

**An anthology
without a
name: just
open and read
the stories**

An Anthology Without a Name: Just Open and Read the Stories

© 2025 Tinashe Joseph Chiwara

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be copied, reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission from the author, except for brief quotations in reviews or academic discussions.

This is a work of fiction. Any similarities to real people, places, or events are purely coincidental. The opinions and perspectives expressed in this book are solely those of the author.

For permissions, inquiries, or any other requests, please contact:

Email: <mailto:josephchiwara123@gmail.com>

Self-published by Tinashe Joseph Chiwara

All stories written by Tinashe Joseph Chiwara

Disclaimer

While reading this anthology, you may come across a character name appearing in two or more stories. You might also notice that some stories share the same setting. This is purely coincidental and not an indication that the stories are connected in any way. Each story stands on its own, existing independently of the others, even if certain names or places happen to reappear.

All characters in this anthology are entirely fictional. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. The events, settings, and situations portrayed are products of imagination and should not be mistaken for real-life occurrences.

Some stories may contain themes or situations that could be unsettling to certain readers. These narratives were written with the intention of exploring different emotions, ideas, and perspectives, not to cause distress. Reader discretion is advised.

By choosing to read this anthology, you acknowledge that it is a work of fiction meant for entertainment and creative expression. Thank you for stepping into these worlds—I hope you enjoy the journey.

WARNING!!!

Welcome to *An Anthology Without a Name: Just Open and Read the Stories*. This collection is unlike any other. There is no roadmap, no hand-holding, and certainly no neat categorization. Each story exists on its own, waiting for you to dive in without any preconceived notions. One moment, you might be unraveling a deep sci-fi mystery, and the next, you could find yourself caught in the tangled emotions of a heartfelt romance. The unexpected is the only thing you can expect.

These stories follow no fixed structure, no particular order, and no traditional storytelling rules. I haven't included descriptions because I want you to experience each piece as it unfolds, without bias or expectation. Think of this as a literary journey where you don't know what's coming next. It's an adventure—sometimes thrilling, sometimes emotional, sometimes downright strange—but always raw and real.

Since the stories aren't grouped by genre, you may find yourself jumping from one world to another with no warning. One moment, you could be deep in a dystopian nightmare, and in the next, walking through a nostalgic memory. That's intentional. Life doesn't come in neat categories, and neither does this anthology. I want you to feel the shift, to embrace the unpredictability, to let the stories take you where they will.

Some of these stories may challenge you. Others may disturb you. There will be moments of light and moments of darkness, of humor and of tragedy. Some characters might feel familiar, while others may be utterly alien to you. The one thing they all share is that they came from a place of passion, curiosity, and a love for storytelling.

I should also warn you that you may encounter characters with the same names appearing in different stories, or settings that seem familiar but have no actual connection. This isn't a shared universe; it's simply a result of my creative process. When a name or a place feels right, I use it. No deeper meaning, no hidden agenda—just stories unfolding in the way they were meant to.

So, with that said, I invite you to step in, to read, to lose yourself in the worlds within these pages. Whether you pick stories at random or read straight through, I hope you find something that stays with you. Now, go ahead—just open and read.

Dedication

To the movie scriptwriters—the unseen architects of the stories that captivate us, the minds behind the characters we love, and the voices that make us laugh, cry, and dream. Your words have painted worlds beyond imagination, and your stories have been my greatest teachers. Watching your work unfold on screen has fueled my passion for storytelling, showing me that every great tale begins with a single idea and the courage to write it down.

To all the writers who have ever put pen to paper, fingers to keys, or dreams into words—you have inspired me to write my own stories, to give life to the characters in my mind, and to believe that stories, no matter how small, deserve to be told. This collection is my tribute to the storytellers before me and those yet to come.

Acknowledgments

Writing this anthology has been a journey—one that wouldn't have been possible without the people who have inspired, encouraged, and supported me along the way. To every writer, storyteller, and scriptwriter who has ever put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard, thank you. Your stories lit a fire in me, showing me the power of words and how they can shape emotions, thoughts, and entire worlds. Without you, I might never have dared to write my own.

To my friends and family, who may not have always understood my obsession with storytelling but supported me nonetheless, I am grateful. Thank you for listening to my endless ideas, for putting up with my moments of distraction when I was lost in my own worlds, and for encouraging me when I doubted myself. Your belief in me has meant more than you know.

To every reader who picks up this anthology, whether you love it, hate it, or feel something in between—thank you. Writing is nothing without readers, and I am honored that you've chosen to spend time with these stories. I hope they move you in some way, whether they make you think, feel, or simply escape reality for a little while.

And finally, to the craft of writing itself—the endless struggle, the joy, the frustration, the magic. There's nothing quite like creating something out of nothing, shaping words into meaning. This anthology is a reflection of years of passion, learning, and growth. And this is only the beginning.

Foreword

Writing has always been a part of me—an escape, a passion, and, at times, the only way I could make sense of the world. This anthology is more than just a collection of stories; it's a journey through my growth as a writer, a reflection of my imagination, and a piece of who I was from the ages of 14 to 18. Every page holds fragments of my thoughts, my inspirations, and the countless hours I spent lost in creating new worlds, characters, and narratives that lived in my head before making their way onto paper.

I wrote these stories at different points in my life, each one capturing a different version of myself. Some of them were written in moments of excitement, others in moments of deep thought, and a few in sheer curiosity to see where my ideas would lead me. There is no single theme that binds them together, no uniform genre that keeps them in place. Instead, they are diverse, unpredictable, and, at times, even surprising to me when I look back at them now.

Throughout this journey, I relied on my creativity, my experiences, and the countless stories I've read and admired. I have been inspired by so many great writers—those who built worlds that felt real, created characters that felt like friends, and told stories that stayed with me long after I finished reading them. Their influence shaped me, pushed me, and motivated me to put my own words out into the world. To them, I owe a great deal of gratitude.

Of course, writing a book isn't just about coming up with ideas. It's about refining them, polishing them, and making sure they read as smoothly as possible. While I would have loved to work with a professional editor, it wasn't something I could afford. Instead, I turned to AI to help edit some parts of these stories—not to replace my voice, but to enhance it. Every word, every sentence, and every story remains mine; the AI was simply a tool to help shape them into their best form.

I know that some may question the use of AI in the creative process, but I see it as just another resource, much like spellcheck or grammar tools. It didn't write these stories for me—I did that. It didn't create the emotions, the characters, or the worlds within these pages—I did that. And I did it with love, passion, and the unwavering belief that stories are meant to be told, no matter the means used to refine them.

This anthology is not perfect, nor was it meant to be. It is a collection of stories that reflect who I was and who I am becoming. Some of them may feel raw, others more polished, but each one holds a piece of me—my thoughts, my dreams, my curiosities, and my ever-growing love for storytelling.

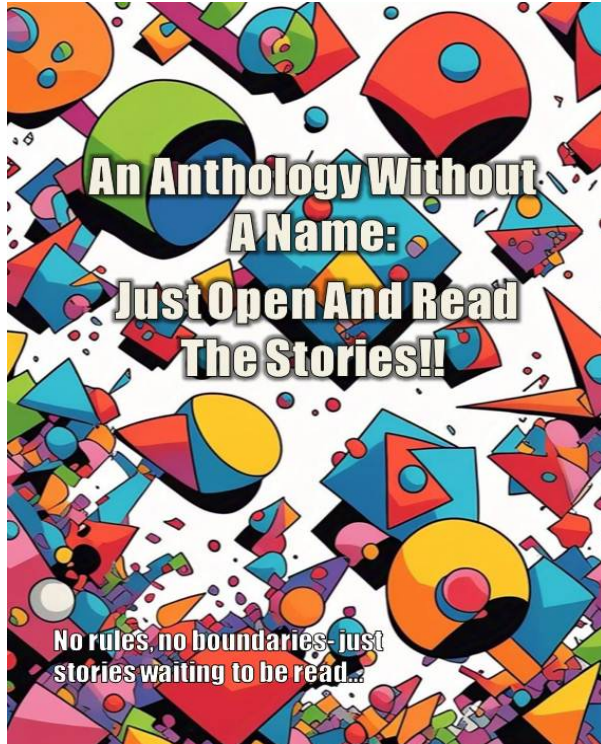
To those who choose to read this book, I thank you. Whether you read one story or all of them, whether you love them or simply find them interesting, I appreciate the time you're giving to something I poured my heart into. Writing is a lonely process, but knowing that someone out there is experiencing these stories makes it all worthwhile.

If there is one thing I hope you take from this collection, it's that creativity has no rules. You don't need a perfect plan, a perfect editor, or even a perfect idea to write. You just need a story inside you that refuses to stay silent. That's what writing has been for me—a voice that refused to stay quiet, a world that demanded to be shared.

So, with that, I invite you to step into these stories, to explore their worlds, and to see where they take you. Maybe you'll find a story that sticks with you. Maybe you'll find one that makes you think. Or maybe you'll simply enjoy the ride. Either way, I hope you enjoy reading them as much as I enjoyed writing them.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. The final curtain
2. If I can't have you... No one will
3. Last call
4. Unfinished truth
5. Hi, I'm will
6. My life as a punchline
7. Jensen Manor
8. In the end it's me, the lake and her
9. NeoEden
10. The haunted classroom
11. Chasing Matilda
12. Run till dawn
13. They made me do it
14. The confession
15. Falling back to you



**An Anthology Without
A Name:
Just Open And Read
The Stories!!**

**No rules, no boundaries- just
stories waiting to be read...**

The Final Curtain

The lights of the Opal Theatre flickered above the entrance, their warm yellow glow casting a nostalgic hue over the cobblestone street. Inside, the air hummed with excitement. Tonight was opening night for *The Duchess's Revenge*, a play that had captured the hearts of the small town long before it even began rehearsals. The red velvet seats were filled, whispers bouncing off the ornate golden walls. Every eye was on the stage.

Eleanor Drake stood in the spotlight, her hands trembling, though not with nerves. Her emerald gown shimmered as she tilted her head, letting the stage light catch the sharp angles of her face. She had been born for this moment—years of struggling in anonymity had led her to this stage, in this theater. But beneath the applause, a shadow of unease crept along the edges of her thoughts.

From the wings, Henry Porter watched her with a clenched jaw. His understudy costume—a replica of Eleanor's co-star's outfit—hung awkwardly on his lean frame. He should have been up there. It wasn't fair. He had talent, passion, and drive, yet Eleanor's mere existence kept him in the shadows.

In the audience, Detective Alex Carter adjusted his tie, his eyes darting between Eleanor and Laura Simmons, the director seated a few rows ahead of him. He hadn't come here for the play. He had come because there had been whispers—something about tension between Eleanor and the cast. This wasn't the first time Alex had found himself in the theater, but tonight felt different. The air was thick with something unspoken.

The play unfolded seamlessly, each scene performed with precision and intensity. Eleanor's voice carried the weight of the duchess's vengeance, drawing the audience into her world. But as the final act approached, Alex noticed something strange. Laura, who was typically engrossed during performances, seemed restless. Her fingers tapped against her program, her gaze shifting toward the backstage doors more often than the stage.

Eleanor stepped forward for her final monologue. The audience fell silent, the weight of her presence commanding their attention. As she raised her hand to deliver the

duchess's curse, she froze. Her face paled, her lips parting as though to speak, but no sound emerged.

It happened so quickly that at first, no one reacted. Eleanor staggered backward, her hand clutching her throat. She looked to the wings, her emerald eyes wide with panic. A low murmur rippled through the crowd.

Then she collapsed.

The audience erupted into chaos. Gasps, screams, and the screech of chairs being pushed back filled the theater. Alex leapt from his seat, shoving past confused patrons as he sprinted toward the stage. He wasn't the only one. Laura Simmons was already there, kneeling beside Eleanor's lifeless body

"She—she just fell," Laura stammered, her hands hovering uselessly over Eleanor. "It's... it's not part of the play."

Alex crouched beside her, his fingers pressing against Eleanor's neck. No pulse. The warmth of her skin had already begun to fade.

"Call an ambulance," he barked, his voice cutting through the chaos. "Now."

The theater had emptied, leaving behind an eerie stillness. Police tape cordoned off the stage, and officers moved through the space like shadows, gathering statements and evidence. Alex stood near the edge of the stage, his jaw tight.

The initial examination revealed no external injuries. No wounds, no bruises. A natural death seemed unlikely for someone so young and healthy.

"She didn't just drop dead," Alex muttered to himself, scanning the stage. Something had happened here.

Henry Porter sat on a folding chair just offstage, his face pale and drawn. He stared at the floor, his hands gripping his knees.

"She stole everything from me," Henry whispered when Alex approached him. His voice was hoarse, his gaze vacant. "The spotlight, the praise, even this role. But I didn't... I didn't do this."

Alex studied him for a moment. The jealousy in Henry's voice was unmistakable, but there was something about the way his hands trembled that made Alex pause. Henry might have had a motive, but he didn't have the confidence of someone who had just committed murder.

"Stay here," Alex said, moving toward the dressing rooms.

Eleanor's dressing room was as opulent as the stage. Gilded mirrors lined the walls, surrounded by soft lights that gave the illusion of warmth. Her costumes hung neatly on a rack, and her makeup station was impeccably organized. But it was the bouquet of roses on the vanity that caught Alex's attention.

He leaned in, his eyes narrowing as he noticed a faint white powder dusting the petals. Carefully, he plucked a single rose from the vase and examined its stem. A prick of his finger confirmed his suspicion—someone had coated the thorns with poison.

"Detective," an officer called from the doorway, holding up a small brooch. "We found this near where she collapsed."

Alex took the brooch, its edges sharp and gleaming under the dim light. He turned it over in his hand, his mind racing. It matched the one Eleanor had worn during her final scene—a scene where her character is betrayed.

Laura Simmons paced backstage, her heels clicking against the wooden floor. Alex approached her, the brooch in hand.

"This was found near Eleanor," he said, watching her reaction closely.

Laura's eyes flicked to the brooch, then back to Alex. "It's part of the costume. It's... symbolic. It represents the dagger that kills the duchess in the story."

"And you chose it for her costume?"

"Yes," Laura replied, her tone defensive. "But I didn't touch it tonight. The props team handles all of that."

Alex nodded slowly, his mind piecing together fragments of the night. "Where were you when she collapsed?"

"In the audience, same as you," Laura said, her voice steady. But there was a flicker of something in her eyes—unease, perhaps guilt.

Alex decided not to press her further, at least not yet. Instead, he turned his attention to the props team, who confirmed that the brooch had been accounted for during rehearsal but had gone missing shortly before the performance.

The breakthrough came when Alex returned to the dressing rooms. He found a journal tucked beneath a pile of scripts on Laura's desk. Its pages were filled with scrawled notes and sketches, but one entry stood out:

"Eleanor has to pay for what she did. She ruined me, stole my career, my life. She doesn't deserve this role—or any role. I'll make sure of it."

Alex's breath hitched. The words were damning, but they weren't enough. He needed something more concrete.

Confronting Laura wasn't easy. She was calm, almost eerily so, as Alex laid the journal on the table between them.

"I didn't kill her," Laura said, her voice icy. "Yes, I hated her. She sabotaged my directorial debut years ago and destroyed my reputation. But that doesn't mean I killed her."

"But you wanted her gone," Alex pressed. "You wanted her to suffer like you did."

Laura's composure faltered. Her eyes darted to the brooch on the table. "I didn't poison her," she said, her voice trembling. "I... I only wanted her to feel fear. I slipped the brooch into her costume to rattle her, not to kill her."

Alex frowned. "Then how do you explain the poisoned roses in her dressing room? Or the fact that she died after wearing the brooch you planted?"

Laura's hands shook as she buried her face in them. "I don't know," she whispered. "I didn't know about the poison."

It was Percy, the props manager, who inadvertently revealed the truth.

"She wore gloves during rehearsal," Percy said as he packed up Eleanor's costumes. "Always insisted on it when handling props. Said she was afraid of pricking her fingers."

Alex's eyes widened. The poison on the roses hadn't killed her. It had been the brooch.

Further testing confirmed it: the brooch had been coated with the same poison as the roses.

In the end, it was Henry Porter who confessed. He had overheard Laura's rant about Eleanor, had found the brooch in her desk, and had seen his opportunity.

"She humiliated me," Henry said, his voice hollow. "Treated me like I was nothing. Laura gave me the idea, but I was the one who did it. I coated the brooch with poison before slipping it back into her costume."

As the officers led Henry away, Alex stood on the stage, staring at the empty spotlight. The theater had always been a place of drama, but tonight, it had seen something far darker.

The final curtain had fallen, and with it, a life had ended. But the truth had come to light, as it always did.

And as Alex walked out into the cool night, he couldn't help but wonder how many more shadows lingered behind the scenes, waiting for their own moments in the spotlight.

If I Can't Have You... No One Will

It was a cold, bleak morning in the small town of Norville when Detective Timothy White received the call that would change the course of his career. The crime scene was as tragic as it was perplexing—a murder on Valentine's Day, the day meant to celebrate love, had now become a symbol of the very opposite.

Timothy stood outside the crime scene, a modest, modern apartment complex on the edge of town. The streets had been deserted, a ghostly calm hanging in the air. The only sign of life was the flash of blue and red from the police cars parked outside the building.

Inside, Victor Langston—a successful businessman known for his charm and good looks—lay motionless on the floor of his living room. The apartment was lavish, a place that would have been the envy of most. But now, it was stained with the blood of a man whose life had been cut short too soon.

Victor's body lay face up, a deep gash across his chest. Blood oozed around him in dark, thick pools, and beside him, the source of his torment—an open bouquet of red roses and a half-wilted flower arrangement. Valentine's Day. Love. It was almost too much to bear.

Timothy crouched near the body, surveying the scene. The room smelled of flowers—an eerie contradiction to the death that had occurred here. Victor's face was frozen in an expression that seemed to be both surprise and horror, his eyes wide open in a final, silent scream.

"Detective White, you're needed in here," Officer Clara Banks's voice echoed in the hallway.

Timothy turned to find his colleague stepping into the room. Clara was a no-nonsense officer, efficient and always sharp. She wasn't one for wasting time, and that was why Timothy trusted her instincts.

"The victim's name is Victor Langston," she began, giving him a quick rundown. "Well-known businessman in town. He's been dating Sarah Tyson for a little over a

year now. No sign of forced entry, no obvious theft. But we did find these beside him.” She gestured to the bouquet and the roses.

“The girlfriend, Sarah?” Timothy asked, his mind already working through the possibilities. He had seen too many cases like this one before—jealousy, betrayal, a murder that seemed too personal to be a random act.

Clara nodded. “That’s our first lead. We’ve got officers looking for her, but she’s gone. It’s like she vanished into thin air.”

Timothy looked down at the body again, his mind racing. There was something strange about this scene. Too neat, almost too perfect. A man who seemed to have everything—wealth, success, and love—had been killed on the very day he was supposed to be celebrating those things.

“Any witnesses?” Timothy asked.

“None. Neighbors didn’t hear a thing. The only thing we have is Sarah’s phone number and a few text messages between her and Victor. They were planning to spend the evening together. But after that... nothing. We haven’t been able to reach her.”

Timothy stood up, his mind buzzing with questions. “Get me everything you can on Sarah Tyson. I want to know where she’s been, who she’s been talking to. Check her social media, her history. We need to find her, now.”

Clara nodded. “I’ll get on it.”

Sarah Tyson. The name lingered in Timothy’s mind as he stood over Victor’s body. He couldn’t help but wonder what had pushed someone to kill another person—especially on a day that was supposed to symbolize love. The roses, the flowers—it all felt like a twisted love letter to someone who would never read it.

The next few hours were a blur of phone calls and interviews. Timothy learned that Sarah Tyson was in her early thirties, a woman with striking beauty and a quiet demeanor. She had worked as a florist in town, owning a small shop that catered to weddings and romantic events. The more Timothy dug, the more he found out about Sarah’s devotion to Victor. From all accounts, she had been utterly infatuated with

him. Her social media posts, photographs, and texts all painted the picture of a woman madly in love.

But there was a problem. It seemed like Victor had grown tired of that love.

Through some more digging, Timothy learned that Victor had been involved with another woman—Emma Wells, his secretary at his business. Emma was a reserved, professional woman in her early thirties, and although she was secretive about her relationship with Victor, Timothy got a sense that there was more to the affair than met the eye.

That evening, after hours of work at the station, Timothy sat at his desk, reviewing the case files. His coffee had long gone cold, but the questions swirling in his mind kept him from caring.

What had really happened here?

Why kill a man on Valentine's Day? What did Sarah know that no one else did?

The phone on his desk rang, jolting him from his thoughts. He picked it up, his eyes still on the case files. "Detective White."

"We found her," Clara's voice came through, a little breathless. "Sarah Tyson. She's in the apartment on Willow Street, near the edge of town. We're going in now."

