

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DARYL BANNER



KISSING  
WITH  
TEETH

# *Kissing With Teeth*

by

**Daryl Banner**

*USA Today* bestselling author

of

*When I See You Again*

*Raising Hell*

&

*Lover's Flood*

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# **Kissing With Teeth**

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*Maybe  
the point  
of living  
isn't finding  
who you are.  
It's outrunning  
who you  
were.*

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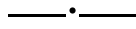
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# *Triggers & Disclaimer*



*Kissing With Teeth* is a work of fiction. It contains heavy and potentially disturbing subject matter that may be triggering to sensitive readers, including violence, graphic imagery, intense and explicit sexuality, as well as depression and suicide.

Sexual content depicted in this story is between consenting adults but may contain unusual sexual activities involving blood that some may find disturbing.

Suicide and death are major themes that recur throughout the book. It is strongly advised to use discretion in determining whether this story is suitable for you.

*Kissing With Teeth* is the first book in a series. While there is no cliffhanger for the main character's storyline, secondary characters and plots may be left unresolved until the next book.

Reader discretion is strongly advised.

Kissing  
With  
Teeth

1.  
*Hello, I Kiss With Teeth.*

—•—

Kyle tries to pick up the phone, but his fingers are too slippery with blood.

*No police, comes Tristan's voice from behind, stopping him. No ambulance. It's no use. They're gone. We have to go.*

“B-But my mom ...” chokes Kyle, overwhelmed. “Dad ... Kaleb ...”

*They're asleep, just imagine they're asleep. Let's go, now, come.*

Kyle stumbles out of the kitchen, dragged by Tristan's cold hand. Feet slippery, slick floor. The stench of death and sweat, hyacinth spilling out of an overturned vase, tiny purple petals, he keeps moving. His foot catches something. Glancing back, a face painted red, unrecognizable, cheek pressed flat against the tile in a pool of spreading blood. His mom or dad? His brother? Shouldn't he know?

But all he sees now is red. Red on the blades of the ceiling fan. Red across the keys of the family piano where he learned to play *Heart and Soul* with his younger brother.

Red footprints over the front lawn as they flee the house.

Streetlamps buzzing like angry red halos over their heads.

Even the midnight sky seems red, the stars like tiny rubies pressed against a canvas primed in black gesso, a masterpiece.

*Run until nothing looks familiar.* Tristan and Kyle race down the throat of Bent Tree Lane together, a pair of pills swallowed by the darkness of this night. *And don't look back, it's everyone's worst mistake.*

Maybe the point of living isn't finding who you are.

It's outrunning who you were.

“Are they dead? Did I kill them? Why can't I remember?”

*Don't think, just run. Until our only company is the pale moon and the crickets, don't stop running.*

Isn't it always the most beautiful things in nature that can kill you? The prettiest of frogs are the most poisonous. Or the snakes dressed in scaly sheaths of breathtaking neon the color of Nerf guns, venom loaded into their fangs like liquid bullets.

Or a set of pale pink lips at your neck.

The next thing, Tristan is peeling Kyle's bloody clothes off behind a 7-Eleven next to a dumpster and a stack of splintering pallets. Odor of putrefied Dr. Pepper, grease. An empty bag of Fritos, crushed Dasani water bottle, a bloody Band-Aid. *You'll need a new name,* says Tristan as he strips him, the streaks of red across his porcelain face like roadmaps. *Kyle Amos is dead, Kyle and everything he suffered. I will protect you, now and always, just like I promised the other day when you fought with your teammates.*

Kyle barely remembers the falling out. “I don't feel right. I need to go back home. I have to see if—”

*That isn't your home anymore. I'm your home.*

“I-I'm bleeding everywhere.”

*It's not your blood.*

“My mom ...” chokes Kyle again, his mind drawn back to the house, to the scene they left behind. “Dad ... K-Kaleb ...”

*Are you listening to me? You will never be hurt again.*

*Nothing you hated can touch you anymore.*

*You can be whatever you want now.*

*We can be gods.*

*By the way, what do you think of the name “Henry”?*

Tristan is always the one saying things. Kyle only listens, watching his own life fall apart like a drama on TV, only it feels like someone else's life, someone else's drama.

“I feel sick ...”

*In time, everything's a memory, and then even memories die.* Tristan takes off his own bloodied clothes, carelessly pitches them at the dumpster with a sigh. *Now answer me this: will the Macy's by the shopping mall suffice, or do you prefer Kohl's?*

Suddenly Kyle is following Tristan through the darkness of a closed department store in his underwear, no idea which one they broke into. He can't keep up as Tristan combs the racks for shirts, for pants, for a whole new person on clearance.

It's like an invisible leash, from Tristan's fist to Kyle's neck.

Wherever Tristan wants Kyle to walk, he walks. If he wants him to jump, to look somewhere, even to take a breath, by Tristan's unspoken command, Kyle somehow complies.

Has it always been this way? Has Kyle not noticed?

*Far away*, answers Tristan. Did Kyle even ask the question? *That is where the likes of us are headed—somewhere far, far away, where we can live like princes.* His voice always seems to come from somewhere else, not his mouth, like a dark thought, the kind licensed professionals prescribe drugs to suppress. *You've outgrown your life. Now you've shed the skin. Free.*

“Why do I feel so hollow? Like I'm dead ...”

*This isn't your death, it's your birth.*

“Everything hurts.”

*You're molting. Just like bugs do, or something.* Tristan holds a shirt up to Kyle's cold bare chest, then another, then another, twists his lips into a pensive frown. *No, you need a confident look. Tighter, to show off your muscular frame. Can you stop fidgeting?*

A thousand unanswered questions circle Kyle's mind like vultures over carnage, all he can manage to say is, “We ... We can't take these clothes ... This is stealing.”

*It's a good thing you're an athlete, you will fit well in anything.*

“Did you throw my letterman jacket away? Back there, in the dumpster? We have to go back for it.”

*There is no such thing as going back, not for anything or anyone.*

“But I finally made varsity.”

*Oh, look at your cute face ... You're gonna steal hearts with that face of yours. Might be your deadliest weapon yet.*

“My heart isn’t racing.” Kyle puts a hand to his bare chest, eyes wide. “Shouldn’t it be racing? Everything is so strange ... like I’m not me, like I’m not here.”

*You're you. You're here.*

“I don’t feel right at all. My ... My finger stings.”

*Still wearing your pinky ring? That's another allergy I forgot to mention—silver—gets worse the deeper you transform. Still so young, barely a night old. Here, put it in my pocket, I'll keep it safe. Already found myself a lovely pair of pants, see? So nice and roomy.*

Hand shaking, Kyle pulls off the ring with a grimace, drops it into Tristan’s outstretched pocket. The stinging slowly fades, then gone. He inspects his pinky finger. It left a burn mark.

The ring makes him think of his younger brother again. Kaleb, overachiever, their parents’ trophy child. The worst part isn’t the lingering taste of blood in Kyle’s mouth right now, nor even whose it might be, his brother’s, his mother’s, his father’s.

It’s that he craves more.

*Caterpillars probably complain in their cocoons too, how icky it is to turn into goo before becoming a butterfly. Who said change is easy? Tristan holds another shirt up, then flings it aside. He does this eighteen times with eighteen tops, making a mess of the aisles. Focus on what you'll become. That was the point all along, remember.*

“Am I gonna have a weird sun allergy, too? Like you do? Am I gonna get bored with food? Am I—”

*Sunlight is such a tiny price for what you get in return. I'll teach you about these things—about everything. But first ...* He holds up two shirts. *Are you more of a vermilion or a carmine, do you think?*

Two red shirts, but every red looks the same now.

Every red is blood.

“Please let me go back, Tristan. We ... We have to go back in case someone—”

*There were no survivors. You know that. There is no hope for them and there shouldn't be. Now: vermilion or carmine?*

“W-What did I do ...?”

*It all happened fast. You're just in shock. That will wear off, too. Are you horny, by the way? Tristan's fingers curl around the two red shirts. Just me? There's something about the thrill of abandon that makes me so incorrigibly hard ...*

“My mom ... my dad ... Are they really—?”

*You're killing the mood, bringing them up. I asked a question.*

“My little brother ...”

Kyle's back slams against a display mannequin as Tristan leaps upon him at once. Everything rattles, then settles. In the darkness of the store, they're just shadows without faces, vague silhouettes, like the mannequins.

A set of cool fingertips touch Kyle's cheek, then his lips. *Bite*, orders Tristan, his pale pink lips hovering somewhere in



the darkness. *If you want to keep up, you need to learn how we kiss.*

“How?”

*With teeth.*

Kyle parts his lips. Tristan’s cool, pale finger slips in. Kyle gives it a soft, shaky bite. Tristan’s eyes catch a glint of red light from a nearby exit sign as his fingers drag down Kyle’s bare chest, down the valley between his abs, then further down to the waistband of his white briefs, where he gives a teasing tug.

*Oh, I’ve made a discovery. You seem to be excited, too.*

Kyle looks down. In just his underwear, there’s no hiding whatever he feels. “I-I can’t help it ... I don’t know.”

*The thrill of abandon does it for you, too. Cool fingers slip into Kyle’s briefs and wrap around him. Kyle gasps. We’re so alike, it’s a wonder it took us so long to realize it. Tingles of pleasure rush through Kyle just from a single touch. Should I go on?*

One of the mannequins tips over, lands with a crash.

*Is that a yes?*

“I can’t stop seeing them,” says Kyle, distressed. “Kaleb, he cried something out to me, my brother, but what was it?”

*No one can hurt you anymore. It ended back there, all of it, your suffering, it’s all over. Tristan still has a hold of Kyle below. The sensation of pleasure radiates through Kyle’s body. It’s ever so difficult to focus on anything else. You are in control now.*

The last thing Kyle feels is in control. Everything is rapidly spinning away from him. His parents, his identity, his life.

“Did I die in that house, too?”

*No. Everything will feel a hundred times more. Every touch, like a hundred touches. Every bite, a hundred. Also your sorrows and your joys. You are a hundred times more alive now than you ever were.*

“But I—”

Tristan’s lips catch Kyle’s right then, silencing him.

All he tastes is blood. Without seeing it, he feels the red all over his lips, Tristan’s lips, everywhere. Seasoning his cheeks. His hair. Earlobes. Down his arms to his unsteady hands, under his fingernails, all of the sticky, sticky red, everywhere.

Somewhere in his bloodstained kitchen, back home, there is a calendar hanging on the side of the refrigerator. It shows a single event planned for this weekend—his football game.

Kyle suspects he won’t be able to attend anymore.

There may never be another game in his future. Only this one which has started with Tristan, this game of running away, of living in shadows, biting fingers, picking out clothes ...

A game that has no end, no winners, and no prize.

Tristan takes hold of Kyle’s face by the chin and aims it to his own. *Do you remember what they did to you? That family? Your so-called friends and teammates? All the events that*

*brought us here? Look into my eyes, Kyle. Now. Look into my eyes and focus.*

It's a beautiful kind of trap, every time Kyle dares to obey and bring his heavy eyes to Tristan's.

The world fades, everything along with it. Every emotion Kyle bears is solved, at once made weightless and trivial.

All of his troubles are obliterated. His worries and doubts.

This is how it has been since the day they met.

Tristan's otherworldly hold over him.

Kyle's helpless fascination.

"Vermilion," Kyle chooses. "The left one, the darkest red."

Tristan's smile returns. *We are going to have so much fun in this new world together, you and I, so much wicked fun.*

*But first, he adds, you will need pants.*

## 2.

### *Tristan.*

—•—

“Well, someday I’ll be dead and gone, and you can make all the rules and live however you want, I don’t care. While you’re under this roof, you walk your little brother to school. Y’know how kids can be. They’re assholes. Pass the pepper.”

It was Kyle’s mother who said that.

Kyle was in the middle of eating breakfast. His dad sat at the head of the table, a sports magazine in one hand, a fork of scrambled egg in the other. He never interfered. In anything. Just a silent, soulless face at the end of the table.

Kyle passed the pepper, and his mother eyed him across the table. “Thank you, dear.”

Kaleb, sitting in the mismatched chair next to him, stayed quiet as he studied from a math book, chewed on toast. Dad let out a sigh, turned a page in his magazine. Mom stirred sugar into her coffee. Typical morning to a seemingly typical day.

On the curb just outside the house, Kyle’s brother turned to him. “You don’t have to walk me. I’m thirteen years old. It’s embarrassing. Mom’s just overprotective and crazy.”

Kyle frowned. “You sure? Kids *can* be assholes.”

“Yes, I’m sure.” Kaleb pulled on the straps of his backpack and set off. Two houses away, he looked over his shoulder. “I said I’m fine, you don’t have to watch me.”

“Go on,” said Kyle. “Promise I won’t follow.”

Despite the promise, Kyle did trail behind his brother for three and a half blocks, past the cemetery, past the park, but keeping his distance, even though he was sure Kaleb knew he was following anyway. The weather was unseasonably nice this time of year in central Texas, a cool front having blown in over the weekend. Kyle stayed by the road and watched his brother from a distance, enjoying the breeze on his face as Kaleb made his way to the entrance of the school.

The kid would be in high school next year, and Kyle would be graduated. He could still remember the bedtime stories he’d read to his younger brother to lull him to sleep. There was one about a town filling up with spaghetti. One about a cat on the moon. One about a prince who stole the rainbow.

He was growing up too fast.

Kyle headed the other way to the high school, backpack slung over his shoulder. With the grey sky overhead, morning wind tossing his bangs, he drew headphones over his ears and turned on his Walkman, listening to whatever mix tape he had made last night, drowning out the world with his music as he stuffed his hands into the pockets of his letterman jacket.

Unaware that it was the last normal morning of his life.

The morning he met Tristan.

Kyle entered his classroom silently and slumped into his seat, hugging his backpack like a pillow atop the desk. Just the start to another school day. Kyle, with his heavy eyes, slouched shoulders, lonely, no one rushing up to talk to him

about their weekend, always tired from football practice, fidgeting with his silver pinky ring, bored.

Until he noticed that the once empty desk two rows over with a lopsided smiley carved on its surface had an occupant.

A new student.

Kyle would come to learn his name was Tristan, the odd and alluring new arrival from a strange town no one knew. Or another country. Or planet. Truth became so twisted by gossip in the halls of the school, no one could hope to untangle it.

Maybe it was Kyle's frame of mind that day that so easily drew him to Tristan. How he felt so detached from everything, even his brother, his family, his teammates, his life. He felt like a moon orbiting nothing, adrift in space, light years from even the nearest star.

And then Kyle spotted Tristan that morning, who appeared at that empty desk two rows over, like an answer to everything.

Milky skin, smooth, strangely unblemished, like porcelain.

Always wearing a smirk on his pale pink lips.

Long, lean figure with perfect posture, like a dancer, or some kind of prince. Wearing mismatched clothes that seemed perfectly intentional, even if picked blindly from the closet.

A face that reflected unwavering apathy.

It was as if nothing could touch him.

He exuded a kind of strength Kyle wasn't used to, strength that didn't come from how hard one could ram their

body into a rival, how big their biceps, how loud their voice.

Tristan's was a subtle strength. Unassuming.

And with just a single glimpse that first day of class, Kyle was spellbound, unable to take his eyes off of the strange new student, to concentrate at all, to think, to even breathe.

It was paralysis at first sight.

Kyle rarely acknowledged feelings he had for other guys. He kept them buried, out of anyone's reach. His nights were so often spent with his bedroom door locked, bed sheets swishing as he jerked off to the front covers of the sports magazines he'd snatch away from his dad's collection when no one looked. But over the past summer, an entirely new source of inspiration was discovered in finding grainy images on the family computer and its crawling dialup internet, which he'd then swiftly delete after burning to memory. The imagery later fueled the machine of his mind as he cooked up fantasies behind his squeezed-shut eyelids, fantasies he would never dare admit out loud.

So it was with great care and caution that he snuck glances at the new student two rows over, at Tristan, the boy with short blond hair, adorably messy, and his sleepy, misty blue eyes that seemed uninterested in anyone or anything.

Even the class president when she decided to introduce herself to him one afternoon. "I'm also a devout Christian," she finished rather pompously, "and believer of God."

Tristan yawned, twirled a red pen between his long fingers, and said, *That's okay, not all of us can be perfect.*

He was fearless. Everything Kyle wished he could be.

Kyle had no real friends anymore. No enemies either. He was a fly on the wall in every scene of his own life. His parents took little interest in him, all of their attention paid to their youngest, to Kaleb. Kyle's eighteenth birthday came and went, no one said a word. His football games, no one ever attended, everyone always having something else to do.

All he craved was for someone to look at him. To truly see him. Even the dullest of interactions would have been a gift.

"The hell's with you?" Morning the next day, two of Kyle's teammates stood over Tristan's desk like trees. The room had fallen silent. Class hadn't started yet, the teacher was nowhere. Word got around fast that the new kid had a mouth he liked to use. "You some kinda psycho or somethin'?"

Kyle wasn't part of this. Just like with everything in life, he only watched from two rows over as Tristan, bored, lifted his sleepy eyes from whatever he was sketching and replied: *Do you believe in karma?*

"Huh? The fuck you talkin' about?"

*I don't believe in karma. I believe the most evil person on Earth can live a happy, lovely life and get everything they ever dreamed of.* Tristan dragged his eyes up the footballer's body, then stopped at his chest with a frown. *Is your name really Brock? Were your parents mad when they named you?*

Everyone in class held their breath.

It was difficult to tell if it was in amazement or fear.

They were all starved for something terrible to happen. It was like a fire in everyone's eyes, an excited, greedy fire.



Kyle's, too.

“What did you just say to me?”

*Your heart is beating faster.* Tristan tilted his head, squinting at him in thought, as if listening to something no one else could hear. *That means either you're angry or you're turned on. It's a pity I can't tell which.*

A girl in the back of the class gasped.

Someone else shifted in their seat, jaw dropped.

Brock took a step forward, eclipsing the fluorescents and casting his shadow over Tristan. “Wanna get your ass kicked? Right here? In front of everyone?”

Tristan crossed his legs and calmly set down his red pen. *Your name, I just realized,* he went on in a lazy drawl, staring at Brock's chest. *It's just “rock” with a “b” in front of it.*

Brock's face tightened.

Kyle wondered why no one stopped Tristan, why no one warned him not to mess with the quarterback's best friend, not to make an enemy out of someone like Brock Hastings.

*Do you like rocks?* Tristan asked, carrying on blithely. He let out a tiny yawn, his eyes half-lidded as he observed Brock with mild interest. *You ever slept like one? Would you like to?*

Everyone in the room clung to something—their backpack, edge of the desk, pencils and binders, anything, desperate to see what was about to happen.

Blood was going to be spilled, everyone was certain.

Blood from the new kid, all over the classroom.

Instead, the teacher entered. “What’s going on here?” The silence persisted until Brock at last said, “Nothing, ma’am, I was just headed out.” He took a step back from Tristan’s desk, mumbled, “*Watch your back,*” under his breath, then made his way out of the classroom, on his way to his own.

That brief encounter was all anyone talked about the rest of the day. Kyle stood by his locker, burdened by schoolbooks in his arms, as he watched Tristan stroll by to another class, no care in the world. He nearly floated, the way he walked.

The truth is, Kyle hated Brock Hastings. The two used to be friends growing up, as close as friends could be. Brock’s dad was pals with the coach, them going way back, and his family had connections with countless colleges and their sports teams, from New York down to Texas, to Phoenix, Arizona and even Las Vegas. Something to do with investments and stocks and who knows. Kyle felt like he was friends with a demigod.

But rivalry and ego drove them apart, and Brock had won it all—the social power, the spotlight, the coveted role of best friend to the quarterback.

And Kyle had a pinky ring.

So it was with private satisfaction that he listened to Brock talk shit in the locker room. “What the hell is it with that guy? Wears weird clothes. Shows up to school in a floppy hat, jacket, and sunglasses. Uses an umbrella in the bright daylight. Special permission to not do PE ‘cause he can’t do laps outside ‘cause of some fuckin’ sun allergy. What kind of bullshit is that? Then he talks shit to me? To ME?” His teammates gave their nods and grunts of agreement, all of

them working each other up like an engine, spitting insults and laughing. “Yeah, I know his last class of the day, you bet I know where he’ll be. You guys wanna come and witness that motherfucker gettin’ his face beat in?”

Kyle was among the five who cornered Tristan outside the doors of Study Hall C that afternoon.

There was no telling how he got roped in. It could be just as well he simply tagged along and no one noticed.

*Always arriving in numbers,* observed Tristan tiredly as he counted them, one by one. *Never alone, guys like you. Is it perhaps that you aren’t a complete person without your friends?*

“You’re gonna die today,” said Brock, jaw tightening.

*I sometimes wish I had friends. Loyal ... always by my side ... I tell you this with absolute sincerity, I envy guys like you.*

“No one here likes you,” said Brock. “No one here’s gonna be your fuckin’ friend. You act like you’re better than everyone and you just got here from wherever the hell you came. You insulted me about my name and implied I’m a homo. Insulted Jessica, the class president. You’re fuckin’ ruined.”

*Which one was she?* Tristan wondered aloud. *The God girl?*

“Go ahead, act smart, it’ll be the last time you speak before I knock every last tooth out of your mouth.”

*People always resort to violence so quickly, always so angry, when they could just try the most obvious alternative.*

Tristan approached Brock. When he smiled, it seemed strangely sincere. *Just give in to your desires. Why hide them? It's so stressful, isn't it? To suppress them, keep them bound down in your gut like prisoners? What did those desires ever do to you but bring you unfathomable joy? What's their crime? It's inhumane, to keep them locked up. Set them free.*

“Say one more fuckin’ word ...”

*Your heart is racing again.*

The second Brock pulled his tight fist back, ready to send it through Tristan’s jaw, an odd thing happened.

Tristan’s fingers, as gentle as silk, rushed up to the side of Brock’s face, like a caress, a stroke of a lover’s fingertips across his cheek, sweetly.

Brock’s eyes twisted upward, mouth fell slack, arm dropped to his side, and to the floor the rest of him went.

Silence befell the hallway.

The others took a step back from Brock’s body, alarmed.

*Out like a rock*, cooed Tristan, as if into a baby’s crib.

After a second, one of the guys ran off without a word, as far from the scene as he could. Another feebly whimpered, “B-Brock ...?” then became distressed when there was no reply and took off, too, followed soon by his friend.

The only one left was Kyle.

Tristan sat upon the floor, cross-legged, and laid Brock’s head in his lap, where he began to stroke the football player’s hair. *There, there*, said Tristan. *Enjoy your nap. You needed it*

*ever so badly. You'll wake up refreshed. And maybe with an erection.*

“H-How’d you do that?” asked Kyle.

Meanwhile, Brock had begun to snore.

Kyle stood there like a rock himself as Tristan’s eyes slowly went from one end of his body to the other—from his sneakers, to the rolled-up cuff of his jeans, to his thighs that filled them out, to his waist, up the crevice between the front of his opened letterman jacket, underneath which his formfitting shirt showed off his work at the gym, up to his broad yet slouched shoulders, and finally to his face, where Tristan’s gaze pierced him like a spear. It was surprising, the hidden power Tristan carried in his eyes, how he was so easily able to penetrate Kyle, to strip away his clothes without touching him at all, to invade him. Each and every inch of Kyle was exposed to Tristan right then.

Kyle had no hope to hide anything.

Just when Kyle thought he couldn’t bear another second, Tristan’s lips curled into a smirk. *Goodness, that was close, wasn't it? I nearly had every last tooth knocked out of my mouth. By the way, I just noticed you didn't run off with your friends.*

Kyle stared back. “What?”

*You're not like them, are you? I can tell.* Tristan peered down at Brock. *Does he use conditioner, do you think? His hair is so soft.*

“How did you do that?” Kyle asked again. “He fell asleep. Like a narcoleptic or something. Shouldn’t you, like ... go?”

*Your friends think I killed him. They may return with an adult. Or a priest. He continued to stroke Brock's hair thoughtfully. Most likely a priest. Hmm, no, I should stay. Besides, who would protect Brock? Did you know that Mr. Reed, your trusty biology teacher, likes to steal used jockstraps from the laundry?*

Kyle blinked. "What?"

*Socks, too. The gym is just around the corner from the lab. I can't say what he does with the dirty laundry, but I know his heart races when he snatches them. He loves doing it, even if it terrifies him. Do you think he has a collection at home? Is one of yours among them?*

"What are you talking about?"

*Whatever he does with them, his briefcase reeks of teenage musk. It wouldn't take a Sherlock. Who's to say what he'd do if he happened upon Brock's vulnerable body? Lying here in the hall, undefended? He might seem like a terrible person, but really, he's got a soft heart, this one. Tristan smiled down at Brock, still stroking his hair. Also, he's rather handsome, if you look at him at the right angle.*

Kyle scoffed at that and took a step back. "No way, you're making that up about Mr. Reed. How can you even know if —?"

*I've noticed you watching me in class, too.*

Kyle looked at him, alarmed, at once ready to deny it.

But he felt flames in his cheeks, betraying him. He felt the power in the words Tristan uttered mere seconds ago—about suppressing desires, setting prisoners free, all of that.

How Tristan thought Kyle was different than his friends.

Kyle considered Brock, still snoring, and wondered if they had another thing in common, something they would never dare confess to each other out loud.

And Kyle considered his own dark secrets.

Things he does at night. His fantasies. His racing heart.

His own locked-up prisoners.

*It's okay,* said Tristan lightly. *I've been watching you, too.*

That caught Kyle by surprise, as he was certain Tristan had been ignoring him since day one. "You have?"

*And patiently waiting for you to say something first. Mmm, you intrigue me.* Tristan pulled lint off of Brock's shoulder and flung it aside. *Your friend is quite a heavy sleeper, by the way.*

"Is he going to wake up? Are you ... Are you a hypnotist? I just want to know how you did that," Kyle insisted. "That's all."

*Are you sure that's all you want to know?*

Kyle didn't know how to respond.

Tristan stopped stroking Brock's hair and looked up. *I can tell you a whole lot more than how I put him to sleep. But first, I have a request.*

"What?"

*Would you eat lunch with me tomorrow? I don't enjoy sitting alone, and as it turns out, your friend here was right. I*

*have no one at this school. Not even a ... what's it called? ...  
"study buddy".*

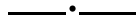
Kyle frowned at Brock. "He's not my friend."

Tristan lifted an eyebrow. *Is that a yes?*



### 3.

## *Creating Monsters.*



It was a restless night of sleep for Kyle.

Not just because of the inconvenient erection he wrestled with under the sheets.

He found himself thinking about Halloween five years ago for some reason. He was thirteen. Kaleb, eight. Brock was with them, too. Instead of trick-or-treating like they were supposed to, the boys went to a psychic, her shop sandwiched between a drug store and a RadioShack. Kyle still remembered the smell. Musk, old books, a cloying fragrance from somewhere unseen. He had wanted to do something special for his brother who was never allowed to experience such things. He had saved up lunch money and allowance just for that night.

But the old psychic, her long silver hair, her brown papery skin, her odd mismatched eyes, she didn't take a cent from him. Children, she called them all. Foolish, reckless little children. She told them to take a seat. Only Kyle did, Kaleb being too distracted wandering around the place looking at this, at that, gawking at the strange trinkets on the shelves, a rack of tiny vials along the wall, potions, tinctures, tonics, likely filled with nothing but colored water and nonsense, Kyle presumed. But in front of the strange lady, he didn't dare mock any of it. Brock was in the back of the room playing it cool, arms crossed, smirk on his face. The woman didn't sit.

She stood over Kyle, peering down at him for a long while, her eyes growing harsh, soft, then harsh again, as if watching a troubling movie only she could see, her long silver hair like a curtain.

“You will live a long life,” she then told him, words spindly and drawn out like piano wire. “A very, very long life. You will make friends. You will make foes. You will make friends who slay your foes ... and foes who slay your friends.”

Kyle never believed in psychics or magic, but when the lady looked at him, he felt as if she could see his darkest desires.

“If you ever find yourself lost,” she had said, “a lone lion in the middle of nowhere without your pride, where even sunlight cannot hope to penetrate the darkness of your life ... you will find comfort in an old enemy ... whose hatred will save you.”

“Lion! Rawr!” Kaleb had shouted as he swung his arms around like a little monster on the savannah, bearing teeth.

“Shut up, Kaleb,” Kyle hissed at him, embarrassed.

The old woman wasn't annoyed by the boy. She seemed to find him adorable. “You, too, shall live a long life,” she said to Kaleb, a twinkle of joy in her eyes. “Music,” she then stated, as if the word came to her as a surprise. “You will cherish it. It will be your greatest and only love ... but you will hate it first.”

It was then that Brock pushed away from the wall. “What about me? What's my fortune or whatever?”

The look the woman gave Brock right then could wither a garden of roses to ruin. Kyle remembered her face reflecting sadness when she answered. “You, handsome little devil ... you will have a wife you love, a child you love, and a best friend you love ... and you will abandon them all.”

Brock fumed in an instant. “That’s stupid.”

Kaleb let out a burp right then, rushed to the side of his brother who was still seated, and asked, “Do you have candy?”

Her mouth wrinkled up. “Will Snickers do?”

That year, it felt as if the Fates themselves wove a path to guide the three of them to that old psychic lady, even if it was just entertainment, just bullshit. The boys all left with Snickers bars and a whole lot of nothing in their buckets. And as Brock went on cursing about how “old and dumb” that psychic was, Kyle peered back at the parlor several times, feeling like the building itself was watching them walk away.

Kyle turned over and over in bed, thinking about that night five years ago, thinking about psychics and strange eyes, about Tristan and what he did to Brock in the hallway, about magic and impossible things, about fate.

Something was coming for Kyle, he just knew it. He felt it in his heart, a cold and difficult sensation, like fear, yet exciting.

Was Tristan what Kyle had been waiting for? Was Tristan the answer to everything missing in his life?

Was he ready for it?

It was at lunch the next day, poking at a heap of mashed potatoes with his fork, that Tristan calmly asked, *Don't you*

*ever get bored with food?*

Kyle's cheeks were stuffed. "Not when it's hamburger day."

Tristan smirked. *You're such a jock.*

Kyle kept chewing mindlessly, then his eyes detached. "Do you believe in psychics?"

Tristan picked at the sleeves of his oversized red cardigan in thought. *I believe in frauds, rent, and capitalism.*

Kyle shook his head with a snort. "Never mind."

It was an easy accommodation for Kyle to let Tristan join him, as he usually ate alone at the end of a table in the back of the cafeteria anyway. The football table was always too noisy and crowded, full of pesky cheerleaders who kept touching him or laughing too loudly.

As they ate together, it wasn't lost on Kyle that people were looking, whispering, staring. No one understood them.

The beauty, Kyle soon realized, was that no one had to.

The next morning, Tristan met Kyle between classes at his locker. *Do you think that teachers are the most disappointed people on Earth?* Tristan pondered this aloud as Kyle fished around his locker for a notebook. *To have a dream of contributing to the youth of today, only to be met by the actual youth of today ...*

"Sounds more like a nightmare," muttered Kyle.

*Nightmares are dreams, too.*

Kyle was about to enter his next class when he spotted Mr. Reed across the hall entering his own. The teacher stopped

just then, as if sensing Kyle, and gazed back. His eyes were nervous, like he had been caught, guilty somehow, just from that glance. The biology teacher offered a mild, tentative nod before quietly disappearing into his classroom.

Kyle noticed the teacher gripping his briefcase. Tightly.

“I never thought Mr. Reed would do anything like that,” said Kyle to Tristan as the two strolled to another class, “but then I saw him, and he had this jumpy look in his eyes ...”

*Eyes never lie.*

“Are there really monsters like that hiding among us?”

*I've seen a lot. Good and bad. I question what really constitutes a monster. Is lust such a bad thing? Murder, even? If you want to see a true monster, try snatching a lollipop out of a toddler's hand.*

“Are you saying what Mr. Reed does isn't wrong?”

*I'm saying in the greater scope of evil, none of us are fair agents in what is right or wrong.*

“I don't think it's right. He knows better, he's a teacher and he's abusing his power.” Kyle grimaced. “Can't stop wondering if he had my jock in that briefcase.”

*Just listen to your Walkman, drown it all out, you will survive.*

“It's wrong, so wrong,” sighed Kyle.

That wasn't the only secret Tristan unearthed. On another day, he said: *Your coach flirts with what's-her-name, the freshman cheerleader, the brunette with no boobs. She*

*reciprocates, but I think it's in fear, something about the way her heart skips.*

*Another day: Someone had sex in the janitor closet by the gym this morning. Heard their hearts racing from my calculus class down the hall, right in the middle of a pop quiz, too. Quite distracting.*

*And also: The devout Christian and class president Jessica is definitely pregnant. I think it's a boy. Should we get her a gift?*

It was always more than Kyle cared to know. Yet each time there was a new story to tell, and due to the seeming truth of what was said about Mr. Reed, Kyle found himself glued to Tristan's every word, mesmerized, sickened, curious. Even if they seemed like fiction half the time. Could it be possible that Tristan really did have an otherworldly way of reading people, as if everyone was a walking book?

Could he read Kyle in the same way?

"Oh, it's just another mix tape," he answered Tristan one morning before the start of their day. They were in front of the school near the parking lot under the shade of the front awning. "Moody stuff, grunge, alternative."

*Can I listen?*

Kyle blinked. He had never shared his music before. "I, uh, I guess you can, if you—"

Tristan took the headphones from around Kyle's neck and put them over his own ears. Music played from the Walkman still sitting in Kyle's hands. Tristan met Kyle's eyes from under his floppy hat. The two stared at one another.

Kyle, the noise of other students in the parking lot fading.

Tristan, whatever music flowed into his ears, as his still-as-a-portrait face stared forward, misty blue eyes upon Kyle's.

In this moment, it was as close as he had ever felt to anyone in the whole world. Sharing his music, which even Brock never gave a shit about growing up, which even Kaleb had no interest in hearing, no friends, no other teammates, nothing.

Only Tristan, only Kyle, and this precious moment.

*Sounds like noise made into music, and a sad man singing on top of it.* Tristan never looked away, not once. *You are a very, very interesting person with unexpected tastes, Kyle.*

“Uh ... th-thank you.”

*Will you continue to share more of your music with me?*

Kyle swallowed hard, too hard. “Yes, yeah, sure, I guess.”

Tristan smiled.

It would be that smile that fueled Kyle's thoughts when he sat awake in bed at night, staring at the wall, heart racing. He took off all his clothes and slipped under his bed sheets, naked. It was then he realized no grainy image scraped off the floor of the internet was going to do it. Nor any of the front covers of his dad's sports magazines. Nothing satisfied.

Nothing except that fierce look in Tristan's eyes.

And the way he was able to touch Kyle without his hands.

Only through headphones, music from a mix tape, and soft words he uttered about sad men singing over noise.

Kyle slipped his hand under the sheets, closed his eyes, and the room filled with a different noise.

A different music.

It seemed like every day their teacher gave them downtime, Kyle would find himself gravitating toward Tristan's desk to check out whatever he was drawing. It was always artful and surprisingly innocent, like a tree in a meadow, or the moon in the starry night sky, or a bushy-tailed cat on a windowsill.

Somehow, the new student became Kyle's center of gravity.

When Kyle was around Tristan, he felt as if he could be anything he wanted, do anything, say anything.

Tristan made him brave. Daring. Reckless.

"Trying something," said Kyle as his pencil scratched along the paper. The headphones to his Walkman hung around his neck, mix tape forgotten. "Had an idea and wanted to try it."

It was in their study hall one afternoon. Tristan stared over his shoulder. *What's it supposed to be? A monster?*

"You can't tell?" Kyle bit his lip as he concentrated.

*Have you ever drawn anything before?*

"I used to. I loved to draw. I have, like, so many notebooks at home, notebooks my mom or dad shoved away into a box in the attic someplace. Gave up drawing when I started football."

*Am I the one who inspired you?*



“You can say that. How’s this looking? I’m no good at eyes, they always look crossed.” When Kyle noticed the perplexed look on Tristan’s face, he sighed. “It’s a lion. I like lions.”

*Very regal animals. Loyal, protective, cautious ... like you.*

“I think it would be cool to live where lions live. Out in the open savannah. Or, like, maybe a desert town, right on the edge of nothing, with just the glittering hot sand and the mountains. I could be like a lion myself, braving the world with my pride.”

*Lions don’t live in desert towns. They feast on them.*

“Lions in my world don’t feast. My pride would unite with the town. We’d live there in peace, everyone happy, even the real lions.” Kyle noticed the look on Tristan’s face and scoffed. “Hey, don’t go ruining my fantasy. Let me have this. I like my imaginary life in the desert.”

*Hmm. Too much sun for me.*

When Kyle neared completion, he realized his drawing did look more like a monster, deadly fangs for teeth, wild mane like a dozen venomous snakes without faces, eyes manic and feral. “Uh ... don’t worry, I’ll get better,” Kyle insisted.

He tried drawing many animals over the week. He found that he loved to draw again, feeling like a piece of his childhood was igniting back to life every time he picked up the pencil.

And each day, instead of a lion, he produced a monster.

*You have an issue with proportion,* said Tristan one morning before class began, standing over Kyle’s desk. *All of*

*your limbs are different sizes. The eyes, too. Can I help?*

Kyle froze as Tristan gently took hold of his hand to guide the strokes of his pencil on the paper.

Tristan's grip was soft and cool to the touch.

Kyle was paralyzed, mouth dry, as Tristan gently drew with Kyle's hand, guiding every line, curve, flick of the pencil.

*You can apply shading, too,* said Tristan, as if Kyle could even hope to pay attention. *To distinguish the limbs better, to give them life and shape. See how I do it?*

Kyle couldn't follow anything. He was too consumed by the sudden close proximity of Tristan, their bodies together, their hands having become one. Tristan was so cute. So sweet. So gentle, the way he touched, as if Kyle was a soft and cuddly cat Tristan was afraid to harm. "Yeah," he choked out anyway.

*See how I make the lines? How I measure them?*

Tingles of pleasure raced up and down Kyle's neck, up and down his arms. His heart pounded. "Y-Yes ... yes, I do."

*Just watch. Watch and feel. I can teach you.*

His words were delivered softly into Kyle's ear as the pencil artfully danced over the paper. Kyle played it cool, as if none of this affected him.

Despite the way his breathing changed.

Despite admiring the smooth, fluid movements of Tristan's hand, Tristan, who was always so graceful, so intentional.

“You’re good at this,” said Kyle. He was impressed at how calm he was acting, even with his hammering heart. “You’re a great teacher.”

*Want me to let you try now? Have you learned enough?*

Kyle kept his voice level. He wanted Tristan to stay close to him as long as possible. “Show me a little more. Like, how do you, uh ... do the eyes? How do you make them right?”

*Like this,* said Tristan, guiding his hand.

Was it true that Tristan could hear the racing of someone else’s heart? Could Tristan hear Kyle’s right then? Maybe he could, and he was just being polite in not pointing out how fast it drummed as he held his hand, afraid of embarrassing him.

Maybe he knew everything, like what Kyle was doing under his bed sheets every night this week, who he thought of, what inspired his hand to move at night, as well as what inspired his hand to move right now.

*One day, you will stop creating monsters,* said Tristan.

Kyle bit his lip as he watched their hands move in sync, like a pair of lifelong dancers, like choreography.

The rest of that afternoon, Kyle felt like he was filled with an infinite supply of thrumming, electrical energy. Even during practice, his legs felt like they could run for miles, from one end of the town to the other, up a mountain and back down without breaking a sweat. His hands were quicker, catching every ball thrown to him. He laughed too easily at jokes.

It didn’t even faze him when he spotted his coach and a few of the cheerleaders in the hallway one afternoon, including the freshman brunette. Nothing seemed all that out

of the ordinary to Kyle, but he couldn't help wondering if he would be able to someday perceive what was so obvious to Tristan.

He smiled as he ate dinner that evening with his family, even if they were busy talking to each other and ignoring him. His dad mumbled to his mom, "Honey, have you seen the July edition? Can't find it anywhere, not with the other magazines." Kyle continued to eat, lifting his free hand to practice his pencil strokes in the air with an imaginary pencil, beautiful animals appearing over his green beans, the desert lions in his pride.

What was it about his new friendship with Tristan that gave him such life?

"Okay, are you ever gonna tell me how you did it?" asked Kyle one day at lunch, imitating the gesture with his left hand down his own face. "Something like that, then Brock was out. Is it some kinda secret pressure point thing? That's my guess."

Tristan gazed at Kyle across the table. *Do you get your pretty eyes from your mom or your dad?*

Kyle blinked. "Both, I guess. We have the same eyes, same color, all of us. Wait." He stopped himself. "Did you just call my eyes pretty?"

*So do you like your family?*

"You didn't answer my question. Either of them."

*You can be honest with me. Tell me everything, even bad stuff. I am really good with bad stuff.*

There was a burst of laughter from the football table. Kyle looked in their direction. He couldn't tell what was funny. He

didn't care, either. "I guess I like them, sorta, but ... they don't pay attention to me much." Even when his father's magazines go missing and Kyle's the only obvious culprit.

*Why not? I feel like an adventurer when I'm around you,* said Tristan, studying Kyle's face. *Everyone else is boring. You are not. I don't understand how your family can regard you so little.*

"How am I not as boring as everyone else? I'm, like ... the most boring. I don't host parties. I don't have some cheerleader girlfriend. No sex life. Don't even have good grades. My lions look like Medusas with paws."

*Where did you get that pinky ring?*

Kyle set down his chicken tender and lifted his finger. "Oh, this? It's ... well, here's the story. My younger brother Kaleb, as a kid, he had this obsession with jewelry, this crazy obsession. He'd steal Mom's rings and wear them. So they started buying him his own. Cheaper ones that weren't family heirlooms ... or wedding bands or however many karats." Kyle shrugged. "This one, he outgrew, and he gave it to me. Fits on my pinky. Here." He pulled it off and offered it over the table. "Wanna see it?"

Tristan took the ring.

Then emitted a shriek of pain.

The ring flung from his palm and landed in Kyle's cup of chicken gravy.

A moment passed as they stared at the ring—or where it was before it sank. Kyle looked up at Tristan, at a loss.

Tristan straightened himself. *Sorry, he said. I have an allergy to a certain metal. Sort of.*

“Another allergy?”

*I didn't mean for the ring to take a bath in your gravy.* Tristan inspected his hand, winced slightly, then lowered it to his lap. *So I take it you like your brother, too?*

“I'm sorry about your hand. I didn't know you had a—”

*Of course you didn't, no one does. Better fish that ring out before you eat it on accident. Then you'd have to poop it out, like a dog.*

Kyle first tried to scoop it out with his fork, failed twice, then finally plucked it out with his fingers. He wiped it off on a napkin. “You sure you're alright? Why aren't you eating?” He put his ring back on, then nudged Tristan's tray with his fork. “I never see you eat. Do you have an allergy to food, too?”

*I still don't understand why your family ignores you.*

Kyle sighed. “I don't know. I didn't really excel at anything as a kid, so I didn't ‘earn’ any attention. My brother did. Kaleb excels at everything. He's the kind of son my dad wanted. Not me.” Kyle took a dejected bite out of a dry chicken tender and mumbled: “Guess I'm just the family failure.”

Tristan folded his arms on the table. *Ever heard the saying ‘children are like second chances’? Your parents are the failures, not you. They waste time suffering with their lifelong flaws, their sexual incompatibilities, their frustrations with each other and themselves, masturbating in private to*

*increasingly bizarre fantasies in a quest to achieve a morsel of excitement in their otherwise dull lives ...*

“What the hell, Tristan? Gross.”

*And they pass down all of their worst qualities—except your eyes, obviously—to you. That places all the burden on you to fix what they could not, and what their parents nor grandparents could not, all the way down the old ancestral family tree, every limb, a tree full of failures and unrealized dreams. What a terrible burden to bear. How is any of that your fault?*

Kyle shrugged. “My dad’s never there. Mom’s too critical and cold. I always feel like I’m doing something wrong.”

*Doing things wrong is the only way the world changes. Tristan gave him a little smile. I really like staring into your eyes.*

Kyle looked up at him right then.

Their gazes locked across the table, across the aroma of bad cafeteria food, across the noise.

To Kyle, Tristan’s misty blue eyes read like a thousand-page manuscript of secrets—and of boundless pain. Kyle’s heart raced, thinking of being the first one to try cracking that book. To be Tristan’s friend. To be close to someone who let no one close. The specialness they would share.

Them against the world. Against the emptiness.

Against the boundless pain.

Kyle couldn’t say any of that, so instead, he put on a grin and leaned forward. “Alright, then. Staring contest. Go!”

Tristan smirked. *Must you turn everything into a game?*

“It’s in my blood. No blinking and no looking away.”

Tristan propped his chin up with a hand. *I can do this for hours, me and your pretty eyes, what a pleasure.*

At first, Kyle had fun, bringing a chicken tender slowly to his mouth to take a bite and making a funny face, still staring. Tristan was unfazed. Then Kyle imitated Tristan, propping his chin up with a hand and smirking. Also no effect. Soon, Kyle simply settled into gazing at Tristan’s eyes, all out of tricks, and he could no longer ignore the symphony of excitement in his chest, which played feverish notes on every instrument in reach. It was just like his nightly activity under bed sheets, only it was real life now, and all the excitement beneath his waist had to be contained, ignored, channeled elsewhere.

Gazing into Tristan’s eyes was such a gift.

Even if it was, in this moment, only a game.

It wasn’t until Kyle started hanging with Tristan that his teammates began to pay attention. “Why do you eat with that guy?” said one of them at practice. “Hear what he did to Brock? Coach found him in the hallway with Brock’s head in his lap, petting his hair. Fucking freak.” Rumors had twisted everything around so much, even the guys who were there had the story all wrong. “He did a karate thing, right at his neck, made him pass out.” “I saw the light go out in Brock’s eyes, he was dead for a sec, the freak tried to murder Brock.” “How’d he get away with it? Fucker should be expelled!” “Bet he would’ve molested him, had the coach not come.” Their mouths ran and ran. “He’s got problems, messed up in the



head, he'll grow up to be a serial killer." "You can tell, just look in his eyes, you can totally tell."

Strange, how they never said those things to Tristan's face anymore. They were scared of him, Kyle knew.

Did that make him a fool, to not be scared of Tristan, too?

"I hate how they talk about you," said Kyle one afternoon, sometime after the last bell rang. "They don't even know you."

*Most things are unimportant, when you think about it, Tristan said. Even friends, even family, having ambitions or dreams.* They sat together under the awning at the back of the school where the busses came. They always sat in the shade, something about a sun allergy, skin sensitivity, or rare hereditary thing Tristan had—the reason changed every time Kyle asked. *People are such wastes of effort. It's why I have no friends. When you free yourself of people, you never feel disappointment. Me?—I regret nothing.* His face twisted, reconsidering. *Well, except for one thing ...*

Their shoulders were touching. Kyle's focus was mainly on that, truth be told. But he asked, "What thing?"

Instead of answering, Tristan just lifted his face to the sky, winced uncomfortably, and closed his eyes. Kyle didn't pry.

After the strange sleeping incident, Brock's life carried on like normal. The boys had stopped asking about it. Kyle wasn't sure if Brock was protecting his ego by acting like it never happened, or exercising caution in keeping his distance.

Both choices seemed wise.

Then one day in the locker room, Brock stopped Kyle on his way out of the shower. "I know what you're doing."

Kyle was naked and wet. Brock stood between him and the towels, fully dressed.

They were alone.

“What?” said Kyle.

“Pretending to be the freak’s friend. Figurin’ his thing out, what his deal is, I get it ... but I don’t think it’s a good idea.” Brock put a hand on Kyle’s shoulder. They were close. “You’ve gotta end it with him.”

Kyle saw it all over again, the way Tristan touched Brock’s face so gently.

How Brock fell to the floor.

Out like a light.

He wondered if he could do that, too. If anyone could. If it just took the right touch, or a specific look from the eyes. One teammate even suggested Tristan had a chemical on his hands.

Kyle kept his cool. “Dude, I need to dry off. Please move.”

“I’m serious,” said Brock, not budging. “That guy has got a demon inside him, a goddamned demon. I saw it.”

“Demons don’t exist.”

“You need to stay away from him. Everyone on the team’s talkin’, Kyle, I’m being serious.”

Despite Brock’s intimidation, Kyle felt a prickle of defiance in his spine. “So we’re friends again suddenly?”

“Huh? Of course we are.”

“You never cared who I spent my time with before.”

Brock's hand stayed on Kyle's shoulder, his grip tightening. "What's goin' on with you? We always had each other's backs."

"Is it really my back you've got?"

Kyle's eyes were stony as he faced off with Brock, naked, heart pounding with resentment. It was never clear whether the hatred was reciprocal. Was Brock too absorbed in his own life to notice how shallow their friendship had become?

Maybe Kyle just missed how things used to be. Sleepovers with Nintendo games late into the night, just the two of them, and Brock's busybody mom bringing them fruit juice and snacks. Tossing footballs in Brock's big backyard under the harsh sun, dripping with sweat. Playing and laughing with his feisty bull terrier out front in the sprinklers every summer.

Brock and Kyle, they were part of a pride. It wasn't clear who was the head lion and didn't matter. They were equals.

They were as close as friends could be. Like brothers.

Until the vultures of puberty and popularity came to nibble every last nice thing out of their friendship, leaving nothing but the bones. And even those bones were turning brittle.

"Haven't you noticed the weird shit happenin' round town since he arrived?" Brock pressed on, frustrated. "Margaret's cat showin' up dead on her front porch? The east playground bein' set on fire? Weird Latin messages left on Ms. Liu's chalkboard every mornin'? Looks like fuckin' dark magic and

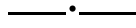
psycho shit, and I may have no proof, but I know it's him. All of it." Brock's tone lowered. "No one knows where that freak comes from, Kyle. No one knows who he is, who he really is. No one knows where he even lives. His family. Is Tristan even his real name? Do you know one single damned thing about him? Open your eyes. He's a fuckin' ghost."

Kyle stood his ground, but the confidence was draining out of his eyes, his posture slowly crumbling.

"Fine," said Brock. "It's your funeral." He pushed past Kyle on his way out of the locker room, leaving him standing there naked and alone, water dripping from his hair.

## 4.

# *Let It All Burn.*



*You're more useful to them when you're invisible. Just a number on the team. Throw the ball here or there. Ram your shoulders into this guy or that. They don't want you to have opinions.*

It was after practice. Kyle's cheeks were flushed and it was unseasonably hot. "I think the thing I hate the most about this place," Kyle said, "is how everyone's trying to tell you what to think, or what to do, as if they know you better than you know yourself. I hate it. Just let me be me, you know? I hate the way Brock has changed. I hate how cocky he's gotten. I hate—"

Tristan brushed a few bangs out of Kyle's eyes right then, startling him. Tristan's pale pink lips curled into a smile. *I think you're beautiful just the way you are*, he murmured sweetly.

Kyle was struck at once, his heart hammering in his chest.

No one had ever said anything like that to him before.

Certainly not another guy.

He felt like he had been chosen out of the crowd, as if by lottery, to win the prize that was Tristan's undivided attention.

*Also, if I may suggest something, don't use "hate" so much. Hate is just a lazy word for something else.*

Hate.

The trance faded.

Kyle stared at Tristan pensively, suddenly troubled.

What he hated most of all and didn't say was that Brock's words had actually struck a nerve.

"Tell me about your family," said Kyle.

Tristan squinted at him. *Who? Mine?*

"You know so much about me, but I don't know anything about you. Parents, family, what they're like, where you're even from."

*You know plenty about me without boring you with the details of who brought me into this world, or—*

"Actually, I don't know much about you at all," said Kyle. "You're a mystery. A mystery with no family who can't go out in direct sunlight and who can't touch pinky rings."

It was something in Tristan's eyes right then.

A glimmer of darkness.

Insolence. Anger.

It terrified Kyle in an instant.

Perhaps Kyle wasn't as ready as he thought to crack open that thousand-page book. "Uh, sorry," he quickly said, at once backpedaling. "You don't have to ... to tell me anything, sorry. I think I'm just mad about, uh, Brock. That's all."

Tristan didn't break his stare from Kyle's.

His eye contact was intense.

And unsettlingly penetrable.

Finally, in a steely yet tranquil voice, clear as a bell, Tristan spoke: *Do you remember what I said about evil people and karma? To Brock in the hallway, that one day? Do you remember how I said the most evil person on Earth can get everything they want?*

Kyle's throat was tight. "Yes."

*I believe the opposite is true, too. A good person, a saint by all rights, they can suffer every last day of their lives, with no reprieve, without in any way deserving their pain. He said all of this while maintaining that cold unbreakable stare, without blinking once. There is an evil person out there in the world, this is a fact, a person like you and me, who enjoys the suffering of those good, saintly types. They crave to see others in sorrow. They love it. In the most genuine way a person can love something, the way a child loves candy. They salivate for others' pain. They yearn for it.*

Kyle was shaking.

He couldn't look away from Tristan's eyes, no matter how hard he tried. It felt disrespectful to look away. It felt wrong.

It felt disallowed.

Like a staring contest upon which he staked his own life.

Tristan gently brought a hand to Kyle's cheek, and for one unnerving instant, Kyle was reminded of Brock in the hallway.

But instead of falling asleep, Kyle only watched the tiniest of smiles touch Tristan's lips. *I ... would never ... ever harm you ... nor take pleasure in your sorrows, Kyle Amos.*

His thumb stroked Kyle's cheek, as if to wipe away a tear that wasn't there.

Kyle let him, spellbound, eyes trapped in the mist.

Then Tristan's face twisted. *You don't believe me?*

The spell was broken. Kyle slipped from Tristan's grip and took a step back. "Sorry. I gotta go home. I'm ... I'm sorry."

For a second, Kyle was sure Tristan would stop him, but instead he said nothing as Kyle hurried away, backpack slung over a shoulder, then gone.

Kyle stopped at the front of the school, catching his breath.

Every time he blinked, he saw Tristan's misty blue eyes.

And that moment of discomfoting darkness.

That flicker.

He had felt Tristan's imposing power, the authority in his gaze, his intention. He wondered if that was what Brock felt before dropping to the floor.

Kyle was certain now.

Tristan was hiding something.

That evening at home, Kyle was lost in his thoughts, heavy with emotion. Everything ached. He kept dropping his clothes on his way to the bathroom to take a shower, then only stood there in the water, numb, staring at the wall. When he settled into the corner of his bedroom on a beanbag chair, he stared at a blank page in his notebook, intending to draw



anything that came to mind, then couldn't even make the first mark.

“What are you doing?”

Kyle looked up to find his younger brother at the door. “Huh? Why?”

“You're just sitting there.”

“Can't I just sit here? It's my room.”

Kaleb came through the door and stopped at the foot of the bed. “Are you doing homework?”

Kyle flung the notebook aside and leaned back with a huff. “I was just trying to draw, it's nothing.”

“Oh. You haven't drawn in a long time. I wish I had time to draw,” he mumbled, then picked the notebook up and turned the pages. He stopped at one. “Is this a dragon?”

“Supposed to be a lion, I don't know, I'm not very good.”

“It looks like a dragon.”

Kyle fidgeted with his pinky ring. “Why aren't you in the middle of studying or playing violin or something?”

“I'm sick of playing. Same old songs, over and over. I hate Bach. My fingers hurt.” Kaleb turned to another page, then another. He made a funny face. “Why's one eye always bigger than the other?”

“I have a problem with proportions,” mumbled Kyle, then realized those were Tristan's words coming out of his mouth.

“Well, I like the weird eyes. Maybe this is just how you do art, your cool way to do art, making weird eyes and

dragons.” Kaleb turned another page, looked at another drawing. “Maybe you don’t have a problem with anything. I think these are cool.”

Kyle gazed up at his brother.

Kaleb smiled back. Then his eyes lit up. “Oh, can you draw a dragon wearing jewelry?”

Despite all the heaviness in his heart, Kyle laughed. “Sure, sure,” he said, “yeah, I can do that, I’ll draw you a dragon with lots of glittering rings, just for you.”

“That’d be so cool.”

Then their mother’s voice rang out. “Kaleb? What are you doing? Sweetheart?” She appeared at the bedroom door. “Kyle, stop distracting your little brother! What are you thinking? He needs to be practicing for his recital this weekend!”

Kaleb set the notebook on the bed and left at once.

His mother followed him out without another word.

Kyle stared at his notebook, balanced on the edge of the bed, one little nudge away from falling off, and wondered what a monster wearing jewelry would look like.

Hours later, Kyle was dead asleep and drooling on a body pillow he cuddled when there came a soft tap at his bedroom window. On the third tap, he stirred awake to find a silhouette eclipsing the pale light from the street.

Somehow, he knew who it was before his eyes did.

He slipped out of bed in just a pair of briefs and stood at the window. “Tristan?”

Tristan cocked his head and offered a smile. *Would you like to accompany me to the graveyard?*

Kyle wiped the sleep out of his eyes. “What the hell?”

*I hope you aren't mad at me, about earlier today.*

“I don't know. I'm tired.”

*You wanted to know more about me. So I've decided to tell you more.* Tristan's voice was muffled through the glass. *It's better we go somewhere safer than your windowsill, though.*

“And that's a graveyard at—” Kyle checked the clock. “—at 2:17 in the morning?”

*Isn't life sometimes as boring as food? Aren't people so tiresome? Your mom, your dad. Brock and his silly friends. Do you ever just ...* Tristan tilted his head and gazed into Kyle's eyes. *Do you ever just want to ... let it all burn ... and start over?*

He asked the question in a lazy drawl. Almost playful.

Casually suggesting they could knock down the sandcastle of their lives, let the tide take it all away, and start anew with a hot pink bucket and plastic scoop toy.

The suggestion was as appealing as it was terrifying.

And it was also entirely in sync with Kyle's present state of mind. “I guess,” he answered mildly.

*We won't be more than half an hour, tops.*

It was a strange fact that Kyle lived a mere two blocks away from the cemetery. With just a brief walk, they were already there. After hopping over the wrought iron fence, they strolled along the paths, lit only by distant streetlights off the

road. Kyle wore a fitted white undershirt and gym shorts. Tristan wore an oversized pale pink shirt with grey plaid slacks and slippers. His outfits never really made sense to Kyle, always as odd as he was.

“So what did you want to tell me?”

Tristan’s hands were in his pockets. *You are the only friend I have ever had, Kyle.*

“I know.” His patience was running thin. He kept rubbing his eyes and yawning. “Can you get to the point quicker? I’m tired and have a chemistry test in the morning.”

*You have questions for me, of course, and I want to answer them, I really do, but I’m also in a predicament of my own.*

“Okay, fine, and?”

*And to further complicate things, I have feelings for you.*

Kyle stopped right then.

Tristan, too. *Yes.* He said this to the ground, not looking at Kyle as he spoke. *I know it may not come as much of a surprise to you. I have not been all that subtle with how I feel. I wear everything on my sleeve, even when I’m not wearing sleeves.*

“Feelings ...?”

Tristan faced him. *Oh, maybe it did come as a surprise. Sorry, I didn’t ask you out to a graveyard in the dead of night to ambush you with my feelings. That wouldn’t be nice. Or fair. That’s not what I’m here to confess.* Tristan sighed. *I want to tell you my secret.*

“Uh, alright.”

Tristan took a seat on a nearby waist-high gravestone, then thought twice. *Is this disrespectful? To sit here?* He leaned back to get a look at the front of the stone. *Mister George McArthur with the withered bouquet of tulips, kind sir, we have not met, but do you mind if I sit on your head while I talk to my friend?*

The gravestone, naturally, did not respond.

*Great.* Tristan took that for consent. He faced Kyle. *I want to tell you about the thing I did to Brock.*

Kyle couldn't close his mouth. He didn't know what he was about to be told. His mind was still stuck on the part about Tristan having feelings. “Uh ...”

*It's related to my allergy. Well, allergies. I have a few.*

Allergies. “You mean your ... your skin thing?” asked Kyle. “Your sensitivity to sunlight?”

*Yes. Well, that's the main one, the big allergy. I have others.*

Kyle watched as Tristan wrung his hands, seeming unsure what to say next. This was the first time Kyle had seen him so nervous like this. “Tristan ...?”

Gripping the edge of the gravestone, Tristan searched for the words. *I don't know how to say this next part. I never said it out loud. I'm not really supposed to, I think. I feel like I shouldn't tell you, even now ... even after all of this, after dragging you out here.*

“Tell me what?”

*And it's not that I don't trust you. I do, actually. Surprisingly. I trust you more than anyone I have ever met, and I've met God.*

Kyle didn't have the energy to decipher whether Tristan was being literal, figurative, or funny. Emotions from his long day still hung heavily on his bones. "So what is it, Tristan?"

*Can't you just read my mind? Put the clues together and ask me the question? Conclude it yourself and save me the trouble?*

"I can't read minds."

*I can read hearts. Have you noticed that yet?*

"Yeah, sure, you can tell when hearts are racing or when someone's angry or turned on or whatever, I guess."

*More than that. I can also smell blood, from miles away, I can smell it like the rain, or grandma's cooking, or bad cologne. You have a cut on the side of your neck, a tiny one, under your shirt.*

"I got it from practice. So you can smell blood? That's it?"

*How are you not amazed?? I can smell a cut that's under your—Never mind. He hid his face behind his hands to say the rest. I'm allergic to the sun. I smell blood like a shark. Normal food bores me. I can lull people to sleep with a touch. Kyle, for fuck's sake, stop being a thickskulled jock for one damned minute and use your brain.*

"I'm tired, Tristan. Just tell me what it is and—"

At once, Kyle's back slammed against a nearby tree, hard, and Tristan was upon him, pinning him to the tree, eyes wild and desperate, their faces inches apart.

Then Tristan's pale pink lips went for Kyle's neck, pulling the t-shirt out of the way so quickly, threads popped.

Kyle felt Tristan's wet tongue touch his skin.

Tingles of pleasure rocketed down his body.

Kyle was frozen, breath wrung out of his chest, as he felt Tristan's tongue lapping at his neck, as if on a lollipop, a piece of candy, savoring. Then he brought his face before Kyle's again. Cool night air on his wet neck, Kyle stared into Tristan's burning eyes, shocked at his strength, confused, heart racing.

"Did you just ... lick my cut ...?" asked Kyle, out of breath.

*Blood*, hissed Tristan.

Kyle swallowed. "So you ... you like ... blood?"

*You're thinking it right now. You know my secret. What I am. Set the truth free for me, I beg you, don't make me say it.*

Kyle felt bound to him in an unspoken, potent way. They always had that connection, like a tether between their souls, ever since the day they met—maybe even before then, when Kyle was merely sneaking glances from two rows over.

Kyle trusted him somehow. Completely. It's them against the world. Them against the boundless pain.

Of course he knew what the clues added up to. It just felt like a ridiculous thing to conclude, let alone say out loud.

“Are you trying to ...” Kyle swallowed, then grimaced as the words came out. “Are you trying to tell me you’re a—?”

*No, Tristan cut him off at once. Let’s not use that word. That is a word used for stories told around campfires by children holding flashlights under their gawping faces. That isn’t what I call myself, anyway. I’m something far more dignified. I’d rather say I’m like ... an employee of Death itself. I can give life ... or take it. It is a great responsibility I plan to never misuse. And my burden.*

*But ... if we were to meet one of Them, one of those horrors of the night whose name you nearly let slip from your lips ... They, who so gluttonously drink of blood, who carelessly take others’ lives as they please, who abuse their Death-given powers with no remorse ... and if They were to try and harm you, even to look upon you, then the world will learn what I am truly capable of, what I truly am ... and I promise you, it will be so much worse.*



## 5.

# *Keep Me Human.*

—•—

“So do you, like, turn into dust under direct sunlight?”

The gymnasium was empty. It was an off period. Tristan sat on the bleachers next to him in the half-lit gym. *This is so not the conversation I was hoping to have today.*

“I’m just curious. Or do you burst into flames?”

*Would it be more interesting if I did?*

“You hate the sun, though?”

*It’s annoying. Feels like fire. I suppose if I am in direct sunlight, I might skip the flames part and go straight to ash. Then you can hold a bit of me in your palm, you know, like a mound of sugar. Bake some cookies with what remains. Chocolate chip, if I had a choice in it.*

“So indirect sunlight doesn’t kill you?”

*Not yet.*

“What do you mean ‘not yet’?”

