent to the kitchen. It had been a few hours of disconnection; the start of what Russell considered the final leg of the race involving Eric.

 “Are you starting to express empathy, Russell?”

 “No, why would I start now?”

 “I don’t know, killing a little girl is not one of your best ideas. Thought maybe you gave that some sort of consideration.”

 Russell chewed without a bit of desire, the warm, salted meat, and cheese a bland mix of textures moving against his tongue. He had sat with her for a minute, the crying stopped, just as she eyed his gun with ferocity, confidence not meant for a kid too young to buy e-cigs.

 Eric was so close. He would be celebrating his victory soon, laughing at James in his face and seeing a financial return from a few who lurked behind the dark curtains. He didn’t care why others had failed or about what Miguel had promised him. It was not as meaningful. Not his real drive. Russell simply saw himself profiting greatly from Evans's elaborately disastrous fiasco all mismanaged by a teenager who belonged nowhere. That’s all Eric had been. That mistake should never have been there in a cold warehouse that fateful day he had told Chanelle to reconsider options. She kissed him with her soft lips, they always tasted like honey, a sweet mix of her being blended with a sheen he loved to watch her paint on her mouth. The press against his lips was a bit longer that morning. All he wanted to do was keep her there in that hotel room not far from the beach, the sand making its way in fine lines in the parking lot and the smell of sea wafting in the air. Chanelle was dead with a quick pull of a trigger. The commotion was rampant and noisy just as Eric vanished to deal with his miseries. Russell remembered running to her, holding them. An instant. That’s all that it was.

 “Do you have your girl lined up?” Russell asked.

 “My fiery Frieda? I talked to her but she’s not moving until she gets something tangible. Stardust is only sold in novelty shops. You know how it is, Russell.”

 “So, I don’t have Xavier?”

 “Russ, you don’t have Vixen. You get Eric here; I pick up the phone. You get him to spill the dirt, I dial.”

 Of all the nasty bits of everything rotten in a restaurant garbage bin; Russell stared at Stephan, the person whom he had placed a certain trust. What was he trying to screw him for then?

 “What the hell, Stephan? You knew from the beginning what I was doing. His kid is right in the other room. I’ve got him. Get ready to dial.”

 “And if it’s a bunch of bullshit? Ever thought of that? Just a ploy so he can screw with Evans, take advantage of the money he stole all while he covers up all the shit he’s done so he’s never caught?” Stephan leaned into the table, stuffed several French fries into his mouth just as he heard Eric’s kid start another crying fit in the adjacent bedroom.

There was no doubt in Russell’s mind that Eric was a genuine source for what he wanted, and if it wasn’t Vixen he had, he had his hands in more places than those areas revealed in a dark room on his love interest; he had to have good reason to with the woman who could lead others directly to the source of what Evans and Miguel could kill each other for. Once he had what he had worked to gather, he still had access to Diablo and a means to use it.

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

A HOWL FROM AN ALARM HAD startled James Evans from his computer. He at first ignored it, passed it off as an inconvenient error, and went back to his screen. That quickly changed when there was a heavy knock on his door, commandments rendered from a deep voice yelling, fire. James quickly closed his laptop, stuffed it into his bag, and swung it over his shoulder. He hadn’t planned on staying long and had the convenience of living from the past two days from a small piece of luggage, leaving his contents inside. It wasn’t a big deal to drag it behind him from the room.

 His floor was busy with people all far younger than he, moving quickly through the hall, a few lingering waiting for another, anxiousness in their eyes. He swung his computer satchel over his shoulder once again in the movement and quickly headed down to the third floor on the stairwell.

 “Where are you going, man? There’s a fire on the third floor. Get out of here.”

 “My son is on the third floor,” James said.

 “Whatever man, just get the hell out.”

 Floor three, the floor he had been forbidden to roam two days before was in flames or a specific room was becoming symbolic of hell, it wasn’t clear in the panic. Just as James opened the door to the floor, he was met face to face with the kid who had saved him from the trunk, his hair soaked from the water sprayed from the emergency sprinklers adding their contribution to the hall.

 Wasting no time for a non-verbal exchange, the kid paused right before beginning a sprint down the staircase. Fucking kid had to be up to something, so had Eric. The smoke, the panic all felt like fifteen years before when Eric set his office ablaze, his defiance just as heated as the whelping flames.

 James moved quickly past the additional folks on the stairwell, forgetting the danger and focused on the white hair, flopping against the kid’s neck. His aggressive actions moving through a bunch of scared folks potentially fleeing for their lives were far from appreciated, delivered in a few ‘hey’s and looks. He understood, but he needed to get to the kid. What the hell had he done? Folks spilled into the lobby and the building’s front facing the street. He looked quickly among the strange faces, many staring and pointing at the structure, while a fire engine arrived. The commotion failed to cease. He looked back at the structure and saw the orange glow from the wide window on the third floor.

 “Excuse me, James?” He heard a voice deep and strong like a narrator for a documentary about whales and echolocation.

 “What do you want?”

 “I’m your ride. Your wife sent me to drive you.” James sighed when he recognized the man as the security guard from the elevator.

 “Of course, she did. Where does she want you to take me?”

 “To her place. She said she’ll meet you tomorrow. Key is in the car.”

 James took one last look at the crowd, new pockets of onlookers beginning to stand aimlessly on the corners, human’s sick need to see a disaster, waiting to watch a woman jump from the burning window screaming for her fifteen-year-old cat companion still trapped in the flames, falling to her death in a charred fireball erupting against the pavement when it made contact. The white-haired kid was gone. Pointless to be among the group of folks, James tugged at his luggage and followed the bald, square-shaped man who walked with confidence found in people he liked to surround himself with. It reminded him of Mitch, the slow strides, deliberate head nods, an heir of fearlessness that assured him that he was in good hands, no more riding in the trunk. James questioned how he came to that moment, still sore from his capture earlier, defeated after staring right into Eric’s eyes and being deceived by Russell. There he was being saved by Rochelle, the woman he still loved in a way, the woman he had wanted dead years before. James bit his jaw with a wave of building anger, watching through the car window as he left the commotion, a popular Pop song made up of electronic pulsations and repetitive meaningless lyrics playing on the radio. She said it, she said it, the voice whined.

 “Rochelle wanted me to give you this along with the key,” the nameless man spoke, handing him an envelope the size of an invitation.

 He removed a small card from the unsealed envelope and eyed the ornate paper, its edges black with gold and silver lines racing across, its cream center marked with her slanted handwriting, elegant and deliberate much like her personality. It read:

Eric is not so bad. Ever thought he could be an ally, gain his trust, which you never had? It’s just us once more, James. Time to do it my way this time, not hers. Your favorite bottle is on the counter.

-Chel

 Her way? Gain Eric’s trust? Everything he had worked for was crashing into the roaring ocean from a hilltop destabilized from years of erosion. The money lost, the companionship deadened, all for Rochelle to tell him that the very person who had turned his back on him and destroyed what he had worked to achieve over the course of a few days in his own desperation was not so bad? He tore Rochelle’s vile arrogance in the form of her lifted words written in blue ink in half and noticed an address neatly printed on the backside of the card, an apartment in Los Angeles. Bitch.

 “Can you take me here instead of her place?”

 “I’m not a taxi driver.”

 “C’mon, you are part of this nonsense. You knew I’d ask, just like she knew.”

 “Caught me. I presume you have the cash. I don’t do pay apps.”

 He stared at the back of his head, felt his teeth scrape against each other on the left side of his mouth. “I’ll cover you. Just take me there.”

The address didn’t ring a bell to him, staring at the side of the card in his hand. He didn’t feel like reading her note again but kept thinking of what she had written, over and over, his face obvious to the driver that he was pissed. Still holding on to his assurance that he was indeed in control of the vehicle, of James, of the circumstances at hand, the driver peaked back at him in the rear-view mirror and smiled.

 James should have killed her himself years before. He should have granted Eric his request there in the forest instead of making an angled point on his face. Rochelle really thought she could deal hands at the table with Eric sitting right across.

 One hundred dollars later, Mr. Nameless wouldn’t settle for anything outside of extortion, they parked across the street from a two-story apartment building, a large arched doorway on the bottom floor. The street was lined with cars, all parked beneath the palm trees moving in the breeze that started to vocalize in a slight sound of a hush, nature’s calming captured in therapeutic nature sounds for sleepless nights. His driver parked and shut off the car, a silver Acura adorned with a dark car bra strapped along the front. Streetlights had activated, a cool autumn evening bringing an unanticipated change he didn’t claim as valuable, not then.

 James pressed the buzzer for apartment four, took a step back, and looked toward the building as if its exterior would give him a clue. His day had been long and still far from valuable. His unexpected stop had better be worth the visit and one hundred bucks.

 After hearing a slight crackle from the speaker, a voice answered. “Who is it?”

 “Rochelle Evans sent me to see you.”

 There was a crackle again with the man’s response. “What the hell does that bitch want with me now?”

 “I don’t know, but I’d like to find out.”

 “Who is this?”

 “James Evans. Who is…” the buzzer sounded for his entry. James didn’t suppress his anger, he couldn’t and found no point in doing so. Her flaunt of control was unbearable, he thought, walking down the wide hall to apartment four. The door was open by the time he had arrived, a strong swell of marijuana spilled from the apartment, a dark-haired woman with her hands on her hips wearing a bit of audacity on her face in an oversized sports jersey stood in the living room area, a mess on the couch and coffee table all behind the eel black-haired brother to Eric, their similarities strikingly identical.

 “I’ll be damned,” he spoke. “Is Eric dead? I’m his successor?” Perhaps his day hadn’t been as shitty as he had thought.

 “No, Derrick. But I am here to strike up a deal.”

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Russell looked into her eyes, Eric’s kid. He saw Eric staring right back at him. She had found companionship with a forlorn dust ball in the room, moving it about with her barefoot when he had arrived, unfolded a chair, and sat before her. Russell still had not contacted Garrett or Eric with her whereabouts. It was about making him squirm, making him struggle enough to open his mouth with no other choice but to give him an answer he needed, wanted, and was determined to finally get from his lips. He tried to ignore that part of him that beat with a hesitancy, a push to change course.

“Hungry?”

“I don’t want your food,” she snapped. “I want to go home. I want my dad, my mom.”

“You’ll see him. When I get what I want from him.”

“What do you want from him?” she asked.

Russell leaned toward her, a sense of satisfaction slowly overtaking him, his face moving to the reaction with a crooked smile. He pictured Eric screaming at the top of his lungs as he saw Russell draw with a knife against his kid’s neck, the blood seeping into her little purple t-shirt, her eyes staring back at him as she struggled to breathe. His reaction to watching his own seed collapsing to her inevitable death was exhilarating. It felt so real, so near to fruition that he felt his pulse quicken with the thought. A rush unlike any other.

“I want to watch him suffer. Like he made me. Then I want a secret he’s been holding onto for a long time. That’s what I want.”

“Why? What do you get from that?”

What if Stephan had a bit of truth to his assumptions? What if Eric had been pulling everyone’s leg? What if he didn’t have anything at all to give? It wouldn’t bring back what he wanted most, satisfaction to his loss. Maybe he was doing everything all wrong.

He had loved her more than anything. They vowed to live to death and to always lift the other higher and higher, as high as they could lift. That meant becoming stronger for the other, building the muscle to its breaking point to be able to continue that promise. He didn’t give a shit about Eric. Didn’t care when he saw him twitching like a fish without water. He wanted him to die then, choke on his tongue. He had been pardoned by Miguel for his importance, his vital knowledge. He’d been passed off so many times. Russell had not forgotten and wouldn’t let him be passed off again. Vixen belonged to him.

His thoughts all doing a quick dance-off in his mind, Russell kneeled and aggressively squeezed Eric’s kid’s face between his thumb and the balance of his fingers, forced her to look at him eye-to-eye, stared at Eric. “You don’t have to worry about that, Princess.” Her face began to quiver in his hand. “You won’t have to worry about that at all.”

# Chapter Twenty-Nine

PRESSURE FROM AN AIR CABIN had been far from therapeutic with his face swollen from Felix’s aggressive point made with his ringed knuckles and the pavement. William figured he would be the subject matter for the stranger next to him once the salt and peppered-haired gentleman departed from the flight in Phoenix. He held a plastic cup of ice he’d insisted on from the flight attendant against his face for much of the flight, taking cube after cube to his mouth, struggling to stay awake. The guy’s eyes burrowed into the uninjured side of his face every time he asked for another cup. He didn’t care. Gwenn was somewhere unfamiliar, in the cold of a stranger, distanced, captured, all that he had promised to keep her away from as he pleaded with her back in Nevada. Suggestions from Mac to get to a hospital had also been ignored. He didn’t have time for a concussion.

 The past day without the existence he had fallen deeply for, walking a dog, curling up with familiar faces he loved to see each day at the day’s end in the welcoming pull of a living room with pictures of familiarity posted on the walls, falling to slumber next to Patricia had unwelcomed reminders of what life had been. What had been deserved.

 William closed the door to the taxi and walked toward the house, noticing immediately the emptiness, a foreignness mismatching to that place he loved coming back to each day. Was Russell watching, a voyeuristic excitement he shared with others with similar desires like James or Miguel? Did he have Gwenn locked up in another tool shed or basement like Albert had Lisa and Alex in Nevada? The anger started with thoughts, the lump in his throat growing as he neared the front door. The lump pulsed from helplessness, the same feeling he felt years ago sitting in front of Maximo Gutierrez, the meeting and commencement of the very moment standing with a fury of questions buzzing in his head. It was his fault that his daughter was gone, his fault that people were crumbling to their deaths from what lurked inside of them.

 Familiarity was painful in the entryway with Gwenn’s picture his first place of focus as the lights came to life, illuminating the small space. There he stood without the ability to move and the weight of his mistakes, the misguided aversions to his past. His swollen face had become numb in areas, the anger bubbling from the lump trying hard to squeeze against the opposite side of his face.

 “Will?! Thank God, it’s just you,” Pat began, the silver weapon he had instructed her on how to use pointed downward in her right hand. At least she’d learned.

 She seemed deflated, smaller in her boldness she never faltered in his presence. They stood separated, a heavy avoidance laying a noticeable fence between them. All he wanted to do was touch her, but he knew not to even try, not then.

 “I haven’t heard anything. I don’t know what to do. She was right there in Christine’s hallway.”

 Stolen from creation, stolen from birth, stolen from experiences, and stolen once again, Gwenn was the child hidden from him, even by his own father. It stunk like dog shit on a wet lawn. William remained still, standing with his head still pounding. He had to have been still unable to legally drink when she was born without his knowledge to a strange woman, raised by Albert, a man he had loathed since he could remember. Normal? That’s all she wanted. But it was far from what either one of them had. Far from what he deserved, even if he were to sit before her and admit everything, every bit of the stink he hesitated to admit.

 “I need to talk to you. Maybe we can figure this shit out together. Find Gwenn. Get her back.”

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He had not been able to sleep at all the night before, the incessant ringing from the pain failing to slumber. He’d had similar nights before, but this was more taxing than other times, the fact that it wouldn’t turn off is what made him reconsider his options. Even if they were not the best options.

Eric slumped into the hard wooden chair and watched as Maximo Gutierrez leaned casually into his seat and a small, thin girl, long dark hair running down her back in a braid placed two small cups of steaming liquid before them.