Timothy's pulse quickened. "Hold on. I'm coming."

When Timothy arrived at the apartment, he could feel the weight of the investigation hanging over him. They had arrived too late to catch Sarah off guard. The apartment was silent, empty, with no signs of a struggle. Sarah had disappeared, leaving nothing behind except a series of unanswered questions.

In the small kitchen, Clara was talking to a neighbor who had seen Sarah leave the apartment just a few hours earlier. There were no witnesses to her departure, and no one could give them a clear direction on where she had gone.

Timothy stood by the window, looking out onto the darkened street. His mind was racing again—did Sarah leave willingly? Was she guilty? Or was there something more sinister at play?

The next morning, Sarah's name was plastered across the news. The police had announced her as the prime suspect, and the town of Norville was abuzz with whispers of the murder.

But Sarah was still nowhere to be found.

The investigation was gaining speed, but Detective Timothy White could feel the tension weighing down on him. The case had only begun, and already, he was swimming in a sea of confusion. As the hours ticked by, more questions arose, but the answers seemed to slip through his fingers like sand. Sarah Tyson was missing, and every lead he followed only led to more dead ends.

He sat in his office, flipping through the stack of papers that had accumulated. There was something about this case that gnawed at him, something that felt off. A woman gone missing. A murdered man on Valentine's Day. Flowers and blood. It was too neat, too deliberate. It wasn't just a crime of passion—it was something more calculated. But why?

Timothy's phone buzzed on his desk, breaking his train of thought. He glanced at the caller ID and sighed. It was Clara.

"Detective White," he answered, his voice betraying his fatigue.

"We've got something," Clara's voice crackled on the other end. "We traced Sarah's phone signal. It pinged near the old factory district. It's a long shot, but we're sending a team to check it out. You should come."

Timothy didn't hesitate. He grabbed his coat and headed out the door, knowing that this lead could be their first real breakthrough.

The factory district was a crumbling, desolate part of Norville, far removed from the bustling streets where most people lived. The air was thick with the smell of rust and decay, and the buildings loomed like forgotten giants, their windows dark and empty.

As Timothy pulled into the abandoned lot, the sounds of his car tires crunching on the gravel were the only noise in the otherwise eerie silence.

Clara and the rest of the team were already gathered near an old warehouse. Timothy joined them, his eyes scanning the surroundings. This place looked like a perfect hiding spot—remote, isolated, with plenty of places for someone to disappear.

“We’re sure this is the right place?” Timothy asked Clara, his voice low.

Clara nodded. “The phone pinged here. It’s the only lead we’ve got.”

Timothy stared at the warehouse, its metal door slightly ajar, as if beckoning them in. It felt wrong—too quiet, too still. But there was no turning back now.

“Let’s move in,” he said, his voice steady.

Inside the warehouse, it was darker than Timothy had expected. The faint light from the outside world filtered in through cracks in the walls, casting long shadows that seemed to shift as they moved. The air was thick with dust, and every step Timothy took seemed to echo louder than the last.

Clara led the way, her flashlight cutting through the darkness. The team spread out, checking corners and scanning the area, but there was no sign of Sarah. As they reached the far end of the warehouse, something caught Timothy’s eye—a small, discarded object on the floor. It was a piece of fabric, frayed at the edges, the same shade of red as the roses found at the crime scene.

His heart skipped a beat.

“Clara, come look at this,” he called, bending down to examine the fabric. “It’s from a dress.”

Clara knelt beside him, her eyes narrowing. “It matches the color of the flowers,” she said, the realization settling in. “This is connected to Sarah. She was here.”

Timothy stood up, his mind racing. “But where is she?”

They continued searching the warehouse, moving further into the shadows. The deeper they went, the more they uncovered—nothing overtly helpful, but there were signs that someone had been here recently. A broken chair. A knocked-over crate. The remnants of what seemed to be a hurried escape.

Then Clara called out from the other side of the room. “Detective, over here.”

Timothy hurried over, his heart pounding. Clara stood near the back of the warehouse, staring at a wall that had been recently disturbed. She pointed to a small crack in the plaster, where something glimmered in the dim light.

“It looks like... a hidden compartment,” Clara said, her voice tense.

Timothy knelt down, carefully prying at the crack. With a little effort, the wall gave way, revealing a small metal box hidden behind the plaster. He opened it, revealing a collection of items: photographs, a few letters, and a small, delicate ring—a woman’s engagement ring.

Timothy’s mind raced. These were personal items, but whose were they? They didn’t belong to Victor Langston, that was for sure. And they didn’t appear to belong to Sarah Tyson either, although there was something hauntingly familiar about them.

“Clara, I need you to run a check on these items,” he said, his voice calm but urgent. “We need to know who these belong to, and we need to do it fast.”

Clara nodded and pulled out her phone, already beginning to make the necessary calls.

That night, back at the station, Timothy sat alone in his office, staring at the photographs spread out on his desk. He had already spoken to the lab techs, and they were still working on identifying the items. But something gnawed at him—the photographs, the ring—everything about it felt wrong.

Timothy’s thoughts drifted back to the victim. Victor Langston had been a charming man, known for his business acumen and his smooth demeanor. He had made enemies, of course, but he was also well-liked by many. But Sarah Tyson—she was different. The more Timothy learned about her, the more her obsession with Victor seemed to border on unhealthy.

Then there was the other woman—Emma Wells. Sarah’s competition. The woman who had been involved with Victor. Timothy’s gut told him that there was more to this than just a jealous lover turning violent. There was something bigger at play, something dark.

But the deeper he dug, the more questions arose. Was Sarah really the killer? Or was there something else, something Timothy had missed?

As the hours passed, Timothy couldn’t shake the feeling that the case was spiraling out of control. Nothing was what it seemed, and the truth was just out of reach. Every lead was a dead end. Every clue only brought more questions.

Just as he was about to give in to the growing frustration, Clara knocked on the door.

“Detective,” she said, her voice tight. “We’ve got a lead. The ring belongs to Emma Wells.”

Timothy’s heart skipped a beat.

“Emma Wells?” he repeated, “What’s she got to do with this?”

Clara’s expression was grim. “We don’t know yet, but it’s something.”

The investigation was taking a sharp turn, and Timothy could feel the weight of the case bearing down on him. The answers he was searching for were slowly emerging, but each revelation only left him with more questions. Emma Wells. Sarah Tyson. Victor Langston. It was becoming a tangled web of lies, betrayal, and obsession.

Timothy had to act fast—before it was too late.

The investigation had intensified, and now the lines between right and wrong, truth and deception, were blurring. Detective Timothy White could feel the heat of the case closing in on him, but the truth remained just out of his grasp. He had to find Sarah. And he had to find her fast, before the mystery became too dangerous to unravel.

The days dragged on with little progress, and the weight of the investigation pressed heavily on Detective Timothy White's shoulders. The small town of Norville was known for its quiet streets and peaceful atmosphere, but the brutal murder of Victor Langston had turned everything upside down. The more Timothy dug, the more he found himself at a dead end. There were so many layers to this case, and he was struggling to peel them back.

The ring found in the hidden compartment—Emma Wells' engagement ring—was the key, but Timothy felt like it was still a piece of the puzzle that was far too complex to fit. He stared at the photograph of Sarah Tyson, her face hauntingly calm in the snapshot, her eyes betraying none of the inner turmoil he suspected was simmering beneath the surface. Was she the killer, or had she been manipulated by someone else? And what about Emma? She was the one Victor had been seeing behind Sarah's back. Was she involved in the murder?

Timothy rubbed his temples, his mind racing through the possible scenarios. The more he thought about it, the more questions arose. There had to be a connection between Sarah, Emma, and Victor, but what was it?

The next morning, Clara walked into Timothy's office, breaking his chain of thought. She looked worn out, her eyes tired, but her expression was determined.

"Detective, I've got something," she said, holding up a file.

Timothy straightened in his chair. "What is it?"

Clara dropped the file on the desk, revealing a report from the forensics team. "We got the results back on the blood found at the crime scene. The blood near the bouquet—it's not Victor's."

Timothy's brow furrowed. "What do you mean it's not his?"

Clara hesitated. "It's Sarah's."

Timothy's heart skipped a beat. Sarah's blood?

"Are you saying she was injured?" he asked, his voice tight.

Clara nodded. "That's what the lab reports suggest. It looks like she was hurt before Victor was killed."

Timothy leaned back in his chair, his mind churning. If Sarah had been hurt, could she have been the victim in this story, not the perpetrator? But why would her blood be found near the body if she wasn't involved in some way?

This only made things more complicated. Was Sarah truly the killer, or was she the one who had been manipulated into committing the crime?

Later that afternoon, Timothy drove to Emma Wells' house. It was a modest home on the outskirts of Norville, one that seemed out of place in a neighborhood of pristine lawns and cookie-cutter houses. The house was dark, the windows drawn. He knocked on the door, and it creaked open after a few moments, revealing a woman in her late twenties, her face pale and tired, but with a hardened look in her eyes.

"I'm Detective White," he said, holding up his badge. "I need to ask you a few questions about Victor Langston."

Emma's eyes flickered for a split second before she stepped aside, allowing him into the dimly lit living room.

"Come in," she said flatly.

Timothy entered the house, glancing around. There were no signs of life—no photos of friends, no family heirlooms, just a few simple pieces of furniture scattered about. It felt sterile, empty, like the woman who lived there was keeping a part of herself locked away.

"I'm assuming you're aware of the murder?" Timothy asked, sitting down on the couch across from Emma.

Emma's expression was cold, and she stared at him for a long moment before speaking. "Of course I know. It's all anyone's been talking about." She paused, her lips trembling slightly. "But I didn't have anything to do with it. I wasn't involved."

"Then why was your engagement ring found in the warehouse?" Timothy asked, his voice calm but forceful.

Emma's face tightened. "I didn't leave it there. I don't even know how it got there."

Timothy's mind raced. Emma had been engaged to Victor, and the two of them had been in a secret relationship for months, according to his investigation. But if she wasn't involved, then why was her ring there?

"Did you know about Victor and Sarah?" Timothy pressed. "Did you know he was planning to leave her?"

Emma hesitated, her eyes shifting nervously. "Yes, I knew. But I didn't—" She broke off, biting her lip.

"What?" Timothy urged. "What didn't you do?"

"I didn't hurt him, Detective. I swear," Emma said, her voice shaking. "Victor told me he was leaving Sarah. He said it was over, but he didn't want to hurt her. He promised me that he'd do it gently, without causing her pain." Her eyes brimmed with tears. "But when I went to his house that night, he was already gone. There was nothing I could do."

Timothy studied her carefully. Her story didn't add up, but there was something in her eyes that suggested she wasn't lying. He leaned forward slightly, trying to gauge her emotions.

"Why did you go to his house that night?" Timothy asked, his voice softer now.

"I... I wanted to make sure he was okay," Emma said, her voice cracking. "We'd been planning a future together, but I knew he was torn. He was still in love with Sarah, even though he was with me. I just wanted to make sure..."

Her voice trailed off, and Timothy could sense the vulnerability in her. Was Emma hiding something? Or was she simply caught in a web of lies and betrayal, just like Sarah?

"Have you spoken to Sarah recently?" Timothy asked.

Emma shook her head. "No. Not for a few days. After... after everything happened, I didn't want to."

Timothy stood up, his mind racing with the new information. He wasn't sure if Emma was telling the truth, but he wasn't ruling her out either. There was still too much left unanswered. He needed to find Sarah.

As Timothy drove back to the station, he felt like he was chasing ghosts. Each lead, each piece of evidence, only made the case murkier. Sarah Tyson, Emma Wells, Victor Langston—they all had secrets, and none of them were clean. The more he uncovered, the more it felt like everyone was hiding something.

But one thing was clear: someone had to be lying. Someone had to be manipulating the truth, and it was up to him to uncover the deception. His next step was to find Sarah—because only she could answer the questions that were gnawing at him.

And Timothy was determined to get to the bottom of it, no matter what it took.

The investigation had turned into a twisted game of deception, and Timothy White was right in the center of it all. With every new discovery, the case seemed to unravel more, pulling Timothy deeper into a web of lies. But the truth was elusive—Sarah's disappearance, Emma's secrets, and Victor's betrayal. Each piece added to the complexity, and Timothy knew the final answer was just within reach. But would he uncover the truth before it was too late?

The investigation had dragged on for nearly two weeks, and Detective Timothy White was no closer to unraveling the mystery. The more he uncovered, the more questions seemed to surface. The pieces of the puzzle were there, but they weren't fitting together. The last thing he wanted was to face another dead-end, especially with the pressure mounting from the higher-ups. But he had to keep pushing. There was something in this case that gnawed at him, some hidden truth he could feel but couldn't quite reach.

It was a cold, overcast afternoon when he got the call.

"Detective White, we've found Sarah Tyson."

Timothy's heart raced as he grabbed his coat and headed out the door. He hadn't found Sarah yet, but the mounting reports about her seemed to confirm his suspicions: she was the key to everything. The person who held all the answers. She had been on the run for over a week, vanishing into thin air after the murder of Victor Langston. Everyone had assumed she was hiding, running from the law, but Timothy was starting to think differently. Maybe she wasn't running. Maybe she had a plan.

By the time he arrived at the rundown apartment building on the edge of town, his mind was racing with thoughts of what might happen next. He had no idea what Sarah was going to say when he found her, but he couldn't back down now.

The apartment was on the second floor, tucked away at the end of a dimly lit hallway. Timothy knocked on the door with purpose, his hand trembling slightly. For all he knew, Sarah could be armed, desperate, and more dangerous than anyone realized. But he wasn't going to let that stop him.

After a long pause, the door creaked open. There stood Sarah Tyson—her clothes were disheveled, her eyes swollen and red from lack of sleep. But there was something in her gaze that made Timothy hesitate. Fear? Guilt? Or was it something else entirely?

"Detective White," she said softly, her voice barely above a whisper. "I knew you'd come."

Timothy kept his distance, not wanting to scare her but knowing he had no time to waste. "I need to ask you some questions, Sarah. It's about Victor Langston. What happened that night?"

Her shoulders slumped, and she stepped back, inviting him inside. Timothy hesitated before following her into the small, dim apartment. The place was a mess, papers scattered on the floor, dishes piled up in the sink. It was clear that Sarah had been living in this space for days, trying to escape from something—or someone.

"Please," she said, motioning toward the couch. "Sit down."

Timothy complied, but his eyes never left her face. He couldn't shake the feeling that she was hiding something—something crucial to this investigation. And he needed to find out what.

Sarah sat down across from him, her hands trembling in her lap. She looked exhausted, the weight of whatever burden she carried evident in the dark circles under her eyes.

"I didn't do it, Detective," she began, her voice cracking. "I didn't kill Victor. I swear to you. But I know who did."

Timothy narrowed his eyes. "Who?"

Sarah's gaze dropped to the floor. "It was Emma."

Timothy's pulse quickened, but he kept his composure. "Emma Wells?"

Sarah nodded slowly, tears welling up in her eyes. "Victor was seeing her behind my back. I knew about it. I found out a few weeks ago. And I confronted him about it. He promised he was going to end it with her. But I wasn't stupid. I knew he was lying to me. He wasn't going to leave her. He was already planning to be with her, Detective. He was going to leave me for her."

Timothy felt a wave of anger rise in his chest. The lies, the deceit, the betrayal—it was all starting to make sense. But there was something about Sarah's demeanor that didn't add up. She was too calm, too composed for someone who had just learned that their partner was planning to leave them.

"But why kill him?" Timothy asked, trying to understand the motive. "If you were hurt, angry... why didn't you just walk away?"

Sarah's gaze remained steady, but her voice shook as she spoke. "I couldn't walk away, Detective. Not after everything. He promised me we would be together. And I believed him. But he was lying. He was playing both of us."

Timothy took a deep breath. "So, what happened that night? What led to his death?"

Sarah bit her lip, her eyes darting around the room as if looking for the right words. Finally, she spoke.

"I went to his house that night. I needed to confront him again. I needed to hear it from him, to make him tell me the truth. But when I got there, I saw something I shouldn't have."

Timothy leaned forward, his heart pounding. "What did you see?"

"I saw him with Emma. They were together. They were... kissing." She choked back a sob. "I lost it, Detective. I lost control. I didn't know what I was doing. I—I just snapped. I picked up the nearest thing, a vase, and I threw it at him. But it hit him in the head, and he... he fell. I panicked, Detective. I didn't know what to do. I didn't mean to kill him."

Timothy took a moment to process everything she had said. He believed her. There was no way she could have planned this. But why hadn't she said anything sooner? Why had she been on the run, hiding from the law?

"And Emma?" Timothy asked. "What about her?"

Sarah's face contorted with grief. "Emma wasn't supposed to be there, Detective. I never meant for her to be involved. But when I left the house, I saw her at the door. She must've heard what happened. And that's when I knew she was the one who found him. She... she was the one who called the police."

Timothy was silent for a moment, piecing together the fragments of Sarah's story. "So, you think Emma killed him, but you're the one who hit him?"

Sarah nodded slowly, tears rolling down her cheeks. "I don't know what happened after that. I blacked out, Detective. I wasn't in my right mind. But I never meant to kill him. I loved him. And I never wanted any of this to happen."

Timothy's mind was racing as he left the apartment, his footsteps echoing in the hallway. The pieces of the puzzle were finally starting to come together. But Sarah's story didn't sit right with him. It felt too convenient, too rehearsed. If Sarah had been the one to kill Victor, why had Emma been so involved in the aftermath? Why had she called the police?

Timothy knew the answers were out there. He just had to find them before it was too late.

The investigation had reached a critical point, and Detective White was closer than ever to uncovering the truth. But the more he dug, the more questions arose. Was Sarah telling the truth? Or was she covering for someone else? With each passing moment, the pieces of the case became more complex. The truth was out there, but would Timothy be able to unravel it before time ran out? The stakes were high, and the clock was ticking.

The morning air was heavy, the weight of the investigation sitting like a thick fog over Detective Timothy White's chest. He had spent the night mulling over Sarah Tyson's words, but something still didn't add up. Sarah had confessed to everything—the confrontation with Victor, the anger, the fight. But the pieces of her story, while tragic, didn't seem to fit together neatly. Emma's involvement, the blood-stained bouquet at the scene—it was all so tangled. The more Timothy thought about it, the more he realized there were still loose threads.

He found himself standing outside the Langston residence, his eyes scanning the house once more, trying to pick up anything he might have missed during his previous visit. The house still had a lingering air of grief, the faint scent of roses from the bouquet still lingering in the corners.

Timothy's mind kept racing, and it wasn't just Sarah's confession that troubled him. The thought of Emma, the woman who'd been so clearly linked to the murder, gnawed at him. She hadn't been in the picture before, but now, she was the one who'd found Victor. She was the one who'd called the police. The story didn't make sense. There had to be something more.

He'd already interviewed Emma once, but there was something off about the way she'd responded. She had claimed to have arrived after the murder, to have just found Victor lying in his own blood. She had seemed so calm, but was it because she was guilty, or was it because she knew something Timothy didn't?

The second Sarah confessed to having gone to Victor's house, Timothy's thoughts had been clouded with doubt. Was she shielding Emma? Or was Emma actually responsible for the murder?

"Detective," a voice broke his thoughts.

Timothy turned to see one of the officers, Detective Harris, approaching him with a folder in hand. Harris had been combing through Victor Langston's background for the past few days, and now, he had something that could finally break the case wide open.

"Sir, we found something," Harris said, handing him the folder.

Timothy took the folder and flipped it open. His eyes scanned the documents quickly—photos of Victor's social media accounts, text messages from his phone, financial records. The evidence was overwhelming.

"What is this?" Timothy asked.

"It's about Emma," Harris said. "She was more involved than we thought."

Timothy froze. "Go on."

It turned out that Emma had more to do with Victor than anyone had initially realized. She wasn't just his mistress; she had been manipulating him financially. They'd found evidence of her draining Victor's bank accounts over the past six months, transferring large sums of money. It looked like she was blackmailing him.

Timothy's heart began to race as he started piecing things together. Sarah had been devastated by Victor's betrayal, but Emma, it seemed, had been playing a far darker game. She wasn't just trying to take Victor from Sarah—she was trying to take everything from him.

Timothy's mind raced. This new information didn't fit with the story Sarah had given. If Sarah had killed Victor out of a fit of rage, why would she have left behind a bouquet of flowers? And why would Emma be the one to call the police, unless she had been part of the plan from the start? Was Sarah simply trying to shield Emma from the truth?

The more he considered it, the clearer it became: Sarah wasn't the killer. She had been too deeply hurt by Victor's betrayal to have killed him in cold blood. But Emma?

She had the motive. The opportunity. And the emotional detachment to carry out the murder.

It was late in the afternoon when Timothy's hunch was confirmed. Emma was arrested.