*It’s a gradual thing, this gift, this condition, once it gets ahold of you. It can eat away your humanity slowly, bit by bit, if you let it.*

“So you’re still human?”

*That’s up to your interpretation, I guess.*

“Well, I think you’re still human. You seem human to me. I thought you, like, get bit on the neck by one and just instantly become one. I didn’t know it was a gradual thing ... like a slow transformation or whatever.”

*Just like puberty, only far less terrifying.*

“Have you ever met one that’s totally transformed?”

Tristan scratched above his eye, appearing uncomfortable.  
*I would really rather not talk about Them.*

“So you have? What are they like?”

Tristan closed his eyes. His voice grew slow, deep.  
*Imagine someone at their greediest, most vile. Soulless and horrifying. Around one, your blood runs cold in an instant. To look upon one is to see your own death, to lose all hope, to know only regret. Anguish beyond Hell. In their eyes, you see a darkness no light can hope to penetrate.*

“Really?”

Tristan eyed him. *Please don’t make me talk about Them.*

“And you’ll become that someday?”

*Not if I can help it.*

“Do they look different? The, uh, ‘fully-transformed’ ...? Do they grow fangs? Or horns? Are you gonna grow horns?”

*Hopefully. Then you can call me horny. It’ll be our thing.*

“You make jokes out of everything, but I can tell they truly disturb you, talking about them. They sound ... scary. Oh, you also have a weird metal allergy, right?”

*Silver, only silver, no other metals that I know of. It stings when I touch it, burns, like it's scalding hot even if cold.*

“I remember a movie I saw when I was ten about a bunch of werewolves. Isn't silver only used to kill werewolves?”

*Maybe everything is made up and considered a fairytale until it's written in your tenth grade science textbook, who knows.*

“Are you all allergic to it? To silver?”

*We all have different allergies, I've learned. We develop in our own ways, like trees, some get tall first, some flowery, fruits or leaves, or tiny spikes to keep enemies away. Maybe someone out there isn't allergic to anything at all ... even the sun.*

“Doesn't the silver need to be blessed by a priest first?”

*I met a priest once, as a child. He patted my cheek and called me a sweet little boy. He's probably dead now.*

“What about a wooden stake? Is it true that a wooden stake through your heart will kill you?”

*I imagine that would kill anyone, don't you?*

“You know what I mean.”

*Haven't experienced it yet myself, fortunately, so can't say.*

“What about garlic? Is that a thing? Or holy water?”

*You seem awfully fixated on how to kill me. Should I worry?*

“So are you immortal, then?”

*Eventually.*

“That doesn’t make sense.”

*Does anything make sense when you think about it long enough? Have you ever tried explaining the universe to someone? Gravity? Corduroy?*

“But you have powers,” Kyle pressed on.

*Ugh. Tristan pinched the bridge of his nose. Are you done with this ungodly interrogation? Can you be? I have a paper on the Renaissance due in sixth period that still needs an ending and title.*

“What you did to Brock, the sleeping thing. Being able to smell blood. Do you have any other powers?”

*I can make fart sounds with my hand in my armpit.*

“Ooh! Can you read minds?? Please tell me you can!”

*I regret telling you anything.*

“Read my mind right now. Tell me what I’m thinking. It’s not my exam this morning, I totally aced it, by the way.”

*This is worse torture than standing in the sun at high noon.*

“Can you move really fast? You’re stronger than you look, I know that much. You pinned me to that tree in the graveyard as if you had the strength of the whole wrestling team.”

*Is this what the rest of our friendship is going to be now? Twenty questions? I think you reached twenty, twenty questions ago.*

“I wondered all day how you got to my house last night. I didn’t see a car or a bike. It was late, too. Do you even sleep?”

*Of course I sleep. But I must hang upside-down like a bat, so as to keep my slender figure and uplifted, youthful cheekbones.*

“Really?”

*No. Yes. No. Yes. Does it matter? Of course I'm joking, hanging upside-down isn't good for anyone's anything. Bell is about to ring.* Tristan gathered his things from the seat next to him. *What do you think they're serving for lunch? I can't wait to see which shape they chose to squish the mystery meat into today.*

“I never see you eat at lunch. Does that mean you're, like, drinking blood at home or something? And whose blood?”

*Enough questions.* Tristan stood up to leave.

Kyle sighed. “C'mon, I'm just curious.”

*You should be careful. Curiosity kills cats, and I heard you're one big lion.*

“Please ...?”

Tristan stopped at the foot of the bleachers, back turned. His voice came softer. *My secret wasn't the only thing I confessed to you last night, you know.*

Kyle froze. “Oh. I ... didn't mean to ignore that. Of course I've thought about that, too. I mean, I was just curious about—”

*I avoid blood at all costs.*

Kyle wondered for a moment all the things Tristan might have omitted from that deceptively simple sentence. “So ... so you've ... you've had it before?”

*I can survive on normal food. I don't need much, just a bit in the morning, a morsel late at night.*

“Why do you avoid blood?”

*Because I believe drinking blood hastens the transformation, and I will do everything in my power to never become one of Them.*

Kyle came down from the bleachers and stood in front of Tristan. “Really? But last night ...”

*I'd rather forget last night, suddenly.*

“... you licked my neck ... where I cut myself. You licked it and looked so ...” Kyle searched for the word. “... satisfied.”

Tristan averted his gaze. *It was just ... simply the taste of it. The idea of it. Like ... a faded memory of the last time I bit my own tongue, perhaps. I didn't taste any real blood, it was just a scab, your salty skin, nothing. Perhaps I simply wanted an excuse to lick you, I'm a horny bastard forever, I don't know. It excited me. Even if there was no blood. Hmm, I guess you heal fast. Congratulations.*

“What happens when you taste real blood?”

The bell rang.

Tristan turned to Kyle at once, and when their eyes met, all of Kyle's questions were swallowed away. Tristan took hold of Kyle and brought his face really close, within inches. Tristan's lips parted, eyes seeming to shine with a beautiful intensity.

Tristan drew in a single breath.

Kyle lifted his eyebrows, anticipating something.

Then Tristan brought his lips to Kyle's forehead, where he put a soft kiss. Kyle's heart drummed away. He didn't care if Tristan could hear it. Maybe Tristan knew the truth already, that his feelings were returned. Tristan must have known that Kyle was excited to be near him, that he craved his attention, his affection, their bond, always. Surely Tristan was just being gracious enough to wait for Kyle to be ready to say it.

*Please do me a favor, if you do anything for me at all.*

Kyle could barely breathe as Tristan's eyes bore into his.

*Keep me human.* Tristan's face tightened. *For as long as you possibly can. I beg you. Help keep me human, like you.*

Kyle swallowed, unsure what to say.

Then Tristan turned and left the gymnasium. Opening the doors, the noise of the crowded hallway spilled in, then faded as they slowly swung shut, leaving Kyle alone.

At practice, Kyle had several chances to catch the ball and fumbled each time. Every minute seemed to crawl. He grew heavier and heavier under the afternoon sun, as if he acquired a kind of sun allergy of his own. In the locker room afterwards, he felt like his limbs had no strength even as he tugged off his clothes, grabbed a towel, and headed for the showers.

It was amid the steam and noise of running water he heard the boys talking.

He turned when he caught Tristan's name.

"Wait, what?" Kyle interjected.

It was two of his teammates. “Brock, he’s got a plan how to deal with the freak, an idea.” “It’s gonna be big,” said the other with a snorting cackle. “Dude, I can’t wait. Brock’s gonna show that motherfucker, he’s gonna regret being born.”

The news was distressing to Kyle. “Didn’t Brock get over it by now? I thought he moved on.”

“You kidding? Haven’t you been paying attention?” “Dude won’t stop talking about him, about wanting to end that guy.” “It’s gonna happen soon, before our big game this weekend.” “Most of the team’s going out tonight, we’re gonna plan it with Brock, it’s gonna be so fucking fun.”

Kyle hadn’t heard a word about this until now. “When are you all meeting? Where?”

“Brock will call you,” said one of them as he lathered a bar of soap under his armpit. “It’s gonna happen fast, all of it.”

“That’s not right,” said Kyle.

“Not right? C’mon, that freak had it coming.” “You don’t mess with Brock,” said the other as he ran his soapy head under the water. “Fuck no, you don’t mess with Brock.”

They were right back to square one.

Except this seemed worse than before. Much worse. Kyle wasn’t sure if Tristan could be lucky again with a sleeping trick. Considering the power of the whole team, Tristan could really be in trouble.

Kyle twisted off his water and faced them. “You guys don’t understand,” he said, jaw tightening. “It’s a bad idea. All of you, all of you should just let it go. Brock, especially.”



Through the noise boomed a voice. “Let it go?”

Brock’s shape emerged through the steam. He was flanked by three others.

All chatter and laughter in the showers ceased.

“Do you even care,” asked Brock, “what that fuckin’ freak did to me? What he could do to anyone on our team? What he could do to you? Everyone sees you hangin’ with him, even the coach. How do you think I feel, watching you befriend that guy who fuckin’ assaulted me? How do you think that looks?”

Kyle tried to keep his back straight, to keep his voice level. “You’re the one who came after him first. He was defending himself. It was four of you, four of you against a new guy who’s just trying to find his place.”

“Five of us. You were with us that day.” Brock took a step forward. “Or were you already on his side back then?”

“I’m not on anyone’s side.”

“Wrong answer.”

“Why don’t you just say what you want to say?” Kyle came forward now. “Tell everyone, right now. Tell the whole team the real reason you want to beat Tristan up. The real reason my friendship with him has you all mad.”

Kyle recognized the tension in the showers. The same kind of tension that first day Brock confronted Tristan in class.

But this time, no teacher was nearby, nor would be.

The coach, kicking back in his office, oblivious, far away.

How the whole team watched, excited, hungry for blood.

The danger was real.

“Tell them,” dared Kyle, ignoring his fear, feeding the tiny devil on his shoulder, itching for it. “Tell them you’re jealous.”

Brock’s eyes narrowed. “You were always on his side, since day one, Kyle. It’s fuckin’ obvious. You were never one of us.”

“I wasn’t one of you since the day you made varsity and left me behind in the dust.”

“He even admits it,” said Brock to the rest of the room, like a show, spreading his hands. “He even fuckin’ admits it.”

“Because you can’t stand to share the spotlight. You can’t stand to share anything. You want it all for yourself. And now I made a real friend, someone who has time for me, who listens to me, who *knows* me, and you’re foaming at the mouth to take him away. At least I’m mature enough to admit the truth. You just want me all to yourself. You’re just—”

“Say one more word and it’s over.”

The word was hissed with teeth. “*Jealous.*”

For once, Brock kept his promise. There was no sleeping trick to save Kyle’s face from the fist that came swinging. Kyle felt nothing for one solid second, as if his cheek turned as numb as ice, as he flew back. Steam mixed with water mixed with red as Kyle fell against the wall, slipped on the tiles, then crashed to his back. A single punch, and his face felt like it broke apart, an earthquake, shattering from the point of contact to every end of his skull. Water poured over his face. His head spun. He tried to focus on something, but everything was fuzzy, an angry blur.

Until Brock's face appeared. His body looked like a distant mountain with arms as he reached forward and took hold of Kyle's face by the chin, fingers digging like claws. "You know my connections. You know my dad. With just a whisper, you would be off the team, off every team in the country, no hope to pursue a future in anything related to football, or any fuckin' ball, for the rest of your life. Just with a whisper. I can do that. All you gotta do to stop me is say you're sorry, right now."

Kyle's eyes stung as he stared up at Brock's face in disbelief.

"Just say it." Brock's voice remained level as he spoke, as if being kind, the way they used to be, as if it was only them in the showers, the two childhood friends they once were. "One word. That's all it will take. I'm forgiving, but only with you. Just one word and I forget it all. Say you're sorry to me, Kyle. Right now. Save your life and just say it."

Kyle felt like a bundle of lifeless limbs, held up off the floor only by the power in Brock's fingers that gripped his chin.

When the silence persisted, Brock's tone hardened. "Even after all this, you'd still choose to defend him? That fucker? At the cost of your future? At the cost of our friendship?"

It seemed like all of the team had come into the showers by then, paying silent witness, all of them as weak as the others, always silent witnesses, watching, learning.

"What friendship?" choked Kyle through his teeth.

Brock's face was stone. "Alright," he said, as simple as that, released Kyle's face, letting him drop to the floor, and turned to leave, finished.

But Kyle was not finished.

It was like a roll of thunder when Kyle flung himself from the floor and charged at his back. Brock barely had time to turn before Kyle came crashing into him.

The two slammed heavily to the floor. Both naked and wet, there was nothing to grab onto, so the moment Kyle had Brock underneath him, he threw fists. Brock shielded his face with his arms as Kyle let loose, one after another. None hit, but the rage in his heart kept his fists going. Years of rage, years of suffering under Brock's unchecked authority. Bright red drops fell from Kyle's nose. Each becoming a tiny pool on Brock's forearms, on his chest, on his cheek. Someone came to pull Kyle off, but he shoved him away to continue his assault. Someone else came next, achieved a grip on Kyle's right arm just before his next swing, and then the boys were separated.

Two of Kyle's teammates grabbed his arms, holding him. Brock rose slowly from the floor, his dark eyes on Kyle. A tense silence followed as the two of them faced off.

Brock was able to draw blood with a single hit.

After a dozen, Kyle couldn't even break skin.

What did that say?

Still restrained by his teammates, Kyle decided to use the only weapon available: his mouth. "Why couldn't you just leave it alone, Brock?? Who made you the person who gets to decide how everyone else lives? This is all your fault!"

Brock gently inspected his own nose, as if to check for an injury. Then, to his hand, he quietly muttered, “Your life just ended today.”

Kyle swallowed, shaking.

Brock turned to leave, and this time, nothing stopped him. The teammates let go of Kyle and followed. Not a single one of them looked back, leaving Kyle in the steam and the noise.

Kyle lifted a hand gently to his cheek, where it ached.

Still blurry-eyed, he gazed down at the floor where pale red water circled the drain. He didn’t even care what bled.

There was no going back now.

## 6.

# *Here, a Gift.*

---

By the time Kyle returned to his locker, the team was gone. It was just him, his stinging cheek, the silence, the doubts. As he dressed alone, he found himself questioning everything.

Could it be possible, even in the tiniest way, that Brock was right all along? That Kyle should have chosen him? Sided with his team and former best friend?

What if Tristan really was a master manipulator?

What if it was all just Tristan's wild imagination? All of his allergies, his taste for blood, the slow transformation crap?

Kyle, being a gullible, small-town idiot, falling for Tristan's bullshit, at the price of everything he knew and loved?

That night, Kyle was in his bedroom, house phone wedged between his neck and ear, avoiding the spot on his cheek that still smarted, and Brock's mother told him her son was out with his friends—the whole team. “Wait a second, now why aren't you out with them?” she asked as it occurred to her. “It's a team outing, he said, big team outing before the game this weekend. Are you grounded? Did you do somethin' bad, young man?”

Kyle squeezed the house phone between his fingers and tried to think of a word other than “hate”.

Nothing came to mind.

Kyle barely touched his food at dinner, heart heavy, circles under his eyes as he listened to his parents praise his brother on another big achievement—something to do with the school debate team, chess club, violin recital, or whatever else he was involved in, Kyle could barely keep up. No one noticed his cheekbone, nor his aloof demeanor. He even left the table without a word and the conversation carried on uninterrupted, his mother chirping with laughter when Kaleb said something clever, his father's eyes swelling with pride.

Kyle couldn't sleep. He imagined the worst Brock could be cooking up with the team, without him. What he planned to do to Tristan, how they would teach him a lesson. Kyle wrestled in his bed, turning left and right, on the verge of tears one second, then dead-faced the next and staring at the ceiling.

Kyle couldn't sit still any longer.

Something had to change.

“Teach me,” said Kyle.

It was the next day at lunch. Tristan nearly fell asleep in the mashed potatoes, and Kyle's voice stirred him. *What? Calculus?*

“How to do the sleep thing. How to do anything you can do, anything useful. I want to know how you do it.”

Tristan lay his head back down. *I was having a nice nap, too.*

“I don't care, this is important.”

*Really, and I dreamt I was strolling through the woods at night, you were with me, and we stopped to gaze at the moon together ...*

“They’re planning to do something to you. Tonight.”

Tristan lifted his head again, curious.

“Brock and the team. They said it would happen before the game. The game is tomorrow, so it has to be tonight.”

Tristan blinked. *What are they planning to do? Braid my hair?*

“This is serious, Tristan. I messed up. I made things worse. I tried to stop them in the locker room yesterday, but ... but I got into a fight. A big one. With Brock.”

Tristan frowned. Then his eyes descended to Kyle’s cheek, focusing. *So that’s what I was sensing. I assumed you had slept on it wrong in homeroom, you always nap on that side. Brock hurt you?*

“The whole team is against me now. They think I’m your friend, which I am, but now they’re talking about taking sides, and Brock threatened to end my career in football, and now—”

*Still, with the violence. Still, with his suppressions.* Tristan let out a frustrated huff, shook his head irritably, frowned. *I’ve not been one to believe in lost causes. I should try something else.*

“You can’t instigate them even more, Tristan, I’m telling you, things are already bad.”

*Instigate? Haven’t I proven I’m the opposite of an instigator? I am a diffuser. A calming agent in a sea of*



*turmoil. All of this drama, this teenage drama, it will be so silly later in life, oh, you will be so embarrassed you gave it this much energy. Here, have a bite of my rectangular cardboard pizza, it's disgusting, you'll love it.*

“Tristan, you can't take on ten of them. You can't put ten of them to sleep at once. I don't know if it'll be something you can avoid, what they're planning. Maybe they found out where you live, or they'll corner you between classes, I don't know. Just teach me your thing, we can both take them on, maybe.”

*I don't actually dream, by the way, said Tristan. A side effect of my being an employee of Death. Or what did we decide to call it? My affliction? Disease? Job perk ...?*

“Are you listening to what I'm saying?”

*And I don't think the Brock thing is something I can teach you. Tristan folded his long arms on the table and leaned forward. Comes with my condition. Package deal, like puppies and butt worms.*

“You can't go up against the whole football team. I want to be there with you. I fucking hate Brock. He can't just do this.”

Tristan smirked. *This anger isn't about me. It's about him. He makes your heart race, but not in the way that I do.*

“I don't—” Kyle flinched away. “It's not racing. I'm—”

*Hearts never lie.*

Kyle rose from his seat so fast, the utensils on their lunch trays rattled. “I'm sick of feeling invisible. I'm sick of my life. I don't care if you hate the word 'hate' ... there's no other

word for how I feel. I *hate* Brock Hastings. I want to take him down just as badly as he wants to take you down. Teach me.”

Tristan, unaffected as ever by Kyle’s outburst, continued to watch him calmly, saying nothing. As if waiting for something he knew was coming, like a cold front, or the apocalypse.

Tristan always looked like he knew things.

Secrets. Futures. Things no one else knew, no one else saw.

“How did you become one?”

Whatever levity existed on Tristan’s face fades at once.

“I want to know,” said Kyle. “I want to know how you got it, your condition, your thing. How you became what you are.”

*That*, said Tristan, in a disquietingly level, frosty tone, *is a story I pray you never make me tell.*

“Can you ... change someone else ... into what you are?”

*I would never dare.*

“But what if they wanted you to do it?”

*Not a chance.*

“What if *I* wanted it?”

Now it was Tristan’s turn to rise from his seat. *This is not a joke. This. What I am. Whatever you think you’re coveting.*

“I don’t think it’s a joke.”

*Maybe you do.* Tristan stared through him, icily. *You think I’m just playing, having fun, talking about these allergies of mine, blood and a discomfort of sunlight. Working for Death,*

*my cute little metaphor. This isn't a job I can just quit, do you understand? I am employed for life. And here you are, asking me for this like it's a club you can hop into, like creative writing or fucking mathletes.*

“Why are you getting mad at me?”

*You do not want this. And even if you were foolish enough to want it, I wouldn't let you have it. This is not a gift, it should not be given. Tristan threw his gaze away. Even now, you're making me doubt myself ... that look in your eyes. Can you do me a favor and stop looking at me? Your eyes are too pretty.*

“Tristan, they're going to come after you.”

*I can fend for myself. Five football players. Ten of them. Twenty. A hundred. They're no match for me. But you? His eyes dragged down Kyle's chest, anguish in them. He shook his head. Just one of you, and I'm questioning every principle I have held so dearly. I'm coming undone, thinking the unthinkable ... I wish I never licked you in that graveyard. Tristan closed his eyes. I'm not sure I'll ever be in a situation to say that particular sentence again. If I didn't feel so terrible right now, I might have enjoyed saying it more.*

“Look, just come to my house after school, alright? Just stay with me. It's that easy. We can look out for each other.”

*No matter what happens, I will protect you, now and always. It is I who protects you, not the other way around. Never forget that.*

“Don't go.”

Tristan left the table without another word. Kyle watched him disappear through the doors of the cafeteria, then gone.

The afternoon was a minefield of tension. No one on the team looked at Kyle. No one talked to him nor threw the ball his way. Even the coach seemed to avoid eye contact.

Every cell in his body told him something was wrong.

“I want to come,” said Kyle to one of his teammates.

The teammate shrugged. “To what?”

“The thing tonight, the plan,” said Kyle. “I want in. I want to help.”

“No idea what you’re talking about.”

Everyone played dumb. Pretended to know nothing.

That, too, was part of the plan. Kyle couldn’t even pretend to tag along and sabotage their efforts. Brock thought ahead for once. Even their plan had walls built around it and a moat with little monsters swimming around, monsters that knew to keep Kyle well away.

Kyle couldn’t eat a bite of dinner. He couldn’t do anything. He sat in his room and picked at a cuticle until it bled. He went from one side of the house to the other, pacing, driving himself insane. What were they doing to Tristan? What did they plan?

Why did the stakes seem as high as life and death?

There was a knock on Kyle’s door. When he spun around, his mother stood there, an impatient look on her face. “Have you heard from Brock?”

Just a mention of his name turned Kyle’s blood cold.

He stared back at her, numb. “B-Brock?”

“Mrs. Hastings just called the house,” she said, giving the phone a wiggle before pressing it to her chest. “Did you not hear the ringing? Must’ve rang a dozen times.”

Kyle could barely manage a breath. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

“I’m sure it’s nothing, but Brock isn’t home, was supposed to be home two hours ago for dinner. Do you know where he is? One of those places you guys hang out? Did he say anything to you at school? She’s still on the line, waiting.”

Kyle was at a loss of what to say. A thousand horror stories flooded his brain at once. “I ... I-I don’t know.”

His mother sighed impatiently. “Really? Think. Anything.”

“I really don’t know.”

She rolled her eyes and left the room. “I’m sorry, Shelly, I don’t know, my son doesn’t know anything, apparently, he’s no help. Have you tried Ms. Carmichael or Mrs. Martinez? They might know if ...”

As his mother’s voice faded down the hall, Kyle turned to the window, alarmed. It could mean anything. A dozen things.

But not one of those things seemed good.

It was a whole hour later when Kyle swiped his letterman jacket off the back of his door and slipped out of the house. On foot, everything was going to take a minimum of a half hour to get to. He was once Brock’s best friend. He decided he would play detective and list at least three or four places Brock could have lured Tristan to conduct his plan. Kyle played a fast game of eeny-meeny-miny-moe and changed course appropriately.

He ended up at the school.

To his dismay, he found the back door to the gymnasium cracked open. There was only one reason for that.

His random choice was right.

“H-Hello?” called out Kyle, then pushed his way inside.

The gym was dark, save for the exit sign above his head. It gave no clue as to the contents therein. Kyle took a step inside, and the door shut behind him. He slowly crossed the long, wide expanse of gym flooring. His ears drank in any little sound they could find, desperate for answers, prickling with fear.

He noticed the door to the locker room was ajar.

Light spilled out from it.

He poked his head in. “Hello ...?” He took a step inside. In the air hung a musky, terrible odor, more so than usual. There was nothing but perfect silence, punctured by each soft footstep of his sneakers, and his own jagged breaths.

Then he reached the center aisle.

Bound to the lockers by rope somehow, side by side, hands over their heads, were eight members of the football team, five on one side, three on the other. All of them in nothing but their jockstraps. All of them with eyes shut, motionless, silent.

Seated on a long bench in the center of the aisle, Tristan, his legs crossed, inspecting his fingernails patiently. He looked up upon Kyle’s arrival. *Ah, finally.*

Kyle froze. “What is this ...?”

*A gift. A jock menagerie, if you will. Tristan gestured at them. Isn't it artful, what I did?*

“What happened? What the fuck happened?”

*They had a plan for me. Something to do with staking me out on the grass outside, naked, letting the sun have its way with me. Or they just wanted to humiliate me and have no idea what I am. Foolish idea, totally juvenile. I decided to have a plan for them, too. A much more fun one. No harm, no violence—just fun. Oh, unless Mr. Reed comes by for more jockstraps, he'll find himself a goldmine of desires.*

Kyle slowly walked down the aisle, sickened. “Tristan ...”

*Hey, it's like a sample of the college hazing they will experience when they join their silly fraternities. Isn't it thoughtful? A reflection of themselves. Honestly, this is really more of a gift for them.*

“How did you even—?”

*Barely lifted a finger, I swear, the boys practically tied themselves up and fell right to sleep. It'll be rather tricky to explain to the coach when he finds them in the morning. You will have to tell me how that plays out. I don't plan to be here. I have a history project due.*

It seemed so unreal, like a dream, a really perverse dream, some other reality. “I don't see Brock. Where's—?”

His foot kicked into something.

Kyle gazed down.

Brock lay on the floor, limbs akimbo—with a thin streak of blood across his chest.

Kyle stepped back at once with a gasp. “What the fuck??”

*He’s asleep, too, don’t worry, minor incident. Tristan wiped his own mouth with the back of his wrist, then smirked. Had to ... clean him up a little. Sorry, yes, I had a little taste, couldn’t be helped, it might be a consequence of our chat at lunch earlier today, I couldn’t get my mind off the idea of blood. Won’t happen again, promise.*

Kyle wasn’t sure he was following everything Tristan said. Or trusting it. His head whirled as he dropped down onto the nearest bench, dazed. “Tristan ... we ... we can’t ...”

*Do you know how cats drop a dead thing on your doorstep to show respect? Like, “Here, a gift.” That’s what this is, Kyle. This is my dead thing, my gift. Why aren’t you celebrating? No one was hurt. I’m okay. Do you believe I’m well capable of protecting myself yet?*

The next instant, Tristan was seated at Kyle’s side.

Kyle turned to him, stunned by his sudden appearance.

*The excitement makes me horny. Sorry, can’t be romantic when I’m like this, but I’m still a gentleman, even if my mouth tastes like blood right now, Brock’s blood, and I will ask for your consent first.*

“My ... My consent?”

*To kiss you, Kyle Amos. Can I please kiss you?*

Half the football team surrounded them, hanging by their wrists from the lockers. Whether they were asleep or not, they



were there. Kyle felt like they were all watching him, watching the traitor, as he considered whether to let Tristan kiss him.

Then his eyes found Brock on the floor, asleep, helpless and foolish, who could not let his inflated ego go undefended, who insisted on plotting to hurt Tristan with the team, who wouldn't listen to reason, who brought this on himself.

He deserved this humiliation, didn't he?

"I don't know," said Kyle, and he wasn't sure whether he was answering his own question or Tristan's.

*Whether here or at your house, wherever, we can go there, far away from this scene, even to the graveyard, but I want to kiss you. I want to show you I'm more than just my affliction.*

Did he want to prove that to Kyle?

Or himself?

And what did Kyle have to prove to anyone in this room? To Brock and his stupid teammates? To his school or his coach or his parents?

What did he have in this life that was worth salvaging? It was all ruined. The next morning, everything would come out. There would be consequences, serious ones. Brock would most certainly follow through with his promise now.

Kyle's life was over.

Even still: "I just ... realized something," said Kyle as he continued to stare down at Brock.

*That Brock's hairline is terrible and he should consult a stylist?*

“I’m tired of this life.” Kyle looked at the other members of his team, adrift in thoughts. “I’m ... I’m tired of fighting. With them. With my parents. All of it.”

*Kyle ...*

“I know. You’re going to say no. You’re going to deny me yet again. You’re going to have a hundred reasons about blood, morals, nightmares, bullshit, I don’t care.” He brought his eyes to Tristan’s, his heavy, tired eyes. “I feel the most myself when I’m with you. I was already dead, Tristan, dead in all the ways that count. I don’t belong here. I never did. Not in this life, not with this team, not with my family ... none of it. At all.” He swallowed. “I want it, Tristan.”

Tristan, for once, did not say no. He merely kept his misty blue stare on Kyle, listening, watching, waiting.

“I want it,” he repeated.

He felt brave. He always did around Tristan.

He decided to prove it by making the first move. Leaning forward, he pushed his lips onto Tristan’s—their first kiss.

When their lips touched, it was perfectly soft and inviting. His lips were cool, refreshing, clean, perfect. Nothing like Kyle imagined. No blood. No repulsion. No strangeness or coldness.

Their lips belonged together, a perfect complement.

Tristan gripped the back of Kyle’s head at once with his otherworldly strength, pulling him close.

The kiss deepened.

The football team continued to watch in silence. Hanging around, one might say. Silent witnesses, as always.

Kyle found himself on his back as Tristan crawled over him on the long bench, kissing him even harder.

The team continued to sleep, fading away, not even there.

Suddenly, they were in the middle of the gymnasium. Kyle had his back against the cold hard wall under the basketball net. Tristan's hands were exploring his body, digging in and out of his letterman jacket, dragging over his skin, clinging, desperate.

It was almost painful, the intensity of their kisses.

In the darkness, they were just vague shapes.

Nothing to distract. Nothing to define. Only passion freed in the dark, unfiltered, allowed to be expressed without bounds.

Kyle found himself in the field outside the gymnasium as Tristan pressed kisses all over his face, his cheeks, his chin, then down to his neck. Kyle let out a moan that boomed across the fresh-mowed grass like thunder. Even the moon heard it.

Then they were outside Kyle's house, pressed to the side of it, to the brick, a foot from his parents' bedroom window. "You taste so clean, so pure, so ... g-glassy ..." whimpered Kyle.

*You taste like sweat, worry, and innocence,* returned Tristan.

"Will you bite me?" gasped Kyle. "I want you to taste me. I know you'll like it. I know you want it."

*Kyle Amos, don't you dare.*

“Fucking bite me,” he growled.

When Tristan's teeth came for Kyle's neck, he felt a pinch of fear and regret, lancing him through his chest, like ice. Then he felt Tristan's tongue instead, licking him at the sensitive spot between his shoulder and ear, making him buckle slightly, soft tingles of pleasure everywhere, invigorating him.

Did he bite?

*I have never regretted a single drop of blood,* whispered Tristan into Kyle's ear, as soft as poetry, *but every time I taste, I regret it.*

“That makes no sense,” breathed Kyle.

Then Tristan's teeth took hold of his earlobe.

He felt the sweet, deep, perfect prick of teeth puncturing.

It was pain for half a second.

Then pleasure, everywhere.

*You've done it,* groaned Tristan as he licked, as he nipped, as he licked some more. *You've gone and opened the door.*

“Tristan ... I think I love you.”

They were on Kyle's bed. The sheets were ripped off and flung aside. Something loud fell from the dresser. Pillows and books and math homework made homes all over the room as Tristan and Kyle wrestled together on the bed.

Kyle and his burning heat.

Tristan and his cool, soft fingertips.

*Kyle*, came Tristan's words between their kisses, made red from the blood on Kyle's lips, *if I ever forget to say it ...*

"I love you," moaned Kyle.

*How lost I was, how incredibly lost I was ...*

"I want us to be together forever."

*And how complete you have made me, at long last, how you made all the pain of my life worth it, my miserable little life ...*

Tristan's teeth sank in deeper.

Kyle cried out.

A cry of elation. A cry of despair.

A cry of freedom.

He clung to Tristan so tightly, his fingers could break.

Even then, even that quickly, Kyle felt his heart thrumming strangely, not normal, writhing around like a bug in a cocoon, fighting to be free.

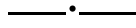
Thrashing uncontrollably, violently, then worse.

*My miserable little life ...*

The bedroom door opened. Light from the hallway spilled in softly, like milk, an accident. In that light, the smallish shape of a boy appeared. It was Kaleb, hand still on the doorknob, and his voice was faraway and curious when he murmured: "Kyle?"

## 7.

# *To the End of Things.*



Kyle runs.

He runs because Tristan runs.

From the bloodbath that became of his kitchen, his family.

In a new set of clothes, courtesy of a rundown Macy's off Creaky Bridge Lane, catty-corner to a Starbucks.

“My mom ... my dad ... K-Kaleb ...”

*Would you like to stop for ice cream?* Tristan asks. *I find that ice cream always curbs the incorrigible taste of blood. Doesn't matter the flavor, you pick, toppings too. It's on the company, I'll put it on Death's business card, another job perk. Hey, should we call you an intern? ... Is this metaphor still working for you?*

Kyle doesn't even know how they get it. One moment, they are running across an abandoned parking lot. The next, they're at an old, creaky picnic table in the middle of a vacant park, one flickering light far above their heads with bugs buzzing noisily around it.

*Why aren't you eating? It'll melt,* warns Tristan.

“What have I done?”

*There is a man I know the next city over, in an alleyway next to a car dealership, a man who'll set you up with a name and legitimate ID, no questions asked. Sometimes you even get*

*to pick the name. Usually not. Really, your ice cream is going to melt.*

“Tristan, I can’t do this.”

*You think you can’t right now. You’ll be amazed what you can do in time. I hardly can be bothered to think of how I felt my first day. I might’ve sang a song for all I know. Or drank hot cocoa.*

“Did you kill your whole family?”

*You didn’t kill them, sweetheart.*

“Now you’re lying?” Kyle turns to him. “To spare me the guilt? You want me to lie to myself and pretend like I’m not a monster? Like I didn’t just fucking murder my family?”

*You didn’t. It was all a dream, your life with them.*

“Seriously, Tristan, did I bite them? Drink their ... their blood? How far did I go? It’s driving me crazy, that I was in such a frenzy, I don’t remember. I feel like I blacked out.”

*Can we move on to our ice cream? Should have gotten sprinkles.*

“Goddamn it, Tristan, stop being so fucking flippant about all of this, stop with all the fucking jokes, just stop!”

A second of insolence darkens Tristan’s eyes.

He closes his eyes, takes a moment, then gazes down at his ice cream, appearing pensive. *I may seem flippant. I know. I have been this way a long time. Hopelessly indifferent to everything. I have seen so much, Kyle.*

“This is my life. My fucking life.”

*And my emotions died a long time ago. Well, the ones that get in the way, at least. I'm so exhausted of sorrow. It bores me. I'm so tired of the tedium of pain and suffering. After you've lived long enough, you learn how to turn it off. You learn to evade it, like a gnat in your face. I'm not meaning to be flippant about your life you just sacrificed. Tristan takes a lick of his ice cream, thoughtful, then faces Kyle again. Let's do a little exercise, alright? Call this an exercise. Imagine it was all staged, that scene with your family. Like theatre. They can still be alive, if you want to believe it. They'll wake up tomorrow and go about their day as if you were never born. Or, if it's easier, pretend it was you who died and not them. Kyle Amos, he is no more, poor soul. Survived by his family. Tell yourself whatever it is you must tell yourself, it does not matter, it's merely an excuse for Kyle Amos to disappear. In the end, regardless of the truth, the result is the same. Your old life is gone. Kyle, too. Whether your mom is alive or dead, or your dad or brother ... it will have no effect on you, forever. You start a new life now. And you define what that is. Tristan brushes hair off of Kyle's forehead. Your new life with me.*

*"Tristan ..."*

*I was thirteen. Your brother's age.*

*Kyle looks at him.*

*My mother had left. My father worked to provide for me and my two sisters. I was lonely and unsupervised. One day after school, I did not go home. I found myself lured to a park by a man in a bowler hat and tweed suit. Don't even remember the bait I took, nor the reason he used to lure me there, I just remember he had kind eyes. I never saw my family again, for*



*the man took me with him on an adventure to the big city, yes, that is what he called it, an adventure. I was met by a lady named—well, it doesn't matter. They wanted a son to share their affliction with ... and got one. After a chat around their dining table for four, as if discussing what wallpaper to put up in the den, without my input, they made a decision and changed me that night.*

“They kidnapped you?” Kyle can't close his mouth. “That man kidnapped you and turned you into their fake son?”

*Like I was a mink coat he picked up at the store for his wife for their anniversary, yes, just like that. Tristan takes one long and thoughtful lick of his ice cream, gazing far away. It was a long time ago. Longer than I should admit. I can't be sure what happened, exactly. The order of things is hazy. But I know I never saw my real dad or sisters again. Do I know if they're alive? Dead? Searching for me? Forgotten me? I cannot even properly tell you how old any of them would be, they're a faded life, my old life. My sisters are likely great grandmothers now, if they're even still alive.*

Kyle drops his eyes to the ground. “I ... I can't just forget them. I can't just ... just let my life go, not like that.”

*You will learn to. Everything is unimportant, my love. We're all just tiny sparks in the football stadium of the universe, existing for a little moment, then gone, no one cares, like the breeze erodes a mighty mountain to dust, one great civilization falls, another built on top of it, over and over, our little world keeps turning like rotisserie chicken around the great oven of the sun. I regret getting you that ice cream, you haven't even taken a lick.*

Kyle takes one lick. He tastes nothing.

*I know, says Tristan with a sigh. Nothing will taste interesting ever again, I'm sorry, we should have made a stop at your favorite restaurant before everything happened.*

“They’d all have been closed,” mumbles Kyle absently. He wants to cry, but nothing happens. He feels empty.

*You notice I don't look thirteen, right? You will continue to age, in case you were wondering, but it will slow, and slow, and slow, as your lovely new condition claims more and more of you by the heart, then finally stopping you fully. I think I might have stopped fully. I've not noticed much of a change these past few decades.*

“Decades ...?”

*I did say it was a long time ago. Strange, how time stands still in the mind. Everything eventually feels like yesterday ... whether it was a year ago, a hundred years ago, or actually yesterday. Tristan tosses his ice cream at the grass, then slides an arm around Kyle to cuddle him close. At least now we don't have to do it all alone.*

“How much will I age before I stop?”

*No more than five years, maybe six, from what I know, which is not very much. If you'd like any piercings, I recommend getting them soon. Tattoos, too. Your skin will become ... far less easy to penetrate the more you mature. I can see you with a cute nose ring. Or a stud.*

“I can't eat this.”

Tristan snatches the ice cream from Kyle's hand and flings it away to join his own, somewhere in the grass.

*Problem solved. What else shall we do with our night?*

“Is there somewhere we can go? Stay for a while? I ... don't want to run anymore.”

The night is a blur of darkness and fog. Kyle finds himself standing in a parking lot, aloof, as Tristan heads into the lobby of a motel. Next, Kyle plods into a musty room on the second floor, the door shuts, and he curls up on a creaky bed.

Tristan lies behind him, stroking his hair. *It is like a disease inverted, he whispers, the sicker you get, the stronger you get, and yet the sicker you get. But if we are smart, if we are careful, we will always be strong, gods among the earth, with the whole planet as our palette to paint whatever scores of monsters we desire. You will also become stronger. You will sense more. Feel more. It is a responsibility and a burden, remember? We are the respectable agents of Death, our great employer, and we forever look down upon Them, who wastefully drink the blood of innocents, who are selfish, hedonistic, and very vile. Have you given any thought to where you'd like to live, by the way? The prairie? The mountains? Hmm, I think a nice wooded cabin may be cozy, plenty of shade, I can learn how to crochet.*

Kyle clutches the pillow next to him. It feels like paper and misshapen cotton balls. “That man who abducted you ... that fucked-up man and his fucked-up wife ... Where they one of *them*, the very vile ones? Or more like you?”

Tristan lets out a soft breath. *They were ... one of Them.*

“And how did you get away from them?”

*Are you sure you wish to know?*

“Yes.”

*I did my job. I ended them.*

“How?”

*With a silver bullet. Two, to be precise.*

Kyle touches his pinky right then, reminded anew that his silver ring is no longer there, Kaleb’s ring. Tristan is holding on to it, stuck in a pocket somewhere, safe. He closes his eyes and strains to hear his brother’s last words, whatever it was he shouted, through the haze of red in his memory, and Tristan hums a quiet melody as he strokes Kyle’s hair.

After a short while, the bed creaks as Tristan slides off of it. *Rest*, Tristan tells him. *I will be right back. I think I will get a little air, run an errand or two, perhaps shop for a few things. This place could use something sweet, soft, like a teddy bear in a little tuxedo, or a dandelion in a vase. I’ll take care of everything. Just rest, and don’t be alarmed if you dream of nothing, you can just pretend dreams bore you now. Face the abyssal void with an open imagination. Count those sheep. I’ll be back in twenty.*

Kyle can’t be bothered to lift as much of a finger off of the bed anyway, too spent, too dead.

*Count those sheep, my love, count them. Start with one.*

One sheep. Two.

One day passes. And two.

Then a week.

*Yes, our new front desk friend Ms. Nanette will allow us to stay here as long as we wish,* says Tristan one night as he

meticulously adjusts the antenna of the motel TV, attempting to get some channels to come in, *but maybe Room 208 of this two-star motel wasn't where I planned for us to spend eternity. Can we aim a little higher? The star rating is rounded up, by the way.*

“Will I still be able to, uh ... come ...?”

Tristan stops fussing with the antenna abruptly and turns. *Well, someone's certainly had a change of mood.*

“I can still breathe,” notes Kyle. “I can eat. Pee. Do bodily functions. But can I ...?”

Tristan sits on the end of the bed. *There is a lot even I can't answer, Kyle. I hate to say it, but I was turned too young to retain any of the wisdom I was taught about my miserable new life. Many of the things I know, I've discovered on my own. Such as the aging thing or what I can or can't eat. My ability to make people sleep—the Lull, I affectionately call it. Or my sensitivity to others' heartbeats.*

“Will I be able to do something special, too?”

*Someday, I hope. Smelling blood, increased sight and hearing, sensing heart rates, that's all the first-level stuff, the inherent traits, the basics. Those develop very quickly. My Lull, that's the second-level stuff. Those things, they take time to discover.*

“So I'll eventually be able to put people to sleep, too?”

*Maybe, maybe not. My dead abductor mother, she said when we come to discover our secondary gifts, that's when we know what kind of—well, what kind of 'employee' we are.*

It seems Tristan, too skittish even still to say the word, has veered back into using his “Death’s employee” metaphor again.

“There are different kinds of us?”

*Three, to be precise. Isn't that a nice number? Very fairytale, everything in threes. Three wishes, three fairies, three little carpenter piglets who can't build a proper house to save themselves from a wolf. My Lull, it comes from the mind. That's one of the three types, of the mind. Your gift may come from a different place.*

“What are the other—?”

*Are you sure you want all this schooling so quickly? It's still your very first week of being employed. Seriously, you just left school, life, and tedium behind. Why do you insist on diving right back in? Are you taking notes or something? There's no exam for this, there's only forever to learn. It's summer vacation now, forever.*

“I just ...” Kyle looks off. “I want to know everything.”

Tristan takes hold of Kyle’s hand on the bed. The two of them stare at their linked fingers. *Want to have sex? We might be horny forever, we were afflicted at such formative ages.*

“I don’t feel horny. I don’t feel anything.”

At once, Tristan’s lips are upon his neck. Kyle’s eyes rock back as he enjoys the sensation of cool lips brushing across his skin. He feels a kiss near his face. Another kiss lower. When the lips part, Kyle feels teeth dragging over his shoulder.

Then the slightest, gentlest nip. Kyle sighs. “Tristan ...”

*Too much?*

“Not enough.”

He bites harder. A sensation unlike anything Kyle has ever known spiders through his body, filling him with excitement.

It is quickly becoming his new weakness.

The touch of Tristan’s teeth, and Kyle is at once in a trance of obsessive delight.

*Again?*

Kyle’s fingers weave into Tristan’s hair, grabbing hold. He feels like he’s floating. “Is it good? Do I ... Do I taste good?”

*I’m addicted to everything about you, Kyle.*

They roll over on the bed. Kyle gazes down at Tristan with a drunken smile, overcome. And those beautiful misty blue eyes stare back up, a smirk on Tristan’s pale pink lips.

“I don’t know if I’m ready to bite back,” Kyle confesses.

*There’s a time for everything, no rush. Let’s just play for now.*

Kyle descends upon Tristan’s lips, kissing him. The tiniest of nips invites a taste of blood, and Kyle can’t say whose it is. They roll over again, Tristan on top now, Kyle below, and then lips unite again. The excitement that storms within Kyle’s chest is nearly crushing. Is this what real happiness feels like? Heavy and crushing and impossible to bear?

They roll over again and run out of bed. To the floor they tumble, to the sticky, stained carpet, the sheets spilled over the

edge of the bed. “Am I ruining you, Tristan?” asks Kyle, his mood shifting suddenly. “Letting you bite me? And taste me? I made a promise to keep you human, I remember, I—”

*What harm’s a little drop now and then?*

Kyle swallows. “Can you ... Can you describe it to me?” Kyle buries his face into Tristan’s neck, digging for kisses. His hand reaches down between Tristan’s legs, discovering him to be just as excited as he is. They’re both starved for it. “Describe what it’s like. My blood.”

*The more I have, the less human is left of me. When I taste it ...* Tristan groans. *No, never mind.*

“When you taste it ...? Tell me.”

*I don’t want to be the salesman of your tragic ending.* Tristan shakes his head. *Don’t put that on me, please, Kyle, just enjoy this.*

The boys flip again, rolling upon the floor. Kyle is on top. “Tell me what it’s like to have my blood. To taste me.”

Tristan peers dolefully up into Kyle’s eyes, defeated. Then he slowly closes his own. A broken smile twists his lips.

*I feel ... alive.*

Kyle listens, waiting.

*All of my emptiness, gone. Every crumb of loathing I bear for the world, for myself, for everyone I have ever known, loved, or hated, it is all burned away at the taste of blood.*

When his eyes open, Kyle is there, staring down at him, in a state of amazement. A droplet of blood lets go from his neck, drops onto Tristan’s bare chest, a bright red drop in a pale sea.



For a moment, a spell of peace, bliss, sweetness.

Then there is an urgent beating of fists at the door. “This is the police department,” booms a voice. “A disturbance was reported at this unit. Open up.” Bang, bang, the fists come once more, shaking the room. “Open up. This is your last warning.”

Tristan bites his lip and squints at Kyle. *I think Ms. Nanette tattled on us. The cops are here to give us a spanking. Should we let them? Are you into it? No?*

Half an hour later finds the boys walking together through the woods. Kyle is only in his new jeans, his dark red shirt left behind at the motel. They left in such a hurry.

*Don't worry, we'll get you more clothes,* promises Tristan.

“Is this what your life was like? Constant movement? After you killed your abductors?”

*I didn't have someone at my side,* admits Tristan. *This part is new. I lucked out, becoming a student at your school and meeting you.* Tristan smiles as he playfully leaps over a knobby branch on the ground, pirouettes, then throws an arm around Kyle. *Things are a little trickier nowadays. Easier to get away with murder in the 30s.*

“30s?” Kyle blinks. “How old are you, exactly?”

*Probably eighteen. That's my permanent age, I like to call it, the age I seem. And in this world, that's all that matters. Do I look that age, would you say? Maybe nineteen? I'm so glad we met.* Tristan lets out a mirthful giggle. *More I think about it, the happier I feel. After all this time, someone to face forever with. Do you want to find a house, by the way? A real*

*one, of course. It'd be nice to have a home. Somewhere wooded, shaded during the day, sweet and safe.*

“Sweet and safe,” murmurs Kyle thoughtfully.

*Wouldn't you like a real home?*

Kyle wonders what it felt like for Tristan to point a gun at his evil kidnappers, to find silver bullets somehow, to load that gun, point it at them, and squeeze his little finger. Twice.

Kyle knows what it feels like to merely touch silver.

But for a bullet made of the metal to pierce the skin and lodge itself inside the body, burning from within like a demonic intruder, a raging, screaming silver-hot kiss ...

*We should find somewhere to stay soon,* suggests Tristan.  
*The sun will rise in a few hours.*

Kyle stops at a small clearing, his eyes on what's left of the moon, hanging low. All he can feel is the breeze on his sensitive skin. Nothing touches him. Even when Tristan comes to his side, he feels alone in the world, lost in a dark place in his mind.

“Is it always going to be like this?” asks Kyle. “Darkness? The stars and the moon?”

*You will learn to treasure the night, my love.*

“Can our bodies really turn to ash in the sun?”

*I suppose. Maybe after a little while, for us, we disintegrate, then blow away like a sandcastle, perhaps, I'm not sure, I simply imagine.*

“Have you seen it happen?”

*No. I haven't known anyone like me, other than the man and woman who took me. They told me of others they once knew, but ... I doubt there are very many of us free spirits left out there in the big wide world. I killed two, so ... two less in the world now.*

“Could we be the only ones left?”

Tristan's fingers glide up Kyle's arm, take hold of the side of his face. *You're so pretty in the moonlight.*

“What a scary feeling. To be alone in the world. Only us.” Kyle stands there as Tristan kisses his neck, his cheek, then his lips. Kyle's heavy eyes remain on the pale moon as he is kissed. Tristan's lips lower to Kyle's chest, each of his kisses full and intentional, savoring every inch of skin. “I wonder if that's what they felt, your abductors ... why they wanted another, a child, why they wanted you.”

*Perhaps,* says Tristan between kisses, his head going lower.

“Maybe I shouldn't be so sad about giving up the sun,” says Kyle as Tristan unbuttons his pants. “What did it ever give me but sunburns in the summer and torture during practice?”

His pants drop to the grass.

*You will always have the sun,* says Tristan as he gently works Kyle's underwear down his thighs. *Where do you think moonlight comes from? It's merely secondhand sunlight.*

“We can do whatever we want, from now on.”

Tristan's lips return to Kyle's neck as he grips him below.

“Do you think we can be happy forever? I want to be. I’d like to be. But I want my life to mean something, too.”

*We can have it all,* says Tristan.

Then he bites.

Kyle clings to Tristan, fingers digging into him. The bite is the most potent yet, bordering right on the razor sharp edge of pleasure and pain. Kyle grimaces, then groans deeply. Was it his neck this time? Was it even more pleasurable than the ear?

*Here’s to the rest of our lives,* says Tristan. *To saying goodbye to all our past sufferings. To making a world all for us, without rules, without denial, without sorrows ...*

“To finding home,” says Kyle, out of breath.

*To the end of things,* says Tristan.

The boys tumble to the forest floor, their passions taking control. Tristan’s mouth drags down Kyle’s exposed chest, with one kiss here, one kiss there, until his soft face grazed over Kyle below, hovering, only cool breath touching his swollen length. When Tristan’s mouth takes it in, Kyle’s eyes drink in the light of the moon, eclipsed by branches and their swaying leaves.

Upon one of them, a single leaf, even in the darkness, Kyle spots a bug grooming itself in the moonlight. Some kind of ant.

*You asked earlier if you can still come, if you’re still you.*

Kyle stares at that tiny ant, in awe that he can see it at all, as Tristan’s mouth slides up and down his length, up and down

with no interruption, even when he speaks. His words must be coming from some other place, invading Kyle's mind. Has he always been capable of that? Has Kyle just not noticed?

*I want to prove you can. I want to show you just how human you still are, Kyle, now and always.*

The ant keeps grooming itself meticulously. Kyle swears he can even hear the tiny appendages as they slide against one another, little ticking and tapping noises.

Every sound, a hundred times more.

Tristan suddenly picks up speed and intensity. Kyle takes hold of Tristan's hair, caught off-guard, clinging. His lips part and his eyes dance upward to the sky, overwhelmed.

Every sensation, Tristan's tongue, a hundred times more.

*You're not only abandoning your life ... You're abandoning the very notion of suffering. You will never suffer another second, Kyle.*

Kyle feels his eyes turning wet.

Brock and the team, tied up, a jock menagerie in the locker room. What became of them? How'd the game go? Did they win? Why is Kyle wondering? Is he trying to cling to his old life, even still, like he has even the tiniest chance to return to it?

*All the best parts of being human, forever.*

Tears fall down Kyle's cheeks as he smiles up at the stars. Kyle's fingers curl in Tristan's hair, squeezing even tighter, his breaths shattering in the night air.

Kyle feels a hint of teeth.

Instead of discomfort, a rush of yearning overtakes Kyle, a deep, irrevocable desire for more of whatever he just felt, even the pain. He wants it. He wants it immediately.

“C-Can you bite me? Down there?”

Tristan’s misty blue eyes peer up at him from below.

“Please?” Every inch of Kyle’s skin is alive. Every hair on his body, prickling with sensation. His soul, were it something a person could see as plainly as the trees around them, is vividly aflame, like a mighty beacon. “I want to feel it. To feel *you*.”

Tristan’s eyes nearly glow in the night. *Oh, Kyle, you look so alive right now. I wish you could see you.*

Kyle feels teeth again.

Tristan turns his eyes back to his task, teeth bared, as he gently surveys, as if calculating, finding the perfect spot. Kyle is merely an eager spectator of his own body and what Tristan is about to do to it, throbbing with anticipation, yearning.

Tristan finds his spot. Teeth make contact.

One pinch of pain, barely a nip, then a flood of pleasure.

Every drop of pleasure, a hundred times more.

The groan that emits from Kyle is a sound he has never heard, a sound he’s never made. Is that the real Kyle emerging, the one that’s been imprisoned his whole life?

Crackling energy rockets through his body, out of control.

His wild eyes dart everywhere. To the moon, every detail in sharp focus, as if it’s within reach. To a tree far away, where a spider wraps a snack, each squeak of silk audible. To that

tiny ant on the leaf, far away, still grooming itself to perfection.

*You will always be human, thrumming with life, never forget this, always.*

“I’m so close ... T-Tristan ...”

*Your life will mean something, Kyle. You are going to change the world, this terrible world we live in. You will save all of us.*

“Don’t stop. Please don’t stop.”

*You are my purpose, it was always you. Stay alive, Kyle. Promise me you will never stop chasing your dreams, you will never die.*

Teeth are traded for tongue as Kyle lets go inside Tristan’s mouth. Every drop that spills from Kyle, blood, sweat, and come, Tristan eagerly consumes. Kyle’s fingers squeeze in his hair, tears of elation hanging from his eyes and cheeks.

All his pressure, relieved.

All his nightmares, all his worries, gone.

Every last bit of everything that was Kyle Amos.

Soon, among the trees, under a night sky that has started to swell a threatening blue as morning approaches, the boys rest side by side, Kyle’s head in Tristan’s lap, a happy, lazy smile stretching over his face.

The world is slowly waking up around them.

Even the urgent matter of finding somewhere to stay seems far away, unimportant.

Everything in its own time.

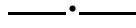
*Promise me, no matter what direction our new life together takes, no matter what monsters face us, even our own, we must keep each other human. Tristan's fingers play in Kyle's hair, eyes upon the dark blue sky, whatever sliver remains of their night. Stay as human as you can. For as long as you can. You deserve everything under the sun, and even then, it wouldn't be enough.*



*27 Years Later.*

## 8.

# *Nowhere.*



Kyle takes a rag to wipe down the last table, drops of liquor, granules of salt, a smear of queso.

Returns the bowls of nuts to the back of the bar, empties the bin of half-melted ice, washes it down.

Faces each bottle of liquor on the upper shelves properly.

Same with the bottom shelves. And the wine.

Takes a peek at the time hanging on the wall, it's the same as always, half past two. He yawns, rubs at a smudge on his arm, unsure where it came from, doesn't care. Nothing requires his full attention. All the same, like any other night.

"Close again tomorrow?" asks Leland, the blue-eyed, baby-faced cook, peeling off his apron. Kyle nods. The cook yawns, then sees himself out, back door shutting softly behind him.

Kyle heads to the jukebox, still playing, and reaches behind to turn it off.

"Wait, I like this one."

The bar manager is at her office door, long tight braids of hair swept down her left shoulder, snake tattoo curling up the right side of her neck, her deep mahogany skin aglow under the nearby light. She's in a pair of jeans and a loose yellow tank top tonight, notebook clutched in her hand, as she closes

her eyes and tilts her head, relishing the sweet and gentle song, a wistful smile on her face.

When it ends, she lets out a sigh. “Mmm, that hits right.”

“Can I switch it off now, ma’am?”

She pops her eyes open and frowns. “You’ve been here half a year already and still can’t call me by my name?”

“Sorry, Cadence.”

“Cade. Only Gran called me Cadence, and she only called me that when I did something bad. Also, she’s no longer with us, God rest her soul.”

Kyle studies her. For a woman who is so sincere and to-the-point, he can’t help but sense a cloud of mystery about her, like she holds back as much as she reveals. He’s never pried. He just keeps his head low, comes in to work, does his job. His own secrets are no one’s business. Cade deserves her own.

He switches off the jukebox. “Are you good for the night?”

Cade studies him for a moment, peeved. “You’re not a man of many words, are you, Henry?”

Kyle takes that for his answer, offers a mild nod, then taps on the terminal by the kitchen door to clock out. Cade watches him as he slips out the back door.

It’s a quiet Wednesday night. Just the dry Arizona air and Kyle, the streets of downtown, empty. Not that there are many streets—or people in this small desert town to occupy them. All the lights are shut off, all the doors closed, barred up, silent.

“I tried to make a paradise for us,” says Kyle, words taken away by the night breeze. “Tried to give us a home. That thing you never had. Somewhere a little happy, a little sweet, safe.”

No one is nearby to answer.

Not anymore.

“I always wondered why you craved safety. Did you feel ... unsafe? Were you on the run, even before you met me? Is there something else out there? Something you never told me about? Someone?”

Kyle passes by the old bakery, poster on its outside showing the freckly faces of the two funny curly-haired sisters who run it. Next to the bakery, he passes the café, the owner of which stops by the bar every Friday—and sometimes Thursdays when things are rough with his wife, which seems more often lately. Everything is closed at this hour, quiet, lifeless. Just across from the café, a dentist’s office, electronics store, and auto shop.

He stops in front of the closed corner store that’s usually run by a cute girl in her twenties. He studies his reflection in the dark glass, tilts his head. Studies the tattoo on the side of his neck. The tattoos on the backs of his hands. His stainless steel stud earring, his nose ring. “Not even sure I ever wanted these. But you said my skin would be as hard as diamond someday. I’d have to decide right then what I wanted my forever-body to be like, right then, at the ripe age of eighteen. Who the hell makes smart decisions at eighteen?” He studies himself. “Barely aged a few years since. You were right. Young forever ... if it weren’t for these perpetual bedroom eyes. You said I look very ‘college boy who just woke up, late

to class, many papers due that he has no time to write’.” He sighs. “Strange to say about someone who never went. I wonder what college would’ve been like. You never had an interest. But it was always my dream. To go. Join a stupid frat. Stress over classes and papers and hate myself. Eat dorm room ramen. Easy Mac.” He runs a hand down his face. “What would you say my permanent age is? Go ahead, take a guess. Twenty-three? Twenty-five? Doesn’t matter. I’ll still get carded everywhere I go. Even with these tats.” He drops his hand to his side. “Whatever.” He leaves his reflection.

“Hey, you remember when you said love never dies?” Kyle strolls down the middle of the empty road. No one in sight. “Only that people grow bored. Did you grow bored? I recall that morning so vividly. We were having one of those talks, one of those *deeper* talks. You said the soul can’t survive on love alone. It needs something else, something ... *thicker*. I never knew what you meant by ‘thicker’, but I nodded and held your hand anyway. You were in a dark mood that morning. It wasn’t clear whether you were talking about your soul, or mine.”

Down a little ways surrounded by a few sleepy houses and a boarded-up storefront sits a park, desperately in need of some tender love and care. Its only neighbors are a basketball court and a rundown swimming pool.

He stands by the chain link fence, staring through at the pool. “You freed me from my life, from my old family, and I’ve been wondering lately what you freed me for. Did you come to regret it? Are you capable of regretting anything?”

Kyle stops in front of an old bench overlooking the park. He imagines lying on it until the morning. He calculates what angle the sun will rise, what the view would be like.

“Not a bad place to die,” he remarks thoughtfully. “What do you think? Will the high school swim team find my pile of ashes first, or a stray dog needing a warm mound to piss on?”

There is no response. Of course not.

“Just kidding,” says Kyle. “This town doesn’t have a high school swim team.”

He passes a playground, the elementary school, a barren soccer field peppered with weeds and cracked earth. He passes a warehouse, a gas station, an intersection where all four roads seem to stretch on forever. He lies down in the center of that intersection, not a car in sight, and stares up at the starry sky.

“Not a bad place to die, either.” Kyle crosses his arms, tilts his head, and blinks his eyes alternately, watching as the stars bounce back and forth between them. “Do you see Orion? And the sword hanging from Orion’s belt? Stars always bored you, but I love them. They’re like tiny suns ... only much, much farther away.”

The stars twinkle. The night air blows across Kyle’s short, messy hair, tossing it around.

“You were right,” he then adds. “I don’t miss the sun. Now I have thousands.”

The silent night is his only reply.

“I’m struggling,” admits Kyle, eyes upon the thousands of tiny, faraway suns. “I know I made a promise, but I can’t let go of the guilt, even decades later. I ended them. My family.

Kaleb and his beautiful violin talent that the world will never hear. My dad and his idiosyncrasies and sports magazines. My mom and her book club and her criticisms and crushing expectations. Doesn't even matter what I thought of them. The point is, they were human beings with hopes and dreams. I'm sure even my mom was sweet when she was a little girl, wondering what she'd be like someday as a grandma ... I took that dream away." He places his palm on the road next to him, cold to the touch. "I ended them. How can I ever forgive myself? Even in a hundred years?" He shuts his eyes. "You wouldn't understand. You don't believe in forgiveness. Or apologies. Or anything at all."

"My life has no meaning anymore," says Kyle as he walks on the narrow curb of a bending road, one foot in front of the next, perfectly balanced. "Who am I helping? Who am I living for? More importantly, who fucking cares?"

He stops and lifts his hand, covering the moon with his thumb. "You would've liked this town, had you stuck around a little longer." Kyle drops his hand. "You selfish fucking prick."

When he reaches his neighborhood on the edge of town, he finds the same somber cat sitting on his front yard. Houses around here have yards covered entirely in pebbles and sand, little grass in sight. The daylight hours bring incorrigible heat from the surrounding Arizona desert, but at night, the air feels dry, crisp, which Kyle prefers. Easier to read his surroundings. Easier to sense, to listen, to breathe. Not that he's had much around here to sense lately. Or threatening things to listen for.

Or reasons to breathe.

Kyle lets himself into his little house on the corner, lets the door stay open without a care, drops onto his couch with a huff. It's the only piece of furniture in the room, except for an old upright piano, out of tune. Everything is dark, but he can see the cat as she saunters inside and plants herself by the wall on the other side of the room next to the kitchen. Her big, wary eyes lock upon him. The room is silent. Kyle closes his eyes.

Hours later, Kyle stirs upon picking up the distinct odor of burning flesh. He peers down. A stripe of morning sunlight has found its way through a slit in the window curtains behind him.

It is slicing across Kyle's forearm like a searing hot knife.

He pulls himself out of harm's way with an annoyed grunt, then settles on the opposite side of the couch to resume his rest. The scorched aroma continues to hang in the air, thick and terrible. The cat has since relocated to the piano bench, where she lifts her head, observes Kyle readjusting on the couch, then lowers her chin back to her paws.

It's nightfall again. Kyle's up and about in the kitchen. He is determined to be happy, forces out a cheery tone. "Oh, you want a sandwich?" he asks an imaginary Tristan. "What do you want on it?" He imagines hearing a reply. "A fair choice," Kyle then says, "same for me, but I can do without that tone of yours. Yes, you heard me, Mister Sassy." He pulls out a can of tuna. The cat circles his feet at once, rubbing all over his lower legs, tail writhing impatiently. "Little Lion wants some, too. Hey, hey, protest all you want," says Kyle, wagging his fork in the air at nothing, "but you're the one who always wanted a



cat, this is the one who turned up at my door, and she's hungry."

Kyle sets the bowl on the floor. The cat sinks her teeth into the tuna, noisily feasting.