“Ah, this is my secret blend. Looks like you can use some. You look terrible.”

Eric pulled the cup to his lips, took a long drink, the warm coffee coating his tongue, just the right temperature, rich and full of flavor. “The coffee is always just right here. It’s to my liking, in my control. When it’s not, we have an issue. So, how’s the coffee, Eric?”

“Terrible. I need help. I can make a deal.”

“La desesperacion puede hacerte tomar un camino equivocado.”

“Puedo hacer un trato.” He responded, leaning into his left arm as his body began to work against him. He hated that Maximo could see right through him, but he had reached a point where there were no more options, desperation was his only reality. No one could add relief but the man before him who sported a slight smile created through satisfaction.

“What deal are you presenting to me, Eric?”

“Info for meds. I can give you a location, a verified source for what Evans is playing with.”

“Desesperacion, Eric…. I’m going to give you a moment to think about this. Sometimes I like you, just a little, just enough to not want to tell Juan to open up your throat.”

Eric didn’t want to do what he was about to do. Making a deal would seal his fate in areas yet to be seen, he just knew it. What if it all blew up in his face? What if Maximo didn’t come through? But his body had been shutting down for the last week. He needed meds more than anything outside of air and water.

“I know you have access to medication. I’ve been without for a couple of months. I have no other resources. My word is my word. I’d hope it would be the same on your end.”

“You give me a verified resource; I give you pills. Sounds fair. Who?”

“No, I need to know that I have something here, not a bunch of Tic-Tacs.”

“Juan!” Maximo called, right before finishing up his coffee. A lone trip past the Mexican border had been spent in and out of sleep, he felt the stares from a girl sitting across from him. He tried to ignore them by veering his attention past the window of the bus. It was getting worse. Juan, a tall, bronzed puppet to Maximo, walked right up to the table, like a good boy. He’d never heard him say a word but saw it with his dark eyes. Maximo signaled for him to come close to him, whispering something in his ear.

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“So, you’re saying that Diablo is your fault?” Patricia asked.

“Yeah. Christine’s involvement, even Shawn. Rochelle should never have had it. I made a mistake that I’m still paying for. Others too, including Gwenn.”

“You had no medication. You could have died.”

“No, I didn’t but—”

“—Will, I’ve seen what this monster does to you. I saw it in Gwenn. You don’t deserve that, nor does she. You were desperate, you had no other choice.”

“People are dying.”

“Damn it, Will, so are you trying to join them?! Stop hating a teenage boy so much and be the man to fix it.”

William sat quieted by her words. He had watched on Hunter’s small screen as people collapsed to their deaths, listened as Brian reminisced about his mother who he had lost due to the evil he had made a deal with Maximo over coffee in the comfort of a hotel lobby, a hatred of himself that he could never seem to quiet.

Every morning he thought of what he had done; of what he hid. He redirected that energy into other channels. Fix it. But how?

“I don’t know how, Pat.”

“Don’t tell me that. You do. William, with all the bullshit surrounding us, you know how. Many of these crooked paths lead to you and to Portia. You are the only person with an honest reason to not be stuck in all this shit, you knew that years ago, you knew that with Albert, you know it now. You told me that people would be willing to tell me things to get me to question you. Fix it. Fix it, Will. And don’t die doing it.” Her boldness returned in the quiet of the kitchen. Every bit of her radiated with a ferocity that drew him toward her. “Now you need to get to a hospital again before your face explodes. Let’s go.”

# Chapter Thirty

DAWN WAS BREAKING. HOURS HAD passed without hearing a word from Gwenn’s captors as William dozed off, medicated in the passenger’s seat. A sleepless night ending with the hues of morning painting across the Arizona Sky, a pink ribbon strewn below the darkness. Patricia stared ahead toward the rising sun, looking for a bit of hope, any brightness that spoke differently to what was quickly brewing. Had it all been inevitable, the moment before her, the sunrise quickly gained a new meaning.

She had tried to move forward from the darkness experienced, the fire, the years in hiding from a father she was told had wanted her eradicated, a building plot against what? Who? How many had her father plotted for and against over the years and what did Russell Marin have to do with it all?

“Will,” she spoke.

“What?!” he abruptly said, moving with animated hand movements in the comfort of the seat.

“It’s okay. God, Will.”

He looked about like a stupefied drunkard, completely in need of a moment of recuperation. He had almost immediately fallen to sleep once he’d buckled the seat belt having obediently taken the oval pill brought to him by the nurse in the emergency room tidily resting at the bottom of a paper cup. “Are we home?”

“Almost. Sorry, I woke you, but it’s bothering me. Tell me about Russell.”

“Russell. He’s serving himself, has his own mission.” William looked at her with his head leaning against the headrest. The left side of his face was still badly swollen with his eye barely able to claim usefulness. He took the beatings, the abuses of others with an education she was not willing to experience. She knew William had learned something valuable from the man who had colorized his face and he had been processing that experience since he had landed in Phoenix to the moment, she had asked the question of Russell. She saw how his mind was always busy, only calmed in silent moments, true silence. She’d seen it when he created beautiful masses of lines against paper, shades, and shapes twisted into imaginative places and people. Unknown to her if some of them were from memory or a combined creation of myth and reality, Patricia found beauty in everything he created. The kind of beauty that pulsed within, a knowingness, why she loved him the way she did.

 “I should have never been there, a ratty old factory in Mexicali, some cover-up for Miguel. They didn’t give a rat’s ass about me, never did. I think he loved her, Pat. I think he loved them. That’s why I’m so scared for Gwenn. It’s a personal vendetta against a person who also offers something more. I’ve got to find her.”

Patricia slowly processed his words. Loved her. Loved them. Then her heart sped up with the understanding of what he had just admitted. “Oh my God, Will.” William had lowered his head, his chin nearly touching his chest with a heavy sadness.

“You had every right to tell me to leave. I understand. I hate it, but I understand.”

“I’m here because I love you, Will, and because I believe in you.”

 William had reached over to the middle section of the car with his available right hand and began scrolling through his phone. She pulled casually onto their street, a few early morning risers taking their run down the sidewalk before the desert showed its true colors, the heat starting to peak its mannerisms in forms of sporadic breezes, kisses sent through hidden channels.

“Mac is on his way; he’s driving back in my car,” William said. “I don’t like how Russell hasn’t contacted anyone. He’s toying with us.”

“You think he’s got her, too?”

“No doubt about that. I don’t know, Pat. This doesn’t feel right. I’ve got a sickening feeling that I can’t get rid of. He’s using Gwenn to taunt. God knows what Garrett told him. There’s stuff I don’t remember. Holes. Some deeper, darker than others. She was aiming for Allen, and I reacted. Then I don’t know. I screwed up.”

“You saved Allen. That wasn’t a screw-up. They couldn’t save the baby?”

“I wouldn’t have fired had I known she was pregnant. I didn’t know.”

Patricia had revisited the event in the parking lot to the club a few weeks before, Russell’s meditated distractions and sadistic satisfaction at seeing William’s blood on his fingertips. There had been meaning to what he studied in that brief, yet haunting moment in the shadows in the presence of the lined pavement. It was as if the poison that dwelled within William had suddenly been handed over to Russell’s command, his possession admitting that he knew more to William than ever admitted. What more did he know?

“Gwenn needs medication. She took it yesterday?”

“Yes,” she responded. New subject matters continued to build, new concerns before the other were even resolved. He remained unfocused and pulled. What others wanted he struggled with. What others saw as a potentially profitable venture, he fought with each day. What lurked inside determined his mood, it forced lies and the insisted solitude she could not breakthrough.

“I found out that Gwenn isn’t like me. She was born a healthy baby girl. Albert gave her Diablo.”

“Gave her…what, what does that mean for her?”

“Diablo is an aggressive variant that’s killing people. It means she can die from it. She could die, Pat.”

Patricia felt a rush of anxiousness as she powered off the car, sitting still in the driveway. The missing voices of Alex, Lisa, and Gwenn, a new saddened reality.

“They felt it right to force another’s essence from them, the very bit that makes us who we are. I never thought of having children, mainly because of what I deal with and what I’ve done. They forced us together. I never asked you how you felt about that, and I would never wish to undo what’s been done because I love her to death. But the memories that will never become ours, hearing her heartbeat for the first time, watching her grow inside of you. It was all stolen. Then an asshole tries to steal her life by giving her Diablo and Russell steals her to make a point to her father.”

The honesty was raw and tormenting as they sat in the confines of the vehicle. They had never said anything about the evils played against them, never spoke to her father’s wickedness that had taken a new level of atrocities performed against others which created fateful determinations, unknown avenues. James Evans had been a stranger to her, a stranger who showed no empathy, who had never treated her as a daughter, but more like a number, a subject that he would use for his own needs. He allowed others to prod at her, yell at her, steal from her. The fact that the cruelty was not solely belonging to her but to William as well had always been obvious, given his personality, but stifled by Will who openly continued to share in a frustrated outpour.

“My whole life has been under someone else’s heavy, nasty, controlling thumb. I killed his family, to save a guy who screwed me in the first place and just recently wanted to screw me again, leaving me face down in the dust in a Mexican alley. I just want to give them what they want. Fuck it. Let the world burn.”

“And what about us? What about you? We all die if you do give it to them.”

He sat in silence. She sat with her eyes unwavering from his direction. Christine was right.

The sun had begun to spread its dominance in the western sky. The dashboard was painted with light, the same glow slowly hitting William’s injured face. They were still without contact and subject to their own planning. He had hinted a few matters of concern one she had to speak to before they continued onto their day.

“Will, about forcing us together, if I had a choice and if it meant having the chance to bring Gwenn into the world myself, I would have done so. I can’t think of another man I’d share the honor and joy with besides you. I shouldn’t have asked you to leave. I really love you, all of you. I can’t be without you. I don’t want to be without you. And I know William, you can get us through this. You’ve never broken a promise.”

His separation from all else persisted. As the morning sun slowly rose, she saw a ferocity battling for power in his stare toward nowhere past the windshield, a purposeful, driven bite encouraged by something none of the other bastards trying so diligently to destroy lives purposely had.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“You’re welcome, Will.”

# Chapter Thirty-One

HE’D FALLEN RIGHT INTO SLUMBER once he laid on the bed in their home, the niceties of familiarity contributing to the moment. A combination of Patricia’s scent against the sheets and the medication helped to lull him to dreamland. His body wouldn’t have it any other way. He had not remembered if he had fallen asleep in socks and sweats, had doubts that he did but that is what he had awakened wearing, the smell of coffee right at the backside of his nose, a deep pull of air with a fragrant aroma. For a moment, it all seemed normal, then he felt a throb in his hand and the churning returned to his stomach, remembering that his daughter was still gone.

Over the years, he’d seen Russell perhaps twice before the Mexicali fiasco. William kept seeing Russell’s face as he ran toward the woman, holding her in his arms, shouting profanities at others around him just before glaring back at him. Then there was a ghostly haze, the urgency he felt like his body was giving up on the relationship with his mind. Then darkness, or brightness or something in between took over everything about him. Lacking control. He hated those incidents. He hated fighting what raged inside, finding that all his attempts at trying to control it had failed miserably. How was he to help Gwenn, except getting her what she ultimately needed?

“I love you too, sweetheart. Be good to Auntie Chris,” Patricia said into her cell phone at the kitchen table. William leaned over to deliver a kiss to the top of her head, getting a sad smile to rise and fall against her face.

“I reached out to the detective. Still no updates.”

“You think Russell would give any clues to anyone?”

“You’re right. Have a seat. You probably need to eat something.”

“I can’t eat,” he said plopping himself into a kitchen chair with a cup of coffee in his hand.

“Me either.” They sat silently, the hum from the refrigerator the only background noise as he softly touched her hand in a supportive, loving reach. Her face wore weariness, a slight puff beneath her eyelids, and the dark areas surrounding her usually excitable doe-like eyes. She tightly clung to a piece of tissue in her left hand.

“Where the hell is Garrett?” William asked.

“Christine said he’s freaking out about all of this. He won’t leave his place.”

“I guess I know where I’m going once Mac gets here. Have you gotten any rest?”

“I tried. I slept a couple hours. That’s it.”

The doorbell sounded.

Every bit of normal was far from the notion. William looked at Patricia who slipped the same weapon she had met him with from a jar marked sugar. He looked at her with a quizzical look.

“What? I was the only one here and it fit.”

William walked down the hall still in his leisurely dark sweats and bright white socks thanks to Pat to the door. He saw it was Mac.

“Hey man. Thanks for driving all this way. You didn’t have to.”

“No problem. I was just hoping your tags were good. Didn’t want to be pulled over with what I had in the trunk. Wanted to warn you before I opened your garage door and you greeted me with what she’s got.”

William peaked over at Patricia, who still handled the gun.

“Hey, Mac. A tough couple of days,” she said.

“Yeah. I figured. Will, your father came back with me. Couldn’t stop him. He drove me nuts. He talks way too much when he’s drunk. He’s sobered up now that we stopped for tacos.”

Mac left the porch back to the vehicle parked in the driveway as Hunter passed before him, a Styrofoam cup with a black straw in his hand. He pursed his lips and concentrated on what he was obviously enjoying as he neared the front porch. “God this is good,” he said. “Guava juice. Want some?” Hunter asked, shaking the cup, the ice bringing notice to the lack of liquid.

“No. Why are you here?”

“It’s the other side of your face now. What did you do to them?”

“I shot him. I asked you a question.”

“I wanted to apologize, then offer my genuine help. Mac told me about Gwenn.”

Genuine help. Since the first moment his father had admitted to who he was, the resistance pulsed with a wanting need for family like any average person would experience and the desire to strangle Hunter, like a person he no longer wanted to be. Anger was more prominent to a confused teenager who felt that he belonged nowhere just as much as an adult who had been given incremental morsels of a covert attempt to convince him to disclose information too dangerous to share with another wanting ear.

William was tired of his antics and had been long before Hunter came slurping the last remnants of a sugary punch on his porch. His audacity was nauseating.

“This is it with you. I don’t need your distractions or self-driven prospects here to help me. Just…why can’t you…” William felt the frustration begin to build from a hidden pocket buried, deep, and overlooked. Never forgotten, simply overlooked by other barriers. He needed him to be what he never had been, but what he needed so badly. “Patricia is scared. I’m scared. I feel like shit and can’t say anything about it and my daughter is being held captive by a man who wants to kill me. Why can’t you just be my father? Not some conniving shit who wants to fuck me over like everyone else.”

Hunter looked at him, looked away, and looked at him again, as if he had processed William’s words so that they not only stuck but pinched, stung a little right where they needed to, where his short remarks in various discussions had never held notice.

“I’m so sorry. Will, I made some poor decisions. You probably won’t believe my pleas at this rate, but I had the realization that Gwenn is my granddaughter. Not a connection, or someone not affecting me, but my actual grandkid. She’s in trouble and you really need real help. Let me start over.”

“Honestly I…”

“I’m being honest here, Eric. You’re my son. I should have treated you that way.”

William silently contemplated as Hunter waited patiently for a response or reaction. There was no slurping from his cup, only a newly displayed vulnerability he’d never noticed before.

“Did she take you back?”