She had been staying at a different apartment complex, just on the outskirts of town. The moment they entered her apartment, they found signs of her panic—disheveled belongings, hastily packed bags, and a concealed suitcase with a large sum of cash inside. Emma had been planning to run, but not because she was innocent. She was running because she had killed Victor. And she had almost gotten away with it.

The interrogation was intense, but Emma remained calm, almost eerily composed. She denied everything, but the evidence was overwhelming.

Timothy sat across from her, his gaze steady and unwavering. "Emma, we know what happened. You murdered Victor."

Her lips quivered as she shook her head slowly. "I didn't do it. I wasn't there."

"Then how do you explain the money trail? The lies? The blackmail?" Timothy pressed. "Victor was going to leave Sarah for you, wasn't he? You couldn't stand that, could you?"

Emma's eyes flashed with a mixture of guilt and fury. "I didn't mean for it to happen like this. I loved him. I thought we had a future. But when he threatened to cut me off—when he told me he was going back to her—he took everything from me."

Timothy leaned forward, his voice low and firm. "And you decided to take everything from him, didn't you?"

Emma swallowed hard, her eyes darkening with remorse. "I wasn't going to let him leave me. I thought I could control the situation. I thought I could make him stay with me."

Timothy watched as the once-composed woman slowly cracked, the tension in the room thickening. “You thought if you killed him, no one would find out the truth. But we know, Emma. We know.”

The case, once tangled and uncertain, now seemed simple. The final confession was the last piece of the puzzle. Emma had killed Victor Langston out of a toxic mix of jealousy and desperation. She hadn’t just been the other woman—she’d been the mastermind behind his downfall.

Timothy stepped out of the interrogation room, his mind heavy with everything he had uncovered. This case wasn’t just about murder—it was about love gone wrong. It was about betrayal, manipulation, and the darkness that festered beneath the surface of seemingly perfect relationships.

As the case drew to a close, Detective Timothy White couldn’t shake the feeling that this wasn’t just another case. It was a reflection of something deeper—of human nature, of the complexities of emotions, and the lengths some would go to for love. The roses left beside Victor’s body? They weren’t just a symbol of affection—they were a symbol of how love could be twisted into something far more sinister.

The case was closed. But the memories of the investigation would stay with him long after the final verdict. And for Emma, it was too late for redemption. The truth had finally come to light, and there was no escaping it now.

Last Call

The neon sign above Hunter's Tavern flickered like a dying firefly, casting faint shadows over the cracked pavement. Detective Peter Callahan stood outside the bar, staring at the yellow police tape stretched across the entrance. The night air was heavy with the smell of rain and the distant hum of city life. Inside, the crime scene waited for him.

"Another one," muttered Officer Jenkins, standing to Callahan's left. Jenkins was a rookie, his pale face barely masking the unease behind his steely expression.

"Yeah," Callahan said quietly. "Let's see what's left of this one."

The bartender, Mitch Wallace, was a familiar face in this part of the city. Everyone who frequented Hunter's knew Mitch, with his easy smile, weathered hands, and the habit of lending an ear to anyone who needed it. Now, he was gone—shot dead after closing time.

As Callahan ducked under the tape and stepped into the bar, a sense of stillness enveloped him. The jukebox in the corner was silent, its colorful lights dim. The barstools stood neatly aligned as if Mitch had tidied them up before his death. Behind the counter, a half-finished glass of whiskey caught Callahan's eye.

"Anything new?" he asked Sergeant Ramirez, who was examining the shattered glass near the register.

"Not much," Ramirez replied, shaking his head. "No witnesses, no security cameras. The only thing we found was a shell casing behind the bar. Nine-millimeter, standard issue."

Callahan's gaze drifted to the dark stain on the floor where Mitch's body had been. The coroner had already taken him, but the blood lingered, stark against the polished wood.

He knelt down, running a finger over the splintered edge of the bar. A bullet hole. Someone had leaned over and fired the shot point-blank. It wasn't random—it was personal.

"Who found him?" Callahan asked.

"Karen Miller," Ramirez said. "One of the regulars. She came by around 2:00 a.m. when she realized she left her purse here. Found Mitch and called it in."

"Where is she now?"

"Questioning room at the station."

Callahan nodded, standing up. His eyes scanned the room, taking in the small details. A set of keys left on a table. A scuff mark near the entrance, as if someone had dragged their feet. A faint whiff of gunpowder lingering in the air.

Something wasn't right.

Karen Miller sat hunched over in the interrogation room, her hands wrapped around a Styrofoam cup of coffee. She was in her late forties, with tired eyes and a streak of gray running through her chestnut hair. She looked like someone who'd seen enough hardship to last a lifetime.

"Detective Callahan," he introduced himself, sitting across from her. "Thanks for coming in."

Karen looked up, her eyes red-rimmed. "I didn't have a choice, did I?"

"No, but you're helping us figure out what happened to Mitch. That means something."

She exhaled a shaky breath. "I don't know what else to say. I just... I can't believe he's gone. Mitch was—he was a good man."

"Tell me about last night," Callahan said gently.

Karen hesitated. "I was there until closing. Me and a few others—regulars, you know? We were just talking, having a good time. Mitch was his usual self, cracking jokes and pouring drinks. Nothing seemed off."

"Who else was there?"

She listed a few names: Paul, an insurance adjuster; Sandra, a nurse; and Eric, a construction worker. All regulars, all familiar with Mitch.

“And when you left?”

Karen’s grip on the cup tightened. “I realized I forgot my purse about an hour later. When I came back... the door was unlocked, and Mitch was... he was on the floor behind the bar.” Her voice cracked. “I didn’t hear anything. No gunshots, no shouting. It was just... silent.”

Callahan studied her, noting the tremor in her hands and the way her gaze darted around the room. She was scared—but of what?

Back at the precinct, Callahan sifted through the statements from the other regulars. Each one painted the same picture: Mitch was well-liked, easygoing, with no known enemies. But something didn’t add up.

Paul had mentioned seeing Mitch arguing with someone over the phone a few days ago. Sandra recalled Mitch locking the bar earlier than usual one night, looking over his shoulder as if he were being watched.

There was more to Mitch Wallace than anyone realized.

The next day, Callahan returned to the bar. This time, he brought Jenkins along.

“Look for anything that doesn’t belong,” Callahan instructed. “A receipt, a note, anything that might give us a lead.”

Jenkins nodded and started combing through the bar while Callahan examined the cash register. It was empty, but there were no signs of a struggle. If robbery wasn’t the motive, then what was?

As Callahan moved toward the storage room, something caught his eye—a small safe hidden beneath the counter. It was locked, but the key hung from a nail on the wall.

He opened it, revealing a stack of cash, a few business cards, and a leather-bound notebook. The pages were filled with names, dates, and dollar amounts.

"Jenkins," Callahan called out, holding up the notebook. "I think we just found Mitch's side hustle."

It turned out Mitch had been running an underground lending operation. Regulars at the bar came to him for loans when the banks turned them away. High interest rates, no questions asked.

The names in the notebook were a mix of familiar faces and strangers, but one name stood out: Eric Wilkes, the construction worker.

Eric owed Mitch \$20,000—a debt he was struggling to repay.

Callahan found Eric at a job site on the outskirts of town. The man was wiry and jittery, his hands covered in sawdust as he tried to avoid Callahan's gaze.

"I don't know anything about Mitch's murder," Eric said, his voice defensive.

"I didn't say you did," Callahan replied. "But you owe him a lot of money, and now he's dead. That's a hell of a coincidence."

Eric's jaw tightened. "I didn't kill him."

"Then who did?"

Eric hesitated, glancing around nervously. "Look, Mitch was a good guy, but he got himself into some trouble. There were people he owed money to—big money. I heard him talking about it one night after the bar closed. He was scared."

"Who were these people?"

"I don't know," Eric said, his voice barely above a whisper. "But they weren't the kind of people you mess with."

The trail led Callahan to a man named Vincent Moretti, a known loan shark with a reputation for making problems disappear. Moretti owned a string of shady businesses in the city, including a nightclub where he was often found.

Callahan entered the dimly lit club, his badge tucked discreetly into his pocket. Moretti was at a corner booth, flanked by two bodyguards.

"Detective Callahan," Moretti said smoothly as Callahan approached. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Mitch Wallace," Callahan said, cutting to the chase. "He's dead, and I hear you might know something about it."

Moretti's expression didn't falter, but his eyes narrowed slightly. "Tragic, isn't it? Mitch was a decent guy."

"But he owed you money."

Moretti chuckled, a low, menacing sound. "Mitch and I had an understanding. He knew the rules, and he knew the consequences."

"Did you kill him?"

"Now, Detective, you know better than to ask a question like that," Moretti said, leaning back in his seat. "But if I were you, I'd be looking a little closer to home. Mitch had plenty of skeletons in his closet."

As Callahan delved deeper into Mitch's life, he uncovered a web of secrets and lies. Mitch wasn't just a bartender or a lender—he was a man trying to outrun his past.

The pieces began to fall into place when Karen Miller came forward with new information.

"I didn't tell you everything," she admitted, her voice trembling. "Mitch called me that night. He said he needed to talk to me about something important, but he wouldn't say what. He sounded... scared."

"What time was this?" Callahan asked.

"Right before I left the bar," Karen said. "I think he knew something was going to happen."

The final clue came from an unexpected source: the jukebox in the corner of the bar.

While examining it, Callahan discovered a hidden compartment containing a flash drive. On it were audio recordings of Mitch's conversations with various people—debts, threats, and a plan to expose Moretti's operation.

Mitch had been gathering evidence, trying to cut a deal with the authorities. But someone found out, and they silenced him before he could act.

Armed with the recordings, Callahan confronted Moretti one last time.

"You're done," Callahan said, tossing the flash drive onto the table. "This is enough to put you away for life."

Moretti's calm facade cracked, and for the first time, Callahan saw fear in his eyes.

"You don't know what you're getting into," Moretti hissed. "There are bigger players than me in this game."

"Maybe," Callahan said, standing up. "But you're the one going down for Mitch's murder."

As Moretti was led away in handcuffs, Callahan couldn't shake the weight of the case. Mitch Wallace had tried to make things right, but it had cost him everything.

Outside Hunter's Tavern, the neon sign flickered once more. The bar would never be the same, but Callahan hoped Mitch's memory would endure—not as a victim, but as a man who stood up to the darkness, even when it meant risking his own life.

Unfinished Truth

The crisp autumn wind swept through the small town of Havenwood, rattling the yellowing leaves that clung stubbornly to the trees. In this place, where every resident knew their neighbor and secrets were supposed to be short-lived, the murder of Callie Hart had become more than just a tragedy. It had become an obsession.

Callie, the golden child of Havenwood, had been found dead in her bedroom one year ago to the day. A girl with a dazzling smile and a kind heart, she was the kind of person who drew people in without effort. Her death—brutal and unexplainable—was the wound the town couldn't heal.

Detective Erin Chase parked her car outside the Hart family's modest two-story house. The yellow police tape had long since been taken down, but to Erin, it was still there, wrapped tightly around her mind. This case was her failure. She had spent every waking moment trying to piece together the puzzle of that night, yet the answer remained maddeningly out of reach.

Inside, the house was quiet. The Hart family had moved away months after the murder, unable to bear the reminders of what they'd lost. Erin wasn't sure what she was hoping to find here now. She had combed through this place a hundred times—dusting, questioning, theorizing. But the whispers of that night refused to give her anything concrete.

Callie had been found on her bed, her body arranged almost unnaturally, her pale hand reaching toward the floor as though grasping for something unseen. There were no signs of forced entry, no defensive wounds, no traces of DNA that didn't belong.

What haunted Erin most was the expression on Callie's face. Not fear. Not pain. Just... shock.

Erin stood in Callie's bedroom now, staring at the spot where the bloodstain had soaked into the wooden floorboards. The room was frozen in time, just as it had been left after the investigation—a time capsule of a young girl's life. Posters of

musicians covered the walls, and her desk was cluttered with notebooks and sketches.

But the things that had once brought Callie to life were now the same things that seemed to mock Erin's failure. A framed photo on the nightstand caught her eye: Callie and her best friend, Mia Ford, laughing in a meadow. Their carefree expressions made Erin's chest tighten. Mia had been one of the last people to see Callie alive.

Erin found Mia at the old coffee shop on Main Street, sitting at a corner table with her sketchpad. She had always been the quiet, artistic type, the shadow to Callie's sunlight. Now, she looked older than her seventeen years, her eyes hollow, her hands fidgeting as Erin approached.

"Mia," Erin said gently, sliding into the seat across from her. "How've you been holding up?"

Mia shrugged, her fingers curling around the edge of her cup. "People keep asking me that. I don't know how to answer anymore."

Erin nodded, understanding the weight of grief's language. "I wanted to ask you something about that night. I know we've been over this before, but... is there anything you remember? Anything you might not have thought was important at the time?"

Mia's hand tightened on the pencil she held. "I've thought about that night every day. About every word we said, every stupid little thing we laughed about." Her voice cracked, and she looked away. "But I didn't see anything, Detective. I wasn't there when it happened. I told you... I left around ten. She was fine when I left."

"And you didn't see anyone unusual on your way out?" Erin pressed, though she knew Mia's answer before she said it.

"No," Mia whispered.

Erin studied her for a long moment. There was something about Mia's demeanor that always left her unsettled—not because she suspected the girl, but because it felt like Mia was guarding something. Not out of guilt, but fear.

The investigation had left Erin with a handful of suspects, each with their own web of questions but no solid connections. There was Jared Langston, Callie's ex-boyfriend, whose temper had led to a public shouting match between them weeks before her death. But Jared had an alibi—he was at a bar across town, verified by multiple witnesses.

There was Mrs. Abbott, the elderly neighbor who had called 911 after hearing "something strange." She claimed it was a scream, but her account had changed each time she retold it. Was it a scream? Or just the wind? Erin had interviewed her three times and walked away more confused each time.

And then there was Mr. Hart himself, Callie's father. Erin hated that he was even on the list, but certain questions lingered. He'd been the one to find her. He'd said he'd come home late from work, but something about his statement had always felt too rehearsed, too practiced. Grief made people act strangely, Erin knew that. But still.

Erin spent the rest of the day poring over the case files in her small office. The photographs, the reports, the dead ends—it was all there, staring back at her. The image of Callie on that bed haunted her the most.

She flipped through the crime scene photos again, her pen tapping against the desk. There was something she'd missed, something buried in the static noise of the case.

Her phone buzzed, pulling her out of her thoughts. It was a message from an old friend, someone who had worked with the department's forensics team before retiring.

"I saw your note about the letter opener. Did you ever check the angle of the placement? Looks like someone moved it deliberately after the fact."

Erin sat up straighter. She hadn't thought about the letter opener in months. It had been on the desk, too far from Callie to have been knocked there naturally. But if it had been moved... why? To mislead? To cover something up?

Erin returned to the house the next morning, a new determination burning in her chest. She stood in the study, replaying every detail in her mind. The letter opener. The untouched tea. The scrawled note in Callie's hand.

It didn't add up. Someone had staged part of this scene. But to what end?

She sank into the chair by the desk, closing her eyes and letting the silence wash over her. What had Callie been thinking in those last moments? Was she surprised by the visitor? Was it someone she knew?

Erin's eyes snapped open. That was it. Callie had let the killer in. This wasn't some random act of violence.

That night, Erin dreamt of Callie. She was standing at the edge of a dark forest, her hand outstretched, her lips forming silent words. Erin tried to reach her, but the ground between them seemed to stretch endlessly.

When she woke, her chest ached with frustration. The case was slipping further away, like sand through her fingers.

Weeks passed. Erin revisited suspects, reexamined evidence, and even called in favors from old colleagues to analyze overlooked details. But nothing brought her closer to the truth.

The town moved on—or at least pretended to. The anniversary of Callie's death came and went, marked by a candlelit vigil in the town square. Erin attended, standing in the shadows as people shared memories and tears.

She watched Mia light a candle, her face illuminated by its flickering glow. Jared stood near the back, his hands stuffed in his pockets, his eyes distant. Mr. Hart wasn't there. He'd left Havenwood months ago, unable to bear the weight of it all.

Erin never solved the case.

The file sat on her desk, a reminder of her failure, a reminder that not every question has an answer. Sometimes, the truth hides in the spaces between what's seen and what's felt, and no amount of logic or persistence can force it into the light.

She thought about Callie often. About her kindness, her laughter, the way she had brought people together without effort. And she thought about the shadow that had taken her away.

Who had done it? And why?

She didn't know.

She might never know.

And that was the truth that would haunt her forever.

Hi, I'm Will

The hallways of Norville High always felt like battlefields to me. Not the kind with actual weapons, but the kind where every glance, every whisper, and every sneer carried the weight of a thousand knives. I wasn't just another face in the crowd, I was the target, the joke, the one they always noticed for all the wrong reasons.

My name is William Lambert, but nobody really calls me that. To them, I'm "Whale," "Lardo," "Fatso." Every insult they can think of, they throw my way. And the worst part is that I can't even argue with them. I know what I look like. I see the way I take up too much space in a classroom desk, the way my gym shirt clings to my stomach during P.E., the way I get out of breath just climbing the stairs. They see it too, and they make sure I never forget.

I clutch my tray in the cafeteria, my heart pounding in my chest as I scan the room for a place to sit. The tables are filled with their usual groups, the jocks laughing too loudly, the cheerleaders flipping their hair, the nerds hunched over textbooks. I know better than to try sitting with any of them. There's an unspoken rule: I don't belong. Instead, I take my usual spot in the farthest corner of the cafeteria, where no one sits except for the occasional loner who's too preoccupied with their phone to care about me.

As soon as I lower myself onto the bench, the whispers start.

"Bet he's gonna finish that tray in two seconds."

"He probably eats in his sleep too."

I stare at my plate and my appetite is gone. My stomach rumbles, but I refuse to give them the satisfaction of seeing me eat. Instead, I keep my head down and wait for lunch to be over, every second stretching into an eternity.

It's not just school, though. School is bad, but home... home is worse.

When the final bell rings, I take my time walking back. Norville in the late afternoon is peaceful, golden light spilling over the cracked sidewalks and rusting street signs. Kids ride their bikes, people walk their dogs, but none of it feels real to me. My world

is the small, crumbling house at the end of our street, where the front steps creak under my weight and the air always smells like stale beer.

I hesitate at the door. I can already hear the TV blaring from inside, some sports commentator shouting through the static. Taking a deep breath, I step in.

My father is exactly where I expect him to be, he's on the couch, beer bottle in hand, feet propped up on the coffee table. His thinning hair is a mess, his old work shirt wrinkled. He doesn't look at me when I walk in. He barely acknowledges me at all.

"Where've you been?" he asks without turning his head.

"School," I say.

His eyes flick toward the clock on the wall. "Took your sweet time getting home."

I shrug, keeping my voice neutral. "Had to finish something."

He scoffs, shaking his head. "Yeah, right. Probably stuffing your face somewhere."

The words land like a punch to the gut. I clench my fists but say nothing. There's no point in arguing. Not with him. Instead, I move toward the kitchen, but his voice stops me.

"Where's your mom?"

"Work," I answer. "She picked up an extra shift."

He mutters something under his breath and takes another swig of his beer. I pretend not to hear him and head for my room, locking the door behind me.

My room is small and plain, but it's mine. The walls are bare except for a few posters I put up years ago, back when I still cared about decorating. Now, they're just reminders of a time when things were different. When I still had hope.

I flop onto my bed, staring up at the ceiling. My stomach growls again, reminding me that I didn't eat lunch, but I don't have the energy to go to the kitchen. Instead, I

close my eyes and try to drown out everything, the voices at school, my father's words, the loneliness that sits so heavily on my chest.

The sound of my mother's car pulling into the driveway wakes me up. I hadn't meant to fall asleep, but the exhaustion that weighs me down is constant. I hear the door open, the rustle of bags as she walks in. My mother's voice is soft but tired when she calls out, "Will? You home?"

I hesitate before getting up. When I step out of my room, she's in the kitchen, unpacking groceries from a plastic bag. Her uniform is wrinkled, dark circles under her eyes. She looks like she's been on her feet for hours, and she probably has.

"Hey, Mom," I say.

She turns, gives me a small smile. "Hey, sweetheart. How was school?"

I force a shrug. "Same as always."

Her smile falters just a little, but she doesn't push. She never does. Instead, she pulls out a container and sets it on the counter. "I brought home some leftovers from the diner. Figured you'd be hungry."

The gesture is small, but it means everything. She's always thinking about me, even when she's exhausted. Even when she has nothing left to give.

I grab a fork and sit down at the table. My mother watches me for a moment before sighing and rubbing her temples. "Your father's been drinking again, hasn't he?"

I nod. "Yeah."

She presses her lips together, her shoulders slumping. "I'm sorry, Will."

I shake my head. "It's not your fault."

She exhales sharply, then walks over and kisses the top of my head. "Try to get some rest, okay?"