Kyle lowers himself to the tiles next to her, a tuna sandwich in hand. He takes a bite and grimaces. "I don't get the appeal," he says to her. "Tastes like nothing." When he reaches to pet her, she recoils from him, ears flattening. "Maybe next time," he sighs, giving up. She resumes her meal. Kyle, too.

Before leaving the house for work, Kyle stops at the dining room table, which he hasn't touched in months. Sitting in its center is a ring—a pinky ring. It rests upon a folded-up letter.

The two items have sat there like a centerpiece for a while.

For twenty-three and a half weeks, in fact, since the day Kyle started calling this house and this town his home.

Kyle stares at that ring, long and hard.

"Mom," he says. "Dad," he says. "Kaleb."

It's a nightly ritual, to say their names aloud, one at a time.

It keeps them alive somehow.

Somewhere.

When he stands here in the silence, he can imagine them having dinner at that table, all of them. Serving food from big, steaming casseroles, sharing stories, laughing. Kaleb is

thirteen forever and his parents are smiling and happy. Sometimes, Kyle can even picture Tristan sitting among them, his inappropriate jokes and banter. Everyone finds him endearing, having long ago welcomed him as Kyle's life partner. His dad calls him Tris, because he likes forcing nicknames on everyone he knows. After dinner, the whole family will gather around the couch to listen to Kaleb play the violin, a new piece he's perfected, a piece by Bach, whom he's come to love after all. Tristan applauds the loudest. Kyle's mom gives Tristan a compliment about his silk shirt, asks him where he got it. Kaleb lifts his violin to his chin for another song, then smiles at Kyle as he plays the first note, its beautiful vibrato ringing out through the house.

Then it all fades away—his family, Tristan, the violin—and it's just Kyle in an empty house, that ring, that letter, and the night air whistling in through a cracked window somewhere.

“You were wrong, by the way,” he tells that silver ring, or Tristan, or no one at all. “About everything. But I'll try anyway. I'll try to make this work. Watch me.”

He turns his back on the ring and leaves.

He takes the more scenic route to the bar, making his way along the back side of town. He passes the grocery store, shoes crunching along the gravel of the old parking lot. He stops at the intersection to let a car go by, its occupant being a teenager who works at a burger joint he frequents. The bushy-haired kid waves cheerily at Kyle before making his left-hand turn.

There are many things Kyle said goodbye to over the years.

The taste of a good hamburger hurts the worst.

It's when passing the police station that Kyle finds himself pulled to a stop. His eyes are drawn to the wide glass windows in the front, showing a perfect view of the office, brightly-lit.

Through that front window of the police station sits a man, twenty or so, in an opened white dress shirt, sleeves pushed up, a loosened blue tie hanging at his neck. Crusted blood at his left nostril. Busted lip, black eye. Golden brown skin, bright red drops like punctuation marks speckled across his exposed chest.

Despite his condition, the young man stares calmly ahead at nothing, looking like he's merely waiting on an order of fries to come out of some kitchen.

Then his eyes lock onto Kyle's through the glass.

Even in six short months, Kyle has gotten to know every person in town, including friends and family who visit. There are no tourists who drive through, nor any visitors at any time of year. It's the reason Kyle picked this hole in the dirt they call a town, the way broken things end up here, lost souls, where even tumbleweeds avoid. No one ever refers to it by its actual name—*Nowhere*, they call it instead. There isn't even a Holiday Inn or a Motel 6 for miles. Anyone who is here means to be.

That face through the window, Kyle has never seen before.

That face, looking at him right now.

The guy lifts a hand and wiggles his fingers at Kyle, a hello. When Kyle doesn't return the wave, he drops his hand to his lap, looks away, and sighs to himself, bored.

Kyle frowns, then moves on.

Slow night at the bar. No surprises. Only a visit from the tall, rigid police chief, Juan Rojas, who eyes Kyle the moment he enters, has a brief chat with two of the customers in the back that seems more like an interrogation, lingers by the windows with radio in hand, fidgeting, then leaves. Many nights, Kyle notices the chief tailing him in his patrol car, slowly, as he walks home. Sometimes, Kyle enjoys the attention. He will stop, turn, and give the chief a little wave. The chief never waves back. It's okay. The town has so little crime, if any at all. It's likely been a year since anyone's even heard the sound of a police siren.

It's ten after ten when Kyle's crouched in front of the back freezer, a bag of tools at his side. Cade pokes her head through the swinging kitchen door. "How's it coming?"

Kyle tosses a wrench back into the bag. "You'll need to call Truman for this."

"Please don't tell me that. Anything but fucking *Truman*."

"I'm not a technician."

Cade hangs her head, lets out all her breath. "This is gonna cost a lot, I can already see it. I thought this would be the year I'd get my daughter a car." She winces. "Can we run without a freezer? Maybe 'til the end of the year, few more months?"

Cade has had a lot on her shoulders since her father got too sick to run the bar. She took things over earlier in life than she expected. All her plans, college, career, set aside indefinitely.

“We could borrow a mini freezer from next door,” suggests Kyle. “Unless Sylvia’s in one of her moods. Or you could—”

“Fuck’s sake! If it isn’t one thing, it’s another.” Cade puts a wrist to her forehead, takes a breath. “Sorry, sorry ... I’m just having a moment here. *Fuck’s sake*,” she hisses again, then yanks her phone out of a pocket, taps on the screen with her thumbs. “Sorry, Henry. I’ve got you changing hats every day, doing this and that, running you ragged. You really are a jack of all trades. What’d you do back in school, huh? Engineer or something?”

“Football,” answers Kyle absently.

And for a moment, for a brief, fleeting moment, he is on the field again with his team surrounding him. He feels his gear on his body, pads, helmet, cleats, the weight of it. He smells the musk of the locker room. He hears his teammates laughing and cheering each other on after the big game. Even Brock is there, and when the two of them meet each other’s eyes, they smile, not even a drop of bad blood between them.

The roar of that locker room fades when Cade says, “You were a jock back in high school?” She lets out a dry chuckle and shakes her head. “Wouldn’t have guessed. Like, that’s the *last* thing I would’ve guessed. You’re way too nice.”

“Some of my teammates were nice,” says Kyle, his thoughts far away, his mind, his everything. “And some

weren't."

"Well, no one likes to look back on those days. Mm, I wish I'd been able to stick it out with nursing. I do miss the smell of sterilized bedding and lavender."

Kyle shrugs. "You should find a way to get into it again."

She's pulled from her thoughts. "Huh?"

"Nursing."

Her eyes scrunch up. "With what hour of what day? You're crazy." She laughs at once, shakes her head, then sighs with a gesture at the freezer. "Seriously, why do I keep asking you to do all these things around here? You're supposed to just be my bartender. Not my handyman."

Kyle nods. "Not a problem."

She notices his arm. "Where'd that come from? You lean against the stovetop and burn yourself?"

He nearly forgot about it. "Something like that."

"Henry, you can't be so careless. Have you taken care of it? Put something on it? You don't want that to get infected."

"It's fine."

"Let me look."

Before Kyle can refuse, Cade is upon him, holding his arm and inspecting every inch of the wound. She stops after a while, squints questioningly at it. She gently traces it with a fingertip, appearing troubled.

Kyle frowns. "Something wrong?"

“Wrong?” She’s snapped out of a thought. “Does this seem strange to you? It’s warm, like you were just burned a minute ago. Yet the wound looks a week old, scarred over, smooth.” She looks up at him. “How’d you say you got this again?”

He gently pulls his arm from her grip. “It’ll be fine, thanks. I better get back to the bar.” He heads to the utility room with the tools, putting them up. Passing back through the kitchen to the bar, Cade is busy tapping away on her phone, mumbling something about nickels and dimes. Leland nearby whistles to himself as he flips a burger, then scratches his ass.

The café owner from down the street is at the bar drinking away his woes—whatever trouble he’s in with his wife this time. Kyle becomes the unintended ear as he wipes the counter, the drunken man blaming himself for his broken marriage. While listening, Kyle wonders how long it might take for the sun to burn his own body into a pile of ashes. An hour? Half of one?

Three minutes like a bag of microwave popcorn?

“Have you, *ungh*, you ever had your—your heart broken, Henry?” The man squints at Kyle as if through thick mist, eyes watery and far away. “You ever—*hic!*—ever feel your whole life slip through your fingers like goddamned sand?”

Kyle continues wiping the counter, thinking of Tristan, of the last time they laughed, the last time they made love, the last time they woke in each other’s arms. “Not really.”

He snorts. “Yeah, you’re way too young. Someday though. Someday. You’ll—*ungh, my head*—you’ll understand. Not that I wish this on anyone, but once you dip your toe in,

*phew*, you're drenched, that's what it's like, this shit, that's what it's like."

Kyle notes the empty glass. "Another?"

"You have to ask?"

Kyle pours. The man kicks it back, sets it down softly, then quietly starts to cry.

When the last customer leaves, Kyle locks up the front and starts with his usual nightshift duties. The office door is ajar, soft light spilling out from a desk lamp, Cade quietly working numbers. The kitchen is closed up, cook gone.

After washing and putting away the last glass, Kyle stops to inspect the burn on his arm. With a fingertip, he traces it from one end to the other. It feels smooth, like silk, yet warm.

And still stings.

Cade's right. There's nothing normal about this burn. And somehow, he doesn't think his carelessness last night was just a coincidence. That curtain was meant to be open. This scar was a punishment. From whom, Kyle may never know.

But he understands for what.

He comes to the door of the office. "Good for the night?"

Cade turns from her computer, startled. "Lord, you move quietly! Didn't hear you. Jesus, about gave me a heart attack."

"Sorry, ma'am."

She's about to correct him yet again on using her name, then seems to change her mind. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?"



“Always ask me if I’m good for the night. Always ask me if I want you to stay.” When Kyle doesn’t answer, she says, “You don’t have to pity me, y’know. I’ve got things handled here. I’m always good. As for that blow-up about the freezer, forget it, all taken care of. Sylvia knows a guy from the city, some guy with a shady business who owes her a favor, the freezer might be back up and running as early as tomorrow. I mean, we may owe one to some local mafia, but small price to pay, right?”

Kyle nods. “Glad to hear it.” He takes a step back. “Have a good night, then.” He turns.

Cade rises from her chair. “Henry?”

He stops and peers back at her.

She leans against her cluttered desk, studying him with her guarded, glassy eyes. Her voice turns gentle. “I’m picking up on something, Henry. I can’t ignore it.”

He lifts an eyebrow. “Picking up on ...?”

“Will you indulge me? Just a little bit? Here.” She pushes away from her desk, reaches for his right hand, takes it. “Good, yes, there we go.” She covers his right hand with both of hers, closes her eyes, and says nothing more.

Kyle stares at her uncertainly. A moment passes.

Then she calmly recites: “May your burdens prove smaller than they feel. May your path prove clearer than it seems. May your soul be sturdy, your bones be strong, and your heart—”

“What is this?” Kyle cuts her off.

“*Hush*,” she hisses, vexed for half a second, then resumes. “And your heart be willing to see beauty in things big, things tall, things tiny and small, and nothing at all.”

Kyle stares down at their hands, waiting.

A wistful smile spills over Cade’s face. “It’s just a thing Gran used to say to me when I wasn’t at my best. She’d hold one of my hands, just like this, and recite these words. Usually something was burning, too. A candle, some incense, whatever. But, y’know, no candles here, smoke detector over our heads, not really ideal. Maybe I got it backwards ... strong soul, sturdy bones, I don’t know, it’s been too long.” She releases his hand, finally opens her eyes. “I won’t pry, Henry. But you just don’t seem like yourself lately. I’ve noticed. Maybe no one else has, but they aren’t as sensitive as I am. I’ve got a teenager, that makes me a *queen* of reading between the lines of sarcasm, silent treatments, and nothing. I can tell something’s not right.”

Kyle only stares back at her, waiting.

“Don’t have to tell me. Of course. Like I said, won’t pry.” She takes a breath. “But I feel like I need to say this. Maybe it’s since Jamal left me and Layna. Or my dad getting sick. I’m no stranger to the heavy feelings. Dark feelings. Bad, bad thoughts. Don’t know if you’re having any, but ... I’m here for you, okay? And if at any time you need to say something, even if you just want to yell, come straight to me.”

Her words can’t touch him. He’s too far away. But he gives her a nod and pretends. “Thank you, Cade. That’s kind.”

“Ah, there you go, using my name properly. See?” She puts on a smile. “Didn’t even have to get mad.”

He returns her smile, sees himself out without a word.

When Kyle is home, the cat is nowhere to be found. That isn't unusual. A few days a week, Kyle suspects she has another place to seek shelter or food. Little Lion knows how to survive.

He finds himself drawn to the dining room table. The ring and the folded-up letter sit there, nice and calm, silent as death.

Kyle takes a deep breath, heavy eyes on the ring and letter, shoulders slumped like he's a teen again in his varsity letterman jacket. The weight of the world sits on his chest.

Cade's words are far away. Too far away to touch him. Her prayer circle, her gran's words, whatever it was she was trying to do, it was for nothing. His burdens are too great, his soul too weathered, his bones, frail. All his eyes see is infinite emptiness.

Giving up doesn't look like tears and drama.

Doesn't look like a decision at all.

It looks like this. Like staring at a table of things. A smile to a coworker before leaving the bar. A cat that didn't come by.

"You don't believe in karma." Kyle closes his eyes. Nothing feels right or good. It can't be fixed, whatever it is. "You said an evil person can do all the evil they want, find happiness, keep it greedily, free of consequences. You said good people can suffer every day they live without reprieve. I wonder which one you think I am. Which one you think you were. The evil one who did bad things and never once paid for

his crimes. Or the good one who suffers until his ... his very last sunrise.”

Something about tonight tells him.

It's time.

“Sorry, Tristan.” He carefully folds the letter over the ring, takes the items. “But I have to break our promise.”

He glances around the house one last time, wishes the cat were here to say goodbye. Maybe she doesn't care if he's gone.

She only came for the food anyway.

The place he's chosen is neither the four-way intersection nor the bench at the park. It's not even in the town, technically. He wanders the wrong way out of his sandy neighborhood and heads down the old dirt road into the desert. As he walks, he slowly removes his shirt, then his shoes, socks, and pants, each dropped like a breadcrumb along the way. His underwear, last.

The air is as dry and sharp as teeth against his skin. The sky is infinite. The horizon, lined with long rolling mountains.

Not a soul in sight, nor even the presence of one.

Absolute solitude.

Kyle chooses a large stone to sit down by and lean against. He faces east. He unfolds the letter, allowing the silver pinky ring to drop harmlessly onto the ground next to him. When he reads, the words come off the page as if whispered in his ear. A smile touches his lips as he leans back against the cold, smooth stone, the dry night air stirring all around him,

picking up dust from the sandy ground, whirling it playfully into the distance.

Kyle chooses to remember only the good stuff as he waits. It isn't much longer that the sky starts to swell the deep blue of impending morning.

It's almost time.

"I thought I'd be more afraid. Instead, I feel ..." He finds the right word. "... ready. You told me once to make up a story, something to comfort me, to justify my actions, it didn't matter, the effect would be the same. So here lies Kyle Amos, or Henry Rosenberg, whatever it is today. Soon to be a pile of ash, laden with the same ring he found upon yours one short year ago. He was a man of few words. Survived by a cat who hates him, a cat with sand fleas, probably."

He holds the letter against his heart. The paper even smells like Tristan. Ring on the ground nearby. Memories in his heart. He is surrounded by loved ones.

The sky swells a richer blue, growing more vibrant by the second as the end approaches.

He never knew a sunrise could feel this peaceful.

Or look this beautiful.

A perfect, precious way to say goodbye to everything.

Until the sounds of footsteps on sand touch his ears, then come to a stop at his back. "The hell you doing in my spot?"

## 9.

### *Meet the Morning Sun.*

—•—

It's the young man from the police station. Swollen black eye. Busted lip. Loosened blue tie and opened white dress shirt, half untucked, slacks with a stain on the left thigh.

Kyle looks up. "Your spot?"

He stands over Kyle. "Yep." His voice is unexpectedly soft and velvety, yet with a subtle edge Kyle picks right up on. "You got it. My spot. That rock you're leaning against is all mine. I feel compelled to ask, why the hell are you naked?"

"You don't own this rock."

"I do. Even etched my name on it. Right by your head."

Kyle glances to his side. Scratched crudely into the stone is a name he's surprised he didn't notice before.

"El ...?"

"Elias," he says. "My real handwriting is better, not a good carver. Used my motorcycle key, too. Back when I had one. It's gone now, the key and the bike."

This is the last thing Kyle needs. "I don't mean to be rude, but can you please fuck off?"

"Me? Fuck off? No, sir," says Elias, crossing his arms. "I believe it is *you* who must fuck off."

"I will be doing no fucking off."

Elias's face fills with rage. Then it goes away with a sigh as he gently touches his swollen cheek. "My head hurts too much to be angry. Why are you doing this to me? And why now? In front of my rock? Naked? Did you even ask its permission?"

Kyle grips the letter tighter. It crinkles. "I'm fairly certain my occasion far outweighs yours. Please go away."

"Really? We're gonna do this? You're—" After another flicker of frustration, Elias seems to give up instantly, then gazes out at the horizon. "Okay, sure, I get it. You're seduced by the breathtaking view. Mountains. Striking sky, with a sick amount of stars at night. A suspicious absence of scorpions and coyotes. The perfect place to come and hate Mom."

"Yeah, it's nice."

"Nice?" Elias gestures grandly at the horizon. "You dare to call the majestic *dreamscape* of Nowhere, Arizona 'nice'?" Even when offended, his words come out as soft and smooth as velvet. "No, sir, that's no way to respect the best spot on Earth. Is that a burn on your arm? Should really take care of that."

The sky is growing brighter, sun crawling up the back of the mountains. A mere handful of minutes remain, if that. "You are about to see a lot more of me burn."

"I'm seeing way too much of you as is. Was that your shirt I passed on the way here? Admittedly, you're pretty fit. What are you? A gymnast? Never mind. In case you missed it, that's why I'm here, at my spot, to spend the sunrise hating my mom. What's your occasion? To sit here and be miserable?"

“Go away.”

“You are doing an excellent job. A+. Top notch. Actually, you could scowl a little more, if you got it in you.”

“Do you want to die?”

“Not yet. Too many episodes of Dragon Ball I still haven’t gotten through.” Elias slowly slides his hands into his pockets. “Only one kind of person comes this far outta town for peace of mind *au naturel*. The damaged kind. So what’s your damage?”

“Everything.”

“I’ve been told I can be kind of intense. Do you find me to be intense?”

“Don’t care.”

“I get that a lot, that I’m intense. Didn’t play well with kids back in the day. Don’t play well with adults either, as is clearly evidenced by the condition of my face. I fly solo.”

“Why are you still here?”

“And I find myself special spots around the world to be all alone and reflect on my damage. Spots such as this one. Which you’ve brazenly stolen from me like a bandit—a naked bandit.”

“Not really in the mood to make a new friend.”

“Is that what you think I’m doing? Wow. I’m trying to get you to go away.”

“And I’m waiting to meet the morning sun.”



“C’mon, man.” Elias slowly paces around the rock. “There are so many other spots you can occupy. Look at this desert. This crazy big desert. From here to Vegas, a thousand spots you can choose. I’ll even help you find one. All I’m asking is to have this *particular* spot.” When Kyle says nothing, Elias’s voice hardens. “Look, nothing’s going my way today. I know my face looks like a train wreck, but really, you should see the other guy. Just kidding, I walked into a brick wall. Okay, just kidding again, I *did* get into a fight, it’s embarrassing, I’m not doing that great, all I want is to sit here with my rock.”

“I’m not moving.”

Elias crouches in front of Kyle, blocking the view, and he stares at him with intensity. Kyle gazes back. The young man has clearly had a day, from the injuries on his face to the heaviness behind his eyes that reveal emotional wounds on the inside. Elias’s eyes sit like coals, burning from a fire Kyle can’t see, but only sense.

What brought the young man to this town at this time, of all times? What brought the two of them to this very spot?

Does Kyle have to start believing in fate, too?

“What do I need to do to get you to go away?” asks Elias. “Are you mad at someone? Wanna scream at a wall? I know a perfect wall you can scream at. Want to break things? I can take you to a junkyard out of town, but you may wanna put on some clothes for that. Don’t want to harm your sensitive bits.”

“Stop trying to help.”

“Want to hit something? Want to hit me? A few already beat you to the punch, pun intended, but you are welcome to give it to me right in the kisser.”

“No.”

“Go ahead. Really. I insist.” Elias gives his cheek a dainty tap of his finger. “Make it count. Don’t disappoint me. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity you’re being offered here. Hell, do you even know how long the list is of people wanting to hit me? You are one very lucky guy, really, the luckiest.”

There is something deeply alluring about Elias’s coal black eyes. The way they burn. Their ferocity. Their vitality. Kyle is trapped in them, and not just because Elias is crouched in front of him like a wall, nearly straddling his lap, blocking the view.

Was this another sick joke of fate? That this young man would appear before Kyle right now, standing like a guardian between him and the approaching sun?

An annoying, stubborn guardian, who isn’t even aware of what he’s guarding?

But Kyle didn’t come here to be saved.

He came here to die.

And the sun is seconds away. “Get out of my face.”

“Get off of my rock, you naked weirdo.”

“I’m warning you—”

“You think you can scare me? Buddy, I’m no stranger to death threats. Threaten me all you want. See what happens. But I will get my spot one way or another.”

“Just let me—” Kyle chokes. He didn’t expect tears. “Just let me be, please? Leave me alone. Get out of my way and ... and just—” His throat grows tight, voice shaking. “Just let me fucking die.”

Elias’s face changes. “You’re ... You’re dying?”

Sunlight erupts behind the young man right then, framing him like a fiery halo.

He has now become a silhouette of cold, protective shadow that falls over Kyle’s face and chest.

The only thing standing between him and death.

“And you’re ruining it,” says Kyle. Then he huffs, throws his hands. “Who am I kidding? Nothing’s ever gone right since the day I left home, my real home, since the day I chose to stop suffering. Oh, the irony ... I’ve suffered every day since. You were so fucking wrong, Tristan.” Kyle lets out a laugh, at once turning manic. “I wish I was never born.”

Elias scrunches up his nose, confused. “Who’s Tristan?”

“Just move a little to the left, even a foot will do, if you can manage that.” Kyle leans his head back on the rock. A tear falls down his cheek, tickling. “I’ll be gone soon anyway, then we’ll both get what we want.”

“Are you sick? Is it cancer? Tumor? Broken heart? Who the hell is this Tristan guy?”

“Just move already.”

“Wait, what’s that smell?”

“Move.”

“Like someone left the oven on, and—What the fuck, are your feet on fire?” Elias twists slightly to get a look.

That movement is just enough to let loose the fiery beast at his back.

Sunlight pours over Kyle’s face.

“Oh my god,” Elias exclaims. “What the—?”

Kyle, feeling the sunrise coat his body like liquid fire, uses his last bit of strength to shove the bewildered shape of Elias off of him. When the light consumes Kyle in its ravenous rays, he doesn’t even have the energy to scream.

So he decides to tell himself another story, just like Tristan said to do in these troubling situations: He’s merely running a bath and let the water get too hot, scalding him. He’s waiting in the line of an amusement park, baking under the harsh summer sun. It doesn’t matter the story he tells himself, the effect is the same, that he’s dying, that this is at last his end, that after one horrible period of lukewarm pain, he will be no more, Kyle Amos and everything he suffered.

The next moment, he’s pressed to the ground, the sunlight gone. Cold, comforting shadow falls over his body.

Kyle opens his eyes.

Elias is on top of him, face in front of his, aghast. “What in the motherfuck was that??”

“Get off of me.”

“Are you flammable? Were you cursed by a sun shaman? What the actual fuck?”

“I said get off of me.”

“Hell no, I’m not getting off of you. I don’t care if you’re naked. Why are your feet smoking like a Thanksgiving turkey?”

Kyle doesn’t move on the rough, cracked earth as Elias’s weight shifts on top of him. Elias pops the buttons off his shirt. Tie, flung aside. A muscular chest, golden brown. Shirt covers Kyle’s face, but everything is still blinding bright. Hands scoop under him. “Stop.” All his energy to protest is gone. “Get off.”

“I’m not letting go of you. Stop fighting me!”

“I want to die.”

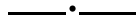
“Fuck me, you’re hot to the touch, like a human iron.”

None of Elias’s efforts are graceful or smooth. Kyle feels like he’s being dragged over the sand by his feet. Then by his shoulders. Then by his feet again, head hitting every rock and ridge. Kyle knows there is no hope. The nearest dwelling isn’t for miles. Elias’s efforts are in vain. Kyle’s life will end while being dragged over the dusty earth like a sack of trash. Not the ideal way he planned, but at least it will be over soon.

Then, he can see them all again.

# 10.

## *Elias.*



Kyle stirs, then opens an eye.

A ceiling fan hangs overhead. Round and round the blades go, buzzing quietly.

A sharp pain scatters through his skull. He attempts to lift a hand to his temple, wincing, only to discover his hands bound by rope. He peers down, groggy. His feet appear to be bound as well. He's on a twin bed in an unfamiliar bedroom. A tattered white dress shirt covers him at the waist, his only dignity, naked otherwise. It's Elias's shirt. He recognizes the blood around the neck and upturned collar. TV is on, the soft murmur of a news station, from the sound of it. A bird sits outside on the sill of the window arranging a thorny nest of odds and ends. It seems to be dusk, barely a sign of light in the sky.

Kyle stares at that bird, confused. Shouldn't he be dead?

The door opens, causing Kyle to snap his head around. In comes Elias carrying a plastic bag. He stops upon seeing Kyle. "Ah, you're not dead. What a relief. I got donuts, Red Bull, and Gatorade to replenish your lovely electrolytes."

Kyle stares at him, dumbfounded.

Elias kicks the door shut behind him, saunters over to a table, sets down the bag of items, drops his keys. He wears a ribbed white tank top, sculpted to his muscular frame, which

wasn't as apparent before. He stretches and yawns, his tank top pulling up ever so slightly, and Kyle's eyes snap to the peek of abs that show above the low-hanging waistband of his jeans.

Then Elias strolls up to a chair near the bed and plops onto it with a grunt. "Hell of a day this turned out to be, huh? Oh, forgot the painkillers, shit, knew I forgot something."

"Why am I tied up?"

Elias frowns. "That doesn't sound like a 'thank you'."

Kyle peers down at the rope twisted around his wrists and ankles, drowsy. For a moment, he doesn't seem able to recall the exact events that brought him here.

He touches the specks of blood on the dress shirt covering him with his bound hands. He notices smudges of dirt. Aching and sore, his fingers curl around the collar, confused.

"You wouldn't let it go."

Kyle looks up. "What?"

"That shirt. My shirt. I ripped it off my body and covered you as fast as I could. Lost a few of the buttons, but won't cry about them. Then you wouldn't let it go. It's yours now."

Kyle stares at the shirt, numb.

"You heal quickly, I noticed. Really quickly. I've seen some weird stuff in my life, but today, this morning, you took home all the awards. I'll be nursing my black eye and nose for days, and you were just baked like a hot enchilada in the Arizona sun and don't have a mark on you. Well ... sort of,"

he quickly amends. “You look a bit burned here and there, to be honest.”

“Where am I?”

“And I tied you up,” Elias goes on, “because you managed to get out of my truck *twice* while I was driving you somewhere safe and out of the sun. You were damned determined to turn yourself into charred meat for the vultures to feast on.”

Memories of white-hot fire prickle across Kyle’s skin like fresh wounds. The heavy burden in his heart, lifting away like steam. His desperation to climb out of the truck as it sped away, yearning to be freed from his existence, tears on his cheeks, his eyelids burning, the taste of sand in his gaping mouth.

And clinging to this shirt—to Elias’s shirt.

“I brought you to my house,” says Elias, answering Kyle’s question belatedly. “I come out here and stay in this cozy abode when things get shitty enough at my actual home. Things are rather shitty right now, don’t you think? Have we met the shitty threshold?”

“How long have I been out?”

“Quite a while. Hours. Want a donut?” He leans back, snatches the bag off the table, sets it in his lap. “Shit, you’re still tied up. Should I feed one to you? Is that too personal? I’m kinda known to be a little intense. We’re basically strangers.”

Kyle remembers the blinding white light when the sun rose behind Elias. How it so vividly framed his muscular



silhouette. And how Elias tore off his shirt to cover Kyle's burning flesh in a panic. How the light looked like ten million hands made of white fire, reaching for Kyle, clawing at him, craving his end.

"Took your temperature earlier," says Elias, "and you were running a fever of 317 degrees. Are you even human?"

"I don't know."

"Okay, maybe it was 107 degrees. I can't remember. You were really, really hot, I know that much, and now you're ..."

He puts the back of his wrist to Kyle's forehead. Kyle flinches away, annoyed. "Cold as a corpse. *Wow.*"

Just then, a phone vibrates on a nearby surface—the dresser on which the TV sits, still playing the news.

Elias glances at it, silences the call with a huff. "Ignore that. Oh. You're crying. Did I say something wrong?"

Kyle blinks, surprised. A tear lets go right then, as if from a cliff, trickling down the side of his cheek. He lifts his shoulder to wipe it off as best as he can.

"Was it my asking if you're human? Was that insensitive?" Elias leans forward, elbows propped on his knees. "I'm going to be straight with you, alright? I don't actually care what you are. While I might entertain a fascination with how mere sunlight gave you third degree burns in seconds which you miraculously healed from in a matter of hours, what concerns me more is *why.*" His words turn soft. "Why do you want to die?"

Kyle turns away.

Elias's phone buzzes again. He lets out another huff, says, "Fucking pests," and silences it once more.

A moment later, Kyle hears movement. When he turns, he finds Elias holding a donut, chocolate iced, near Kyle's frowning lips. Kyle had cherished them as a kid. Parents would splurge, get the family a fresh dozen for breakfast on a random Saturday morning. He and Kaleb, racing to eat them, ravenous. Felt like a reward for merely being alive.

Why does he only seem to recall the good things about his family ever since they've been gone?

"It's fresh," sings Elias, wiggling the donut.

There is an unfamiliar kind of heaviness sitting on Kyle's heart right now, different than what he felt this morning when watching the sunrise seemed like a good idea. It saps away his conviction. Ruins the mood. Breaks his determination to say goodbye to this world and every wretched thing in it.

It's a frustrated, new weight upon his chest that demands to be solved somehow.

Nothing about his life feels right anymore.

Even dying.

"What's on your mind?" asks Elias.

Kyle peers at the window again. The bird is gone. "I don't think you could possibly understand."

"Have you seen this gorgeous, busted-up face of mine? Try me. I understand the hard stuff. I'm a fucking miracle worker."

Elias's voice may have a soft, velvety quality, but his energy is forceful, crackling, sharp. His eyes seem to be at a constant burn, searching Kyle for answers, intent on connecting to him one way or another.

That intense scene in the desert this morning must have changed Elias's tune, because he has shifted from wanting Kyle gone to wanting to know every damned thing about him.

Kyle wonders if they might have a bit more in common than he cares to admit.

He lays his head back. "I'm just ... tired of hiding."

"You don't have to hide. Not here with me."

"You don't know yet what I'm hiding."

"I may not like people to know my personal stuff either, but hey, I clearly got an issue keeping my mouth shut. It's part of the reason for my busted-up face. Speaking of, open yours."

Kyle feels the heat on his skin again like a haunting, deadly memory, everything stinging mildly. Like part of him is still out on that desert right now. Some other version of him in another reality where Elias and his bloodstained shirt wasn't there to save him, a version that turned into ash under that wretched morning sunrise, right down to the bone.

Maybe something did burn up on those sands.

Something inside Kyle.

"You okay?" comes Elias's voice, closer. "You look ..."

Kyle shuts his eyes. Then, to his surprise, he's fighting back tears. "I'm ... I'm tired of ... of ..."

A warm hand touches Kyle's head, gently, thumb stroking his hair. When he opens his eyes, he finds Elias even closer, studying his face like the page of a book.

Kyle stares back, disarmed. Elias's coal black eyes had once seemed impenetrable. Now they're sensitive, warm, curious.

Unlike Tristan's eyes which penetrated him like a needle, Elias's are inviting and sincere, like an opened front door with the aroma of a fresh-cooked dinner wafting out, a fireplace with a couple of soft armchairs awaiting, wood crackling, a place to feel safe and among friends.

Elias calmly retracts his hand. "I know we just met ... but you should know something about me ... just one thing. My younger brother ... he died. Senselessly. It was an accident. I could've been there, could've stopped it, maybe, possibly ... but I'll never know, because I was too busy fucking off in college, living it up, flunking all my classes, being a party boy." Elias's voice cracks on those last words. "I ... have to live with that. It's on my mind. I think about him a lot, especially around this time of year. It's ... part of the reason why I went out to the desert. Why I found you."

Kyle can't explain why, but at once, he's overwhelmed with a sense of trust. It is inexplicable, but absolute. He knows for a fact, without evidence or reason of any kind, that Elias's words are honest and trustworthy.

Where is this certainty coming from?

How is he so sure?

“So I’m of the opinion that no one deserves to die before their time,” says Elias, meeting Kyle’s eyes. “Even if they want to.”

“I’m sorry about your brother,” says Kyle.

“Me too.” Elias lifts the donut again.

Kyle hesitates, then takes a bite. Tastes like nothing, which is no surprise, but even so, he recognizes the firm yet soft and chewy texture of a fresh, perfect donut.

He can almost imagine he’s savoring one with Kaleb again. Both of them at the breakfast table, silly grins on their faces.

“My younger brother is gone, too,” Kyle decides to say.

Elias gazes back. His eyes falter. “Oh ... I’m sorry.”

“Seems we have something rather specific in common.”

“Seems so.”

Without warning, Elias brushes a dollop of chocolate from the corner of Kyle’s lips with a finger.

Their eyes meet.

Elias brings the finger to his own lips, casually licks it off. “Sorry about that,” he says belatedly. “It was just sitting there. Couldn’t help myself.”

Something else rushes into Kyle right then, another deep, overwhelming feeling, a new emotion. It pierces through the sense of trustworthiness and honesty he picked up on a moment ago, three times as strong, but as obvious as a slap to the face.

It's a feeling of deep desire.

Yearning. Wanting.

Like holding a precious thing close to the chest.

It confuses Kyle, because at first, he mistakes it for his own emotion. But the longer he processes it, chewing it down like the bite of tasteless donut in his mouth, he recognizes its odd composition, its unfamiliarity.

Could it be Elias's emotion? Is that what he's feeling? Has Kyle found a way to project himself somehow into the neural highways of Elias's body and read his feelings?

"What?" asks Elias, alarmed.

Kyle must be making a face. "Nothing, sorry."

"Was that too much? Us sharing about our brothers? Or wiping the chocolate off your lips? Probably could've licked it yourself. Like I said, couldn't help myself. It was just—"

"It's okay. It was ... sweet."

That word surprises Elias. "Sweet?"

"Yeah."

Elias stares at the donut, stunned somehow. Then he lifts an eyebrow. "So ... you want some more, then?"

"Why not."

Elias offers. Kyle bites.

Their eyes meet again.

Once more, Kyle feels a rush of unfamiliar sensations he's certain now aren't his own. He chews in silence as Elias feeds him the rest of the donut, bite by bite, that surprising, foreign

knot of emotion flooding him like medicine, that swelling sense of someone else's desire, tingling and new.

The last bite, Elias snags for himself, popping it into his mouth. "Sorry, too tempting, haven't eaten yet, and chocolate's kinda my favorite," he says through his mouthful.

Kyle watches. "Mine, too," he says, omitting that he can't really taste them anymore. If only he knew at eighteen that his third donut one Saturday morning in July would be the last he would ever taste, he might have cherished it more.

The chime of a doorbell rings through the house. Elias lets out an exasperated sigh, mutters, "You gotta be fucking kidding me," then rises from his chair to take a peek out of the bedroom door. He turns back to Kyle. "Sorry, just ignore it, it's probably some solicitor who wants to know if I've accepted Jesus Christ as my personal—"

A loud series of knocks at the door. "Elias," a man calls out. "You need to answer your phone or the door. Open up, Elias. Let us have a little talk, a conversation, like reasonable adults." Knock, knock, knock. "Elias, now."

Elias leans against the wall with a sigh, curses himself, then turns to Kyle. "This is a bit awkward. Can't remember the last time I was caught with a half-naked guy in bed."

Kyle frowns. "Caught by who ...?"

Knock, knock, knock. "Elias, answer the door, so help me, I don't get paid enough for this."

Elias comes up to the bed. "Do you prefer an action-movie backdoor escape, or should we hunker down and wait it out siege-style? Could be days. I might run out of Red Bull."

Knock, knock. “Elias!”

Kyle stares up at him, dead-eyed, then lifts his bound-up hands and gives them a wiggle.

Elias winces. “Right, that.”

Minutes later, Elias and Kyle have wormed out the back window, hopped a fence, and are walking along a dirt path lined with barbed dry shrubbery, the moon hanging over their heads. Kyle is in a pair of navy sweatpants and a t-shirt with a giant eggplant stretched across the front, complete with an old pair of mismatched Nike socks and sneakers. All the clothes are courtesy of Elias, gathered from his bedroom in seconds.

“Sorry about that,” says Elias. “You and I were just trying to have a meaningful moment, and all that nonsense happens.”

“Who was that?”

“Not important. I’m more interested in you.” Elias’s phone buzzes, startling him. He sighs, taps on it to shut it completely off, then shoves it into a pocket. “Eat my voicemail, bitches.”

Kyle studies him, trying to sense his emotions again like he did back in the house. For some reason, that extra layer of sensory information is gone. Or become too dull to pick up.

Was it a fluke? A coincidence? A play of Kyle’s own mind?

“So what’s your deal?” asks Elias. “Tell me your story. Let me in a little. I know it seems like I’m coming on too strong,” he adds, “but you should know something: I’m a protector.”



“Is that what you’re doing? Protecting me?”

“Didn’t claim to be good at it. But isn’t the point to try?”

“You don’t have to protect me.”

“Then who will?” He blows air out his lips and shakes his head. “Can’t leave you unsupervised, free to walk out into the sun all willy-nilly. Now that I learned it’s deadly to you, I know what to protect you from.”

“Why? This morning, you wanted to get rid of me.”

“This morning, I was a different person. That person was at the end of his rope. And now ...” He slaps his chest, proud. “That person found more rope! You’re the rope. Kinda.”

“I don’t need protecting.”

“Sometimes, people need protecting from themselves, too. Hey, let’s get back on track. Back at the house, you said you were tired of hiding. Started opening up before we got chased out.” He glances at Kyle. “Did you mean hiding what you are?”

Kyle stares at him, stunned. “You are acting ... suspiciously calm about what I am and what happened this morning.”

“Just going with the flow here, don’t mind me. What’s the big deal? So you combust into flames under sunlight. I have a friend whose bowels combust when he eats dairy.”

Kyle stops. “Did I really ... combust ...?”

They’re under a streetlamp by a back road, a trailer home across the street, a dirt patch at their back overrun by weeds. Elias rubs his head. “Well, at first, your feet were red, super

red, like they already endured hours of sun tanning after just a few seconds. I smelled burning. Your legs began to smoke like a barbecue, and—Do you really want me to describe it?”

Headlights turn the corner right then. By instinct, both Kyle and Elias duck behind a nearby fence. The car drifts by slowly, oblivious to them, and continues down the street, on the hunt. After an excruciating twenty seconds of suspense, the car finally turns onto another back road, then gone.

Kyle turns to Elias. “Is it a crazy ex?”

Elias frowns. “What?”

“Is your family affiliated with the mob or something? Do you owe someone money? You running from a drug kingpin?”

“No, none of that. You’re limping. Should I carry you?”

“Who’s looking for you?”

“Didn’t I say not to worry about it? Seriously, I can carry you. Your feet got the worst of the burns, and—”

“Not to mention you apparently own a house here. I know everyone in this town, and the first time I see you, you’re sitting in the police station with a bleeding face.”

“Good points, all very valid, A+ detective work. I must be a frustrating conundrum for you. Can we maybe go somewhere to chat that isn’t out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“Everywhere out here is in the middle of Nowhere.”

Elias scowls, then nods. “Fair, I walked into that one.”

“And no, I don’t need to be carried.” Kyle sighs. “What I need is to text my boss. I’m gonna be late to work.”

“Work? Wait a sec.” Elias faces him. “You’re still going in to work? After ... After this morning? After everything?”

“Of course,” mutters Kyle. “Drinks don’t serve themselves. Let’s go. I left my phone at my house. Didn’t think I’d need it again.” He heads off. Elias soon follows, hands in his pockets, frowning in thought.

The outskirts of town are lifeless as they make their way down the silent paths, even the wind and bugs seeming absent. Only the noise of their feet crunching along the dirt can be heard. Kyle’s steps are quiet, even with a limp, but Elias moves heavily, each step shattering the peace of the town. Vehicles are spotted, though they prove harmless, just a man heading off to the store and someone else coming home. The faintest hint of blue still hangs in the sky along with the rising moon, the last remnant of this wicked day finally being put to rest.

They come to a stop in front of Kyle’s house at last. “Oh, this is your place?” Elias peers around as they approach. “Uh, it looks abandoned. You sure it’s safe? Door is wide open.”

“Why bother closing it? I own nothing of value and wasn’t planning to come back. Besides, Little Lion needs access.”

“Little who?”

Kyle heads inside, then stops in the living room near the couch. He wasn’t expecting to see any of this again, and for a moment, he finds himself struck by the sight of everything. The piano. The archway leading to the dining room and kitchen. The thick curtains over the front window. The silence in the house is nearly suffocating.

Kyle notes the absence of the cat. Again.

Elias follows him inside, his noisy footsteps shattering the silence. “You alright?”

Kyle flinches from his thoughts. “Of course.” He goes for his phone, which he left on the piano bench, of all places. He picks it up and thumbs through his contacts, lands on Cade, and sends her a quick text, explaining he’ll be late.

Meanwhile, Elias paces around the room, glancing here and there, curious, the floorboards creaking. He stops at the curtains, touches them, nods. “Smart, keeps the sunlight out.” He peers up at a spot in the ceiling, points at it with a frown. “You realize you’ve got a leak here? Maybe get that looked at. I know a guy.” Then he circles around to the piano where he comes to a full stop right by Kyle. “You play?”

“Not anymore.”

“I envy musicians. Did guitar once, lessons were forced on me. Tutor was a cute Korean dude with long hair, one of my mom’s friend’s sons. I suck. Don’t have the fingers for it.” Elias taps a couple of notes. An A, then a C#, Kyle recognizes.

“My ... My younger brother Kaleb. He played violin.”

Elias glances at him. “The one you lost?” he asks gently.

Kyle can’t help the emotion swelling in his chest. He’s in the company of a strange young man he barely knows the first thing about, a man who’s hiding from something, just like him. Despite the man’s reluctance to share, Kyle can’t dismiss the fact that this man saved his life. Without question. Without any repayment. He simply refused to let Kyle die.

And Kyle, now more than ever, can't stand the burden of his lonesomeness another second. This man is right here. Elias, standing in front of him, asking him about pianos and singing, staring at him with his deep, dark eyes from across a deep, dark room. Like an answer dropped out of the sky, yet again.

"You were expecting a 'thank you' earlier," murmurs Kyle. "I want to thank you for saving my life, I do." Kyle lowers his head. "But not yet. I'm not sure whether I feel thankful."

Elias takes that in. "I didn't save your life for a 'thanks'."

"It doesn't matter the reason. You did it anyway. Because of that, I'm still here. And now you're in my life, running from your own thing. I guess I don't have to know what it is. We're both hiding something. That's fine. We can be strangers. You owe me nothing. I may owe you my life, but maybe can't thank you for that yet. Thought I understood my life this morning. But now ... you've made me ..." He looks away. "... peeved."

Elias grunts, "Peeved?"

"Now I don't understand anything. I don't understand this piano. This empty house. You. Donuts. Fucking eggplants," he says with a smack at the t-shirt he's wearing that Elias lent him. "I think before I can thank you ... I owe an apology. But I don't know to whom I owe it. I think I'm ..." Kyle grimaces, feeling pained. "I think I'm sorry for not valuing my life."

Elias stays silent, listening, eyes and ears on Kyle.

“All I ever wanted was to be seen. Truly seen. That’s all I asked for.” Kyle comes up to the piano, thinking about Kaleb, the sound of his brother’s violin, the squeak it made when he struck a wrong note, the scowl on his face when he scolded himself. “I just wanted my life to ... to mean something.” Kyle lowers his head. “Then he abandoned me right when I needed him. Turned into a pile of ashes with my ring sitting on top.”

“Pile of ashes ...?”

“He had the audacity to leave me a letter,” Kyle goes on. “Sitting there on the pillow, right by my head, like a dinner mint. A stupid fucking letter. I woke up, feeling unusually cold, middle of the afternoon, too early to be awake. That letter, it sat in my face. I didn’t even read it. I just knew, the second I saw it, I knew something wasn’t right. Flew out of my room and onto the porch, the one we’d shared so many nights sitting on, stargazing, listening to the night ... and ... and I saw ...”

Kyle experiences it all over again. Like a nightmare that won’t leave him alone, he sees the pile of ashes sitting in the middle of their backyard, right by an aging oak tree.

On top of that colorless mound of ash, a tiny shimmer that caught the afternoon sunlight. The ring, the one Tristan swore to keep for Kyle, his tiny silver burden.

“This is hard for you,” says Elias. “I can see that. Look, you don’t have to—”

“I *want* to tell you,” Kyle cuts him off. “I want to tell you everything. I want ... I want someone else to know. I’m so sick of carrying this burden myself, of being alone.”

“You’re not alone.”

“And I’m tired of living without purpose, of having nothing to strive for ... of this sick, hedonistic existence. Tristan said I would be happy eventually. He was so wrong.”

“So Tristan is the guy ...?”

“He’s a pile of ash now, he’s fucking nothing.” Kyle steps away from the piano.

Elias comes right up to Kyle, catching him by surprise. He takes hold of his shoulders and brings his face close. “Maybe you never wanted to die. You considered that? Instead, you’re realizing that you are finally ready to be seen. And boy, do I see you. Look what you did already. Caught me when I was at my worst, stole my spot in the desert. You saved my life today, too. This isn’t a coincidence. Don’t let that *pile of ash* tell you what you are or how to live. Maybe it’s the old you that burned away in the desert this morning. Tell you what.” He leans forward. “I’ll make you a promise. I’ll stand between you and what haunts you. I’ll be your *new* rock in the desert. Got it? And if you want, only if you want, you can be the same for me.”

The dull light spilling in from a streetlamp through the opened front door illuminates their tattered, wounded faces, a sickly amber light catching all their emotion. The house is otherwise dark and empty. But in the presence of Elias and his strong, deep, sincere eyes, for the first time in years, Kyle doesn’t feel that usual, crippling sense of lonesomeness.

Which might be the reason he says: “Everyone here calls me Henry, but ... my real name is Kyle. Kyle Amos. No one here knows that, and no one can.”

Elias gazes upon Kyle, earnest, present, reliable. “My full name is Elias Asad Trujillo. And if that name means nothing to you, then you can count yourself goddamned lucky.”



# 11.

## *Straight to the Heart.*

---

Kyle washes the glass, sets it on the bar counter.

Then he wonders if he had already washed that glass before and just washed it again for no reason.

He could be dead right now.

A pile of ash in the desert, blown away, gone.

But instead, he's still here. Washing glasses. Like nothing happened. Like his life refused to end.

His employment with Death, refusing to terminate.

What a strange, strange feeling.

Kyle's mind isn't here, nowhere close. It's stuck back at the house, back with Elias. As it turns out, Elias can't go home with the chance of a pesky vehicle still combing the streets looking for him. Elias's truck sitting on his driveway is a dead giveaway of his presence in town, so unless the truck is hidden somehow, whoever's looking for him will know he's here.

So it seems Kyle has a houseguest for the time being.

He isn't sure yet whether he minds.

Or how this is going to work.

Was it foolish to tell Elias his real name? Has he become so reckless that he's willing to break every one of Tristan's rules?

Kyle grabs an order from the kitchen, finds himself staring at a piece of meat Leland left on the grill top, watching it sizzle and smoke for way too long.

Is that what he looked like this morning?

Maybe Elias was right. Maybe it was Henry who burned up out in that desert.

It's around eleven o'clock after the evening rush that Cade finds him. "You gonna tell me what's up?" He's by the jukebox figuring out why it's been stuck playing the same song on loop for the past hour. He looks up at her. "You sent that text about being late, but I didn't know it'd be several hours. I could have called Becks in to cover for you. This isn't like you, Henry."

Kyle nods. "Sorry. Had a rough day. Won't happen again."

She leans against the side of the jukebox. Her voice turns soft. "Do you want to talk? Did something happen?"

"No," he says. "I'm fine."

"You do some yard work today? Plant a tree? Looks like you got a little too much sun."

If only she knew.

The door to the bar swings open right then, letting in the brooding, rigid shape of Police Chief Rojas. He skulks right up to the pair of them. "Cadence," he says briskly.

Cade turns to him. "Chief," she greets him. "What brings you here? Want Leland to whip you up a little something?"

“I’m fine.” He eyes Kyle in the usual contemptuous way. Kyle never minds. “Can I speak to you in your office? I’ve got some questions, shouldn’t be long.”

“Of course.” She turns to Kyle. “We’ll talk later, you and I. Oh, since I’m being pulled, can you ask Leland to run the trash now while it’s slow? Afraid he’ll forget like last time.”

“Sure thing,” says Kyle somewhat absently. While the chief continues to stare him down, he finds himself wondering about Elias at the police station that first night. Does the name Elias Asad Trujillo mean something to the chief? Should he ask?

“I appreciate it, Henry,” says Cade, then disappears into the office with the chief, leaving Kyle with his thoughts.

Maybe it’s for the better he doesn’t ask at all.

Deciding to leave the one or two occupants of the bar in the company of the rogue jukebox and its recent obsession with an obscure 90s folk song, Kyle slips into the kitchen to relay the message to Leland, only to find him sitting on an overturned crate nursing what appears to be a burn on his hand. He looks up. “Fucking fryer got me. Need something?”

Kyle decides to do it himself. “Nope. Just keep an eye on the bar for me, will you? I’m gonna take out the trash.”

The alley behind the bar is silent and empty. As Kyle takes the two bags of trash to the dumpster, a mouse scuttles away, flitting down the alley and around the corner. He throws both heavy bags into the dumpster with ease. He stops halfway to the door when his phone buzzes, which startles him, as it’s

the first time in a long time the device has indicated any sign of life.

It's a message from Elias.

> What time you get off? Don't eat. I snuck out to the store earlier. You have no food here, weirdo. Promise not to burn down your house when I cook us some late night grub. Not that there's much to burn down. You need to paint these walls or hang a picture. Bleak in here. Sorry, long message. Bored AF. Later.

Strange that Elias texts now. Kyle was just wondering what he's up to. He assumed he would be sleeping. Or playing notes on that old, out-of-tune piano. Cooking was last on the list.

Is it too soon to enlighten his housemate about his diet?

Kyle prepares to type a reply, then stops, senses prickling.

He glances over his shoulder, heeding an instinct.

At the end of the alley stands a figure.

Only a silhouette, nothing at all but shadow. No face and no discernable features. Entirely soundless. Entirely motionless.

Kyle stares at the figure, arrested at once by the sight. For a moment, he considers that his eyes are playing tricks on him. Is that even a person? Or an illusion? But the longer he looks, the more certain he becomes that a person is standing at the end of the alley, staring at him. A person who doesn't move. Doesn't even seem to breathe.

Kyle draws air to speak.

And the figure is gone at once.

He blinks, astonished at the abrupt disappearance. “Hello?” he calls out, confused. With no sense of self-preservation, Kyle races to the end of the alley where it spills onto the main road. He looks to the left, then the right, then the left again. No one is there. He listens as well as he can with his ears, straining for sounds beyond what any normal person can sense, despite it being a long while since he’s used such skills. It doesn’t help at all. He hears and sees nothing.

Who was that? *What* was that?

Kyle is in a daze when he reenters the bar from the front. He goes to the sink behind the counter, washes his hands, and tries to convince himself he wasn’t just hallucinating. The song persists from the jukebox, looping on and on, and Kyle tries to identify anything at all from that shadowed figure he saw.

It felt hollow. Like a void. An absence of light, sound, and matter. As if the person existed in a vacuum, not really there.

“Did my dad come by?”

Kyle nearly jumps out of his skin. His eyes find a teenager in front of him. Oh, it’s the police chief’s son. Short, bleached hair, spiky all over. Same russet complexion as his dad. A small loop earring in both ears. Pert lips. Big, kind eyes that defy his father’s perpetual grumpiness. His small frame always drowned in black oversized clothes, the t-shirt sporting some metal band. His name is Jeremy, but some people in town call him—

“Jer Bear!” greets Leland, emerging from the kitchen. “Did you do your homework, dude? What’re you doing out so late?”

“First off, it’s Friday, there is no homework. Second, I go out at night all the time because it’s the best time to take pics of weird stuff. Third and finally, I’m looking for my dad.” He eyes Leland. “Did you burn yourself again?”

Leland swiftly hides his bandaged hand. “Nope. You didn’t see a thing. Don’t tell Cade.”

Jeremy pops a peanut into his mouth from a nearby bowl, then makes a face. “These are awful.”

“They’re there to make customers thirstier and order more drinks, it’s all a scam,” says Leland with a chortle. Then he eyes Kyle. “Hey, you went out the back to take the trash. Why’d you go all the way around the building and come in the front?”

Kyle glances at the windows of the bar, looking out onto the street. “Thought I saw something.”

“Like a coyote?”

Kyle shakes his head. “Forget it.”

Jeremy hops onto one of the stools. “Do you think it’s the weird guy hanging around town?”

Kyle snaps his gaze to Jeremy. “Weird guy?”

“Overheard my dad talking on the phone this morning,” Jeremy goes on. “He hates when I do that, but I was just about to head to school when I overheard him say something about a

weird guy. Doesn't live here, not a resident. Doing weird stuff. I think he was spotted walking around at night. I don't know."

Leland scoots right up next to Kyle at the front counter, shoulder-to-shoulder. "Walking around at night?"

"I heard he loitered around the pawnshop," says Jeremy. "A few nights ago. When Georgina came out to ask him what he wanted, he took off."

"Huh. I don't like the sound of that," Leland decides with a curt shake of his head.

"That's not all. Ricardo had complained about missing stuff from his vegetable stand, thinks he has a thief on his hands. But maybe it's the same guy. My dad's trying to figure it out."

Leland lets out a breath. "Wow ... a pawnshop enthusiast and vegetable thief? Sounds like a real piece of work." He peers over at the office, narrowing his eyes. "Must be what your dad came in to talk to Cade about."

Jeremy perks up. "So he *is* here?"

"Better not interrupt him," says Leland, clicking his tongue and winking. "Y'know how your dad can get. Hey, Henry, you think that's who you saw in the alley? This creep-o?"

Kyle stirs from his thoughts. "I don't know."

"I'll just wait for my dad," says Jeremy, tossing his backpack onto a neighboring stool with a huff. He tries another peanut. Then another. "They grow on you. Still gross, though."

“I’ll get you a soda,” says Kyle absently, fetching a glass and filling it up. Leland inspects his bandage, pokes at it and curses under his breath.

It’s almost three in the morning when Kyle is back home. He stands outside for a moment, chewing on his thoughts. He doesn’t know anything about Elias. Doesn’t know where he’s from or what he’s running from. Now to hear that a stranger has been lurking around town raising suspicions at the same time Elias arrives?

The timing is too perfect.

Then there’s the strange figure in the alley, the figure Kyle is certain he saw, who vanished the moment he drew breath.

After years of day-in-and-day-out sameness, everything has become so bizarre overnight.

When Kyle enters the house, he finds Elias sleeping on the couch. For as soft and velvety as his voice is, Elias is a rather heavy snorer. Kyle could hear it outside the house, but inside, it’s even louder. He comes up to the side of the couch, listening to the earthquake that rushes in and pulls back from Elias’s cute parted lips with each slow drawing of breath.

Somehow, the image of this snoring young man doesn’t quite fit the description of a shady guy lingering around town stealing broccoli or whatever from outdoor vegetable bins. Nor a deathly silent figure appearing like a phantom in the alley.

Perhaps none of it is related.

Elias jerks awake so suddenly, even Kyle jumps. Elias’s eyes find Kyle’s in the dark, then he sits up. “Fuck, dozed off. When did you get in? Didn’t realize it’d be so late. I put



everything in the fridge. You hungry? Yeah, you're probably hungry." Elias wipes his eyes, hops up, and heads off.

After changing into just a t-shirt and shorts, Kyle lingers by the kitchen, watching as Elias whips something up and rambles on about what his night's been like, and his little adventure of sneaking off to the store before it closed. Kyle focuses on none of it, too lost in his own thoughts as he gazes at Elias.

Even when they sit down to eat, Kyle is still distracted.

After filling his second taco, it seems to occur to Elias that Kyle hasn't taken a bite of his first. "You gonna eat? Something wrong? The meat's good, I promise, you watched me cook it. Store didn't have any guac, which isn't too surprising out here. You only had one serving spoon, which I used for the salsa, so you gotta scrape the meat and pico onto your tortilla with this knife, if that's not too awkward. A bit sharp, so be careful." Elias blinks. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Kyle folds his arms on the table and leans forward. Quite suddenly, he is determined to rekindle that connection he felt earlier tonight, the one that gave him certainty over what Elias was feeling inside. Anything to help him trust Elias. To give clues as to his intentions. Even the faintest bit of extrasensory information will do.

Tristan said once that Kyle might experience this. Like a doorway opening inside his mind, light flooding in. Tristan said it was how he discovered his Lull.

Is this Kyle's latent talent at long last stirring awake? His extra special ability he has been wishing for?

A connection to others' emotions?

Kyle wants an ability like Tristan had. He wants a special power. He wants the upper hand. The control. The security.

“You look like you’re trying to take a shit,” says Elias.

Kyle focuses even stronger. He feels like his head might split open as he dives into Elias’s eyes, ever so determined.

Without breaking eye contact, Elias sets down his second taco, then leans across the table, too, bringing his face closer, as if thinking it’s a game. Kyle’s jaw tightens as he listens with every fiber of his body.

Heartbeats. Pulsing.

Breaths flowing in, coursing out.

“Do you see something in my eyes, Kyle?”

It’s strange, hearing his real name out loud again. “Just stay quiet,” whispers Kyle back. “Don’t say anything.”

“What’re you looking for?” asks Elias anyway.

“Shush.”

He leans forward even more. “Want to ask me something? Want to just come out and ask? I’ll answer. Anything.”

Kyle grits his teeth, leaning forward.

A flicker of excitement. A flicker of fear.

Wait. Was that it? Did he grasp a connection for a second, only to lose it right away? Those flickers are enough to have Kyle reach out even more urgently, reaching without his hands, trembling with his efforts to recapture that connection.

“I think I know what it is,” says Elias.

Another flicker. A throbbing, crushing need. The feeling of gasping for air. Of craving a bite while starving. Of desperately needing release from insurmountable tension.

Then Elias says: "I'll save you the trouble."

He reaches across the table, takes hold of the back of Kyle's head, and brings his face in for a kiss.

Their lips touch.

The flicker Kyle experiences now is one of his own: shock.

Elias's eyes close as he melts into the sudden kiss, pressing his mouth firmer against Kyle's, charged with desire.

Kyle feels weightless, floating in the vacuous space between thoughts, his only attachment to reality being Elias's lips.

And his own.

This isn't the kind of connection he expected.

Elias ends the kiss and pulls back. "Was that too much?" he asks, reading Kyle's stunned expression. "Did I misunderstand? You look like I sucked your soul outta your mouth."

Kyle sits back in his chair, lips parted, speechless.

"I warned you I can get intense sometimes. Sorry. Thought I was receiving all the signals. Felt right. You're emotional. I'm restless. We're both feeling things. I went for it."

Kyle brings a couple of fingers to his lips, as if to check that they're still there.

They tingle with electricity.

Something Kyle hasn't felt in a very long time.

"Guess I misjudged." Elias frowns at his taco, which grows cold on his plate. "Maybe you don't even like Mexican food. I just thought, hey, who doesn't like tacos? Everyone likes tacos. But you're not like everyone, are you?"

"No," Kyle finally says, half-whispered. "I'm not."

Elias eyes him. "So you don't like Mexican food?"

"I don't like or dislike any food. It's all the same. I tolerate it because I have to ... because I forever swore off tasting the ... other thing."

"You mean blood?"

Kyle snaps his eyes to Elias at once, shocked.

Elias doesn't only get to the point.

He plunges straight to the heart.

"It doesn't scare me," says Elias, taking Kyle's silence for an answer. He comes around the table. "Is that what you want? Is that what you've wanted since you first saw me?"

"Elias ..."

He stops in front of Kyle's chair, staring down at him. "Is it what you won't dare say out loud? Your *real* secret?" His voice lowers to a near whisper. "You want my blood?"

"Elias ..."

"You keep saying my name."

"I don't ... I ... I can't ..."

“Didn’t I say you don’t have to hide anything around me?” Elias stands over Kyle like a mountain, sturdy, strong, devoted. “Let me be your rock, Kyle. Let me be what you need.”

The next second, Elias swipes the knife out of the meat, brushes it off on his hip, and drags it straight across his thumb in one deft movement.

# 12.

## *The Lion.*

—•—

Beads of blood scatter like rubies.

Kyle gasps out. “Elias!”

Elias takes hold of Kyle’s chin right at the front with that same hand, fearless, then brushes his sliced thumb across Kyle’s lips, as if to paint them in his blood. His gaze never detaches from Kyle’s, watching him every moment, his eyes filled with unwavering courage, heart racing with excitement.

Then Elias pushes his thumb inside.

The taste of blood washes over Kyle’s tongue.

Eyes fill with fire. Body thrums with energy. Heart, for the first time in a thousand sunsets, ignites with purpose.

It’s like a spell that takes over at once.

It claims ownership over everything. Claims every cell and fiber in his body, an invasion.

Kyle’s tongue, coated in the elixir of Elias’s blood.

Intoxicated by the taste, the savory, enslaving taste, nearly sweet, that satisfies on a superior level no other sustenance can hope to touch.

How is the blood sweet? Isn’t blood metallic? Salty? Gross? Has Kyle’s taste buds transformed somehow over the years, too, unbeknownst to him?

Elias pushes his thumb in even deeper, generously obliging Kyle's thirst, his grip tightening, insisting, giving.

Kyle reaches up to take hold of Elias's hand, sucking even harder, clinging as if to a long-lost lover. His heart, thrashing within his chest, rumbling, pounding, a chaotic drum.

Elias's finger, a life-replenishing oasis at long last.

Kyle fights an overpowering desire to bite, to chew like an animal, to draw even more blood. He begrudgingly practices restraint, rocking his eyes back with frustration, overcome.

No amount will be enough, he knows for certain now.

No amount at all.

That's why he pulls Elias's thumb out of his mouth, takes hold of him by the shirt, and pulls him down to his knees with strength that catches Elias by surprise.

Then Kyle takes hold of Elias's face and brings it to his for a deep, desperate kiss.

The blood has thrown him into a frenzy of desire.

There is no hope of controlling it now.

Mouths locked, kissing feverishly, Kyle grabs Elias by his jeans, opens them. Elias grunts when Kyle slips his hand inside and takes hold of him, finding his cock hard and throbbing. Elias slides his good hand down the front of Kyle's shorts, discovering a similar situation. Without prompt, the kiss ends, and Elias takes hold of Kyle's chin again, thrusting his thumb into Kyle's mouth, feeding him the intoxicating nectar again, eyes locked, hands stroking one another below.

Elias's face contorts with elation as he reaches the brink.

Kyle can't restrain himself another second and bites down on the finger, breaking skin.

Elias groans, bearing it, and his hand moves faster.

Together, they reach the peak, then bask in the pleasure that floods through their bodies as they let go. It happens too fast. Then silence takes over the room, disturbed only by the sound of their breaths as they become themselves again. The men grow quiet when the rush ebbs, both still gripping each other below, Elias clutching Kyle's face, thumb willingly locked in the cage of his soft, red lips, their eyes upon each other.