“Dad…”

“...If you marry Pat, then the other two little boogers will be my grandkids too. I’d get three almost instantly. You are going to do that? I mean she’s gorgeous and God she can cook, fed me like I was the President.”

“Dad…”

“…Sorry. She’s not there,” he smiled. “I promise, Will. Let me start over.”

William stepped aside and watched as Hunter walked past him. “Put a ring on her finger,” Hunter reminded just before William made his way to the garage where Mac waited patiently.

He was hesitant about learning what Mac had driven miles over state lines with stowed in his trunk that caused concern. The bright glow of the fluorescent lights from the overhead portion of the garage created an optical illusion with the colors of Mac’s blue polo shirt and a painful ping in his head. The top seemed to glow at shoulder level as he leaned against the driver’s side door.

“What are you doing out here? You’re welcome to come inside Mac, you’re family.”

“I’m nervous, I didn't want to leave anything.”

The look on Mac’s face spoke more than anything he even needed. William moved to the back of the Highlander and opened the trunk. There on the spacious interior of the vehicle sat a black duffle bag. With a building hesitancy, William unzipped the bag and peered inside. Many clear vials marked Diablo handwritten with permanent marker rested in the bag, too many to count, too many to guess in number.

“Shit. I thought you guys were destroying what was there. Not commandeering it.”

“You weren’t too clear about that. I didn’t know if I’d get sick from this shit if I tried anything either. You said it was a virus.”

William continued to stare at the vials, trying to think about what to do next. Fix it. He heard Patricia say. Fix it. Diablo was right in his garage. If others wanted what he had before, it was about to get worse. Much worse.

# Chapter Thirty-Two

“GARRETT, OPEN THE DOOR,” WILLIAM started. He landed five forceful knocks once again against the black door to the condo attached to another twin structure. William refused to move his Highlander from the garage with the contents in the trunk. He had no idea if the vials had an active agent or if all the little demons were floating lifelessly in their own excrement. He’d dropped Mac off at the airport, feeling compelled to do something for him in return for all he had done, while his father Hunter stayed behind with Patricia. “Garrett! It’s Will. Open the door!”

“Geeze. You want to wake up the old couple across the street?” Garrett finally spoke from the doorway, quickly peaking around William before ushering him inside.

He hadn’t spent too much before in Garrett’s home before, but he could tell that Christine had practically already moved in, from the beaded throw pillows on the couch and vases filled with peacock feathers, and warm orange and yellow painting reading one of her favorite motivational quotes she’d often repeated in his presence, as if a lesson she’d wanted him to memorize with weighted consideration, Live in the Now. That rested next to an eight by eleven sized picture of both she and Garrett with their faces pressed tightly together like a two-headed creature in a frame.

“Man, I thought the black eye was bad. What are you doing here?” Garrett asked.

“Really? You know why I’m here. I need to find Russell.”

“He has Gwenn?”

“There’s no doubt in my mind.”

Garrett seemed to struggle with the direction he could take. William watched him with a new status, that as an enemy with valuable information he desperately needed. There were no more affable moments between them. Garrett had added himself to William’s list of never to be trusted in a thousand years even if they came crawling backlist of individuals rapidly filling up with names and histories. His former pal looked obviously lost amid the shuffle of events over the last forty-eight hours, unable to look William in his face with a bit of honesty. Even though William had considered many of his decisions over time to have been cause for labeling it an error, a huge error, the decision had been derived with weight. At times, those bad decisions were his only option outside of meeting his ancestors in the ethereal. But Garrett’s decision to team up with Russell when he was as squishy as folks came made William realize just how desperate Rochelle had been to have her way. Had she wanted William to have her stash of Diablo from the very beginning?

Just thinking of the peacock feathers in the tall, rustic vases made Will frown, think about the best way to move forward, the best way to get to Gwenn without any harm rendered.

“What did he say to you?” asked William.

“I haven’t talked to him. He’s called several times like a compulsive mad man right before Gwenn disappeared.”

“Exactly what was he expecting you to do for him?”

Garrett averted his glance, a sudden heaviness on his face, his stature and presence compromised, so much he could no longer talk directly to William, only to the rug on the floor with its dark brown crescents running every which way.

“Will, I don’t know what would have happened had you not been in that emergency room. You stepped in for me and didn’t even know me. I remembered that and I still listened to a woman I had no idea about and talked to Russell when he talked out loud about some sick thing he called a peel. The guy was screaming in the background. I should have backed out, been honest. I’m sorry. He thinks I can get something out of you.

“He told me about how you killed a guy and don’t remember when you were a kid. He was pretty graphic, almost like he had been there.”

Blotches of time and place where he barely felt connection surfaced. How else would Russell know? A history where Russell had no supposed connection, yet he had been successful in dishing up more to build a case, build justification for his need to use Garrett.

“I can’t remember that. I’ve tried but it's like I get kicked out of my own memory.”

“Functional amnesia. You really don’t recall what happened, huh? But you remember what he wants?”

Darkness. He felt heat on his face and cold against his bare skin as a sharp pain raced through his skull and the surface of his skin only to fade for a minute then return. They were laughing in his turmoil, making light of his suffering. He saw Connor’s face, the others called him Piper for some stupid reason he was never keen on hovering above him, a wide smile planted on his pink face. Then the words uttered began to vanish and the faces became distorted, dark and a nothingness, no memory, as if he conveniently passed through a time allowance spoken of only in sci-fi movies with giant spaceships carrying interplanetary cohesiveness in the form of cooperative existences. Oddly enough, there was some satisfaction to his having no recollection of pulling the trigger.

William remained silent, the thoughts all selfishly creating nightmares for only him to witness, and made his way to Garrett’s couch, never offered to him as decent hosts would. He had to make Russell think he was in control, make him think that he was willing to give him Vixen, anything to get Gwenn to safety. There was no telling if he would move forward with hurting her, or even worse.

“Garrett, you need to hand me over to Russell. Convince him that you got me to comply.”

Hesitancy quickly created a reaction on Garrett’s face, as if he suddenly took a bite of something sour. “I don’t know, what if he catches on?”

“You have to convince him.” William had been dealing with a building hesitancy, trying hard to find the best route as circumstances kept darkening. The color was rapidly fading, from his familiarity. “A lot of bad happened years ago. Something that I can’t take back. God, I wish I could. Anything I do with Russell has consequences. I can’t be the person in control with him. Not right now. If I am, I think he’ll be openly willing to kill Gwenn, but not until I can see him do it. I can’t deal with those circumstances.” Thinking of losing his child due to instances directly linked to a teenage boy stuck in a no-win situation made him nauseous.

Garrett had crossed past the lane of comfort, long before William’s admissions, steering wildly into the wrong lane where he knew very little about the rules of engagement. William could see the anxiousness building. But it was likely his only option.

“I’ll do it. I’ll call him. I think I can do it. Yeah, I know what to say.”

He watched as Garrett mentally prepared with a deep breath, a few of them, armed with a concentrated awareness of self, a complete separation from William. He felt the pull once Garrett pulled out his device and scrolled through the screen. Then came the pacing, just as William’s stomach tightened in a raucous pull. Any minute he would confirm if Russell had Gwenn; if she was alive, if she was dead. Garrett started his conversation with Gwenn’s presumed captor. The pacing continued, just like the conversation, back and forth in the area before William.

“He came by trying to bust down my door like I was the person who took her. He’ll do anything to get her back. So, I’ve got him, kind of.”

“What the hell, man? You either do or you don’t,” Russell spoke.

“He’s in my kitchen right now. I’m trying to carefully get you what you want, but he won’t give me anything more until he knows where his kid is.”

He sounded out of place, the pacing acting as his temporary pulse, the rhythmic connection that kept him right where he needed to be for the call that reminded Will of the first moment of suspicion loudly taking place on his front lawn.

“Well, tell him then.”

“I don’t know where she is. Look, I’m as close as I can get. I can probably get more if you tell me what you want. I came through, on time.”

“You didn’t answer my phone calls, Garrett. I thought you forgot about me.” William carefully listened, as the conversation shifted. What if he suspected something? William started to speak when he heard Russell’s response again. “I’ll meet you, both of you. Bring him to me.”

“Wait, his kid. Do you know where she is? He won’t budge if he doesn’t know.”

William listened as Gwenn’s voice finally sounded through the speaker of the cell phone. The tears started at the corner of his eyes, the movement back and forth as he heard her missed presence delivered with questions unanswered. He wanted to say something, tell her he would keep his promise, but he couldn’t. “Dad?” she asked. “Dad?” she said again. William breathed, heavy pants of breaths as a tear rolled down his face. Still unable to say anything when all he wanted to do was comfort her, a victim of his own sins. Her voice stopped and slowly became flooded with tears. William stood in response, the biting anger beginning to distract his movements.

Vengeful foes forcefully involving a child, completely innocent to her father’s mistakes. He’d promised her to change the ways already in place, to remove the borders of the twisted existence she had endured for her whole introductory period of her life. William had gone from having no one to having someone need him for reasons much more meaningful and valuable than a man-made disaster fallen into vengeful hands, much more than bad deals. He’d finally found meaning with Patricia, with them, a reality once unfamiliar. There in the small space of Garrett’s living space, surrounded by the series of motivational sayings in the forms of artwork against the walls, desperation rapidly becoming a part of his decision making and a pain quickly radiating from his back to his side, the weight of having Vixen as part of his everyday existence was not as heavy as the weight of getting back his daughter, without Russell putting his claws on her.

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Gwenn studied the black and white board between them. It had been a full five minutes, enough time for a microwaveable popcorn bag to be done.

“Ah-ah, remember, the knight doesn’t move that way,” William said as he slowly sat down at the small table in the kitchen of his apartment. In just a few weeks of domestic changes, William was in the process of teaching Gwenn how to play Chess. He’d enjoyed every minute of being a guide.

“Oh yeah, like this?” Gwenn asked. She captured one of his pieces with her move.

“Just like that,” William answered with a proud smile.

In the few weeks together, he wondered how much more he could absorb. Every day was something more, different. Gwenn was never shy about asking questions, never held back, and had started to realize very quickly how many times William was quite the opposite. They had never spoken of the circumstances that had brought them to the point of suddenly forming a father and daughter relationship, even as William slowly came to terms with watching the large scar in the middle of his chest and the mark of a yoyo with a thick string to the left of his belly button, a mark Gwenn had given him herself slowly darken over time.

Gwenn stuck her hand without thought of generosity into the bowl of warm popcorn and pulled out an indulgent handful. A few of the kernels clumsily landed on the table, the floor, and the Chessboard.

“Your turn,” she spoke, barely understandable from the kernels still puffing her cheeks. Even though he had suddenly come to learn of the child before him, each new realization hit him with intensity and at a leveled pace.

“How was school?”

“Oh, some ugly girl hates me and kept bothering me during P.E.”

“Ugly? Did you call her that?”

“No. Anyone who acts like that is ugly. I came this close to pushing her face-first into a pole on the basketball court,” Gwenn kept her fingers pinched before her face.

“Maybe your mom can talk to the counselor there.”

“Why not you?” Negotiation was not his forte.

“She’s better at talking to people. Much better than I am.”

Gwenn smiled and looked at the board for a moment, before beginning another conversation. “Why Chess? Miami Zombie Force is a fun game. Most of the kids at school are playing it. I’d kill Brandon Watts, this kid at school ten times over.”

He flinched a little, recalling Gwenn’s composure as she fired a bullet into him. Too real, too much violence, too bad for Gwenn. “No Gwenn, Chess is quiet. I can watch you think.” She studied the board again, not for her next move, he could tell, her eye’s shifted upwards as if studying a daydream. Then she took a whole hand of popcorn from the bowl, only to meticulously pick one piece at a time to chew, leaning into the back of the chair, studying him. Her sparkling brown eyes spoke to him, a hint of curiosity and exploration swaying in a rhythmic dance.He reacted with a straightened spine and a connective glance, realizing that he was looking at his own stare, only mocha.

“Secret or Question,” Gwenn asked.

“What? What do you mean?”

“It’s like a game. I made it up. You tell me a secret, or I get to ask you a question. You have to be honest with your answer.”

William finally helped himself to some of the popcorn next to the Chessboard. “Alright. You start.”

“Okay then, question. Do you like me being here with you?”

Did he like her being there? He smiled slightly, making sure to not make direct eye contact as he carefully thought out what to say. Discomforts of a person never spoken of who suddenly was introduced in dire circumstances but who expressed her radiating bits of being, her humor, the joy she brought her mother, Lisa, and Alex, were valid, warranted, and far from William’s reality. He saw Patricia in her. He saw himself in her. He would never take back his promises to her.

“Do I like you being here with me? Gwenn, you never stop surprising me, never. I love seeing you every day. I love knowing that I have a beautiful, smart, quirky little girl who looks a lot like me,” he said and smiled. “I love having you here. So does your mom.”

He watched as an awkward smile stretched upon Gwenn’s face. She smiled his smile with her mom’s lips. His reaction was out of his control as he responded with a full grin, one that triggered a lifted pull of the curtain, revealing his teeth, something he hardly ever did, only in the presence of those he valued and in the safety of sheltered honesty.

“Secret,” William said. He reached again for a bit of popcorn in the bowl, finding much of it gone, the straggling bits of un-popped kernels laying behind instead. Gwenn could eat, had no problem packing it down.

“I don’t like being alone. I did a lot of that with Mr. Wright. It’s nice to wake up and see you every day.” She smiled. “I like seeing mom after school and Alex and Lisa. Lisa is always asking me questions and I like answering her. Even though this is all still new, it feels good. I don’t feel alone anymore and I don’t feel like one day, you’ll leave me.”

“I’d never leave you. Never. You understand that? I’ll always be there for you.” Gwenn smiled; her eyes filled with tears which she quickly wiped away from her face.

“So, which way does the guy with the wizard’s hat move again?”

“You mean the bishop?” William moved a piece as an example to Gwenn, both trying to distract one another from the emotional moment. Gwenn’s secret or question bit had William beginning to consider other factors at first not visited. Secrets unsaid. He thought of how Patricia made him feel, how much he loved her and hated being without her only to ricochet from an internal wall built from his own guilt.

“Awesome! My bishop just ate your little castle!” Laughter was his only response shared with his daughter. Her comical expressions ingrained themselves as a permanent memory in the cool of late winter. His apartment was tucked in the busyness of a Los Angeles neighborhood, sharing a thin wall with a family of five on one side and a single thirty-five-year-old woman who could not find the right companion for more than three weeks at a time on the other side, the meat or cheese of a perfectly dysfunctional existence altogether. He reflected on the simple moment, just before there was a knock on his door.

“Ooh, that’s mom. She said she was making dinner. Sorry. I’m tired of your boxed pancakes and undercooked pasta.”

“Your mom spoiled you pretty quickly. Why are you complaining anyway? You fed me raw chicken.”

“Undercooked!” Gwenn responded just as William opened the door.

“Hello beautiful,” he said, welcoming Patricia who pushed two full bags of groceries into his arms.

“How are you feeling?” she asked as she made her way to the kitchen. Cooking had never been one of his qualities to share. William had gone through the act of purchasing additional cook tools for Patricia during her stays from glass bowls and metal measuring cups and something called a spatula.

“I’m fine. Gwenn and I were just playing Chess. All of this for dinner?” William asked.

“You barely buy eggs and milk. I told you two I was making dinner. I didn’t want to start and need to leave again for the store.”