I nod again, but as I eat in silence, I know rest won't come easy. It never does.

The night stretches on, the house growing quieter except for the occasional creak of the floorboards and the murmur of the TV. Lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, I wonder if things will ever change. If I'll ever escape this cycle.

Somewhere deep down, I want to believe there's more waiting for me beyond Norville High, beyond this house, beyond the walls I've built around myself.

But for now, I'm just William Lambert, the overweight kid that nobody likes. And tomorrow? Tomorrow will be just another day.

Morning comes too soon, dragging me out of a restless sleep. The alarm blares in my ear, but I shut it off without opening my eyes. For a few seconds, I lie there, clinging to the last bits of warmth, the last moments where I don't have to face the world. But reality always wins.

I force myself up, my body aching like I just ran a marathon. I rub my eyes, staring at the cracked ceiling, then glance at the clock. 6:45 AM. Time to get ready.

Breakfast is the same as always, toast that's too dry, coffee that's too weak, silence that's too loud. My mom left for work an hour ago, and my father is still passed out in the living room, snoring into the couch cushions. I move quietly, grabbing my backpack, slipping out the door without a sound.

The air outside is crisp, the sky a dull gray that perfectly matches my mood. The walk to Norville High isn't long, but it's long enough to give me time to think. To remind myself what's waiting for me.

The usual routine starts the second I step inside. A group of jocks near the lockers glance in my direction.

"Yo, watch out, the floor might crack," one of them mutters.

Another one snickers. "Nah, the school's got insurance. They'd probably make money off of it."

Laughter follows, but I keep my head down, pretending I didn't hear them. Pretending it doesn't bother me.

I make it to my locker and start fumbling with the combination, my fingers stiff. Just get through the day, I tell myself. Just one more day.

“Hey, Will.”

The voice is soft, almost hesitant. I glance over and see Sarah Morris standing a few feet away. She’s one of the few people at Norville High who doesn’t treat me like I’m invisible or like I’m a joke. She’s small, with curly red hair and freckles that stand out against her pale skin. She’s nice, always has been, but I never know how to talk to her.

“Hey,” I mumble, shoving my books into my bag.

She hesitates, then shifts the strap of her own backpack higher up her shoulder.

“How’s it going?”

I shrug. “Same as always.”

Her lips press together like she wants to say something else, but before she can, a voice calls from down the hall.

“Hey, Sarah! You coming?”

It’s Emily Carter, one of the popular girls. She’s standing with a group of friends, watching Sarah expectantly.

Sarah glances at me, then back at them. “Yeah, I’ll be there in a sec.”

Emily rolls her eyes but doesn’t argue. Sarah turns back to me, offering a small smile. “Well... I guess I’ll see you later.”

I nod, even though we both know we won’t talk again today. Maybe not even tomorrow.

The moment she walks away, I feel it again—that weird, heavy feeling in my chest. Like I almost had something, but it slipped through my fingers.

Classes drag by, a blur of lectures and notes I barely pay attention to. Lunchtime comes, and I take my usual seat in the corner of the cafeteria. My stomach is already twisting before I even touch my food.

I know what's coming. It starts with the sound of approaching footsteps. Then the shadow that falls over my tray.

I look up and see Mason Carter standing there with his usual smirk. He's tall, broad-shouldered, with a letterman jacket that practically screams privilege.

"Hey, Will," he says, too casually.

I don't respond. There's no point.

He gestures at my tray. "You gonna eat all that?"

I grip my fork tighter. "Yeah."

He tilts his head, like he's pretending to think. "You sure? Looks like you've already had plenty."

Laughter erupts from his friends behind him. Heat rises to my face, but I force myself to stay still and not react.

Mason leans down, lowering his voice. "You know, maybe if you stopped shoving food in your face all the time, people would actually wanna be around you."

I stare at my plate, willing myself not to let the words sink in. But they do, they always do.

Mason waits, like he's expecting me to lash out, to fight back. But I don't. He huffs, then grabs a fry from my tray and walks away, his friends following.

The cafeteria noise returns to normal, like nothing happened. Like I don't exist. I push my tray away and just like that my appetite is gone.

The rest of the day is just more of the same. By the time the final bell rings, I feel like I've run a marathon, even though all I've done is survive.

The walk home is quiet. The houses in Norville are mostly old, paint peeling, yards unkempt. My house is no different.

When I step inside, I can tell right away my father's awake. The sound of a beer can being set down, the creak of the couch as he shifts. I try to slip past unnoticed, but his voice stops me.

"Will."

I freeze. "Yeah?"

He doesn't bother looking at me. His eyes are fixed on the TV. "Go grab me another beer."

I hesitate, grip tightening on my backpack strap.

He finally glances at me, eyes narrowed. "What?"

"Nothing," I mutter, moving toward the fridge.

As I hand him the beer, he looks me up and down, lips curling in disapproval. "You look like hell."

I don't respond.

He pops the tab, takes a long swig, then sighs. "Maybe if you weren't so damn lazy, you wouldn't be such a disappointment."

The words cut deep. Deeper than anything Mason or the others at school could ever say.

I turn and walk away before he can say more. In my room, I sit on the edge of my bed, staring at the floor. The weight of everything presses down on me—the school, the bullying, my father's words, my mother's exhaustion.

I don't cry. I haven't in years. But for the first time in a long time, I wonder what it would be like to not feel like this. To not feel so... alone.

I don't remember falling asleep. One minute, I was sitting on the edge of my bed, staring at the floor, and the next, the harsh beep of my alarm was dragging me back to reality. My whole body felt heavy, like I'd been crushed under the weight of yesterday.

For a few seconds, I just lay there, staring at the ceiling. The cracks in the plaster formed strange patterns—lines that stretched and split like veins, like fractures in glass. Like me.

Then, from the other room, I heard the sound of my father waking up. The usual groan, the clinking of an empty beer can being tossed onto the floor.

That was enough to get me moving. I swung my legs off the bed and stood, my joints aching like I was eighty instead of seventeen. My reflection in the mirror didn't look much better. Dark circles under my eyes. Skin too pale. Shoulders hunched like I was trying to make myself smaller.

I sigh and grab my backpack. Another day to get through.

The halls of Norville High are as crowded and suffocating as ever. The noise, the bodies moving past, the slamming of lockers, it's all blurred together into this mess of chaos that made my head pound.

I keep my head down, moving toward my locker, trying to make myself invisible. But being invisible has never been my strong suit.

"Watch out, incoming earthquake."

I barely have time to react before someone's shoulder slams into mine, sending me stumbling into the lockers. Laughter follows, bouncing off the walls like it was the funniest thing in the world. It was Mason and his friends.

I clenched my jaw and forced myself to keep moving. Just keep walking.

"Hey, Will!" he calls out, his voice laced with mock excitement. "What's up, man? You heard about that new diet where you actually stop eating?"

There's more laughter. I keep my eyes fixed on my locker. If I ignore him, maybe he'd get bored. Maybe he'd go find someone else to torment. But this is Mason, he doesn't get bored easily. Not when it's me.

He steps in closer, his voice dropping just enough so that only I could hear. "You know, if I were you, I wouldn't even bother showing up to prom. No one wants to dance with someone who looks like you."

That one stung. Not because I wanted to go to prom, but because deep down, I already knew no one would want me there.

The bell rings, saving me from having to respond. Mason smirks and walks off, high-fiving one of his friends.

I let out a slow breath, my hands tightening into fists. My stomach churned, but I force myself to move. I had to get through the day.

Lunch comes, and I take my usual spot in the corner of the cafeteria. The tray in front of me, untouched. My appetite has been missing for days now.

As I'm staring at the table, a tray suddenly slides onto the seat across from me.

I looked up, startled. Sarah.

"Hey," she said, offering me a small smile.

For a second, I don't know how to respond. Sarah never sits with me. Sure, she is nice to me in passing, but she has her own friends.

"Hey," I said slowly.

She unwraps her sandwich, then looks at me. "You okay?"

I blinked. No one ever asked me that. Not really.

"Yeah," I said automatically.

She gives me a look, one that told me she didn't believe me. But she doesn't push it. Instead, she changes the subject.

"So, I was thinking about the English assignment," she says, taking a bite of her sandwich. "And I have no idea what I'm doing."

I stared at her. "You're, like, the smartest person in class."

She laughed. "That's what they all say. But Shakespeare? He makes zero sense to me."

I can't help it so i smile.

Sarah grinned. "Ah, there it is. I knew you could smile."

My face heats and feels like im about to pop, and I looked down. "Shut up." i laugh.

She just laughs again. And for the first time in a long time, I feel something that wasn't exhaustion or anger. I feel okay. The feeling didn't last though.

By the time school ends, my stomach is twisting again. The thought of going home, of facing my father, makes my chest feel tight.

Sarah had invited me to study with her, but I turned her down. I didn't want her seeing where I lived.

The walk home is quiet. Leaves crunched under my feet. The sky is already turning that dull shade of gray that made everything look colder than it was.

When I reach my house, I hesitate on the front steps as always. I take a deep breath and step inside. The smell of beer hits me first. Then, the sound of the TV blaring some sports channel.

I try to sneak past, but my father's voice stopped me.

"Where the hell have you been?"

I swallowed hard. "School."

He snorted. "Yeah? Learn anything useful?"

I didn't answer. He turned his head to look at me. His eyes were bloodshot, his face unshaven. "You look like hell."

I say nothing.

He sighed and took a swig from his beer. "You're lucky your mother isn't here to see you like this. She's already got enough on her plate."

Anger bubbles in my chest. "She's got enough on her plate because of you," I say before I could stop myself.

Then, his beer can hits the table with a loud thud.

"What did you just say?"

My heart pounded. I take a step back.

"Nothing," I mutter.

He stands up, and for a second, I thought he was going to hit me. But he doesn't. He just stared at me, his jaw tight.

"Go to your room," he said finally, his voice low.

I don't need to be told twice. I turn and walk away, my hands shaking.

I close my bedroom door behind me, leaning against it. My whole body felt like it had been squeezed in a vice.

I stare at the walls, at the same cracks I had looked at that morning. They hadn't changed. They never changed. I sit down on my bed, staring at my hands.

I'm too tired, tired of school and my father. Tired of feeling like I was always on the edge of something, but never quite falling.

For a long time, I just sit there, listening to the sounds of the house.

Then, without really thinking about it, I pull out my phone. I stare at the screen for a moment, then typed a message.

>Hey, Sarah.

I hesitate but eventually i press send. I don't know why I did it. Maybe because, for the first time in a long time, I want to believe someone cared. Even if it was just for a moment.

I stare at my phone, half expecting it to buzz immediately. But the screen stays dark. There's no reply.

Of course. What was I thinking? Sarah probably had better things to do than talk to me. I wasn't anyone special. Just Will Lambert, the guy everyone ignored until they needed a joke to laugh at. I sigh and toss my phone on the bed.

Outside my room, the house was quiet now. My father had probably passed out on the couch, another beer bottle rolling onto the floor. My mother won't be home for another 3 hours.

I lay back, staring at the ceiling. The cracks looked deeper now, like they had spread while I wasn't looking. Maybe that was just me. Maybe I I'm the one breaking.

I don't know how much more of this I could take. A vibration shakes the mattress.

I shoot up, scrambling for my phone. My hands shaking as I unlock the screen.

>Sarah: Hey, you okay?

I exhale. So she finally replied.

>Me: Yeah. Just a long day.

The typing bubble appears. It Stops then appears again.

Sarah: Wanna talk about it?

Do I? I'm even sure. But the fact that she is even asking makes something in my chest loosen, just a little.

Me: Just school stuff. Home stuff. You know how it is.

Sarah: I get it. I really do.

She doesn't press. Doesn't even ask for details I'm not sure I'm ready to share.

Instead, she changes the subject, just like she had at lunch.

>Sarah: So, I was looking at the English assignment again. Still don't get it.

A smile tugs in my lips. I know what she's trying to do. She's trying to distract me. And strangely enough, it's working.

We texted back and forth for hours. About school, about books, about stupid things that made me laugh for the first time in what felt like years.

At some point, I realize that I'm not alone. Not completely. And that... that is something.

For the first time in a long time, I don't wake up feeling like I'm dragging myself through mud.

Sarah's messages still sat on my phone, a quiet reminder that maybe, just maybe, someone out there actually cared.

That thought carried me through my morning routine. I ignore the ache in my joints, the exhaustion still clinging to my bones. I even manage to eat a little breakfast before heading out the door.

School was still school, though Mason was still Mason.

He catches me in the hallway before the second period, a smirk already curling on his lips.

"Morning, big guy," he says, slinging an arm around my shoulder like we were old friends. His grip was too tight, fingers digging into my skin. "Heard you've been texting Sarah. That true?"

My stomach twists but I say nothing.

Mason laughed, squeezing harder before letting go. "That's cute, man. Really. But you do know she's just being nice, right? She probably feels sorry for you."

The words hit harder than I wanted them to. I clench my fists, willing myself to keep walking. But Mason isn't done, he never is.

"She'll get bored eventually," he continues, leaning against the lockers. "Then it's back to reality for you."

I wanna to tell him to shut up. I want to say something, anything, to wipe that smug grin off his face. But the words are stuck in my throat. I just turn and walked away. Maybe he's right.

The rest of the day dragged on like It didn't want to end. By the time the final bell rings, I'm already exhausted in every way imaginable.

I start heading home, but halfway there, my feet stop moving. I don't want to go home, Not yet atleast. Instead, I turn around. I find myself walking to the one place that felt safe.

The bell above the door jingled as I step inside. The smell of coffee and grease filled the air, warm and familiar.

I spot my mother immediately, her hair pulled back, her uniform slightly wrinkled. She is wiping down a table, her movements slow and tired.

She doesn't see me at first. I hesitate, unsure if I should be here.

Then, her eyes lift and for the first time in a long time, I see something shift in her expression. Not disappointment or exhaustion, just a surprise.

"Will?" she says, setting the rag down.

I nod, stepping forward. "Hey, Mom."

She glances at the clock, then back at me. "You're out of school early?"

I shrug. "Just... didn't want to go home yet."

She studies me for a moment, then gestures to the counter. "Sit. I'll get you something."

I obey, watching as she pours a cup of coffee and slides it toward me. We sit in silence for a moment.

Then, she sighs. "You know, I used to come here when I was your age."

I blink. "Really?"

She nods, a small smile playing on her lips. "It was different back then. But it was always a place to breathe. To think."

I wraps my hands around the warm mug, letting the heat seep into my skin.

"Is it bad that I don't want to go home?" I ask quietly.

She was silent for a long time.

Then, softly, "No, Will. It's not bad at all."

Something cracks in my chest.

I looked down, swallowing past the lump in my throat. For the first time in forever, I felt like she saw me. When I leave the diner, the sky is already dark. The air is cool.

I pull my phone out of my pocket, staring at the screen. Then, before I could overthink it, I type out a message.

>Me: Hey... Thanks for talking with me last night.

A few seconds passed before Sarah responded.

>Sarah: Anytime, Will.

I hesitate. Then i type another message.

>Me: Do you maybe want to hang out sometime?

The typing bubble appears immediately.

>Sarah: I thought you'd never ask.

For the first time in a long time, I feel light, like I'm not the overweight Will.

Maybe things wouldn't change overnight. Maybe Mason would still be an ass. Maybe home would still be a mess.

But right now, I know I'm not alone. And that... that is enough.

My life as a punchline

I woke up to the sound of my alarm not going off. Instead, it was the deafening squawk of Mr. Peppers, my neighbor's loud-mouthed, insult-slinging parrot. For a split second, I panicked, thinking I was being verbally assaulted by a burglar who had a very personal grudge against me.

"GET UP, FAILURE!" the bird screeched from its cage in the corner of my room.

Ah. Right. I had agreed to watch this demon in feathery disguise while my neighbor, Mrs. Goldman, was out of town. Worst decision of my life. I groaned, turned over, and checked my phone. My heart immediately plummeted.

8:45 AM.

My shift started at 9. I shot out of bed so fast I nearly concussed myself on the ceiling fan. Mr. Peppers cackled like he had just witnessed the greatest comedy show in the world. I tripped over a stray sneaker, knocking over a cup of week-old coffee that had become its own biohazard experiment.

No time for a shower. I grabbed the nearest clothes I could find, which turned out to be yesterday's jeans (wrinkled beyond salvation) and a shirt that might have been clean. Might, I didn't have the luxury of questioning it.

In the midst of this chaos, I heard my phone buzz again.

>Boss: "If you're late today, don't bother coming in."

Fantastic. One more screw-up, and I was officially unemployed. I bolted to the kitchen, shoving a piece of slightly questionable toast in my mouth, and was about to grab my bag when I heard a loud crash. I turned slowly.

Mr. Peppers' cage door was wide open and the damn bird was nowhere in sight. A sinking feeling hit my stomach. I turned in frantic circles, scanning the room. That's when I saw the window open.

"Oh, no no no no no..."

I dashed to the window and spotted Mr. Peppers flying triumphantly down the street, screaming, "I'M FREE, LOSERS! YOU CAN'T STOP ME!"

This could not be happening. I didn't even think. I just ran out of my apartment, still barefoot, chasing a parrot down the street like some kind of deranged lunatic.

People were staring. An elderly woman gasped. A man on a bicycle nearly fell over trying to process the sight of a grown man sprinting after a bird in mismatched socks.

"COME BACK HERE, YOU WINGED MENACE!" I yelled.

Mr. Peppers swooped down and, for some ungodly reason, decided to land on a stranger's car.

A stranger's very expensive, very red sports car.

I ran up to the vehicle just as the owner, a guy in a suit with an expression like he ate lawyers for breakfast stepped out. He glanced at me, then at the parrot.

"That your bird?" he asked.

I froze. "Not exactly."

Mr. Peppers chose this exact moment to look the man straight in the eye and scream,

"I HATE YOUR FACE!"

The man blinked. "Excuse me?"

"I...I...look, I can explain..."

Mr. Peppers took off again, and in my desperation, I lunged for him, except I tripped right into the car guy, knocking his coffee clean out of his hands and onto his probably \$1,000 suit. That's when I knew. I was going to die today.

Miraculously, I made it out alive. I'm not sure how. Maybe car guy had a secret soft spot for absolute disasters.

I finally caught Mr. Peppers outside a bagel shop, bribing him with a half-eaten croissant from a trash can. I shoved the bird into a makeshift cage (a cardboard box with "DO NOT ESCAPE" scribbled on it) and rushed back home.

The clock now read 9:20 AM. I was officially, spectacularly late.

I grabbed my shoes and bolted for the subway station. As I was running down the steps, my shoelace decided now was the perfect time to betray me. I tripped and fell.

I tumbled down an entire flight of stairs in front of at least fifteen horrified commuters.

By the time I hit the bottom, I was pretty sure I had dislocated my dignity.

"Hey, you okay, man?" someone asked.

I gave a weak thumbs-up from the floor. My train arrived, and I dragged myself inside, collapsing into a seat. Just as I started catching my breath, a voice rang over the speakers:

"Attention passengers: due to signal issues, this train will be delayed by approximately... 40 minutes."

I could feel my soul leaving my body.

I finally stumbled into the office an hour late, looking like I had survived a natural disaster.

My boss, Mr. Peterson, was waiting at my desk, arms crossed. "Nice of you to join us, Owen."

"I can explain," I said.

"Can you?"

I opened my mouth. Then closed it. There was no possible way to explain the absolute hurricane of events that had unfolded this morning.

"...No," I admitted.

Peterson sighed. "You're this close to being fired. We have an important client meeting in ten minutes. I need you to sit in, take notes, and most importantly don't screw up, Got it?" I nodded vigorously.

Ten minutes later, I was seated in the conference room with six very serious businessmen. I took a deep breath, straightened my posture, and reminded myself, This is your chance to redeem yourself.

That's when Mr. Peppers broke out of his box. The entire room froze.

A high-pitched, "YOU'RE ALL IDIOTS!" echoed through the air.

I lost all color in my face. One of the businessmen, an older guy in a fancy suit blinked. "...Excuse me?"

There was Silence. Mr. Peppers landed on the conference table and let out the most ungodly screech known to mankind.

Then, for no reason at all, he picked up a sugar packet in his beak, flung it at the CEO, and screamed, "I'LL SUE U!" It was chaos, absolute chaos.

Mr. Peterson looked two seconds away from strangling me. The CEO spit out his coffee in shock. One guy fell out of his chair. And me? I just sat there. Completely dead inside.

Mr. Peppers was banned from the building. I was written up for causing "workplace disturbances," which felt wildly unfair considering I had no control over my life.

I dragged myself home, exhausted beyond belief. As I collapsed onto my couch, my phone buzzed.

Text from my boss: "If you EVER bring that bird near this office again, you're fired."

I stared at Mr. Peppers, who was perched smugly on the armrest.

He looked me dead in the eye and said, "You're a failure, Owen."

I sighed. "I know, buddy. I know."