Kyle frees Elias's thumb from his mouth. A bead of blood slowly draws a line down to the wrist, then drips.

The two gaze in wonder into each other's eyes.

Neither says a word.

Until the corner of Elias's lips curl up. "Guess I'm a little bit of a masochist. Would it weird you out if I said this actually isn't the freakiest thing I've done?"

Energy continues to flow through Kyle like a drug.

Invigorating, filling him with power and pleasure.

"No," Kyle decides, lets out a strange laugh, then slumps to the floor with a smile on his face, overcome.

They lie together just like that for the rest of the night. In the semidarkness of the house, Kyle relishes in the prickles of joy that bounce around inside him as the men make small talk, laugh, enjoy each other's bodies, as well as simply lie there in



a warm and peaceful silence, content to say nothing at all. It's the first time in a while that Kyle has felt truly himself.

“What's your middle name?”

Kyle turns his head. “Huh?”

“Your middle name,” repeats Elias. “You never told me.”

Kyle shrugs. “You don't need to know. The less you know, the better, remember? I don't ask about you, and you don't—”

“My mom's Middle Eastern,” says Elias. “Dad's Mexican. Hence the Asad Trujillo, which you already know. Your turn.”

Kyle turns his head to Elias. They at first were cuddled on the floor of the dining room for a while, then relocated to the foot of the couch, backs against it. He gives in. “Bentley.”

“Kyle Bentley Amos? Really?”

“Yep. I'm not really sure where it comes from. Maybe just a name my parents liked. Think it means ‘dead grass’.”

Elias snorts. “That doesn't sound right, Kyle, and I suggest you look that up again.”

“If you say so. It's been a long time since I've given much thought to my real name, anyway.”

“Oh. Would you rather not talk about it?”

“It's okay.” Kyle nudges him. “So what does yours mean?”

“Asad? It means ‘lion’.”

Kyle glances at him, surprised.

Elias smiles back, almost sweetly. “*Rawr*,” he says coyly.

Kyle finds himself thinking of a night not too long ago, he was standing at the counter of the bar, no customers for half an hour, and he took out a napkin and a pen and began to draw. In the space of ten minutes, a blue lion sat on that napkin as proud as a true king of the savannah, perfectly proportioned, complete down to the individual claws. His skill has vastly improved over the years. It showed. When the door shook upon the arrival of the next customer, Kyle balled up the napkin, pitched it at the nearby bin, and put on his customer service smile.

A noise at the front door stirs Kyle from the memory. He and Elias turn their heads to find a cat slowly prancing toward them. From her mouth hangs a limp, hairy thing. She comes up to Kyle's side and drops the gift from her mouth.

A dead mouse.

Kyle stares at the carcass, now on the floor next to him.

“What the random fuck ...?” grunts Elias.

Kyle doesn't find himself disturbed by the comically timed return of the cat. She's in and out when she pleases. Neither is he repulsed by the gift she brought him, which is admittedly a first for their rather peculiar on-again-off-again relationship.

Instead, he finds himself thinking of Tristan, of all things. Something he said a long, long time ago. Something about gifts being delivered by cats.

And a rather dramatic gift of his own: a jock menagerie, in the locker room of a half-remembered high school.

Then of the letter Tristan left him on a pillow.

And his pinky ring.

“Where is it?” asks Kyle suddenly.

Elias, who was a second ago lost staring at the dead mouse in morbid fascination, stirs. “Huh? Where’s what?”

“My ring. My letter.”

“What ring? What letter? That cat just dropped a rodent at your feet and we’re not talking about it?”

“I had them with me, out in the desert, a ring and a letter. I was holding them.” Kyle turns to Elias. “Did you bring them back with you? To your house? Or here?”

“I was too busy saving your life to notice anything. Are we gonna address this weird cat or not?”

Kyle looks away. “Change of plan. I’m gonna put a bowl of tuna on my kitchen floor, then make a trip back to your favorite rock. Wanna come? Or stay and stare at the dead mouse?”

Elias gazes at Kyle, at a loss.

The cat glances from Kyle to Elias, back and forth, bored.

The dead mouse looks at nothing.

After Little Lion is contentedly eating from a bowl of tuna on the kitchen floor, Kyle and Elias set out, heading the wrong way out of the neighborhood back into the desert.

As they make their way, the two happen upon Kyle’s many breadcrumbs he dropped along the way: his shirt, his shoes, no sign of the socks, unfortunately, likely taken away by the wind throughout the day, and finally his pants and

underwear. By the time they reach the spot, they have an armful of dusty laundry.

Kyle looks around while Elias dutifully holds the armful of laundry, casually glancing here and there. Kyle finds nothing in front of the rock. Nor behind it. Nothing to the sides, either. Kyle soon grows impatient. He walks in fevered circles around the rock, combing the ground, squinting at things. Where are they? “Oh, here it—” calls out Elias upon noticing something, only to realize what he’s found is just an oddly-shaped piece of stone glinting in the sand, not the ring. “Never mind,” he says, deflated, arms still full of Kyle’s clothes, then kicks at the rock and sends it flying off, doesn’t hear where it lands.

“Where’d you park your truck when you came here?” asks Kyle, turning urgently to Elias. “I think I dropped them along the way. Could they be in your truck?”

“You had nothing on you,” insists Elias. “You were naked, wrapped up in my shirt, I’m sure half of you was on fire. Maybe the letter was blown away, probably dancing around the Grand Canyon by now. It was just lightweight paper, right?”

Kyle stops at the rock again, staring at the crude, angular etching of Elias’s name. “I had them with me. Letter and ring. I was holding them. The ring ...” Kyle thinks it over. “It fell on the ground next to me. It wouldn’t have blown away, too.”

“Someone else might’ve found it,” suggests Elias.

Kyle spins. “Who? No one comes out here.”

“Haven’t you seen those treasure hunter dorks with metal detector tools who comb the sands for valuable shit? They do it every day, looking for odds and ends they can sell, pawn off, melt down, whatever. They might’ve found it.”

Kyle sits on the rock and stares at the ground, defeated. The idea of a strange person snatching up the ring so quickly and taking off to sell it for a measly fistful of cash sickens him.

Elias joins him on the rock, still bearing Kyle’s clothes in his arms. “Meant a lot to you, huh? That ring?”

“They’d be lucky to make twenty bucks off of it. Whoever took it. And yet it was my ...” Kyle closes his eyes. “It’s the last thing ... the last thing I had of him ... of my brother.”

“Oh ... I’m so sorry.”

“He’s gone now ... every bit of him, even his memory is ... fading. I can barely see his face.” Kyle can’t believe he’s saying this. “You’re right, Tristan. Even memories die.”

Elias frees an arm from the laundry and places it around Kyle’s back, rubbing in circles. He says nothing.

“Doesn’t matter, I guess,” Kyle decides. “Just yesterday, I was prepared to say goodbye to everything. So what if I lose the last possession of my brother? Fuck it.” He hops off of the rock, Elias’s hand dropping. “And fuck that letter, too. It was just ... It was just a paper full of lies, anyway.”

“What did it say?”

Kyle chooses a rock from off the ground, inspects it, weighs it in his palm, then pitches it into the distance. Despite his emotional state, he finds himself amazed at how far it flies.

He squints to see where it lands. Far away, with a little crunching sound as it settles on the cracked earth.

Are his senses stronger now, after tasting Elias's blood? It's been so long since he's been able to see so well, so far away.

That first night in the woods, when he could see an ant on a leaf in the darkness. Hear the scraping of its tiny legs ...

"It's okay, you don't have to tell me," says Elias. "I was just wondering. Seems important to you."

"Tristan was my lover for twenty-six years." Kyle chooses another rock, a small bluish-grey one, weighs it, throws it at the horizon. Again, he watches where it lands. Even farther than the first. "Allegedly, I was his only one, ever."

"Allegedly?"

"Don't know anymore. After he chose the sunrise over me, I started feeling like our paradise wasn't what it seemed. All the cracks started to show. Maybe I was in a trance." Kyle throws another rock. Even farther, it lands. "That's how it happens. It works like a trance—paradise. You fall in love with it so much, you can't see what's wrong. I went along with everything he chose for us. I was so used to being invisible, to letting others run my life ... couldn't even tell he was running mine."

The dry air blows at Kyle's face, picking up his bangs.

Elias listens from behind, as still as the rock he sits on.

"I keep wondering ... even to this day ... if I would've been happier had we never met. I'd be in my forties by now, human, normal, beautifully boring. My younger brother, on the

cusps of forty. He'd be on tour right now, touring the world with his violin. Maybe I'd even be great with my parents, inconceivably. Maybe in adulthood, I'd realize all I needed with them was time. They'd realize how they treated me, and I would've come to love them. I'd be settled into a simple career, maybe with a husband and a dog. We would all be happy, all of us." Kyle picks up another rock, but he only stares at it, troubled. "If Kyle died twenty-seven years ago, and Henry died this morning ... who does that make me right now? What's even left?"

Elias drops the clothes and comes right up to Kyle. "You're whoever the goddamned fuck you want to be, that's who."

Kyle turns to him. "You have to curse so fucking much?"

"You can be Kyle *and* Henry," he says, "or someone else, someone new. Don't get all tangled up and shit in the what-ifs. Everyone plays the what-if game. All you got is what *is*." Elias takes hold of Kyle by his face and pulls it against his for a kiss, surprising him, then pulls away "If what you got isn't enough, go for more. Take the whole fucking world. Keepsakes and shit, they just make us sad and bitter, hanging on to them. Look at me. I got nothing but the clothes on my back. You should see my trail of *rings* and *letters* I've let go of or lost, all the way through my pitiful life up to this point, to now ... to you."

Kyle gazes out at the desert, pensive. Without warning, he chucks the rock in his hand as hard as he can. This one travels so far away, he can't even see where it lands.

Maybe that's the point.

# 13.

## *Twofold.*

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Long after Elias falls asleep on the couch, Kyle sits at the piano bench, fully awake, staring at the curtains on the window in deep contemplation. Even when the sun rises, he studies the faint glow around the curtains, with little regard to the fatal rays they block. Over and over, he tastes Elias in his mouth, long after every drop of beautiful blood is gone. It lingers like a happy memory.

The happiest memory he's had in years.

That's when he makes the decision: "We can't do it again."

That night at the bar, Kyle stands aloof, sucking on the end of his finger in thought. Can he still taste Elias's blood? Or is he imagining it? His foot taps impatiently on the floor as he keeps sucking on his finger, brooding.

Then he bites his finger suddenly, hisses in pain, and pulls it away. He reaffirms his decision. "We won't do it again."

Cade appears at the office door. "Do what?"

Kyle turns to her. "Uh, sorry. Talking to myself. Did you need something?"

"Sorry. Computer's doing that *thing* it does. Can you ...?"

Kyle nods. "I'll see what I can do." He heads to the office to help fix Cade's decade-old computer, leaving the bar's sole



occupant—a mustached man from the auto shop—to stare at the sports game on TV like a zombie, munching on peanuts.

Having steeled himself the whole way home, Kyle comes through his front door, ready to have the talk.

Until his eyes fall upon Elias.

Elias, who stands there waiting like a strong, loyal friend, devoted and ready. Without prompt, he slowly pulls his shirt up over his head, pitches it aside. Kyle watches. Elias opens his pants next, lets them drop to the floor, his syrupy warm eyes on Kyle the whole time. Elias is naked in seconds, every inch of his beautiful body on display.

He says: “Ready for dinner?”

For a second, even still, Kyle opens his mouth to give his we-can’t-do-this speech anyway, but the words don’t come. All he hears is Elias’s pulse, ringing through the room like a drum. He sees his body, powerful, virile, sturdy. Without realizing it, Kyle has come up to Elias, right up against him, chest to chest.

What was it he wanted to say again?

What had he decided this morning and confirmed tonight?

Kyle slides his hands around Elias’s waist, pulls their hips together with sudden force. The softest grunt of surprise comes out of Elias. Kyle adjusts his strength, ensuring not to hurt his muscly new housemate and confidant.

Or snack. Whatever Elias has become.

“Wanna try my earlobe this time?” asks Elias softly.

Kyle's eyes dart to Elias's ears. He's never taken much time to admire someone's ears, but in this moment, he finds Elias's to be especially attractive. Not big. Not small. Slightly stuck out just enough to grab hold of, to massage, to kiss.

To nip with teeth.

And break skin.

Without answering, Kyle takes hold of Elias's cock, which catches him off-guard. If he wasn't fully hard, he is now. Kyle brings his lips to the side of Elias's neck. "I'll start here," he says, placing a gentle kiss. The next kiss is higher, then higher.

When his teeth catch the earlobe, a deep, soft, pleasurable sound emits from Elias's throat.

Kyle bites gently.

Elias responds with a growl of delight.

Kyle bites harder—and the taste of blood rushes over his tongue, the taste he all day longed for.

And all day swore he wouldn't dare let himself savor again.

"We can't—" Kyle starts to say, stops himself, then takes one more nip, sucking, lapping at his ear. Elias moans. "We ... We need to—to—" To stop? What's his next word? Kyle bites with more need, suppressing his strength as best as he can.

"Somewhere else," moans Elias. "Bite me somewhere else. I want you to taste me, Kyle, really taste me, deep."

"Elias ..."

"I want you to fucking taste every inch of me."

Kyle drags his bloody mouth down the muscular landscape of Elias from his ear to his shoulder, to his chest, a beautiful red trail. His teeth find Elias's nipple, where they catch hold.

“Oh, fuck ...” moans Elias, his hand sliding up Kyle's body, fingers weaving into his hair, gripping. “Bite. Harder.”

“Elias, I ... I ...” Kyle licks his lips of blood, tongue taking a taste of Elias's nipple, dragging over it. “We need to stop—”

“Fucking harder,” begs Elias.

Kyle bites his nipple.

Harder.

Elias's fingers squeeze so tightly on Kyle's hair, tugging. His dick swells with need, throbbing in Kyle's hand. He strokes him, gripping tightly, faster and faster.

The blood makes Kyle stronger, daring, more reckless. He gnaws on Elias's nipple, certain it's too much. But Elias with all his strength takes it, his body flexing, firm, wanting more.

“Oh, Kyle ...” he whimpers, delirious.

Kyle releases his nipple. His red lips drag down the firm, magnificent meat of Elias's body, elongating the trail of blood down his smooth and sculpted body, over his hills of abs. Kyle's on his knees as he licks his man's navel, then nips at it with his teeth, playful, hungry.

Kyle moves his lips lower still, takes Elias's cock at the end, and swallows every inch of it without warning.

Blood is an incredibly effective intoxicant, Kyle learns.

It takes the leash. It leads him. It casts light in every dark corner of Kyle's soul.

Both of Elias's hands are in Kyle's hair, pulling, tugging, as he sucks up and down the length of Elias's cock, painting it red with his mouth.

"Every night, I'm yours," moans Elias. "Any part of me you want, it's yours, just—*mmm*—say the word, and—*fuck*—and—*god, how do you do that?*—I'm your fucking dinner."

Kyle's teeth drag down Elias's cock.

Elias bucks slightly, lets out a groan, then settles into a joyful sigh. "Goddamn, if you could only feel how hot this is, what your teeth can do ..."

Kyle pulls Elias out of his mouth, peers up from below. "I don't want to hurt," he gasps with mouth, teeth, and tongue red. "I don't—"

"Have you met me? Have you seen this body?" Elias gives his chest a slap, smacks his bicep, pats his abs, then grins, cocky as ever. "You can't fucking hurt me. I can take it, whatever you need to do, wherever you need to taste. I'm your man."

Kyle's eyes rock back, overwhelmed by blood in his mouth, delirious, drunk. "I'm so afraid of hurting you. Your nipple's bleeding. Your ear."

"Think that scares me? C'mon." Elias bares his teeth, body flexed, every muscle taut. "Try me. Bite my dick, right there, do it. Let me show you how strong I am."

Kyle once asked for the same thing.

He understands the thrill.

It's quite different, on the other side.

“Let me show you just how strong your man is,” says Elias, deep-voiced, defiant. “See if I cry.”

Kyle can't contain himself a second longer. He gently drags his teeth along Elias's firm, throbbing cock once more, as if to savor the thought before the taste. Elias's fingers clutch Kyle's hair once again, gripping him, guiding him, begging him.

Elias's dick pulses against Kyle's lips, ready.

Kyle bares his teeth, settles on a spot, then bites.

“You got it, Kyle,” cries out Elias from above. “*Don't stop.*”

Encouraged, Kyle keeps on. He drags his tongue right over the bite at once, lapping up every bit of red it can find, coating his lips like a dessert. He alternates from sucking Elias's dick, to stroking it with his hand, to finding a new place to take a nip. Over and over, he savors Elias, giving him exactly the test of strength he was begging for.

Elias not only endures the might of Kyle's teeth.

He seems to crave even more.

It's then that Kyle is overwhelmed by another sensation, a stronger sensation, even stronger than the blood. He feels at once an overjoyed, sparkling energy that seems to float at the very top of his head, gleeful and exultant, then showers down his body like raindrops made of light and electricity.

It's Elias's pleasure. Kyle has somehow connected to him again, feeling every trace of his emotional state.

He doesn't know how. He doesn't care. All he knows is that Elias is delirious from the stimulation, both happy to serve and happy to be served in this sexual dance between them, a trade of blood and carnal desires. There isn't an ounce of Elias that isn't overjoyed.

This is Elias's life now, that's what he's amazed by. His connection with Kyle. To be so lucky as to find him, a person like Kyle Amos, someone to be absolutely free and open with, to sexually express with, to be there for.

A purpose.

"I've never felt so fucking good," groans Elias. "What you are doing right now, goddamn, I love how much you need it, as badly as I need this."

He's a glutton for the pleasure in the pain, as much as Kyle is a glutton for the drug of Elias's blood.

It's unclear what is love, what is sustenance, what is desire.

Does it matter?

"You're gonna make me come in your mouth, Kyle, if you aren't careful." Elias's words are out of breath, nearly gasped. "I am so close. Just one more little nip ..."

"Do it." Kyle speaks around Elias's dick, as he slides up and down the length, nonstop.

The closer Elias is, the closer Kyle feels, their minds locked upon one another's. Which are Elias's emotions?

Which are Kyle's? He can't tell. As desire surges through Elias's system, Kyle feels himself overwhelmed, quickly drawing to the brink of orgasm faster than he can help it. He thrusts down his pants and grabs hold of himself, stroking rapidly.

It's overwhelming. Nearly suffocating. The double amount of arousal in his system. His racing heart, threatening to burst. Both Elias's and his own desire, swelling within, twofold.

Tears begin to fall from Kyle's eyes.

What's happening to him?

Elias's fingers squeeze Kyle's hair as he tenses up, as if to delay the inevitable just one more second, before at last giving in, unable to hold it anymore. He lets out a roar that could rock the house off its foundation as he empties inside Kyle's mouth.

Kyle feels the crackling burst of Elias's orgasm, connected to him through every electric second of it.

Unexpectedly, it triggers his own.

While he empties all over the floor, Kyle swallows up each and every powerful emission from Elias's dick as he releases them one after another, over and over, abundant joy and relief.

Kyle pulls back, the taste of sex and blood and everything in his mouth. His eyes drunk with delight, tears stuck to his cheeks, he gazes up the mountain of Elias to find a similarly satisfied expression.

The men watch one another, catching their breaths.

Elias, beads of sweat on his face, drawing shiny lines down his chest and stomach, a glow on his muscles. Kyle, whose face is likely a mess of sweat, blood, and happiness, gazing up at Elias with a drunken, half-lidded gaze.

“Shall we shower together?” offers Elias.

Kyle licks his lips of blood and come and everything Elias. He rises to his feet, hands on Elias’s body. His eyes fall to the places he bit. The earlobe. The nipple. A couple of stops along the road to his navel and his dick.

What surprises him most is the lack of blood still dripping.

The places he bit have stopped.

“Do you heal fast?” asks Kyle, curious. “Or did I do that?”

Elias glances down at his own body, curious. Then he peers at Kyle and shrugs. “Does it matter?”

A grin spills across Kyle’s face. How could he have possibly considered telling Elias they needed to stop? How can he ever have such a terrible, self-denying thought again? He takes Elias by the lips right then, and the men embrace as they kiss in the heat, sweat, and blood between them.

It feels amazing, to truly give in.

Wrong somehow, too.

Decades of Tristan’s cardinal rule, broken. Blood on Kyle’s tongue, willing blood from a willing human, feeding a part of Kyle’s soul that has starved for far too long.



A part of his soul that bursts to life from just a single drop.

But isn't that the point? To detach from his past? To let go of everything? The letter is gone. The ring, too.

Nothing holds Kyle back anymore.

Long after Elias is asleep on the couch again, Kyle perches on the piano bench like a bird, mixed feelings tumbling around inside. Some happy, some confused, some uncertain. He keeps reliving the sex they just had. Each time he bit Elias. The burst of excitement inside him that was both his own and Elias's. The blood he tasted, every drop. The come he tasted. Elias's dick, his own, and the way his mind could connect their sexualities, feeling every stroke of pleasure twice. He sucks the tips of his fingers, as if in search of one last morsel of Elias on them.

"No," he whispers to himself at last, decided. "We can't do this again. This was the last time."

But another night comes.

And another night, Elias answers the door, strips off all of his clothes, and asks the deadly question: "Where do you want to taste me tonight?"

Kyle bites his own lip, enduring an impossible struggle.

And loses.

Minutes later, Kyle has Elias pinned to the floor, where his face is buried between Elias's muscular legs. He bites the inner thigh, and Elias squirms with overwhelming arousal. Kyle feels it all again, connected to Elias, feeding on both their pleasures.

He knows when he bites too hard.

He knows when he doesn't bite hard enough.

Kyle is getting better at reading the emotions, far better.

When Elias comes, Kyle does too, the pleasure flooding his system too powerfully for any person of any amount of stamina to dream of holding back.

And again, Elias is asleep on the couch.

And again, Kyle gnaws on his fingers from atop the piano bench, trembling in the happy afterglow of sex and blood. His eyes narrow as he listens to Elias sleep. His heart still races.

“Okay,” he says, miserable, happy. “*Actual* last time.”

It's another late night at the bar. Is it Tuesday or Sunday? Kyle struggles to keep track lately, the days flying by. With no kitchen orders, Leland is out front complaining about the cute girl he likes who works at the corner store and won't give him the time of day. Kyle pats him on the back while gazing out at the near-empty bar, not really listening. Instead, he's imagining what it'd be like if Elias was free to visit here, kicking back in the booth, watching Kyle with his deep, intense eyes across the way while sipping on a glass of whatever. He would tease him all night, straight-faced, sometimes touching his ear, his neck, or cupping his crotch with a hand, now and then giving Kyle a casual wink, as if wondering which body part he'll let Kyle nip on tonight. The fantasy drives him wild.

But that can't happen. No one can know about Elias, whose identity apparently needs as much hiding as Kyle's does.

“Fucking nicked myself, too,” whines Leland as he lifts a finger to the light.

Kyle’s eyes snap to Leland’s finger.

A perfect, plump drop of bright red perches at the end like a shimmering ruby in the dim bar lighting.

Like a cable attached between that blood drop and Kyle’s mouth, he feels it pull taut, reeling him in, reaching for him.

“Fucking clumsy-ass hands,” mumbles Leland, oblivious. “I need to bubble-wrap myself around here. Like a dang toddler.”

Kyle grabs hold of Leland’s hand right then.

He sees it.

He smells it.

He wants it.

“Uh ... Henry ...?”

The sound of his false name brings him back. Kyle looks at Leland, wide-eyed, to find Leland staring back, stunned.

Kyle clears his throat. “You, uh ... need to put a Band-Aid on this.” He’s still gripping Leland’s hand, that bead of blood taunting him. Why won’t he let go? “Better do it before you ... you get blood in someone’s fries or something.”

Leland frowns. “Whose fries?”

Kyle glances at the bar, reminded anew how empty it is.

And how Elias isn’t actually sitting in a booth in the back.

Kyle abruptly lets go of Leland’s hand, scowling. “I’ll get the first aid. Stay here, you big baby.” He heads to the back,

leaving a blinking Leland at the counter, confused.

That night when Kyle comes home, he nearly tackles Elias to the floor, no sense of restraint left.

“Will you fuck me while you bite me?” asks Elias that night on the couch. Kyle has already bitten him in six different places. “I want to feel you inside me when we—”

“Be careful to tempt the demon any more than you already have,” hisses Kyle in Elias’s ear.

“Demon?” Elias snorts, takes hold of Kyle by the shoulders and says, “Didn’t I tell you you’ll never break me? Don’t hold back, Kyle. I want you to fuck me so hard, every muscle in my body is too sore to move. And believe me, it will take every last ounce of strength inside you.” He brings his own lips to Kyle’s ear, gives it a playful lick. “I can take everything you’ve got.”

Kyle grins. “Mmm, you shouldn’t have said that.”

Prickles of excitement race through Kyle’s body. It’s never clear whether it’s his own or Elias’s. With a maneuver, Elias is face-down on the couch, naked, glossy with sweat, as Kyle lies on top of him. An end table by the couch—a new addition to the décor, courtesy of Elias—is home to an eclectic assortment of other recently acquired items: a teak-colored lamp, a coffee mug with “R.I.P. SLEEP” in tiny block letters across its center, and a bottle of lubricant. It’s the lube Kyle reaches for, squirts a generous helping on his hand. After stroking himself, he slides his slippery fingers between Elias’s butt cheeks. The second he feels those fingers slip in, Kyle feels it too, his senses tingling with excitement. It’s an incredible and new feeling, to slide his fingers into someone

else and feel like it's his own body. While his fingers do the work of opening Elias up, Kyle spots an area of Elias's shoulder that looks especially pliable and perfect, and it's there where Kyle leans forward and puts his teeth.

Elias flinches, taken by surprise. His hole squeezes around Kyle's fingers. Kyle experiences it all twice, simultaneously, the shock and the pleasure. When Kyle trades his fingertips for his cock, he feels Elias's urgency as he slides it inside. Elias's body ripples with the deep sound of his moaning. He curls his fingers around the edge of the couch. Kyle pushes in deeper, following his instincts, reading the sparks of excitement in his connection.

Despite Elias's wishes, Kyle starts out slow, savoring every movement the same way he savors every drop of blood. Down to its smallest part, to the cells, to the very atoms. The rocking of their bodies, their weight. The firm feel of Elias's muscled ass against Kyle. With every thrust, he is closer to paradise.

"You won't break me," grunts Elias. "I dare you to try." Kyle bites Elias's ear right then from behind, both a reaction to his taunt, and an act of desire. Elias lets out an amused groan, sighs with delight, and says, "You drive me crazy, Kyle."

A flood of pleasure overwhelms Kyle's mind.

How can he ever dream to get enough of this?

"Harder," begs Elias as Kyle keeps thrusting. Every time he moves, Elias's whole body responds, Kyle's mind bubbles with insurmountable sensations. He obliges, adding more force with every push. He knows exactly when to pick up pace,

feeling Elias's desires. "I'm stronger than you think. I'll—*mmm, yes*—I'll prove to you how strong I am. Harder."

Kyle thrusts harder.

And bites deeper.

He tastes everything a hundred times more, coursing into every nerve ending of his body, invigorating him.

"I can't imagine a night without this," whimpers Elias.

Kyle thrusts even harder, letting out a moan each time.

"I was so fucking lost, Kyle ... *mmm*." He grunts, fingers curling around the edges of the couch, his muscles contracting beautifully, Kyle's hips slapping him with every push. "Do you even know, do you even know how much I fucking need you?"

The next second, Kyle pulls out, peels Elias off the couch like he weighs nothing more than a feather, then drops himself onto the couch and pulls Elias atop his lap. When Kyle thrusts himself back into Elias, now seated on him, Elias's face reflects breathless surprise.

"I'm strong, too," says Kyle as he holds him by the hips on top of his lap, pushing hard, his determined gaze on Elias.

Elias's eyes are like liquid emotion, pouring into Kyle's. "I don't think I'll ever stop being surprised by you."

"Let me look at you when I come," says Kyle. "Kiss me."

They bring their lips together as Elias rocks himself on Kyle's lap, adding power to every thrust, a dance between their bodies. Elias starts stroking his cock with his free hand between them. The kissing intensifies, deepening as they grow

closer to the edge, their breaths shattering across one another's faces.

Elias pulls away to gaze into Kyle's eyes. "Every part of me is yours," he whispers. "Every part."

Kyle gazes back at him. "*Every part?*"

Even now, even in the heat of sex, with sweat, blood, and breath between them, Kyle experiences a moment of desperate, urgent humanity trying to claw its way through.

The part of his humanity telling him he shouldn't do this.

He should stop. It's too much. The blood is wrong. This must stop, here and now, before it gets out of hand. Something is happening to Kyle. Something dark is growing inside, deep and evil, a hunger that someday won't know restraint.

Is this how They are born?

Is he becoming one of Them?

"Elias ..." he moans. "We need ... We need to ..."

Elias has reached the point of no return. Kyle feels it just as certainly as his own. The two come together with their crazed eyes locked upon each other's. Their orgasms carry on as long as the sex itself did, wave after wave, every pinch of tension in their bodies breaking away, every worry, every frustration.

A calm settles over them. Elias takes hold of Kyle's face so gently, he'd think he was made of glass.

He says, "You mean everything to me, Kyle."

Kyle swallows, staring back into Elias's eyes, overwhelmed. Every time after sex, the connection is there,

but only slightly, as it starts to detach, thread by thread, the presence of Elias in Kyle's mind slowly ebbing.

"You mean everything to me," Elias repeats so soft, nearly inaudible. "Everything ..."

Kyle brings his lips to Elias right then, kissing him.

It's the only thing he can do.

It's the only thing, to stop the voices in Kyle's head that tell him they shouldn't do this anymore.

Hours later, the men hold each other on the couch, Kyle swimming in the afterglow of Elias's taste. So many nights have passed now, so many nights Kyle didn't have the strength to resist Elias, to stop him, to have the talk.

So many nights, their feelings have grown.

"Do you ever worry someone will find out about us?" asks Kyle after a while of silence, lost in thought.

Elias is half asleep already. "Mmm... how can anyone find out? Your secret only exists here, between us, in the walls of this old—" He fights off a yawn. "—this old house you let no one else in. No one in the world can threaten that." His words run together as sleep takes over. "Not even if ... if she sends a hundred cars out here looking for me ..."

Kyle lifts his face from Elias's chest. "She? Who's she?"

Elias starts snoring.

Kyle frowns, then lays his head back on Elias's chest.

Time carries on, indifferent to Kyle's daily internal battle. Every night at work, Kyle can't help but obsess about how



Elias tasted the night before. Or the hungry look in Elias's eyes. Or the hypnotizing sound of his strong and racing heart.

Every morning after, Kyle's resolve crumbles further, yet he recites to himself anyway: "We won't do this again."

Then they do it again.

And again.

It's a Wednesday when Kyle stares at the clock on the wall of the bar, waiting for the night to end. Or is it Tuesday? Every shift at the bar is just an obstacle in the way of what he really wants: to be home, taking a taste of whatever body part Elias offers. It has consumed him. It's all he can think about, all he cares about, all he wants.

"Don't worry," says Leland as he sweeps the floor with a broom, too bored and restless to stay in the kitchen. "He will get picked up by his nephew, as usual." He's talking about their last customer, an old man who passed out half an hour ago at the bar, face nearly planted in the peanut bowl. If it wasn't for that damned customer, they might be closed already, and Kyle could go home. "Hey, you alright, Henry? Bet you could use a night off. Becks would come in for you tomorrow if you asked." Leland hums to himself as he returns to sweeping the floor, then yawns.

Kyle stares at the old man's glass, an inch of bourbon still in it, and imagines that it's an inch of blood instead.

He licks his lips as he thinks about what it would taste like.

Every nerve ending in Kyle's body feels like it's been pulled taut, wound up to exhaustion, like strings of a guitar

tuned too tightly, on the verge of snapping. Something happy and terrible jumps around inside of him, excited, yearning, impatient.

Impatient to a degree that feels fatal.

Impatient to a degree that overwrites all sense, all logic, all maturity.

At once he's next to the counter, teeth bared, glaring at that inch of bourbon, that wasteful inch of bourbon sitting in the glass. He beholds yet another fantasy of Elias, who saunters to the other side of the bar, slices his thumb, and pours it into the glass with a knowing smirk. "Drink," this fantasy Elias says, commanding him, yearning to watch it. "Drink me from this glass, drink me from my body, drink every inch of me."

Drink every inch of me.

Every inch, until there's nothing left.

Nothing left but bone and meat.

Nothing left but spilled blood.

*Drink.*

Kyle shuts his eyes, rubs them aggressively, then lets out a shout that makes Leland jump, startled, as well as the old man at the bar, who flinches awake so violently, he nearly knocks his glass straight off the counter. Kyle grabs that glass, kicks it back at once, then slams it down and squeezes shut his eyes as the alcohol burns over his tongue, savors it as if the fantasy is real, as if it's blood, Elias's.

He opens his eyes. Leland is staring at him, frozen in place. The old man wipes sleep out of his eyes, grumbles, “Ain’t that my drink?” then slumps off the stool, nearly falling over.

That’s when Kyle knows he needs to end it.

He needs to tell Elias.

Tonight.

# 14.

## *Bad Blood.*

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“Another long shift at the bar?” asks Elias, leaping out of the kitchen upon hearing Kyle come through the door. A faint aroma of Mexican food hangs in the air. “Just finished eating an hour ago, a bit later than usual. Your cat stopped by earlier, but only stayed outside, didn’t come in. I don’t think she likes me.”

“Elias ...”

“I think I’m finally on the same schedule as you. Not tired at all. Bet I can stay up with you until sunrise, if you wanna \_\_\_”

“Let’s go for a walk.”

Elias moves past Kyle, shuts the front door behind him. “And skip your dinner? No, sir.”

Kyle, mustering his strength, opens the door right back up. “No dinner. You and I are gonna go for a walk.”

“But Kyle ...”

“It’s *Henry* for the next hour.” He gestures at the door. “It’s been a while since we’ve done a night walk.”

“It has,” agrees Elias, squinting at him suspiciously. Then he gives in and heads out the door. Kyle follows.

They’ve gone on many middle-of-the-night walks over the past few weeks, but this is the first one that isn’t preceded

by a frenzied offering of blood and sex. One night not too long ago, the two of them ended up at the playground in a pair of swings, side by side. One Wednesday at 3:30 AM, they hopped the gate of the neighborhood pool and swam under the stars. Another night, they ended up on the stoop of the closed corner store for some reason and talked about favorite movies, arguing for an hour about which remakes are better than the originals.

Tonight, everything feels different. Elias appears on edge. Kyle still hasn't found the words, brooding and unsure. They end up circling the empty roads of downtown, all the businesses closed, not a soul in sight. Above them, a dark canvas of stars stretches from one end of the horizon to the other.

"You don't have a bed," says Elias suddenly. "You need a bed, I've been saying for weeks. That couch sucks."

Beds and couches are the last thing on Kyle's mind tonight. But he still hasn't found the words, so he mumbles, "I know."

"You need a decent bed, a beanbag chair, a gaming console, and a goddamned picture hanging on the goddamned wall."

"Beanbag chair?"

"I'd get some of those things from my house, but y'know, the whole *looking-for-me* thing." Elias lets out a sigh. "Your house looks like it's haunted. Ready to serve kids on Halloween, closed year-round otherwise. Are you punishing it? Did it do something wrong to you? Even your cat's started avoiding it."

“She’s an independent lady.”

“Alright, look. As long as I’m crashing with you, I’ll get it spruced up and livable. It’s got good bones. Decent-sized yard, front *and* back. You could even extend the patio. Telescope to look at the pretty stars. Catch Venus as it flies by or some shit, whatever you want, I don’t know much about all that.”

Kyle glances to the side, catching his reflection in the glass front of the corner store. His shoulders are slouched. His face looks gaunt and sickly.

The worry is obvious on his face.

And Elias is rambling on about renovations.

“Do you even have an HOA out here?” asks Elias, strolling down the middle of the empty road. “You can cover your entire yard if you wanted. Extend that patio to cover the whole thing, all the way to the fence, no one will care. Then you’d be able to sit out there during the day if you wanted. Indirect sunlight doesn’t harm you, right?”

“No, but—”

“But then a covered patio would block the stars at night. Hmm, maybe not such a good idea. I’ll brainstorm some more, alright? I’ll think of something better, just wait.”

“Elias ...”

“Nah, don’t worry about it, really, I’ll—”

“We have to stop the blood thing.”

Elias stops moving. Kyle, too.

After a moment, Elias turns to him. “Why?”

“We just have to stop,” Kyle repeats, saying the words to the ground. He slides his hands into his pockets. “No more.”

“I asked why.”

“Because I said so,” Kyle answers simply.

Elias comes up to his side. “There has to be a reason. Did I do it wrong? Am I not tasting as good as I used to? Or did I \_\_\_”

“No, none of that. It’s just ...” Kyle looks away. “It ... It isn’t ... good for me.”

“What do you mean it isn’t good for you? Isn’t it what you want? Isn’t it the *only* thing you want?”

“The only ...?” Kyle scoffs. “That’s all I am to you, then? A junkie for your blood? There are more important things, you know. Far, far more important things than just—”

“Don’t you need it to survive?”

“No. I never said I did.”

That seems to catch Elias by surprise. “Really?”

“Yeah, really. I can survive on human food, too.”

Elias makes a sound right then, something between a gasp and a laugh. “That sounds so fucking cool. ‘Human food’. You really call it that? ‘Human food’?”

Kyle rolls his eyes, annoyed, turning away.

“Alright,” says Elias to his back. “Maybe you don’t *need* the blood, but it obviously does something to you that *human food* doesn’t. You’re always so damned ravenous when we do it, like you can’t get enough.” Elias chuckles. “You could suck

me dry and you don't. Goddamn, it's always so hot, when you bite me."

Kyle has never had to face such complications before. He's never told another soul, nor has anyone ever found out, in all these years. Secrecy has been his leading principle until the day he met Elias. He realizes now how tedious it must have felt to Tristan so long ago after coming clean in the graveyard, the question game, the interrogation, the mindless fascination.

But the last thing Kyle expected was to have his disposition seen as sexy.

"You know," starts Elias, "you may think I'm just indulging you, being stupid, reckless, whatever ... but the reality is, you're giving me a purpose here."

Kyle peers back at him over a shoulder. "A purpose?"

"No one in my life wants me."

Kyle turns around fully. Elias is leaning against a nearby streetlamp, the light above pouring a halo over his head.

"What do you mean no one in your life wants you?" asks Kyle softly.

"I know I still haven't told you much about me." His voice is unusually soft, faraway. "But I swear ... everyone in my life seems like they'd rather I just ... go. I'm in everyone's way. I'm too intense for friendships. Guys I dated think I'm just a fuck boy. All I do is irritate the hell out of my mother because I'm not the son she wanted. Do you know what that's like? To have a mother for whom you will never, ever be enough? A constant disappointment? It's crushing."

Kyle takes a step toward him. "Elias ..."



“Even got left off of my cousin’s wedding invitation. Still don’t know the real reason, but I can take a couple guesses. I’m not wanted around. I’m trouble. Heard they had an open bar, fortune teller, and even a damned caricature artist. I’m more pissed about missing out on the caricature artist, to be honest. Bet I would’ve made a fucking awesome caricature. Point is, I’m a problem, to everyone, in every definition of the word.” Elias looks at Kyle. “Until now. For the first time, I feel ... useful.”

The way the light catches his dark eyes and every bit of emotion that swells in them.

Kyle could believe in love again, just from a look in Elias’s eyes. He trusts every word that comes out of his mouth. Is Kyle connected to Elias’s emotions right now, in that special way he is when they are intimate? Or is this just a normal gut feeling any human would have? Kyle can’t tell tonight. It’s frustrating.

“My blood’s yours,” says Elias. “I said so. We’re doing it.”

Kyle sighs. “Elias, I said—”

“I know what you said. ‘It’s not good’ or whatever. Why? Are you trying to suppress your nature? Was it a pact you made when you lost Mr. Pile of Ashes or something? To never taste it again? I see your eyes, Kyle, every time. The second you taste me, you look fucking *alive*.”

“You don’t understand.”

“That so? Well, I’ll tell you what I do understand,” Elias fires back. “Just a few weeks ago, you wanted to end your life.

And whenever you taste me, I see a light in your eyes that could compete with the sun itself.”

“That doesn’t mean you should turn yourself into my own personal blood bank.”

“I’m not your blood bank. I’m more than that. You know it, too. I don’t just sit there and let you bite me. We have sex. We make love. Whatever you wanna call it. Okay, we’re maybe a little *different* compared to other couples, but I—”

“Couples?”

“I’m intense. Haven’t we had this talk before? I’m intense. I move fast. I dive into the deep end. Aren’t we something by now? You and me?” He takes a step back, lets out a breath, then makes a face. “Why does it turn me on when you called me that earlier? Your ‘blood bank’ ...”

Kyle shakes his head and walks away. “Just when I thought I could take you seriously.”

“Hey, just kidding,” calls out Elias. “Well, kinda. I mean, it makes me feel important, which—Hey, stop walking away!” He grunts as he pushes himself off the streetlamp, following Kyle down the sidewalk. They pass by the electronics store. “Why’s it a big deal? It’s not like you’re gonna kill me.”

“You don’t know that.”

“It isn’t any different than couples who have kinks. A little bit of domination. Fuck me with your socks and shoes on. Tie you up. So what if I let you have a little of my blood?”

“I already learned firsthand that you like tying people up,” says Kyle, shooting him a look.

“Hey, that was just to keep you from running away.”

“Or maybe it’s just another thing that turns you on,” Kyle says back. “You want to tie me up when you feed me, too? You think mere rope can restrain me? I could’ve broken out of your knot easily. Your rope work is level 1 at best.”

“Level 1? I’m at least a 10, don’t sell me too short. I was in Boy Scouts. I know my knots.”

“You can barely tie your shoes. Elias, I’m not going to have another drop of your blood.”

Elias glances down at his shoes, as if to check, then stops at once and takes Kyle by the shoulders. “Didn’t we say we don’t have to hide anything from each other?”

“Actually, I think we said the opposite.” Kyle looks at him. “I don’t ask about who you are, who’s looking for you, what your deal with your mother is, none of it. And you don’t ask me what I really am, where I’m from, or how I got here. Our relationship is literally made out of, supported by, and thriving because of the secrets we’re keeping.”

“I ... I didn’t say we ...” Elias clenches his teeth and growls in a way that Kyle can best describe as adorable. “Stop using my own words against me, Kyle.”

“I’m *Henry*,” he snaps.

That’s when he hears it.

Something like a gasp. Choked.

As infinitesimal as a grain of sand settling into place. Or a snowflake landing on the branch of a tree a mile away.

Kyle spins around, eyes wide, listening.

Where did it come from, that sound? What was it?

Elias barely shuffles a foot and Kyle spins around and holds him against the wall at once, pinning him there, pressing a hand to his mouth to stifle whatever he's about to say.

Unblinking, as silent as stone, Kyle brings a finger to his lips, indicating silence.

Elias, wide-eyed, nods back at Kyle, obeying.

Then Kyle senses something else. It feels like cold fingers at the base of his stomach. He recognizes it. It's fear. Deep fear. The taste of impending death. Pure, compounding horror.

He has at last found that special connection again.

But it's not with Elias.

Whose fear is he sensing?

Kyle bolts from the street at once. Regrettably, he can also hear the noisy pursuit of Elias at his back, following. But his full and undivided focus is on finding the source of the fear, not in hushing Elias, who can't help his lack of stealth.

It's not even clear to Kyle how he's able to track the fear. Does he smell it? Does he taste it? Does he *feel* it?

Then he hears someone cry out.

Kyle picks up his pace now, hurrying toward the shout. Cutting through an empty parking lot and racing across a dirt patch, he spots the front of the pawnshop—and finds its doors ajar.

Without a thought in mind, he plunges into the dark store.

The pawnshop is lined with display cases along every wall, with a maze of cluttered tables in the middle full of knickknacks and confusingly-labeled items. It's at one of those tables that he sees the shape of a man in a black and grey hoodie. He holds a gun, finger on the trigger, pointed at the face of a teenager in front of the table.

The teenager is Jeremy, the police chief's son, hands in the air and trembling.

The moment Kyle appears, Jeremy looks at him, then lets out a shriek, likely not recognizing his silhouette in the dark, thinking he is someone else coming to harm him.

Jeremy's cry has the unfortunate side effect of spooking the gunman, who in one swift motion takes Jeremy into a headlock, presses the gun to his temple, and spins around. "Back away!" screams the man at Kyle. "Back away now!"

Kyle stops at once, right in the doorway.

He sees a single bead of sweat dripping down the gunman's forehead. He can see it even across the dark room, his enhanced senses sharper than ever right now.

He feels Jeremy shaking, too.

Even down to the rattling of his feet within his sneakers.

Is it his fear Kyle sensed? Jeremy's? How did Kyle possibly connect to him from all the way across town, of all people? Is that even possible?

"I said back away!" the gunman screams. "Now!"

Kyle sees a second bead of sweat falling from the gunman's forehead, coming to rest at the tip of his nose, then

letting go.

Suddenly, it isn't fear Kyle senses anymore.

It's desperation.

And dread.

The emotion feels like an insurmountable heaviness, cold, right at the center of the man's bowels, pulling downward with no mercy.

It's the gunman's dread.

"What do you want?" asks Kyle simply.

"Leave or I fucking shoot the kid!"

There is no possible way Kyle can know this, but he senses the gunman won't pull the trigger. "Just tell us what you want," says Kyle, taking a step inside, then another. "Say what you're looking for. Is it something in this store? I'll help you find it."

The man squeezes tighter around Jeremy's neck. "I fucking said back off!"

"H-Henry!" squeals Jeremy, choked by the gunman's hold.

Kyle needs to be careful, but his senses keep telling him the man doesn't want to kill anyone. Can he trust those senses so easily? Is there any chance his senses can be wrong?

"You've been looking at this store awhile now, right?" asks Kyle, remembering what Jeremy overheard from his dad, trying to use reason. "It's something in here, isn't it? Whatever it is you need? Let go of the kid, take what you want, go. No one's gonna stop you. No one cares. This is all just ... stuff."

The man's hand falters slightly.

Kyle notices. "Tell me what you're looking for," he says to the gunman, taking the slight wavering of his hand to be a sign. "I'll help you find it. Just tell me."

The man clenches his teeth, uncertain.

Just then, red and blue lights flash at Kyle from behind. Kyle peers over his shoulder, startled, as police lights blind him. Through the colors, the shape of the police chief emerges with his hand on his undrawn gun. "Hey!" he snaps at Kyle, annoyed more than threatened. His lackadaisical demeanor suggests he is entirely unaware of the situation inside, likely called here by a silent alarm in the store. "What's going on? What do you think you're doing, Henry? Step away from the —"

Before Kyle can answer, he's wrenched inside from behind.

Reaching out, he grabs hold of nothing, falling backwards onto the floor of the pawnshop grunting as he lands. The doors slam shut ahead of him, the gunman shoving a table in front of the entrance, items falling to the floor with a loud clatter, while still gripping Jeremy by the head. "You!" he shouts at Kyle, gun pointing wildly. "On your feet! Fucking move!"

Jeremy, visibly shaking, teary-eyed yet not crying, trembles in the gunman's grip. "S-Sir, I was ... I-I just ... p-p-please ..."

"Shut the fuck up. You." The gunman aims at Kyle, still on the floor. "Who are you? Answer me before I blow your fuckin' head off."

Kyle rights himself, blinking away the disorientation, and faces the man. He can still sense his dread like frigid air spilling from a walk-in freezer. This guy, he's at the end of his rope. He just wants something, one specific thing, then he'll be gone. It isn't money. It's something personal and important.

And the man is certain it is in this room.

How does Kyle possibly know any of this?

"I want to help," says Kyle, slowly rising off the floor. "I \_\_\_"

"Stop moving!" he screams, pointing his gun as Jeremy lets out a shout, shrinking against the man's body, shaking.

There's banging at the front glass doors. "Hey!" clips the police chief's voice from outside. "Henry! Hey!"

Kyle maintains his composure, voice level. "Whatever it is you're looking for, let's find it and get this over with, okay?"

More banging at the front doors. "Henry!"

That's when the gunman's eyes sharpen. His sense of dread sharpens too, Kyle senses. It changes, growing from being ice-cold to white-hot, taking the shape of a needle ready to pierce.

That needle is an intention to defend himself to the death.

To kill.

Kyle is alarmed by the man's sudden shift in emotion.

"Were you sent here to stop me?" whispers the man, barely audible, hands growing sweaty. His emotions, all over the place. Fear. Dread. Kill. "Is that what this is? A test? Is that



who you are? Another fucking test? You playing with me right now?"

His emotions have become so radical, spiraling so quickly, blurring together and falling apart like a storm. Kyle can't read any of them, like pages of a book flipping too fast.

The front of Jeremy's pants are soaked, Kyle notices.

The poor teenager wet himself in fear.

Another bang of a fist at the front door, rattling the glass. "Hey! Henry! What's going on in there? Open up! Now!"

"I wasn't sent here by anyone," says Kyle, determined to be calm. "That's just one person outside, one irritable police chief who hates me. I didn't call him. I can deal with him, okay?"

More banging. "Open up, Henry! I'm not kidding!"

"I'm just a friend of *that* guy," says Kyle. "Jeremy, the guy you've got in your grip right now. I'm no one."

"Even someone who's no one can be deadly," says the man. "I'm not anyone to you either, and I've got this kid's life in my hands." He aims again at Kyle. "And yours."

Kyle's jaw tightens. "I'm Kyle, alright? Now I'm not just a nobody. I'm Kyle, a guy with a name, no one special, a resident in this town like anyone else. Please let me help you."

The man squints at him. "If you're Kyle and this is Jeremy, then you wanna tell me who the fuck's Henry?"

Kyle freezes.

What name did he just let slip out of his lips?

Even Jeremy looks at him, confused through the terror in his eyes.

“You’re one of them,” decides the gunman, eyes widening, whites flashing.

The words come out in nearly a hiss.

An accusation.

One of them?

The gunman presses the cold tip of the gun to Jeremy’s forehead, causing him to whimper out in terror. “My wife and child are innocent, they’re fucking angels, and you godforsaken demons still want to test me? I’m the one with the gun!”

Kyle frowns. “I ... I don’t know what you’re talking about. What demons?”

“Tell me where they are,” he growls, and for the first time, Kyle hears fear in his voice. “Tell me or I’ll shoot this kid in the head right now, I swear to God in Heaven, I will end his life.”

Banging at the front door, glass rattling. Gasping, breathy noises indicate Jeremy has started to cry, tears falling free from his squeezed-shut eyes. Kyle stares at the teen, feeling strange, out-of-body, faraway, as if this is all happening to some other nobody in another small desert town. What should he do?

“Tell me,” says the gunman. “I’m done with you. I’m done with all of you ... y-you fucking bloodsuckers.”

Kyle's eyes snap to the man's at once. "What'd you just call me?"

That's when the front doors of the pawnshop fly open. The table that blocked it topples over with a booming crash, sending items strewn across the floor. Police lights flood the room.

Kyle doesn't think. He grabs hold of the gun at once in an attempt to wrench it away. Jeremy screams out in terror.

The man aims the gun at Kyle's face instead.

And squeezes the trigger.

# 15.

## *No One Special.*

---

Light. Blinding, searing, annoying light.

Kyle moans with discomfort and lifts a hand to shield his eyes, only to find his wrist stuck to something.

He cracks open an eye.

Hospital room. He's on a bed, one of his wrists handcuffed to the railing. A hospital curtain hangs nearby, beige and yellow striped. The light is artificial, a fluorescent above him. He's in his same clothes, but blood stains the front of his shirt.

Standing next to the bed is the police chief staring down at him, stony-eyed and stern.

That sobers Kyle at once. "S-Sir ...?"

The chief wastes no time. He leans forward so far, Kyle has to lean back in his bed, causing it to creak. "You want to explain to me what the hell happened in that pawnshop?"

Kyle blinks, looking around. "Am I in a hospital?"

"The clinic. You know damned well this town doesn't have a hospital."

"What happened ...?" rasps Kyle, bewildered.

"That's what I want you to tell me, Mr. Rosenberg. What the hell happened, and how the hell you're still alive."

Kyle gapes at him, lost.

A door opens somewhere, unseen. There's a noise from behind the curtain. "Dad?"

The chief rolls his eyes and turns. "Jer, damn it, I said to stay outside!"

"Is he awake yet? Has he woken up?" A distant door shuts. The hanging curtain is swept aside. Jeremy rushes up to the bed, astonished. "Henry! He's alive! Henry, oh my god, thank you, you saved my life, thank you!!"

"Jer, that's enough!" snaps the chief again.

Jeremy can barely contain his excitement. "S-Sorry, Dad, I just—" He shrinks, but his big eyes practically bounce inside his skull as he stares in wonder at a rather bewildered Kyle. "You are ... are *so* amazing ..."

"Out. Hallway. Go."

"Thank you, Henry," repeats Jeremy, then finally gives in to his dad's orders, albeit reluctantly, backing away and leaving the room. Kyle sits up to watch him go, dazed.

What the hell happened?

How did Kyle even get here?

"You saved my son's life," says the chief.

Kyle looks at him, still dazed. "Huh?"

"You saved my son's life," he repeats. "I'm indebted to you. Literally took a bullet for him. In the damned face, at that."

Kyle blinks.

The bullet.

The hooded man in the store.

Cold barrel of the gun kissing his forehead, then snap, the trigger, the bang, and—

Kyle brings his free hand to his face, as if wondering if he might find a crater there. There aren't any reflective surfaces nearby to check. He keeps touching his face, bewildered.

What happened?

“But that’s where my debt to you ends and my questions begin,” says the chief. “Now I don’t care how crazy it is, what you’re about to tell me, whether you’re a demon, escaped from an institution somewhere, got a magic skull made of tungsten or a voodoo priest blessed you as a child, all I want is the truth, the goddamned truth. I want you to explain to me what I, my son, and that criminal shithead witnessed tonight.”

Not a single scrap of memory emerges from his mind. Not even a flicker, nor a glimmer, nor even a half-remembered hint of what happened when that gun fired. Everything since is a complete and total blank, up to the point at which he opened his eyes right now in this bed.

“Don’t misunderstand my gratitude earlier,” says the chief. “You are still a person of interest until I’m satisfied with what you tell me. How are you still alive?”

“I ... I don’t know,” says Kyle, out of breath.

“Yeah, I think you do.”

“The gun went off, and ... and ...” Kyle shakes his head. “And then I woke up here. I don’t know how it happened, sir.”

He narrows his eyes, annoyed. A steely silence passes. “You will tell me eventually. But for now, you’re gonna answer my other questions.” He folds his arms on the railing of the bed. “You’re gonna tell me how the hell you ended up at that store. Start at the beginning of your night if you have to. You worked your closing shift at the bar. You walked home. And then?”

Kyle’s eyes drift away, suddenly thinking of Elias. Where is he right now? Elias followed him. Was he too fast to keep up with? Did Elias hide somewhere when he saw the police car? Should Kyle mention his existence at all?

“Earth to Henry Rosenberg,” clips the chief, impatient.

Kyle clears his throat. “After I got home, I ... I decided to go for a walk.” He swallows hard. “Alone.”

“And?”

“I heard a shout.” That part is true, isn’t it? He’ll leave out the part about having extrasensory experiences. “I followed the shout to the pawnshop. I saw the doors were ajar. I went inside. I found two people. A man in a hoodie and—”

“My son, yes, I know the rest, goddamn it. What I don’t know is how in the hell you took a bullet between the eyes, then continued on like nothing happened, like he might as well have tossed a ping-pong ball at your face. Then you went into a maniacal rage and took him down like you had the strength of a dozen hippos.”

Kyle stares back in disbelief.

“And then you ...” The chief makes a face, appearing for a moment uncomfortable, then meets Kyle’s eyes with

certainty. “Then you bit him.”

Kyle can't close his mouth. “I ... I did what?”

“You heard me. Fucking bit him, the criminal, right on his ear. Nearly took it straight off, like a dog.”

Kyle reaches with the wrong hand to cover his mouth, the handcuff yanking his wrist back in place, reminding him it's there. He stares down at his lap instead, aghast.

The chief's energy seems to deflate as he watches the shift of expressions on Kyle's face. He steps away from the bed and slowly circles it, shaking his head. “Henry, Henry ... what am I gonna do with your scary ass?”

Kyle can't form thoughts. “I bit him ...?”

“Everyone in town loves you. Got no clue why. I never trusted you as far as I can throw you since you first stepped foot here.” He huffs. “Now my Jer thinks you're a superhero. The criminal thinks you're a motherfucking demon. I don't know what the hell to think anymore. I'm on some kind of ... fucking prank show, for all I know, because not a bit of this makes sense to me. Someone's laughing at me right now on the other side of a camera, I'm sure of it, making a fool of me ... Christ.”

“But how did I end up here ...?”

“I'm the one asking the questions!” barks the chief. After a second, he sighs. “Once the criminal was subdued, you just ... fainted, right there, right in front of the store, with some kinda sick, sleepy grin on your face. I thought you finally succumbed to the bullet, but nope, the bullet didn't even break your skin. How's that possible? Found it inside the store where



you were shot. As if the thing bounced off your forehead like rubber.”

Kyle lies back in the bed, overcome, staring at the ceiling. He tries to remember. He feels like he’s in a battle with his own brain, desperate to recall even the tiniest moment.

It’s just like the night he lost his family.

All of it, gone.

No trace in his memories whatsoever.

“You got something you want to tell me, Mr. Rosenberg?”

Kyle shakes his head. “No. I don’t know anything. I don’t remember any of that happening.”

“Oh, I think you know exactly what I’m asking you. I think you know exactly what’s in my head right now.”

Kyle looks at him, alarmed. “What?”

The chief leans forward. “Let me be clear. Whatever you tell me,” he says, then stops, lets out a sigh, and lowers his voice to something uncharacteristically soft, “it stays in this room, you got it? Just between you, me, and God. I don’t want none of this to get out to the rest of the town, not a bit of it. It didn’t happen, won’t exist. Not even to Georgina. I’ve already cleaned up the shop, it’s ready for her to open, she won’t know a thing.”

“Wait. You’re covering this up?”

“Now I want you to talk, Mr. Rosenberg, and I want you to tell me everything ... the honest truth.” He lifts his eyebrows expectantly. “Is there something I need to know about you?”

Kyle stares back at him, numb, empty, as silent as a shell.

What could he possibly say?

There's a knock at the door. "Sorry to interrupt, Juan, sir, but there's a call for you."

"I'm busy," the chief clips without looking, eyes burning a hole through Kyle's blank face.

"They said it's urgent. Chelsea from the station."

The chief's eyes narrow. "Thank you," he nearly growls, sounding anything but thankful. After the door shuts again, he takes a step away from the bed, then looks Kyle over. "You and I aren't done, Mr. Rosenberg."

"Am I free to go?"

The chief cocks an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"You have me handcuffed." Kyle gives his wrist a few tugs against the railing. "Isn't anyone in the clinic wondering why you have a patient cuffed to the bed? What was I brought here for at all? I'm guessing it wasn't a gunshot wound to the head."

The chief stares him down, nearly angry. Then he comes right back up to the bed. "I'm gonna take this call. And you're gonna sit right here and think long and hard about what you wanna tell me. Once I'm satisfied, and only once I'm satisfied, then that cuff comes off your wrist, you go back home, and we all pretend this day never fucking happened. You got it?"

The look in the chief's eyes is harsh and unyielding.

But underneath the gruff, Kyle, for the first time, senses a rich and pulsing emotion, as warm as a blanket on a cold

winter morning, wholesome and pure.

It's appreciation. Relief. Overflowing happiness.

This man almost lost his son today.

He can't wait to return to him.

He is, despite all his suspicion and dislike for Kyle, grateful.

"I got it," says Kyle sincerely back.

The chief takes a step away, frowns, then heads out of the room, curtain swishing. With the curtain out of the way, Kyle spots a digital clock on the wall. 5:58 AM, it reads.

The sun will be rising soon, if it hasn't already.

That unfortunate fact is not lost on Kyle.

Even if he does get out of here soon, how will he get home safely? The clinic is on the opposite end of town.

It's exactly one and a half minutes later that the door opens again. When Kyle looks over, it's not the police chief. Jeremy is at the door, having slipped in.

He rushes up to the bed. "Henry! We need to talk. I saw my dad on the phone by the nurse's station and we don't have much time."

"Are you alright?" asks Kyle. "Did you get hurt? You got a cut on your forehead."

"None of that matters. You and I got a way more serious issue. An issue my dad doesn't know dick about."

Kyle sits up fully. "What issue?"

Jeremy winces. "I ... I wasn't alone last night."

“Not alone? Who was with you?”

“Layna.” Jeremy won’t stop wringing his hands. “Layna and I. We’re ... We’re kinda seeing each other. Sorta. Not sure if it’s serious yet.”

Layna, Cade’s daughter. Kyle saw no sign of her. “But—”

“She snuck out with me last night,” says Jeremy. “We were out taking photos. Weird stuff at night, like I always like to do. And ...” He appears uncomfortable. “I noticed the pawnshop doors were wide open. Layna told me not to go, told me to call my dad, but I didn’t. She stayed back when I went inside.”

Kyle shifts in the bed, handcuff tugging annoyingly on his wrist, digging into the skin. “So she witnessed it all, too?”

“More than witnessed.” Jeremy grimaces as he averts his eyes. “She ... recorded everything. On her phone.”

Kyle stares at him. “Everything ...?”

“Yes ... everything. You showing up. The confrontation, she got it through the side window, recorded on her phone. She got the ... the gunshot. And ...” Jeremy looks at Kyle, worried. “And you attacking the guy.”

Hollow.

That’s what Kyle feels like. A flute with no player, holes up and down his body, punctured, silent, hollow.

“She ...” Kyle swallows. “She recorded ... the whole ...?”

“My dad doesn’t know. Like I said. But ...” Jeremy’s eyes flash as he grips the railing. “We watched the video, like, fifty

times, Layna and I. The gun must've misfired or something. It barely affected you, like you're Superman. Then you straight up pounced on him, bit his ear off. Blood went everywhere. Like, what?? Crazy!" Jeremy nearly laughs, shaking his head. "You're a fucking badass, Henry."

Kyle leans back in his bed, aghast.

It's on video?

The whole encounter is on video?

"But that's where we have a little problem," says Jeremy.

Kyle turns to him, already too overwhelmed. "What?"

"Layna got caught by her mom. I guess her mom went into her bedroom and saw she wasn't there. So when Layna tried to sneak back in through her window, her mom was there, and she got a bit of a scolding. I think she's mad at me now. But ... that isn't the issue." Jeremy squirms. "Her mom took her phone."

Kyle lifts his eyebrows. "Cade? Cade took the phone?"

"With the video, yeah. Hey, don't worry," Jeremy quickly adds, noticing the change in Kyle's face. "I don't think she'll see it. She just took it away to punish her or something. I heard it from my dad. Haven't been able to talk to Layna since."

Kyle closes his eyes, at his limit.

What has he done?

"I'm sorry. I know it's all fucked up. But I think you're safe. Maybe in another day, her mom will give her phone back. She never stays mad at Layna for too long, she's a softie."

“Okay,” says Kyle, out of breath. “Alright.”

“Anyway, that’s the main issue. But ... uh, hey ...”  
Jeremy speaks calmly now. “Can I ask you a question? It’s something else that’s been bothering me a bit.”

Kyle has nothing left in him. He’s floating. “Sure, kid,” he mumbles. “Ask away.”

“Um ...” Jeremy’s voice comes closer. “Why’d you tell the guy your name was Kyle?”

Kyle lets out a sigh. “Just a name I made up,” he decides to say, feeling flippant. “It didn’t matter what name I gave him. I was just trying to calm him down.”

“You mean before you bit his ear off?”

Kyle looks at Jeremy.

Jeremy lifts his hands at once. “Sorry, sorry, I’m not trying to be weird. But, hey, whatever you are, we won’t tell anyone, you can trust me and Layna. We think you’re awesome. We know you’re one of the good guys.”

Kyle’s face wrinkles up. “Good guys?”