“Understood,” he said, kissing Patricia gently on her forehead.

“Booooomaaabaaa!” alerted Gwenn from the living room area. William listened as he heard laughter erupt from Lisa and Alex.

“What was that?” asked Pat.

“Nothing. Just Gwenn being herself. A little quirky.”

#  Chapter Thirty-Three

HUNTER HAD BEEN SITTING AT her kitchen table exactly as he had done sometime before. Patricia had come to know him a tad more during his kitchen conversations. He played with unyielding confidence when he suffered from genuine discomfort, there was always some unsaid. Like William, he told stories unspoken to the willing ear with his eyes, the green waving like the tops of forest clumps swaying to nature’s rhythm. Much to him lingered in the unspoken. Patricia set a plate with hash browns, eggs, and two slices of bacon before him, then set herself right across from him with her third cup of coffee for the morning.

“Will is really lucky. He eats this way every day?”

“You asked that a few weeks ago.”

“You’re right. I did. Didn’t change my mind. Thanks for breakfast,” Hunter happily scooped a bit of the runny yellow of the egg into the potato and scooped it into his mouth. “Tina, Will’s mom would make sunny-side-up eggs for me. Never quite did it right, but I ate it anyway. It was the thought.”

“Where is she? William never talks about her.”

Hunter looked upward, toward the ceiling. Patricia’s face softened as she realized that she was in a place beyond the confines of the natural. The reality of her essence danced near Hunter as he seemed to remember her, Tina’s presence in the then, her recollections welcomed and sweet to him in the solitude of the kitchen.

“They killed her. I found her dead, William and his brother were gone by the time they were four. She suffered from the same thing William does, that virus. When we saw a problem with our boys, I got scared, ran back to your father. Then he turned around and thanked me. Did Will tell you about Gwenn?”

She nodded.

“That’s what Albert was trying to see in Gwenn, control a person born with their shit, like your father did. But that didn’t happen.”

“So, he made it happen with Diablo?”

Hunter lingered for a moment, his fork raised above his plate as if in a motionless abolition of time and movement, stopping his long bites and animated chews, glanced at Patricia, a look of unadulterated honesty, realism unlike any other moment shared between them. She saw pieces of William in his father, his jaw and nose, even his long fingers. The relation was obvious to her, more so with each visit saturated with admissions never heard. Then he returned to his breakfast in quick bursts of bites as memories spoken lingered as a new presence.

“Asshole. It wasn’t fair what they did to you or to Will, how Gwenn came to be. I saw her once when she was probably five or six years old, had a missing tooth. I looked at her and honestly thought I saw my sons there in that little radiant face. I didn’t say anything to Albert. I didn’t ask. Then he turned around and barked at her. I dismissed it as me still trying to cope with what I had missed, what I failed at being. Then I found out the truth about her a few years later.”

She had watched a backward and forward-moving relationship between William and Hunter, an odd push from Hunter and resistance from William. Breaking down walls had been a factor, especially when they both continued to add more bricks. Gwenn’s capture had caused a downpour of unspoken admissions, which had been impregnated in ominous storm clouds, the rains starting to heavily flood. Hunter had finished his breakfast, only a tiny bit of yellow remaining on the red plate, and moved on to his coffee.

“I haven’t been the best father to Will, to either one of them. Far from what he’s turning out to be to Gwenn. I ran from the danger, lost my kids doing so. He’s out right now, running right into the fire.”

He looked at her for a moment again. She returned the glance, wondering what he was going to say next. Hunter was always full of randomized thoughts, thoughts he didn’t try to consider how they landed, in the stomach, in the head, or dead in the chest. With the emotional weight of missing Gwenn and the next moves yet to be finalized, Hunter’s rambling was somewhat therapeutic to her, but mostly to him.

“You love him, don’t you? I can tell he loves you, the way a man does for a woman he’d suffer for, I see it. Is everything alright with you two?”

Patricia nodded her head, her focus steered to the last bit of coffee at the bottom of her mug. She admitted to herself of the fear that had etched itself into her thoughts, the fear that Christine so blatantly pointed out in the quiet of her kitchen.

Patricia claimed to have loved another man before, but it faded. She claimed to have loved Shawn, gave him two beautiful children, but the cold loveless kisses never faded from her memory. She hadn’t truly loved another until William, and it was this realization that frightened her more and more when she looked into his eyes, when she thought of what was never said when he told her that he was protecting her. It was true, he had been protecting her, but on a much deeper level. That connection was what she feared and why she had wanted him to leave. She couldn’t see what he asked if she saw, of what she wanted so badly to see. It had never been there, never would be.

With her child missing and William on a quest to find her, she dreaded the possibility that she would not be able to see what was really in his gaze ever again. Patricia silently dropped her head, stared at the empty coffee cup, felt the tears cool her face, the dense plunk hit the tabletop.

“Hey, I think I defeated the point by talking. Don’t worry about him. Will is stubborn. That’s the only thing he got from me. I’m sure he’s got a plan.”

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“I don’t have a plan here.”

“I thought you did. You had me call Russell and put on an act. This is your area, not mine,” Garrett answered.

Both Garrett and William had left Garrett’s condo with a heavy hesitancy following Russell’s agreement to meet. The day was already nearing a changeover to late afternoon, the whole morning forgotten.

She cried. William couldn’t get the sound of Gwenn’s desperation from his thoughts, he kept seeing her facing what she feared in the incongruity of circumstances and place. William tried with aching anguish to put steps in place in his thoughts, pattern together possibilities and worse case scenarios. Garrett was as useless as a lost traveler speaking a foreign language offering directions, even admitting his position for a third time without William’s prompting. For months, Garrett had dismissed the possibilities during his negotiation with Rochelle and impromptu conversations with Russell, forgetting that every action would result in a conclusion. William didn’t want to hear of his excuses, it knotted his stomach even more. He was focused on three problems, Russell holding his daughter hostage, Russell’s knowing how to find Patricia, and Russell’s determination to end his life. The list was pretty shitty. Garrett’s complaints were trivial. The discomfort of it all had forced Will to see a dark tunnel before him, the light ahead growing dimmer and dimmer with each passing minute.

William tightly closed his eyes and leaned forward with his uninjured hand against his head, the stress of the situation triggering a reaction from his body, a faltering battle with what controlled his wellbeing finding the wrong moment to make a point.

“You don’t look good. Just make sure you heave outside the window.”

William ignored Garrett, took a deep breath, and pressed his cell phone to his ear, anticipating hearing Patricia’s voice.

“Will? What’s going on?”

“He’s got her. I’m on my way to meet him with Garrett. Pat, I don’t know what is going to happen. These things can end badly, you know that. I’m getting her home to you. When she’s there, you and the kids leave, don’t let him find you. It’s not safe there.” William watched as Garrett steered into a street leading to a wide dusty area under development, a multi-level parking structure ahead. “Listen closely to me, bury it here.”

“Will, I told you not to die. I don’t like how you sound right now. Bury what?”

“You’ll see. Pat if all I can do is get her back, that’s what I’ll do. Vixen ends with me, at least with your father and his mess, you know that. I love you so much. I have to go.”

“I love you too, Will. Please come back, we need you, you promised.”

William stared at his phone in his hand, wishing he could see her, the anxiousness of the unknown causing drumming in his ears.

“He’s not going to let her go,” William admitted. “It’s too easy. Wait, stop the car.”

Garrett pulled over obediently and stared at William, waiting for the next command. William studied Garrett’s face for a moment. He never noticed the light brown freckles on the bridge of his nose, only the ones on his cheeks, two linear traffic jams of jumbled spots. He was a creamy complexion, sort of like a sugar cookie with a hint of brown from the oven’s bake. William had only a few minutes to bruise it. He swung and hit Garrett on his freckles, then his nose.

“What the hell are you doing?!” Garrett yelled. He put his left hand under his nose that had started to snot red.

“Trying to make this believable. I’d never sit willingly with a person who is turning me over to someone worse. Would you?”

“Are you out of your mind, Will? I’ve never been hit in the face before.”

“Don’t say to anyone I never gave you anything. You need to keep up the act. I need to get Gwenn back with you. You convinced me to cooperate. I’m not your friend, remember that.”

“Geeze, Will. How do you swing if you’re provoked?”

“Harder.”

In the distance, William could make out a black vehicle, parked all alone, its singular presence menacing. Thoughts started again to ping from place-to-place in his mind, a jumbled mess of what-ifs and regrets. Having Garrett there offered no sense of relief. He saw him from the corner of his eye, watching as Garrett still touched his nose after being struck. William tried to think ahead. Still, the negative conclusions in his mind continued to plague, only resulting in a massive wave of remorse. It affected him enough to get Garrett to respond, taking notice of his obvious moment of struggle.

“Are you ready?”

“Wait. I’ve gone into danger several times, met with bad folks, but this feels more ominous than anything I ever encountered. Garrett, Russell might kill me. You made a mistake. I’ve made dozens of those, and I still heard words of forgiveness from Patricia. The thing about mistakes is that we can find the wherewithal to forgive. In case I never get the chance to tell you, I forgive you. If I end up hitting you again, it’s to protect you, alright?”

“Not my face, please. Not again.”

Having nothing to say to his pleads, William chuckled a little in response to Garrett. With all the drama surrounding them, all he wanted was for William to not put another developing bruise on his freckled face. There was more he wanted to say, his admissions teetering on the edge of his own finality, but they were words for another, words he would probably never say to her.

Garrett slowed his Audi to a stop a distance from the parked car, just as the two doors opened.

“Whatever happens, keep up the act. Follow that car if it moves until you have Gwenn.”

“What if he stops somewhere?”

“I’m going to get her to you if nothing else. Just get her back to Pat.” William touched the backside of his shirt, covering his weapon, laying flush against him as he stared ahead, his eyes failing to waver from the two men who leaned casually against the vehicle. Still no sign of Gwenn, Garrett still pasty and nervous beside him, his death feeling more and more inevitable.

“Please tell Pat that I love her. Tell Gwenn, I’m sorry.”

Garrett exited the vehicle with an extra bit of dominance rising from the car, moving to William’s door. William stepped out just in time to find Garrett already there, continuing the act as instructed, a hand extended to him, which William pushed off in a costumed angered push like an actor taking the right mark per the director’s instructions.

“Get out, c’mon,” Garrett commanded.

“Don’t put your damn hands on me!” William reacted. “Put your hands on me again, I dare you!” William tried to view Russell, who remained stoic at first. Then the glance upon his face slowly activated into a bout of sadistic satisfaction. He moved his tall, slender figure into a stance with his feet planted, his neatly groomed almond-colored face leaning upwards in a bout of pride, just as William came closer to the parked vehicle. A guy with a neatly combed ponytail stood nearby, another unfamiliar connection to the madness of Evans, the greed of others. Where was Gwenn?

“Here you go. The most covert piece of shit I’ve ever known. Three days. Leave me alone now, Russell.” William flinched a little as Garrett pushed him toward Russell. Had it been an act from Garrett, or had it been what he really meant? The months of his deceit toward him had been played with such vigor and distraction, his connection with Christine, his fun and energetic moments spent with the kids. Garrett had started to feel like a friend, an actual dependable, trustworthy person he found allegiance with. It felt so contrary there in the parking lot, even though it was a so-called act. William saw Russell move his hand toward his side, what if he killed Garrett? Another Shawn?

Suddenly, William pushed Garrett to the ground, a moment of hesitancy striking him as he reached over him and grabbed him by the collar, lifting his upper half from the pavement, waiting for an interaction from Russell who continued to watch. Garrett was genuinely afraid, grabbing William’s wrists as a means of escape, protection from the potential blows, or something else. William searched wildly around Garrett, finally softening his glance for only Garrett right before he forcefully pushed his right shoulder with force into the pavement.

“We don’t have time for this,” William heard the nameless man speak. Then William felt his tug. “C’mon. Let’s go. Russell is waiting for you.” He heard himself utter an involuntary grunt as his physical issues slowly possessed, he felt his breaths quicken, his lower half tighten as he tried desperately to show no reaction. He couldn’t help it when he closed his eyes, took a deep breath. The stranger stared at him.

“My daughter, where is she?” William forced.

“Back seat.”

“Let her go. You’ve got me.”

“Talk to Russell,” the guy said as he pushed him toward the vehicle. William peaked backward to find Garrett slowly pulling himself to a seated position, pain on his face, and Russell holding a silver gun.

“You got your ass kicked enough Garrett. Fuck off.” Russell shouted as he returned to the vehicle. He leaned into William’s chest with his free hand. “Felix did a good job. You look like what you are, a sack of shit. Damn, this feels good. I’m sure you’ll start to share as you do with your fuck, Miguel’s stepdaughter, right Eric?”

“Don’t touch her. She has nothing to do with this.”

Russell laughed and pressed his weapon against his jaw. “She’s got everything to do with this. You make me sick, Eric. How you’ve gone about as if you hadn’t screwed others over. I’m going to change that. Make you pay for your years of sin.” William felt the gun’s barrel touch his temple. He closed his eyes as his breaths quickened. Gwenn.

“Please. Let her go. This is between us, not a child.” Russell’s smile vanished from his face as he struck William in his midsection, pushed him against the car, and reacted again with a blow against the unbruised side of his face. William reacted in pain. His hand quickly moved toward the weapon tucked in his side but resisted as he thought of his daughter. Then Russell pushed against the bruised area of William’s face, the tender section just under his cheekbone, resulting in a tear from one eye.

“Get in, say hello to your princess.”

Gwenn sat quietly in the passenger’s seat; her hands tied in front of her with silver masking tape. “Dad!” she spoke as he was forced next to her.

“Gwenn. Thank God.” He immediately wrapped his arms around Gwenn. The relief of finally seeing her, dismissing any negative alternative he had tried to prepare himself for was overwhelming. He wondered if she would follow through on what he had told her. Would she be brave enough to try? “Are you alright?” She nodded her head, tears starting to fall from her eyes and along her cheeks. “Shh. Be brave. Remember?” He whispered. The car started. Gwenn sat wearily beside him. Would she follow what he had told her to do? William looked at the rearview mirror with his eyes only, making limited movements, back toward Russell at the helm of the vehicle, a confident determination on his brow as he steered away from the parking structure. Go. He had told her to go. Russell probably anticipated anything he planned, any movement. Why hadn’t he been tied up? But he needed him alive still, but Gwenn was different. She was just a piece of a lesson meant for him. Go. He had told her to go.

“Go,” he whispered. “Go,” he mouthed. He watched as Gwenn quickly moved toward the front seat, kicking her legs, swinging her connected hands. The unnamed man riding in the passenger’s seat moved his body then his head during his child’s attempt to escape. Commotion erupted as Gwenn fought forcefully with her feet and legs. William pulled out his Glock from his side, threatened Russell, and fired into his partner’s shoulder just as Gwenn was able to kick her way to escape from the front passenger’s side after she had successfully opened the front door.

“Don’t stop this car!” William commanded. “Keep it going!” He said to Russell. “You, in the passenger’s seat, touch me and I’ll fire into his head. Keep going, Russell. I need to give you a gift, show you how I’m not bullshitting.