I woke up to the sound of my alarm actually going off this time.

I groggily reached out to silence it, only for my fingers to miss and knock my phone straight onto my face.

I groaned, tossed the blanket off, and sat up. My body immediately protested. It felt like I had been in a wrestling match with a gorilla. Oh, wait. That was just the lingering aftermath of my Olympic-level staircase tumble from yesterday.

I glanced at the corner of my room where Mr. Peppers was perched inside his reinforced cage with extra locks, zip ties, and a firm warning label that read: DO NOT TRUST THIS BIRD.

He stared at me with those beady little eyes. A calculating stare. Like he was plotting something.

"You look like garbage."

I sighed. "Good morning to you too, Peppers."

"Failure."

This was my life now.

Determined to make today better than yesterday (which, let's be honest, wouldn't be hard), I decided to actually cook breakfast instead of grabbing a half-stale slice of bread and calling it a meal.

I cracked some eggs, put a pan on the stove, and against all odds, things were going well. The eggs weren't burnt, the toast was actually edible, and for the first time in a while, I felt competent. Then, disaster struck.

I turned away for five seconds just to grab some salt and in that microscopic window of time, I heard a horrifying crash.

I whipped around. The frying pan was on the floor, the eggs were splattered across the kitchen tiles, and at the center of the crime scene was Mr. Peppers, looking absolutely pleased with himself.

He had managed to unlock his cage, fly over, and knock my breakfast into oblivion. I just stood there in silence. Processing everything. Deep breath in. Deep breath out.

"Peppers," I said, dangerously calm. "Did you just ruin my breakfast?"

He fluffed up his feathers. Then he laughed. Like a full-on, evil villain cackle. I had never wanted to dropkick a bird before this moment.

Since breakfast was now a crime scene, I opted for the next best thing: coffee. Simple and reliable, it was impossible to mess up.

I walked down to the local coffee shop, a place called Brew & Chew, because apparently, marketing departments had given up. The line was insanely long, but I was determined to at least have caffeine before facing the world.

Finally, after what felt like an entire presidency, I reached the counter.

"A large coffee, please," I said, fishing for my wallet.

The barista, a guy named Trevor, according to his nametag nodded. "That'll be 4.50."

I handed him my card, he swiped and the machine beeped aggressively.

Trevor frowned. "Uh... declined."

I blinked. "Try it again."

Another swipe, and another loud rejection noise. I started to Panic. I pulled out my phone and checked my bank account, praying for some kind of banking glitch or misunderstanding.

Balance: 3,12.

I looked at Trevor and he looked at me.

"Would you like to make a donation?" he asked, looking entirely unimpressed.

I had two options:

1. Accept defeat and leave, completely coffee-less.
2. Scavenge for spare change like some kind of caffeinated raccoon.

I chose Option 2.

I stepped aside, digging through my pockets like my life depended on it. Lint. A single paperclip. Half a breath mint. Ah-ha! One dollar! But I still needed \$0.38 more.

Just as I was considering offering a heartfelt sob story in exchange for mercy, a voice behind me said, "Hey, dude. You need a few cents?"

I turned to see a guy, early 30s, wearing glasses, holding a perfectly brewed latte, offering me exactly 38 cents.

I had never been more emotional over pocket change in my life.

"Dude," I said, overwhelmed, "you are a hero."

He shrugged. "I just believe in coffee accessibility for all."

Fueled by caffeine (finally), I made my way to work. I was only five minutes late, which, in my book, was basically on time.

I walked in, expecting absolute workplace normalcy (which was dumb because this was my life).

What I got instead was chaos. Phones ringing non-stop. Papers flying. People scrambling like they were evacuating a natural disaster.

I grabbed my coworker, Todd, who looked two seconds away from hyperventilating.

"What's happening?" I asked.

Todd turned to me, eyes wild. "The CEO is visiting. Today."

I processed this. "And... why is that bad?"

Todd grabbed me by the shoulders. "Owen. Do you not remember what happened yesterday?"

Oh Right, the parrot attack.

The corporate sugar packet assault. The CEO being personally insulted by a rogue bird. I suddenly felt the overwhelming urge to crawl into the air vents and live there forever.

"Okay," I said, trying to breathe. "Okay, maybe he doesn't remember me?"

"OH, HE REMEMBERS," Todd hissed. "I heard him say, and I quote: 'If I see that bird-loving imbecile today, I will personally escort him out the window.'"

I spent the rest of the morning in stealth mode. Ducking behind desks. Taking the long way around the office. Avoiding any and all places the CEO might wander into. And, for a while, it worked. Until of course, it didn't.

I was hiding in the break room when the door swung open and there he was, the CEO. His piercing gaze immediately locked onto me.

He took a step forward. I took a step back. He narrowed his eyes. I started sweating. Finally, he spoke.

"...You."

I opened my mouth to explain. Or beg for my life. Or maybe just scream.

But before I could, Mr. Peppers, who I had left in my apartment, locked up, supposedly unable to escape, chose this exact moment to fly in through the window.

He landed right on the CEO's head. It stared at him straight in the eye. And screamed, "I HATE YOUR FACE!"

I watched, in slow motion, as the CEO's face turned so red, I was genuinely worried he was going to combust into flames.

This was it. The end. The grand finale of my disastrous career. I braced for impact. But then out of nowhere the CEO laughed. Like, actually laughed.

"Holy hell," he said, wiping a tear from his eye. "That bird is a menace."

I blinked. "Y-Yeah. Total menace. A nightmare, really."

The CEO sighed. "You know what? Keep it away from me, and I won't fire you. Deal?"

I nodded so fast I probably looked like a bobblehead. And just like that, I survived another day.

You know, there are moments in life when you wake up and think, today is going to be different. Maybe today, I wouldn't embarrass myself in public. Maybe today, my bird wouldn't actively ruin my life. Maybe today, the universe would decide to cut me a break. This was not that day. I woke up to chaos.

I had done everything right. Set an alarm. Double-checked that it was on. Even placed it across the room so I'd be forced to get up. Foolproof plan, right? No, Wrong.

Instead of waking up to the gentle chime I had carefully chosen (Morning Breeze—a name that promised peace and tranquility), I woke up to the horrifying, soul-shattering sound of Mr. Peppers imitating a fire alarm.

I shot up so fast that I crashed headfirst into my nightstand.

"PEPPERS!" I yelled, rubbing my forehead.

"Wake up, failure!" the demon bird screeched.

It was too early for this.

After a ten-minute argument with my own, well my neighbour's pet (which I definitely lost a thousand times), I dragged myself out of bed, got dressed, and braced myself for the day ahead.

My apartment was on the seventh floor, and while I usually took the stairs to avoid people, today I was running late, like always. I opted for the elevator. And man was it a big mistake.

The moment the doors slid open, I stepped inside and immediately regretted it. There were way too many people.

A guy holding a towering stack of boxes. A woman wrestling with a stroller and a screaming toddler. A dude with headphones blasting music so loud, I could hear every single lyric.

Then, the doors started to close, and instead of making a logical decision (wait for the next one), my dumb instincts kicked in, and I squeezed myself inside. The doors shut. The elevator lurched. And then there was nothing. It was absolutely stillness.

Someone coughed. The baby kept screaming. The dude with the headphones? Still vibing. I pressed the button and nothing happened.

Someone else pressed another button. Still nothing happened. The guy with the boxes groaned. "Oh, come on." We were stuck.

I refused to be that guy, the one who immediately panics, so I took a deep breath and forced a casual smile. "Well. This is fun." No one laughed.

After what felt like an eternity (but was probably five minutes), a voice crackled through the intercom:

"Uh... hey, folks! Looks like a bit of a technical issue here. Should have you moving soon!"

The woman with the stroller did not look convinced. The guy with the boxes sighed.

The dude with the headphones? He was till completely unaware of reality.

I could feel the awkwardness in the air. This was the peak of discomfort. And then, as if on cue, my stomach growled loudly. The kind of loud that echoes in a tiny, silent space. .

The stroller woman side-eyed me. The box guy looked personally offended. I tried to play it off.

"Uh. So... anyone got snacks?" I joked. No one said anything.

After a painfully long thirty minutes, we were finally freed, and I practically sprinted out of the building. I needed coffee badly, i always do.

Back to Brew & Chew I went, fully prepared to avoid eye contact with everyone and just grab my caffeine. But, of course, the universe had other plans.

The line was mercifully short, so I ordered quickly. "Large coffee. No nonsense."

Trevor, the same barista from yesterday, sighed. "Dude. You again?"

"Yeah," I said. "And I'd appreciate a judgment-free transaction."

He rolled his eyes, made the coffee, and handed it to me. Success.

And then, just as I turned to leave the door swung open, fast. Someone rushed inside at light speed. I didn't react in time.

The next thing I knew, my entire coffee went flying out of my hands... and directly onto the shirt of the person who just entered.

I stared and people stared.

Trevor? Was absolutely loving this.

The poor guy I had just assaulted with coffee looked down at his now soaked hoodie, then slowly back up at me. I panicked.

"Uh. Hi?"

He blinked and he blinked. Then, with terrifying calmness, he said, "I was having a good day."

I nodded. "Yeah. Not anymore."

Trevor snorted. The guy sighed, took off his ruined hoodie, and revealed a second hoodie underneath. I could not handle the audacity of that.

"You..." I gestured wildly. "You were prepared for this?"

He shrugged. "I spill things a lot."

He sighed. "I owe you a coffee?"

"Nah," i said, waving him off.

Then he started "Honestly, watching you suffer was worth it."

Fantastic. Another person added to the 'People Who Have Witnessed My Embarrassment' list.

I got to work fifteen minutes late. Todd greeted me with a slow clap. "Amazing."

I ignored him and made my way to my desk, determined to just get through the day without further disaster.

And then as I pulled out my chair. I heard the unmistakable sound of duct tape. The moment I sat down, I immediately regretted everything. Because I could not move.

Someone had at some point during the morning duct-taped my chair to the floor.

Todd lost his mind laughing. I stared at him. He stared back. I sighed. "Todd. Was this you?"

He wiped a tear from his eye. "I would never."

The CEO walked by, saw me literally stuck to my chair, and kept walking without a word.

You ever wake up with that feeling? That deep, unshakable sense of dread, like the universe is lurking around the corner, just waiting to trip you up and steal your last shred of dignity? Yeah. That was me this morning.

Mr. Peppers, my personal demon disguised as a bird, had already started the day at full volume, screaming phrases he absolutely should not know. I tried to ignore him, burying my face in my pillow, but then...

"GET UP, FAILURE!"

I flinched so hard I nearly rolled out of bed.

"Peppers, for the love of..." I groaned, sitting up. "Can you not start my day with emotional damage?"

"Do better!" he cackled, hopping around his cage.

I sighed. It's fine, I told myself. Today will be normal. Just get up, get dressed, and survive.

I shuffled into my tiny kitchen, still half-asleep, and grabbed a carton of milk from the fridge. Then, because I'm an idiot, I didn't check the expiration date. I took one sip.

Instant regret.

If I had to describe the taste, it would be rotting disappointment with a hint of betrayal.

I immediately gagged and spat it back into the sink, hacking like I had just swallowed liquid death. Mr. Peppers was loving every second of my suffering.

"Good job, idiot!" he chirped.

I chucked a piece of toast at his cage. He dodged it effortlessly and gave me a look that clearly said, Pathetic.

Since I had long ago given up on owning a car (mostly because I could not be trusted behind the wheel), I took the bus to work and not the train.

Usually, it was an uneventful trip when I took the bus but not today.

First, the bus was already packed when I got on, which meant I had to stand. Not a problem. I could handle standing.

Until the bus jerked forward the moment I let go of the pole to adjust my bag.

One second, I was upright. The next, I was face-first in some random guy's lap.

I looked up, the man stared at me, wide-eyed. A woman behind me gasped. Someone else snorted.

I scrambled back up so fast I nearly fell again. "I—uh—sorry—"

The guy, to his credit, just sighed. "This happen to you a lot?"

"You'd be surprised," I muttered, gripping the pole like my life depended on it.

The rest of the ride was agonizing.

I felt the judgment radiating from every person on that bus.

By the time I got to Brew & Chew, I was exhausted.

I just wanted coffee. No drama. No disasters. Just one peaceful moment. Instead, I got Trevor.

Trevor, my favorite sarcastic barista, greeted me with his usual deadpan stare. "You're back. Why?"

"Because I enjoy suffering," I muttered, digging for my wallet. "Just—large coffee. No nonsense."

"Coming right up, Disaster Man."

As he made my coffee, I leaned against the counter, already mentally preparing for whatever fresh humiliation was coming next.

And that's when I saw a lady across the shop, sitting by the window, was probably the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

I know that sounds dramatic, but listen she had this effortlessly cool look, dark curly hair tied up in a bun, a leather jacket that made her look like she belonged in an action movie, and an expression that clearly said, i don't have time for nonsense.

Naturally, I immediately wanted to talk to her and naturally, fate had other plans.

Because the moment I turned back to grab my coffee, I somehow knocked over a display of sugar packets, sending them everywhere.

Trevor sighed. "Why are you like this?"

"Good question," I muttered, kneeling to pick them up. And just when I thought the situation couldn't get worse i heard a snort.

I looked up and she was laughing at me.

I tried to play it off, flashing my most casual, not-at-all-embarrassed smile. "This is, uh. Not my best moment."

She raised an eyebrow. "Is this a common thing for you?"

"More than I'd like to admit."

She smirked. "Sounds fun."

I blinked. Wait. Was that—was that flirting? Was she flirting with me?

Before I could figure out how to not ruin this, Trevor slid my coffee across the counter. "Here. Take this and get out before you destroy anything else."

I sighed, grabbed my cup, and—with one last glance at Mystery Girl, i fled.

By the time I reached the office, I was emotionally exhausted. I just wanted to sit at my desk, do the bare minimum, and not attract any attention. But Todd had other ideas.

Todd, my personal workplace menace, was already waiting for me with a suspicious grin.

"What now?" I asked warily.

He held up his phone. "So, funny story. My friend was at Brew & Chew this morning."

Oh no, he turned his phone around and there it was, it was a video of me.

Knocking over sugar packets. Looking like an absolute mess. With the caption: "Local man loses battle with gravity."

The video had 4,000 views. I wanted to die.

"You have too much free time," I muttered, collapsing into my chair.

Todd just grinned. "You make it too easy."

I barely survived at work. All I had to do now was get home without incident.

As I walked toward my apartment, I noticed something odd. A tiny, fluffy dog sitting right in front of my door.

No collar or a leash. I crouched down. "Uh. Hey there, little guy. You lost?" The dog wagged its tail.

I reached out and it immediately latched onto my sleeve with tiny, unreasonably sharp teeth.

I yelped. "STOP, let go!!" The dog refused to let go.

After a solid five minutes of struggling, I finally freed myself and stood up, only to find my elderly neighbor, Mrs. Harris, watching me with deep disappointment.

"Fighting puppies now, Owen?" she asked.

I sighed. "It attacked me first."

"Sure it did, dear."

This was my life.

I unlocked my door, escaped inside, and collapsed onto my couch. I had survived another day.

Mr. Peppers, sitting in his cage, watched me suffer.

"Pathetic," he said.

I sighed. "Yeah. I know."

Jensen Manor

The night was colder than it should have been. Even in the middle of autumn, when the cool air clung to the town of Sandale like a ghostly presence, it had never been quite this cold. The five of us stood at the edge of the overgrown property, staring up at the looming silhouette of Jensen Manor. Its dark windows gaped like hollow eyes, and the wind rattled the skeletal branches of the surrounding trees. Somewhere in the distance, an owl hooted, a lonely, hollow sound that made Sarah shudder.

"You sure you wanna do this?" Billy asked, shoving his hands deep into his hoodie pockets. His breath curled into the night air like a dying whisper.

"We said we would," Jeremie replied, but his voice lacked conviction. He was trying to sound brave, but I could see the tension in his jaw, the way his fingers twitched at his sides.

"An hour," Elise muttered, staring at the house. "Just one hour inside. Then we leave."

That was the deal. We'd all heard the stories of how people who entered never came back, how the Jensen family had disappeared overnight, leaving dinner plates still set at the table, as if they had simply faded from existence. Some people claimed to see shadows moving inside, or that the house whispered to them when they got too close. None of us believed it, not really. But there was something about this place, something that sat in the pit of my stomach like a stone.

I took a deep breath and stepped forward. "Come on," I said, forcing my voice to stay steady. "Let's get this over with."

The others hesitated before following, their footsteps crunching against dead leaves and brittle grass. The rusted gate groaned as we pushed it open, and we walked up the cracked stone path, past the twisted vines that crawled up the walls like black veins. As we reached the porch, Sarah let out a nervous laugh.

"Last chance to back out," she said.

Nobody moved or said anything. So, I reached for the door.

The door swung open far too easily, as if it had been waiting for us. A wave of cold, stale air rushed out, carrying with it the scent of damp wood and decay. The darkness inside felt thick, pressing against us as we stepped in, our flashlights barely cutting through it. The entry hall stretched before us, a long corridor lined with ancient wallpaper, its floral patterns faded and peeling. A massive staircase loomed ahead, leading to the second floor, where shadows pooled in the corners like ink.

The floor creaked beneath our weight, each step sending echoes through the empty house. I tried to ignore the way my skin prickled.

Elise swept her flashlight across the hall. "Looks abandoned."

"Obviously," Billy muttered. He turned to a dust-covered mirror hanging on the wall and wiped it with his sleeve. "I don't get why everyone's so scared of this place. It's just a..."

A loud bang cut him off and we all jumped, spinning around, flashlights darting toward the sound. The front door had slammed shut.

Sarah let out a sharp breath. "Okay. That's weird."

"Must've been the wind," Jeremie offered, but I could hear the unease in his voice.

"Yeah," I said. "Let's just... keep moving."

We stepped deeper into the house. Our flashlights flickered against faded paintings of people whose faces seemed too hollow, too stretched, their eyes following us no matter where we moved. Dust floated in the air, disturbed for the first time in years. In the corner, an old rocking chair sat eerily still, untouched by time.

Then I heard a faint whisper. At first, I thought I had imagined it. But then Sarah whispered, "Do you hear that?"

We froze. The whispering was soft, almost like a breath against the walls, words just out of reach. It was coming from the next room.

I swallowed hard. "We keep going."

Nobody argued. We stepped through a doorway into what looked like an old study, its wooden shelves filled with books that were so decayed they barely resembled books at all. Papers were scattered across a desk, brittle and yellowed with age. The whispering had stopped.

Sarah drifted toward the desk, running her fingers over a leather-bound diary that lay open.

"This belonged to... Annabelle Jensen," she murmured, flipping through the pages.

I stepped closer. The handwriting started neat but grew frantic, the ink darker, smeared in places, almost like it had been written in desperation. "Something is here. I hear it at night. It speaks to me from the walls."

"Mother and Father don't believe me. But it watches."

"It took Henry first. He was in his bed, and then he wasn't."

"I don't want to go next."

The last page was nothing but claw marks gouged into the paper. Then we heard a sharp bang sounded above us. Then another. They were heavy footsteps.

"Guys..." Billy whispered.

Something was upstairs. We heard a slow creak came from the staircase. We turned, our flashlights trembling.

The rocking chair in the hallway was now moving, swaying back and forth as if someone had just stood up from it.

"We need to go," Elise said, her voice shaking.

We turned toward the front door. It wouldn't open. I yanked on the handle, pulling, kicking, twisting but it wouldn't budge.

Behind us, the whispering started again. They were closer this time.

Billy's flashlight flickered. Then Jeremie's. Then mine.

The air in the room thickened, pressing down on us like a living thing. The flickering beams of our flashlights barely pierced the darkness, their trembling glow revealing only the dust-laden air and the shadows that seemed to shift when we weren't looking. My fingers were still locked around the unmoving doorknob, my heart hammering in my chest as the whispering grew closer and louder and it wasn't one voice, but many, layered on top of each other. I didn't even dare turn around.

Sarah was the first to break the silence. "It's not..." She swallowed, her breath unsteady. "It's not letting us leave."

Jeremie's flashlight blinked out completely, plunging his side of the room into pitch black.

"Hell no," Billy muttered, stepping away from the locked door, away from whatever thing was breathing down our necks. "We need to move. Now."

The rocking chair at the far end of the hall let out a low creak, moving in a slow, rhythmic motion. I could hear it scraping against the wooden floorboards, a sound that made my skin crawl.

I forced myself to take a breath. "Upstairs," I said. "We need to find another way out."

Elise turned sharply to me. "Upstairs? Where the noise came from?"

"You wanna stay down here?" I shot back, jerking my head toward the whispering that still hadn't stopped. The voices weren't just whispering anymore, they were laughing, a soft, eerie sound that made my stomach turn. Nobody argued.