“You’d never harm anyone in this town. My dad knows it, too, he saw everything, he saw you go crazy. My dad knows you were doing it to protect us, to protect me ... the town.”  
Jeremy smiles so big, he can’t wipe it away. “I feel so lucky to have you here, looking after all of us. Weird stuff happens out here in Nowhere. Now, we don’t have to be afraid of it.”

Kyle feels a vacuum in his chest.

A complete and utter lack of self.

Whatever he thought he was building, this safe zone, this place to be invisible, this place to fade in, a paradise of oblivion, it's fallen apart overnight. Jeremy is saying things. The chief of police is drawing conclusions no normal person would draw.

And Kyle is on video now. In a video that is now in Cade's possession. Kyle, in his most vile state, his most private nature, contained to an amount of bytes of data on a teenager's phone.

"Jer ..." Kyle tries to take hold of the situation. "Whatever you think ... Whatever you think is going on ... I promise you, it's ... it's not what it looks like, okay? I just went a little crazy. I think you're right, I think the gun misfired, nothing happened. I'm just Henry, a bartender. I'm no one special."

Jeremy smiles. "You're a bad liar."

Kyle cringes in frustration. "Jer ..."

Then Jeremy gasps. "Oh, I nearly forgot." He produces a tiny item from his back pocket—a handcuff key. "I came in here to uncuff you. Snatched it off my dad's belt. I know, I know, I'll get in trouble, but hey, I'm the victim, and you're the hero, and why are you being treated like this?"

With a few clicks, the cuffs come undone. Kyle brings his sore wrist to his chest, massaging it. "Uh ... thanks."

"You probably want to get home to rest. My dad won't see you if he's still on the phone, so we gotta go now."

It's a quick endeavor to get out of the room. As predicted, the chief is still chatting away heatedly on the phone, so the

two of them are able to sneak past to the front lobby. When they spill out from the doors of the clinic, the sky is already far too bright for comfort, the morning sun somewhere behind them, the shadow of the front of the clinic falling forward, Kyle's only mercy.

But it's not the presence of the morning sun that brings him to an abrupt stop.

Leaning against the wall nearby is Elias. Hanging from one fist, a hooded jacket, and in the other, a closed umbrella.

He spots Kyle, comes alive, pushes away from the wall with a start. "Hey!" Elias greets him at once. "I've been—" His eyes fall upon Jeremy. He draws quiet. "Uh, hey there."

Jeremy looks at him, then slides his hands into his pockets. "Hi," he greets him, reserved suddenly. Then he turns to Kyle. "This a friend of yours?"

Kyle isn't sure what to say, staring at Elias, both relieved and filled with a hundred questions at the sight of him. "Yes," he finally settles on. "A friend."

"Just here to pick him up," says Elias. "Uh, and take him ... back to his house." He seems unsure what to do with the jacket or umbrella suddenly.

Jeremy's eyes grow double when he spots them. "Wait a sec. Are those for Henry? To protect him from the sun?" He gasps and looks at Kyle. He is too quick for comfort. "You ... You really *are* a—!"

"I'm nobody," Kyle cuts him off. "I just have an ... " It is near anguish to utter these next words. "... allergy to sunlight."



Tristan's words, from decades ago.

Sun allergies. Sitting under awnings at the high school. Staring off at the busses as they'd gather at the back. People in the fields, tossing footballs in the sun, walking by with the tops of their heads shining brightly. An allergy to the deadly sun.

Those words are now Kyle's.

"Here you go, buddy," says Elias at once, playing the role of a dutiful friend as he slides the big jacket onto Kyle, sleeve by sleeve, then pops open the umbrella. "We should probably head off quickly before the sun's fully up."

Kyle glances back at Jeremy. "Thanks for everything, Jer."

"It's me who's gonna be thanking you the rest of my life," says Jeremy in awe, taking a step back toward the doors of the clinic. "I'll deal with my dad for you, don't worry. You're one of the good guys, Henry. Don't ever forget that."

Kyle thinks of his mom suddenly. His dad. His brother.

Whatever Layna's phone camera caught last night.

A frenzy of anger, blood, and violence.

Red, red, red.

"Sure," mutters Kyle, then heads off with Elias under the cover of his umbrella.

# 16.

## *Only My Thirst Will Be.*

---

“Wait, she recorded everything?” asks Elias.

“Yeah.” Kyle strikes a note on the piano, filling the house with a ringing, high-pitched D#. “Everything.”

“I wish I was there. I lost you, you were going too fast, and by the time I found you, the cop was there, and—”

“It’s okay.” Kyle strikes another note, then turns it into a halfhearted arpeggiated chord, C minor. “Nothing I can really do anyway.”

“Feels like someone stole your sex tape or something. How violating.” Elias leans against the piano, his ass unintentionally contributing a series of discordant bass notes. “So what’re you gonna do? Try to get the phone from Cade tonight?”

“All I wanted to do was lay low.” Kyle plays another chord. “I wanted to disappear, here in this town, just be like everyone else, going about my day. Or night, in my case.” He hits a deep chord, strokes a few keys, finding a melody. It feels derivative of Bach, reminding him of his brother. “I was just ... Henry.”

“I love listening to you play.”

“Now there’s a video. A crazy pawnshop thief whose ear I probably scarred. Police chief. His son. My boss’s daughter

...” Kyle strikes another chord, then glances at Elias. “You.”

Elias gazes at Kyle, voice turning soft. “Me.”

Kyle drops his hands from the piano. “I feel like it won’t be long before everyone knows. Then people will dig. And they’ll learn my real name. And once they learn that, they’ll find out where I’m from, what happened, and then—”

“Or maybe it’s the best of both worlds,” says Elias. “This weird little town likes to keep its secrets, know what I mean? It isn’t interested in the rest of the world. And if everyone here thinks you’re not a bad guy, that you’re part of the community, what’ll they care who you really are?”

“Elias ...”

“You’re overthinking it.”

“You don’t know my secrets. My real secrets.”

Elias shrugs. “C’mon. How bad could they really be?”

Kyle closes his eyes. Behind them, all he sees is red. It has been a very, very long time since he’s seen the relentless storm of red behind his eyelids, the red that claimed his family, the red he is certain he will never cleanse from his soul, the red that forever keeps his hands dirty.

“I want to tell you why I wish to stop drinking from you,” says Kyle. “The real reason. Do you know what happens to my kind when we drink blood? There’s a dire consequence.”

“What do you mean? What consequence?”

“Every drop I have ... it transforms me more.”

“Huh? Transforms you how?”

“There’s a reason They exist, Elias. The ones people talk about. Bloodsuckers, like that guy called me in the pawnshop. If I keep tasting you, I’ll become that monster I’m trying not to be—one of Them. You will see why people throughout history feared Them. Capital ‘T’, Them. I’m a chained monster, and with your blood, you’re unchaining it, link by link, whether you mean to or not. How’s that feel? To be an accomplice in ... in unleashing a monster? I can feel it already. I ... I feel like I’m someone else when I taste you. Sometimes I’m not careful with you. Haven’t you noticed? I get rougher. Reckless. Greedy ... and it will only get worse.”

Elias takes hold of his hand. “Kyle ...”

Kyle pulls away, stepping back. “Someday, I will take one taste too much, and you won’t recognize me. You may see my face, my eyes, my lips, but I won’t be there. Only my thirst will be. And the next time you go for a kiss, it’ll be a monster you’re kissing, a monster who only kisses with *teeth*, who would sooner drink every last drop from your veins than love you.”

Elias’s eyes never leave Kyle’s.

He doesn’t even seem to draw breath as he listens.

“He warned me about this a long time ago. Tristan. It was our only rule. No blood. And I’ve broken it, disrespected it, abandoned my principles. In the pawnshop, the way I attacked the gunman ... I wonder if maybe I wouldn’t have lost control and done that ... had I not been strengthened by blood.”

The silence at Kyle’s back tells him he just got Elias’s full attention.

Until Elias says: “You really believe all of that shit?”

Kyle turns. “What?”

“And it’s Mr. Pile of Ashes who told you this?”

“He had a name.”

“You’ve told me enough about that guy to give me an idea who he was. How about I propose a different interpretation of his so-called wisdom?” Elias comes up to Kyle’s face. “What if he was *lying* to you?”

Kyle parts his lips.

Then doesn’t speak.

“Amazing,” breathes Elias, studying the look in Kyle’s eyes. “You really never considered it? He had *that* much power over you, you never even questioned his words?”

“Of course I questioned him. All the time. I just ...” Kyle throws his gaze to the floor. He thinks back, recalling all of the different conversations he had with Tristan about blood, about Them, about why he and Tristan had to survive without it.

Could Tristan have been hiding something from him?

Why does it all of a sudden seem so perfectly possible?

“Maybe he was limiting you, too,” says Elias. “Keeping you in a cage. He didn’t want you to realize your full power. Blood isn’t destroying you. It’s what you need. Your body’s telling you that, isn’t it? Your mind’s telling you. Teeth are telling you.”

Elias puts his hand on Kyle’s chest right then.

Kyle grabs his hand at once, eyes snapping to him.

“Don’t deny who you are,” finishes Elias.

The two men stare into each other’s eyes, the silence of the house taking over.

Kyle fights an instinct to defend Tristan, even now, even after everything, to insist that he’d never lie about something so fundamental about their nature, so important. If they needed blood, wouldn’t Tristan have been drinking it himself?

Then Kyle’s mind races into the past like flipping pages of a book, all the way to the cover, combing every moment they spent together. Small moments when Tristan might have been out of sight. Or went on a walk without him. Or took a trip to a neighboring town, then came back strange, different.

Energetic. Moody. Inspired. Aloof.

Could he have been drinking blood behind Kyle’s back? Seeking victims, then hiding them? Tristan was good at hiding things, after all. He was a master of stealth, a thinker, a planner.

But he was also honest, wasn’t he?

Honest in the ways that counted.

His lazy sincerity, his calmness, his misty blue eyes ...

“No,” says Kyle. “He wouldn’t have lied about something like this. I know because I’ve experienced the blood taking me over. Each time I taste it, I’m less myself. I feel it, to my bones, this whole time you and I have been together. I—”

Elias takes hold of Kyle’s face right then and shuts him up with a kiss.

Kyle fights it for half a second, gives in, then finally pushes away. “Elias, stop. I’m not—”

“I don’t care if you get mad at me. I don’t care if I’m trying to compete here with a fucking century-long boner you’ve got for this stupid Tristan. That guy was lying to you. He was lying to you and holding you back. He’s not here. I am.”

Kyle shakes as he stares into Elias’s eyes.

Mom. Dad. Kaleb.

How long has it been since he’s said those names? It used to be his nightly ritual, until he lost the letter, lost the ring, and lost himself to Elias, this man whose true identity he still does not know.

But Elias doesn’t truly know Kyle, either. The truth about his family. What happened to them. If Elias knew, would he be so certain of his opinion that Kyle should drink from his veins?

Would he even stand to be in this house a second longer?

“What I did in that pawnshop ... to that criminal ...” Kyle swallows. “It wasn’t the first time I lost control ... blacked out.”

Elias continues to hold Kyle’s face. “And?”

“I told you my younger brother died.”

Elias’s thumb strokes Kyle’s cheek, voice softening. “Yes?”

“But I didn’t tell you how.” Kyle’s every muscle tightens, to his fingertips, to his legs, even to his heart. “I’m the one ...”

who took his life.”

Elias’s thumb stops.

His eye contact doesn’t break.

He waits for the rest.

“I lost control,” Kyle chokes out. “The day I became what I am. I blacked out. With Tristan, he was there. I ... I drained them dry. Killed them all. My mother. My father. My brother. All of them. When I came to, all around me was carnage. I left my house dressed in blood, their blood. I’m a monster, Elias.”

A silence passes. Elias tilts his head. “You blacked out?”

“Yes.”

“And when you woke up, everything already happened?”

“Yes. Blood, everywhere, like I said.”

Elias purses his lips in thought, squinting. Then his thumb moves again, stroking Kyle’s cheek. “You’re not a monster.”

Kyle’s face wrinkles up, confused by Elias’s response. “Did you not hear anything I said? I murdered my family, Elias.”

“You blacked out. That’s what I heard. You blacked out and can’t say what you actually did.”

Kyle can’t believe his ears. “Seriously, Elias ...? Even now, you’re denying it, what’s in front of you. You are just turning a blind eye to what I’ve done, to what I am.”

“What if Tristan was the one who murdered your family?”

Kyle pulls Elias’s hands off his face at once and steps back. “It was me, Elias! Open your eyes and see what I am!



See what I'm capable of! I'm not drinking another drop of your blood. It fucking ends today, right now."

"I think you're a victim of him, too."

"How are you so convinced that Tristan is the mastermind here??" Rage bubbles up inside of Kyle. "I just told you my ... my darkest secret, a secret I haven't told anyone, ever, and—"

"I know. It must've taken a lot of courage, and that's really fucking great, Kyle, I'm proud of you for that. But let's be even more brave." Elias brings his hands to Kyle's shoulders, his eyes focused. "Think about the dozens of nights you drank from me. All of that blood, and you didn't black out once. All of that blood, and you haven't lost control. Think about it."

"It has to stop!" shouts Kyle.

"And then what? If you stop drinking, you'll end up in the desert once more waiting for the sun to rise. No ... I won't let that happen again, Kyle Bentley Amos." His eyes burn. "Didn't I say people need protecting from themselves, too? This is me protecting you, in the best way I know. This is me tying up your hands and ankles again for your own good."

Kyle feels Elias right then.

A connection to his heart, his passions, his feelings.

There is a familiar, electrical heat that surges up from a place deep down, like a dark fire swelling with insatiable need, feverish and beautiful.

Kyle's eyes narrow. "This is just you wanting to get off."

Elias makes a face. "Huh?"

“You’re addicted to being bitten, maybe even more than I am addicted to your taste.”

“The fuck?”

“And now I’m cutting off your supply and you’re mad.”

“That’s not what’s going on,” says Elias. “I’m trying to save you.”

“You sure about that?” Kyle takes hold of Elias’s hand right then and brings it up to his mouth, bares his teeth.

Elias watches, lips parted.

Kyle hears Elias’s heart pick up into a gallop.

He hears it just like Tristan could.

Elias’s pulse, as clear as music.

“Tell me how badly you want this,” says Kyle, teeth held over Elias’s palm, barely scraping the skin, teasing him. “Tell me you’re not throbbing in your pants right now, Elias. Hard as stone. Desperate for my teeth to sink in, to make you bleed.”

“This is cruel,” whispers Elias.

“It’s honest. Isn’t this what you’re wanting more of? Want us to be *really* honest with each other?” Kyle presses his teeth upon Elias’s palm, not yet biting. “Want to see how much of a monster I can really be? Say it. Tell me to bite.” He speaks with his teeth against Elias’s skin, the meat of his palm tempting.

Elias is out of breath, but even still, he tries to maintain his composure, pretending to be calm, forcing his face to comply.

Then he gives in. “Fine, Kyle. It turns me on. You win.”

Kyle drops his hand. “I don’t want to win, Elias. I’m trying to make a point.”

“So am I.”

“That I’m nothing without blood?”

“You’ll never hurt me, Kyle.”

“You don’t know that. You don’t know anything. The next time I lose control, it won’t matter what you believe, because you’ll be dead.”

The tension between them feels so tight, Kyle can hardly stand it. As the men stare off, it becomes increasingly clear to Kyle that neither of them is willing to relent. He can feel the unbending steel of Elias’s emotion, resisting, determined.

Then Elias sighs. “I should go for a walk.”

Kyle lifts an eyebrow. “What?”

“You have a lot on your mind. The video. And whether you never want to drink my blood or not, whether you want to hide in this town and fade into unremarkable dullness and ignore the amazing person you are, no matter, the truth is in a video now, and it’s bothering you. I should be more understanding. Here I went again, being my intense, pushy self. I wish you’d believe that I wasn’t here just for your teeth.” Elias turns away, gives a nod at the couch. “Sun’s up. You need rest, you’ve had a rough night. I’ll go for a walk. I could use a little sun, no offense.”

“Elias ...”

“I’m such a hypocrite, right?” Elias laughs suddenly. “I’m the one who’s been escaping who I am since the day we met. And here I am, arguing with you, telling you to be what you are and drink me like a glass of sangria.” His smile fades. “Maybe you’re right not to listen to the words of some guy who can’t even be fully honest with you. What do I know? I’ve got nothing on a century of Tristan’s superior rulebooks and mind dominance. Sorry,” he quickly adds, lifting a hand, “I won’t get ugly, I don’t know him and hate to speak ill of the dead. It’s tacky.”

Kyle comes up to him, nearly blocking the door. “This has nothing to do with Tristan. This was completely my decision.”

“Alright. And it’s my decision to not believe a word he said to you and, instead, believe what I see with my eyes. You are not a monster.”

“Elias, I’m warning you ...”

“You never were and never will be. I think I’ll come back in a few hours, if that’s fine. I’m not done with you quite yet, Kyle Amos.” He rests his hand on the doorknob. “Hey, better take a step back, cutie. The sunlight’s aimed this way. See? I still care about you, even when you hate me.” Elias smirks. “You look sexy when you pout. God, I wish you’d bite me right now.”

Kyle bows his head, frustrated. Then he surrenders, takes a step to the side, says nothing more.

Elias cracks open the door just enough to slip out. Sunlight spills in like white-hot lava as Elias glances back at Kyle, as if to give him one last chance to say something. He doesn’t.

But just as the door closes, Kyle reconsiders, takes a step forward and says, “Elias?” The name comes too late. He’s left standing in front of the door, listening to Elias crunching across the rocks and dirt to the street, then away. Kyle relocates to the kitchen where the window faces the right direction to see Elias, but the sun is too bright, and he can’t pull the curtain.

Kyle sits on the couch in silence, stares ahead at the piano, and wonders what the hell went wrong. He still wears the jacket Elias brought to the clinic. Smells like him. “It’s for the best,” he tells himself. “For both of us.” He curls up on his side, closes his eyes.

It’s dark when he opens them again.

He sits up at once. Sometime after sundown. The house is quiet and still. “Elias?” he calls out.

No answer.

Kyle checks the kitchen, the bedroom, the bathroom. He looks out from the back patio, then heads to the front door. He stands on the end of the driveway and peers down the road.

Elias is still gone.

He heads back inside and fishes his phone out of a basket of their crap they leave at the end of the kitchen counter. No calls or texts. He drums his fingers on the counter, bothered. Then after flipping a coin in his hand, he decides to send a message.

> Hey. I’m sorry about earlier. Where are you? I just woke up. Let’s talk.

After sending it, he sets his phone down on the counter, then waits for a reply.

Four minutes later, he's still waiting.

Nine minutes, he's pacing the kitchen, still waiting.

It's thirteen minutes later that he opens his phone back up to send another text—only to see a notification that the first was unable to be received.

Kyle stares at the words on his screen, irritated.

Did Elias turn his phone off? Or is it dead? Thrown into a chasm? Kyle grinds his teeth as he rereads the notification over and over. Two more attempts to send the same message, and two more times they fail to deliver. He tries calling instead. The call fails without answer, not even sent to voicemail.

Kyle throws on clothes without bothering to shower and heads out, mind racing, anxious. There is enough time before his shift, so he heads out to the desert, making the long trek to their special spot.

Elias isn't there. Only dust, only stone.

Kyle doubles back, on a mission. Once within range, he pulls out his phone and checks it again. No messages. He heads the other way down the curving back road by the trailer park, taking the path he remembers to Elias's house. It takes him a while to find the right street, seeing as he was only there once, wasn't conscious when he arrived, and the departure was swift and chaotic. He recognizes the house by its appearance from behind, the fence they hopped, the window they clambered out of. Coming around to the front, he spots a truck,

Elias's, he has to assume, as he's never seen it while conscious.

Kyle peers through the front window. All dark inside. He closes his eyes and attempts to use some kind of extrasensory strength to hear or detect anything inside.

No presence. No emotion. Nothing.

"He's fine," Kyle tells himself, heading to the bar from the wrong end of town. "He's strong. He can take care of himself. He's not afraid of anything, remember? Not even you."

Did Kyle even use his talent efficiently at Elias's house? His extrasensory power seems so exact and focused at times, like when he is having sex with Elias and has his teeth sunk into him. Or when a gun is pointed at his face by a madman in a pawnshop, apparently. In other times, he wields his talent like a slippery toy, falling out of his hands, sliding this way or that way, entirely unreliable.

How did Tristan hone his Lull? How can someone practice something they're not even sure how to use? No one's left to teach Kyle anything anymore. He's completely on his own.

Even more so now without Elias by his side.

"Why did I say those things?" Kyle blurts out. "Why did I upset him like that? I should've been more patient. I should've been more understanding. He cares about me. He ..."

Elias may be the only person in the world who truly knows Kyle, in a way no one else has, in a way no one else ever will.

Maybe even more than Tristan ever did.

“What have I done ...?”

Kyle stops at the park on the way to the bar, his eyes falling on the bench at which he and Elias sat during a few of their late night walks. He grips the side of a tree, bracing himself, and lowers his head, trying to catch his breath. Did he ruin things with Elias? Was it that easy, to end what they had?

Or did something terrible happen?

Something unthinkable?

Heart drumming with dread, stomach flipping over and over inside of him, he pulls out his phone and stares at it, at the undeliverable texts, the failed calls.

He can't shake the feeling.

Something is very, very wrong.

When he passes in front of the market, he finds Ricardo at the door, locking up. Upon seeing Kyle, Ricardo freezes, terror in his eyes. Kyle stops, alarmed by the strange reaction. Ricardo flinches away in fear, drops his keys, grabs them right back up, then runs off without a word.

Kyle stares after him. “The fuck ...?”

He's still thinking about the weird encounter with Ricardo when he comes in through the back door of the bar. Leland is sitting on an overturned bucket, staring at his phone, eyes wide, appearing tense. Deciding not to startle yet another person who looks unusually on edge, Kyle heads out front, ready to clock in and relieve Becks from her shift, despite



feeling anything but ready to face a night of work, considering all that's on his mind.

What he finds instead is a dozen people huddled at the bar, Cade and Becks among them, all eyes glued to a single phone, watching a video.

The sound from that video rings in Kyle's ears like a dark and terrible joke.

Shouting. Scuffling. A booming, threatening voice.

Glass shattering.

That's when it hits Kyle, what they're watching.

Straight in the gut, taking away all his breath.

"Sorry!" cries out Jeremy, who appears from the back of the crowd, hidden, rushing up to Kyle. "I'm so sorry! I'm so, so sorry. I thought she didn't do it, I swear, but ... but then ..."

Cade, Becks, and the others look up from the phone.

Their eyes fill with fear, seeing Kyle.

"Layna," says Jeremy, nearly in tears. "She ... She posted it online ... on her page. She secretly posted it, the video, before her mom got her phone ... the video from last night."

Of all the terrified eyes on him right now, it's Cade's that Kyle focuses on, Cade's that penetrate him the deepest.

Cade slowly lifts up the phone, gives it a reluctant wiggle. "Got 889,901 views, give or take," she says, voice so small, it's nearly gone. "Looks like you've gone viral." She shifts her eyes, adds: "... Kyle."

# 17.

## *You're Fucking Kidding Me.*

—•—

Kyle sits in a chair in the middle of Cade's office. There's a cup of coffee on the desk in front of him he hasn't touched yet, a cup Cade brought him an hour ago. It's cold now.

He can't move.

Is he even breathing?

The door opens from behind, Cade slips in. "Sorry," she sighs, "needed to get a few things settled, all done, everyone's heads are still on their shoulders. Mostly." She comes up to the desk, face set into a semi-permanent grimace. "You holding up? Need more time alone? You don't have to work tonight. Becks already said she's got nothing going on, she can stay late."

"No, it's fine," recites Kyle automatically, starting to rise. "I can still work. I'll just ... I'll ..."

Then his brain shuts down again, his words gone.

He drops back into the chair, staring blankly ahead.

The video was taken down. But not before a countless sum of people snatched it and uploaded it to their own pages, and from those, countless other shares and postings, on and on.

Thirty minutes ago, Jeremy reported that the total number of views had surpassed one and a half million.

No telling what it is now.

“So ...” Cade sits on the edge of the desk. “In the video, in *that* video ... you said your name was Kyle. Jer said you made it up. That true?”

Kyle opens his mouth.

Brain still not working. He closes it again.

“I’ll be honest,” says Cade, “the bar is a bit crazy right now. Lot of people out there. Some are ... uh, concerned. Others are curious. I’m not sure yet whether this is great for my business or totally crippling, jury’s still out, but at least Chief Rojas is here doing his best to crowd manage. I don’t care whether you want to be called Henry or Kyle or something else entirely. I’m definitely not calling you ‘bloodsucker’. What an asshole thing for that guy to say.”

Everyone even knows the conversation, each word that was shared. It’s all out there. “I don’t know if I can face everyone.”

Cade shrugs. “Then don’t. You can stay in here all night. Until every last one of those nosy people out there go home.” A doleful sigh whistles through her lips. Then: “I’m so sorry.”

Kyle stirs. “What for?”

“My daughter. It’s ... This is all ...” Cade brings her hands to her face, rubbing it vigorously. “I can’t believe she uploaded that. She adores you. Why would she betray your trust?? She’s grounded for the rest of the school year. Rest of her *life*.”

“No.” Kyle barely has the energy. “It’s not her fault.”

“Like hell it’s not her fault. Kids these days, obsessed with followers and likes and attention ... It blinds them.”

“I won’t blame her for this.” Kyle stares at the cold cup of coffee. “It’s on me. I am what I am. I did what I did. And I’m not going to blame anyone for my secrets getting out. It ... was bound to happen someday.”

Cade studies him for a while. Then: “So ... if I may, um ... if I may be so bold ... can I ask ... what *are* you ... exactly?”

Kyle answers in a set of soft and icily spoken words. “I’m exactly what you think I am.”

Cade pauses. “A kind of person who ... drinks blood ...?”

“Sure, that.”

“I assume it’s also why you only work the night shifts.”

“Yep.”

“And why you wouldn’t come to Layna’s sixteenth birthday party. The real reason. Because it was a Sunday afternoon.”

“Bingo.”

“And now, it’s ...” Her voice softens, eyes turning sensitive. “It’s come out, your innermost secret. And you’re here. And ... you’ve *been* here. Living among us. No one’s been harmed. You aren’t *eating* anyone, if I can be so crass as to word it that way.”

“Be as crass as you like. Word it however.”

“My point is that you’re not some evil predator, obviously. You’re not bad. You protected Jeremy. Stopped a criminal.”

“Yeah, with my face.”

“How did that feel, by the way? Did it hurt? The bullet ... the gun really did fire, right? Couldn’t quite tell from the video. The gun fired and ... and you ...” She lets out a jagged sigh of amazement. “You aren’t anything like I’d expect. At all. Then again, what *did* I expect?” she suddenly asks, spreading her hands, her bracelets jangling loose. “What do we know about any of it other than from fiction? Movies? You’re no Dracula. You don’t even have fangs.” She reconsiders. “Do you?”

He bows his head. “Everyone’s going to find out.”

“Well, of course we can’t stop people seeing the video now, but, I mean ... you *do* understand what people are like, right?”

He turns to her. “What do you mean?”

Cade pauses, eyes wide. “Haven’t you read the comments? The actual reactions to the video?”

Kyle squints at her, lost.

Cade purses her lips, then slowly nods. “Ah,” she says with a click of her tongue. “You haven’t. Okay. That explains it.”

“Why? What are they saying?”

After a second’s hesitation, she pulls out her phone, thumbs through it, brings up one of the postings, then hands it to Kyle. He glances at the top few comments, which seem to be general exclamations of surprise, disbelief, the expected reactions.

Then he scrolls farther down. Reads. His face changes. He scrolls down more, reads more. “The fuck ...?” he mumbles.

“Yeah, people are shitheads,” she says. “See? Maybe it’s not as bad as it looks.”

Kyle keeps scrolling through them, jaw slackening.

> Fake AF, lol. #fake

> Obvious clickbait, bullet didnt even fire, look at 3:22 u can tell its fake, whos falling for this???

> Kyle guy is hot, I’d tap that tbh. But vid def edited

> wat do u think they used for the blood, bet it tastes like cherry lmao id lick that up too

> “anyone who’s no one can be deadly” omfg... im on the hoodie guy’s side, dude who wrote this script?

> I want 2 sit on Kyle’s face, he has a hot nose.

Kyle brings a hand to his nose. “What the hell ...?”

“People are natural skeptics. I’d warn you about scrolling too far, but it gets kinda entertaining. My personal favorite is the Team Kyle hashtag.” She peers at him, winces. “Sorry, too soon for jokes, huh?”

“They think it’s fake.” Kyle lowers the phone to his lap, his mouth agape. “They think it’s all ... just a ... a grab for clicks.”

“Isn’t everything? Even articles with real news, they have a headline that’s, like, some out-of-context bullshit, clicky titles.” She takes the phone from Kyle’s hand before he drops it. “Hey, if it’s any comfort, the only people taking the video seriously are right here in this bar, this town. People who

know you, who know Jeremy and the chief. People who know it makes no sense for you guys to make up all of this.” She tilts her head, her tight braids dancing to the side. “But Chief Rojas is addressing it as best as he can right now. He’s answering questions and telling people not to worry, that the video was misleading, that it isn’t what everyone thinks. You don’t even have to worry.”

Kyle looks at her. “Wait. He’s telling people it isn’t real?”

“He thinks it’s better. Keep it all locked down, not let it get out. Wouldn’t that be better for everyone? Yourself included?”

Kyle blinks. He can’t help but think of Elias’s words, all of the things he said before walking out the door. “I ... guess so.”

“Trust the chief. He’s kept this town safe for ages, just like his father did before him. The mayor, the lazy ass he is, didn’t bother to come out of his house for this. Literally talked to the chief on the phone and told him to deal with it, bury it, nip it in the bud. Mayor’s probably in his bed right now, snoring. Are you okay?” she asks suddenly. “You look pale.”

“I’m ...” Kyle rubs his eyes, then leans forward, face half-buried in his hands. He has no answer.

He could really use Elias by his side right now.

The door cracks open. Leland’s face pops in. “Cade, we’re out of cheese sauce for the queso, do you—Oh, hi, Henry!” He freezes. “Or Kyle? Do I call you Kyle now? I’m confused.”

Cade puts a hand on Kyle’s shoulder, patting. “Just chop up tomatoes, onions, japaleños, throw together a salsa with

what you've got, serve that instead," she says. "Everything else fine?"

"Madness," answers Leland, his big blue eyes wide. Then he leaves, door shutting fast, muffling the noise of the bar.

Cade's phone buzzes on the desk. She comes around, peers down at it, then shakes her head. "Layna. Apologizing. Again. Thinks I really am gonna ground her for life. I just might, even though you say not to blame her. If it wasn't for her, we would not even be in this situation."

Kyle lifts his face from his hands. "On the other hand, if it weren't for this situation, I'd still be in hiding. Like I've been for twenty-seven years."

"Twenty-seven years ...?" Cade's eyes grow, as if it all just now occurs to her. "How old *are* you, exactly?"

"If I wasn't changed, and I survived, I'd be forty-four years old right now."

"Really? Forty-four?" She lifts her eyebrows, glances off in wonder. "I'm forty-three. We're about the same age. Did you realize that? Except you look like you're twenty-nothing."

Kyle tries to smile, then ends up staring at the cup of cold coffee in front of him again. He feels like he's being punished.

"Does it bother you?" asks Cade.

Kyle looks up. "What?"

"That Chief Rojas wants to cover it all up? He wanted me to talk to you, to get you onboard with denying it all."

"He did? But how? How do we possibly explain me leaping onto the criminal and nearly biting off his ear?"



“Temporary lapse in sanity?” offers Cade.

“I licked blood. Off of his face, Cade. And his body.”

“So you bathe in the blood of your enemies. Big deal.”

“I’m being serious. How does Chief Rojas hope to cover up any of this? He can’t possibly think everyone’s *that* gullible.”

Cade sighs. “There’s no telling what he’s saying to people out there. Maybe no one’s even asking the big things. I think if we just trust his game plan, parrot whatever he’s come up with to say, minimize all the backlash ...”

Kyle is out of the chair suddenly. “Then I’m right back into hiding.”

“What?”

He stands in front of a shelf lined with framed photos. One of them is Cade and her daughter Layna on the beach, both of them in sunglasses and matching bikinis. They look like they’ve been caught in laughter the moment the photo was taken, sun beaming behind them over the water.

He considers the last time he was under the sun.

And why.

Was Elias right? About everything?

“There’s a reason this happened,” says Kyle. “A reason that video got posted. A reason everyone out there’s talking. Do you expect me to just lie to everyone again, go back into hiding?”

“Oh, Henry, please, I didn’t mean it in a bad way, I—”

“Kyle.” He speaks softer. “Kyle Amos ... my real name.”

Tears fill her eyes. “Kyle Amos? Beautiful name. Why am I so emotional all of a sudden?” She lets out a laugh, wipes a few tears out of her eyes. “I knew there was something special about you, Henry—sorry, *Kyle*. Gonna take me a little bit. Yeah,” she decides with an abrupt nod, “Kyle fits you better. Never looked like a Henry Rosenberg to me.” Kyle takes a box of tissues from off a nearby filing cabinet, extends it to her. Cade plucks one out with a thankful smile, wipes her eyes, then crumples it up and stares down at it. “Kyle ... I ... I think I need to confess something to you.”

Kyle sets the box of tissues down. “Confess what?”

“You’re not the only one with ... a secret.” She lets out a sudden breath, shuts her eyes. “Kyle, I’m ... I’m telling you this because I trust you. I’ve only known you half a year, I trust you more than most of my friends. That says something. You’re probably feeling very exposed right now. What better way to help you than to expose myself, too?”

“Cade ...”

She comes forth and takes hold of his right hand, enclosing it within hers, then shuts her eyes. “May your burdens prove smaller than they feel. May your path prove clearer than it seems. May your soul be strong, your bones be sturdy, and your heart be willing to see beauty in things big, tall, tiny and small, and nothing at all.” She opens her eyes. “Gran had a gift. I was the only soul she told before she died.”

“A gift?”

“I’m not going to call it anything. I’ll just be straight with you. I’ve seen things. I’ve seen her say things, and I’ve seen her do things, and I’ve smelled more aromas of incense than I care to count and learned way too many names of herbs and flowers and roots.” She squeezes Kyle’s hand between her own. “I used to think she passed the gift on to me, but I’m not so sure. She died too soon. She told me nothing. I ... I know nothing. I’ve heard it skips generations sometimes. My mother didn’t do any sort of strange things. What if it skipped me, too? What if my daughter wakes up levitating one night in her sleep? Or visions plague her? Or she accidentally sets the house on fire? I’ve seen and heard so much, Kyle, my whole life. I know I act fearless, but I’m so afraid, every day. Do you think I’m crazy? Do you think I’m crazy and Gran was just a crazy lady and I’m just losing my damned mind?”

Kyle slips his hand out from between hers and brings Cade in for a hug. The two remain embraced for some time, neither saying a word, only the muffled noise of the bar is heard.

“I’ve seen things, too,” says Kyle.

“You have?”

“I don’t think you’re crazy. Not even a little. Ever since I became what I am, I’ve accepted just about anything is possible. Magic. Visions. Witchcraft. Ghosts. If you believe your gran had a gift, I’ll believe it, too.”

“Thank you.” The two of them separate. “I didn’t mean to make this all about me.”

“Actually, I very much appreciate taking the spotlight off.” Kyle lets out a sick little laugh, shakes his head. “I feel

... I feel a bit better suddenly. Maybe your gran's words really are some kind of magic. Did you know ...” He shifts uncomfortably, then meets her eyes. “Did you know, that day you took my hand in your office, the first time you recited those words ... I was ... I was planning to head out to the desert and put an end to it all?”

Cade brings a hand to her mouth in surprise, another wave of tears coming.

“Someone came out, found me, interrupted my whole plan. Who's to say your gran's words weren't responsible for that incredibly unlikely act of fate?” Kyle grabs the box of tissues and extends them. Cade takes another. “I really appreciate you sharing your secret with me. It stays with me, alright? I might not have had the luxury of keeping mine, but I'll be damned if you're robbed of the same.”

Cade wipes her eyes, balls up the second tissue to join the first, then nods. “That's sweet of you, Kyle.”

He smiles. “Don't sweat it.”

She seems to think of something, then squints. “Who came out and found you in the desert, by the way?”

Kyle's smile fades.

The door opens right then, revealing Leland again. “Sorry, but I'm all outta onions now, and the chief, phew, he's looking pretty stressed out. He's demanding to speak with—”

“Don't worry,” says Cade. “I'll deal with him.”

Suddenly Leland is bumped out of the way, and the chief himself appears. “Mr. Rosenberg,” he says with a growl,

pulling the door shut behind him. “I want you to get your ass out there and tell everyone the whole thing was a hoax.”

Cade steps forward. “Chief ...”

“Tried telling them in ten different ways,” he goes on, “but they don’t buy any one of them. I’ve even got everyone’s lips locked at the station, no one saying a word about the burglar we’re holding there, but word’s getting out anyway, bastards, and that burglar won’t shut the hell up. He’s got a lot to say. Now, everyone out there wants explanations, and I—”

“Juan, please,” Cade urges, coming right up to him. “Kyle just needs time, and I—”

“Kyle? So that’s his name now?” The chief turns to Kyle. “I swear, if I wasn’t in uniform right now, I’d pop a hole in you and drink all your damned blood myself, just to spite you.”

“Gross,” sings Leland in quiet, wide-eyed fascination.

Kyle glances at the photo of Cade and Layna at the beach one more time, moved by them, then faces the chief. “Actually, I think I should tell them the truth.”

The chief snorts. “Like hell you will.”

“I owe it to them. And to myself. I ... can’t keep lying.”

His eyes darken. “Kyle ...”

“I need to be myself or else nothing at all. You don’t know what it’s been like for me, hiding, suffering in silence, acting like ...” He glances at Cade. “... like nothing’s wrong.”

“My town didn’t ask you to move into it,” the chief states. “You brought your own damned self here, and all the

craziness, too, including that criminal. Yeah, I watched the video,” he adds with a snarl, “what he said, about your kind wanting to kill his wife and child, innocent angels, all that. So did everyone else. It’s all out there and everyone’s got an opinion about it. For all we know, you’re the reason he came here at all.”

“Chief, you can’t know that,” breathes Cade from behind.

“Now everyone’s talking about the damned end days,” he carries on, “praying to God, chugging beer like holy water out there. Sylvia brought a cross, for fuck’s sake. And now you want to entertain the idea of making them even *more* crazy?”

Kyle shakes his head. “No. The opposite, actually. I feel like I can fix this with the truth. They don’t want to be lied to. That’s what they’re saying. I need to come clean and—”

“You need to put an end to this,” he cuts him off.

“That’s exactly what I intend to do.” Kyle’s eyes harden. “With the truth.” He heads toward the door.

The chief grabs hold of Kyle’s arm right then.

Kyle stops and turns to him.

When the men lock eyes, Kyle sees a flicker of true fear in Juan Rojas. At once, a connection is made, and Kyle feels all of the chief’s anxiety he’s been enduring all night, how his nerves are all tightened and frayed, like worn yarn. He feels the cold wave of desperation coursing through him, too, icy, restless.

What hurts the worst is that the chief truly believes he can be harmed if he is too forceful with Kyle. He knows what Kyle is capable of—thanks to that video. He must exercise caution.

The chief also resents having to be so cautious. He isn't even thinking about his gratitude for Jeremy still being alive. In a dark corner of Juan's heart, he wishes Kyle was just gone.

"Please," says the chief, and for once, his tone is that of a human being talking to another. "I want you to think about it. Really think about it. Everyone out there, everyone saw what happened, heard what was said. And they have many thoughts, many opinions ... but mostly fear. Fine, you think you're noble, somewhere down in your heart, you want to do good. But think about what you invite upon this town by letting the truth out there, Kyle, you better think long and hard. I know you believe you're one of the good ones. But ..." His voice trembles. "What if that isn't the case with others? What if you're sending out a smoke signal for every kind of *bad* to come to our town? Hasn't that occurred to you, or are you still so selfish, you'd risk all the peaceful lives of these people just so you can—what?—be more honest? Who the hell lives honestly? You wanna know how many goddamned secrets are out there in that bar right now? How many people live lies, even when they look happy just to have a pint of beer in their hand? Open your eyes, Kyle, we're all fucking liars."

Leland watches them, eyes wide, breath held.

Cade lingers at her desk, balled up tissue held at her face, uncertain and quiet.

As Kyle surveys the energy in this room, he wonders if the police chief is right. He considers if he should listen and see it his way. Crawl back into a hole, deep in the shadows, away from the scrutiny of others, away from human beings.

Away from the light.

“If another one of you shows up,” says the chief, his words gaining confidence, “he could be someone who would *not* have protected my son. He would have rather sucked the blood right out of my son’s neck, every last drop, leaving just bones. That what you want for my boy? For my Jeremy?”

Kyle closes his eyes. His jaw is clenched so tight, his teeth feel like they’re shaking. Why does every decision feel wrong? Why does he both respect and despise the words coming out of the police chief’s mouth right now?

“I believe we ...” Kyle stops, takes a breath, and faces the chief. “I believe we may be surprised with what’s out there. I’m not convinced we’re all evil. The first one I met, he despised violence outright. He was a little peculiar, sure, kind of odd ... but wouldn’t *you* be if you were around for a hundred years with no friends?”

“The hell you talking about? There *are* more of you?”

“He’s the only other one I’ve ever known. He’s gone now, walked into the morning sun, couldn’t bear another moment of existence. That could be me right now. I ... I don’t want to feel that way ever again.” He glances at the chief one last time, pain in his eyes. “That’s why I have to do this.”

The moment the chief prepares to growl something back at Kyle, Cade steps forward. “I get you, Kyle,” she hurriedly says. “I know what you want to do. And ... I want to support you.”

The chief spins on her. “Cadence!”

“I’m just reminding you, you can take all the time you need before opening that door. Gather your thoughts. Think it



all through. Once you go out there and say what you've gotta say, well, there's sure as shit no turning back." She meets his eyes. "So ... boss to employee ... friend to friend ... be absolutely sure you know what you want to do. You can hide in here as long as you need before you open that door."

Kyle and Cade exchange a long and meaningful look that speaks volumes of what they can't say out loud in front of their present company.

Finally, he smiles. "Thanks, Cade, but ... I think I've been hiding behind doors long enough."

The chief trembles, furious.

Leland stares at Kyle in wonder, wringing his hands.

Cade, after a moment's hesitation, finally nods. "Well then. What else can we say?" She steps back. "Go get 'em, tiger."

Kyle gives one last look at her, then the police chief, who looks like he's on the verge of either drawing his gun, crying, or shitting his pants, possibly all three. But the chief mercifully does none of those things as Kyle faces the door, takes a breath, then pulls it open to brave the people of Nowhere.

He quickly realizes Cade was being kind about the crowd. It isn't just a lot of people. It's damned near everyone in town. Even Ricardo, who was spooked from the sight of him on the street, stands near the jukebox with some friends, the music drowned out by the noise. Even the curly-haired sisters who run the old bakery are here, and the bushy-haired teenager who flips burgers down the street. The café owner who cries into

his drinks when things go bad with his wife—as well as his wife. A dozen people at the booths, noisily gossiping away. And many more at the bar, where Becks doles out drink after drink.

It takes about eleven seconds before everyone realizes who just stepped out of the office. Everything grows still and quiet. In the background, the music from the jukebox is the only thing that can be heard, playing “Sympathy for the Devil”.

Kyle hasn’t had this much attention his whole life. Not a single moment has been spent in any semblance of a spotlight.

And now here he stands, feeling like a small thing before a mountain of deadly challenges.

To all of that, Kyle lifts a small hand, smiles at the room, and says, “Hi.”

No one responds back.

Fourteen excruciating seconds later, the song comes to an end, and even the jukebox decides to join the rest of the crowd with the sheer, impregnable silence.

“You all have questions,” states Kyle, still feeling small. He tries to sound more confident. It doesn’t work. “I know. I want to, uh, answer them. T-To put you at ease. As best as I can.” Kyle awkwardly adjusts his weight from one leg to the other. The floor groans in response. “I guess all I’ll say is ...”

His eyes meet the police chief’s—those stern, unblinking eyes. Next to him, an anxious Cade, still clutching her balled-up tissues full of tears, and a wide-eyed Leland, who doesn’t seem able to close his mouth.

Even now, it isn't too late. Kyle can still change his mind. Before he says another word, he can take the imaginary shovel Chief Rojas is offering with his stony stare and bury the truth with the cold, heavy dirt of lies.

But then Kyle thinks of Tristan. What he might be. What he might not be. Elias and all the words he said before he went and disappeared. About truth. Embracing what he is.

What's right?

What's wrong?

Why is everything less clear than it's ever been?

Kyle still isn't sure whether it's the right thing to do when he faces the room at last, clears his throat, and, with little to no confidence, states: "The rumors are true. What you saw is real. The whole video, every second, and likely most of the bizarre things you're probably thinking about me right now." He puts on his best smile. It's strained and hopeless. "Any questions?"

# 18.

## *The Secret.*

---

Someone sneezes near the bar, squeaks, “Excuse me,” eyes wide as they remain on Kyle, waiting for more. Someone else at a table leans forward, their chair squeaking. No one else speaks.

“All I want to do is live a normal life,” explains Kyle. “Well, as normal as I can manage, considering what I am. I may not be at your afternoon barbecues, both because I can’t be out in the sun and don’t really eat much. But I’m still me. The same me I was before. Chief Rojas, he means the best for you, for all of you, and he wants to protect you. That’s why he preferred I not tell you the truth. I don’t believe he’s wrong in wanting that.” Kyle glances at the chief, whose stony eyes reflect little, then back to the crowd. “You all saw the video. The way I behaved in it ... that was a moment of weakness. And you should know that I’ve sworn off blood.” Kyle swallows, fighting back sudden thoughts of Elias, as if he’s in this room right now, listening, scowling, frustrated. “I won’t drink another drop of it.”

Someone nearby wrinkles up her face. Someone else lets out a breath that sounds like a shudder. The silence persists.

“Other than that, I’m ... I’m really just like any of you, just getting by, day to day. I just have a few peculiarities. Such as my allergy to the sun. And a strange diet. Which I’m suppressing,” he quickly reiterates. “And .... if you’ll be

gracious enough to continue having me as a resident here ... I only ask one thing: that we keep this a secret. Just us, here in Nowhere. I don't care what the rest of the world thinks. But you guys ... you deserve to know me, the real me, and see that I'm not someone to fear."

The silence continues to swell in the room.

Daunting. Enduring. Painstaking.

He realizes, perhaps belatedly, that this was a great, terrible mistake. He should have listened to the police chief.

Is it too late to backpedal and say he's kidding?

"What's it taste like? The blood?" asks a woman at the bar, quietly, wincing, sickened yet curious.

The lady sitting next to her rolls her eyes and elbows her. "Haven't you ever bitten your own tongue? The hell do you think it tastes like? Blood tastes like blood."

"I know!" she spits back. "But what if, to him, it tastes—"

"So your name's Kyle now?" asks the local barber, cutting off the women and tossing a fry into his mouth, squinting.

Kyle nods. "Yes. Kyle."

"So there's no Henry?" asks someone else.

"Nope."

"And we're supposed to believe you won't bite none of us?" asks one of the curly-haired sisters from the bakery. "Not to be rude or anything, but hasn't it crossed your mind ever? Do you *want* to bite any of us?"

"I do not," states Kyle.

“I’m more curious about the sunlight allergy thing you just said,” the other sister adds. “Are you for real? You really can’t go out into the daylight without—”

“But you almost ate the burglar!” shouts a man, rising from his chair so suddenly, he knocks a basket of fries off the table by accident, much to the chagrin of his wife, who sighs at the fries now on the floor, mourning them. “I know he wasn’t a good man, but what if you get hungry someday and eat one of us?”

“He isn’t *eating* anyone, you moron,” mumbles a woman nearby, a teacher from the school. “Use the right words. He *bit* him, then licked up the blood.” She reconsiders. “That doesn’t sound much better, actually.”

“Have you been eyeing us around town?” asks someone.

“Are there more of you out there?” asks someone else.

“Are the hoodie guy’s wife and child okay, do you know? What was he talking about? Are you holding them hostage?”

“I’d like to know how he made the bullet disappear,” cuts in a woman from one of the booths, to which her friend scoffs and says, “Damn it, Laurie, the bullet didn’t disappear, the gun fired a blank, I told you.” “No, it didn’t, I have eyes,” the other retorted, annoyed, “and I know what I saw!”

The room swells with more questions and remarks as every person gives their opinion, asks questions, makes a point about the video, or argues with someone else. At first, Kyle tries to calm them down, but soon finds it’s no use, everyone deciding they’d rather debate it with each other than listen to

him. After a while, he sighs and leans against the wall, defeated, helpless. None of this seems productive or good.

“What are we doing??” someone’s voice booms from one of the barstools.

The room grows quiet. Kyle looks.

It’s Jeremy, who has climbed up to the top of a stool, his short, spiky bleached hair like white fire under the bar lighting.

“I was the one who was there,” he says. “In the flesh. Me, with a gun at my head, in the headlock of that madman. Have we forgotten the video already? Did you even see it, or are you just going off what someone else said?”

“Son ...” comes the police chief, stepping forward.

But Jeremy carries on. “This man saved my life!”

Eyes in the room shift between Kyle and Jeremy, silent, contemplative, anxious, curious.

“Don’t nitpick him to death,” says Jeremy. “Just take him at his word. I don’t want to see this *hero* rushed out of town because you guys are afraid of him. It isn’t us who should be afraid. It’s assholes like that guy who put a gun to my head who should be trembling in their fucking boots.”

“Goddamn it, Jer, your language,” mumbles the chief.

“No one will mess with us now. Don’t you see that? No one! And if they do, Kyle’s here to protect us. Kyle is one of us.” Jeremy rides the high of his barstool soapbox, everyone’s attention in his palms. “I don’t care what he is. Or what he eats, even if he does want some blood from time to time. Who

cares what his name is? He's the guy who saved my life, that's what he is. Nothing else matters."

Kyle shrinks against the wall as more and more eyes are upon him, reconsidering everything, a new wave of curiosity.

"I think we should support him," concludes Jeremy. "This video that leaked out, maybe nothing will come of it, or maybe a whole lot of something. We don't know that yet. Whichever outcome it is, I think we need to be there for Kyle. We need to respect his wishes and help keep it secret." Jeremy gazes at Kyle across the room. "We need to be his family."

Kyle feels fidgety. There are so many emotions in this room. Maybe he's picking up a tiny piece of everyone's, all of it infiltrating the corners of his mind, shaking on the doors. The collective uncertainties. Intrigue. Excitement. Wonder.

A hand rests on Kyle's shoulder. He flinches, startled. Cade has come up to his side, giving him an encouraging squeeze.

"Fine," says one of the bakery sisters with a nod. "Yep," the other one says, "I'm good." "He's a great listener," says the café owner, his wife giving him a quizzical look. "He's already like family to me," says Leland at Kyle's other side, big blue eyes on the verge of crying, "like a b-brother I never had."

The spontaneous testimonials and praise keep coming from all over the room, catching on as quickly as the bickering did, overlapping like waves against a shore, until the only thing Kyle hears is the noise of resounding acceptance, relief, and cheer.



Kyle stares out at the room, overwhelmed. Most of what's being said isn't even directed at him, but rather at each other, as the whole town seems to talk themselves into supporting Kyle and his secret, right before his eyes.

"I guess everyone came through for you, huh?" asks Cade, her hand still on his shoulder. "Lucky us."

Kyle is too numb to respond at first. Could it really be that easy? Could the worst experience imaginable, the very thing he dreaded, be so easily overcome?

The whole thing does, in fact, turn out to be rather good for business, as the bar runs out drinks and food without end. Leland is out of fries by ten o'clock. Becks has to empty her tip jar seven times. Kyle helps out behind the bar, but finds himself constantly trapped in exhausting conversations with people who have endless questions for him—serious questions, funny ones, and odd things he didn't expect to be asked, such as whether he ever tried satisfying his taste for blood with an ultra-rare steak. That last one comes from the manager of the steakhouse, who seems both nervous and excited to ask, perhaps thinking he can secure a customer for life in Kyle. "Hey, we can even stay open until after midnight, you know," the man insists with a toothy grin as he shakes Kyle's hand over and over.

By the time things wind down, it's much later than the bar has ever been open on a weekday. Once the last few customers are gone, Becks stays to help Cade with the cash while Kyle and Leland clean up the place. The police chief also stays behind to be with his son. Jeremy seems positively set on locating every last post of the video online, now and then

calculating the total number of views and giving an update, the latest being over two million. “Some are being taken down,” Jeremy explains, “likely because of the violence or language, but then they pop up again in new places. Who knows how many more there are? There could be hundreds of thousands of views I haven’t even found.”

“You’re in over your head, son,” says the chief tiredly. He’s had a long night. “Too obsessed with those numbers and it isn’t even your math homework, if only you’d apply as much effort into *that*. C’mon, son, put away the phone.”

“I wish Layna was here,” says Jeremy, glancing over at the office where Cade and Becks are. “Her mom won’t let her out of the house right now. Oh, another posting! Hmm, just 16k.”

The chief sighs, giving up.

It’s only when the bar is fully closed down that Kyle leaves, together with Cade, Becks, Leland, Jeremy, and a weary police chief. “I still don’t like it,” says the chief to Kyle, “what you did in there, telling everyone, but I guess time will tell whether you just dug your grave. I’m gonna have a tough conversation with the mayor come the morning as it is, and the last thing I need is any more scandals in this town.”

To that, Cade quells him with: “Juan, we’ve all had a long day, please, let’s put it to rest for the night, shall we?”

Before Leland takes off, he comes up to Kyle. “Just curious, though,” he asks with a funny face, “but if you’re still human with blood in your veins, can’t you, like, feed yourself ...?”

Kyle only wrinkles up his face in reply.

“Never mind,” says Leland, “I need sleep. Like, tons of it.” And off he goes with Becks, who both live on the same side of town behind the school.

When Jeremy is getting into his dad’s car, he stops, rushes up to give Kyle an unexpected hug, then pulls away. “Sorry. I just wanted to say thanks again. For ... everything.”

“He knows you’re grateful, son,” says the chief tiredly from the driver’s side door. “Now let’s go home. Still have school in the morning. In a handful of hours, at that. Phew, if Gloria was here, I’d never hear the end of it, letting you stay up this late, at the bar, no less.”

“Doubt I’ll sleep at all tonight,” says Jeremy, but he heeds his dad and gets in the car. Kyle watches as they drive away and turn the corner.

It’s just Cade left. “Sure you’ll be okay?” she asks. “You still gotta walk all the way home.”

“Night’s my awake time,” Kyle reminds her, feeling oddly exposed in doing so. “I think I’ll take a walk around town, clear my thoughts.”

Cade nods, understanding. “I hope tonight proved to you, other than my daughter needs a serious lesson, that you aren’t alone, not here in this town.” She takes his hand and gives it an assuring squeeze. “I’ve got your back, Kyle, just like you’ve got mine. This is your home, where you belong.”

“Thank you, Cade. Hey, don’t be too hard on Layna.”

“Never am. Oh, also,” she adds, “I’m giving you the next two nights off. No arguing,” she says when Kyle makes a face.

“You need them. Rest up. I’ll tell Layna you’ll forgive her only if she gets straight A’s this semester. Back me up if she asks.” Cade shoots him a wink, then crosses the street. Kyle watches her for a while, then heads the other way, hands in his pockets.

In truth, it doesn’t matter whether or not everyone in this town approves of him or banishes him to the desert. Now that he’s alone, all his thoughts are pulled right back to Elias.

Elias, who said he was going out for a walk. Some sun, to be precise. Then never returned.

Where is he?

Kyle finds himself in front of Elias’s house again, staring at the truck still sitting there. Frowning, he pulls out his phone and calls Elias again. Five times, all failed. After pocketing his phone, Kyle comes right up to the front door and knocks. No answer. Knocks again. Only silence greets him.

He grips the handle and gives it an experimental turn.

The door is unlocked, creaks, opens.

Kyle cautiously steps inside. He has never been in the main part of the house, only the back bedroom where Elias fed him a chocolate donut he couldn’t taste. Leaving the door ajar, he walks through a dark living room, unexpectedly big, cluttered. A couch with laundry stacked on it, and a giant brown box with “MY STUFF” written on the side, wrapped in packing tape. A shelf of action figures with a tiny hourglass at the end. Another shelf with comic books, manga, and a thesaurus. Kyle stops at a bright orange armchair that looks transported from the 70s, in front of which are a pair of

dumbbells on the floor. Kyle moves to a short hall that leads to the bathroom, to the kitchen and dining area, and to two bedrooms.

One of the bedrooms he recognizes, the one he woke up in. He steps inside. It even smells familiar, like Elias.

Then he sees it.

A folded-up paper on the bed.

Marked with a giant “K”.

Kyle knows it’s for him instantly. There’s no doubt in his heart. He rushes up, snatches the letter, opens it up at once.

*Hey, K.*

*If you’re reading this, then congratulations, you’re officially trespassing. Just kidding. Do you have any idea how long it’s been since I handwrote a letter? Anyway, I guess I’m about to disappear for a while, they found me, so my best recommendation is to just get on with your life, forget you met me, and maybe reconsider giving up blood for good. I know you’re probably still mad and feel like we have tons of unfinished business. I’m sorry, it’ll have to stay unfinished. There’s no use looking for me. In fact, please don’t. I knew what we had was tagged with an expiration date long before it even started. Everything good in my life always is. Sorry, there I go, pitying myself again. Tempted to scratch this part out. Anyway, I still stand by everything I said before I left, even if it makes you mad. You should embrace what you are, K. It’s bad-ass. It’s beautiful. It’s what the world needs.*

*Hey, I also meant to ask, did you know I went out to the desert that morning to end my life, too? Hate to write it this way in a letter. Sorry, this should've been something we talked about in person. But here I am, staring at the words I just wrote, and I don't feel like crumpling this up and starting over. So there. Now you know. Guess I had a lot on my mind that morning. My mother. My brother's death, the anniversary of which always crushes me every damned year. You saved my life that morning, too. I believe we're both still here for a reason. We just need to find out what the fuck it is. Let's not waste this second shot, alright? Good luck. Don't die or I'll kill you.*

*Love, E.*

# 19.

## *How Special You Are.*

---

Kyle drops onto the bed, staring at the letter, overcome.

He can't even properly identify which part of the letter has him the most struck with disbelief.

Kyle rereads the letter as he slowly paces the house. Who is Elias, really? Who found him? Where is he? The letter raises more questions than it answers.

Until now, Kyle respected Elias's privacy, refraining from doing the obvious thing of looking him up online. After reading the letter, Kyle finds his mind dramatically changed. He pulls out his phone, opens the search engine, types Elias Asad Trujillo, and mashes his thumb with conviction.

The list of results are frustratingly null. No social media pages. No images. No business links. No associations. Nothing. Running just the last name Trujillo is also comically unhelpful, especially without context. Over 200 results in Arizona alone.

"Why are you insisting to stay such a damned secret to me, Elias?" Kyle asks the letter, as if it'll grow a mouth and answer him. He walks around, gazing at all of the clutter that makes up the remnants of Elias's secret life here, wondering if he'll spot something helpful. He doesn't. He reads the letter again, then flips it over, looking for a hidden message leading him to Elias's location, anything at all. Suddenly mad, he

swipes a lighter off a nearby table and flicks it on, daring to burn the letter. It may even be satisfying.

Then Kyle's on the floor in the middle of the living room, the letter not burned to ashes. Haven't enough things become ashes in his life? No need to make any more. The last letter of any meaning to him is riding the wind of the Arizona desert.

Kyle may have to hang on to this one especially tight.

It's about four in the morning when he's back home. In the darkness of his house, he listens to the world around him, to the distant rustling of dirt and tiny rocks as the wind stirs them. He lies back on the couch with the letter on his chest and stares up at the curtains, hands behind his head, thinking of donuts.

Donuts and Elias.

And that one terrible morning that feels like yesterday.

He closes his eyes.

It is only a few hours later when the noise of his phone stirs him. He rises at once, reaches for his phone off the end table, knocks it onto the floor. He scrambles for it, on his knees, then peers at the caller.

He frowns. It's no one he recognizes.

Maybe it's Elias from an anonymous number. Elias, finally trying to reach him from a secret location. Elias, at last.

Kyle answers in a hurry, wide-eyed. "Hello?"

"Good morning," comes a nasally woman's voice, as sharp as cheddar, as sweet as a pineapple. "This is Dahlia with Dahlia Dishes, seven-time winner of the Carly Castle Award



and twice recipient of the coveted Platinum Page Prize. Is this Kyle to whom I have the pleasure of speaking? Or are you Henry?”

Kyle stares forward at the wall. “Who is this? How did you get this number?”

“This is Dahlia, of course, like I said. I take it I’m speaking to *the* Kyle? *The* Kyle ... who defies physics and everything we know about life and biology itself, from the video? Oh, it is an absolute pleasure to speak with you. I am here to extend the most prestigious honor of being a guest on my latest broadcast. My 39 million followers and I are *dying* to hear your story.”

Kyle shakes his head. “Sorry, you’ve got the wrong, uh —”

“Don’t you want to share your story with the whole world? I’ll only take half an hour of your time, tops. Well, an hour including makeup, setup and lighting, all that. Maybe two. I can fly you out to Vegas or my team and I can come straight to you, won’t be a bother at all, nope, not at all. How’s tomorrow for you, Mr. Kyle? I could even come out today.”

Kyle’s heart drums in his throat. “No, I think I’ll—I think you have the wrong idea. Sorry.”

“Kyle—”

Kyle hangs up and tosses the phone at the couch like it just caught fire, staring at it.

Fourteen seconds later, it rings again.

Kyle gets up from the couch and paces the room as it rings. Once it stops, he stops too, staring at it from across the

room.

Then it rings again.

He picks up the phone and looks at the caller. It's her, this Dahlia person, this reporter or blogger or whatever she is. Kyle stares at his phone until it stops ringing. A mere ten seconds later, it rings again.

Only now it's someone else, a different number.

He answers a touch less politely. "Hello?"

"Kyle, it's Dahlia, I think we were disconnected. Listen, I'd hate for you to miss out on this chance. Perhaps I didn't explain the full scope of what my interview will entail, or my true purpose in reaching out to you. Shocking stories pass through my feeds each day, and of all of them, I have personally selected yours to feature. Do you know how special you are? Half of Hollywood tries to get themselves into my stories, but it's not them I'm interested in. It's you. Hiding away in a desert town in northern Arizona, away from everything and everyone ... you, who has the most incredible, the most magical little life. I want the world to *see* you."

The woman knows so much about him already.

Even where he's located.

"There's nothing to see," says Kyle. "The video was staged. It's fake. I'm not who you think. Please stop calling."

To Kyle's surprise, she comes back with, "I don't care if it's fake, it makes no difference. Do you see the traction your video has gotten? The reach alone is astounding. Do you have social media? Are you gaining followers? People would kill

for this kind of exposure. I just want to make you famous. Say yes,” she pleads. “Just say yes. Let’s change the world.”

Kyle frowns, sickened. “No.” He hangs up.

Less than a minute later, the phone rings again.

Two minutes later, again.

And again.

Kyle lies on the couch and closes his eyes, overwhelmed. With the ringer turned off, the phone is left buzzing on the floor, forgotten. Kyle turns away to try going back to sleep, his face buried in the back cushions.

An hour of restless sleep goes by as his phone buzzes over and over. Every time it does, he’s reminded of pawnshops and questions and blood. When he grabs his phone off the floor to check it, he finds no less than seventeen different callers, none of them known, as well as thirty-eight text messages.

They aren’t all Dahlia.

> Hello. It’s Drew from West Coast Wild & Weird. Please call.

> This is Julie with NVPP. We would love to feature your story. Front page. \$\$\$ in advance. Call me back or text me at this number at your earliest.

> THE POWER OF CHRIST COMPELS YOU, SATAN!

> Is this Kyle from the robbery video? I’m so wet for you. I want you to bite my pussy and lick me so good like you do in the video. Click here for pics, bb.

> Hello, I'm Paige from Angelfinger Press. I would love a moment of your time.