# Chapter Thirty-Four

GARRETT HAD NOT EXPECTED IT, a thirteen-year-old girl landing on the pavement from the front passenger’s side of the black vehicle in an acrobatic roll, like an elusive spy escaping with ease from their captor in a big-screen thriller. She was just feet away from him as he struggled back to his vehicle after William aggressively kept up the act in the form of his forceful knock into the ground. Garrett’s shoulder pounded with an ache unknown to him before, throbbing and aching as if he was slowly cooling on the stovetop like a Sunday roast with potatoes and carrots, the whole works.

He witnessed the unexpected, Gwenn roll and spin physically unscathed from the event. Witnessing Gwenn made him think of the other unknowns with Christine, with William, if Patricia knew how to put him in a headlock. She sprung to her feet, the fear and anxious tug quickly giving her reason to cry, a cry deep and painful where she hung her head and then fell to her knees in agony.

The black vehicle continued without her and with William as the new hostage. Garrett looked ahead as he approached Gwenn feeling the wrath of his mistakes rendered over the last year finally come to fruition. The reality was then in the cool shadows of the deserted structure, his actions played out in conversations, never weighing the circumstances. Rochelle had never admitted to her real desires, what she really wanted William for. Russell had intercepted, playing new connection when he never was supposed to be. How could he have been so selfish? What had he received? $2,500. A month’s rent in a three-bedroom apartment next door to a restaurant that always smelled of boiling pig parts and anise on the weekend and a parking spot too small for a motorcycle. She’d fired him before the final payoff.

What if Russell did kill William, a person who had just saved his life, again? Garrett had seen the gun. He neared Gwenn, pulled her into a genuine hug.

“Gwenn are you alright?” he asked as he started to remove the tape from her wrists.

“Leave me alone.”

“No, I’m here to help, Gwenn. Your dad wanted me to get you home to your mom.”

The tears returned after she took in a deep sniff from her nose. Then she leaned into his injured shoulder. After a flinch, he reciprocated with a reach around her back, a welcomed squeeze.

Her father was gone. He hated that he had played a part in the disaster. William had been inviting to him, respected him, even encouraged him in the short period of time he had known him and forced his way into William’s way of being despite his open forms of dissatisfaction with the attention. Garrett had played on his vulnerabilities, the hidden impulses William possessed of wanting to be accepted by those he opened himself to, for people to get him, accept him. The darkness he spoke of only showed when the wrong question was asked, more like the right question for others, the wrong one for William. He didn’t deserve whatever was about to happen in the controlling dimension ruled by Russell.

“They took him. They’ll kill him. Please, he wants to kill him.”

“Shhh.” Garrett tried to comfort Gwenn, a burst of desert dust dancing in a quick push near their feet. “He’ll be okay. Don’t worry. He really wanted to get you home, Gwenn. C’mon.”

They walked back toward Garrett’s vehicle when he heard something in the distance, the aggressive utterance of a vehicle’s motor, coming at them full force. “Quick, get in the car, let’s go, Gwenn. Now!”

 Garrett and Gwenn moved as fast as they both could toward Garrett’s Audi. His heart suddenly thudded forcefully, its voice in his ears. Gwenn watched ahead as they sped off. Hit in the face, pushed on the cement, only to end up in a car chase, his afternoon had been less than stellar. He looked toward his rear-view mirror and saw the black Charger. Oh God. He was going to die. Russell was going to shoot him, kill him with a single bullet. If it wasn’t that, he’d get into an accident once he hit more traffic, the straight drive in the emptiness of the area was short-lived. Garrett continued driving, speeding up a bit, his hands on the steering wheel, tightly pressing against the cool of the wheel. Then the car vanished from behind him. He looked to his left, finding the car beside him.

“Do you have a gun?!” Gwenn asked anxiously.

“No! Of course not, why would I have a gun?!”

He looked again at the vehicle, finally seeing the driver. It was William. Just ahead a few commercial structures and a stoplight a few feet away, reminded him of desert existence continuing past a fine line of pavement and sand. He pulled over, taking a quick look back at Gwenn, who was still panicked. “Told you he’d be okay.”

William knocked against the passenger’s side window. “Hey, it won’t be long before Russell wants his beast back. Didn’t know you could drive like that, drove like someone was after you.”

“I thought they were.”

“Gwenn?” asked William.

He watched as Gwenn released herself from the confines of the back seat and ran into her father’s arms. Garrett watched with a sense of relief as William hugged Gwenn, spoke to her directly, words not meant for him, speaking in a near whisper that triggered a head nod and another hug, long and intentional. Then they both joined Garrett in the car.

“You scared the shit out of me. I thought that you were dead.”

“I saw a window of opportunity. He gladly handed over the keys.”

“What happened? Are you alright?”

“Bruised, but no bullets, thank goodness. Not like Russell.”

Garrett hesitated for a moment. “You killed him?”

“No. Left him bleeding from his own gun by a cactus. I’m sure his friend will help him.”

Garrett studied William as he calmly pulled his seatbelt across his chest, the anxiousness he had last seen haunting him gone, replaced by relief. Being a bad ass had never quite been on Garrett’s to-do list, but after having performed the feat, he had just pulled off with William and a brief high-speed escape, he felt like he was living in a slow-motion scene of a blockbuster movie wearing all black with a pair of shades. With a smile, Garrett invited William for a welcomed fist bump. He reciprocated after a moment of hesitancy, just before silently leaning into the passenger side headrest, his face staring at the car’s ceiling.

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Patricia waited anxiously at the front door, waiting for the sign of Garrett, for the moment to see her daughter, a gift she had been missing for the past day and a half. Hunter still lingered at their home, making himself comfortable with a remote and their couch in the family den. Lisa and Alex remained with Christine, but the comfort level was dwindling there. When she saw Garrett’s car pull into the driveway, she felt as if she were about to give birth for the first time to Gwenn, the anxiousness of seeing her face, if she was safe, a new start to what had been before, how she was to move going forward. Then she thought of hearing William’s voice, we got her. The moments spent on the phone with her as he told her he loved her, the hesitancy in his voice, another close encounter with the dealings of death, all had her nearing an edge of rocky, jagged abysmal nothingness. She needed him. She needed him more than any other ever before him. They needed him. Hearing his words of finality pressurized her chest where she couldn’t breathe, couldn’t stand. Not when they had come so close to doing so much more.

“Gwenn,” Patricia greeted as she entered the front door. “Oh, thank God, you’re okay.”

Patricia wrapped her arms around her daughter, touched her golden-colored face, and looked into her sparkling eyes. She missed every part of her, every single part.

“Mom, I missed you.”

Patricia pulled away from her and looked into her face. “Don’t you ever leave me again. Never. Do you understand?”

Gwenn nodded her head and fell into her embrace again just as Garrett walked through the doorway, followed by William. He watched her, moving his eyes with every movement, she accepted his glance and moved toward him, placing a hand against his shoulder, then reaching up toward his face, cool to the touch. He was real, no impulse from her miseries derived following her frightening conversations over the phone. Then she felt a strong pull against her waist toward him, his hand against her face pulling her toward every part of him, his lips pressed against hers. He tasted of salt and a slight hint of citrus, the tiny strokes of his tongue sensually dancing inside the cavern of her mouth as she closed her eyes tightly, feeling every bit, every bit of cool in the doorway to their home. She couldn’t let go of him and didn’t want him to loosen his embrace. William locked eyes with her, kept his stare in that place where only he was invited in a knowingness that delighted.

“Question,” he asked. “I know this is far-fetched, but I didn’t think I would be standing here like this. You were there, there in my thoughts, everything about you, even before, when I sat there and couldn’t breathe, it was you I thought of, everything I never said, never did with you. Marry me? I can’t be without you, Pat. I can’t. So, I’m asking you if you’d do me the honor?”

Still held in his embrace, she remembered that moment of sheer magic there in his gaze. All the fear of loving him vanished as she uttered the words, “yes, I will,” to William. He took her hand into his, which he tenderly kissed and caressed.

He chuckled a little just before he said, “It would make more sense if I had the ring on me.” Patricia shifted her head to the right smiled a huge grin and leaned into his chest. “It’s here. I just didn’t know when to ask.”

Patricia covered his lips with hers, a combined moment of appreciation and a means of quieting his nervous yammering. Discomfort about his admissions always made him that way. With the distracted look, his lowered head, he was a teenage boy again admitting his feelings to a crush. In moments of his multifaceted ways she often treasured similar times, adding the one experience at that minute, one of the most cherished breaths of time, finding her answer as one of the most important and best decisions she had ever committed to. “You’re still nervous.”

“I don’t want you to change your mind,” he admitted. They remained connected, his arms still holding her and Patricia’s hand laying against his chest. “Close your eyes. Stay here.”

She smiled and followed his request, taking in the sounds returning to normal from the silence of unification that had dominated the moment. Garrett’s voice in conversation with Hunter, a bark from Jake. Then William’s voice returned.

“Okay, you can open them.” For some strange reason, the emotion had not quite hit her until she saw the black box, the validity of his question and her response all encapsulated in the tiny bit of sparkling silver mounted with a beautiful diamond at its crown. He spoke, placing the ring on her finger. “You are everything and so much more. I love you so much and I can’t live without you waking up to me every morning. Thank you for agreeing to take this journey with me.”

“It’s beautiful,” she said. The tingle from the tears had started to compromise her vision, clouding the view of her hand.

“Sorry I did it out of order,” said William. He took her hand into his uninjured hand.

“It was perfect.” They lingered in a welcomed moment of calm, just as William looked toward the hallway behind them, a look of concern returning to his face.

“That’s funny. I thought I closed that door.”

Patricia wished she could have stayed in the moment just a little longer, lingered in his gaze where only two fit, and become saturated in his presence she had missed so much, and thought was gone to a new set of miseries. Instead, she followed William toward the partially opened white door to the garage, finding an opportunity to ask him more about the need to bury whatever it was he had mentioned during his directions on the phone, so she thought.

He stopped at the door, lingered, then stared at the knob. “Did you leave at all?” he asked. “Did you come in here when I told you to close your eyes?”

“No. You told me to close my eyes, so I closed my eyes. I’ve been here all day with your father otherwise.”

He was slower in his processing, the thought seeming to teeter on an unbalanced edge, his glance falling upon her from his height. Then it all turned soured, rancid, and frightening.

She watched as the tattooed man from the club and the elevator glared at the two of them from the doorway, the door fully opening in an aggressive hurry. A split second later, he struck William in the chest with the handle of the shovel from the garage. He quickly grabbed Patricia by the shoulders, forcing her back into the garage area with a strong shove. She landed on her knees in a heavy thud, pushing her hands out against the surface, watching as William reacted, his angered brow mirroring his aggressive struggle with Felix, inches away from her on the cemented garage floor. Felix was quick, agile, much more than William who obviously still dealt with the injuries inflicted on him earlier. Then Felix swiftly took a knife from his back pocket, jabbed it into William’s injured hand. She watched William's face twist into a distorted bout of pain. Then Felix went for his shoulder, which William blocked in a fit of anger dictated shove of his whole body directly into Felix.

She didn’t see the gun when it surfaced from wherever Felix had it hidden, only felt the sudden heat, which quickly cooled against her skin, a deathly cool. Then the action slowed, the sound stopped. William pushed his way past Felix and moved toward her as she felt herself falling backward. Her chest began to burn, her shoulder throbbed, the blood quickly seeped through the thin peach-colored blouse. Patricia watched the patterns of the fluorescent bulbs lining the garage’s ceiling and William’s face directly above hers.

“Patricia, look at me. Look at me. Don’t look anywhere else, just look at me.”

“Get her up and into the car there.”

“I’m not moving her!”

“Want to rethink that?” The tattooed man asked, pushing his gun into William’s temple.

“I’m not Russell. I have no need for you. I’ll blow your eyes out right onto her. Put your gun on the floor.” In the moment suddenly created, her mind chased memories, forgotten pieces fragmented together in quick moments. The sound vanished again, replaced by a frightening ringing as she felt herself being lifted. She tightened her grasp against William’s neck.

“Pat, look at me. You’re okay. You’re going to be okay. You’re fine.”

Fine. She was fine. Everything was far from the thought. Far from it.

# Chapter Thirty-Five

THE BALD BASTARD HADN’T MOVED from the edge of his vehicle since having found it some yards away from the rendezvous spot Russell had selected late that afternoon and towed back to a chain hotel room, the floor sticky in random spots. Stephan chewed on a piece of gum as if each chew brought forth wisdom, his left cheek purple and red from Eric’s kid’s forceful kick. He remained silent since they walked into the room, threw down a couple of plastic hospital bags, and questioned where everything had gone wrong. There was enough reason for Russell to believe that his longtime friend was just about done with the adventure and ready to head back to his endeavors past the border. Russell moved the dark curtain smelling of histories already written and forgotten, arguments decorated by the tar of cigarettes and spilled beer from impromptu gatherings of too many people in the confines of the room. The chocolate Oscar statue was still there, moving his finger against the body of a cell phone.

Russell’s chest ached from Eric’s handling, a vengeful filled strike into the ground just before he shot him a second time, both shots landing in his thighs, intentional and painful. His plans had gone amok when he put him in the back seat, unrestrained. He should have started his peel, which left him bleeding in desperation, showing who was in charge. But he had failed. Garrett had played him; he should have shot him dead as he had intended. Should have could have. There was nothing left but to move forward. Just how was it possible with whoever it was leaning against his vehicle who obviously sat waiting for him? Stephan stayed silent.

His phone buzzed a third time, the phone number relating to Rochelle Evans. He didn’t want to talk to her with aches all over his body only to end up with an ache in his head directed from her. “What do you want?”

“What did Miguel give you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I hate weasels, Russell. There’s not much for me to say about my feelings towards you. You disappear for years and suddenly show up with a solution to a problem for James after Miguel shows off a new sport in Durango.”

“I told you I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You really think I wouldn’t have figured it out? You have two choices, Russell. Did you meet Joseph yet?”

“No,” he said, staring past the window of the hotel, right at Joseph. Mr. Clean had a name.

“You go with Joseph, take what he has to offer you, and leave. Forget Eric, forget this and leave or you do what you probably want to, resist him, fight him, and meet your maker in the next twenty-four hours.”

She played negotiator while he watched Joseph and listened to the demands. The terms only benefited her and had always served her. She had worked against him from the very moment he sat down with James.

“I’ve got Eric,” he looked at Stephan. He had the same build as Eric, just not the right height, but not too far, perhaps he could pull it off. Rochelle’s demands were shit. Take the prize money in the first box? Game players knew not to take the first prize and walk away when there was something much bigger ahead, only if he played the risks a little longer. Eric was still his and would go right along with his lovely prize who obviously loved to give herself over to a killer. Russell thought of her long legs Eric couldn’t stop patting and rubbing in the dark violet of Miguel’s club and her scent as she whiffed by. He’d find her secret, monetize what Eric already knew, keep it himself and forget he ever spoke with Miguel. It was worth the risk, a bigger prize, the one Evan had no idea existed. Damn Rochelle.

“I’ve got that piece of shit you couldn’t handle. I’ve handled him like I said I would. Good luck on convincing James and the other old washed-out fools you think you’ve got control over.” Russell hung up without granting her a moment to respond and looked at Stephan again, who stopped his chew as his eyes fell on him. He grabbed a pillowcase from a pillow on one of the beds following a slow, painful walk with two holes in his legs and shared his plan.