We moved as one, keeping close as we climbed the grand staircase that groaned beneath our weight, the wood threatening to snap under our steps. My flashlight bounced against the walls, casting fleeting glimpses of faded portraits lining the stairwell. Their faces were somber, expressionless, hollow-eyed and they seemed to follow us, watching as we ascended into the darkened second floor.

Halfway up, a sudden thud echoed through the house.

Sarah let out a startled gasp. "That came from behind us."

I turned back. The hallway below was empty, the front door still firmly shut, the rocking chair now completely still, as if it had never moved at all.

A trick of the light, I told myself. That's all.

We reached the second floor and spread out cautiously, flashlights cutting through the murky gloom. The hallway stretched in both directions, doors standing slightly ajar as if waiting to be opened. A cold draft curled around us, carrying with it the unmistakable scent of mildew and something metallic. It was blood.

Elise clutched her arms around herself. "Where the hell do we go?"

Billy gestured toward the nearest door. "Maybe there's a window we can get through."

He stepped forward and pushed the door open. The moment he did, every door in the hallway slammed shut at once. There was a deafening bang that rang through the air. Sarah screamed.

Billy stumbled back, his eyes wide. "Oh, hell no."

We all stood frozen, the echoes of the slamming doors still ringing in our ears. I fought the urge to turn and bolt, I knew somehow, deep in my gut, that running wasn't an option. The house wouldn't let us leave until it was done with us. Something didn't want us here.

"We have to keep moving," I forced out, my voice tight. "We find a window. We break it if we have to."

Elise inhaled sharply and nodded. We picked a door at random, the last one on the right, its wood swollen with age. Jeremie was the first to touch the handle. It was ice-cold, as if it had been left in a freezer. He hesitated for a second before pushing it open. The door creaked inward, revealing a room that didn't make sense. It should have been just another bedroom, like the others.

There was no furniture. No dust. No sign of age like the rest of the manor. Instead, the room was pristine, its wallpaper fresh, its wooden floor gleaming, as if someone had just finished cleaning it. The air was warm, inviting.

That wasn't the worst part. The worst part was that the room had no window at all.

Where a window should have been, there was only a solid wall, smooth and untouched, as if a window had never existed in the first place.

Billy let out a shaky breath. "This ain't right, man." But before I could respond, the door slammed shut behind us.

Sarah let out a strangled cry and lunged for the handle, twisting it desperately. "It's locked!"

A sharp, scraping sound filled the room. We all turned, our flashlights whipping across the walls. The wallpaper was peeling off. Not just in one place but all around us, curling and peeling back like skin, revealing something underneath, words.

Words carved directly into the walls, jagged and rough, as if someone had used their nails to scratch them in.

"Help me."

"It sees me."

"It won't let me leave."

"I hear it in the walls."

"I am not alone."

The whispers returned, louder this time, as if coming from just behind the walls.

Then a low, rasping breath that came from the corner of the room. I turned, my heart stopping cold in my chest. Something was there, it was tall, thin, just beyond the reach of our flashlights and it was watching us.

The moment stretched, suffocating, as we stood frozen in the eerie glow of our flashlights. The thing in the corner didn't move, at least, not yet. But we could feel it. Watching and waiting. The rasping breath filled the space between us, each inhale a jagged, wheezing sound like lungs full of dust and decay.

Sarah was trembling so hard that I could hear the clatter of her teeth. Elise had backed up against the wall, her fingers gripping the old, peeling wallpaper like it was the only thing anchoring her to reality. Billy stood motionless, the beam of his flashlight shaking, a quivering spotlight on the shape lurking in the shadows.

I swallowed hard, my throat dry as sandpaper. "We need to get out of here."

The thing shifted, it was a slight movement in the dark, enough to send my nerves screaming. The breath grew louder, more strained, as if the presence in the room was struggling to contain itself.

Jeremie took a slow step backward, gripping Sarah's arm. "The door," he whispered.

Sarah, still shaking, turned the handle again, yanking at it. "It's still locked!" she hissed through clenched teeth.

Billy cursed under his breath, then turned to me, his voice barely above a whisper. "You got a plan, man?"

A plan? I was trying not to lose my mind. But I forced myself to think.

If we couldn't get out through the door, we had two choices:

1. Stay here and hope it doesn't get any closer.
2. Try another way out.

Neither option sounded great.

But before I could answer, something unexpected happened. The whispers returned—only this time, they weren't coming from the walls. They were coming from inside the room.

The air shifted like it was being pulled through a vacuum. The whispers blended together into a low, guttural murmur, overlapping voices that weren't ours, weren't human. The sound filled every inch of the space, crawling under my skin, making my stomach twist.

Billy stepped forward, shining his flashlight directly at the figure in the corner. But there was nothing there. No shape or body.

"What the...?" Billy started, his voice cracking.

The breath was still there. The whispers were still speaking. But the thing we had seen, the presence we had felt, was suddenly gone.

I grabbed Jeremie's arm. "We need to move, now."

Sarah was still fighting the door, tears forming in her eyes. Elise was whispering to herself, muttering prayers under her breath. She had always been the most skeptical of us, the one who rolled her eyes at ghost stories. But not now. Now, she was terrified.

As swung my flashlight around the room, i saw a window, it wasn't there when we had entered. It even had old curtains.

"There... a window," I said. "Check the damn window."

Billy ran to the other side of the room, grabbing the edges of the dusty curtains. He yanked them open.

It was an empty, endless void, stretching beyond the glass, as if the world had ceased to exist outside the room. I felt my breath catch in my throat. My skin went ice cold. That was impossible.

We had seen the manor from the outside. We had walked up the hill, seen the windows, the overgrown garden, the rusted old gates.

But now there was nothing.

Billy reached out, pressing a hesitant hand against the glass. It didn't feel like glass at all.

"It's warm," he muttered.

Sarah let out a small, strangled noise, shaking her head in disbelief. "That doesn't make sense."

Nothing about this made sense. Then the walls began to shift.

At first, I thought it was a trick of the light. Maybe my flashlight was shaking too much, making the shadows dance. But the walls were actually moving.

The scratched words—"Help me. It sees me. I hear it in the walls." began to peel away, twisting and shifting like living things.

The wallpaper curled, revealing raw wood underneath, wood that pulsed like it was breathing. Elise let out a choked sob. "This—this isn't real. This can't be real."

Then, from behind us the door creaked open slowly.

A gust of cold, damp air blew into the room, carrying with it the scent of earth, rotting leaves, something ancient and wet.

None of us moved or spoke because we all knew that something was standing on the other side. We couldn't see it but we felt it. We felt its presence, heavy and watching, as if it had been waiting for us to realize that we were never going to leave this house. Jeremie was the first to break.

"Run," he whispered, before grabbing Sarah's wrist and yanking her toward the door.

Billy and Elise followed, but I hesitated, i just stood there for a second and that second nearly cost me everything. The shadows in the room lunged forward.

The whispering voices screamed the moment my foot crossed the threshold the door slammed shut behind me.

We were back in the hallway, panting, hearts racing, backs pressed against the rotting wood. The air out here was just as cold, just as suffocating. But at least there were no moving walls. No endless voids where windows should be.

I turned to face the door we had just escaped from. There was no door.

It was just a solid wall, like the room had never existed. Billy was gasping, hands on his knees. Elise was shaking, staring at the wall like she expected it to change back any second. Jeremie wouldn't stop mumbling, his voice a mess of half-formed words and stuttering breaths. Sarah was the only one who spoke clearly. Her voice was flat and emotionless.

"We need to get out," she whispered.

The hallway stretched before us, long and dimly lit by the soft glow of our flashlights. The walls, once covered in tattered wallpaper, now seemed more like skin, pulsing faintly as if the house itself was alive. My breath came in short gasps, my fingers tight around my flashlight, knuckles white.

We had just escaped a room that no longer existed. The doorway was gone, replaced by a solid wall as if we had never been inside. But we knew. We had felt the whispers, the unseen presence breathing against our necks, the thing in the shadows that had watched, waited, toyed with us.

Sarah swallowed hard. "This house is messing with us," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

Billy let out a shaky laugh, running a hand through his sweat-damp hair. "No kidding, Sherlock." His usual bravado was gone, replaced with pure, unfiltered fear.

Elise was hugging herself, her lips moving in silent prayers. She hadn't spoken since we'd left the room, and I didn't blame her. I wasn't even sure I could trust my own voice.

Jeremie stood still, staring at the floor. "It wants something," he muttered.

I turned to him. "What do you mean?"

His fingers twitched at his sides. "It let us out of that room, but it's keeping us inside the house. Why?"

I didn't have an answer, but I could feel it too the weight of something unseen pressing down on us. It wasn't going to let us leave until we figured out what it wanted.

I turned my flashlight down the hall. The long corridor led to a grand staircase at the far end, a massive, twisted thing with a banister warped from years of decay. At the top of the stairs, another hallway stretched into darkness. I knew that something was up there, watching us.

A low creak echoed from above, followed by another, and another, it was footsteps.

Sarah grabbed my wrist. "Will," she whispered, voice tight with fear.

I didn't answer. My body was frozen, my mind torn between running and standing my ground. My flashlight shook as I lifted it, directing the beam upward.

At first, there was nothing. Just shadows and dust. Then a figure appeared at the top of the stairs, it was tall and motionless. No eyes. No face. Just the shape of a man, his body distorted in the dim light.

The footsteps had stopped. The thing tilted its head. Sarah sucked in a breath. Elise let out a whimper.

Then, in the stillest silence imaginable, the figure took a step down.

Panic shot through me like an electric jolt.

"Go!" I yelled, grabbing Sarah's hand and pulling her toward the other end of the hall. The others bolted after us, our footsteps pounding against the wooden floorboards.

The thing moved faster than it should have, its steps nearly silent despite its speed. We reached the staircase at the other end of the hallway. It spiraled downward into a deeper part of the house, the basement maybe.

I hesitated. The last thing I wanted was to go down, but we didn't have a choice. The thing was coming.

"Down! Move!" I hissed.

Sarah hesitated for a second but followed. Jeremie, Billy, and Elise scrambled after us, our footsteps sending dust and debris scattering down the staircase. The air grew colder as we descended, the scent of rotting wood and mildew thick in my nose.

We hit the bottom. A long hallway stretched ahead, doors lining the walls.

There was silence, the footsteps above had stopped.

Elise wiped at her face, her breathing uneven. "Did...did we lose it?"

"I don't know," I admitted, shining my flashlight behind us. Nothing moved. No shadows stretched toward us. No unseen figures lurked at the edge of the light. But that didn't mean we were safe.

Billy ran a hand through his hair, pacing. "What the hell, man? What is this place?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. But Jeremie's right. It's playing with us."

Sarah turned, her flashlight scanning the hallway. "Then what do we do?"

Jeremie exhaled sharply. "We figure out what it wants."

I stared at him. "And how do we do that?"

He didn't have an answer. Then Elise's flashlight flickered over something at the end of the hall, it was a door.

It was different from the others. Older, maybe, or just more worn down. The wood was splintered, the handle rusted. But there was something wrong. Something about it felt important.

Sarah took a step toward it, her breath shallow. "Guys... I think we need to go in there."

I didn't want to. None of us did. But the house had led us here. And deep down, we knew there was no other choice. I reached out and turned the handle. The door opened without resistance.

Inside, the air was thick and heavy. My flashlight flickered as I stepped inside, and I nearly gagged. The smell was awful—damp, decayed, like something had rotted away for years.

The walls were covered in scribbled symbols, drawn in something dark. The words were nonsense, scattered phrases that made no sense:

"It takes. It waits. It knows the blood."

"You cannot leave."

"The night is endless."

And in the center of the room there was a chair. An old wooden chair, positioned perfectly beneath a rotting ceiling beam. But what sent ice through my veins was the rope hanging from the beam above it. There was a noose.

Elise made a small choking sound. "Oh my God."

I swallowed back the lump in my throat and stepped closer. The rope was frayed, old. Someone had been here before, sat in this chair and someone had died here.

Jeremie stepped beside me, eyes locked on the noose. "This is it," he whispered. "This is what the house wanted us to see."

Billy shook his head. "What does it mean?"

I didn't have an answer. But my gut told me we were close, too close. Sarah's flashlight flickered. Then there was a whisper, it was soft and directly behind us.

"You're not supposed to be here."

The door slammed shut. I spun around, my heart in my throat. And then the chair moved.

Slowly creaking as if someone was sitting there. Then, the noose tightened. A horrible, sickening snap filled the room, the sound of a neck breaking. And everything went black.

I didn't know if I had lost consciousness for a second or if the house had simply stolen the light away, but for a moment, it felt like we no longer existed. My heart slammed against my ribs, my breath came in short, panicked bursts, and for the first time in my life, I was convinced I was about to die. Then, the lights flickered back on.

Not our flashlights, those were still dead, their beams were useless now but the room itself was now bathed in a dim, sickly glow, as if the walls themselves were bleeding light. The old chandelier above us, long covered in dust and cobwebs, shimmered with an eerie glow, swaying slightly as if moved by an unseen force.

The chair, the one we had just seen empty, rocking slowly back and forth—was now occupied. A man sat there, his head bent at an unnatural angle, his body limp, his feet dangling just inches from the floor. The noose still wrapped tightly around his throat. His skin was gray, waxy, his mouth slightly open as if he had been mid-scream when his life was stolen away.

Elise made a horrible, choked sound, her hands covering her mouth.

Billy backed up so fast he nearly tripped over his own feet. "Oh—oh my..."

Sarah couldn't move. Her breath came out in ragged gasps, her body frozen in pure terror.

Jeremie was the only one who stepped forward, his face twisted in a mixture of horror and fascination. "It's him," he whispered.

I forced myself to look, to really see the man.

The tattered clothes. The sunken, hollow eyes. The faint resemblance to the portraits we had seen upstairs. It was Jensen.

"Jensen," I murmured, my voice hoarse.

The moment I said his name, his eyes snapped open. I stumbled back, my pulse hammering in my ears. For a second, there was only silence.

Then he moved his head snapped upright, the sickening crack of bone shifting filling the room. His fingers twitched. His lips parted, and from his throat came a sound that was neither human nor natural.

A whisper, like wind rushing through dead trees.

"You are not supposed to be here."

The entire room shuddered. The walls groaned, as if the house itself had come alive. Then, the screaming began. Not from Jensen but from the walls. Voices, hundreds of them, all overlapping, all crying out in agony.

"Help us."

"Don't let it take us."

"It won't let you leave."

The temperature plummeted. My breath came out in white puffs, the cold sinking into my bones. The chandelier above us swayed harder, the light flickering wildly. And then Jensen stood up. I didn't think, I just ran.

I grabbed Sarah's arm, yanking her with me toward the door. "GO! MOVE!"

The others followed, pure fear driving them forward. Elise was sobbing, Billy was cursing under his breath, and Jeremie kept looking back, as if some part of him needed to understand what was happening. We reached the door and it wouldn't open.

I shoved against it. Pounded my fist into the wood. "Let us OUT!"

Behind me, the whispers grew louder, the voices becoming one.

"You belong to the house now."

The walls pulsed. The floor beneath us shifted, like a heartbeat.

Sarah let out a sharp scream. I turned just in time to see a hand burst through the wall beside her, fingers grasping for her throat.

I grabbed her and pulled her away. Elise was next, something reached for her ankle, nearly dragging her into the shadows before Billy yanked her free. The house was trying to keep us here. Jeremie was the first to figure it out.

"We have to break the cycle!" he shouted, his voice barely audible over the chaos. "It's feeding off of us! The fear, the suffering, it needs it!"

I turned to him, desperate. "Then HOW?!"

He pointed to the chair. To the noose. To Jensen.

"We have to end what started this," he said. "Jensen's death trapped him here, and now, now he's keeping everyone else trapped too!"

It made sense. The disappearances. The house feeding off the energy of the people who got too close. Jensen wasn't haunting this place, he was the key to keeping it alive. But what did that mean? How do we break it, the cycle?

I turned back to the horrible, empty eyes staring at us from the shadows.

"What do you want?" I shouted.

Jensen didn't answer. He tilted his head, watching me with cold curiosity.

The whispers turned to laughter. That's when it hit me. "He doesn't know he's dead."

Jeremie's words from earlier echoed in my mind. Jensen wasn't haunting the house. Jensen was trapped, just like us. I turned to him, stepping closer. The others gasped in fear, but I ignored them.

"You died here," I said, my voice shaking. "You were the first. And now, you're keeping the rest of them here."

His expression didn't change. I swallowed hard. "You don't have to stay."

The whispers stopped. For the first time since we entered the house, there was a normal silence. Jensen blinked. Then, slowly, his lips parted.

"I..." he started, his voice cracked and broken.

His body twitched. The noose around his neck loosened. And then the entire house began to shake.

The walls cracked. The chandelier fell, crashing into the floor. The temperature rose, burning hot. Jensen's figure began to fade, his body breaking apart like mist in the wind. The whispers turned to screams. And then the door flew open.

I didn't wait. I grabbed Sarah and bolted. The others followed, stumbling through the collapsing hallway. The staircase split in two behind us, the floors crumbling into darkness. We reached the front doors.

I slammed into them. They didn't move. Then we heard Jensen's voice.

"Go."

The doors burst open. We tumbled outside, hitting the cold grass. And then, behind us the Jensen Manor collapsed. We sat there, staring at the pile of rubble. The house was gone. No sign of Jensen. No voices. Just silence. Sarah was crying. Elise was shaking. Billy was breathing hard, staring blankly at the ruins. Jeremie was smiling softly.

"It's over," he whispered.

I didn't say anything. I just watched.

In the end It's me, the lake and her

I don't remember the exact moment I first noticed Amanda Armstrong, but I do remember when I realized I couldn't stop noticing her. It was last spring, just before finals. She was sitting by the window in the library, the sunlight catching the strands of her dark brown hair, looking lost in whatever book she was reading. She had this small absentminded smile, the kind that people make when they've completely disappeared into another world. I stood there for a moment too long, pretending to look for a book on the shelf, even though I wasn't reading much of anything those days.

Now, almost a year later, nothing has changed. Maybe it's worse now. I still catch myself watching her in class, my eyes following her as she walks past in the hallway, my ears tuning into her voice whenever she speaks. And yet, I've never actually talked to her. Not properly, anyway. A few awkward "hi's" here and there, maybe a "sorry" when I bumped into her once near the lockers, but that's it.

My best friend, Jake, finds this hilarious. "Dude, you've had a crush on her for, what, a year? And you still haven't even had a real conversation? Pathetic." I roll my eyes but don't bother denying it. "It's not that simple."

"Sure it is. You walk up to her, say 'Hey Amanda, i think you're cool and i like your hair,' and boom conversation started."

"Yeah, and then what? She laughs in my face?"

Jake shakes his head, grinning. "Man, you overthink everything. She's just a person."

He's right. She is just a person. But to me, she's also everything I can't seem to reach, effortless confidence, kindness, that way she always seems to belong wherever she is. I, on the other hand, feel like I don't quite fit in anywhere. And yet, fate has a twisted sense of humor.

Because today, when Mr. Reynolds pairs us up for a history project, Amanda turns her head, smiles at me, and says, "Guess we're partners, Tim."

I freeze. For a second, I swear my brain had stopped working entirely. She knows my name?

I try to respond, but my throat suddenly feels too dry. I clear it quickly. "Uh, yeah. Looks like it."

Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant. Jake would be laughing his ass off if he were here.

Amanda doesn't seem to notice my internal meltdown. She pulls out a notebook and starts jotting things down. "So, we have two weeks to put together a presentation on the Industrial Revolution. Do you want to meet up after school today? We can start planning."

After school, Today, Alone? My heart does an uncomfortable flip.

"Uh, sure...Yeah. Sounds good." I said.

She grins, and for a second, I can't look directly at her. "Great. Library, four o'clock?"

I nod, probably too fast I think. And just like that, I have my first real date with Amanda.

The hours until four o'clock crawl by. By the time I get to the library, I'm almost convinced she's forgotten or changed her mind. But there she is, sitting at a table near the back, a pen tapping against her notebook. When she sees me, she waves.

I force myself to walk over like a normal human being and sit across from her.

"Okay," she says, pushing a textbook toward me. "Where should we start?"

For a moment, I just stare at her. The way she tilts her head slightly when she's thinking. The little crease in her forehead when she focuses. She really is just a person. But somehow, she still feels like something more.

I snap out of it and clear my throat. "Uh, well, I guess we should split up the research first."

She nods. "Good idea. I can take the economic effects, and you can do the social impact?"

"Sounds fair." I say awkwardly. For the next hour, we actually work. And weirdly, it's not awkward. I expected it to be me sitting here fumbling over my words, sweating through my shirt, making a complete idiot of myself. But Amanda is easy to talk to. She jokes about Mr. Reynolds' terrible handwriting, rolls her eyes when a group of freshmen get too loud, and complains about how hard it is to focus when the library smells like old socks.