What does he do? Ignore them? Reply? Tell them all to fuck off like he did to Dahlia?

He considers shutting his phone off completely. But what if Elias tries to contact him, even still? What if these messages are legitimate? Not all of the callers left messages. Could one of them have secretly been Elias already? Or a news station? The CIA? The president? How would he even know? Kyle uses his phone so seldom, he can't be sure whether he even has a proper voicemail set up.

He throws the phone into a kitchen drawer, shuts it, then returns to the couch to sleep. Somehow, he can't bring himself to close his eyes. Minutes later, he hears buzzing again, as if it's right next to his ear, thanks to his lovely extrasensory abilities.

"Fuck ... the ... fuck ... *off*," he groans.

The phone, regretfully, does not fuck off.

He stands in the kitchen an hour later, heavy-eyed, staring at the drawer, which hums with the constant calling and text messages. He looks up at the curtained window in the kitchen, then frowns when he finds it strangely overcast for this time of day. Daring a peek through the curtains, he sees a storm cloud.

A storm cloud?

In Nowhere, Arizona?

Then raindrops scatter across the window at once, followed by a sudden downpour.

Bewildered, Kyle goes to his front door, steps outside, and finds it raining. Above, the sky is obscured by a scattering of dark, heavy clouds. It doesn't often rain here and certainly not in large amounts such as right now.

He comes out even further, standing in the middle of his front yard, letting the rain pour over him. He lifts his face to the sky, eyes closed, and feels strangely liberated from the noise of that pesky phone.

The wind blows.

The rain swirls around him.

The sky grumbles with the sound of soft thunder rolling overhead.

Despite everything, he finds himself amazed.

The rain right now, the clouds, the absence of sunlight ... it all feels like some kind of gift meant just for Kyle, a reprieve from his tiresome existence.

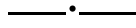
“Kyle? Is that you? ... Is that really fuckin' you?”

Kyle opens his eyes, startled. At the end of his driveway is a man in his forties, clothes drenched, his handsome face full of stubble, creases of tension, fuming disbelief.

And upon making eye contact, the man marches right up, pulls back his fist, and swings it right into Kyle's jaw, full force.

## 20.

### *It's Rock With a B.*



Imagine a human's fragile fist meeting a thick brick wall.

Swung at full power. No holding back. Charged to the max with twenty-seven years of anger and resentment.

Then crunching like celery.

Kyle, the thick brick wall, barely flinches, as if he was just swatted by an inflatable toy. The man is not so lucky. He lets out a cry of anguish as he quickly draws his hand to his chest. "FUCK!!" he screams as he cradles his hand, stumbling back, glaring at Kyle through the rain.

This all happens so fast, Kyle only now takes in the face of his sudden assailant. His squared jawline. His harsh eyes. Wet bangs pasted to his forehead, shirt stuck to his athletic build. It has been twenty seven years, yet Kyle knows this man's face at once. He knows the emotion in his eyes, recognizes his posture, his anger, everything down to the specific way he glares.

Kyle takes a step forward, stunned. "B-Brock ...?"

"What the fuck?!" Brock shouts out, still hugging his hand to his chest. "Fuckin'—what the—*aagh!*" He doesn't seem to know what to do with his hand, alternating from holding it against his chest to quickly inspecting it. He crouches down rather suddenly, hugging his arm, apparently

trying not to cry. “My fuckin’ *hand* ... you made of fuckin’ *concrete?! Fuck!*”

Kyle has literally no idea what to respond to first. “What’re you ... doing here ...? How’d you even—?”

“My hand is fuckin’—*AGH!*—fuckin’ broken!”

“Why did you punch me like that?”

“Punch you?? Your *face* punched my *hand!*” he shouts back, voice shaking.

Kyle decides to address one thing at a time, starting with the most apparent pressing issue. “There’s a clinic on the other side of town. Did you drive here? We—”

“Fuck you, Kyle, you’re supposed to be fuckin’ dead! You are *dead!* You and your whole family, you died! I went to your fuckin’ funeral, and—and—!” Brock’s eyes swell with tears. His lip quivers, at once reminding Kyle of one time when Brock cried in front of him as a child. It was after his dad scolded him for recklessly stealing a base in a Little League game. He still cries the same way, even as a forty-four-year-old man, the quivering lip first, then taking the rest of his face with it, like a sculpture made of sand softly crumbling from a single touch.

Kyle stares at that quivering lip. “My funeral ...? You ... You went to my—?”

“All of you. Your mom, your dad, your brother Kaleb, the whole Amos family ... burned in that fire.”

Fire.

Burned in that fire.

Kyle hasn't thought of the fire in decades. He nearly forgot how Tristan handled it all. It's a dark memory that Kyle likely blocked out, too traumatized to ever think of it again. *I'll take care of everything*, Tristan said that first night at the motel, after Kyle became what he is and fled his old life. *Just rest, and don't be alarmed if you dream of nothing, you can just pretend dreams bore you now. Face the abyssal void with an open imagination. Count those sheep. I'll be back in twenty.*

Tristan wasn't back in twenty.

He was back in six and a half hours.

That's what it took. For Kyle's old house to be burned to the ground. To burn his mother's body. His father. Kaleb. None of whom had to die. What body did Tristan find to act as Kyle's? How did Tristan handle his own disappearance? These are things Kyle never asked. He let Tristan take care of it all and didn't do anything but count sheep, just as he was told.

He couldn't bear to think of that night again, ever since.

And now, staring into Brock's anguished eyes, hearing his words, Kyle finds himself struck through the heart, as if with an actual wooden stake, gutted. Memories of that night rushing to the front, drowning him, clinging to his skin like the raindrops from the sky right now, raindrops in the middle of a desert.

Kyle takes a breath, closes his eyes. "Where's your car?"

"Fuck you!" screams Brock.

Kyle takes Brock by the arm, causing him to shout out, but he makes no further protest as Kyle drags the stubborn man to the only vehicle that can be his, an entirely out-of-



place white sports car on the curb down the street some ways. He fishes a set of keys straight out of Brock's pocket, startling him, opens the door, puts a bewildered Brock in the passenger seat, then lets himself into the driver's side and takes off.

At a stoplight by the bakery, Kyle glances at Brock across the center console. Brock stares forward, still holding his hand against his chest, eyes unblinking, drops of rain on his face and hands. It is such a strange feeling, to gaze at Brock, this person he once knew, to see him sitting right next to him.

As if the fight in the locker room long ago never ended.

This was just the next punch, twenty-seven years late.

"This is my friend Brock Hastings," says Kyle when they arrive at the front counter. Brock glares at him, likely confused by being called a friend. "He injured his hand punching a brick wall like an idiot."

Brock scowls. "Fuck you."

The nurse tiredly slides a clipboard over the counter. "It's a slow day. Fill this out, we'll get your idiot friend right in."

It's merely half an hour later that the two of them are in a room, waiting on the doctor. There is silence, save for the soft drumming of rain on the window. Brock is on the edge of the examination bed. Kyle is in a chair in the corner by a biohazard bin and a counter with cotton swabs and tongue depressors.

Brock breaks the silence. "I fuckin' hate you."

"That's fine," says Kyle after a moment.

“And you called me a friend to that nurse?” Brock speaks to the floor. “Lord help me. Lord help me in this time of ... of great ...” Then he closes his eyes and lifts his face to the ceiling with his uninjured hand pressed to his heart. “Lord, please give me the strength to overcome my anger, to change, to—”

“What are you doing?”

Brock’s lip quivers again, then he pops open his eyes and glares at Kyle. “This is your fault. All of this. It’s because of you I came all the way up here from Phoenix. To confront you. To see if it really was you at all. To see if—”

“You live in Phoenix now?”

“Yes, I live in Phoenix now, where my dad’s company is based, where the hell else would I—” He clenches shut his eyes once again. “Lord, give me strength, give me strength to —”

“I think the Lord is far away from here,” says Kyle.

Brock’s breathing slows. He bows his head, speaks quietly. “I have to do better. I have to be better. For my wife. My son. I shouldn’t have—”

“Son?”

Brock looks up. “Yeah. My ...” He lowers his hand to his lap. “My son. Light of my life, my boy, seventeen, in his senior year now. Almost the same age that we were when you —” His face twists, and he looks back at the floor. “When you left.”

Kyle wonders if he was just about to say “when you died”.

“What happened?” asks Brock, the question nearly hissed out. “Can you even tell me? The actual truth? Did that Tristan fuckin’ do something to you? Did he kill your family and cover it up? Never mind,” he says at once, shaking his head. “I’m just askin’ questions I already know the answers to. He killed you, turned you into a ... into a whatever-he-is. I warned you, Kyle, didn’t I? I told you to stay away from him, and now look at you, lookin’ like you haven’t aged a damned day, lickin’ blood off of people like a freak. Satan took hold of you ... the Devil did.”

Kyle only listens patiently, studying Brock across the room, withholding his own mountain of questions for his old friend-turned-enemy. Maybe he’s still fascinated by Brock’s unplanned return in his life, too curious about him to feel any kind of way, angry, remorseful, curious, sad.

“We were ... such good friends,” says Brock. “We were so close, Kyle. My whole childhood is just ... us. What happened? What’d I do wrong?”

“We changed,” says Kyle softly.

“*You* changed,” Brock spits back. “You were supposed to be my friend. Stick by my side. Then Tristan came along and you changed. You acted like he was your new God. Do you know what he did to me, Kyle?” he asks, his voice turning low. “The day your whole family burned up, including you? I was knocked out on the floor of the locker room with my team tied up all around me, all of them moaning and squirming, none of them remembering a damned thing. I had teeth marks on my ass, on my inner thigh, on my damned *dick*, Kyle.” Brock grits his teeth as he speaks, tears pooling in his

impassioned eyes again. “I don’t have scars to show for it. Isn’t that messed up? I healed that same day. The scars I carry are burned onto my mind, the look in ... in Tristan’s eyes ... spawn of the Devil himself. Kyle, what he did to me, what he did to the team ...” He shudders, eyes darkening. “What he did to you.”

Kyle only listens.

Brock’s eyes drop to Kyle’s chest, lost in thought. “I guess a lot happened to both of us that day. I went from wantin’ to kill you that morning ... to learnin’ you and your whole family died in a house fire the night before. The game ... The game didn’t happen. Everything fell apart that day. Tristan disappeared ... you and your family died ... and I ...” Tears run down his rosy cheeks. He lets them. “I think somethin’ broke in me that day, too, somethin’ seriously ... b-broke ...” He covers his face with his free hand as he starts to quietly sob. “I-I-I-I’m l-losin’ my mind, I’ve f-f-fuckin’ lost it.”

Despite everything, it isn’t easy to watch Brock break down like this.

Brock’s whole life since high school is a mystery. What he has had to endure over the years. Unanswered questions he has had to carry, torturing him. Nightmares waking him without relent. Trauma from that day, not too dissimilar to Kyle’s own.

“Oh, God, my wife,” moans Brock, “she’s probably worried sick, the way I—*God*—the way I just packed a bag and left on some mad mission here to find you, to see if it was real ... if I didn’t finally lose my last damned marble ...”

“What’s your wife like?”

Brock squints at him, confused. “What? Who?”

“Your wife.”

“Oh. My wife?” He sniffs loudly, wipes away a tear. “You know her. It’s Jessica.”

Kyle blinks. “Wait ... You don’t mean the class president Jessica, do you? The ... The Christian Jessica?”

“Yes, her, so what?”

Kyle shrugs. “Just didn’t expect it.”

“So? God has saved my life. He took me into his hands and delivered me from evil. Evil like Tristan, who destroyed both of our lives. He delivered me from my dark thoughts. That was all thanks to Jessica, who brought me to Him, who saved me, too.”

Kyle wonders if this is a bad time to question how many times in their short reunion Brock has already cursed and taken the Lord’s name in vain. “That sounds ... good,” he says dully.

“Jessica is a woman with values, a woman with conviction and a kind soul, a woman ...” He sighs, frustrated. “I don’t owe you any explanation. You’re the one who should be talkin’.”

Kyle nods. “Alright. What do you want to know?”

Brock stares at him. A silence passes between them. Now that he’s presented with a chance to ask whatever he wants, it seems he has nothing to ask.

Or too much.

Just then, the doctor arrives, and their conversation is quite suddenly shelved in favor of attending to Brock's injured hand. The whole time, Kyle stays in that chair in the corner, feeling like either a supportive friend or estranged brother. Brock now and then glances back at him, a weird look in his eyes.

Even at forty-four, Kyle still sees the same old Brock.

As if not a day has passed.

As if the walls that kept them apart in high school are no longer there, their friends, peer pressure, differences, no longer excuses for them to hate each other.

As if the walls were merely illusions, never there in the first place.

"You're lucky," says Kyle as they head down the hall to the front doors of the clinic some time later. "No breaks, just a tiny fracture that'll heal all on its own."

"Tiny fracture my ass," says Brock, inspecting his bandaged hand, the fractured finger in question immobilized by a splint. "I've punched an actual brick wall before, this didn't compare. Can we get somethin' to eat around here? Fuckin' starving."

When they reach the front doors, Kyle abruptly stops.

Outside, the rain has come to an end. The sun is back out.

Brock pushes open the door to the front covered awning of the clinic, then glances back at Kyle. "You comin' or what?"

Kyle remains silent and still.

“What is it?” asks Brock. “What’s the problem?” He gazes outside, as if looking for something threatening, a person Kyle knows, a coyote, anything. Then it slowly dawns on him. He looks back. “Really?”

Kyle peers at him. “What?”

“Are you ...?” Brock steps away from the door, letting it close. “You really can’t walk out there? For real? Because of ... of the sunlight ...? You’re not playin’ with me?”

“What do you think?” says Kyle back.

Brock gazes through the glass door, a mixture of wonder and bewilderment twisting his face. He looks as if he’s about to ask Kyle something again, still fighting his own disbelief.

Then he shifts gears completely. “Fine, we’ll wait then.”

A moment later, they are standing in front of the clinic’s sole vending machine, which only serves coffee and powdered donuts. Brock stares at it in disgust. Kyle picks at his fingers as he waits, saying nothing.

Brock smirks. “Hey, you remember when we’d raid the hell out of that machine at the arcade?”

Kyle looks up. “You mean when we were kids?”

“Parents left us at the mall, we’d run rampant, hit that old arcade by the movie theater—closed down now, by the way—and they had these sick vending machines we’d raid, you’d get mad when they didn’t have your favorite candy, Sour Patch Kids, Gummi Worms, whatever the hell it was that week ...”

“Yeah,” says Kyle, the memory coming to him. “I do.”

Brock chuckles. Then he frowns and smacks the glass of the machine in front of him. “Who in the hell puts coffee in a vending machine? Tastes like dishwater. And who knows how old those donuts are.”

“What did you hope to accomplish, Brock?”

“Huh? I was hopin’ to accomplish puttin’ somethin’ in my stomach, what do you mean?”

“I meant by coming out here. Seeking me out. Confronting me.” Kyle turns to him. “The first thing you did when you saw me was try to knock my face off.”

“Can you blame me?” Brock stares into the machine. “You ruined my life, Kyle.”

Kyle frowns. “How?”

“You ruined my life,” repeats Brock, firmer. “You have no idea how messed up I was after you died. After I ... *thought* you died. Even after our big fight in the locker room, I thought to myself: ‘y’know what, he’ll come around one of these days, he’ll get this Tristan thing outta his system, become my friend again, and everything will go back to normal’. I believed it.”

“You threatened to end my career in sports,” says Kyle. “You had all the power of your family at your back. You—”

“Lord help me, how thick are you? You really think I’d do that? We were in high school, we were stupid, dumb teenagers, I didn’t have any of that kinda power. You think my dad really would’ve done anything? He was an asshole back then, he’s an asshole now all the same. I won’t ever be enough for him.”

After it comes out, Brock recoils, as if he didn’t mean to say so much. He shoves money into the machine, grabs the



package of powdered donuts that fall out, carelessly tears it open, then shoves one into his mouth. Powdered sugar hangs from his lips as he chews resentfully.

Kyle puts his hands in his pockets. “You married Jessica. I assume you had success in your career. Sports car outside kinda suggests that.”

“So? You think it makes me happy? Jessica fuckin’ trapped me into marrying her. She—” He stops at once—both chewing and speaking—then lowers his head. “Shouldn’t have said that.”

“It’s fine, let it out. What am I gonna do with your secrets? You’re in the middle of telling me how I ruined your life.”

Brock shoves another donut into his mouth, chews, glaring ahead at nothing. He swallows. “Doesn’t matter what happened to her. To me. Pregnant in high school. Lost the baby. Then our dads had this heated talk in my living room, I remember the way her dad spoke about me like I was scum. Still to this day thinks I’m scum. Why am I always fuckin’ proving myself to every damned person I know?” he asks suddenly, package of donuts crinkling as his grip tightens. “Everyone thinks I’m a shithead before we’ve shared two words with each other. That’s my destiny, I guess, being a rich shithead son to my shithead of a dad. Everyone talking behind my back in college, in football, like the only reason I got on any team was because of my dad or my family’s influence, money, clout, strings pulled. All of my friends abandoned me. Jessica, we were happy at first, but now she can’t stand the sight of me. Keeps me in this sham marriage for appearances,

for God and Christian men and women, for her parents ... for our son, the only soul on God's green Earth I truly love." He sighs. "But he's a mama's boy, goes runnin' off to her when it's tough, when he needs somethin', I'm just the stranger who's always at work, always in a mood, always ..." He stops, stares ahead blankly. "Always drinking. Might seem crazy to you, but I think, I honestly think, had you stuck by my side, you and I could've ruled the world. I'd have had the sense not to marry Jessica, thinkin' it's what I had to do. I'd have had a friend, a real, true friend, not one of these elitist club member douchebags who just like me for my money. Kyle, you stuck by through it all, even when I took—" His voice cracks. "—when I t-took you for granted, my best friend, my ... my brother from another mother, you were still right there, loyal as ever. This is all my fault, isn't it?" His shift in tone surprises Kyle. "It isn't yours. Of course you went to Tristan, went to the freak 'cause he paid attention to you. All this, what happened to you, what he did to you, your family being slaughtered ... it's ... all ... my fault. I could've ... could've saved you from him, had I been a better f-f-friend. Fuck." He fights back tears as he offers the package of donuts to Kyle. "Want one? They're disgusting."

"It isn't your fault," says Kyle.

"Shut up and eat one of these."

"What I am. What happened to me. The Tristan thing. It's not your fault, Brock, none of it was. Even if he hadn't come to our school, into our lives, I'd probably still have grown distant. Our friendship was already crumbling. We ... We grew apart."

“I said take one, damn it.”

Deciding it's not the time to debate the whole peculiar diet thing, Kyle exercises diplomacy, takes one, then bites it in half. Chewing on the powdery, cakey nothingness, he gazes at Brock and finds his old friend gazing back.

That's when the emotions flood in. Brock's emotions.

For the first time in his life, Kyle sees the real Brock. He feels his regret and his wishful thoughts. He feels tiny bubbles of joy popping at the top of his skull, making him feel as light as helium. Is that how Kyle makes Brock feel when he's around? As light as helium? Is he remembering the good old days?

Does he miss Kyle?

As they peer into each other's eyes, he feels something else, something urgent, something that overrides every other feeling he just sensed. It's a desperate, painful, broken longing. Infinite sadness, regret, and longing. It comes at Kyle like an unseen tidal wave, crashing over him, a terrible feeling of longing for something he truly, deeply believes he can never have.

The impact is so powerful, Kyle drops the other half of his donut onto the floor.

That brings him out of the moment. “Oops,” says Kyle.

“Don't worry 'bout it,” mutters Brock, powdered sugar still clinging to his lips. “Have another. I'll buy out the machine, I don't care. Aren't you hungry?”

“I ...” Kyle picks up the piece he dropped, walks over to a nearby trash bin, tosses it in. “I actually don't, uh ...”

“What?” Brock wrinkles his face. “Got a problem?”

Now Kyle experiences a wave of indignation from Brock. With the connection made, Kyle can't seem to sever it, and for whatever reason, his connection with Brock is overwhelmingly strong, perhaps the strongest he's ever achieved, even stronger than the one he had with Elias. Every tiny shift in emotion, Kyle feels like a powerful new current in the river, grabbing at his limbs with all the strength of the water, dragging him left and right, under and away.

Then the emotion settles at once, traded instantly for fear and discomfort. “Oh. You don't like it, 'cause you ...” Brock's face reflects disgust. “You don't eat normal stuff anymore?”

“I eat ‘normal stuff’,” says Kyle calmly as he navigates the sensitive, ever-changing landscape of Brock's touchy feelings. “I just don't eat as much, and I can't really taste anything except for ...” He shakes his head. That was a misstep. “Never mind.”

“Go ahead. Finish that sentence.” Brock tosses the package of powdered donuts onto a nearby waiting room table without looking, struts up to Kyle, eyes narrowed and sharp. “I want to hear it. Say it.”

Kyle looks at him. “Why bother saying it if you already know what it is I almost said?”

Indignation again. Then pity. Then deep disgust. Emotion squirms around in Brock like snakes battling over territory. He shakes his head. “It's so vile ... so *wrong* ... How can you—?” Brock scoffs, mockery swirling around inside him, every bit of that mockery flinging itself straight at Kyle like a dart through their unfortunate and potent connection. “Is that really what

you are now? A blood-drinking freak? Tristan did that to you? You don't eat anything but ... but *blood* now?"

"Brock."

"That'd make you happy? If I offered my neck instead?"

"I wouldn't accept it even if you did. I don't want it."

"Fuckin' liar."

"You saw the video," says Kyle, turning on him. "You know the answers already. Why are you acting like this is new?"

"Yeah, I saw the video. My son beat me to it, saw it and ... and I couldn't believe my eyes. Now? I believe my eyes." Brock shakes his head, and at once, all his emotion turns to fire. "No. I can't do this. You're not the Kyle I know. You really did die that day, along with Kaleb and your parents and everything I knew and believed in."

"Brock ..."

Brock doesn't say another word. He brushes past Kyle, the same as he did twenty-seven years ago when he tried reasoning with him in the locker room, and heads straight for the front glass doors. Kyle watches as Brock shoves them open and takes off. As he marches away across the parking lot, the presence of Brock's emotions flees Kyle's system. It is instant relief, the moment he's gone.

Yet somehow, the fight still feels far from over.

# 21.

## *Still Got It.*

---

It's just past seven when Kyle opens his eyes. He'd passed out on the couch of the waiting room with his legs kicked up on the arm, waiting for the sun to go away. There's an old lady in a chair on the other side of the room, and upon Kyle waking, she offers a kind smile. Kyle reluctantly returns it, then checks the light through the front glass doors and decides it's safe enough to walk home.

Before going, he spots the unfinished package of powdered donuts Brock left behind. He stares at them, heavyhearted. What a short-lived, totally unnecessary reunion, Kyle thinks to himself. Brock's only parting gift is a fractured finger he will be nursing for six to eight weeks, according to the doctor, and a prescription for painkillers he's likely too proud to utilize.

Still, Kyle is left with a lingering sadness. Maybe, in some faraway, long-forgotten corner of his heart, he actually hoped he and Brock might be able to reconcile. Brock is a living piece of his past, perhaps the only part that remains. For one fleeting moment, Kyle thought he had found it again.

He takes the package of donuts off the waiting room table, weighs it in his palm like it's a toy football, aims for the trash bin across the room, then throws. With an unsatisfying little swish and a thump, it lands in the bin.

“Still got it,” mutters Kyle, miserable.

He crosses the town in the mild twilight, hands stuffed in his pockets. When he turns onto his street, he stops. Parked in front of his house is Brock’s white sports car. Kyle approaches it and finds Brock sitting inside, windows down.

Brock glances at him, then shakes his head. “Don’t ask.”

Kyle frowns. “How long have you been sitting here?”

“Dunno. Got halfway to Phoenix. Stopped at a gas station. Bought a fuckin’ hat.”

Kyle glances at the passenger seat, where a red ball cap sits, tiny football graphics all over its curved bill.

“Like it was put in that gas station by God,” says Brock to the steering wheel, “wantin’ me to find it, sendin’ a message.”

Kyle isn’t sure what to make of this. “Message ...?”

“It isn’t a gift,” says Brock, snatching the hat off the seat and putting it on his own head. “It’s mine.” Then he frowns at Kyle under the shadow of the hat. “Damn it, I didn’t want to ... to come out here and be like this. I don’t know what I’m doing Kyle. I’m fuckin’ lost. I can’t even hear God anymore. It’s just nothing when I pray. I pray and I hear nothing. Nothing, not a damned thing. Did Tristan curse me? Is he haunting me? Did he bite me and leave a piece of the Devil inside me? I can’t hear God anymore.” He presses his forehead to the steering wheel, causing the hat to lift up slightly. He stays like that for a while. “Do you think ...” He shifts his head, doesn’t quite meet Kyle’s eyes. “Do you think we ... can be ... friends again? Even after everything? Can we just put it

behind us and be okay ... before I give up and let you die all over again?"

Kyle gazes at the cockeyed hat on Brock's head, all the little footballs in a sea of red. On the radio, an old country song is playing softly, barely audible. It sounds like a song he heard a lifetime ago, maybe just once or twice, yet he recognizes it.

"Tristan's dead, by the way."

Brock's eyes snap to Kyle's. He parts his lips, lets out a delayed breath, then mutters, "You ... You mean ... people like him ...? Like you? You mean ... you can ... you can die ...?"

"Yes," answers Kyle simply.

"H-How?"

"Sunlight is one way."

Brock stares down at Kyle's chest, as if trying to picture it, Tristan's last moment on Earth, how it might have looked, how it might have felt. "I thought ..." Brock swallows, shakes his head. "I thought he ... he'd never ..."

"Well, he did," says Kyle. Then his tone softens. "I guess you have nothing left to fear except me."

Brock looks up at him, softly says, "I'm not afraid of you."

"And I see you working it over in your head," Kyle goes on. "I wouldn't bother wasting the effort. Whether you try to drag me into the sun or pour holy water on me, it's no use. *I* can't even kill me. I tried."



“I wasn’t gonna—” Brock starts, then belatedly hears what Kyle just said. “Wait. You ... you tried?”

None of this is easy for Kyle. He lets out a patient breath, steels himself, then comes to a decision. “You wanna come in and crash here for the night? You can continue escaping your miserable life for a bit longer, provided Jessica doesn’t consult your pastor or your whole congregation to track down where you’ve gone. I might have some ‘normal stuff’ for you to eat, including tuna I keep for a cat who hates me. Or if you’re too afraid I’ll bite you while you’re asleep, you can sit out here and sulk in your child-sized football hat for as long as you please.”

Brock makes a face. “First, this isn’t a child-sized hat. This is a man-sized hat. For a man. Me. Second ...” He whips the hat off his head suddenly, checks the label, curses. “Seriously? I bought a hat for a damned toddler?”

“For being married to Jessica and having this whole ‘God saved me’ story, you sure cuss a lot.”

“Shut up. Second ...” Brock’s eyes darken. “It isn’t food I need right now. What I really need ... is somethin’ to knock me onto the floor and make me forget my whole life.” Brock sighs. “I need a drink, man.”

Kyle snatches the hat straight out of Brock’s hand, slaps it on his own head. “I happen to know just the place.”

Brock blinks.

An hour and nineteen minutes later, Kyle is at the bar with a glass of whiskey in his hand he still hasn’t finished. Brock is

on his ninth, forehead slick, hair messy, pits of his shirt sweated through.

And he won't shut up. "I'm tellin'—*mmp*—tellin' you, this guy here, Kyle, he was such a beast on the field that afternoon, I was so proud to be his friend when, when he—*one more, yeah, top me off*. KYLE ... he goes runnin' the ball straight on down the field like a roadrunner—*bzyooooom!* I'll never forget it. Still lost the game, but damn, that one run ... How'd you not make varsity before senior year? Coach didn't know what he—*yeah, yeah, keep 'em comin'*—what he had. Dumbass prick."

In another half hour, he's hanging off the jukebox, a bottle in hand, arm slung over Kyle's back, singing loudly to a country song Kyle doesn't know. "Why aren't you singin'?" Brock cuts himself off, giving Kyle a shake with his arm. "C'mon, you know this song! Grew up with it! Or are you shy, huh? Shy? Hey, heh, you didn't go to prom, you were dead. Just realized that. They played this song. Jessica and I danced, and I stepped the *fuck* on her foot. Did you know they—*hey, I'm bein' serious, listen up*—they had a memorial for you in the yearbook? Full page for you, they did a whole—*nng*—whole memorial page thing. Did you date Stacy on the yearbook staff? She had a—" Brock belches. "—hard-on for you. All torn up the day after we found out, kept crying, the counselor was sick of her by the end of the semester, even the counselor needed counseling, fuck."

Then Brock is back at the bar, hanging off a stool. "Wait. Becks? Is that ... was that your name, sweetheart? Becks, short for—*where the hell did I put my keys?*—Rebecca, right? Are you a lesbian? You got a lesbian vibe. Sorry." He lifts his

hands. “I’m new here, I don’t know anybody, I like lesbians. The Lord tells us to love, like, your neighbor. We aren’t neighbors, but I love you. Hey, I’m this guy’s friend, this guy’s best friend from back in the day, y’know that?” Brock’s arm is around Kyle’s neck again, pulling him. “Fuckin’ Kyle, this guy, this Kyle guy ...”

Then Brock is scarfing down his third basket of chicken wings and fries. “Man, havin’ kids, doin’ the whole dad thing, it makes you hungry. Shit just tastes better in your forties, know what I mean? Food is my fuckin’ *Lord and Savior*.” He shoots Kyle a dizzy look. “You’re missin’ out, man. I busted my jaw once, real bad, in college, fuckin’ mouth all filled up with blood, it don’t taste good at all, you’re weird, I’m tellin’ you—”

Another hour later, Brock is snoring at the counter.

Leland comes out with yet another basket of nachos Brock ordered, then sighs with relief when he discovers the guy passed out. “Your friend puts food down like a *hoover*.”

Becks leans against the counter, plucks a nacho out of the basket in Leland’s hand. “Seeing as he won’t be eating these.” She munches away. “Mmm, no one makes them like you.”

“Still feels weird,” says Leland with a frown, “calling this guy your friend. He’s so, uh ... loud.” He looks at Kyle. “Until tonight, I’d assumed you had none. No offense.”

“None taken,” says Kyle, seated on the stool next to Brock, gazing at him tiredly.

Leland sets down the nachos, from which Becks continues to snack, then leans against the counter. “Is it weird?” he asks.

“Being reunited with your old childhood friend?”

“I’m not sure yet,” admits Kyle. “I’ve got a lot of feelings. Not sure what to make of any of them.”

“But this wouldn’t have even happened if that video didn’t go viral, right?”

“Guess not.”

“So maybe good stuff will come out of what happened, too. Do you know how many people stopped by today to see if you were working? Oh, that reminds me.” Leland moves down the counter, snatches something out from under it, and slides it across the counter in front of Kyle. “It’s sunscreen. SPF 100. Blocks about ninety-nine percent of UV rays. Sylvia next door dropped by with it, a gift, wondered if you might like to try it sometime. Y’know, because of the whole sun thing.”

Kyle takes the bottle. “I’ll ... be sure to thank her for the, uh, suggestion.”

“*I wouldn’t try it,*” whispers Leland with a shake of his head, “*too risky.*” Then he slides next to Becks and starts snacking on the nachos, too.

For some reason, it only now occurs to Kyle that his phone is still stuffed away in a drawer in his kitchen. It probably has a thousand missed calls and messages by now.

Likely zero from the one person he wants to hear from.

Elias.

“Does the name Elias Asad Trujillo ring a bell with either of you?” Kyle blurts out suddenly.

Becks and Leland look up. “Trujillo?” asks Becks. “Not to me,” says Leland, blinking. “Why? Who’s that?”

Kyle sighs. “No one.”

It’s then that Brock lifts his head straight off the counter like a zombie come to life. “Asad Trujillo? Fuckin’ Trujillos in Vegas are a—a fuckin’ pain in my dad’s ass. Hear ‘bout ‘em all the—” He rips out a belch, his eyes go crossed. “—the time. I played their casino once, stayed in a suite, room service sucked, it wasn’t all that.” His head drops back to the counter. “Had better luck at the, the, fuckin’, what’s the name ... the ...” His eyes shut, air blows out his lips, and he’s asleep again.

Kyle stares down at him, stunned by the sudden bomb drop of information. “Brock?” He nudges his shoulder. “Hey, Brock, wake up. What was all that? A casino in Vegas ...? Brock!”

He’s completely out. Kyle frowns, frustrated. Even several nudges more, the guy still doesn’t stir, snoring away.

The sound of his snores revives a half-faded memory. Kyle sees Brock’s head on Tristan’s lap. *He might seem like a terrible person, but really, he’s got a soft heart, this one,* Tristan had said, gently petting Brock’s hair.

Kyle reaches out and strokes Brock’s hair, curious.

It’s still as soft as it used to be.

“My sister runs AA meetings the next town over,” murmurs Becks with a sympathetic frown, munching loudly on nachos. “I can hook your friend up.”

Something tickles the back of Kyle’s neck.

Hairs standing up.

Without prompt, Kyle looks up at the front windows of the bar, as if he was just directed to do so.

Standing outside is a dark figure, obscured somehow, as if repelling all trace of light, like a silhouette, pure black, a void.

It's the figure from the alley.

The figure he saw. The motionless, soundless figure.

The next instant, it's gone.

Kyle abandons Brock at once and races to the front door of the bar, nearly steamrolling over the sad-eyed café owner who was on his way in. "Sorry," he barely mutters as he pushes out of the bar and onto the street, eyes opened wide. He looks one way, then the other.

There's no sign of the figure anymore.

He goes around the building, determination pounding in his heart, and stares down the alley.

No one, nothing.

"Who are you?" Kyle calls out. His voice echoes down the alley, echoes back at him. "Why do you keep hiding? Come on, let's stop playing with each other. I have had a long day." Kyle strolls fearlessly down the dark alley, takes a peek behind the dumpster, even lifts the lid of a trash bin, nothing. "If you're so curious about me, why don't we have a chat? Face to face? I'm told I've got a handsome one, maybe a bit dead in the eyes, but we all can't be perfect."

He stops at the other end of the alley next to the back door of the bar. With no visual sign of the figure, Kyle decides to

try something new. He closes his eyes, focuses, and reaches out in an alternative way—with his gift.

Warmth.

Like a heated stone in a set of cold palms, comforting, nice.

Relief. Happy, pulsing, and lighthearted, nearly giddy.

Kyle opens his eyes.

At the end of the alley, back in the street, the figure again, completely obscured in shadow, a vacuum of sound and light.

That warmth is at once frozen over.

The heated stone turning instantly into a lump of solid ice, stinging the imaginary palms of Kyle's gift with its frigid bite.

“H-Hey,” says Kyle, unblinking. “Please don't go again. I won't hurt you. Please just tell me who you are. What you are.”

The figure doesn't move. Doesn't speak.

Doesn't breathe.

“You've been here before,” Kyle goes on, listening to his gift. The emotion is growing even colder still, impossibly cold. It's nearly painful for Kyle to stay connected to, like gripping a steel bar in a freezer, stinging, pricking, biting, sharper, harder by the second. “Is there something you want to ask? Something you want to say? Are you ...” Kyle swallows. He's shivering. In this humid, hot alleyway in the middle of the desert, he shivers like it's the dead of winter. “Are you ... someone like me ...?”

At once, the cold is too much to bear. It's painful. Aching.

“Can you stop—” Kyle grunts, anguished. “Can you stop feeling a certain way? I’m honestly not enjoying your emotional state right now.”

Alas, the figure does not stop feeling a certain way.

Kyle struggles to sever his connection, regretting having made one at all. He grimaces as the stinging strengthens, grabs his chest, fights back. But like a warm hand on a frosty steel bar, he’s stuck, skin glued to the metal, trapped, unable to let go.

The next instant, the figure whips past Kyle’s face so fast, he barely sees it.

An ice-cold strike to his body.

Kyle flies backwards with a shout, launched high into the air, legs and arms flailing, then lands on his back at the end of the alley—the shadowy figure, vanished.

A searing, excruciating pain ripples out from his hand.

Kyle lifts his fingers to his face, wide-eyed, screaming.

Upon his pinky, a silver ring.



## 22.

### *I Probably Deserve This.*

—•—

“Get it off, get it off!” screams Kyle.

He’s in tears, kicking on the floor of the kitchen, gritting his teeth so hard, they might break.

“Hold still!” shouts Leland. “Careful, careful,” hisses Becks from the other side.

Every effort Kyle already made himself was fruitless. The second he touched the ring with his other hand, he screamed out in agony. All he could do was barge in through the back door where he collapsed on the kitchen tiles in hysterics.

The ring is as tightly squeezed on Kyle’s pinky as a twenty-year-old wedding band, flesh puffing up around it, trapping it.

“Get it off! OFF! OFF!!” he screams, over and over.

Even Cade is in the kitchen. “Use butter! Oil! Dip his hand in oil and slide it off, for fuck’s sake, it isn’t rocket science!”

Leland continues to pry with both his hands, sweating from his brow, panicked. Becks scrambles around the kitchen for oil, rattling spoons, bowls, plates, on a mission. Kyle can barely see anything through his curtain of stinging tears, can barely hear anything past his own shouting, his nostrils filled with a sick, vile odor of metal and boiling flesh.

“In here!” orders Cade. “Put his hand in here!”

The kitchen is a total blur as Kyle’s arm is tugged one way, then another, and finally his hand is submerged in butter, oil, grease, whatever they found. Even with his hand dunked, the searing anguish persists without relent, like a jigsaw having its way with his pinky, only it never cuts through.

Something squeezes Kyle’s finger.

Kyle yells out.

“PULL! NOW!”

He flies back, the ring at last freed. He cradles his hand to his chest at once and curls onto his side, shivering. The pain is gone, but memories of it bite where the ring cruelly sat. Kyle dares a peek at it, as if expecting the finger to have been ripped off entirely. Amazingly it’s still there, though the skin is like blood, as if the ring was replaced with a red one tattooed on.

The room settles. Kyle’s face is a mess of tears when he gazes at his saviors—Leland, Cade, and Becks, who stare back. A pot sits on the floor between them, filled with oil. Cade holds a set of pliers, the silver ring still caught in its bite.

“Kyle?” comes Cade’s voice, soft, faraway.

He blinks away tears, still holding his tortured finger to his chest. “S-Sorry,” he chokes. He wipes his eyes, suddenly feeling embarrassed. “I ... I didn’t ... didn’t mean to worry you guys or anything. I’m sorry. Uh ... th-thank you,” he quickly adds.

“What happened?” asks Leland, wide-eyed. “Is this some kind of cursed ring or something?”

“No,” answers Kyle, paying no mind to how casually he just answered such a question, as if cursed rings are now a thing everyone must be wary of, like scorpions, or diarrhea. “It’s not a cursed anything. Just a simple silver ring ... a silver pinky ring. Harmless to you all. Not so harmless to someone like me.”

“Silver ...” murmurs Cade thoughtfully, as she turns it over and over with the pliers, inspecting it from all angles, as if still not daring to touch it. “How is silver so harmful to you?”

“I don’t know. I’m not a doctor.”

Cade makes a face. “With all due respect, I doubt that’s something any normal doctor knows either.”

Leland stares off, wide-eyed. “Do you think there are non-normal doctors? Like ... supernatural ones ...? Whoa.”

“But if you know silver hurts you, why did you put it on?” asks Becks, confused.

Kyle thinks of the figure in the alley. The way it was able to move so fast, he couldn’t see it. The way it stood there so silent, so empty, without a single discernable feature. Is this what that figure came here to do? To return his brother’s pinky ring in the most cruel way imaginable, to force it upon his finger in the space of half a second? How was that even possible?

And why did it do that? Who is that damned shadow?

The kitchen door flies open suddenly. Brock stumbles in, eyes half open, mouth slack. “Does anyone work here? The hell is goin’ on? Shit, just sittin’ out there, alone, gonna—

*mmph*—make myself a whiskey sour, unless—Oh.” He squints, staggers a bit, makes a face. “What’re you doin’ on the floor, Kyle?”

Kyle rises to his feet, wipes any remaining tears out of his eyes. “I’ll take him home. Um ... thanks,” he says to the others, who still stare at him with questions in their eyes. “If you don’t mind, I’d ... like the ring back. It has sentimental value to me.”

Brock lets out a belch, slumps against the swinging door. “I am fuckin’ *wasted*,” he grumbles, then leaves.

This is not how Kyle envisioned his night ending.

Of course, the whole day has been unexpected, ever since Brock barged back into his life as suddenly as the storm did.

They walk to Kyle’s from the bar. “You’re such a ... a great friend, man,” mumbles Brock, arm slung over Kyle’s back to keep himself walking straight. “Look how you take care of me. Takin’ care of your ol’ pal. Your *man*. Heh, heh, yeah.”

Kyle supports Brock with a hand around his waist, guiding his noodle legs as they make their way. It takes little effort, but is annoying nonetheless, and with the whole incident involving the ring, Kyle doesn’t feel at one hundred percent.

And his other hand holds a Ziploc baggie, inside which the culprit pinky ring dangles, its silver rendered harmless thanks to one and a half thousandths of an inch of polyethylene.

“You’re a man of honor, of fuckin’ honor, Kyle.”

They're passing by the park, the rundown swimming pool, an old bench. "Thanks. One foot in front of the other, let's go."

"Never really ... e-expressed how much it means to me. How much you mean to me."

"Sure you have," says Kyle tiredly. "Expressed it all night, in fact. To everyone in the bar, anyone who'd listen, even the wall at one point."

"Kyle ... I ..."

"We don't have much farther to go. My neighborhood's up ahead."

Brock takes hold of Kyle by the shoulders right then, faces him. His harsh eyes are upon Kyle's, drunken and wet, staring at him for too long.

Kyle is about to say something when Brock rushes forward and plants his lips on him.

Brock's lips tremble as he kisses Kyle.

A stiff, trembling, terrified union of mouths.

Icy fingers of fear and thrill and elation assault Kyle's body, all of it Brock's, every bit of it Brock's fear, thrill, and elation as their lips touch.

"H-Hey," sputters Kyle against his lips as he backs away.

It inspires Brock to rush forward again, desperate for more, forcing their lips back together. Kyle's heel hits the base of a streetlamp at the edge of the park. Brock's mouth continues to tremble in fear as he pours all of his emotion into this kiss.

Kyle presses his hands to Brock, pushes him away. “What the hell is this?” he blurts out.

Brock stares at him hard, drunk, eyes glassy and vacant.

Then Brock lets out a sudden laugh. “What? Can’t I ... I just ... Can’t I just express how much you—how much I—” He laughs again as he steps back. “You should see your face right now. You look so serious.”

Kyle stares at him in shock.

Then the longing surges forth again, swelling like a storm ready to fall from the heavens, to drench the earth. It roils and churns and grows by the second. Kyle feels every bit of it.

Suddenly Brock is upon him again without warning, this time grabbing hold of his head and pressing his lips to Kyle’s mouth with urgent force.

Kyle grunts out the word, “Stop, Brock,” against his lips. The kissing persists. “Brock,” he warns yet again.

Brock’s hand slides down the side of Kyle’s body like a rake of desperate fingertips, takes hold of his ass, gives it a desperate squeeze as he pulls their hips together with a quivering moan, a sad and desperate and pitiful moan, a whimper.

Kyle shoves Brock off of him with such power, Brock flies out into the street with a shout, struggles confusedly to find his footing, then slams onto his back in the middle of the road.

Silence falls between them.

Brock rolls onto his side. “The fuck ...?” He appears dazed as he sits up, blinks, then lifts a hand to his lips, touching them. “Did you—Did you just—?” He scrunches up his face. “Have you been workin’ out?” He lets out a sudden laugh, then falls back again, sprawled out on the road, still laughing.

Kyle stares down at him, sickened. This is the last thing he needed to deal with. Considering everything else on his mind, he doesn’t even have a spare second to pay this any more mind than he already has.

Even now, Kyle can’t help but feel sorry for him.

An hour later—and after an unfortunate incident involving Brock trying to pee in the kitchen that necessitates removing his clothes and starting an unintended load of wash—Kyle now sits at his dining room table, Brock knocked out and snoring on the couch, an arm hanging off. The ring, still safe in its Ziploc baggie, is returned to the center of the table where it once lived for six months. Kyle stares at the ring in a tired, numb trance.

Who is that shadowy asshole anyway? *What* is it?

Did it follow Kyle out to the desert that one morning? Did it fetch the ring after Elias took him away? Does it also have the letter, by chance? Did it read it? Does it know about Tristan? How long has it been following Kyle? Studying him?

The list of questions is dauntingly long.

When Brock stirs, finally waking up, it’s still dark outside. Also, he seems to discover with a start he’s wearing nothing but his boxers and socks.

“What the f-fuck?!” Brock shouts out, slurred, groggy.

Kyle is still sitting at the dining room table, within sight. He holds his phone, thumbing through all the missed calls and texts. They number over a hundred. He looks up. “You awake already? Thought you’d sleep to the morning, at least.”

“Where are my—??” Brock rolls over, nearly falls off the edge of the couch, rights himself. “Did you take off my—?”

“When we got back, you became ... a problem,” says Kyle. “You tried to pee in the kitchen sink. You ended up peeing on yourself instead, trying to use your left hand instead of your injured one. As I tried to stop you, you threw up all over your shirt. And me.”

Brock blinks. “Fuckin’ what?”

“Your clothes are in the dryer right now, should be done in another twenty or so.”

“I threw up on you?”

“You also kissed me.”

Brock sits up fully. “Huh?”

“By the side of the road. Near the park. Forced yourself on me. Is that how you treated your girlfriends in the past? Is that how you treated Jess? Did you even have any others?”

“I didn’t—I’d never fuckin’—” He can’t seem to commit to a sentence. “That’s horseshit.”

“It’s fine, you can pretend it didn’t happen, play the denial game. Wonder how many other times alcohol was your excuse. Maybe I really *should* have followed through with Becks’ offer of an AA meeting for you.”



Brock grabs his head, then drops his hands like they're as heavy as lead. "The hell happened ...?"

"I shoved you off of me pretty good. Went flying, all two hundred pounds of you, scraped your arm up good. Y'know, to go with your messed-up finger."

Brock blinks, checks his arm, finds the long red abrasion.

"Do you drink like this often?"

"No," mutters Brock automatically, still inspecting his arm. Then he lets out an irritated sigh. "Yeah."

"You mentioned you drink earlier, before the bar. I should have listened. Didn't realize you had a ... problem." Kyle sighs. "I guess there are more responsible things I could be doing for you right now, help you, be a friend, whatever. I guess I'm not feeling all that responsible at the moment." Kyle lifts the base of his pinky finger up, studies it. The skin, still blood red, in the shape of that ring, another tattoo to go with the rest. Lingering pain, just present enough to be annoying, has eaten at Kyle's patience since they returned from the bar, ever so persistent.

"Don't need an intervention," grumbles Brock. "I'm fine. I got God in my heart and ... and a roof over my ..." He grabs his head again, winces. "I'm A-OK."

"Not even a sorry?"

Brock drops a hand, turns. "What?"

Kyle sighs, shakes his head. "Nothing. You can sleep more. It's only a little bit after midnight." He checks the time. "Oh, it's past one already."

Brock peers back at the curtained window, squinting, then looks back at Kyle. “Did I really ... try to ... to kiss you?”

“Yep.”

Brock stares at the floor for a while in silence. It’s as if he’s trying to remember it. How their lips felt when they touched. If he enjoyed it, if he was happy, anything.

Kyle feels a flicker of Brock’s tortured emotion trying to attach to him. He brushes it off as best as he can. “Need a glass of water or something?”

“Nah,” mumbles Brock, nearly inaudible. Then he wrinkles his face up, glances around. “This your house?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Huh.” He rubs his eyes, then leans back on the couch. “It reminds me of ... *fuck, my head* ... Hey, you remember ... d’you remember those sleepovers we’d have? Man, we’d play games in our PJs, old Nintendo games, Kid Icarus, hard-ass Castlevania, fuckin’ Bomber Boy or whatever the hell it was called, and ...” He shakes his head. “Stayed up so late, no one cared, it was just us and those ... those games and ... and ... *wow*.” He closes his eyes, puts his hands on his head. “Think I’m still drunk, man. Are you *sure* I tried to kiss you? You’re not fuckin’ with me?”

“Go back to sleep,” says Kyle. “I’ll wake you later.”

“No, to hell with that, my ass is gonna ... gonna stay up.” He’s trying and failing not to slur his words. “Hey, do you got anythin’ good here? Could go for a whiskey sour. No. Corona. No, fuck that, you got any vodka?”

“We’re not drinking any more, you’ve had enough.”

“I decide when I stop. I decide when I’ve had enough.”

Kyle sighs. It’s no use. Drunk Brock is a dimension of his old friend he never had to deal with. Had he been around to experience college with him, this might be another story.

Maybe they’d have had many drunken make-out sessions.

That thought makes Kyle feel sad somehow.

Kyle’s phone buzzes. He glances down. Just another text from another who-knows.

“Someone blowin’ up your phone?”

Kyle shakes his head, sighs. “Ever since the video, I’ve been getting these calls, nonstop. Crazy people. Weirdos.” He runs his thumb across the screen, showing Brock the stream of calls and texts. Brock has to squint to see it, eyes still too blurry. “It’s annoying, being temporarily famous.”

Brock snorts. “That must suck.”

“It does.” Kyle glances at Brock. Is it too soon? He decides he doesn’t care. “Hey, uh, back at the bar, you said something about some Trujillos. About a casino you went to in Vegas.”

“Trujillo? Huh? Oh, fuck, right, *that* Trujillo.” Brock rolls his eyes and lets out a laugh. “New money in Vegas. Huge new resort casino, blew into existence outta nowhere about three or so years ago, took over a cushy spot in Vegas, rakin’ in millions. It’s all my dad talked about last time he went. Good things and bad. He still invested in the, the, the whole thing, I think. Got himself a permanent suite.”

Kyle leans forward. “Tell me more about the casino.”

Brock squints. “Why you wanna know?”

“Just tell me.”

“Hey.” Brock gets up, stumbles, sits right back down when he realizes it wasn’t a good idea to attempt standing. “I’m your friend, right? I’m your childhood friend. I’m not the one you give bullshit reasons and excuses to. You tell me your business. I got you.” He leans back and lifts his chin at Kyle. “Why you so interested in it?”

Kyle finds Brock’s sudden interest in opening up rather ironic, considering his insistence to stuff down and deny the kiss he forced on him. Kyle decides he doesn’t care. Finding Elias takes precedence over it all. “I’m looking for a friend.”

“Your friend got a gambling problem?” Brock snorts. “The casino, it’s ... *what the hell was it* ... Scarlet? ... Yeah, that’s it, the Scarlet Sands Hotel & Casino.”

“The Scarlet Sands?”

“Place is always booked, up to its eyes in waitlists, only the elite of the elite can get a room on the fly. ‘Course I always got a hookup, thanks to my old man. But I’ve only been the once, like I said. Once was enough.” He frowns at Kyle. “What? You plannin’ a vacation or some shit? Wait.” He lets out a sudden laugh and claps his hands together. “Fuck, now I get it! I get why you’re so interested in that place. It’s ‘cause of the whole Transylvanian bullshit, isn’t it. That’s why.”

Kyle is so lost. “Transylvanian what?”

“That’s the whole thing with Scarlet Sands. It’s all fuckin’ over-the-top Transylvanian shit. That’s the whole dark appeal. Like the place is a glorified coffin. It’s so stupid. Servers

walkin' around half-dressed, fake-ass bite marks on their necks or fangs in their mouths. Even got these ... these blood-themed drinks, blood margaritas ... it's all just cherry juice and vodka punch."

Kyle wrinkles up his face. "Seriously?"

"You don't wanna go there, trust me. Went once, a while ago, dragged to Vegas on another business thing with my dad. Trust me, God wouldn't touch that place. It's Satan's domain."

Kyle has relocated to the couch, sitting right next to Brock. The next question has Kyle's heart galloping. "Do you know ... Do you know an Elias Asad Trujillo? Is that name familiar?"

"Elias who ...?" Brock pinches the bridge of his nose. It apparently hurts to access his brain or perform much thought.

"Can you think? Please? For me?"

Brock gazes at Kyle. It seems to only now occur to him how close they're sitting on the couch.

That awareness has his heart jumping.

Kyle not only hears it literally. He also feels it, the emotion packed behind Brock's stony face, his incessant longing, and his stubborn suppression of said longing.

Suddenly the emotion is gone as Brock's eyes snap forward. "Wait a sec. Yeah. Elias. I think he's ..." Brock snaps his fingers at once. "Yeah, yeah, that's ringin' a bell! Elias. He's the son."

Kyle lifts his eyebrows. "The son ...?"

“Yeah, the son of, like, the big lady, the head lady. The one who owns and runs the whole thing, the whole Scarlet Sands.” He shakes his head. “Dunno her name. Met her just once.”

Kyle takes hold of Brock’s hands suddenly, startling him. “I need to get out there. I need to go to the Scarlet Sands.”

Brock appears distracted by the hand holding. “H-Huh?”

“I need to find Elias.”

“Wait. You actually know him?”

“He’s my friend I mentioned. He was living with me, here in this house. I think he was trying to get away from his family, but ... but they found him, they found him and took him back. He left me a note. Brock, I think he’s in trouble.”

“Wait, slow down.”

“That’s his coffee table you got your foot on.”

Brock apparently didn’t realize he propped a foot up on it. He drops it to the floor, then squints at the table and the teak-colored lamp. “You’re friends with ... with the boss lady’s son? But how? Why would he step foot in this shithole of a town?”

“Do you know where that casino is? I’ll drive.” Kyle gets to his feet. “Where’d you leave your keys, Brock?”

“Wait, wait, wait, you mean *now*??” Brock blinks rapidly. “You wanna drive out to Vegas right the fuck now?”

“It’s just a couple hours away. It’ll still be dark by the time we arrive.”

“I ... I didn’t say we—Didn’t you hear—?” Brock sputters in disbelief. “You can’t just show up at the Scarlet Sands.”

“Why not? You just said your dad has a permanent suite. That’s our excuse. *You*. You are the excuse.” Kyle speeds to the kitchen to grab his wallet, then heads to the other room. “You owe me this! Ah, here they are.” He returns from the laundry room with Brock’s keys. “I don’t have a car. We’ll take yours.”

“Dude, we can’t just—”

“Or you can stay here,” offers Kyle. “I’ll just wing it if I have to, figure out something else. Hide out around the other casinos until I find Elias. Either with or without you, I’m going to Vegas tonight.”

“You’re fuckin’ crazy.”

Kyle comes right up to Brock, crouches in front of him. “When it comes to the ones I love, I *am* crazy. I’m really, really fucking crazy.”

Brock’s eyes detach, mouth agape. “You ... love this guy?”

Kyle stares back.

He finds himself stunned.

Does he love Elias? Is that what this is about? Racing to reclaim the only person he has left in the world of any true and lasting value?

“I am your oasis,” decides Kyle.

Brock lifts an eyebrow. “You’re my what?”

“That’s why you came here. That’s why you felt safe, to talk to me, to open up. That’s why you kissed me. To get away from yourself. I’m your oasis, the place that saves your life in a stretch of misery and suffering that is the desert.”

“Are you callin’ my wife and child a stretch of misery and sufferin’?”

“Now I’m asking you to be ... my camel.” Kyle grabs Brock by the shoulders, brings his face close. “I need to get to Vegas. I need to save Elias. He’s stranded out there, a slave to the desert and the misery and the suffering. I have to save him. No one ... No one else ... cares about him.” Kyle’s gaze drops to Brock’s chest as he hears Elias’s words replay in his mind. “Everyone makes him feel like a problem, just trouble, something to deal with. He was happy when he was here, with me, together. I have to save him, Brock. He ... is *my* oasis. He is the reason I’m still alive. Literally. And yes,” he decides right then. “Yes, I love him. I love Elias Asad Trujillo.”

Brock is in a daze as he gazes back into Kyle’s eyes. It isn’t clear whether any of this overcomplicated metaphor is reaching Brock at all.

Until his eyes begin burning with tears welling in them. “I really did it all wrong, didn’t I? My whole life, did it all wrong.”

Kyle doesn’t have time for this. “Brock ...”

“Do you ever ... ever wish ...” He takes hold of Kyle’s shirt suddenly, tugging on it, bringing their faces closer. “You ever wish you could go back ... all the way back to the beginning? Do it all different?” He lets go of Kyle’s shirt and falls back on the couch, mouth slackened. “I’m such a piece of



shit, Kyle. I'm sorry I did that, forcin' myself on you, kissin' you, whatever you said I did. I ... I don't deserve to be your camel." He lets out a groan, closes his eyes. "Get me another beer, would you?"

"No."

A tear runs down Brock's cheek. He scowls. "Beer ..."

Kyle sits on the coffee table across from Brock. Despite all of his urgency, he sets aside his mission and gazes at his friend, at Brock, the boy he grew up with from the other side of their weatherworn Texas town, his teammate and once confidant.

"Listen to me," says Kyle. "I know that might be an unfair thing to ask of you, present blood alcohol level considered, but listen. I know things feel like a mess. Your life. Jessica. Choices you've made these past few decades. But it's never too late to change. To do better. Whether you're forty. Fifty. Eighty. You still have time on this earth, Brock. Your son depends on you."

"M-My son," Brock whimpers, sounding so pitiful.

"I can't promise things will turn out well. I'm not a shining example. I've made so many mistakes, Brock. Yes, maybe I'd ... maybe I'd have done things differently, too. Very differently. I have regrets. I live with them every day. Every fucking minute. But we can't let our regret destroy us. What a waste of the time we've got left, right?"

Just then, a connection erupts into existence, flooding Kyle with Brock's heavy longing and pain. It endures for a handful of seconds before at once fading, broken again.

Perhaps it's the alcohol that makes the connection slippery somehow, but in those few seconds, Kyle felt everything woeful in Brock's heart.

But through the woe, he also sensed hope. "You and I ..." says Kyle. "I believe we can become friends again. We can be *us* again. Wouldn't you want that?"

Brock closes his eyes, grits his teeth, then pushes his keys to Kyle's chest. "Let's just get the fuck outta here already."

## 23.

### *Down to Trouble Town.*

—•—

The road stretches ahead, dark and unknowing.

In the passenger seat, Brock, arms crossed, head rolled back with his tongue out, snoring.

Kyle found a satellite radio station playing 90s alternative to drown out said snoring, and it's a particular song playing that has his mind drawn back to the old days.

A moment with his headphones and his Walkman, Tristan next to him, close, his soft, misty blue eyes under a floppy hat, asking to listen to his music.

It was this song they shared that day, this particular song.

Why is he missing Tristan suddenly?

“D’you remember ...” mumbles Brock.

Kyle flinches. “I didn’t realize you were awake.”

“D’you remember the one Halloween when we ditched the dumb candy route my mom planned out for us? We went to the strip mall by the old movie theater. Your brother was with us, little Kaleb, always followin’ us. We went to that psychic.”

Kyle slowly nods. “Yeah. I remember.”

“Remember what she said? I’d have a wife, a son, and a best friend. I’d love ‘em all ... and I’d abandon ‘em all. Huh.”

Brock scoffs, slaps a hand to his forehead, gives his eyes a rub. “What a fuckin’ fraud, that old bag.”

Kyle thinks back on it. “She also said my brother was going to live a long life. Just like me.”

Brock turns to him. “Ah, shit. I’m sorry, man.”

“It’s okay. I like to think psychic readings are just warnings. Not prophesy. Maybe the entire thing was meant for me. She wanted to tell me I could’ve saved him. We could both be living long lives right now ... had I been more careful.”

“Nah, don’t go down that road, that what-if road, it’s a ... a fuckin’ dangerous, waste-of-time road.” Brock shifts in his seat with a grunt. “Bitch had it wrong, anyway. I didn’t abandon my son. Wife, maybe, but not my son. I’d never abandon that boy.”

Kyle doesn’t know the first thing about this new Brock, but he nods anyway and says, “Of course not. You love your son.”

“More than anything.”

They continue for a while in silence, the darkness and the road hypnotizing and eerily calm.

“Maybe it’s the ring.”

Kyle glances at him. “Ring?”

“Yeah. You’re still hangin’ on to it, I saw. That pinky ring, it’s sitting on your table back at the house. Didn’t Kaleb give it to you? I remember.” Brock shrugs. “Maybe a part of him is with that ring, livin’ on or somethin’, stayin’ by your side.”

Kyle doesn't respond. He wonders if such a thing can be said about everyone and everything, all the items that anyone has ever left behind, just ghosts, clinging, lingering.

The silence persists. The purring of the engine. The hum of the road beneath them. The darkness.

Kyle asks, "Why'd you bring that up?"

"Hmm? Oh, 'bout the psychic?" Brock snorts. "Just gettin' lost down memory lane lately, thinkin' about all the adventures we went on, you and I. That one Halloween, it just stuck with me for some reason. Wonder if that hag is still alive. Probably buried in that cemetery down the street from your old house by now. She's another agent of Satan, I'm sure of it. I don't mourn agents of the Devil, they all get what's comin' to 'em." He looks out the window.

Kyle frowns. "You're really serious about all this God stuff, huh? Jessica got to you."

"This isn't Jessica gettin' to nothin'. I told you, God saved me, God turned my life around."

"If Tristan and that psychic are both works of Satan, then what am I?"

Brock stares at the side of Kyle's face, as if offended such a question can be asked. But he answers softly. "You're a victim here, Kyle. You're not a work of the Devil." He puts a hand on Kyle's shoulder, gives it a squeeze. "God's on your side now."

Kyle gazes at the road. "Alright," he decides to say lamely, perhaps hoping some part of that is true.

Brock clumsily pulls out his phone with his other hand, as if a thought just occurred to him. He squints at it. “Not even a message. Not a call. Nothin’.” He sighs, kicks back in his seat. “Love you too, Jess. Hope you’re havin’ some sweet dreams.”

They continue down the road without interruption. Kyle’s phone is affixed to the dash with the Maps app guiding the way. There’s an hour left until their destination. Then fifty minutes.

Forty. Thirty.

The sky begins to glow with the approach of the Las Vegas skyline. Kyle turns down the radio at once, focusing ahead, his heart picking up pace the moment he senses the big city within reach. His grip on the steering wheel tightens to the point of discomfort. The road has since opened to the highway, wide, full of lanes of traffic. Even at half past four, many vehicles are still on the road, inbound and outbound.

Brock stirs, looks up. “Whoa. When did we get there?”

“Give me directions,” says Kyle. “Never been to Vegas.”

“Really? Not even once?” Brock yanks Kyle’s phone off of the dashboard mount, squints as he pulls up the directions. “Just keep goin’.”

“What’s the exit?”

“Not for quite a bit, hold your horses. Exit 75, Las Vegas Boulevard, keep goin’. Hey,” he says suddenly, slapping his hand on Kyle’s shoulder. “Look at us on an adventure together, catchin’ up on all the time we missed in each other’s lives. I’m so ...” Brock’s voice tightens. “I’m so glad to have you back.”

“Think it’s time you hold *your* horsies,” says Kyle, “before you go ballin’ like a baby again.”

“‘Ballin’? Did you just say ‘ballin’? Aw, I knew it, the Texan is still in you, Arizona didn’t burn it all up.”

Kyle starts to feel the bubbly aftermath of Brock’s emotion as a connection tries to form. He shrugs Brock’s hand off of his shoulder to cease that right away. “Directions. Focus.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll give you directions, bud.” Brock grins.

To the tune of another 90s alternative hit, they head down the highway, take the exit, and make their way down the neck of the Las Vegas Strip. Kyle drives slower than he should, eyes on the glittering buildings, crowds that still linger out even this late, and dark nooks between the hotels and casinos. Walkways and concrete overpasses connect all of the sidewalks, the streets helpfully devoid of people and pesky interruptive crosswalks.

“Over there, take a right,” instructs Brock, who has become surprisingly alert, considering he’s likely still fighting off the alcohol—or else his tolerance is proving higher than Kyle first thought. “Gettin’ close, almost there, just a bit further.”