“We’ve got a chance to put on our own act, Stephan. I’m not letting Eric leave this hot, dusty-ass state alive, and definitely not with his bitch. Felix is ahead of us.”

“What’s with the pillowcase?”

“Have you been watching that old block-shaped piece of shit leaning against my car?”

“No. Haven’t been paying much attention to him. But I have paid attention elsewhere. I got my face kicked in by some gymnast kid and shot by her dad. You look like you can barely walk from the damn pair of eyes he put in your thighs. You let him pull off what he just did?! What the hell happened? I thought you said you had him?! Now you waddle over to me with a fucking pillowcase from a two-star hotel’s bed so I can what, pretend to be Eric?! That’s your fucking plan Russell? This started to stink the moment we set up camp in that old fire pit of a house. You’ve taken me on another journey where I’ll be picking something out of my skin yet again! The rocks from that kid’s fucking shoe print from my face and a bunch of stitches on my shoulder!”

Stephan’s antics had allowed him to think, an act he had quickly started to abandon as tensions swelled to mere impulses and reactions to those impulses. Admittedly, he worried a little about Joseph, a man who possessed the quiet calm of a deadly storm. Sending an amateur to do her bidding was not Rochelle’s style. Even though he still considered her offer exactly what he had dubbed it as being, shit. Russell knew it was serious enough for him to quickly think of an alternative, one that would still allow him to take care of Eric in the process.

“Do you have a better alternative?” asked Russell.

“Twenty-five percent. I want a quarter of whatever Miguel promised you when we get Eric’s girlfriend over to him.”

“Fine. I can do that.”

“Be simple, Russell. All your peeling and wanting to pleasure yourself with the woman Eric already has, believe me, I sense it, it’s all overkill. Get her, hold her down and get Miguel to meet you halfway. I underestimated Eric. You underestimated Eric. The next encounter I’m confident that he’s going to put a bullet in your head, just like he threatened.”

 Russell had been misunderstood by Stephan, a misfit, misguided by money and revenge. He knew what Eric’s girl hid, what he hid. If he possessed that secret, took it from Eric who wanted it for different reasons? When she said his name, like he knew she did, in those moments in the dark, when her legs were splayed wide in the secrecies never spoken to another, those passages of hidden keys where desires went fulfilled or denied or teased, did he watch the other secret burned into her flesh with secret obsession? Is that what he really wanted from her? Was he buying time as his body slowly gave up while his mind tried desperately to cling on to something more, hoping that he could beat the inevitable, his own demise? But others including Stephan thought it was all about Vixen, the amplifier of misery. Yes, and no. Stephan heard him speak of Chanelle and his desire to see him suffer. Yes, and no. The truth was, Russell no longer knew what it was all about for him. His drive, why he had allowed years to pass with the chase still ongoing? Maybe all that once was no longer mattered, not anymore.

After the incident with Eric watching as his stoic expressions turned manic, raged in the adobe-colored earth dusting his bloodied pants leg, he understood Stephan’s underestimated comment. The leery, eerily quiet teen he’d watched pull the trigger that afternoon in Mexicali was not the person he watched in the desert sun. And it wasn’t a mirage. Only Russell knew that the same person had surfaced before. After adding natural dyes to the sands of Arizona at the feet of a majestic cactus through his veins on the hardened grounds following Eric’s quickly evolving behaviors openly expressed, his demands and control of the moment, he wanted nothing more than to put a gun against Eric’s head and pull the trigger, watch him as he greeted the ultimate journey with his bitch watching from a pool of blood. It was a dress rehearsal. He knew what had gone wrong and where to fix it.

“You help me get her, Stephan and you have your quarter. We’ll wait until Rochelle’s buddy outside takes a nap under a bridge.”

“He’s big, but not too intimidating, we can run without a pillowcase. We probably have to meet Felix,” Stephan responded.

“He’s got to piss some time. Get your shit while I make a call. Time to get on the road.”

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The garage door was closed, William’s Highlander gone. All that remained behind with any reference to either William or Patricia was a black handgun, a bloodied knife, and a trail of blood leading to where the truck had been parked in the garage’s bowel. He heard the shouting and the gunshot. By the time Hunter had made it to the garage, he heard the doors closing and the truck backing out of the driveway, the man behind the wheel was quickly recognized as the tatted-up guy from Rochelle’s hotel in Los Angeles. Barely an hour had passed since William arrived home with Gwenn. The bastards involved were relentless, obviously narrowly focused on their own gain.

Having no idea where the tattoo obsessed crook had driven off to or why William had even allowed him to do so, Hunter exited the garage and stared down the bowels of a suburban neighborhood, all the homes copycat peach and white stucco boxes planted into drought tolerant front yards designed with cactus and rocks. What had Will been thinking? Escaping from one life to another where everyone covered up their affairs and sexual perversions of getting off when their lover wrapped themselves in foil all behind the walls of their four-bedroom desert oasis with a pool in the yard. Hell, maybe that’s exactly what he had been trying to do, just darker secrets than perversions. For a minute, the street was quiet, the few nosey neighbors who pretended to care unaware of the kidnapping that had just taken place on their own peach-colored street.

 “Damn it,” he said to himself. Hunter went back into the house. They could have been killed already. Dead, both of them.

He recalled that night years ago, an ominous storm dictating the night’s drive, the windshield pelted with thick rain droplets, the kind of rain that damaged, terrorized the burn zones along California’s sensual figure clinging to the coast. Both Eric and Derrick rested comfortably in the back seat, unaware of their father’s plans that would greatly alter the rest of their lives. Tina’s voice kept rattling his nerves, the elevations higher than what offered comfort to breathe when he announced what he was going to do. She’d hate him, despise him for taking away her boys. But they needed help, the help he couldn’t provide. It stung hard near his heart when he came to the final decision. Get Evans’s help, help with what he was learning so well. Hunter didn’t realize in his desperation that by seeking Evans’s help, he was forfeiting his relationship with his two boys, severing ties, and handing them over to James Evans for his own gratification. Help had hindered.

Hunter stared at the gun on the ground, immediately connecting it to William. Had he never taken that drive, abandoned them, what would they be? Would William still honor Eric, the name his mother had spoken when she first saw his face, a name instead he obviously shunned?

“Garrett!” he shouted from the entryway.

“What’s wrong?”

“You didn’t hear what happened? Where’s Gwenn?”

“Her room. What was I supposed to hear?”

“William and Patricia. Someone took them. What do we do?”

“What the hell? How am I supposed to know?”

“Because Will just came back with you. Please. I don’t want to hear bad news here in a few hours and have to say that news to Gwenn. I don’t want to bury my son. No father does.”

From the look on Garrett’s face, the moment of dread quickly darkening the moment could not be ignored. The folks at play in kidnapping William and Patricia were all unfamiliar to Hunter, all new faces involved in their own desires. His selfish objectives began to seem trivial. Hunter looked again at the red against the contrasting gray of the garage floor, then he heard the pleas of a child, his own son as he left them, passed off a difficulty he couldn’t handle to the worst possible person. And calling for a cop to come by and ask a few questions about something way beyond their ability only for them to complete a report and turn around and arrest him for dirt he couldn’t quite wipe off his brow was not what he wanted to do.

Why can’t you just be my father?

“Give me your cell phone,” Hunter said.

“Why? I can call for help.”

“No. Rochelle Evans. You were talking to her, weren’t you?”

“Yes, but…”

“Dial her. Call her now.” The doings of James Evans, many well-hidden jewels of underhanded illegality, which he had unfortunately once taken part, hence the dirt tied into others just like him. It had been Hunter’s fault that his beloved wife had been exposed to what became a definition of his own son’s existence, a dictating source for so many facets of his life. Behind that multilayered fiasco controlled by James was Rochelle, the person who he wouldn’t be surprised held his balls tighter than a free stress ball from an insurance company in the hands of a guy about to lose his job.

“What is it, Garrett? I fired you,” Rochelle said.

“I’m borrowing Garrett’s phone. This is Adam. Your help is valuable right now. God knows you’ve probably got your fingers in this one.”

“I don’t owe you a thing, Adam. What makes you think I need to help you?”

“You’re not helping me. You’re helping my son and your daughter. Someone took them.” Her brief moment of silence felt longer than comfortable. It worried Hunter. He thought his contact with a woman he despised all for the sake of his son would result in better help than a questionable long pause. His last direct encounter with her was years before, in the confines of a brand-new pick-up truck in the uncomfortable middle seat with the seat belt poking in at his hip, so much that it left a mark. Rochelle was in the passenger’s seat barking orders to the large caramel-colored driver who spoke very little, just a single ‘mm hm’. His vocal cords activated only when he drew his gun, aimed at Hunter’s chest just before he was abandoned in a pocket of a desert city in the nowhere parts of Nevada with a population of fifty. He recalled standing in front of a small market in the dry heat, a hole in his foot, a dead wife and his two boys gone.

“I’m guessing here that you’ve got a clue about who it was?”

“Of course, that punk Russell and his posse of folks. Some asshole drove off in William’s truck with the two of them in the back seat.”

“Drove off with them?”

Hunter processed the question. Why William did what he did was beyond his understanding. He couldn’t imagine why he would let some stranger force him into the back seat of his own car with the woman he cared for. He’d seen him before, he was perfectly capable of avoiding a hit to his face, let alone a kidnapping. Or that was what he thought.

“Where did he take them? Do you know?”

“If it’s Russell, I’m certain it is, that ass has been a pain. I can help you. I have a guy following him. So far Russell has ignored him.”

“I want to know where he is.”

“Just a minute. You might be necessary in the next few weeks. I could use your assistance. I’ll contact my contact if you agree.”

“Fucking….” Hunter stopped and stared at the phone. Evil, cold-hearted, soulless conniving bottom of the barrel…. Where did she come from? Her wickedness seemed to have no limit. William could be killed by a man just as heartless as she. Her daughter was at the mercy of the same monster and all she wanted to do was make a deal for something less valuable than the life she woke up to each morning.

“You are a soulless serpent from a pit of shit, Rochelle. Really? Your daughter can be killed. Forget William. Your daughter is in danger, and you want to cut a deal with me? Really?”

“She’s not my daughter, not my blood. Do you want to make a deal or what?”

Adam looked at his shoes, shaking his head as he listened to Rochelle’s words. Evan’s world was as mixed up as a cross-culture taco bowl with teriyaki sauce served with chopsticks and a falafel. He had made the mistake of joining his nonsense years ago and continued a generation with his sons. He saw the disparity in William’s eyes a few days before finally realizing its reasoning as he spoke with a person who had abandoned humanity and ethics of any sort.

“I’ll take the deal, you heartless bitch.”

“Let me find out where he is.”

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Patricia leaned against him as he pressed into the wound imposed on her left shoulder. He had not let go of her, mindlessly staring ahead at the dangerous man with the skull against his neck driving his vehicle. Controlling the circumstances, his outcome. He couldn’t help the anger building internally as he sat as a passenger, dealing with his own resentment for an hour. The lingering sweetness of the moment spent in the doorway to their home, Patricia’s expressions of happiness elicited in her eyes as she looked at the bit of jewelry that meant so much, a representation of what should have been the future, lingered. William held on to it as if Russell had already won.

They pulled into the driveway of a house, its windows scorched with blackened ash, the dark a burned scar from a tragic history surrounding the front three windows. He could see the skeletal remains on one section of the roof, also darkened by what had happened.

“You’re okay, Pat. I’m right here.”

“Where are we?”

“I don’t know,” he answered.

“Get out,” Felix said.

William had no weapon except for the one under the driver’s seat. He hesitated and made the mistake of looking at Felix once the back door was opened. William saw Patricia’s waiting glance, tears pooling again at the bottom of her eyes. “I said get out of the car.”

She did not stop looking toward him in the silent walk from the vehicle. They held hands tightly, the fear from Patricia apparent to him through her trembling hands, in the dying heat of the day. A dry burst of wind hit his face as he walked toward the house that was once white with navy trim. It had all become a mess, a smoked-out structure with a dilapidated porch that creaked with his weight, Patricia beside him, her hand pressing hard into his. Felix remained steadily behind them, moving aside only to open the front door, which had been unlocked, then having no hesitancy moving his gun to the center of William’s back once they entered the house.

“Move this way,” said Felix.

They continued deeper into the house. Shadows of the flames once washing through the house's halls primed themselves like dark pastels, the rich, darkness along the walls some spots bare-boned, open to the elements beyond the house. The remnants tickled his nose as Felix led both William and Patricia to a room, a tattered armchair sitting abandoned in the room’s corner and a metallic table on the opposite side. A fine layer of dust and ash lay against the wood floor. An odd sense of remembrance slowly swelled in his head, the armchair, and desk. The chair was in the wrong spot. It had once been on the porch. Suddenly the sounds and sites returned, memories moved into pockets of forgetfulness, willful amnesia for years cleared, scenes rushed back to his thoughts.

“No, no... no.” William froze, the room glowing in its brilliance from the wide window, the smell gone, the ash vanished, a dark-skinned man standing near the desk with a hypodermic needle in his hand. Then came the painful burning in his back, the pulsing pain in his feet, his toes. William pushed Felix back toward a wall. “No. You’re not keeping us here.” He swung and was countered by Felix who pushed William back into the ground. William started to rise to his feet when she saw the shadow of something, another blow to his face. He felt himself staggering toward the doorway. He’d lost sight of Patricia. Then came another forceful blow. He felt the cold of the floor against his face, the tickle of the dust in his nose, Patricia’s shoes at his eye level. Then came the darkness like the ashen walls of the room.

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Something terrified him when the room met his glance, the reflection of memories casting against present time and reason. Whatever it had been was part of what he had never said, likely one of those secrets he buried deep inside, caged, locked so deep that it was willfully forgotten. Patricia watched as that secret animated back into existence and swelled into a manifestation possessive and controlling, stripping away his control and any assurance that anything was okay. It wasn’t for Eric.

Patricia watched helplessly as Felix proceeded to tie William’s hands behind his back and dragged him toward the metallic table in the room, then he wrapped the tape around his ankles. He remained unresponsive.

“Sit over there,” Felix told her, pointing at the armchair. She didn’t know what prompted the hesitancy. Perhaps it was the sight of blood coming from behind William’s ear or the sound of the front door of the home greeted with voices not at all singular. What if they took her somewhere else while William remained unconscious? “Move now before I put another bullet into you.”

She nodded her head obediently and sat slowly into the hard surface of the navy-blue piece of furniture. Patricia raised her legs to her chest and tightened herself into a ball, the madness of the past few days swelling about her. Fighting had its limitations, conjuring up the ability to stop any of her captors felt impossible. The pain swelled in her shoulder from the gunshot. Mind over matter. Mind over matter. Bullshit, when a piece of metal remained lodged in the muscle.

The voice of whoever it was that had just walked into the house echoed through the empty halls. Embittered, callous waves of sound imposed on the other person. They hid no plans, no whispered terrors for her to abruptly learn of once they revealed themselves. William’s demise was a clear purpose for their being there. Felix had abandoned his post, obviously feeling little threat from her. Unfortunately, he was right. Patricia needed a lucky window of someone else’s mistake to either make a run for it or try her best at offensive measures to save herself from what they had planned, so she thought. She didn’t want to make a desperate move, not then she thought as she studied the episode about her.