And before I know it, I'm laughing. Like, actual laughing. And talking. And not overthinking every single word.

At one point, she leans back in her chair, stretching her arms above her head. "You're not as quiet as I thought you were, you know."

I blink. "Huh?"

She smirks. "In class, you're always so quiet. I thought maybe you just didn't like talking to people."

"Oh." I scratch the back of my neck. "I guess I just don't always know what to say."

"Well," she says, tapping her pen against her notebook, "you seem to be doing just fine now." I don't know what to say to that, so I just smile.

By the time we leave the library, it's starting to get dark. The air is crisp, the sky turning shades of pink and purple. We step outside, and suddenly, I feel nervous again. This moment, the walk home is quiet.

Amanda glances up at the sky. "I love this time of day," she says. "It always feels like a transition. Like the world is taking a deep breath before night falls."

I never thought about it like that. "Yeah. I guess it does."

She looks at me, really looks at me, and for a split second, I think she sees right through me, she sees everything I feel, everything I want to say but can't.

And then she smiles. "See you tomorrow, Tim."

And just like that, she's runs off. I stand there for a long time, watching her walk away, my heart still beating way too fast.

Maybe Jake was right. Maybe I do overthink everything. But for once, I don't want to overthink.

I just want to hold onto this moment for as long as I can. It's strange how fast a routine can form.

By the time a week passes, meeting Amanda in the library after school feels... natural. It's not that I don't still get nervous around her, I do. But it's different now. The kind of nervousness that keeps me aware of every little movement she makes, the way she twirls her pen when she's thinking, the way her lips press together when she's concentrating. But it's also mixed with something else, something warmer. Something that makes me want to know more about her.

She's easy to talk to now. I don't know why I ever thought she wouldn't be. There's something about the way she listens, really listens, that makes it feel like whatever I'm saying actually matters. Like she's paying attention, not just waiting for her turn to speak.

And that's how I find myself telling her things I don't usually talk about. Like how I hate math, how my dad always wanted me to be more into sports, but I never really cared about them.

Like how sometimes I feel like I'm just... waiting for something, but I don't even know what. Amanda listens. She nods, asks questions, and shares her own little details in return.

She tells me she used to be afraid of the dark when she was a kid, well that's something we were afraid of right? She tells me she loves thunderstorms, the louder, the better. Now that is just messed up but i never said anything.

She tells me she's been writing a novel since last summer, but she hasn't told anyone else because she's afraid it's not good enough.

"You're writing a book?" I ask, leaning forward.

She shrugs, looking almost embarrassed. "It's not really a book. Just... a story. I don't know, i guess.

Well actually i do know. I want to tell her that. Want to tell her that I understand completely, that I think it's incredible, that I want to read every single word she's ever written.

But all I manage is, "That's really cool."

She smiles, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Thanks."

And for a moment, we just sit there, the quiet stretching between us. But it's not uncomfortable. It's the kind of quiet that feels full, like there's something important just under the surface, waiting to be said. I should say something.

I should tell her that I like talking to her. That I look forward to these study sessions way more than I should. That every time she laughs, it feels like the best sound in the world.

But instead, I say, "We should probably get back to the project."

She laughs lightly. "Yeah. Probably."

The next day we're sitting outside during lunch, something we've never done. We usually just see each other in the library, but today, Amanda finds me at my locker and asks if I want to eat outside with her. Yeah just like that.

"Uh, yeah," I say, trying not to sound too eager.

So now we're sitting under a big oak tree at the edge of the school yard, our lunches between us. The air smells like fresh grass, and the sun is warm against my skin.

Amanda stretches her legs out, crossing them at the ankles. "So, Tim. Serious question."

I raise an eyebrow. "Okay."

She grins. "If you could have any superpower, what would it be?"

I blink, caught off guard, a kid's question I think. "Uh. I don't know. Maybe invisibility?"

She tilts her head. "Why?"

I shrug, taking a bite of my sandwich. "I guess it would be nice to just... disappear sometimes."

Amanda watches me for a second, like she's trying to figure me out. Then she nods. "Yeah. I get that."

"What about you?" I ask.

She thinks for a moment, then smiles. "I think I'd want to fly. Just take off and go wherever I want go."

"Like running away?" I say, half-joking.

She laughs, but there's something in her eyes, something thoughtful. "Not running away. Just... being free."

I don't know what to say to that, so I just nod. And for the first time, I wonder if maybe Amanda Armstrong is waiting for something too.

Later that evening, when I walk into the library, Amanda is already there, but something feels... different.

She's sitting with her head down, staring at her phone, her fingers tapping anxiously against the table.

I sit across from her, hesitating. "Hey."

She looks up, and I immediately know something's wrong. There's a tightness in her expression, something careful in the way she meets my eyes.

"Hey," she says, but it's quieter than usual.

I hesitate. "You okay?"

For a second, she doesn't answer. Then she sighs, setting her phone down. "Yeah. Just... family stuff."

I don't push it I wait till she tells me. She exhales again, softer this time, then rests her chin on her hand. "It's nothing. Just my mom being... my mom."

I nod slowly. Amanda has mentioned before that her mom is strict. That she expects a lot. That sometimes Amanda feels like she's being pushed in a direction she doesn't want to go.

"I get it," I say.

She looks at me. "Yeah?"

I nod. "Parents can be complicated."

She smiles faintly. "That's one way to put it."

For a moment, we just sit there, the quiet stretching between us again.

Then she suddenly says, "Let's get out of here."

I blink. "What?"

She stands up, grabbing her bag. "Let's go somewhere. Anywhere."

I hesitate, glancing around. "But... we have to work on the project."

She grins, eyes shining. "Screw the project. Just for tonight. Come on."

And for some reason, I do. I grab my bag, follow her out of the library, and into the cool night air. I don't know where we're going or why she suddenly wants to run.

But I know that, for the first time in a long time, I don't want to be anywhere else but with her. The air outside is crisp, carrying the distant scent of rain. The sky is

layered with deep purples and blues, stars barely breaking through the haze of city lights. Amanda walks ahead of me, her arms swinging slightly, her pace relaxed but purposeful. And i don't even know where we are going.

"Where are we going?" I ask, shoving my hands into my jacket pockets.

She glances back at me, her expression teasing. "You'll see."

I don't question it any further, i just follow. We leave the school behind, walking past rows of quiet houses and dim streetlights. There's something freeing about this, just walking, without a real destination, without a plan. The world feels smaller at night, quieter. Like it belongs to just us.

Amanda eventually stops in front of a small park, barely lit by a few scattered lamps. The swings creak softly in the breeze, and the jungle gym stands in silent invitation. She walks straight to the swings and drops onto one, kicking her feet lightly against the ground.

I hesitate, then sit in the swing beside her. The chains groan under my weight. For a moment, neither of us speak.

Then she exhales, looking up at the sky. "I used to come here all the time when I was little."

I glance at her. "Yeah?"

She nods, pushing herself slightly so the swing rocks. "My dad used to bring me here. He'd push me on the swings until I thought I was flying."

I know about Amanda's dad, how he left when she was ten, how he never really looked back. She doesn't talk about it much, and I don't push.

But right now, she's offering a piece of herself, and I don't want to ignore it.

"Do you miss him?" I ask quietly.

She's silent for a long time. Then she sighs. "Yeah. But not in the way I used to."

I don't know what that means exactly, but I nod anyway. She tilts her head, looking at me. "What about you? Any deep, tragic stories to share?"

I huff a quiet laugh. "Not really. My parents are still together. My life's pretty boring."

"Boring isn't bad," she says.

I shrug. "Maybe."

She watches me for a second, then smirks. "You know, you never told me who you like."

I freeze. "What?"

She grins, nudging my swing with her foot. "Come on. Everyone has a crush. Who is it?"

My pulse kicks up. My mind races through a million ways to answer. I could lie. I could change the subject. I could joke it off. But instead, I just look at her.

And maybe it's the way the lamplight catches in her hair, or the way her smile softens just slightly, or the way my heart has been hammering ever since the first time she said my name. But I know I can't pretend.

"It's you," I say. The words just fall out, simple and undeniable.

Amanda blinks, her lips parting slightly. "What?"

I swallow hard. "I like you. I have for a while."

Her expression is unreadable, her hands still gripping the chains of the swing, her body frozen mid-motion. My stomach tightens, dread curling in my chest. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything. Maybe I just ruined everything.

Then she exhales, almost like she's been holding her breath. And she looks at me, not with shock, or discomfort, or anything I was afraid of. But with something else. Something that makes my heart pound even harder.

"You're serious?" she asks, her voice quieter now.

I nod. "Yeah."

For a second, she just stares at me. Then, slowly, a small, almost shy smile tugs at her lips.

"I thought you'd never say anything."

I blink. "Wait what?"

"I knew," she says, tilting her head. "Or... I thought I knew. But I wasn't sure."

My brain feels like it's short-circuiting. "And?"

She laughs softly, looking down at the ground for a moment before meeting my gaze again. And then she reaches over, her fingers brushing against my hand.

"I like you too, Tim," she says.

The words send a jolt through my entire body. I don't even know how to respond, so I just stare at her, heart thudding against my ribs.

She squeezes my fingers lightly before pulling back, biting her lip. "So... what now?"

I let out a breathy laugh, shaking my head. "I have no idea."

She smiles. "Me neither."

For a while, we just sit there, our swings barely moving, the night stretching around us. The moment feels big, like it belongs in a movie, like I'll remember it forever.

And somehow, I think I will. Because everything just changed. And for once, I don't feel like I'm waiting for something anymore.

The walk back from the park is quieter than before. Not in an awkward way anymore. It's the kind of quiet that comes when something big has happened, and you don't want to break the moment. Amanda walks beside me, her hands tucked into her hoodie pockets, her footsteps light on the pavement. I keep glancing at her, trying to read her expression, but she's just... calm. Like this is normal. Like everything is the same.

Except it's not. I told her how I felt about her and now she knows and what freaks me out the most is that she likes me too.

That fact keeps replaying in my head like a song on repeat, like I don't fully believe it yet. I was so sure I'd mess things up, so sure that the second I admitted how I felt, she'd look at me differently. But she didn't. She just smiled, said she liked me too, and then we kept walking, as if we'd done this a hundred times before.

We reach her street, the one I've walked down a million times, but tonight it feels different. Her house is just ahead, porch light flickering slightly, the usual hum of her neighbor's radio drifting through the night air. She stops near the curb, turning to face me.

"So," she says, shifting her weight. "Guess we should talk about what this means."

I nod, shoving my hands into my jacket pockets. "Probably."

A smirk tugs at her lips. "Are you always nervous?"

"Only when I'm panicking inside."

She laughs, and it's soft but real. It makes my stomach flip.

Then, for the first time tonight, there's a bit of nervousness in her expression. She bites her lip, glancing down before looking back up at me. "Look, Tim... I like you. I really do. But I don't want to rush into something just because we finally said it out loud."

I nod quickly. "Yeah. Yeah, no, I get that."

Her shoulders relax. "Good. I just... I want to make sure we do this right, you know? That it's not just some 'oh we admitted it, so now we have to date' thing."

"That makes sense."

A small smile tugs at the corner of her mouth. "But we can still hang out, right?"

I let out a breath, laughing lightly. "Obviously. Not like I'm gonna stop talking to you just because you rejected my imaginary first-date plans."

She grins. "Imaginary, huh?"

"Yeah. In my head, we were totally going to some fancy restaurant. Like, candlelit dinner, expensive steak, the works."

She laughs. "Sounds like you were really prepared."

"Oh, for sure. Had it all planned out."

Her smile softens, and for a second, she just looks at me, like she's studying something. Then, before I can react, she reaches out and squeezes my hand, just for a moment. Just enough to make my pulse stutter.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Tim."

And then she turns, heading up her front steps, disappearing inside before I can even process what just happened.

I stand there for a second, my hand still warm from hers, my mind spinning. Then, slowly, I start walking home, my heart feeling a little too big for my chest.

The next day at school feels completely normal and completely different at the same time.

Amanda and I still sit together at lunch, still walk to class like we always do. But there's something new there now, something that wasn't there before. It's in the way she catches my eye and smiles a little wider. The way her hand lingers just slightly when she passes me something. The way we stand a little closer when we talk.

It's subtle, but it's there and I feel it.

"So," Jake says, sliding into his chair next to me in history class, "you and Amanda, huh?"

I nearly choke on my own breath. "What?"

Jake raises an eyebrow. "Dude. Everyone saw you two at the park last night."

I groan, slumping in my chair. "Of course they did."

He snickers. "So, is it official, or are we still in the 'awkward and figuring it out' phase?"

I glare at him, but I can't help smirking. "We're... taking it slow."

Jake hums knowingly. "Uh-huh. That's what people say when they don't know what the hell they're doing."

"Shut up."

He laughs but doesn't push further, and I'm grateful for that.

Because honestly? I don't know what the hell I'm doing. But for once, I'm okay with that.

A few days pass, and everything still feels the same and different all at once. We haven't really talked about what we are, but there's something there, something we both know without having to say it.

Then Friday rolls around, and as we're walking out of school, Amanda nudges me with her elbow.

"Hey," she says, tilting her head. "Wanna go to the lake tonight?"

I blink. "The lake?"

She nods. "Yeah. You know, the one just outside town? I used to go there a lot."

I hesitate, not because I don't want to go, but because something about the way she says it makes it feel important. Like she's inviting me into something more.

"Yeah," I say. "I'd like that."

She grins. "Cool. I'll pick you up at seven."

And just like that, my whole day is made. That night, Amanda pulls up to my house in her dad's old car, a beat-up thing that still runs surprisingly well. I climb in, and we take off down the road, the radio playing low, the windows cracked just enough to let in the cool night air.

The drive is quiet but comfortable, and when we finally reach the lake, the sky is already deepening into twilight. It feels kinda weird sitting in the passenger seat while a girl drives me somewhere.

The water reflects the fading light, rippling slightly in the breeze. It's peaceful, untouched. Amanda steps out of the car, stretching slightly. "I used to come here when I needed to think."

I nod, following her toward the shoreline. "Yeah?"

She hums. "It's nice, right?"

I look around. The trees, the water, the way everything feels suspended in time.

"Yeah," I say. "It really is."

We sit near the edge, our shoulders barely brushing, the quiet settling around us.

Then she exhales, tilting her head toward me. "Hey, Tim?"

"Yeah?"

She smiles, soft and knowing.

"Thanks for waiting for me."

I don't really know what to say to that, so I just smile back.

And in that moment, with the lake stretching out before us and the stars starting to peek through the sky, I realize I'd wait for her as long as it takes.

NeoEden

I never asked to be different. I never wanted to be some relic of the past, some outcast in a world that had long decided what it meant to be human. But in NeoEden, a city where flesh was outdated and the only currency that truly mattered was the metal in your body, I had no choice. I was the one of the last natural, organic human walking the streets, and it was only a matter of time before they came for me.

The city didn't want people like me. It tolerated us at best, ignored us when possible, and erased us when necessary. I'd spent my entire life watching it happen, one by one, people either upgraded or disappeared.

The government didn't force anyone to get cybernetic enhancements, not officially. But try getting a job without a neural processor. Try renting an apartment when landlords only accept tenants with biometric security linked to their augments. Try existing when every transaction, every service, every function of modern society depended on tech that wasn't embedded under your skin. It wasn't a law, a system.

And me? I was an error in that system. An anomaly. A bug waiting to be deleted.

NeoEden was alive in the worst way. The streets pulsed with neon lights, advertisements flickering like artificial stars above a skyline built from steel and glass. Automated drones zipped overhead, scanning pedestrians, running facial recognition on every person who walked by. The sidewalks were crowded with people but not people like me. People with chrome arms and retinal displays. People who didn't blink because their eyes weren't real. People who barely looked human anymore.

I kept my head down as I walked, hoodie up, trying not to draw attention. The key to surviving in NeoEden wasn't to fight the system, it was to stay beneath it. But lately, I'd been feeling like that wasn't an option anymore. People like me were disappearing.

Not all at once, not in some big, dramatic way that would cause panic. But every week, another natural was gone. First, it was Jason, the guy who worked at the noodle stand near my apartment. He never missed a shift. One day, his shop was closed, and the next week, someone else was running it, someone with a sleek

cybernetic spine and the dead, glassy stare of a corporate drone. Then it was Mira, the girl from the underground market who used to sell off grid food packs. "Joined the system," they said. No one ever saw her again. It wasn't hard to figure out what was happening.

I was on my way home when I heard a female's scream, it was sharp and raw, cutting through the usual hum of city noise. People turned, but only for a second, before looking away. In NeoEden, you didn't get involved. You minded your own business because getting involved meant risking your life. I looked back.

I saw a girl, barely older than me, struggling against two enforcers in sleek, black exosuits. She kicked, clawed, screamed. "Let me go! You can't do this!" But they didn't care. They weren't people anymore, they were just bodies full of corporate programming, following orders without hesitation.

I didn't know why I moved. I just knew that I couldn't stand there and watch.

"Hey!" My voice came out louder than I expected, cutting through the air like a gunshot. People actually stopped this time, looking at me like I had lost my mind.

One of the enforcers turned his head, scanning me with a glowing red lens where his eye used to be. "CITIZEN. MOVE ALONG."

But she was looking at me now, desperate and terrified. She had real eyes. Real human eyes, they were not augmented, they weren't artificial. And I realized, in that moment, that she was like me. That's why they were taking her.

I clenched my fists. "Let her go."

The second enforcer stepped forward. "Interference detected. Unregistered citizen profile. Identification required."

And just like that, I knew I was screwed.

A red holographic screen appeared in front of the enforcer's face. I saw my face on it—my name, my citizen status marked as "Anomaly." Before I could react, he moved too fast, faster than any human could. His arm swung toward me like a steel wrecking ball.

I barely dodged. Pain exploded across my ribs as his fist grazed me, sending me stumbling. The girl screamed again, but I couldn't see what was happening to her anymore. I was running. I didn't want to run but I had no choice.

I ducked into a narrow alley, my heartbeat was beating like crazy. Behind me, I could still hear the enforcers following. Their footsteps weren't normal, they had machine precision.

I had to get out of the scanning range. Had to get somewhere they couldn't track me and I knew exactly where to go.

NeoEden wasn't just skyscrapers and flashing neon screens. Beneath all of that, beneath the streets, beneath the corporate towers, there was the Undercity.

It was a place that didn't exist on any map. A place for people who weren't part of the system. People like me.

I ducked into an old service tunnel, one of the few remaining places where the city's scanners didn't reach. My lungs burned, my legs felt like they were going to collapse, but I kept moving.

The enforcers didn't follow not because they couldn't but because they wouldn't. The Undercity wasn't just hidden it was off-limits. Not even Orion Industries, the corporation that practically owned NeoEden, could control what happened down here.

I staggered into the dimly lit underground streets, past people who barely spared me a glance. Some were naturals, like me. Others were half-augmented, their bodies patched together with second-hand cybernetics that didn't quite fit. These were the ones who had tried to join the system but failed. Too poor to afford the good implants, too modified to live without them. This was where NeoEden discarded its mistakes.

I collapsed onto a metal crate, trying to catch my breath. I had escaped and I had seen too much. And if they had flagged me as an anomaly, it meant that I wasn't safe anymore.

And neither was the girl they had taken. I looked up, my hands still shaking, and realized that i had to go back for her.

Because if I didn't, I knew exactly what would happen, she would disappear. Just like all the others.

I didn't sleep that night. Not that it would have made a difference. Sleep had become a luxury in NeoEden, something only the privileged could afford. The kind of people who lived in sky-high apartments with built-in neural dampeners that filtered out the city's endless noise. The kind of people who didn't have to run for their lives.

I was holed up in the Undercity, sitting on a crate that reeked of damp metal and old oil. The air here was thicker and heavier. Up above, in the real city, the air was artificially purified, pumped with just the right balance of oxygen and chemicals to keep people functioning at optimal levels. But down here? It was raw. Like everything else.

The girl's scream still echoed in my head. I knew what happened to people who got taken. They weren't executed, at least not immediately. Orion Industries wasn't that crude. They were smarter. People disappeared because they were recycled. Some ended up as mindless drones in corporate factories, lobotomized and repurposed to do the city's dirty work. Others were converted into test subjects, their bodies ripped apart and rebuilt with augments they never asked for. And some... well, no one ever found out what happened to some.

I had seen it before. Jason, Mira, All of them. And if I didn't do something, she would be next.

The problem was, I didn't know her name. I didn't know where they had taken her or why they had grabbed her specifically. All I knew was that she was like me, a natural. And that meant that she was a threat to someone powerful. I needed information.

I pushed myself up from the crate and pulled my hood tighter over my head. The Undercity wasn't exactly safe, but at least down here, people didn't ask questions. Everyone was running from something. Everyone had secrets. I just had to find the right person to talk to.

There was one place where I could start called The Hollow.