The next corner they turn, the world changes. The glitz of the Vegas Strip is traded at once for gloom. Kyle stares ahead at three towers, triangular in shape and glassy, the color of which lands hardest with Kyle—like obsidian, black, impenetrable, but with deep red undertones, sinister and daunting. The towers all protrude from a wide, castle-like complex of stones the color of gunmetal grey and demonic

red, opulent in appearance, yet too far removed from reality to be truly representative of anything but its own twisted fantasy. Even the red-leafed, grey-barked trees lining the way to the entrance seem imported from some alien planet where blood is the only sustenance, even for the grass and bugs and earth.

Kyle can't be sure whether he's using his gift or not, but all around him, he feels eyes. He feels mocking laughter. He feels bitterness and spite. This is a dark and evil place.

"Isn't it stupid as fuck?" mutters Brock, at once ruining the atmosphere. "Wait 'til you see inside. It's like Satan took a shit all over everything."

Kyle finds himself grateful for Brock's boorishness. It helps deflect some of the cold dread making a home in his stomach. "Yeah, stupid as fuck," he agrees absently, driving up the road to the front of the building. Soon, they are under the long, wide entrance canopy, lined with black thorny vines and blood red roses. He comes to a stop by the curb. "Do they only do valet?"

"I'll take care of it," says Brock, hopping out of the car.

Kyle turns off the car and steps out, keys in hand. He takes in the diabolical décor. Statues of odd, regal-looking men with fangs and demonic winged women in artful poses hug the tall doors leading in. Electric lanterns line the walls like torches that burn forever—or at least until someone fails to pay a bill. Kyle imagines there would be more activity here during the day or evening when normal guests are checking in, but this late, it seems they're the only people here, save for one car at the other end of the entrance, a woman smoking a cigarette on a bench to the side of the car, and an old man in a



suit on a cell phone by one of the statues, pinching his forehead and looking annoyed.

“Kyle, the keys,” calls out Brock, who returns with a young man. The valet attendant wears a red and black leather uniform that is as lavish as it is tacky, over-sexualized with cutouts at the chest and sides. His dead eyes compete with Kyle’s own. “This guy’ll take care of my baby. Hey, you bring it back without a scratch,” says Brock, “and I’ll double your tip.”

In a dull voice, the valet attendant replies, “We’re happy to have you back, Mr. Hastings.” He takes the keys from a rather reluctant Kyle, slips into the car, then calmly takes off. Kyle is still watching him drive away when Brock throws an arm over his back and steers him to the front doors. The woman on the bench keeps smoking her cigarette, aloof. The old man on the phone turns away with a huff.

The lobby is colossal and unexpectedly bright. The floors are white and reflective, contrasting with the unsettlingly matte black-and-red walls and impossibly high ceiling, which makes it feel as if there is no ceiling at all. Noise from the casino far ahead echoes around the lobby, disorienting. Kyle notices an enormous metal enclosure in the center of the lobby bursting with otherworldly plants and exotic flowers, hugged by one of those creepy red-leafed trees with greyish bark. At a glance, he assumes everything in that enclosure is poisonous.

Isn’t it always the prettiest things in nature that are?

The three women and one man at the front desk all wear the same sort of sexualized red and black leather uniforms,

each of them just as dead in the eyes as the valet attendant, each of them silent and still.

“It’s all an act,” says Brock as they approach. “Gotta stay in character, act like they’re all dead and shit, so dumb. See what I mean? Hey,” he greets one of the women at the counter, who regards him with a twitch of her tiny red heart-shaped lips. “I’m Brock, Brock Hastings. I need the key to my father’s room. Got a pal with me, he’ll be staying.” He slaps his ID on the counter with his damaged hand, splinted finger sticking out. After she gives it a look, she returns her eyes to the computer to type away. “I’ll get us some of their crappy room service, bud. It’s overpriced garbage, like I said, but the BLTs are decent.”

Her eyes flick to his, then back to the computer. Kyle feels annoyance radiating off of her. He doesn’t blame the clerk.

“This place is a fuckin’ amusement park,” says Brock after they’ve retrieved their keys. They’re passing down a tall, wide hallway. “And celebrities pay high dollar for this kind of gaudy shit?” He snorts and shakes his head. “Can’t believe my dad’s so hard for this place. Apparently one of the LA Chargers made a streaming thing online out of his visit, shit went viral, basically an endorsement from the sports world, of all places. I think I might change my mind about those BLTs. Maybe I can get Pizza Hut to deliver to the lobby, y’know, just to be a big fuck-you sorta thing. You should see the resort pool here. It’s red, Kyle, the water, it’s fuckin’ red. A blood pool. Actually, I think it’s just a trick of the pool lighting, but still ...”

Kyle finds he doesn't have the patience for a history lesson about this place. "We're not just here as guests to fuck around. We're here on a rescue mission, remember?"

Brock snorts. "'Rescue mission'. Do you hear yourself? We aren't the FBI. I think your friend's plenty fine. His mom runs the whole thing. He's loaded. What the hell can he want for? He's basically Prince of Vegas. Hell, I bet he'd set you up with your own suite if you guys really are in *love* and all that."

Kyle sighs. "Brock, I'm being serious. We need to—"

"We're goin' up to my dad's suite," he states. "I'm takin' a shower. You're eatin' the room service, no need to repay me, I probably make fifty times what you make at that bar, and yeah, the shit here's that expensive." They come to a stop in front of a set of elevators. Brock jabs the button. "And tomorrow when we wake up and I got a clear head, we can look for lover boy."

Kyle stares at him. "Tomorrow??"

When the elevator dings, Kyle notices a set of red glowing eyes in a golden face above the doors. He grimaces at it as the doors slide open, revealing a tall gaunt bellman standing inside. The bellman gives a slight bow and asks, "Which floor do y—"

"Hastings suite, thirty-third," Brock cuts him off. "Thank the Lord you're here to push a fuckin' button for me. This jerk broke my hand with his face," he says, giving his hand with the splinted finger a demonstrative wave.

The bellman smiles mildly, taps the button, then folds his gloved hands. Kyle gives him an apologetic wince as they step

inside, the doors close, and the elevator slowly ascends.

Kyle speaks quietly to Brock. “I need to find him *tonight*.”

“You’re gonna shit when you see the size of the suite,” says Brock. “Even got obscuring shutters that cover the windows, if I’m remembering it right. Am I remembering it right?” he asks the bellman, who smiles plainly and nods. “Yep, thought so.”

Kyle closes his eyes, jaw tightening with frustration.

The doors open to a triangular atrium of sorts, elevators located in its center. Only six doors, two on each wall, lead to what Kyle presumes to be the suites. Apparently knowing the way, Brock heads straight for one of the doors, letting himself in. Kyle steps inside behind Brock, who makes his way into the massive, pristinely-kept suite complete with a kitchen, dining area, and wall-to-wall glass windows overlooking Vegas.

Kyle pays it little mind, not exactly in the mood to be awestruck. “Do you think the owner even lives here?” he asks. “Does her son? Do you know?”

“No idea. Probably up in a penthouse if they do.” Brock flicks on a kitchen light, squints when he realizes how bright it is, then shuts it off in favor of another. Decorative sconces lining the walls come on, emitting a soft glow. “Better.”

“You seem to know your way around this place,” says Kyle as he measures his patience. “Weren’t you only here one time?”

“I was. And that one time happened to last for a month and a half.” He rummages through the kitchen, checking drawers. “Wifey and I were goin’ through a rough patch. My dad had a project goin’ on. I chose to stay and help with it than be home gettin’ the bible—” He suppresses a burp, fist pressed to his mouth. “—whacked over my head, smack, smack, smack. Jessica loves to do that, knockin’ the God into me. Or the Devil out. I love the woman. Even if she doesn’t love me.” He opens one cabinet, then another. “The hell do they keep the glasses?”

Kyle comes up to his side and presses shut the next cabinet Brock tries to open. “If you stayed here a month, then surely you know something about where Elias might be. That is the only reason I’m here. To find him. Not eat bad room service or be your gambling buddy or whatever you got on your mind.”

“Fuck gambling. I hate gambling. Don’t you want to kick back a little first? Hang with your old buddy? Hang with me?”

“I need to find Elias.”

“And then what?”

Kyle stops. “Huh?”

“What happens after you find your Prince Charming?” He leans against the counter, glassy eyes on Kyle’s. “Then I’m out of your life again? Used me just to get your Elias back? Just for a ride to Vegas? Don’t you have any appreciation for what I’m doin’ here? For you?”

It’s instant, the pulsing waves of indignation that flood into Kyle’s system from Brock’s. Instant and asphyxiating. If

there's anything about Brock that certainly hasn't changed since they were kids, it's his crushing insecurities. Kyle was a fool to think twenty-seven years was enough to outgrow them.

Still, maybe a little appreciation is warranted. "Thanks."

Brock makes a face. "That's it? 'Thanks'?"

"I do appreciate it. If it wasn't for you, I'd still be stuck at home right now, emotional and frustrated and lost. I wouldn't have even known where to start looking for Elias."

"Seriously? Haven't you ever heard of Google? What the hell, man? You even had his full name."

"I *did* look him up," insists Kyle. "He is a ghost, no results, nothing. You have any idea how many Trujillos exist?"

Brock seems to find that strange for a moment. "Maybe it's his mother." He moves away from the counter up to the island where a row of three barstools sit. He slides onto one with half a grunt, folds his arms on the island. "I can relate to that."

"What do you mean?"

"If she's anything like my old man, she pro'ly doesn't want to risk her son doin' anything stupid, tainting the name of her business, gettin' out to the press. So she eliminated his presence online completely. I've had my own issues." He shakes his head, pinches the bridge of his nose. "Phew, I was a pain in my dad's ass back in my twenties. Be glad you weren't a part of my life back then, Kyle—shoot, I'd've taken you straight down, all the way down to trouble town." He lets out a sudden laugh, looks up at Kyle. "The mess you're talkin' to

right now, this drunken-ass mess, it's nothin' compared to what I used to be."

"Elias isn't like that, though," says Kyle suddenly. "There's no reason for his mother to hide him like that."

"Don't be so sure you know the first thing 'bout his mom." Brock gazes at Kyle. "And for that matter, don't be so sure you know who this Elias guy really is. Maybe some secrets should stay secrets." His face tightens. "Maybe there's a real reason he didn't tell you who he is."

Kyle thinks about his very first impression of Elias. Sitting on the other side of the glass in a police station. Busted lip. Black eye. Spots of blood on the collar of his white shirt.

"Shower time for me," announces Brock. "Nothin' sobers me up like a cold-ass blast under a waterfall showerhead. Hey, order us some grub," he adds after sliding off the stool and sauntering across the room. "I'm still not opposed to Pizza Hut if you wanna give a fuck-you to this place. Otherwise, use that phone over there, order anything, it's on me, I don't care what the hell it is, I'll eat Dracula's dick I'm so hungry."

He heads off, leaving Kyle in the kitchen, head bowed, full of agitation and stinging doubts.

Apparently Brock's memory is too short to recall Kyle's dislike for 'normal stuff', even if nothing on the room service menu of a place like this can deign to be described with such a banal adjective as 'normal'.

Kyle doesn't order anything. He's not going to heed the half-assed warnings from his drunk ex-best friend, either.

Brock doesn't know Elias. Brock has no right to have an opinion.

Elias needs Kyle's help. That's Kyle's one and only purpose for coming here at all. And nothing can get in the way of that.

Not even himself.

As soon as Kyle hears the noise of water running, he heads straight back to the door and sees himself out of the suite. The elevator dings, Kyle steps on, says hello to the mild-mannered bellman, then rides down to the lobby again.

It's there that he starts combing every hallway, corner, and lounge of the building. The restaurants are closed at this hour, and the twenty-four-hour "bloody burger" joint holds no one of interest, so he makes his way to the other side of the building with no hint of guidance but his own gut. He has to cross the wide, daunting lobby, where he catches eyes with the people at the front desk, just the same four from before, chatting away, out of character. When one of them spots him, they all draw silent, faces turning to him.

Kyle is discomforted by the attention—and a rather sudden realization. Could he be recognized from the viral video? Why does that possibility only just now occur to him?

He ducks away and makes a sharp turn, plunging into the moody, dimly-lit casino nearby. The energy he feels changes at once, growing colder and bitter, reflecting the emotions in the room. There are a lot of people at the machines, populating the card tables, throwing dice, calling out bets, more than Kyle had estimated. His heart races as he hurries along. "I don't belong here," he mumbles to himself, losing his nerve. "What



am I doing? How'd I expect to find him? Have I lost my mind?"

He doesn't have a plan. This complex is impossibly large. Even the casino itself seems to go on and on, one giant room expanding into another, then another. It isn't long before he feels completely turned around, unsure where even the lobby is.

Brock is probably finished with his shower by now, crashed on the sofa, or ordering everything on the room service menu. Maybe Kyle should have waited and convinced Brock to come with him. Something about Brock's attitude and rude dismissal of this place and its vibe helped Kyle stay grounded somehow.

He passes a narrow section with mirrors that line the walls. With a glance, he's greeted by his reflection. Desperation and stress paint his pale, sweaty face. He doesn't look like the kind of money or clientele this place is used to, sticking out like an unbitten thumb. Every step he takes, the more he feels doubt. Every set of eyes he meets seems to have spotted him first, watching, and the amount of eyes is legion.

Was this a mistake? Coming here at all?

Should he have listened to what Elias wrote in the letter?

Machines all around him ring with their digital melodies and fanfares, making it difficult to reach out with his senses. He feels incapacitated and blind as he makes his way around the room, uncertain what he's even trying to sense, to see, to hear. He never appreciated how often he relies on his senses until now when they're rendered dull and useless by the noise.

What is he even listening for? Looking for? Elias, sitting at one of the machines? Elias, walking around like a supervisor? Maybe the answer wouldn't be out here, waiting in the open to be discovered. Kyle needs to find a way into the innards of the Scarlet Sands, somewhere out of sight.

The more he thinks, the more foolish he feels.

So he decides not to think.

He stops and closes his eyes instead.

All around the room, in every direction, he feels anxiety. The coldness of fleeting hope. Dreams of fame, bubbling and desperate. Wanton longing for riches, luxury, and power. For sex. For relief from sadness. Prickling bitterness. Loneliness.

Kyle is determined to feel him. To find him.

Tristan could do something like this, couldn't he?

During their twenty six years together, the two of them make little use of their gifts, staying hidden away, avoiding all people. But back in school, before everything, when they had to endure the presence of others, Tristan seemed unstoppable. He claimed that one time in class, he could hear a heartbeat from down the hallway. He heard Mr. Reed stealing jockstraps and socks from the locker room. He heard people having sex in a closet. From across the school, he heard everyone's secrets. Is it so unreasonable to think Kyle can do something similar?

"Reach for me," Kyle mutters to himself, determined. "I'm here, Elias. I came for you. Reach out to me, if you can. Put out something I can hear, something I know is you. I promise I will know. Please, anything, Elias, just ... reach."

He senses more desperation. More sadness. More coldness. All around him as he reaches out with his gift, he drowns in a sea of shattered dreams and crumbling hope and bitterness.

This is Hell, this vile place, this building. It has trapped all the saddest and most broken of souls.

Kyle grimaces as he bears it. Tears sting his eyes. It's nearly too much, feeling everything in the room. He bears it anyway, fighting off the ache, the despair, the depression. "R-Reach," he begs, voice choked. "Please reach, damn it," he growls, a tear letting loose, trickling down his cheek. "Elias ..."

Then, a lone note of calmness.

A sturdy, certain calmness, ringing out like a tiny bell.

As warm as a hearth. As a home-cooked meal. Tacos at two in the morning. A mischievous yet welcoming smile.

Kyle turns his body, eyes still closed, until that sensation is the strongest. He reaches with his gift toward that smile, that lone voice cutting through the gloom, that voice he knows.

Then, a connection.

Kyle's eyes flap open, shocked. With as much certainty as grabbing hold of a long length of rope, the rung of a ladder, he has connected to that voice. It nearly feels physical, as if it is something he can hold with his hand.

"Elias," breathes Kyle, certain of it. "I found you. I actually found you. I ..." He clings to that warmth, that all-too-familiar warmth that can only be Elias. He's known it

intimately before. “You’re here,” he says in disbelief. “You’re really here.”

But where, exactly? How far away did Kyle’s gift reach?

Kyle starts moving before he means to, now with the help of his attachment. The moment it feels weak, he pivots, makes way in a corrected direction. Several times, machines and walls are in the way, and he has to circumvent them. His heart swells with hope, with real hope, as he hurries along.

He will find Elias at last.

He is certain of it, as the connection grows and grows.

Kyle turns a corner, then stops abruptly when he sees a pair of employees standing by a propped-open utility stairwell door, atmosphere-annihilating fluorescent light spilling out. The two seem to be arguing about something to do with vacation time, the female employee holding the door open, the male one with arms crossed, looking nervous. Fake bite marks on their necks, shadowy makeup around their eyes. “I can’t ask for more time,” says the female. “Why not?” “I’m due for a raise this month, I have to keep low.” “If you still wanna hit Long Beach with me, I gotta know by tomorrow.” “Well, I guess you can count me out.” “But you said last weekend you’d go with me.” “Not if Jeff’s coming, that man whore.” “Okay, but what about me?”

Kyle lingers near a slot machine, feigning interest in it, as the employees continue to bicker. His heart is pulling him right to that door, beyond the back wall of the casino, somewhere in the bowels of the building where the guests don’t belong.

“Damn it, I don’t even care about Long Beach, it was never about fucking Long Beach, I just ...” The male employee looks on the verge of tears, the female, bewildered. “I just wanted to spend time with you. Just us. Away from work. I ... I like you.”

The female stares back at him, blank-faced.

Kyle grits his teeth. What an annoyingly inconvenient time for a puppy-dog love confession.

“Kyle, what the fuck?”

Kyle spins. Standing there is a freshly-showered Brock, his hair messed up, half-dry, in a t-shirt, shorts, and fuzzy slippers.

As if things couldn’t get worse. “Please go back.”

“Are you seriously down here lookin’ for him?”

“No, I thought I’d try my luck at the penny slots,” Kyle spits back sarcastically. “Just let me do what I came here to do. I know he’s here. I can sense him. I just need to get to him.”

“Sense him? You serious? You can do that?”

Kyle sighs. “Just go, please. You order the room service. I’ll be back to eat it up with you, promise.”

“Bullshit.”

Spurred by Brock’s sudden arrival, Kyle pushes away from the machine and heads straight to the pair of employees by the door. “Hey,” he greets them halfheartedly. “Ma’am, his feelings are genuine and pure. He doesn’t want to one-night-stand you like Jeff did, he actually wants a relationship, the real thing, and he has for a while. And you, sir,” he says,

facing the other one, “need to give her space. She likes you, but has a distrust of most men because of her past, and maybe whisking her off to Long Beach alone isn’t the best tactic to securing her trust. Now if you two will excuse me, I need to find my friend. Don’t worry, I’ve got, uh, proper clearance or whatever.” Kyle slips between the startled, wide-eyed pair of them, entering the utility door.

As he hurries up the stairs, he hears the male employee call up at him, “Uh, sir? I don’t think you’re allowed to—Sir? Sir?” But Kyle ignores it, reconnecting to his heart, chasing Elias up the brightly-lit stairs, everything white and unremarkable. With each flight ascended, he feels his heart swell more and more, telling him he’s going in the right direction.

He stumbles as he spills out of the stairwell, falls to the floor, then gets back to his feet, shaking with nerves. This hall is as bright and dull as the stairwell was, fluorescents from one end to the next. Some upper floor, too bright, his eyes stinging with office lighting. He quickly makes his way, listening to his heart, which drums with urgency. He turns a corner, keeps on going. A door opens somewhere behind him, and he senses the person grow still, watching him with concern. He even feels that concern, now multitasking with his reach, connected both with Elias and the presence at his back. Was he capable of this before? Is desperation making an expert out of him?

“Excuse me, sir?” calls out the person from behind, a young woman. When Kyle keeps on, ignoring her, she calls out again. “Who are you? Excuse me? I asked who you are.”

Kyle pushes through a door, spilling into another hallway. It's then he hears someone shout from behind. Kyle doesn't look. He breaks into a run. "Hey, you!" someone shouts out. Footsteps at his back, chasing him. Now Kyle is running faster, determined, fists clenched.

Rounding another corner, Kyle stops short, coming face-to-face with a security officer. "Hey, stop right there! Identify yourself!" says the man with authority.

Sadly, the man is only able to make it through half of those words before Kyle shoves him out of the way with a strength the man clearly was not anticipating, brushed aside like a twig and crashing into the wall. "Sorry!" shouts Kyle over a shoulder as he races ahead, rounds another corner.

The warmth grows ever warmer. It is a literal game of hot and cold. Elias, the target. Kyle's reach, the clue-giver.

Kyle's *Reach*. Is it too soon to name his gift? No, he decides in this moment, his mighty heart aflame with its power. Tristan had his Lull. Kyle will have his Reach. Suddenly, the name feels perfect. "I will find you, Elias," he says to himself, inspired.

The next set of doors he shoves through, he is startled to find himself on the roof, all the stinging fluorescents gone, the distant glow of Vegas now surrounding him. He slows, in awe of the sudden shift in atmosphere as he walks across the smooth surface of the expansive rooftop. There are plants up here, rows of potted plants, colorful flowers, none of them looking poisonous or sinister. Covered area with tables and chairs, a meeting area for top-tier guests, executives, people of

importance. A few lights here and there, hanging lanterns, strings of bulbs artfully hung. Kyle slowly circles the area.

Ahead, he spots a bench near the edge of the roof, looking off in the direction of the Las Vegas Strip some distance away.

On that bench sits a young man, his back to Kyle.

Kyle's heart pulses triumphantly. He already knows.

“E-Elias?”

Elias turns. Elias, in a crisp white dress shirt, unbuttoned at the top, free of blood. Elias and his warm brown eyes. He does not seem able to believe what he sees. “Kyle ...?”

A smile spills over Kyle's face. “Hey there, stud.”

“What're you doing? I ... I told you not to—”

“I know. Guess I don't follow instructions well. You look really nice, by the way.”

Softness touches Elias's face as he slowly smiles. It's as if the comfort and joy of hiding out at Kyle's house in Nowhere is returned at once, just by the two of them being in each other's proximity again. There is hope in his eyes, in both their eyes.

Then Elias's smile vanishes. “Kyle, who's that?”

Kyle doesn't need to look. “Probably security. I gave them quite a workout, chasing me down a hall or two, maybe up one of the stairwells. Nothing wrong with a healthy dose of cardio, right? Good for the heart.”

“That isn't our security or anyone I know.”

Kyle frowns, then turns.



A set of misty blue eyes meet his.

Cold fingertips drag down his face, softly, sweetly.

Kyle's eyes rock back, the world twists away.

# 24.

## *All Kinds of Bad.*

—•—

*Wake up.*

*Wake up.*

*Go ahead, wake up.*

*Yes, you.*

*Can you try to open your eyes for me?*

*If not for me, perhaps for your friends. They've been waiting so patiently for you.*

*Well, perhaps 'patiently' isn't the right word.*

*To be honest, they are actually in quite a state of distress. Totally inconsolable. Like children, really.*

*But compared to you and me, they are children, aren't they?*

*You and I, we are timeless.*

*We are forever.*

*We are the opposite of temporary.*

*I might recommend you wake up soon, at the very least to gather your thoughts before you meet Markadian, Lord of Vegasyn.*

*That's his real name, by the way. I didn't make that up.*

*He also demands the title always be said with his name.*

*A bit overly dramatic, don't you think?*

*I have never been one for theatrics. I suggested once that he go by just Mark. I regretted suggesting that immediately.*

*Are you ready to wake up yet? No?*

*Anyway, I'm afraid I may not be able to help you out of this one, my love. I'm sorry.*

*These people, these bureaucrats of our world, they can be terrible.*

*I wished I could have kept you away from their clutches.*

*I suggested we stay hidden forever. I suggested you stay hidden forever. I suggested we live on our own in the woods, in a town lost to time, in the wilderness, even Canada, hidden forever and ever.*

*Now you're there. And I'm here.*

*And you still won't wake up.*

*Perhaps this is my fault. I wasn't serious enough. I expected you to take me seriously, to stay hidden, and instead you broke the internet with your heroic theatrics, you angered Markadian, Lord of—really, it's so exhausting to say the whole title—and now look at you, in this prickly pickle.*

*I expected you to heed my words. To understand, to learn.*

*But you won't even heed my suggestion to wake up right now.*

*Of course, it is only a suggestion, you're not obligated to obey. You can stay sleeping if you want. Just for a while longer. A little while.*

*You probably have a lot of questions for me.*

*You might even hate me. I'd understand.*

*God, how I've missed your pretty eyes.*

*By the way, did you know that I—*

“WAKE THE FUCK UP, KYLE!”

Kyle stirs, blinking rapidly.

Brock's panicked face, haggard, bags under his eyes, hair a mess, hovers over his own.

Kyle sits up at once, blinks away his sleep, looks around. A boardroom of an office, small, a rectangular table pushed to the wall next to a stack of chairs, a dry erase board, one door.

“What ... What happened?” hisses Kyle.

Brock, still in his t-shirt, shorts, and one slipper—the other must have gotten lost somewhere—breathes a sigh of relief. “I'd thought you fuckin' died.”

“Obviously he didn't, he was breathing the whole time.”

Kyle turns the other way and finds Elias seated on the floor right next to him, back against the wall, then realizes belatedly that his head must have been resting on Elias's lap.

Elias offers a tired smile. “Hey, Kyle.”

“E-Elias!” Kyle turns completely to face him, on his knees, takes hold of Elias's face and puts a kiss on his lips. He feels the warmth surge into his system like liquid gold. He can't even be sure if it's from his Reach, from Elias, or his own joy and relief at their reunion. “Elias, I'm so fucking glad to see you.”

Elias kisses him right back, fingers clawing into his shirt. “I sure missed that mouth. *Damn*, you’re a good kisser.”

“What happened?” asks Kyle. “I was on the roof with you, and ... and I turned around and saw ...”

Cool fingertips brushing against his face. Misty blue eyes.

Then that voice in his dream.

Except it wasn’t a dream. He hasn’t been capable of dreams for twenty-seven years. That was—

“Tristan.”

Elias’s grip on Kyle’s shirt eases. “Tristan?”

“Tristan,” Kyle repeats. “He’s ... He’s alive.”

Brock stumbles toward him. “The fuck did you just say?”

Kyle stares off, as if trying to remember the face he saw just before everything went dark. “He put me out. He used his Lull on me. I saw him. And then I ... I heard him. Just now. While I was asleep, I heard him speaking to me, through my mind ...”

“You must be fuckin’ high,” says Brock, “because he’s dead. You told me he’s dead and gone.”

“It’s okay,” says Elias softly, quickly, putting an arm around Kyle and pulling him against his side protectively. “I got you. He can’t hurt you anymore. We’re gonna be alright.”

“You fuckin’ kidding me?” barks Brock, pacing the room in a panic. “We’re so fuckin’ far from bein’ alright. Those freaks locked us in a room in God-knows-where. And now Tristan is back? Fuckin’ Tristan?”

“Huh?” Kyle looks at Elias. “We’re not at Scarlet Sands?”

Elias shakes his head with a sigh. “After you passed out on the rooftop, I was similarly captured. I don’t have a clue what happened after that. But when I woke up, I was in some kind of van or limo or something. Right next to you and *that* clown.”

“Fuck you, I’m no clown, you’re the clown,” barks Brock.

“You seriously went to high school with this dude? Never mind,” says Elias, then calmly carries on. “We were all tied up. Both of you were still asleep. Don’t know where we were taken, how long we were out, but this isn’t Scarlet Sands for sure.” He glances around. “If I had to guess, I’d say we’re in another part of Vegas, some office building, maybe an abandoned one.”

Brock crouches in front of Kyle. “How do you know that freak bastard is still alive? Tell me.”

Kyle is still trying to recall what Tristan said. “I saw him. For half a second. Maybe less than that. I saw his unmistakable eyes. I felt his fingers on my face.” Kyle looks off with a sudden realization. “That’s the first time he ever used his Lull on me.”

“His fuckin’ what?”

“His gift. What he used on you,” says Kyle, gazing up at a wide-eyed Brock. “Putting others to sleep with a touch.”

Brock staggers back, falls, lands on his ass, stares ahead at Kyle without blinking. His emotional landscape has become a forest of horror and forgotten nightmares returning to him.

Elias rubs Kyle's arm, brings his face close. "Don't worry. Tristan can't hurt you."

"I don't think he intends to," admits Kyle. "He's worried about me. He didn't want this to happen."

"Well, it did," barks Brock, "and it's your fault. Your *lover boy* here—yeah, we met, got real nice and acquainted while you were takin' your little nap—he's apparently involved with these freaks. And now Tristan's got somethin' to do with it?"

Elias lifts an eyebrow. "I don't know who these people are, but they aren't anyone I'm involved with."

"That so? What about your mom?" Brock spits back. "Is it *her* who's caught up with these motherfuckers? Why should I even believe anything you say anyway? You're all fuckin' liars."

Elias thinks it over, calmly shakes his head. "No. My mom, she has her secrets, she has her questionable ethics ... but she'd have told me about something like this." He peers at the door, pensive. "I feel like this is something else."

Brock, seemingly unprovoked, goes right back into panic mode, appearing on the verge of either crying or melting down, emotions twisting his face. Maybe all the nightmares he's ever had about Tristan are waking up in his mind, one by one.

Kyle gets up suddenly and moves to the door. He closes his eyes and tries to concentrate.

"What're you doin'?" asks Brock.

"Reaching," answers Kyle.

“For what?”

Kyle reaches out as best as he can. He tries to focus, to let his gift expand the way it did in the casino, the way it was able to reach Elias. He scrunches up his face, determined to make a connection with something, to sense someone, anything.

All he feels is Elias’s warmth. Brock’s fire.

And nothing but ice-cold emptiness.

“I don’t hear anyone,” says Kyle, deflated. “I can’t pick up on anything at all. It’s like we’re totally alone in this place.”

“Fuck this shit,” growls Brock, shoving Kyle out of the way to confront the door with his might. He beats his fist against it several times. “LET US OUT, YOU MOTHERFUCKERS!” He rams his shoulder into it once, twice, and again. After the fourth attempt, he scowls in discomfort, rubbing his shoulder. “This door made of concrete or what?”

Kyle turns to Elias. “How long have we been in here?”

“Not sure,” admits Elias. “Maybe an hour or two. No idea how long we were out in the van, either. It’s possible we’re not even in Vegas anymore.”

Vegas.

Something slowly comes to Kyle, something Tristan said in his mind. “Veg ... Vegas ... *syn*.”

Elias looks up at him. “What?”

“Lord of Vegasyn.” Kyle reaches for the name. “He called him ... Markadian, Lord of ... of Vegasyn. Is that what they



call Vegas? Vegasyn? Is that their own name for Las Vegas?”

“Whose name?” asks Elias. “Where’d you hear that?”

Kyle brings a hand to his head, squinting, drowsy. “While I was knocked out. Tristan said the name.” He shakes his head. “Maybe I’m not remembering it right.”

“Vegasyn??” blurts out Brock. “The fuck is that dumb shit? It’s just Vegas with an ‘yn’ on it. Stupid.”

Elias climbs to his feet, comes up to Kyle. “What else did Tristan tell you? He mentioned some kind of Lord ...? Who is this person? What do they want?”

“Who cares,” spits out Brock. “Do these people even know who I am? My dad owns half of Vegas. He *runs* half of Vegas.”

“Well, welcome to the half he *doesn’t* own or run,” retorts Elias, getting tired of Brock.

Brock turns to him. “Don’t these people know who *you* are? Your mother’s a big deal, too.” Brock goes up to the door and beats a fist on it. “Two of us are big fuckin’ deals in here! You’ll be hearin’ from our lawyers!”

Elias sighs. “I’m getting the feeling anger and indignation don’t impress these people. You already broke two chairs trying to bash your way out. I think it’s safe to say we won’t be getting out of this room until they want us to.”

“Fuck you.”

“We need to be calm and smart about this.” Elias turns to Kyle. “Try to remember. What else did Tristan say?”

“Fuck both of you.” Brock paces away, kicks at one of the broken chairs Kyle didn’t notice until now, sends it tumbling across the floor. “I swear to God, Kyle, if I get outta this ...”

“Please stop blaming him,” says Elias.

“I shouldn’t’ve seen that video. Shouldn’t’ve come to find you. I should’ve let you stay dead.” Brock kneels in the corner at once. “God in Heaven, give me strength, please, oh Lord, hallowed be thy name, protect and watch over me, guide me back to your holy light, oh sweet, merciful Lord ...”

“I don’t remember much else,” admits Kyle, feeling useless. “Maybe I’m no help at all.”

“You are, Kyle,” says Elias, bringing a hand to Kyle’s hair and gently stroking it. “Without you, we wouldn’t have the first clue what’s going on.”

“I’m really glad you’re here,” returns Kyle as softly.

Elias smiles. Then the smile twists. “But I told you not to come find me. I told you to move on. To forget me.”

Kyle takes Elias’s hand, kisses it, holds on to it. “How could I? You think I can’t handle who you really are?”

“Kyle, you don’t understand.”

“Son of the Trujillo fortune? Heir to everything that is the Scarlet Sands Hotel & Casino, Las Vegas’s dark new secret, the gateway to the underworld? I know enough. I even have an idea what you’re running from now that I’ve seen it myself.”

Elias sighs. “It’s not just my name or a hotel. It’s my duty, Kyle. My legacy. It’s so much bigger. I can’t abandon it again.

My mother, she owns everything, she runs everything, and that includes me. I'm just another thing she owns and runs."

"You don't have to be." Kyle clings tightly to Elias's hand. "You need to talk to her. Tell her how you feel."

Brock continues to pray mindlessly in the corner, kneeling now, hands clapped together and shaking, splinted one sticking straight out.

"Kyle, please," sighs Elias. "It's not that simple."

"It can be. Let *me* talk to her, then."

Elias snorts. "I doubt *that'll* go over any better. You know how pissed she was with me when her henchman finally got me back? It's been her mission to clean me up, shine me up like a trophy on a shelf, mold and shape me into a miniature version of her since I was old enough to wipe my own ass. It's been this way my whole life. I didn't even go to a real high school. Scarlet Sands? This is just her latest project." Elias lets out a sigh, leans back against the wall, shakes his head. "I really miss my dad. In times like these, he'd know what to do."

Kyle decides to bookmark that last comment. "She needs to see what her greed is doing to you."

"Wouldn't call it greed. Is there a word worse than that?"

"She's breaking you, Elias. I came back to find you, and I find you on a damned rooftop full of lights, full of flowers, the only joy I sensed in the whole hotel. Is that where you escape to now? Without me? Without your house in Nowhere? Is that rooftop the one and only scrap of freedom you're allowed?"

Elias gazes at Kyle, pain in his eyes.

Kyle takes hold of Elias's cheeks, brings their faces close. "I am ready to say thank you now."

Elias's eyebrows pull together. "For what?"

"For saving my life that morning in the desert. I told you I couldn't thank you yet. Well, I'm ready now. Ready to finally thank you. Elias Asad Trujillo, you saved my life, you stopped me from making a terrible mistake." Kyle's face hardens. "Now let me return that favor."

Emotion swells within Elias. He leans forward and presses a kiss to Kyle's lips, full, encompassing. Gratefulness for his life swells in his warm chest. Kyle feels every trace of it, like they sit before a hearth, warming their feet in the winter.

Then Elias pulls back. "But you already returned the favor. I went out there for the same reason that morning, remember? You saved me, too."

Kyle's face falls flat.

"Guys," comes Brock's voice calmly.

The two of them turn to Brock.

Brock's hands are clasped in front of him. "I ... spoke with God. H-He assured me we will be okay. He told me to be calm and let what will be, be. He told me to forgive you." He faces Kyle. "I forgive you, Kyle. It isn't your fault. I chose to come back into your life, to break my own hand, I did all of that. And Elias," he continues, facing him, "I know we don't know each other all that well, but I get the sense you're a great guy. Our parents and I even had dinner together. Business thing, kind of short n' boring, but I was there, met your mom.

Small world, all of us connected in our ways. Just more proof of God's great design." He puts a hand on both Kyle's and Elias's shoulders and leans forward, as if huddling in one last football game. "I'm gonna do better. I'm gonna be better. We're gonna get through this, all of us, together. My s-son ..."

He chokes up, fights back tears. "My son needs me to come back home to him."

Kyle and Elias exchange a look. It's Elias who returns the gesture, putting his hand on Brock's shoulder and giving it a pat. "Apology accepted."

Brock meets Kyle's eyes. "I'm real glad to be here with you, Kyle. Glad to be here with my old pal, my buddy. I'm so ..."

He fights tears yet again. "I'm so happy you didn't die that day twenty-seven years ago. Somewhere in my heart, I swear to God, I knew. I ... I just *knew* you were still alive, somehow."

Just then, a noise at the door.

Kyle, Brock, and Elias turn to it at once, alarmed.

The doorknob rattles, stops. There's a grunt of annoyance from outside. The knob rattles again, then turns at last, and the door gently swings open.

A tall man enters, six and a half feet. A sickly, artificial pink colors his cheekbones, otherwise pale as paper and gaunt as the dead. Thin lips, pencil mustache, sunken eyes, and brownish hair parted crookedly down the middle, appearing odd.

The instant impression is this man is not a real person. At once unsettling. An alien. A creation of a tortured artist who

rides the uncanny valley, eliciting no good feelings at first sight.

What Kyle might have once produced, had he tried to draw people instead of lions.

A thin, soulless monster with sad eyes.

And bad hair.

“Hullo,” he greets them simply, voice deep and curt. He wears a pinstripe suit and tie with shiny shoes. “You are Kyle Bentley Amos, secured from ...” He produces a tablet, pokes a long finger upon it, swipes left, left again, left again, left again, then arrives at a name. “Scarlet Sands, yes?”

Elias and Brock glance at Kyle. After a second of terror, Kyle finally makes himself nod and say, “Yeah, that’s right.”

The man purses his lips. “Come. All of you.” He leaves.

Kyle glances back at Brock and Elias, uncertain, then heads out of the room, following the strange man. Outside the room is a wide, vast office area that might have once contained many cubicles, but is now completely barren, an expanse of nothing. As they walk, Kyle looks around the dim room, lit only by a single fluorescent in its center, the rest shut off or burned out. The room is so wide, so dark, it doesn’t even seem to have walls on any side, even with Kyle’s enhanced vision. His senses pick up a steady stream of defiance from Elias, which he takes to be his particular brand of courage, ready to fight, yet staying as calm as he can manage. From Brock, Kyle feels an eerie sense of hollow hope that God is watching him, peppered with the salt of soul-crushing terror he’s struggling not to taste.

From the tall man ahead, Kyle feels only ice.

Ice and nothing.

Is that what Kyle felt earlier? Did he mistake the coldness for nothing, when it was in fact this man?

Suddenly Brock takes hold of Kyle's hand, fear thumping through his system, sharp and terrible. "Is he a demon ...? That man? A b-bloodsucker? He's ... He's ... He's one of ...?"

"I think so," murmurs Kyle, feeling out-of-body, unreal.

"I don't like this." Brock shakes his head. "No, no way, we can't follow him. We need to get outta here."

"Brock, I don't think we—"

At once, Brock takes off, running into the darkness to the left, disappearing. Kyle and Elias stop to watch, alarmed.

Until suddenly Brock emerges from the darkness to their right, then stops cold at the sight of them. "W-What the—?" sputters Brock. Kyle and Elias spin, surprised to find him there, as if he teleported somehow from the left side of the room to the right. "How'd I—How did you—?"

"Come," calls the man patiently, still walking forward.

"What the fuck??" cries Brock to no answer.

Kyle takes hold of Brock's hand. Brock's freaked-out eyes snap to his. "We're together in all of this," Kyle assures him. "Alright? They haven't harmed us yet. They didn't even keep us tied up, did you notice? Our binds were undone. They just kept us waiting in that room."

“Waiting for what?” blurts Brock, shaking. “To be eaten? There’s somethin’ not right with this place, somethin’ not right at all. Is it even an office building? An alternate dimension? Is it fuckin’ Hell? Where are we?”

Kyle feels it, too, the strangeness, the discomfoting quiet. He can say all the words of comfort he can think of to Brock, but inside, he feels no confidence, no certainty, no assurance that anything is going to be okay. All he knows about others like him are from Tristan, things he said over the years. How they each have secondary gifts that develop over time. Tristan’s Lull. Kyle and his newfound Reach. What if what they’re now experiencing is the gift of some other being? Someone with an incredible power over the mind, rivaling even Tristan’s?

Does Kyle even know anything at all?

“Let’s ... Let’s just see what they want,” says Kyle. “We’ll stay calm, talk to them, and get outta here and back to our lives, alright?” Kyle glances back at Elias. “Are you okay?”

Elias, ever so brave, so fearless and daring, even he seems a touch unsettled when he gives Kyle a nod. The trio of them, less than okay, continue warily across the room.

They arrive at a single, featureless elevator. The tall man presses a button, they wait for exactly three seconds, then the doors open. “Come,” he says, stepping on. Kyle enters first, still gripping Brock’s hand like a child he’s escorting, Elias stepping in behind, his arm protectively around Kyle’s waist.

The elevator doors gently close.



The screen above shows no numbers, Kyle notices, and all of the buttons are blank. Yet the tall man taps the second one from the top, and the elevator begins to ascend.

“Sir, can you, uh, tell me where we are?” asks Kyle.

“You are in the House of Vegasyn. I am taking you to meet Markadian, Lord of Vegasyn.”

“F-Fuckin’ Vegas stupid bullshit name,” mutters Brock to himself. It is heard by all four of them.

The name nonetheless sends a chill up Kyle’s neck, having heard it from Tristan earlier. “And ... who is that?”

“He is Markadian, Lord of Vegasyn.”

Unhelpful. Kyle gathers his patience. “And who are you?”

“I am George.”

Brock makes a face, glances at Kyle and mouths, “*George? The fuck?*” to him.

Kyle ignores Brock. “Are we still in Las Vegas or not?”

George seems irked by the question. “I do not acknowledge nor recognize the existence of this human city of ‘Las Vegas’. You are in the domain of Vegasyn.”

Kyle decides to play along with that for now. “Uh, alright, thank you. And why were we taken from—”

“Markadian, Lord of Vegasyn, requested an audience with you, Kyle Bentley Amos, and so you were summoned with your present company. As this is likely your first time encountering the Lord of Vegasyn,” he adds with a twitch of his thin lips, “I shall enlighten you of certain rules of etiquette you would do well to oblige. First, you must and will always

address the Lord of Vegasyn as Markadian, Lord of Vegasyn. Full name and title included. Second, in his presence, keep your head bowed. You do not deserve to look him in the eyes. Finally, as is customary of facing such respected leaders, do not speak until spoken to.”

Kyle feels a spark of defiance from Brock, a note of heated frustration from Elias, and a sea of ice from this George.

“I do wish we could have met under better conditions,” the man suddenly confesses, smiling at Kyle at once. The smile is terrifying. “I have learned ever so much about you, Mr. Amos, I confess I feel as if we’re already friends.”

Kyle blinks, unsettled by the sudden change. “Really?”

George turns to the door, smile vanished. “We are here.”

The elevator doors open to a square, featureless chamber, four white walls, white floor, white ceiling. At the other end of the room are a tall set of doors that nearly blend with the walls, in front of which are posted two tall figures with long, straight white hair that runs down over their faces and to their waists, making them appear at first like nothing but curtains of pure white hair with legs emerging from the bottom, even their arms partly obscured.

Kyle craves reassurance, comfort, normalcy, and this place and its occupants only grow stranger the further they proceed.

As George approaches the two figures, Kyle and the others step off the elevator, following. Kyle glances behind

them, then discovers the elevator seems to have vanished.  
“The fuck?”

Brock and Elias turn, discovering the same thing. “Where the hell did it go?” blurts out Brock. “What in the hell kind of Houdini shit is this?”

George stops before the two figures. “Miss May.”

“George,” they recite in unison, mouths unseen behind the curtains of white hair.

“Where’d the elevator go??” cries out Brock, growing even more frantic. “How in the fuck does an elevator disappear??”

“I have brought Mr. Amos forth for Markadian, Lord of Vegasyn,” states George to the two strange figures, Miss May, whichever one that is, if not both of them somehow. “I request to know what precisely he wishes to do with the accompanying humans.”

Brock snaps his gaze forward, lips hanging. “What? Who? No one’s doin’ anything with us.”

“It’s okay,” whispers Kyle as he takes Brock’s hand. “Relax. It’s okay, it’s okay.”

One figure turns her head to the other, indicated only by the slightest movement of hair. The other does the same, as if returning her glance. They remain still for a brief moment. Are they communicating with each other? With someone else?

With this Markadian guy, somewhere unseen?

“Elias, son of Rosemarie Trujillo, is Protected Blood,” the two women recite in unison.

Elias glances at Kyle. “Protected Blood?” He looks forward at them. “What is that?”

George purses his lips. “And the other?”

“Not,” they state.

George nods with grim understanding. “Very well.”

Immediately, Brock’s emotions turn to fire and ice, Kyle feeling each and every bit of it. He lets go of Kyle’s hand and stiffens up. “I-I-I’m protected, too. Is there a list? Check your list again. M-My father. He’s f-friends with Rosemarie Trujillo, with Madame Rose, they call her. We’ve had dinner together. She complimented my hair. Said I got n-n-nice bone structure. *Lord help me,*” he hisses out, shaking, “*Lord, my Lord God.* Sir, I don’t belong here, just let me go, let—I-I-I got a wife and child, my beautiful wife Jessica, my son, my dear sweet son, they’re expecting me home, and I—” He turns to Kyle, panic in his eyes. “K-Kyle, what do I do? What do I—?”

In a flash, quicker than even Kyle’s eyes can catch, George spins around, swipes a finger in a perfect arc, one blind slice.

Red spills from Brock’s opened neck.

A bib of blood down his chest.

Brock’s eyes go wide. He slaps both his hands to his neck, as if there’s a chance to stop it, gurgling, sputtering helplessly, drops to his knees.

“BROCK!!” cries out Kyle, falling to his knees along with Brock, pressing hands to his neck. Blood has scattered all over Kyle’s face. He blinks it away as he stares into Brock’s eyes—seeing the child inside them, the child he grew up with, the

child who used to laugh, to play, to love. He watches the child disappear as Brock's eyes turn to glass, fading, then he slumps to the floor.

## 25.

### *You Are Your Blood.*

—•—

Arms wrap around Kyle, pulling him away, Elias's.

Kyle's cries are traded for silence as he buries his face into Elias's shoulder.

If he doesn't look, it didn't happen.

If he keeps his eyes closed, he is home, safe, far away from here, it didn't happen.

None of this happened.

But George's voice takes away even that comfort. "Come."

"Why'd you do that??" shouts Kyle, muffled slightly within Elias's shoulder. "Why'd ... Why'd you have to ... to ...?"

"Come," repeats George. "Markadian, Lord of Vegasyn, is waiting. He has a busy schedule today, and he requires—"

"I don't care about *Mark*, Lord of fucking *Not-Las-Vegas!* You just killed my friend! You just—just—"

Kyle draws silent again, overcome with coldness.

That coldness, a second ago, felt white-hot. It was Brock's emotion that Kyle was attached to, right until the last moment, right until everything went into a vacuum.

Is that what death is like? Did Kyle just feel death?

“Kyle,” whispers Elias, worried, emotional himself.  
“Kyle, we’ve got to go.”

Kyle tastes blood. Is that Brock’s blood he tastes? Brock’s blood on his lips?

“Come,” says George.

When Kyle looks up, he’s already walking forward, Elias’s arm around his back. If it weren’t for Elias, he’d still be on the floor with Brock right now, kneeling in a spreading pool of blood in that bleak white room, he’d be unable to move one foot in front of the other, he’d be done.

The tall doors part. George leads the way.

Kyle lifts his eyes to the chamber of Lord Markadian. It is a complete departure from the last. Fiery light spills out from a Victorian-esque office, hexagonal in shape, with dark oak wall paneling, hardwood floors, and decorative moldings. A Persian rug with deep red and emerald green tones sits in its center. From the ceiling, a bronze chandelier hangs with amber shades, pouring a honeyed light over the room. Ahead is an antique hardwood desk, its only contents, a neatly-piled stack of paper, a pen in an ink fountain, and an entirely out-of-place laptop.

At that desk sits a man. Young, late twenties, thirty at the oldest, but no telling what his age really is—fifty, one hundred, a thousand years. Handsome face. Sharp jawline. Dusky brown complexion. Surprisingly bright eyes. Hair buzzed neatly, short, faded up the sides. A tiny hoop earring in each ear.

Upon their entrance, the man looks up from the desk.

Kyle stares at him, tears still in his eyes, numb.

“Have you already forgotten the rules?” asks George with a note of irritation. “A short memory, this one. I offer apologies, Markadian, Lord of Vegasyn. Eyes to the floor, Kyle, and head bowed. You are but a guest. Mind the rules.”

“This one can look,” says Markadian from his tall-backed leather desk chair. “In fact, I wish him to.”

George, unfazed, gives a curt nod.

Kyle, not in the mood for rules, pleasantries, or otherwise, marches forward, stops in the center of the room. “You killed my friend,” he snaps. “And for nothing. He didn’t deserve to die. Protected Blood? What kind of bullshit is that?”

Markadian maintains a blank, level stare as Kyle speaks.

He indicates nothing on his face.

No malice, irritation, nor judgment.

He simply listens.

“Doesn’t matter who did the actual killing,” says Kyle. “Whether George. Or those weird Miss May twins. Or some other subordinate puppet under you. You’re the one who gave the order. Why? Brock didn’t do anything. If it’s me you have the problem with, if it’s me you wanted to speak to in the first place, you could have just abducted me from the hotel alone, only me, no one else had to get involved.”

Markadian continues to listen. Continues to stare.

Continues to say nothing at all.

“Fucking say something,” barks Kyle, at his end. “Stop just sitting there saying nothing. I don’t care who you are.”



But Markadian maintains his silent stare.

He doesn't even flinch.

A man made of wax—unmoving, unbreathing.

It is George who then speaks. “Should I deliver him later, Markadian, Lord of Vegasyn? Perhaps when he is less *spirited?*”

“No,” answers Markadian simply. “This will do.”

George gives another curt nod, falls silent.

Markadian's eyes never once leave Kyle's. “I've long since wondered who this ... *Kyle* ... is. I thought to myself, he must be one very exceptional, very remarkable human being, to have inspired my once trusted and devoted Tristan to go astray.”

Kyle's breath is stolen away by the name.

“So many years he has been here. Standing right where you stand, right now, giving his reports, performing his duties. Very reliable. Or used to be. Nearly seventy years he spent here ... other than the twenty-six he wasted playing house with the likes of you. Isn't that right?” he asks George without even looking.

George softly replies, “Yes, Markadian, Lord of Vegasyn.”

Kyle's lips part. “S-Seventy ... seventy years?”

“But I am disappointed,” says Markadian, “for I find you neither exceptional nor remarkable. In fact, I find you tedious. Loud. And boring.” His eyes trail down Kyle's body. “Qualities for which your looks, while I agree may inspire

temporary *other* appetites, do not in any way compensate for. What a waste, all of my dear Tristan's efforts were, in chasing after you like a sad, lovesick schoolboy." Markadian's face barely moves, indicating the slightest of grimaces. "Ah, and all over my Persian, too."

Kyle frowns, confused, then glances down at his feet.

A trail of red footprints from the door, along the hardwood floor, across the Persian rug. He tracked it in from the other room, Brock's blood in the shape of the soles of his own shoes.

"Oh," is all Kyle mutters, out of breath suddenly. He feels a tickle on his forehead, wipes at it, realizes it's a drop of Brock's blood. He stares at his fingers, his bloodied fingers.

When Markadian speaks, it's with an eerie calmness, a tired parent speaking down to a child. "Bullshit, you call our rule of Protected Blood. Yet it is thanks to said 'bullshit' that Elias, the man behind you, with whom you are apparently in love now, is still alive, and can never be harmed by our kind. Any attempts to harm him will be paid with in death."

Kyle glances back at Elias, some distance away. Elias heard the words, all of them, and seems to be caught by surprise, his eyes blank and face stunned. What or who designated him as Protected Blood? How?

"In the end," Markadian finishes, "it was your actions alone that brought you and your friends to my House at all."

Kyle turns. "My ... *My* actions?"

"Actions for which you will answer in court."

Kyle takes a step back, realizes he just put another bloody footprint on the rug, freezes. “Court? What do you—?”

“George, take our Protected Blood back to his mother. No further need for him today. Send Rosemarie my regards—and a warning.”

Elias comes undone at once. “Wait, to where? Hell no, I’m staying right here with Kyle, I’m not—”

“She misses you,” sings George as he gently takes hold of Elias by the arm. Every effort Elias makes in pulling away is in vain, no match for the strength of one of their kind. “Shall we stop by the Midnight Garden on the way? We keep a species of flower that smells like Coca-Cola. Do you know it? The human drink that bubbles? Come, I will show you my favorites.”

“Kyle!” shouts Elias as he’s dragged off, wide-eyed.

At once, the room twists, as if seen through a kaleidoscope, turning double, triple, rotating. Kyle staggers forward, but Elias and George are already gone. He feels his stomach turn along with the room, disoriented, sick.

The next instant, everything’s right again, but the room has changed shape, or else traded for a new room entirely, having grown ten times in size. Kyle gapes as he peers around. He now stands in the center of what appears to be an arena theater, no windows or doors. Only one light remains, the same chandelier, which is now white and harsh, pouring its hot light over Kyle.

“What ... What is this place ...?” asks Kyle, astounded and petrified. “Elias!” he shouts to no reply.

Markadian and his desk remain. But now there are many desks of different shapes, sizes, and styles, all of them enclosing Kyle in a wide circle. Fifteen or twenty of them, at a glance. A black metal desk with a black stuffed bear on top, its eyes poked out, and a pale, gaunt woman seated behind it with dull, deep-sunken eyes and long black hair. A slate grey desk with a glass top and what appears to be a boy of no more than twelve years, irritably typing away on a cell phone. Another desk, this one pink and sparkly, but with scratches and stains along the side, looking as if it came from a little girl's room after surviving a tornado, its occupant, a man with tanned ochre skin and white-blond hair, messy yet straight as straw, in a very tight pink suit.

At almost all the desks, a different person, only three or so unoccupied. Kyle can't stop spinning, looking at each one in turn, heart pounding. Who are these people? Where did they come from?

"Hurry up," gripes the young boy, his prepubescent voice startling and unexpected. "I've near a dozen things to do before sunrise, and I'm a good two hours ahead of you, Markadian."

"Same," grunts a grey-bearded man at the next desk over, his eyes bearing the deepest bags and darkest shadows Kyle has ever seen, the man irritably scribbling away in a notebook.

"Care to enlighten us on the purpose of this court?" asks another one of them, a curvy, sweet-faced woman with soft rosy skin and freckles, a finger twirling in her stylish mane of bright auburn curls. When she sees Kyle, her finger freezes,

brow lifts, and lips pucker with interest. “Ooh, I see, you’ve brought us a cute one. Mm-mm, hi, honey-poo.”

“Can someone hand Cindy a towel?” drones the dull-eyed pale woman with long black hair, rolling her eyes. “She seems to have sprung a leak.”

“Oh, Zara, I’m just lonely, buried in paperwork, and have a personal assistant position open immediately as of now,” coos Cindy right back, eyeing Kyle with adoration—or thirst.

Kyle stumbles backwards. “I ... uh ...”

“Is this about that idiot who threw our community into a shit fit?” asks a woman at a teal desk, mid-forties in appearance. Heavy-hooded eyes that sit behind a pair of stylish teal glasses. High cheekbones. Tawny complexion. Face framed by straight brown hair to her chin, the tips teal-colored. She peers at him over her glasses. “Expected someone taller.”

“Let’s get on with it,” states Markadian, slapping onto his desk a manila folder, which he flips open. “I sent the email the moment it happened, two nights ago, or was it three?”

“Two,” answers the pink-suited man crisply. In a tiny voice he adds, “*I actually read my emails.*”

“Very well, two,” Markadian carries on, tired, long-faced, everything tedious. “Here stands Kyle Bentley Amos, the man in question, who openly revealed his nature via a digital video that was, that same night, uploaded to the net.”

“Respectfully, no one calls it ‘the net’ anymore,” murmurs Cindy, eyes still drinking in Kyle like a tall glass of sweet tea. “I’m Cindy, by the way, director of the Dallasade domain.

Ever been?” she asks Kyle. “Some say it’s similar to the human city of Dallas. Even located in the same place,” she adds, a coy joke. At once, her eyes turn dark and demonic, pulsing with energy. “I think you’d love it here. I’d make damned sure you did.”

“Cindy, seriously,” groans the dull-eyed woman Zara.

With a blink, Cindy’s eyes return to normal. “Truthfully, your fifteen minutes of fame *did* cause a pain in my ass.”

“The video was eight minutes and forty-four seconds, not fifteen,” states the boy, still busily typing away on his phone.

The woman in teal-glasses nearby squints at him. “I believe Director Cindy was being figurative. Perhaps you ought to refrain from inserting yourself unnecessarily into anything else before your balls have dropped.”

The boy eyes her over his phone. “Your domain isn’t so far from mine, Director Tsuki. I would be happy to pay you a visit and cut you in half.”

“Promise?” she icily retorts.

Markadian carries on, paying them no mind. “Any further spreading of the video has been suppressed as best as my team can manage, all known search engines, social media, the usual sort of damage control and so on. We have submitted diversion content to the bot team that went live at—” He lifts his wrist, drops it right back to the desk. “Forgot my watch. Yesterday evening, seven or so, thereabouts. Questions? Other than you,” he snaps with a look at Cindy, who retracts her hand.

It’s Kyle instead who has the question. “Wait. All of this ... All of this is because of that video? It’s that big of a deal?”

“Can we get to the vote already?” asks the boy. “It’s late. I have a cat to feed.”

“Vote?” breathes Kyle, turning to look at the boy, then the bearded man next to him, then the dull-eyed Zara, who squints quizzically back, appearing annoyed. “Vote on what?”

Markadian turns a page in the folder. “Now that the main facts have been stated, let’s get to the counterpoints. Kyle Amos was videoed against his will and initially without his knowledge. The material was uploaded by a third party, a human teenage female by the name of—” He taps a finger to the folder. “Layna Fludd, the lone blood daughter of humans Cadence Fludd and Jamal Fludd, seventeen years old, according to my informant.”

Hearing those names come from his lips raises every hair on the back of Kyle’s neck, insides going cold. “Informant ...?”

“Were this situation left alone at this point,” Markadian points out, ignoring Kyle, “then we would not be at our current juncture. But Kyle Amos, a single night after the uploading of the material, attended a meeting with a crowd of—” He checks his notes. “—fifty-seven humans, where he made a confession of his nature, confirming the video as true.”

The boy yawns, says, “Good, fine, I’m ready to vote.”

The one in the pink suit sighs, mumbling, “*I read the email, I know all of this already,*” under his breath.

The grey-bearded man stops scribbling in his notebook at once, lifts his pen to his chin. “This reminds me of—Drat, the audacity to forget her name, what was it?—Anyway, the one

case a few years back, the teenage girl from the New Yorkaeda domain, do you remember? The one who made plans to tell her school at her prom? Another young, foolish individual.”

“Why are we bringing her up at all?” asks Zara. “The New Yorkaeda domain is the east region’s concern, not ours. Unlike this case, the girl didn’t actually expose her nature to her prom like a fool, as she was fast destroyed by Lord Xiang following a unanimous vote. Cindy, are you even paying attention?”

“Yes,” answers Cindy, staring at Kyle and licking her lips.

“Wait,” interjects Kyle. “D-Destroyed??” In the presence of everyone in this room, his voice feels so small. “Hey, I didn’t tell them recklessly or maliciously. I-I was trying to get ahold of the situation. We all came to an understanding. I wasn’t—”

“I see what you mean, Markadian,” says the grey-bearded man as he studies Kyle with disdain. “Like an unchecked brat, a self-important child with no discipline, running his mouth, on and on. Shouldn’t he be bowing his head? Eyes down? Have we become so lax with our enforcing of etiquette?”

Markadian bristles, staring at Kyle as he replies. “This one seems to think he’s special because he was Tristan’s playmate for two and a half decades.”

Eyes shift between the others. Kyle watches them, feeling helpless. Why can’t he read their emotions? Are they not really there? An illusion? Is this their version of a video conference, communicating in some mentally manifested room that feels as real as if they’re sitting at actual desks around him?



“And because of his actions,” Markadian carries on, “our delicate society is now at risk of further exposure by these fifty-seven humans.”

“So what?” blurts Kyle. “Fifty-seven people in a small town in Arizona no one’s heard of. Who cares? They’re good people. Kind people. They want to protect my secret.”

An old lady who hasn’t spoken until now adjusts her glasses and sighs. “Goodness, he still calls them ‘people’.”

“So cute,” sings Cindy.

“But they *are* people,” states Kyle, looking at each of them. “What the hell do you think *you* guys once were? We weren’t born like this. You were once a person, too,” he says directly to Cindy, still licking her lips. “And you,” he says to the boy. “And you, and you, all of you.”

“*Why’s he still talking?*” mumbles the pink-suited one.

Markadian lifts his eyes to the others, ignoring him. “Have we any more questions before a vote is commenced?”

“I have one,” says Cindy, “and no, it’s not a thirsty one, stop giving me that look, Zara, I can see it with my other eyes.” She leans forward. “My question is actually for the informant you sent to observe Kyle Amos.”

Markadian sighs with great weariness. “Very well.” He says nothing further, but merely glances to the side, as if seeing something no one else can.

Then from behind him comes a shadow.

A figure.

Kyle at once recognizes it—the figure from the alley, from the bar, the one who forced his own pinky ring onto his finger just earlier this very night.

Entirely obscured in shadow as it always is, it slowly draws forth, stops next to Markadian's desk.

Suddenly the shadow is traded for shape and color.

Like a light switch in a room, flicked on, the vacuum of sight and sound released instantly.

It's a hooded female, just under five feet tall, a pixie cut of short brown hair, alabaster skin, with dark, sickly circles under her large brown eyes. There is something sinister and off about those eyes, her dead expression, her stark lack of empathy.

Kyle can feel it, that abyssal vacuum of feeling.

Infinite darkness. Coldness. Sharp and biting and evil.

He pulls his emotional reach away from her at once, not daring to connect to her again.

“You have Wendy's attention,” says Markadian patiently to Cindy. “Ask your question.”

After a dainty sigh, Cindy tilts her head, then addresses the unfeeling figure—Wendy, apparently. “Firstly, I am in awe of your fascinating shrouding gift. Really, to be able to manipulate shadows the way you do, it's remarkable.”

“I manipulate light, not shadow.”

It's the first time Kyle hears the figure's voice. It's soft and gentle, almost sweet, which somehow makes this Wendy all the more disturbing.

Cindy squints, thinks on her response for a second, decides instead to move on to the point. “Did you notice anything kind or meaningful about Kyle during your time observing him?”

Wendy’s face reflects nothing when she answers, “He kept a little silver ring, a reminder of his dead family, even though the ring was harmful for him to touch. He lost it. I claimed the ring, then was instructed to return it to him.”

Kyle instinctively touches his hand, the finger in question still scalded where the ring sat for too many seconds.

“You have no silver allergy yourself?” observes Cindy.

“Only the sun,” she confirms, “but even that is no bother, for I can manipulate its light away from me.”

“Oh.” Cindy considers that. “Clever, I ... I guess.”

“Yes,” cuts in Markadian, “Wendy is a marvel. I am proud to have her on my team. Any further questions, Cindy?”

“Just one more, this one is for Kyle.” She smiles with a tiny pinch of sympathy. “Kyle, stud ... I don’t seem to recall reading from your file what your gift is. Perhaps that will and should be taken into consideration before we cast our final vote. Have you found it yet, hot stuff? Have you discovered what it is?”

It’s Wendy who answers on his behalf. “He can read the emotions of others.” Her cold eyes flick to his. “He made the mistake of trying to locate any in me.”

Kyle holds his wounded finger, glaring bitterly at her.