Patricia looked toward the edge of the room as the voice solidified, stopping its chasing against the emptiness. She recognized him immediately from the club, Russell, his dark eyes hinting unspoken wickedness as he stared at her from across the room. They were locked beneath his thick, but neatly styled eyebrows. His build was obvious in his chest, which he puffed in an intimidating fashion, likely to distract another’s observation of the painful limp he elicited like a zombified, one-legged pirate walking on a boat at sea.

Russell stared at her for a long moment, just before he peeked over his shoulder back at William.

“Where is it, your secret?” He started to move his hands against her. She responded with a quick burst of energy pushing his hand away from her body.

“Don’t you put your dirty hands on me.”

“Dirty? My hands are dirty? What about his?” Russell pointed toward William. “His hands are filthy. You know what he’s guilty of? The dirt on him? But you like that, don’t you? You like to fuck a killer, huh?” Russell put his hand against her knee, slid it near her leg. She forgot the pain in her shoulder, forgot William’s unconsciousness, and stood to her feet, forcing an aggressive push into Russell’s torso, resulting in an unbalanced shift backward. He smiled, a cold satisfying smirk limited to the left side of his face, his toasted browned skin lifted in a noticeable pull upward.

“Damn. You’re fearless. You’re probably a screamer, aren’t you?”

She turned her face into a bout of disgust as he neared her again.

“You know you are way more valuable than that piece of shit? Do you think he hasn’t cashed in on you like he’s done others? Sold your secrets for his meds, a pill, or something else? Did he tell you his secrets? Probably not.” Patricia breathed deeply as her eyes started to burn. Secrets? She had not admitted her own. Russell quickly moved from her and back toward William who had by this time opened his eyes. He lay staring toward Russell, blood gathered near his face from the most recent interaction with Felix.

“Stephan!” Russell said as he neared William. “Help me get this asshole up here.” Another man, mysterious to her, had followed directions at the whim of Russell dutifully next to him before he followed instructions, helped him with William who showed reaction with his feet. Patricia looked about the room, finding still no viable means of escape, still fearful of what Russell and his associate wanted with her. More valuable to whom?

Years had passed since she obsessed over the night she and Christine were pulled from a closet of a burning cabin by William and helped into a waiting car. Little had she known that there was so much more to that escape shielded by William, who also carried the burden of those secrets. A mother who never expressed her love for her who found it worthwhile to penetrate her skin with a message for others to hunt her, to kill others over. They all wanted the same thing, to command an evil and to carry on a point to others, one that ruined others, particularly one person who stared from across the room as Russell elicited his verbal abuses. She hesitated when she saw the look rendered, she knew what it meant and what he might have been about to do.

# Chapter Thirty-Six

EMOTIONS RAN WILDLY, A MESS of sweating, rapid heartbeats, and satisfaction all playing on his face and through the tight grip he had placed upon the fabric of Eric’s shirt. Russell’s knuckles reddened, matching the scarlet against the neck of the man before him and spots on his forest green shirt from his blood. Russell pulled him toward him, stared into his face bruised and emotionless. He looked unbalanced, his eyes chasing consciousness it seemed as his stare pulsated, snapped back into place with ferocity, then danced off again into a wavering uncertainty. Russell smiled as he realized that he had successfully captured what James Evans had not been able to; who Rochelle didn’t want to handle. He was right there in his grasp.

“You’re going to tell me what I want?” He pulled again. “Tell me where it is?”

“Let her go.”

Russell stared at him in the eyes. The same bastard he watched pull a trigger in a warehouse, the same thief he’d tried to show his place to unsuccessfully. “Why? She’s got a meeting with her stepfather, and you’ve got a limited amount of time. You can make this easier for her, not you. Do you like how things have come full circle? Like what someone did with the house?” Russell watched his attention veer off, off to someone else, her. “Look at me!”

 “You let her leave; you don’t need her. Let her go.” Russell took a knife, his favorite one for moments like the one before him, when he made a controlling move against another, it was the same one he sliced the neck of that giant shadow of Evans, and it was the same one he would use to convince Eric’s admissions to bleed from his tongue. He placed the blade in the thickness of Eric’s neck, pressed, bursting the tight skin, the poisoned red slowly starting a trickle downward. Eric’s breathing picked up, his disagreement with his being held captive by the tape and Stephan showed with his aggressive jerks. Then Russell used force to draw the knife into Eric’s thigh, pulled upwards as Eric shivered in pain, his face becoming tortured, desperate. Then Russell snatched it from his flesh. Eric pushed forward despite Stephan’s hold. But Russell wasn’t intimidated, he felt a swelling pride as he watched the blood wet the fabric of his pants. Eric had never become more than a mistake with information that was about to become a brief memory. No one wanted him, just what he had. Russell smiled knowing this fact as he drove the knife into his left thigh, giving Eric a gift like he had done in the cool of the narrow shade of a succulent.

“Russell, c’mon, focus,” said Stephan. He saw him struggling to hold Eric, whose face had twisted into a ferocious pull.

“Let me go you cowardly piece of shit! Let me go! It was your ass who should have died, not Piper! It was you! It was you!” Eric returned to what he had seen in the white sun of the desert floor, his shoulders pulling away from Stephan’s control, then he forced his weight into Russell’s frame, full force, charging like a maddened drug addict facing no fear, no pain simply a rush of drug-induced adrenaline pumping through the veins. Eric forcefully leaned his weight into Russell, still bound by the restraining forces on his hands and ankles, Eric’s heaving chest next to him in an uncomfortable connection of syncopated heartbeats, the smell of the salt of his sweat too close for comfort, then came his bitch’s voice.

“Please! Stop hurting him! Stop it!”

Russell frowned.

Eric wasn’t going to out do him again, not anymore. Not then, with his tainted blood staining the fabric of his clothing, Eric attempting to gain the advantage. The anger hadn’t dissipated, but the dysfunction caused by the bruising on Eric’s face, the pulling and disoriented visual cues gave Russell an unfair advantage. Russell pushed against Eric as Stephen took him back under control.

“Don’t try that again,” Russell said, brandishing the knife. “You take one step near me, and I’ll cut her throat, make you watch as I did.”

“That’s between us, not her. She can’t give you anything. Just let her go.”

“You’re going to lie like that? Lie like you’ve done with everyone else? Vanished with God knows what? Fuck her to steal what she has and sell it to someone else?”

“I wouldn’t...I wouldn’t do that to her. I’d never do that to you,” he said. “She doesn’t know anything. I do. Vixen, Diablo…” he paused, staggering backward into Stephan. “Whatever you think she has, I have it. She’s useless to you. Give her the keys, let her go. I’ll talk.”

Liar. He saw it plainly on his face. He’d talk? After all the years and suddenly grant him access? He needed to believe his words, believe that he was desperate enough to tell the truth about what he hid with no alternatives. Russell was not going to fall for another distraction from Eric or Garrett or any of the fools who thought they could underhandedly convince him that they were on his side. They would hand over information just because he could trust what they said, gems that glistened in the sunlight and turned to rust in the dark. Russell turned toward Patricia, obediently remaining in her designated side of the room, her long legs back before her like bars on a cage, holding her entirety behind them, the screamer. He would talk, tell the truth. Russell wanted to hear what he wanted to hear, not what Eric was willing to volunteer, a lie he had constructed in replacement of the true circumstances. He saw their glances, understood what they meant.

“Get up,” Russell said as he pulled her by the mid-section of her dark hair. “I’m going to make you scream.”

“Stop it! Leave her alone!”

“Are you going to make him talk? Give me what I want?” Russell said, squeezing her face with angered force in his hands. She stared into his face, a fear building blocking her ferocity first displayed. Eric’s game was over. He loved his knife, loved that he could make points with his blade. He moved in a swift upward pull against her chest, watching the fabric rip. A point, that’s what he was making. He wanted her alive until he confessed. She screamed and took her hands to her chest, stumbling backward.

“I said stop! Russell, stop! I’ll talk! I’ll talk!”

“Stand up,” Russell said.

“Please, no,” she cried. “Please don’t.”

“Stand up.”

“Don’t touch her!” Eric yelled. “Grahams Family Cemetery, the graveyard, two plots to the right of a statue of an angel. Matthew 11:28 is written on the stone.”

Admission of what Eric held captive caused a reaction Russell had not anticipated. Reality had suddenly become so clear that the edges of surfaces buzzed with their assigned electrical allowance. Then the sudden urge to piss, as if the cool of revitalizing water had passed over his feet, his ankles causing that giddy reminder to his other functions. Elated in his own satisfaction of having successfully debilitated the person who had stolen, divided others, killed, and paid for nothing. Russell felt like a person having finally accomplished a feat thought to be impossible. “Repeat what you just said.”

 “It’s in a graveyard. Two plots down from the statue of an angel. Come to me, all you are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest, Matthew 11:28 written on the tombstone, a metallic box with a flashcard and information about what you think she has. My mother’s grave.” Eric said with a noticeable bite to each word, his body shaking.

The struggle with Stephan had stopped with Eric. His gaze locked in on the woman he obviously was stupidly absorbed into. Their visual cues continued as he started to struggle with the act of planted feet with his leg splayed open like a frog on a dissection tray.

“Stephan, help him clean up. I don’t want any blood in my car. You’re going to show me the angel and what it's hiding. Then I’ll send you on your way to hell.”

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Familiarity of voices from yesterday never faded from memory, not for Rochelle. Not Adam’s voice. A rusty edge of sound that carried the journey of several places lived and moved on, his voice returned thoughts to a time when she saw her son’s face, heard his innocent laugh, and where she felt joy. She smiled honest, warm smiles born from a satisfied and grateful nature that her only son had elicited during his short tenure living. Adam had been the person who found her child face down, bruised, and unresponsive. Finding a new reason to being or whatever it had been Adam had claimed, he abandoned James’s mission to follow his own heart, raise a family, all conveniently after James had discovered that he had stolen what would ultimately become his own son’s fate, the virus that would burden Eric from childhood to his captive moment as a person who she still needed. Eric was the only person who would assist in planning out the final leg of the race she was trying to finish up, still trying to catch her breath, she hoped.

Rochelle rolled a silver-colored piece of luggage into her office at the Corner Lot, greeted Melanie who leaned over the desk area obviously making an ogled look at Malachi, one of the tenants. As long as they hadn’t fucked in her office, otherwise, she couldn’t care less about the nauseating romance between the two. Then she locked the door.

Adam, Eric’s father would call her back for an update, just when she tried to carefully unlock the padded case nestled in the luggage. The fire set to a single room in the building and the missing vials were all enough to get James to look in another direction. If Eric had destroyed what was in room 319, or even taken the contents, it didn’t matter because their attention would be directed toward him, just as she needed it to be.

Twelve vials were all that she had. Rochelle looked toward the locked door of the office and back toward her desk and cell phone. Either one activated would be a distraction. Yet Adam’s call had struck her with some sentiment. His pressing call was anticipated like an order for a coffee with low-fat milk at a coffee shop. Rochelle had followed her instincts regarding Russell. Joseph would have dropped him off for a wake-up call meeting with a man she swore never cracked a smile, had enough frown lines on his forehead and jaw to question his age, and frankly scared the shit out of anyone who sat down with him or looked into his dark eyes. Russell was a mistake, had been from the very beginning with him, always in the way and his kidnapping of William and Patricia was exactly what she didn’t want to hear about. There was no telling what would happen, especially if William remembered Eric’s miseries.

She learned of the location they had been taken to, from Joseph who had been waiting for the right sign to interfere. Unfortunately, that had not come and would not come. She learned from him that another person fled from the house and tempers were too high for a single person to deal with and at her price. He forfeited the gig, leaving William and Patricia to fend for themselves.

The toxic spot turned out to be far from a surprise to her considering Russell’s tactics and his obsessive behavior toward Eric. The gritty video of Eric’s killing Piper, a player in James’ game unfortunately killed at Eric’s temporarily crazed hand. Pushed to an edge, where he reacted. Russell thought he could use the footage to convince her to do his bidding. She had ignored it, ignored him, and moved forward to remove him as best as she could from the playing field.

Rochelle admitted that terrible acts had been played upon others in the house both William and Patricia had been taken to. Terrible doings had taken place against a young Eric on a few occasions including the one moment captured in dark detail played back to her on a small mobile screen. It was a moment that caused a brief departure from sanity triggered by another’s callousness, Russell’s callousness. Then Russell vanished and Piper was buried next to his grandfather following a quiet gathering of people she knew nothing about; she and James hovered in the background. He was a low-life conniving bit of human who died from circumstances he could have avoided, the wrong place at the right time.

Just as she anticipated, the screen illuminated in syncopation with the standard phone jingle.

“It’s Adam, any news?”

She explained the whereabouts to Adam, finding her conversation slowly revealing circumstances she had not come to terms with, hesitations unspoken or ignored.

Rochelle watched Patricia walk across the stage as a seventeen-year-old, shaking the hand of the high school principal who had personally told her that she had a questionable road ahead of her. She smiled the biggest, brightest smile when her hand met theirs. Rochelle swore she saw her say fuck you instead of thank you, then marched across the stage. She was there when Patricia brought Lisa into the world, wanting the first person to lay eyes on her to be Rochelle, not Lisa’s father Shawn who for whatever reason had not been present and there in the small space of her kitchen after she returned with a recovering, battered William, admitting her love for him, the very person who only wore a different name, who Rochelle had purposely tried to find hatred for, disenchantment over and disdain like none other. The same person who was willing to do anything for Patricia had saved Christine’s life, her life, and had just risked his own life to take a fake set of Diablos out of the Corner Lot. Rochelle saw the love she admitted in Patricia’s gaze when she spoke of him, the same kind of love she had once held dear for James a lifetime long ago.

Patricia was her daughter, whom she had rejected. She would always be, no matter what blood dictated. Her rejection stunk like a rancid separated bottle of soured homogenized milk in a warm refrigerator.

“Adam, they’re there alone with him. I can’t tell you now if they are dead or alive. Do me the favor of calling me back when you do hear from them? Let me know if they are alright?”

“Are you showing that you care, Rochelle?”

“I wasn’t right. I haven’t been right toward either one of them.” Rochelle looked back over to the luggage, still in need of settling, regrouping scattered thoughts as emotions began to cling right where they stung. “We’ll talk in a few weeks otherwise. You owe me, Adam.”

“Yeah, I do. Thanks, Rochelle.”

The silence of her lies caused a sudden ringing in her ears, a physical reminder of the power of thought. The last leg, that’s what it was. She had to. There was no other choice. Perhaps one day she could look ahead instead of backward, revisit those feelings from years ago, those feelings of joy and genuine smiles attached to what could be, and hear the words I love you from her daughters. Rochelle closed her eyes in a moment of solitude, a necessary reset before she picked up her office phone and dialed.

“What is it, Rochelle? Are you giving me better news?”

“Not sure if it's good news, but it is information. Manning, Eric. I’ve tracked him down, now he’s got Diablo.”