“A reader of emotions,” mutters Markadian. “Even his gift is unremarkable. I think I have encountered nearly forty of your kind in my lifetime. Your gift comes from the heart. Not the mind or body.” He shakes his head. “The heart is the weakest of the three. I have no use for such a gift, none at all. Anyone else have something to add? Are we done?”

Kyle feels like it’s all slipping away, all of this moving too quickly, too messily. “W-Wait ...”

“Shall we vote and put an end to it?” asks Markadian to the rest. “Good. All in favor of sparing the one Kyle Bentley Amos from immortal destruction, raise a hand.”

Kyle turns, breath held.

From the sea of desks around him, only two hands.

Two in favor of sparing his life.

Cindy, and the pink-suited man.

“But I ...” Kyle can’t believe his eyes. “I didn’t even have a chance to defend myself. I didn’t have a chance to—”

“I’m afraid you are alone in this court,” states Markadian. “You have no friends in this council, nor any other council in the region. Unless someone wishes to lay down their immortal life against yours as collateral, I’m afraid this is the end of your very short road. Director Cindy? Is your infatuation still alive? Do you wish to lay your immortal life against his?”

She shrinks into her seat. “Sorry, Kyle. You’re hot, but—”

“Anyone else?” asks Markadian, addressing the rest of the directors. “No one wishes to lay their immortal life against his? What a surprise.” Markadian closes the folder with a sigh.

“I grow weary of this case. I must confess, when I first received it, I was intrigued. It isn’t often our kind go ‘under the radar’ as long as he did. It was twenty-six years before we even had a log of him in our database. Now we have a headache to clean up and too much paperwork.” He stares at a stunned Kyle. “Were he not aided by one of our own, I am certain he would have been found instantly and dealt with.”

Kyle takes a step back, overcome.

Another bloody print on the carpet.

He doesn’t care.

“It all started with him,” mutters Kyle. “It’s because of him I became this way ... because of Tristan. And my family is dead because of what I am. Because of ...”

Kyle stares down at the carpet. One bloody footprint after another. Isn’t that how this entire journey started?

Bloody footprints on his kitchen tiles.

Across his living room.

Across his front lawn.

Down the street.

“I didn’t want this,” says Kyle to that bloody footprint. “It’s because of what I am. Had I know this was my destiny, I’d ... I would have never become this. I don’t want this anymore.” He clenches shut his eyes. The footprint is still there in his mind. “I don’t want it.”

“Are you saying you wish to return your gift? You wish to be rid of it?”

Kyle opens his eyes, turns to him. “Rid of it? ... What?”

“Simple question.” Markadian’s voice has become soft and oddly alluring. “Do you wish to be rid of it? Do you wish to no longer be what you are?”

All the directors in the room watch.

All the directors in the room wait.

All the bloody footprints around Kyle, in and out of his life and his memories.

“You ... Y-You can do that?” asks Kyle.

Markadian’s stare never breaks. His eyes never blink.

And his answer: “Yes.”

Kyle stares back in disbelief. “I ... I guess I ...” He squints at him. “I don’t have to be this anymore? I can get rid of it? I ... I didn’t think that was possible. I never considered it. I thought this is ... forever.”

The room continues to watch.

Continues to wait.

“It can be ended,” says Markadian. “All you need do is ask.”

At once, it feels miraculous.

Kyle and Elias in the sunlight, eating from a picnic basket, laughter in the air.

Kyle and Elias on the beach, basking in the sun, atop a soft beach towel with polka dots all over it in every color.

Kyle and Elias walking to a friend’s house for dinner, hand-in-hand, under a warm evening summer sun.

“Well?” Markadian also watches, also waits. “What do you wish, Kyle Bentley Amos? Shall we ... end it?”

The life he could have with Elias.

A life in the daylight.

It breaks his heart, to think it cannot be a possibility, unless he says yes to Lord Markadian.

Kyle decides to ask one more question. “How is it done?”

“Simple.”

A rush of air blasts before Kyle, and he’s flat on his back on the bloodied Persian rug. Standing atop him is Lord Markadian staring down, one booted foot on Kyle’s chest.

Every director has stood up, no longer bored or tired, each of them excited, thirsty, staring over their desks to watch.

Kyle stares up at Markadian, all his hope traded for terror.

He cannot move.

“You are your blood,” Markadian tells the stony-eyed and blank-faced Kyle. “If you no longer wish to be what you are, I’ll simply remove your blood from your body. Every last drop of you. Every last drop of Kyle Bentley Amos. All your dreams. All your memories. All your anger and bitterness. Mine.”

Kyle can barely speak, as if the weight of the world is upon his chest, pressing down. “I ... I didn’t ... d-d-didn’t realize ...”

“Save me the trouble of finishing this dreary case. Save me the tedium of paperwork and pageantry. Everyone loves a

show. Shall we give them one? Say the word and it all ends now.”

Kyle shivers, trembling uncontrollably, his hands clasped to Markadian’s booted foot, placed on his chest, pinning him.

Tears sting Kyle’s eyes.

Somehow, he knew this is how it would end.

No matter what he said. No matter what he did.

“I ... I should never have ...” Kyle musters his last ounce of strength, pushes the words out from his strained throat. “... let Tristan ... sit with me ... at th-th-that lunch table.”

It is Markadian’s voice that smiles, not his lips, when he says, “My dear, beautiful boy. Nothing can save you now. Not even Tristan, who has used up all his favors ...”

The world presses down harder upon Kyle.

“... burned all his chances, played all his cards ...”

Crushing him. Ending him.

“... and spent every last one of his bargaining chips, the last of which he spent when he left you one year ago and returned to me.” Markadian bares his teeth. “I do wonder what you taste like. Perhaps your blood was your only appeal at all.”

*Ah, but I have one chip left, actually.*

Every face in the room turns, alarmed. From the boy to the grey-bearded man. To Directors Zara, Cindy, and teal-glasses-wearing Tsuki. To the old lady and a dozen silent others.



Markadian does not turn. He closes his eyes, jaw tightened.

Footsteps. Kyle looks up as best as he can from the floor, watching upside-down. Far behind the circle of desks comes a man in an odd outfit. His pants, one leg yellow, one leg powder blue. Oversized cream-colored blouse with a lion embroidery.

Messy, short blond hair. Misty blue eyes. *I think I would like to lay my immortal life against his*, announces Tristan.

## 26.

### *I Still Kiss With Teeth.*

—•—

Kyle sits on a bench, alone, in a grey stone corridor that looks like the hall of a 12<sup>th</sup> century medieval citadel, complete with artificial sunlight at his back. He has been seated on this bench for some time, gazing out at the illusion of sunlight, his heart a complete mess, uncertain of everything, everyone.

How did things become this messed up?

How did Kyle go from feeling in control of everything to becoming so small and powerless?

Perhaps he was always this small and powerless. Just like he was as a slouched teenager in a varsity letterman jacket, ignored by his teammates and parents, overlooked and alone. Becoming what he is now, it was just an illusion of power. An illusion of freedom. He knows now that he will never have power, now that he has seen what it can do to his kind.

Footsteps, soft and sensitive. A shadow falls over Kyle.

*I brought you tea.*

Kyle can't even bring himself to look up at him. "Is the tea even real? Is any of this real?"

*It's mostly Lord Markadian. He is very powerful with his mind. More powerful than I ever was or will be. Do you mind if I call him just Lord Mark around you? It can be our thing, if you ... still want to have things with me.*

“You still speak the same,” notes Kyle. “You move your lips most of the time, for the benefit of others, I guess, but ... your words, they invade my mind, like I’m hearing them inside my brain, like they’re my own thoughts.”

*It’s how I’ve always talked ever since I became this way. It is nice that they let you clean up. You were quite bloody earlier.*

“It wasn’t my blood.”

*I know. I’m so sorry. Brock ... dear Brock ... he didn’t deserve to die. George is in hot water, as far as I was told, and Lord Mark’s not happy. Heads will roll. Maybe literally. He shouldn’t have killed him.*

Kyle doesn’t give a shit about George, nor whether or not Markadian is happy, pissed, or dead. Nothing can fix this.

“My whole view of the world is broken now. Vegasyn ... These people who hide between the cracks of society. Secretly running things. Doing whatever horrors they please. Has this hidden underworld always existed? Even when I was a teenager, with no care in the world but football and meaningless bullshit? All of this, right under my clueless nose?”

*And for much longer than that, even. Centuries. Millennia. No one truly knows how long we’ve been around.*

“This palace of illusions? House of Vegasyn? What does this place even look like without Markadian’s power?”

*I’m not sure, admits Tristan. I doubt anyone can accurately say how big it even is, how far these halls stretch, where they lead to. I wonder if Lord Mark himself even knows.*

*Those of us with gifts of the mind, sometimes we don't understand the full scope of our own powers. There's a joke in there somewhere, but I can't think of it. A friend downstairs told it to me. Something to do with why we're the quickest to lose our way, to lose our minds ... our sanity. I would hate to see how this place looks if Lord Mark someday loses his.*

“And here I am. Right in the middle of the world's darkest most sinister of secrets. With nothing to show for it. Nothing to offer. Nothing to do about it except sit here ... and wonder.” Kyle gazes down at his hands. “Wonder, forever and ever ...”

*It helps if you think about it less. Really, if you don't think about it at all. Hmm, maybe this cup of tea can distract you ... provided it isn't also an illusion. Are you quite sure you wouldn't like a sip?*

“I don't know if I can do this, Tristan.” Kyle closes his eyes to shut away everything—the view of the sunrise, the view of the citadel around him, rendering all of it unable to deceive him a second longer. He pretends he's in his childhood home, long before Tristan burned it down, sitting on his bed drawing little monster lions in a sketchpad. “I can't have the big conversation with you right now.”

*That's okay, the tea is cold anyway.*

“That's how I take my tea. Ice cold sweet tea. I'm Texan.”

*There's nothing sweet about this tea. Can I start with a sorry?*

Kyle can't even deceive himself anymore, whether he keeps his eyes closed or wide open. He looks up at Tristan standing over him still, clutching a cup of tea. He looks

exactly the same, not an inch of him changed, not his hair, not his eyes, not his proud and princely posture, nothing. Kyle hates that, even still, his heart betrays him when he looks upon Tristan with joy.

Then the joy is soiled, bitterness rushing in just as fast.

Kyle looks away, not answering him.

*You must have questions. I understand. They're questions you've no doubt been holding in your heart for nearly a year now. That must be like swallowing a liter of ginger ale and refusing to burp.*

“Did I not just say I don't want to have this conversation?”

*Yes, you did. I'm proving to be a terrible listener. Kyle, I missed you so terribly.*

Kyle gets up from the bench suddenly, paces over to one of the tall, stained-glass windows. He stares through it at the sun, the fake sun, the fake sun as seen through a maybe-fake window in this bullshit illusion of a medieval citadel.

*My deceit started long before the day I faked my death. I think it started the night I changed you. Twenty-seven years ago. The night I returned to your house and set fire to your life. I've been terrible ...*

“Just shut up, please.”

*I've done worse things than you even know.*

“Please.”

*I don't deserve your forgiveness. But I will do whatever is in my power to make up for all that I have taken from you, for*

*the rest of my immortal days, I will help piece your heart back together.*

“It isn’t yours anymore to piece together. And also, it isn’t broken.” Kyle turns his eyes onto Tristan, nearly scowling. “My heart belongs to someone else now.”

Tristan’s soft, understanding gaze lingers upon Kyle. The sleeves of his blouse are so long, they go halfway down his fingers, cradling the cup of tea. After a moment, Tristan brings it to his lips, slurps, stops. *Oh, I forgot I got this for you, not me.*

“Keep it.”

*Are you sure? Thank you, I’m actually quite thirsty. Tristan takes another sip, sighs. It’s much better hot. Quite disappointing that it’s gone cold. Too bad Lord Mark’s illusions are not skillful with tastes. Then we would all eat like kings and queens.*

Kyle peers out the window again, at the sunrise. He thinks of the one he almost saw in the desert.

Then the question spills out. “Why did you leave me?”

Tristan takes a step toward him, reconsiders, then sits on the bench, cuddling his cup of tea. *Would you like the honest and less artful answer, or the one that sounds like an answer I have been rehearsing for a whole year?*

“How would I even know the difference? How can I trust anything you say ever again?” Kyle huffs, shakes his head. “Just forget I asked.”

*The answer, the true and honest answer ... it’s quite boring, in fact. And it may lead to even more questions, more*

*than I think I'm willing to answer just yet.*

“You knew Markadian,” says Kyle at the window. “He has some kind of control over you. Power.”

*He likes to think he does.* Tristan reconsiders, then answers with a touch less sass. *Yes, actually, he has an incredible amount of power over all of us. As was evidenced a moment ago. The truth is ...* Tristan casually throws the cup of tea over his shoulder with a sigh. It shatters, causing Kyle to turn away from the window, watching as all its contents scatter across the floor. *I have known Lord Mark for a very long time. He is the one who took me in after I shot my fake parents with silver bullets. Remember that bit? Yes, he helped cover it up. He took me in off the streets. He gave my life a purpose. Recruited me ... so to speak.*

“This place *is* a business,” says Kyle. “It wasn’t a metaphor. You were serious. Death’s your employer. Markadian is like the Grim Reaper. This is your job.”

*Well, sort of yes, sort of no. There’s no contract. No vacation days to accumulate. All the places in this region that established a House and a dwelling have an appointed director. Mark is the Lord of this region, seeing over all of them. After working here for a number of years, I ... I had a bit of a breakdown, you might say. An emotional one. I craved the life I missed out on. A childhood, teenage years, high school, friends, the whole dream. Lord Mark didn’t understand. So I ran. Abandoned my post ... a renegade, a deserter. Took off to live my life. Wasn’t easy at first. I had no idea where to start. I had to learn many things.* Tristan hugs himself, his face softening. *Once I had it all sorted out, that’s when I ended up*

*in a small Texas town. That's when I ended up meeting you, Kyle Amos, with the cute face and silly letterman jacket and Walkman in your ears.*

“Then my life fell apart. I killed my family. You burned down my house. And I went on the run with you.” Kyle turns away, sour. “You lied to me. The whole time, you lied.”

Tristan seems to have run out of words.

“I trusted you,” Kyle goes on, voice empty, deflated. “Each and every thing you said to me. Even when I was still human. You told me the only ones you knew were your fake parents, but you knew so many more. Markadian. The existence of this place. The countless others who ‘work for Death’. You knew about all of it, so much more than you ever revealed.”

*There is no excuse for my actions. I concealed many things. I just wanted to be innocent again. Oblivious again. A teenager without a care, who woke up and did his studies and sat with the cute boy during lunch. I meant no harm.*

“The whole time, lies and lies, the whole time we were out in the woods, in the world, like nomads in love, you were lying. You were—” Kyle chokes, clenches his fists. “Where did we go wrong, Tristan?”

*We didn't, my love.*

“Don't call me ‘my love’. Even without the lies, we weren't perfect. We had ups and downs, big ups, big downs. What did I do so wrong? Why did you feel like you could never trust me with the truth, the bigger truth? What did I do, before that day you left a letter on my pillow and my ring on a



pile of fake ashes I wasted tears over, or before that year, even, or the year before that? Actually, better yet, allow me to rephrase it completely.” Kyle faces him. “When did you start to hate me?”

*Oh, Kyle, my love.*

“I said don’t call me that.”

*How can I not? You will always be my love, no matter who your heart is devoted to. I don’t hate you. You did nothing at all, Kyle. I simply had to leave you.*

“Why?”

*Because they found me.*

Kyle’s eyes drop to the floor. The tea Tristan tossed over his shoulder now crawls over the cold stone flooring, snaking its way slowly through the grout between the stones.

*It was in the forest, actually. Quite scenic. I was picking flowers I had seen the night before. The sun was still up, but ah, that forest we found, it had such a thick canopy, it was safe to walk, even if you get a little burn now and then from a stray shadow playing a trick. I had a full bouquet ... when through the brush I saw his face. Mark’s face. Tristan gazes down at his hands, as if imagining the flowers. All that hard work, the flowers just fell from my hands. I asked him how long he’d been following me. Long enough, he answered, and ... well, I guess that’s when I realized I had to strike a deal with the Devil. If I went back with him, he’d agree not to touch you, to let you be, to let you have your life ... to live. Tristan’s eyes reflect pain as he peers at Kyle. I needed to protect you, Kyle ... even from me. I didn’t want Lord Mark’s hands on you. I did*

*the only thing I could do. I severed myself completely from you. I sacrificed my own happiness, burned our little life down, hoping that in time, you'd rebuild and discover your own happiness without me.*

Kyle felt firsthand what Lord Markadian is like. A man of his possessions. A man of his power. A man who doesn't seem keen on sharing said possessions and power. A man who, only a moment ago, had his foot pressed upon Kyle's chest, ready to drain him dry.

"I don't think the tea was an illusion," says Kyle.

Tristan glances behind him, notices the same thing. *I don't care, I just realized.* Tristan rises at once. *I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. It kills me, Kyle, what I've done to you. You don't even know the worst.*

"I know."

*You really don't. I am so terrible, Kyle. I am manipulative. I am selfish, in so many ways, multiple ways selfish. I look at myself and ... and I wonder how it was possible for you to love me at all. And do you know the worst part? I look at you now, and I'm so selfish, I just want to kiss you. I want our life in the forest back. I want us back.*

Tears sting Kyle's eyes. He can barely look at Tristan. His heart rages in his chest, light one second, heavy the next.

How can he turn off twenty-six years of love, just like that?

"I thought ..." Kyle chokes. "I thought we were forever."

*I know, I know, my love.*

“I thought we’d be together forever. You promised me ... you promised and then broke that promise ...”

*It was to protect you. I made the choice to leave, thinking it was to protect you. Oh, any choice I made would have been the wrong one. I wonder if that might have been my first selfless act, to give you up and return here, and it was that selfless act that hurt you the worst. I’m the real monster, Kyle.*

“You’re not.”

*I’m the real monster, you don’t even know—*

Kyle rushes up to Tristan right then, wraps him in his arms and squeezes so tight, it aches.

Tristan’s fingers curl, clinging to the back of Kyle’s shirt.

The two don’t let go. For ages, it seems, they stand there in the illusory hall of the sunlit citadel. All of their happiness has returned. Their peace in the forest. The nights on the porch. Stargazing. Talking. Laughing and feeling free. Overcast days when it would rain. Sharing a blanket by the fireplace, stroking one another’s soft hair. Watching the seasons change, leaves to red, to dead, then green and back again.

Kyle and Tristan pull apart, gaze into each other’s eyes.

That’s when Kyle feels a breeze. Cool and crisp, like a kiss of oncoming winter. Refreshing and revitalizing. Bubbles at the top of the head, cascading down to the tips of fingers and toes.

Kyle realizes with a start that it’s Tristan’s happiness.

The first time he’s touched Tristan’s emotions.

He hadn't discovered his Reach until the day he met both Elias and the morning sun.

"Thank you," says Kyle, overcome by the sensation.

Tristan tilts his head, not following.

Another set of footsteps come, causing Kyle and Tristan to turn. From down the hallway comes the last person in this evil House of Vegasyn that Kyle wants to see: the tall, gaunt, prim shape of George, with his odd hair, pencil mustache, and thin pursed lips, sauntering forward.

He comes to a stop. "I have been sent to retrieve our guest Kyle and escort him back to Las Vegas."

"Cut the bullshit," says Kyle, "we're *in* Las Vegas. That's what this is called. Not some 'Domain of Vegasyn' or whatever you guys make-believe to feel special."

"Quite mouthy after just having been saved from a death sentence," observes George, for a moment losing his soft, mild-mannered demeanor. Quite abruptly he seems over it, his stony eyes flashing with a new thought. "Oh, I forgot to ask you. Do you know if Patrick was able to secure my item for me?"

Kyle squints at him. "Patrick? Who's Patrick?"

"The human who came to your little town of Nowhere, the human who didn't belong. See, I sent him on a mission there to retrieve something special for me. I gave him the very specific instructions to *steal* it, as I wished no record to exist of it being purchased. That makes it more special to me, to know it was retrieved with a sense of urgency, maybe even a little terror."

Kyle stares at George. He takes a step forward. “Patrick is his name? You mean to tell me—”

George lifts his eyebrows. “Oh? Does it ring a bell now?”

“The pawnshop thief? The one who was in the video with me? Whose ear I bit off? *That* guy is Patrick?”

“Yes, of course. Wasn’t it obvious who I was talking about? So do you know if he retrieved the item I sent him there to steal, by chance? It was an hourglass.”

Kyle can’t believe his ears. “A ... An hourglass ...?”

“With red sand. My sources told me the item made its way out to your town. I *really* want it,” George carries on, his upper lip twitching, mustache dancing. “It will look so pretty on my shelf next to my blue one. I collect them. I have two hundred and two. This was to become my two hundred and th \_\_\_”

Kyle is upon a startled George at once, grabbing hold of his suit vest, pressing him to the wall. “Are you telling me all of this started because of *you*? You threatened that man’s life, holding that man’s wife and child hostage, ruining his life and mine, over a fucking *hourglass*??”

George’s face twists upward in thought. “Wife and child, you say? Oh!” He snaps his fingers as it comes to him. “Yes, now I remember them. But no, they’re gone already. Patrick took much too long and I hadn’t had my supper yet.”

Kyle lets go of George at once, aghast, mouth hanging. He backs away, his heel hits the bench, his knees bend, he drops.

George gently smooths out his clothes, as if even still not understanding Kyle’s outrage, oblivious to the way Kyle’s

hands tremble or why he was grabbed at all. “Anyway, I suppose I will have to enlist someone else’s help someday. I do not wish to go there myself. That is so ... banal. It is much more rousing if it is stolen. Hm.” He studies Kyle for a moment. “Perhaps I will leave it be for now. You need more time with your old friend.” He glances at Tristan, for a moment appearing curious. Then he flicks his eyes away. “Really wish I had that hourglass. It will bother me for days and days.”

He walks away, heading off down the long stone hallway, then vanishing around a corner.

A moment of silence passes. Then Tristan sits next to Kyle on the bench. The silence of the hallway persists.

“I can’t believe you would align with these monsters,” says Kyle. “This isn’t you.”

*I know.*

“Would that fact just now have even saved me in Mark’s stupid pretend court I was just subjected to? The fact that the entire situation, the video, everything was because of ... of ...”

*I really can’t say, Kyle. My gift of the mind only goes so far.*

“He said my gift was from the heart. He said the heart was the weakest of the three types.”

*I suppose it depends on the heart.*

“What deal did you strike in there? With Lord Mark of Not-Las-Vegas?” Kyle looks at Tristan, looks him right in his

misty blue eyes. “What does it mean to lay your immortal life down against mine?”

*It's quite simple. My immortal life is the collateral for your strict obedience of the deal we have made with the Lord of Vegasyn.*

Kyle frowns. “And what is that deal, exactly?”

*That you return to Nowhere. That you enjoy your life just the way you want. That none of those fifty-seven humans you confided in share your secret with anyone. See? Simple as that.*

Kyle's eyes avert, his stomach twisting, unsettled. “And ... if that deal is somehow violated? Somehow broken?”

*Then I will be violated. I will be broken.*

“Tristan ...”

*Like I said. It's the least I can do. I'll never ask your forgiveness. I will just do what I can to secure your happiness. With little acts and big ones. By the way, I'm the one for whom Wendy works.*

Kyle shudders. “I know.”

*She and I go way back, decades, since before I even met you. I told her to return your brother's ring to you, but ... didn't realize she'd do so in such a cruel manner. I'm quite sorry. Wendy can be a ... sadistic fiend at times, but I promise she doesn't mean to be like that any more than the roots of a tree mean to dislodge a sidewalk. A true accident. Like bubblegum on your shoe. Or a baby sister.*

“Or kissing with teeth,” says Kyle.

He glances at Tristan. Tristan gazes back.

At once, Tristan takes hold of Kyle by his face, presses his pale pink lips against Kyle's own. All the cool wintry breeze of his emotions become enflamed at once, swirled into a fire that surges as the kiss deepens.

Kyle grunts as he feels Tristan's teeth pierce his lip.

Blood swells between them as they kiss. After each bite, a lapping of tongue, like an apology. Then the kiss strengthens with another bite, over and over. Tristan's fingers claw into Kyle's shirt, bodies pressed together. It is the first time Kyle has kissed him with his connection, every burst of emotion twofold.

They part abruptly, stare into one another's eyes.

Red lips. Blue eyes. Out of breath.

*I suppose we should say our goodbyes.* Tristan's eyes are not sad or pained as he speaks. *I don't wish to test Lord Mark's patience any more than I already have today. Really, you don't want to find yourself here again. This is a place of endings.*

Kyle lets go of Tristan. It isn't easy. "I understand."

*I suppose I'll do my Lull thing to you now. Need to keep secret the location of the House of Lord Vegasyn. Protocol.* Tristan brushes a drop of Kyle's blood to his mouth. *I hope you're able to fulfill your end of the deal. Live as comfortably, as peacefully, as invisibly as you can, among your new family in the middle of Nowhere. I have really enjoyed seeing your pretty eyes again. Thank you. Oh, how I hope you're still drawing lions.*



“Monsters, too.” Kyle sighs. “Respectfully, Tristan, I hope we never see each other again.”

Tristan lifts his fingers to Kyle’s face, hesitates, then gently strokes. The world turns over to darkness one last time.

# 27.

## *Somewhere.*

—•—

When Kyle wakes, he turns over in a cold, unfamiliar bed, finds a note on the pillow next to him.

He sits up, clutching it.

A brief set of instructions. He reads them. Lowers the note to his lap.

It's really all over with.

Swept under the Persian rug.

Like a terrible dream.

It's the bedroom of an empty suite. Not Brock's. In a fresh outfit he doesn't remember putting on, he slides off of the bed and moves to a nearby mirror, looks at himself. Not a speck of blood on him. He was cleaned thoroughly. And changed.

He tries not to picture what that looked like or who did it.

Kyle notices the windows are covered by obscure shutters. He stands there a moment, hears Brock's words from earlier asking the elevator attendant about these big shutters. Is it the morning? Is it the afternoon? Is it nighttime again?

Kyle takes a jacket left for him by the door, puts it on.

He takes an umbrella and a pair of sunglasses.

A small wad of cash is on the kitchenette counter, where his phone and wallet sit neatly, awaiting him. He turns the

phone on. Judging from the lack of messages, it seems the number of prank calls and interested press has greatly lessened overnight. Is that the work of Lord Markadian and his team, or has Kyle's fifteen minutes of fame at last expired?

He realizes he doesn't care.

Kyle leaves the room, takes the elevator down. Passes by a sad-faced woman in the lobby, two men talking business, and a teenager taking photos of the colorful flower and plant display. "Careful, they're all deadly," says Kyle absently as he walks by. "Everything here is." The teen stops taking photos, frowns at Kyle as he walks away.

The woman at the front desk offers no smile, the same one who checked them in. "Did you enjoy your stay at the Scarlet Sands Hotel & Casino, sir?"

"No," answers Kyle.

As if she didn't hear nor process the answer, she asks, "Was Mr. Hastings able to find something adequate to enjoy on the room service menu?"

"He found more than he came here for," answers Kyle.

Then, he is standing outside the front of the building, just under the large shaded front canopy, waiting for the car. The sun is up. The jacket covers Kyle completely, including a hood flopped over his head, sleeves coming nearly to his fingertips, his look completed by the pair of shades over his eyes like he's nursing a hangover. At his side dangles the umbrella, unopened. One of the demonic statues stands to his side. In the daylight hours, the statues seem funny, out of place, as if caught being transported to a pretentious art gallery. When he

gazes to the left, the sky's midday glow. To the right, a demon's erection in granite and polished limestone.

When the car pulls up, Kyle double checks the description in the instructions. Dark tinted windows. Black, unremarkable.

The window rolls down.

Elias's face appears.

His warm, golden brown skin. Intense eyes. Big arm, hand on the steering wheel. Subtlest of smiles playing on his lips.

Kyle stares back, dumbfounded. "Elias ...?"

"Hey." He smiles, pats the seat. "You getting in or what?"

Kyle rushes up to the car and peels the door open, climbing into the car quicker than he should and nearly closing the door on his own leg. "Elias! I thought ... I thought I'd never see you again. I was expecting some weird driver. How'd you—??"

"Don't worry about it. Hey, shouldn't you give me a kiss or something?"

Kyle climbs over the center console to press his lips against Elias's. Emotions fill the car like hot chocolate in a mug, warm, sweet, and full of hearthside promises. Whatever nightmares had lingered inside Kyle from the night's events are obliterated at the joining of their lips.

Kyle is practically sitting in Elias's lap when the kiss ends. "Explain to me what happened," Kyle demands. "What'd your mom say? Does she know who they are? Markadian and all his Vegasyn assholes? Does she work with

them? *For* them? Why are you here and not with her and her henchmen who took you away from me? How are you here right now? Why?”

Elias blinks. “I’ll need a little time to get through all those questions. For now, why don’t you pretend to be a human being and sit in the passenger seat properly, do your seatbelt, and I’ll tell you a story over the next few hours as we make our way back home to Nowhere.”

Kyle kisses Elias instead. Again.

“Goddamn it, Kyle,” groans Elias happily as the two grind against one another in the driver’s seat, lips locked, kissing with such ferocity that their teeth ache.

The traffic is treacherous, proving difficult and slow as they make their way back to the highway. It’s while waiting in the line of bumper-to-bumper vehicles that Elias tells Kyle what he has learned in the very eye-opening past few hours.

“Wait a sec,” breathes Kyle, trying to follow. “Your mom doesn’t know what they really are, but she works with them?”

“I don’t know which ones she’s associated with or knows, but they’re all over the place. Investors, executives, staff, you name it. In fact, they’ve even infiltrated other casinos and hotels all across the city. Learned that from my new best pal George, who I hope dies a long and agonizing—*Hey! Eyes off your phone, jackass!*” he shouts at a car that cuts him off, sighs, and resumes. “Anyway, their money’s everywhere. Fucking demons.”

“So ... I still don’t understand how that somehow gave you the freedom to drive out to Nowhere with me.”

“One of Markadian’s fancy suit-wearing underlings has a high-ranking position at Scarlet Sands apparently—Marketing and Promotions Director, something like that. He had a private discussion with my mom, and long story short, I’ve been sent on a long-term ‘field project’ as an ambassador for the hotel.”

Kyle wrinkles his face. “You’re doing what now?”

“It’s a lie, total bullshit, a cover.” Elias smiles. “I’m simply coming back to Nowhere with you and doing whatever the fuck I want.”

Kyle can’t believe this. “It’s that easy? It can’t be that easy. How is your mother okay with any of this?”

“I don’t know.” Elias thinks about it. “She seemed off when we talked it out before I left. But she hasn’t really been herself for a long time. Right before I headed out the door, she wanted a hug. A ... long one.” Elias shakes his head. “So weird ... like she was replaced with an alien who actually has a heart.”

Kyle stares ahead at the road and the countless vehicles.

Send Rosemarie my regards.

And a warning.

Those were Lord Markadian’s words before sending Elias back to his mother with George.

“Sorry you didn’t even get to meet her,” says Elias. “I know I’ve said many things about her. Our relationship isn’t perfect. We’ve both said and done things. But she’s still my mom. I still love her. I just ...” He lets out a sigh all over the steering wheel. “I just hope she’s actually okay and ... and those fiends aren’t threatening her or something.”

That is exactly what Kyle believes.

They threatened her. They run her. They control her. She doesn't even need to know what they really are. In the business world, money is power, and money bends the world to its will.

But whatever they said to his mother, it freed him from his imprisonment under her scarlet thumb. Now Elias has gotten exactly what he always wanted: the freedom to go to Nowhere, to live the way he wants, to have an actual life. He won't even have to hide anymore. He can get to know everyone in town, make friends, live like a normal human being.

As normal as he can, considering the circumstances.

"I was also caught up about the, uh, court thing."

Kyle glances at Elias. "You were?"

"Yeah. How you were almost destroyed. Then almost eaten alive by that Markadian bastard. I'm telling you, if I was there, oh no, sir, he wouldn't have even been able to get within an inch of you. I don't care if I'd have to defy physics or lose a few bones in defending you. No one puts a hand on you. Boils my blood, just thinking about it." Elias's eyes avert. "Also ... heard you were saved in the nick of time by an old flame."

Kyle blankly stares ahead at the traffic.

He can still feel the bite Tristan left on his lips.

"So ..." Elias's tone turns sensitive. "How was it? To ... see him again? To see Tristan?"

Kyle isn't sure how to answer at first. "Strange."

“Good strange? Bad strange?”

“Just strange.”

Each of Elias’s questions come with a note of hesitation.  
“So how did it go?”

Kyle measures his words. “I expressed my anger to him. He expressed remorse. Then I kissed him.”

Someone honks at them from behind. Elias gently eases the car forward, stops half a foot later. “Okay. And how did it feel?”

“Strange.”

“An awful lot seems to be strange concerning him.”

“Because it was,” says Kyle. “Until now, I thought he was dead. Never thought I’d get the chance to get answers. Or tell him off. Or get ...” Kyle’s throat tightens. “... closure.”

Elias takes Kyle’s hand suddenly, startling him. The two look at one another.

“Is that what that was?” asks Elias gently. “The kiss? Was it closure?”

When Kyle stared into Tristan’s eyes earlier, he felt the sting of chaos, of his past, of regret and confusion.

He also felt love.

When he gets lost in Elias’s eyes, Kyle feels like he’s home. He sees the future. Hope. Warmth and life and possibility.

And also love.

“It was a kiss goodbye,” answers Kyle.



The emotion inside Elias right now is like a calm ocean. But the skies over that ocean are overcast and troubled. It is a seascape of uncertainty. Will it storm? Will it remain calm?

“You know ...” starts Elias, then pauses. “You know, if it wasn’t a kiss goodbye ... if it was a kiss of see-you-later, or even a kiss of passion ... I would understand.”

“Elias ...”

“I’m not a jealous guy.” That sea inside of him is rippling, rocking. “I understand emotions can be, well, complicated. You weren’t expecting to see him ever again. I own the things I buy, Kyle. My clothes, my watch, a pack of Twizzlers to chow down on. I don’t own you. I don’t own your heart.” Waves toss and crash around, the wind picking up. “But if someone hurts you, if someone tries to hurt you, comes after you, anything at all, I will defend you, Kyle, I will stand up for you.” The seas shatter within Elias, roaring. “Even if it’s Tristan hurting it.”

The ocean settles nearly at once.

The Sea of Elias growing as calm as a pool.

He leans over the center console, brings his face right up to Kyle’s. “No matter if your heart’s mine yet, or not ... my heart is all yours. I love you, Kyle.”

An ocean of rumbling vehicles all around them.

Kyle stares at Elias, his last words swimming in his ears, in his own tumultuous sea of emotions.

Words Kyle caught himself saying to Brock just yesterday.

His feelings for Elias.

“I don’t want my heart to belong to me,” says Kyle. “I can’t look after it properly ... I’m no good with it.” He takes hold of Elias’s hand with both of his now. “I think you need to keep it safe for me, Elias. I think you need to have it.”

Elias swallows. “I didn’t say all of that just for you to—”

“I love you, too.”

Elias’s eyes go wide.

“I knew it before all this happened, before I thought I lost you. I realize now that you didn’t just save me that one morning in the desert. You keep saving me. You protect me in ways no one else in my life ever has. Not my parents. Not my team back in school. Not even Tristan, who had a whole second life he was living and suffering without me, a life with monsters.” Kyle brings Elias’s hand up to his mouth, gives a tender kiss. “I love you, Elias. My heart is, in every way a heart can be, yours.”

Elias stares back in wonder, hand caught within Kyle’s.

The ocean within him, perfectly, utterly still.

“Alright,” Elias finally says, “I’m ... I’m gonna need you to put all of that into writing. I want to hear those words again.”

Kyle lifts an eyebrow. “What?”

“Especially the part about ‘not even Tristan’. I liked that part a lot. Damn it, I love you so much right now.” A car honks at them from behind. Elias ignores it. “I love you. Those are my new favorite words. Oh, man, when you first appeared

on that rooftop, back at the hotel, do you know the first thought I had in my mind? Before I freaked out? Before everything?”

“Cars are honking,” says Kyle.

“The first thought I had was that I wish I’d never left your house. I was an idiot, to leave you there, to go for that walk.”

Kyle grimaces. “They’re honking a lot.”

“Whether you taste my blood, whether you never taste it again, if you want to live like a human, live like yourself, I will love and support every decision you make for your life. Unless it has to do with keeping your house dreary,” Elias quickly adds with a wince. “We’re gonna spruce that place up, pronto, yes, sir, we are. Starting today.”

“Elias ...”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, cars honking.” He steps on the gas, a happy smile spilled across his face. “Damn, Kyle, you just made me feel like it’s my birthday. What did I do to deserve you?”

The traffic soon gives way, just like the sea in Elias’s heart does, and it isn’t much longer before the two of them are on the open road, driving off to Nowhere together.

Soon, there’s an unremarkable black car in Kyle’s driveway, previously occupied by no vehicles at all.

In the house, Kyle and Elias have peeled off each other’s clothes, Elias happily pinned to the wall, Kyle’s mouth picking a place to bite. “God, how I’ve missed this,” moans Elias.

Kyle has become so skilled with his Reach in such a short amount of time, forced to listen to it, to rely upon it, to use it. He connects instantly and feels every bit of Elias's excitement. When he grazes a nipple with his lips, he feels Elias's thrill, his yearning for a bite. When Kyle's lips drag over Elias's shoulder, there's a shudder, him wanting it badly. Kyle's lips touch Elias's neck, his heart leaps, and Kyle knows he's found the spot.

Teeth sink in.

Elias yells out.

Fingers dig into flesh as they grab hold of one another.

Kyle's fingers into Elias's muscles, clinging to him, craving every part of him. Elias's fingers grappling with Kyle's soft hair, tugging with desire as he braces for Kyle's skillful teeth, his soft and teasing tongue, his plush, perfect lips.

Kyle realizes now the responsibility he was never taught in his time with Tristan in the woods.

The responsibility of maintaining control when he feeds on the ever so willing human Elias.

Of never losing sight of the give and take of this beautiful exchange of blood and passion.

Of listening to his Reach and knowing every second what is too much, what is not enough, what is perfect.

Kyle and Elias are upon the floor, bodies slick with sweat, spots of blood upon Elias's neck, his shoulder and chest, each part of him tasted like samples off a gourmet menu.

The only menu Kyle ever wants to know.

“We need ...” growls Elias as Kyle slides inside him. “... to get ...” Kyle pushes, causing Elias to groan with delight. “... a fucking ...” Kyle latches on at once to Elias’s ear, biting, tasting the nectar that spills. Elias moans so deeply, he can’t finish his sentence, clinging to Kyle as he rides him.

Kyle brings his bloodied, sensitive lips to Elias’s ear. “*Bed,*” he finishes for him in a whisper.

It is always so difficult to hold back when Kyle is connected to Elias, all the pleasure doubled, sensations doubled, each taste and touch and stroke and pump doubled. The closer Elias gets, the closer Kyle already is. His insides somersault with delight, every part of his body rendered weightless and giddy.

“Let’s ... rethink ... the curtains,” groans Elias. “I want ... to build you ... a great ... big ... front porch ...” Their bodies rock with increasing tempo, with increasing passion. “Shade at all ... *mmph* ... at all times ... of day ...” Kyle licks up a spot of blood. Elias’s eyes rock back. “You ... deserve ... to feel like ... you never have to ... hide again ...” It won’t be much longer. “... not even ... from the sun.”

At the point of no return, Elias and Kyle lock eyes at once.

Elias peering up from the floor, lips parted, every inch of his face twisted with happy disbelief. Kyle gazing down, feeling every bit of joy that Elias feels at the brink, connected deeper with Kyle than he has any other partner in his life. Can Elias feel when Kyle is connected to him? Does he know somehow?

Then they finish, letting every bit of tension they endured together go, every moment of pain from the night and the long morning, every muscle in their bodies that carried sorrow.

Kyle collapses onto Elias, who embraces him in his strong arms and sweaty body, as they slowly catch their breaths.

After a while, they have found themselves on their backs on that same floor, staring up at the ceiling as if stargazing in the middle of the day. Now and then, a kiss. Now and then, a note about something else Elias wants to do to the house. Now and then, Kyle imagining what their life out here will be like, then sharing a few words of it, to a delighted Elias at his side.

But soon, the grim weight of reality returns to Kyle.

The events that have transpired.

Lives that were lost.

Kyle can push it all away as much as he wants, out here in Nowhere where nothing seems to happen. Pretend to not see the jagged scars that darken his soul. Live on, fuck Elias, laugh and moan and get sweaty.

Kyle needs to address the other feelings.

To honor them somehow.

“There’s something I need to do,” murmurs Kyle, pressed to Elias’s side, Elias holding him with a protective arm. “Later when the sun’s gone to bed. Something for him. Both of them.”

Elias puts a kiss on Kyle’s forehead. Somehow, he seems to understand. “I’ll be there every moment of it for you.”

Kyle is comforted deeply by Elias's reassurance, even if he didn't need it. He knows Elias is his new rock.

But first, he must visit the old one.

The moment the sun is down, Kyle and Elias set out of the house, head the wrong way out of the neighborhood, and stroll into the desert. It's even cooler tonight than usual, the air dry and wispy, as if it too feels the weight in their hearts.

They arrive at the spot, their special rock that overlooks a great and impressive stretch of desert, made even more scenic by the recently set sun. Kyle crouches down by the rock and digs into the earth, barehanded. It feels right, to do it this way, without tools, using his hands to create this meaningful site. Once the small hole is made, Kyle produces the bag which keeps his brother Kaleb's silver ring. He sets it in the hole with care. Next to it, he places a small red cap with footballs on its bill, the only item he has left of Brock's, the cap that sent him turning around halfway to Phoenix and coming back.

Kyle kneels. For a moment, he doesn't know what to say. "I love you both," he murmurs rather simply. "You lost your lives too soon. You lost your lives because of me. I will have to carry that weight with me for the rest of my time here ... however long I'm allowed to live. I hope that my happiness carries on to you, to both of you ... somehow, in some way. If I could live on for you and allow you to share my joys with me ... to feel any sense of peace and belonging here in Nowhere, then perhaps I can make use of the rest of my existence ... in honoring you." Kyle places his hands on the rock, bows his head, then remains there in silence for quite some time.

When he stands back from the rock, the sun is gone and it is dark. Upon the rock now exists a few more etchings.

*K A & B H*

Elias brings his arms around Kyle, holds him tightly under the faraway stars, as the two gaze down at the gravesite, lost in their respective thoughts and wishes.

“I’m ready,” says Kyle when it feels right.

Elias kisses him. “I’m not sure I’m ready,” he admits.

Kyle glances at him questioningly. When he feels the hot and prickly sensation of anxiety dancing around in Elias’s chest, he realizes what he means. “Why not?” teases Kyle. “You afraid to meet everyone? No one’s gonna bite you.” He gives Elias’s ear a nip, catching him by surprise. “Except for me.”

Elias smirks. “That’s ... actually oddly reassuring.”

“I want everyone to meet you. I want everyone to know the person who saves my life every day.”

Elias makes a funny face, clearly masking the pride he feels in hearing those words from Kyle. “You give me far too much credit.” Then he grabs Kyle’s ass and gives it a sudden squeeze. “And I’ll take it,” he adds.

The two of them leave the site in the dark, feet crunching along the sand and dirt. As they walk away, Kyle peers over his shoulder, watching as the rock grows smaller at his back. He promises himself to return, to honor their memory, just as he did when those items once sat on his table. He will come back every day when the sun sets if he must, just to say their names.



Mom. Dad. Kaleb.

And now Brock.

The moment Kyle comes in through the doors of the bar, the first person who spots him is Cade.

And she isn't having it. "What the hell?" she cries out. "I'm generous, I give you two nights off like a decent human being, a good manager and friend, and here you come, visiting *both* of those nights? Are you incapable of staying away from this bar? Is it the jukebox? Are you addicted to—Oh." She blinks upon seeing Elias. "Who's this hunk? Another blast-from-the-past?"

Kyle smirks, slips an arm around Elias. "Actually ... this is a blast from my present and future. His name is Elias."

"Wait a sec." Cade lifts her hands. "Are you two ...?" She wags a finger between them, eyes wide as she pieces it together. "Are you two a thing? Since when? How did I not know?"

Kyle and Elias share a look. "I guess we've got a little bit of catching up to do," admits Kyle with a wince.

Cade frowns disapprovingly. "Becks," she says without even looking. "Pour us a couple of hard ones. Kyle and I have got a little bit of catching up to do."

The moment a drink is poured, a dozen glasses are already emptied. It's a talent, the way Cade latches quickly on to new faces, making anyone welcome around her, a talent for which Kyle finds himself especially grateful. Elias is soon rolling in laughter, sharing stories, and falling in with the crowd in no time. At one point, when she's telling a story to everyone

about something funny her daughter did when she was three, Kyle finds his mind wandering to that night in the office when she shared her secrets. Even now as he listens to her talk adoringly about three-year-old Layna, he can feel the love that burns inside her like a beautiful lantern with an infinite supply of oil, casting away all the nearby darkness. Maybe there is something inside of Cade just yet, something beautiful and magical about her, like a gift waiting to be discovered, carried down from one protective ancestor to the next.

Kyle hopes he gets to witness her find that gift.

Leland, having become bored out of his mind in the back kitchen doing nothing, finds himself at the bar laughing along with them. There are few customers and no orders coming in. “I can totally see it,” Leland insists after wiping sweat off his face by lifting the front of his apron. “You two. You totally go together. Elias? That’s your name? Yeah, fits you, love it. Elias and Kyle ... Kyle and Elias ... Wait, what’s that I’m hearing? Do you hear it, Cade? Do you, Becks? Ah! That’s the sound of wedding bells!” he sings. “Nah, just teasing. But seriously, if that happens, I wanna be someone’s best man, I’ve never been a best man. Hey, Kyle, you don’t have any friends. Can’t you use me as a best man? No offense.”

It’s some time later while everyone’s laughing at a funny dance Leland is trying to do in front of the jukebox when the bar door swings open and in walks Jeremy, hand-in-hand with Layna. “Uh, Leland, are you trying to dance?” ask Jeremy.

“What’s going on here??” cries Cade, tears of laughter still clinging to her eyes. “What’s with you two and your hands??”

“Seriously, Cade, you are sometimes so oblivious,” mutters Becks as she pours another drink for Elias, who nods for thanks. Leland continues to dance in front of the jukebox like no one’s watching.

“Figured it’s about time we made it official,” says Jeremy, gazing at Layna, tiny stars of adoration dancing in his eyes. She is too shy to show much on her face at all, embarrassed at once by all the attention. Perhaps holding hands was Jeremy’s idea and Layna is sorely regretting agreeing to it.

“Official??” asks Leland from the jukebox, shaking his butt like he’s wagging a duck tail. “Maybe it’s *your* wedding I’ll be a best man at! Hey, what’s that face for?”

Layna comes up to Kyle the moment she sees him. “I never got the chance ... t-to apologize ... for my actions. I’m so sorry, Mr. Rosen—” Her face goes wonky. “Uh ... Mr. Kyleberg. Uh, no, that’s not right either.” She is now in full-blown panic. “I’m sorry for posting the video.”

Kyle smiles understandingly at her. “It’s alright. All that’s behind us now ... just so long as everyone here helps me out in keeping it a secret.”

“Secret to the grave,” Layna quickly promises, letting go of Jeremy’s hand to lift hers to her heart.

“Not that anyone’s gonna see much of it anymore,” says Jeremy, sounding sulky. “Ran some searches earlier, couldn’t even find a single instance of the video online. As if the whole thing was just wiped straight out of existence.”

“You almost sound bummed about it,” says Cade, her voice flat and critical.

Jeremy grimaces. “Sorry, Mr. Kyle.” He notices Elias quite suddenly. “Hey, you’re that friend from the clinic, the guy who picked up Kyle the morning after the whole thing happened.”

Elias nods. “Yep, that’s me. Elias is the name. Pleasure to meet you. By the way, you are very observant.”

“I get it from my dad, actually,” admits Jeremy. “He’s the police chief here. Chief Rojas.”

“Ah, rings a bell,” says Elias, takes a sip of his drink, then winces. “He might have arrested me once. That ... wasn’t my best night. Sorry that was your dad’s first impression of me.”

“No one has to be sorry about anything,” Kyle insists with half a laugh. “A video. A first impression. None of that matters anymore, what’s done is done.” He faces the room and lifts a drink. “Right now, I just want to say ...”

“Oh, is he giving a toast?” asks Cade. She pats the counter. Becks pours a quick one. Leland stops dancing and comes up to the counter, grabs one himself. “For Jer Bear and Layna, too! Cokes, Becks, c’mon, don’t give me a heart attack.” Jeremy and Layna now join them at the counter, glasses of Coca-Cola in hand. “Go ahead, Kyle, like we never interrupted.”

Kyle meets Elias’s eyes. “I just want to say ... I am feeling thankful right now. Thankful and grateful and any other word I can think of. For the love I’m feeling in this room. The love I have gotten from this town and its amazing, surprising people. I’ve not been the most forthcoming person, I know. I came to this place with a sack full of secrets over my shoulder. I wish I knew sooner how safe I’d feel in this place

eventually. This is a town we all call Nowhere, like it doesn't deserve a name, like it isn't worthy of attention. You guys ... all of you ... you make it feel like Somewhere."

"If that isn't the cheesiest most adorable thing I've ever —" Becks nudges Leland, shutting him up. He plasters on a smile. "It's great. Somewhere. I like it. Keep going."

Kyle grins at him anyway. "You all make it feel like home. Each and every one of you." He lifts his glass. "To all of you."

"To all of us!" shouts Cade, joining in.

"Hell yeah, all of us," says Becks. Leland goes to lift his glass, realizes he doesn't have one, lifts his fist instead. "All of us!" he shouts happily.

All the glasses are clinked, and for one precious, beautiful moment, the bar looks like any normal bar. Just a handful of boring, happy humans sharing a pleasant drink and a great time among friends. A handful of people who look like anyone else, who live, breathe, and celebrate like anyone else. Kyle included, with a happy, free-as-can-be Elias by his side.

And as the small and intimate crowd of them drink and cheer and laugh into the night, Kyle finds his Reach awakened without warning, swelling with the happiness in this cramped bar. It swells until he feels each and every nuance of the joy that ripples out within all the bar's occupants. Jeremy and Layna as they gaze curiously at each other, young love buzzing in their eyes. Leland and Becks, who share drinks and cheer each other on and crack jokes, faces wrinkled up, eyes teary with laughter. Cade, whose own heart bursts with vicarious joy at seeing her daughter truly happy and at ease for

the first time in a long while, most certainly let off the hook and ungrounded far, far earlier than planned.

To Elias, whose true and liberated joy in this town has only just begun to grow.

Kyle swears, were he to let his Reach swell any greater, he could feel the private joys and comforts of every single person in the whole town, from one dusty, happy end to the other, a chorus of long-awaited contentment, belongingness, and peace, like music to his heart.

# *Epilogue.*

## *I Am Your Blood.*

—•—

Tristan stands by the window of the tower, staring out.

It's his favorite place to stand.

Favorite place to stare.

Perhaps it is because it's the one place where Markadian's illusions don't touch. A spot at the top of the tower, where the tendrils of illusion give way to reality. This unexceptional, old room with no furniture or fancy décor or magic tricks. Tristan stands at the window, gazes out at the real night sky, the real stars that blanket it, and the pale, deathly moon.

It's full tonight.

Somehow, that feels significant to Tristan.

“Dear me, what in heavens do you find appealing about this drab shithole of a room?”

Tristan smiles. It's a friend at the door. Her name is Raya. She is Lord of nothing. Director of nothing. Unimportant as unimportant can be.

It's why Tristan likes her.

Despite her unimportance, she carries herself like a queen.

That's why Tristan likes her more.

Long black and white hair interwoven into a thick braid that comes down her left shoulder, skin like milk, creamy and

flowing, eyes black as night to match her lips, always black, and wearing at any time of day or night a matching skirt and bustier of black lace with stockings and spike heels.

Considering said heels, it's a wonder Tristan never hears her approach. *Need something, my dear Raya? Has someone died?*

“Sadly, no,” she confesses, “but I was feeling so bored, and Lord Marky is in one of his moods, and Miss May is busy, so I thought I would come to you for entertainment.”

Tristan turns from the window. *I seem to be quite low on your list of people to seek entertainment from.*

“That’s because you come to rooms like these and stare out of windows.” Raya pouts her lips into a tiny black heart. “Can you rescue me tonight, Tristan, oh please?”

*Of course,* Tristan decides rather quickly. *But only if you will accompany me on a small errand.*

Raya’s black heart lips twist into nearly a V of a grimace.

Nonetheless, she follows Tristan as he moves away from the window, through the door, and down the spiral staircase. As they descend, the barren walls around them slowly adopt their illusions, turning into grand white marble. The creaky wooden steps at their feet, into polished oak. The further they descend, the more grand the appearance of this tower.

“What is this horrible errand?” complains Raya.

Tristan only continues descending, hands clasped in front of him, bouncing almost playfully on his thighs with each step.



At the foot of the now-marble tower, Tristan and Raya pass through an archway together, and are immediately in a large glass dome filled with artificially-enhanced, vividly green trees and thorny vines and bright glowing butterflies. Tristan ignores every trace of beauty around him as if it isn't even there. A colorful butterfly lands on his nose, which he also ignores, until it flutters away like a fairytale, forgotten. He heads down a path of shiny colorful cobblestone, turns abruptly to the left down the path, then passes through another archway.

At once, they are in a bright chamber where nurses wander around busily, clipboards in hand, tall hats with big red crosses upon their heads. Their outfits, like caricatures of nurses. Their existences, all illusions, not one of them a real person.

“Oh, dear heavens, I hate this place. Are you punishing me? Have I wronged you, dear Tristan?”

Tristan stops at the doorway to one of the rooms.

He doesn't dare enter the room. He merely stands there, peering in. A hospital bed is inside, upon which rests a body—a body Tristan happens to know.

Raya senses it, takes a step back. “What kind of errand did you say this was again?”

*I didn't say.*

The bed sheets are soiled with blood, with real blood.

The body is silent, still.

“Is that a new one?” asks Raya, confused. “Why is he here? Does someone have plans with him? He looks quite

gone.”

Tristan stares at the body for quite some time. From this vantage point, all he can see is from the waist down, long trails of blood drawn to the toes, stains and spots and spatters across the legs, long since dried over, like red paint.

Like red, red, red paint.

Red on the blades of a ceiling fan.

Red on the kitchen tiles.

Red on Kyle’s mother.

Kyle’s father.

Kyle’s ...

*Have you ever just ... wanted to start over?* Tristan asks the question in a perfect deadpan, his thoughts elsewhere, his heart elsewhere, his eyes on that body. *Do you ever just ... want to let it all burn ... and start over?*

He thinks of Kyle, of when he asked the same question to him, decades ago.

He wonders why he still asks himself that question, even today.

Even if he never feels brave enough to answer it himself.

“Start over? Sounds awful tiresome,” complains Raya. “Are you finished with your errand yet? I want to be entertained.”

*I have done such terrible things, Raya. Such terrible ...*

Red on the blades of a ceiling fan.

Of a mother.

A father.

And ...

“We’ve all done bad things,” says Raya, rolling her eyes.

*I wish sometimes I knew why I did certain things. I wish I knew if I did them for myself, did them for someone else, or did them just because I was ... bored. I’ve wondered all this time if he would forgive me ... but I wonder, even if he did ... I wonder if I could ever truly forgive myself.*

“This is why you were last on my list,” explains Raya. “You are such a drag, dear me, it’s a wonder you don’t bore yourself to death.”

*I wish you could feel my sadness, Raya, my dear friend.*

Raya sighs like a petulant teenager. “Is it entertaining? To feel your sadness?”

*Sometimes.*

She brings a long white finger to the black heart of her lips, mulling it over. “Alright,” she decides playfully. “Make me feel it, then. Make me feel your sadness.”

Tristan closes his eyes.

*Very well.*

Tristan leaves the room. Raya follows, hands linked behind her back, nearly skipping.

Around the corner from the nurse’s station, they pass a long, bright room with cream-and-lime wallpaper where approximately ten humans sit getting their blood drawn. Attending to them is a very real, non-illusionary nurse, also human. As Tristan and Raya pass through, every human, nurse

included, bow their heads. *Thank you, as you were*, says Tristan without looking, and the blood drawing resumes.

They arrive at an elevator. With a tap of a button, the doors slide open, and the two step on.

Tristan's finger slides down the array of blank buttons, taps one near the very bottom.

"Oh, dear me, Tristan, what in heavens are we going down *there* for?"

*Sadness*, answers Tristan as the doors close.

When the doors open again, an impossibly long, stark grey hallway stretches before them, utterly silent, cold, still.

Tristan walks down the hall, Raya following behind. They pass a human in plain grey clothes mopping the floor, who at once stops, kneels, and bows his head respectfully.

*Thank you, as you were*, Tristan says as he passes by, and the human then rises and continues his duty.

The hall opens to a small commons area. Three humans, all in similarly plain grey clothing, sit at a table playing cards. When Tristan and Raya pass through, they drop their cards at once, kneel upon the floor, and bow their heads.

*Thank you, as you were*, Tristan says to them as well, continuing on.

Down the hall, another commons area with more humans, more kneeling, bowing heads. *Thank you, as you were*. And then a narrow, drab library room. Demure humans quietly put books away on the shelves, then stop, kneel, bow their heads. *Thank you, as you were*. Another room with long tables, a

handful of humans eating, the opened window to a kitchen along the wall, humans serving food to other humans on plain metal trays. All of them stop eating, stop serving, kneeling and bowing heads.

*Thank you, as you were.*

The eating and serving resumes, quietly, calmly.

“I do very much hate this place,” complains Raya. “How long will we be down here, do you think? Are we finished with the entertainment?”

*No,* answers Tristan.

Soon, they walk down narrower halls lined with doors—a staggering amount of them, intersections after intersections of hallways full of doors. Tristan and Raya pass them one by one, each door bearing a small glass window, each door marked with a tiny metal placard. Blood 203. Blood 204. Blood 205.

At each intersection, Tristan knows which way to turn.

Blood 434. Blood 435. Blood 436.

“We don’t drink directly from them,” complains Raya. “So why are we down here in these miserable halls?”

Tristan doesn’t answer her. He just turns another corner.

Blood 758. Blood 759. Blood 760.

“Is it because we’ll find sadness here?” asks Raya. “Because no one drinks blood from anything over 800 anymore? Because there are less of us? Can you tell me if I’m warm, at the very least? Oh, I do hate your games sometimes, Tristan.”

Another corner.

Blood 981. Blood 982. Blood 983.

One more.

Blood 1023. Blood 1024.

Tristan at last comes to a stop. Before him, a door labeled Blood 1025. Before gazing through the small glass window, he closes his eyes and takes a breath.

It has been some time since he stood before this door, perhaps too long.

*Are you awake?* Tristan asks the question of the occupant, a courtesy not often granted to them. *May I enter?* This question, also a rarely given courtesy.

From within echoes a soft, gentle voice. “Yes, sir.”

Tristan unlatches the door, opens it with ease, steps inside. A narrow room, perhaps six feet wide and twelve deep. Plain greyish walls. A slim table against the wall, upon which sits a lantern and a single book. Across from that, a twin bed with a blanket. Against the back wall, a stainless steel toilet and sink combination, for human needs.

When Tristan and Raya enter the room, the human kneels at once, gently places his hands upon the floor, bows his head, and awaits further instruction.

Tristan peers down, observing the human. Late thirties. Sweet-faced. Gentle. At first, Tristan is unsure of what to say, of whether it was a mistake at all to come down here, but for that full moon in the sky tonight outside his favorite window. And Raya’s request for entertainment.

And Kyle.

*I was wondering if you might like to entertain us.*

The man understands at once. “Do you request anything specific, sir?”

Tristan thinks. *Something from the heart*, he finally decides to say. *Something honest. Something true.*

The man seems puzzled by the request for a moment. “Yes, sir,” he finally says, then carefully reaches underneath his bed for an item.

A violin.

He brings the instrument to his chin, still kneeling.

*This won't do.* Tristan forces himself to be assertive. *Please stand. I insist. Stand as if you are a great violinist in an auditorium of adoring fans. They're here to listen to you and the beauty you give this world. Please, stand with dignity.*

The man climbs to his feet at once, then settles into place just as fast, obeying too rigidly. He brings the instrument to his chin again, hands shaking. He attempts a first note. The string squeaks. The bow, slipping and uncertain.

Raya sighs impatiently.

*I believe in you. Steady your hands, remember the audience, the large auditorium of adoring fans. Do you see my eyes? Look at me.*

The man looks at him.

Right in the eyes.

Tristan wonders if he shouldn't have asked such a thing. But he did, and now the man stares at him with his soft, gentle eyes, his beautiful, sweet, disarming eyes.

*Good*, says Tristan, in a voice so quiet, so empty, it's merely breath. *From the heart, now.*

The man lifts his bow.

Then plays.

The first note steadies itself, then rings out, resonating and full as it fills the room.

That single note leads into the next, and the next, stringing together into a melody of somber emotion.

The rooms nearby must hear the music, too. All the other occupants, the other humans, normally silent as the dead, now gently coaxed to life by the sweet and unassuming song of the tender violin.

It swells as it fills the hall.

Fills their ears.

Fills their hearts with melancholic hope and beauty.

With richness, darkness, and resounding light.

He draws his bow up and down the strings as the melody takes flight. The man's face twists with emotion as he closes his eyes and becomes one with the violin, becoming every note.

As the music swells, Tristan can almost believe they aren't in this room, but rather in an actual auditorium, a grand opera house, under the bright, glowing stage lights, an audience full of teary-eyed admirers. Each of them moved as they watch the violinist play, every note bleeding with emotion, every vibrato ringing out with its sorrow, bringing every audience member to inspired tears.



All of them, under the spell of this man's violin, changed by the power of his music and its inexplicable influence over them.

Tristan watches with unwavering apathy on his face as the man plays. Despite Tristan's stony, emotionless face, he feels a single tear let loose from his eye.

It runs to his nose, to his lip, to his chin.

Drops to the floor.

Too soon, the song concludes. When the human finishes, he lowers his head at once, violin held to his side, and waits.

"Sadness," says Raya. "What an ... an interesting emotion. I think I may never have felt it that way before."

Tristan decides they are quite finished here. *Thank you for that beautiful song. We shall leave you be now. You may rest, Blood 1025.* He turns to go.

"Not so quickly," insists Raya, stopping him. She takes one step forward. "I wonder what 'sadness' means to you, human?"

The man keeps his head bowed. "It means ... whatever you wish it to mean to me, ma'am."

"No, no. I want a *real* answer."

Tristan takes hold of her arm. *Let's go, you're disturbing him.*

"But I want to be entertained," whines Raya playfully, with but a hint of annoyance. She faces the man. "You will survive long down here with those manners. I can respect that."

Tristan clenches his jaw. *Raya ...*

“Perhaps I will ask a different question. One that is easier to answer truthfully, a far simpler question.” Raya’s black eyes burn as she stares upon the human, takes another step forward. “Can you tell me ... your name?”

*Raya, please.*

The man nods once, keeping his head bowed. “Yes, ma’am. I am Blood 1025. I am your Blood. I—”

“No. I don’t want *that* answer. I want a real one. Your *real* name. I want your *illegal* name. I want the name you were made to abandon when you became our Blood. Tell me. I insist.”

The man barely lifts his head. Emotion fills his sweet, sad little eyes. “My ... My ...” He struggles with Raya’s impossible request, his heart strangling him, silencing him. “My name ...”

Tristan watches the human, face blank as stone, anguished.

Then the human at last obliges. “K-Kaleb. My name ... My name is Kaleb.”

*To Be Continued.*

Thank you for reading *Kissing With Teeth*.

**A second book is on the way. Keep scrolling if you wish to check out some of my other work, and be sure to sign up for my newsletter to keep in touch and not miss any news about the upcoming second book in this series.**

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Thank you again for reading *Kissing With Teeth*. I hope Kyle, Elias, and Tristan have taken you on a journey that stays in your heart. Keep in touch with me via my newsletter to hear any news about what happens next for them, or consider connecting with me on social media!

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\* \* \*

*Maybe the point of living isn't finding who you are.*

*It's outrunning who you were.*