# Chapter Thirty-Seven

HE’D LOST A LOT OF BLOOD, much from the serious wound Russell had inflicted on William, his vengeful reaction obviously to their encounter earlier. William was concerned about Patricia who needed care for the gunshot wound to her shoulder and Russell’s new point across her chest. Moving hurt, his dark pants starting to stick to the damage beneath the fabric, and the uncomfortable stickiness of his blood having entered a sock and a shoe made the walk to the small bathroom an uncomfortable journey if the terrible circumstances passing could be counted as a journey at all. The dizziness had not ceased, his head pounding again and the random blotches of darkness he was experiencing had him realize that there was a problem, one that afforded no time for a long drive to his mother’s grave. He hoped his sudden outburst of admission bought time, created an avenue for Patricia’s escape. All he knew was that Russell remained near her, scheming, vying for another vicious snap, while his partner with the ponytail still neatly in place waited with a growing impatience in the doorway, throwing a red, hooded jacket at him to stop the bleeding. William looked down at the floor, recognizing the jacket as being Gwenn’s.

She had been there. Had he intended something worse for her? Russell’s intentional decision to bring William’s child to the same place he had found pleasure in sadistically causing harm to a sixteen-year-old kid? William remembered Russell’s laughter, an obnoxious bark mixed with a slight gurgle, his response to his pleads. For the first time in years, memories became clear and vibrant. As quickly as they had restored, the sourest kind of gift, William wanted them returned to the dark corners. He looked at the cotton zippered jacket laying uselessly at his feet, emotions mixed into an uneven bout of confusion with the unnamed man still standing in the doorway, unreactive.

“He brought her here?”

“I’m a follower, not a doer. Listen,” the man whispered and looked over his shoulder, obviously concerned about his next words or moves, or both. “Your acrobat kid was here. But you got her back, didn’t you?”

“Not because of you.”

“What you said about the plot, is it true? Is it there?”

“How am I supposed to use that with my hands behind my back?” William asked.

God, his leg hurt. The burn had turned into an incessant throbbing. Then he thought about Patricia, tried to listen for anything beyond the room. The ponytail-wearing partner was obviously fading from having an interest in Russell obviously as he slowly closed the door completely behind him. William had a feeling that treachery was an act satisfactory to the guy, perhaps the better way to line his pockets, keep breathing until his next bad decision.

“Did you tell the truth? Is it there?” he asked, his voice clear, forfeiting the whisper from before.

“She leaves. I see her leave. Otherwise, you either believe me or you don’t. I’ve got a bad bleed here, a long drive won’t happen, especially if I’m standing here with my hands tied. You can tell that to Russell.”

With a slow reach toward the sweatshirt, the man balanced on his toes in a tight bend, never moving his eyes from William. Then he quickly ripped the front side of the tape on his ankles.

“Don’t kick me. Stand right there and I’ll tie this on you.”

Ankles freed. One step at a time. The man then removed the tape and used what he could around the sweatshirt. He wasn’t going to let his hands go, William figured from the way the guy carefully neared him as he helped with his thigh, the glaring search from his gray eyes unwavering. Then he quickly stepped backward toward the door.

Neither one of them trusted the other.

“You didn’t answer. I told you, I’m a follower. I don’t want to die here. And I don’t trust you. Maybe we could change that.” William’s body tensed when the man reached back into his back pocket, where he stood vulnerable to an attack, his arms tightly held behind him and his injury making other matters more complicated. Keys. His keys, that’s all that he had.

“I don’t need her. Hell, Russell doesn’t need her if it’s true. She can drive off, without you.”

A buried truth for a life he held dear. The ominous feeling accompanied by his darkened tunnel imagery continuously playing in his mind dug in deep when he thought of her. If she was forced out of that burned house in which they stood, where they held the title as a hostage in the solitude of a hot Arizona City bordering California, a midway between his past and what he had seen as his future, Russell would take satisfaction in killing her. He knew it. Getting Gwenn back had been a lucky outcome, the nauseating hesitancy he had felt moments before a lingering reminder of the fragility of existence and of his promises he couldn’t break.

His outburst of desperation, an outburst leaving no untruths for a reason, was a part of Patricia’s secrets he had purposely hidden from her, given to her in cryptic bits in the form of a video he never asked if she viewed. Maybe she hadn’t. Passing on a message from her dead mother about circumstances that could lead to callous greedy individuals vying to locate her, all because of her mother’s errors. Familiar signs, familiar paths. He had every reason to keep her from what he knew and was reminded of that reality as he stared face-to-face with a stranger who saw him as a monetary payout to a force invisible to the naked eye, yet powerful enough to cripple and control and kill.

“What the hell are you doing?” Russell said from the doorway, the sound of the moving door startling him enough to trigger a noticeable tension in his shoulders.

“Nothing Russell. You asked him to clean up. Had to find something to stop the bleeding.”

“You’re lying Stephan.”

“Russell, what the hell? That’s the truth, right, you?”

The newly named Stephan looked toward him, Russell’s tall frame joining him in the small space of the doorway.

“Yeah, it’s the truth,” William admitted, an unwavering connection with Stephan with his eyes gave him a little trust.

Russell wasted no time in pushing past Stephan and pulling William toward him again by the fabric of his shirt. Beads of sweat had formulated at the crest of his forehead, his perfectly edged line of dark, thick hair, his desires led by a vengeful, yet pointless cause only understood by him. How many others had he damaged, killed, plotted against? William had made a major mistake, one he could never change, one he could never make right. That mistake was what brought him to the moment before him. But it was his mistake, not Patricia's, not Gwenn’s. He just needed to see that she was away from there. Dying. He’d faced it before, but it had never felt like such a dramatic encroachment.

“You won’t hear me plead for my life, Russell. I won’t give you that satisfaction. If you kill me, it won’t do a thing to bring them back. I can’t say that I deserve anything more than you because of what I did. And I’m not sorry because I want to please you. I’m sorry because it was wrong, it was all wrong. But if you are wicked enough to follow through on Diablo or Vixen, it's you who will have to pay for it.”

Russell released his shirt and clapped his hands. His face became a disoriented drunkard’s playground for a smile, crazed and bizarre. “Check out your bullshit speech. You really thought I wanted to hear your apology? You’re a bizarre case. I can’t quite figure you out. Of course, you can’t do anything to change shit. I knew that. That’s why I fucked her.”

His words swelled in his mind, a dizzying, nauseating bout of sound that resulted in an elevation of his pulse, his jaw tightened, and he pulled against the thick tape against his two wrists.

“You wh... what did you just say? You fucked her?” William felt no pain in his legs, no dizziness, nothing but pulsing in the back of his head as he pushed himself near Russell.

“Russell, what the hell? What the hell did you do?” Stephan asked.

“I told you, I fucked her.”

“Russell!”

“Shut up Stephan! I win here! I win. Made her scream.”

“Untie me! You screwed up, coward! Let me go!”

William’s anger ran amok as he pulled at the restraining tape against his skin, wanting to do anything to hurt Russell, bring him to his knees. Patricia. William ran towards Russell and pushed himself against him, forcefully landing him onto his back. He felt Russell beneath him forcing his weight against him. William rolled to his side and made his way to his feet, ignoring once again the burning sensation in his thigh. Then he raised his left leg and ushered a strong kick into Russell’s chest, then another and another into his face.

“Patricia!” he yelled from across the hallway to the room opposite where they had first been settled. “Patricia!” William saw her near the chair, her bare legs pressed against her chest, her head bowed and a mournful cry escaping from her chest. “Pat?”

He neared her just as she pulled him towards her. Her body quaked. He couldn’t hold her, he leaned toward her, pressing his face toward her. The quick huffs of her breaths between sobs came forth in bursts and vanished, her arms tightly around him as he kneeled before her, restricted from touching her. William couldn’t speak as he felt a churning within, one that made him shake. He bit his lower lip, the rage pushing against his chest.

“I tried to stop him, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t.”

“It’s not your fault. Get my hands.”

“William-”

“Get my hands, Pat.” Patricia moved, quickly pulling at the tape against his wrists. When he heard the definitive rip indicating that the crap had been removed, it felt better than cold water after a run. “Russell’s buddy has the keys. Get the hell out of here.”

Russell’s gratification in finding him suffering had not found an end. He had seen Russell’s face years before, the same sadistic smile unwavering as he took a knife to his toe, the agonizing rip of the nail abandoning the flesh, wicked and cold. Albert egged him on while he pushed, jabbed at him as he helplessly pleaded from the cold of a metal desk. Then he continued by forcing himself into the woman he loved, violating her despite William’s admissions of the hidden secrets to what no one else knew following a natural disaster and flames. That had been the perfect excuse to hide what Portia knew. Lie with a convincing face that there was no cure to Diablo or to the virus. That was a lie, like much of what Evans possessed. Exactly what happened and why it did was a mystery to William. He was only provided with the jumbled pieces, still more than what James or Russell had, all in exchange for a promise.

He readied himself as he heard Russell near the room once more, moving his freed hands behind his back. Russell was not going to win, despite his calls and shouts, not like he had before. He’d punished himself over their deaths, saw himself as worthless, unforgivable. You’re different from them, from him. Fix it. Fix it. Fix it.

Russell leaned heavily into the doorway, blood falling from his nose, his eyes glaring at him as he struggled upward, struggling to move toward him.

“You’re not getting away. I’m getting what I want from you. I want to watch you feel how I felt. Why the fuck are you standing there?” His glance moved over his shoulder to Patricia.

“Russell, c’mon, just get him, leave her alone, let’s go,” said Stephan.

“Why are you suddenly wanting to let her go, Stephan? Should I stop the trust? You already tried to stab me in the back over Xavier.”

“No. We talked about this.”

“No, you talked to him.” Russell fired two shots into Stephan who fell backward, landing on the floor. Russell hadn’t blinked, his glare returning to William.

Russell had escaped from what William had abandoned in memories, averted his death years before only by a fragmented bit of time, a careless play by another heartless puppet of James.

“You should have died years ago, Diablo would have been mine, not under the control of some mistake that Evans didn’t know how to handle.”

“No, it wouldn’t have. You’re a worthless, spineless selfish piece of shit that couldn’t fight fair. You never have fought fair.” William neared Russell, glued his eyes to his breathing, his chest heaving. “It’s fair to kidnap a little girl, to rape a woman?”

“You and I both know that nothing is fair but killing another person can make a point, especially her.” Russell started toward Patricia, just as William pushed himself forward, stretching his free arms out toward Russell and forcing him once more to the ground. He made every attempt to strike him with his uninjured right hand, focusing on Russell’s weapon. William struck Russell in his jaw with a closed fist. They both watched the weapon land into the cool of the laminate flooring of the hall, the smooth surface causing it to move further away. The burning of his wound aggravated him as she stood to his feet and struggled toward the weapon. Patricia, his promises made, his mistakes to be fixed.

William grabbed the gun and fired. He watched as Russell’s neck snapped backward from the impact of the bullet to his head.

William’s hands shook as he handled the gun, still pressed into his skin. He watched the blood pool from the wound, gathering near Russell’s black head of hair, face down. He stared, unable to take his eyes from death, dropping the weapon as the room swelled about him. He couldn’t stop his movements, the quaking, the spinning.

Patricia held him as the tears started.

“William,” Patricia pulled his face toward her, then held him steady with her hands. His healing source, her strength. He held her tightly and closed his eyes. “We need to go,” she said.

William walked over Russell’s body, and over to Stephen, painfully leaning down to reach into his pocket when Stephen raised a hand. The bastard was still alive.

“Please, help me. I don’t care about what you said, just please help me.”

“Where’s your phone? I’ll dial, you talk. We weren’t here.” Disappearing was the right move. He wanted to hurry up and vanish, leave the house, the smoke, Russell’s dead body.

“No, you weren’t,” Stephan moved a little, allowing William to search his pockets, which he did and followed through on dialing for help, leaving it up to Stephan to do the painful talking.

She waited for him from the entrance to the house, her arms crossed tightly before her. William veered his attention from Patricia, kept his eyes on the ground until they reached the car.

William flinched as he settled himself into the driver’s seat, leery of the ride ahead of him. Six miles felt like forty with his leg vying for medical attention, but he was content for the first time in a week. The threats felt silenced for a moment even though he had just ended a life, another one. It stunk. There was nothing more dreadful to him than to admit to himself what had just happened.

“Will, you had to do what you just did. You had to.”

“But I wanted to. I wanted to kill him. That’s my problem.”

They turned into traffic, civilized hustle and bustle becoming strange for obvious reasons.

“How’s your shoulder?” he asked.

“It hurts like hell,” she answered.

He couldn’t ask what more he wanted to ask, what more he wanted to say, not sure if the same would be for Patricia.

“Will, I didn’t want to tell you like this. I wanted to do something special, but given the circumstances…”

“Tell me what?”

“I’m pregnant.” He stared ahead at traffic starting to form, the what if that had happened scenarios planting in his mind. Then he let in a cleansing breath, allowed a smile, small at first, then he let it grow and stretch his skin, just as Patricia took his hand into hers. The pleasantries could outshine the dark, the fact that Miguel was waiting for a deal that would never transpire from Russell and James Evans still had access to a killer concoction, or the cousin to it still riding in the trunk of his Highlander. He put it all aside for a moment and let the joy tickle his spirit. He smiled and let it remain against his face, just before the happiness triggered a tear. He felt her squeeze his hand just before freeing it in time for him to return it to the steering wheel.

“You know; you always laugh when I say thank you. I’m not kidding, I know what each and every one is for. That, you just gave me the thirty-seventh.”

“Thirty-seven? Really, Will?”

“It’s up to you to figure them all out. You’re keeping me.”

“Yeah, I’m keeping you.”

William looked past the windshield toward a gas station ahead, the evening in full swing, taking notice of the vehicle parked at the pumps. “Is that Garrett and my father?” They drove past the intersection and into the station. Maybe he had heard him during their discussion on the porch, maybe circumstances had a chance to change. He pulled in behind Garrett’s Audi and beeped once.

“Hey, thank God. We were just about to drive over to the address Rochelle gave me. But I had to piss because of the nerves. Are you two alright?” Hunter asked as he hung his arms into the driver’s side window, a half-finished bottle of cranberry juice hanging in his hand. “Home or hospital?”

“Definitely the latter.”

“Are you okay to get there?”

“My legs are bad; Pat’s been shot, and my head is killing me. When I get out, I’ll need a stretcher and not another seat belt.”

“We’ll follow you.”

William nodded and started to raise his window just before Hunter returned. “William, you keep doing something that I would never do. Something I never did but should have. You’re selfless. And you probably had to make a difficult decision today, but you do it for reasons outside of yourself. I’m proud of you. I’m proud to be your father.” His glance rested with him for a moment just before he turned his head. “We’ll meet you there. We’re right behind you.”

William drove off, Patricia silently beside him, as he heard those words for the first time ever. They took in the silence.

Then Patricia said, “I may have number thirty-six.”

“How’d you do that?”

“You didn’t say I had to explain.”

“You’re right. I didn’t.”

“So, it's my turn. Thank you.”

“Please don’t tell me you have thirty-seven of them too.”

“No, I’ll make mine fifty,” said Patricia.

“Oh, c’mon you can’t possibly have more than me.”

“Okay, fine, you caught me, twenty. A solid twenty. You’re keeping me, so you’ve time to guess.”

They both smiled tired smiles, together, just as they drove into the hospital emergency driveway.

“You’re welcome, Pat.”

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# About the Author

Lauren Schultz is a California native who enjoys the Southern California summers and mild winters with gusto. She would not call any other place home if she could help it.

She loves sharing her love for reading with her two children. She’s been happily married to her husband whom she found an incredible friendship with over 15 years ago.

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