It wasn't a club, not really. It was more like a market for information, buried deep in the ruins of an old metro station that had been abandoned long before Orion had taken over. If you needed something, like illegal augments, black-market tech, or just rumors about what was happening in the city, this was where you went.

I made my way through the narrow alleys, past rusted-out vending machines and makeshift homes built from scrap metal. The Hollow wasn't exactly welcoming. The entrance was marked by flickering neon signs that buzzed and hummed with barely contained energy. Two massive bouncers stood at the door, their arms full cybernetic, their eyes glowing like something out of a nightmare.

One of them stepped forward, scanning me. "No augments?" I shook my head.

The other bouncer let out a laugh. "Poor bastard. What are you even doing here?"

"I need information," I said.

The first bouncer grunted and stepped aside. "Try not to get yourself killed."

Inside, The Hollow was alive with the sound of low chatter and heavy bass vibrating through the floor. The place was packed. People hunched over tables covered in glowing screens, trading stolen corporate data like it was pocket change. A woman with metallic arms was testing out a new wrist-mounted blade, slicing through the air with perfect precision.

I moved carefully, keeping to the shadows. I wasn't looking for weapons or stolen tech. I was looking for one person.

I found Gideon hunched over a table in the back, sipping something that smelled like it could strip the paint off a car. His left eye was cybernetic, flickering with data streams as he scrolled through encrypted files projected from his fingertips. He was an information broker, one of the best. I sat down across from him.

He didn't look up. "Whatever you're selling, I'm not buying."

"I'm not selling," I said. "I need to find someone."

That got his attention. He leaned back, eyeing me carefully. "That's dangerous business. Who is it?"

"I don't know her name. She's a natural and Orion took her last night."

Gideon let out a low whistle. "Orion doesn't take people for no reason. Naturals go missing all the time, but a public grab? That means she's special." He paused, then smirked. "Or you are."

"I just need to know where they took her," I said.

He tapped his fingers on the table, considering. "Information isn't free, kid."

"I don't have credits," I admitted. "But I have something better. I know about the disappearances."

His expression didn't change, but I could tell I had his attention.

"Everyone knows people go missing," he said.

"But not everyone knows why," I countered. "I do."

A long silence stretched between us. Then, finally, Gideon sighed. "Fine. I'll tell you what I know. But if you get yourself killed, I don't know you."

"Fair deal."

Gideon pulled up a holographic display from his cybernetic eye, data flickering in midair. "Orion has a black site. Off-grid. It's where they take people who don't fit the system. You'll find your girl there."

"Where is it?"

He smirked. "That's the problem. It moves."

I frowned. "What do you mean, it moves?"

"It's not a building. It's a train. A mobile research facility. They keep it off the grid, always on the move. It never stops in the same place twice."

My stomach sank, a moving facility? How the hell was I supposed to find that?

"How do I track it?"

Gideon leaned in. "That's the million-credit question, isn't it? There's a hacker, a real old-school, pre-Orion era. Calls herself Wraith. She's the only one who's ever cracked Orion's security. Find her, and she might be able to get you a location."

"Where do I find her?"

Gideon grinned. "That's the fun part. She finds you."

I left The Hollow with more questions than answers, but at least now I had a lead. Find Wraith. Find the girl. Expose Orion. Simple enough, right?

I wasn't an idiot. This was a death sentence. But what choice did I have?

As I stepped back onto the streets of the Undercity, I felt it again, that cold, creeping sensation at the back of my neck. Someone was watching me.

I turned, scanning the crowd, there was nothing. No enforcers or drones. Just people.

But I knew better. I pulled my hood lower and started race walking. I had taken the first step into something much bigger than me but I was running out of time.

I didn't sleep again. Not that it mattered. Sleep was a privilege like I said earlier, a thing of the past. Something that belonged to people who weren't being hunted. People who could afford the safety of locked doors and security systems. Me? I had none of that. Just a hood, a heartbeat, and a growing sense of dread that I was already too late.

The girl whoever she was was out there, somewhere, trapped in a moving prison that didn't exist on any map. If Gideon was right, the only person who could help me track it was Wraith. But how do you find someone who finds me?

I spent the morning searching. Asking around. Keeping my voice low, my eyes lower. The Undercity was full of whispers, but none of them led anywhere. No one knew where to find Wraith and if they did, they weren't telling me.

By midday, I was out of options. I needed a new plan. So I did something stupid. I walked straight into an Orion surveillance zone.

It was reckless, borderline suicidal, but if Wraith was really a hacker, the best hacker then Orion had to be watching for her. If I could trip their system, if I could bait them, then maybe, just maybe, she'd notice me or I'd get myself killed. Either way, at least I'd stop running in circles.

I stepped onto the main street of Sector 12, where every traffic light, every sign, every store was connected to Orion's citywide surveillance. My heart pounded as I passed under the first camera, knowing that right now, somewhere, an enforcer's screen had just lit up with my face.

I didn't stop walking, I walked like I belonged there. Like I wasn't the last natural human in NeoEden. Like I wasn't the only person in this entire city who couldn't be tracked through an implant.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a stolen Orion datapad, an old model, something I'd swiped from a careless technician a few months back. It was worthless to me. Locked behind security protocols I couldn't crack.

But Wraith could, I held it up in front of the nearest scanner, just long enough for Orion's system to see me.

Then I ran, I didn't make it far. It was fifteen seconds or maybe twenty. Suddenly my vision glitched.

For a split second everything around the people, buildings, streets flickered. Like reality had just stuttered.

And then, my datapad screen lit up. New message received.

I skidded to a stop in a side alley, ducking behind a rusted-out supply crate. My fingers shook as I opened the message.

It was a single line of text.

"You have five minutes. Dock 42."

Wraith had found me.

Dock 42 was on the outskirts of the Undercity, a forgotten section of NeoEden where shipments came and went under the radar. No cameras or enforcers. Just rusted metal and shadows.

When I got there, the place looked abandoned.

I took a cautious step forward, my boots scraping against the cracked pavement.
"Wraith?"

I was about to turn back when a hologram flared to life in front of me.

A hooded figure, face completely hidden behind a shifting mass of static.

"You're either brave or stupid," the voice said. It was distorted, genderless, synthetic.

I swallowed hard. "I need your help."

A short laugh. "Everyone does. Why should I care?"

I took a deep breath. "Because Orion took a girl. A natural. And they're keeping her on a moving black site. A train and i need to find it."

"Interesting," Wraith murmured. "They don't usually make mistakes like that. A public grab? Either she's important... or you are."

I clenched my fists. "Can you track the train or not?"

Wraith didn't answer right away. Instead, they lifted a hand, fingers flicking through invisible data streams. Lines of code flared around them, twisting and shifting in midair.

Then, after what felt like forever, Wraith finally spoke.

"I can find it," they said. "But it won't be easy. Orion moves this train on a randomized schedule, changing tracks every few hours. There's only one way to pinpoint its location in real-time."

I leaned forward. "How?"

"You break into Orion's central database and steal the tracking algorithm."

My stomach dropped. "That's suicide."

"Probably," Wraith said. "But isn't that what you signed up for, what you want?"

I exhaled slowly. "Where's the database?"

"Sector 3," Wraith replied. "The heart of Orion's empire. Security tighter than a vault. But I can get you inside."

I frowned. "Why help me?"

Another pause. Then, Wraith's voice softened—just barely.

"Because," they said, "you're not the only one who wants to burn Orion to the ground."

For the first time in days, I felt a bit hopeful

The plan was insane. Break into Orion's main server. Steal the train's location data. Get out alive. But I didn't have a choice.

As I turned to leave, Wraith's voice echoed behind me.

"Jimmy," they said.

I froze, I had never told them my name.

I turned back slowly. "How do you..."

"Orion isn't the only one watching you," Wraith said. "Be careful."

Then, just like that, the hologram vanished.

The moment Wraith's hologram vanished, I took off, my mind racing faster than my feet. Orion's central database, the heart of their empire was my only way to track the train and find the girl. But breaking into Sector 3 was suicide. I knew it and Wraith knew it. The entire city probably knew it but I didn't care.

For the first time since this nightmare began, I had a plan. A real chance at cracking the truth wide open.

And if I died trying, At least I'd die knowing I did something.

Sector 3 wasn't like the Undercity. It wasn't rusted metal and flickering neon. It was clean, too clean. The glass towers stretched high into the night sky, glowing with artificial perfection. Every building was sleek, every street was polished and every person who walked through this place had the same cold, mechanical stare of someone who had long since traded their soul for an upgrade.

I was the only natural here. And I stuck out like a sore thumb. If I got caught they'd be no trial or warning, i'd just be erased.

The city hummed with the sound of electric vehicles, drones scanning the streets. I kept my hood low, moving through the crowd, heart pounding. Wraith had uploaded a map of the Orion facility to my datapad. The entrance was heavily guarded, there was security everywhere.

Wraith had sent me coordinates for a maintenance tunnel that ran beneath the building. It was my best shot. I reached the alleyway near the entrance, checked twice for cameras, then slipped inside.

The tunnel was tight, damp, and pitch black. Pipes lined the walls, leaking steam. The deeper I went, the more my nerves twisted into knots.

Then I saw a heavy metal grate, bolted shut. The only thing between me and Orion's central servers.

I reached into my jacket and pulled out the device Wraith had given me, a lock disruptor. It wasn't perfect, but it would buy me time. I pressed it against the lock and held my breath.

The bolt clicked open. My pulse thundered as I lifted the gate and climbed inside. The server room was colder than I expected.

Rows of massive, humming machines stretched in every direction, blinking with endless streams of data. Orion's entire system was here. If there was a secret to uncover, it was buried somewhere in these machines.

I pulled out my datapad, connecting it to the nearest server. Wraith's virus uploaded in seconds, tearing through Orion's firewalls like they were paper.

Then, the files appeared, it was lines of classified data scrolled across my screen.

I skimmed through them, heart pounding, searching for anything on the train. Anything about the girl, then I found it.

A file labeled "Project Eden". I opened it and what I saw made my blood run cold. The train wasn't just transporting one girl. It was transporting hundreds of people.

I saw names, birthdates that all natural humans.

They weren't being taken to a prison or a lab. They were being taken to a facility beneath NeoEden, one I had never heard of. It wasn't an experiment, it was infect a purge.

Orion wasn't just controlling the population with cybernetics. They were systematically erasing natural-born humans from existence and I was next.

I barely had time to process it before the alarms started blaring. I looked up. Security lights flashed red. They knew I was here. I ripped the datapad free and ran, heart hammering. The entrance was too far. The tunnel? I'd never make it back in time.

I needed another way out. I turned to a corner and nearly crashed into a glass window overlooking the city. A rooftop access door stood a few feet away.

I heard boots pounding behind me. Voices barking orders. I ran for the door, burst through it and found myself standing on the edge of a skyscraper.

The wind howled. The streets of NeoEden sprawled below me, impossibly far down. There was nowhere left to run.

Then, a hovercraft roared into view. It was sleek and fast, it was piloted by Wraith.

The side door slid open, and I saw their hooded figure in the cockpit, motioning for me to jump.

I didn't have a choice, I ran and leaped and for a second, I was weightless.

I crashed onto the hovercraft's floor, rolling hard as Wraith yanked the controls, sending us barreling into the sky just as bullets tore through the air behind us.

We shot into the darkness, leaving Orion's security in the dust. For a long moment, neither of us spoke.

Then, Wraith finally turned to me. "What did you find?"

I swallowed hard, gripping the datapad. "They're not just taking people." I looked up, my voice shaking. "They're wiping us out."

Wraith didn't flinch. "Then it's worse than I thought."

I stared at them. "You knew?"

Wraith exhaled. "I suspected."

I clenched my fists. "We have to stop them."

A beat of silence, then, Wraith nodded.

"We will," they said. "But first, we get the girl." I looked out over the city.

NeoEden wasn't a home, it was a graveyard waiting to happen. And as long as I was breathing, I wasn't going to let it happen. Not without a fight.

The Haunted Classroom

Harry and Angelina stood at the edge of Whiteville High School, looking up at the crumbling structure. The building had been around for decades, its brick walls cracked from years of weathering, and the windows were dusty and fogged. Despite its age, the school had a certain charm about it, with its sprawling courtyard and the occasional glimpse of students wandering between classes. However, it was the stories that had been circulating about Room 303 that brought the two paranormal investigators here.

For weeks, rumors had been buzzing through the halls of Whiteville High. Students about strange occurrences, whispers in the middle of the night, objects flying across the room, and a chilling cold that seemed to settle in the air when the clock struck midnight. But the most unsettling story was about the figure that appeared behind the teacher's desk, always watching, but never speaking. Some claimed it was the ghost of Mrs. Simmons, the teacher who had mysteriously vanished years ago. Others believed it was the spirit of a student who had met a tragic end in the classroom. Whatever the cause, the school had officially labeled Room 303 as the "haunted" classroom, and word had spread quickly.

Harry, the more skeptical of the two, wasn't so easily convinced. He'd spent years investigating the paranormal, and in his experience, most so-called hauntings were nothing more than fabrications or overactive imaginations. His partner, Angelina, however, was a true believer. Her eyes sparkled whenever the subject of ghosts came up, and she was always eager to jump headfirst into the unknown. Together, they made an unlikely team, Harry the rational skeptic one and Angelina, the dreamer with an unwavering belief in the supernatural.

"Alright, let's get this over with," Harry muttered, adjusting his equipment bag. "But I'll bet you ten bucks there's a perfectly logical explanation for everything."

Angelina smiled at him, her eyes gleaming with excitement. "We'll see about that. Just remember, you owe me ten bucks if we find something truly spooky."

As they made their way inside, the school felt empty. The hallway was silent, except for the soft echoes of their footsteps. The air seemed heavy, as if the building itself was holding its breath. They reached Room 303, and as they stood before the door,

Harry couldn't help but feel a strange sense of unease. It wasn't that he believed in ghosts, but there was something unsettling about the way the door creaked open when they pushed it.

Inside, the classroom was just as they had expected, old wooden desks, a chalkboard covered in faded writing, and rows of empty chairs. A musty smell was in the air, and the walls were adorned with decades-old posters of historical figures and scientific equations. Nothing about the room screamed "haunted," but there was an odd energy to the space, something Harry couldn't quite place.

"This is it," Angelina whispered, pulling out a small handheld camera. "Let's set up our equipment."

They began unpacking their gear—cameras, EMF detectors, infrared thermometers, and microphones. The room felt cold, but that was to be expected in a place as old as this. Harry, ever the skeptic, began inspecting the area methodically, checking the windows for drafts and the lights for any electrical issues that might explain the strange occurrences.

Angelina, on the other hand, had already set up a camera near the front of the room, facing the chalkboard. She could feel the hairs on the back of her neck standing up as she glanced around. There was something off about this room, something that tugged at the edges of her intuition. She wasn't sure what it was, but she had a feeling that tonight, they were going to witness something extraordinary.

"Let's start by trying to communicate," she said, turning to Harry. "I've read about using EVP (electronic voice phenomena) sessions in places like this. Maybe we can get a response."

Harry sighed but nodded. He had heard of EVP sessions before, and although he was dubious, he figured it wouldn't hurt to give it a try. They turned off the lights and sat in the darkness, the only sound being the quiet hum of their equipment.

"Is anyone here?" Angelina asked softly into the microphone. "Can you speak to us?"

They waited in silence, the seconds stretching into minutes. Harry sat with his arms crossed, watching the room closely. Nothing. Not a sound. He was about to speak

when a sudden chill swept through the room, sending a shiver down his spine. The temperature had dropped significantly in the last few minutes, and his breath was visible in the air.

Angelina noticed it too. "Did you feel that?" she whispered.

Harry nodded, his skepticism wavering just a little. He glanced at the EMF detector, which was now flickering with spikes of activity. Something was definitely off.

"Maybe we're getting something," Angelina said, her voice filled with a mix of excitement and nervousness. "Let's try again."

She repeated her question, but this time, the silence was interrupted by a soft whisper, barely audible. It was faint, like a murmur in the wind, but it was there. Harry's eyes widened as he leaned closer to the equipment. The voice was indecipherable, but the hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

"What was that?" he asked, his voice low.

Angelina's heart raced as she pressed her ear closer to the recorder. "I don't know... but I think we need to check the camera footage. Maybe we caught something."

They both gathered around the camera, watching the screen closely. At first, there was nothing unusual. But as they rewound the footage, they saw it. A faint shape appeared in the corner of the room, a shadowy figure standing still, almost invisible at first. The figure grew clearer, but just as quickly as it appeared, it vanished. The room was empty again.

"That's... that's impossible," Harry said, his voice strained. He had seen plenty of things in his time as an investigator, but this—this was different. The figure had looked too real, too solid to be a mere trick of the light.

"Let's check the rest of the room," Angelina suggested, her voice barely a whisper. "There's got to be more evidence."

They moved cautiously through the room, scanning every corner. But as they approached the teacher's desk, a loud bang echoed through the space. Both of them jumped, and Harry's flashlight flickered.

"Did you hear that?" Harry asked, his voice shaky now.

Before Angelina could respond, the desk drawer flew open by itself, scattering papers across the room. The noise was deafening, and for a moment, neither of them could move. Then, as quickly as it had started, everything stopped.

They stared at each other, wide-eyed, both too stunned to speak. The room was as still as it had been when they first entered.

"Alright," Harry said finally, breaking the silence. "I'm willing to admit something's going on here, but I still don't think it's a ghost. Maybe there's a more logical explanation. Something's triggering all of this."

Angelina nodded, but her expression remained uncertain. "I think you're right. But it still feels... different. Too real."

They continued their investigation for another hour, but the strange occurrences seemed to have subsided. Just as they were about to pack up, they heard footsteps outside the door. The door creaked open slowly, and to their surprise, Principal Davis entered the room.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," Principal Davis said, looking concerned. "I couldn't help but overhear some of the noises from down the hall. I assume you're investigating the supposed haunting?"

Harry and Angelina nodded, still in disbelief from what they had witnessed.

"We've seen some strange things," Angelina said, her voice low. "Figures, strange sounds... It's like the room is alive."

Principal Davis' expression softened. "Ah, I see. You should've came to me before starting your investigation." He paused, glancing around the room. "This room was equipped with a state-of-the-art hologram projector as part of an experimental project to enhance the students' learning experience. Some of the devices still trigger automatically, especially when the room is empty for too long."

Harry and Angelina exchanged a look. "Holograms?" Harry asked incredulously. "So, everything we saw... it was just projections?"

The principal nodded, a slight smile tugging at his lips. "Yes. Everything. We've had a few students prank each other with it over the years, but I suppose you two have experienced it firsthand."

The realization hit them both at once, there had been no ghosts, no spirits, just a malfunctioning hologram system. They had spent hours investigating something that wasn't even real.

"Well, that explains a lot," Harry said, rubbing his forehead. "And here I thought we were dealing with something truly paranormal."

Angelina chuckled softly. "I guess the ghosts were all just projections after all."

They packed up their equipment, a mix of disappointment and relief settling over them. The haunting of Room 303 wasn't what they had expected, but it was certainly a mystery they would never forget.

Chasing Matilda

Cedric had only been in Luminaria for a few months, but the city already felt like an extension of his loneliness. The tall buildings, the flashing streetlights, the endless shuffle of hurried people, it was all a blur, an unfeeling, mechanical existence that swallowed him whole.

He had come here for work, for opportunity, for something new, but so far, it had been nothing but long days at the office and even longer nights spent alone in his tiny flat.

The train was the one constant in his life. Every evening at exactly 6:37 PM, he would board the Silver Line, slide into his usual window seat, and watch the world pass by in smudged reflections against the glass. The familiar screech of the brakes, the muffled voices, the rhythmic clatter of metal on metal, these were the sounds of routine, of predictability. He had stopped expecting anything remarkable to happen.

Until one evening, it did. A young lady sat beside him at the Holloway Street stop, slipping into the seat with the kind of quiet confidence that turned heads without meaning to. Her name was Matilda.

He wouldn't learn her name until later, but even before she spoke, there was something about her that made him sit up a little straighter, as if the air had shifted around them. She smelled faintly of vanilla and rain, and when she glanced at him with deep brown eyes, he felt a flicker of nervous energy in his chest.

"Mind if I sit?" she asked, already settling in. Her voice had a soft lilt to it, warm and unhurried.

"Not at all," Cedric replied, forcing himself to sound normal.

The train jolted forward, and for a few minutes, neither of them spoke. She pulled out a small notebook, flipping through pages filled with messy handwriting, her fingers idly tapping against the edge of the seat. Cedric, despite himself, kept stealing glances, trying to catch a word or two. It wasn't nosiness, not really. It was just... curiosity.

"You could just ask," she said suddenly, her lips twitching in amusement.

Cedric blinked. "Ask what?"

"What I'm writing about."

He was caught red-handed, he then let out a small, sheepish chuckle. "Alright then, what are you writing about?"

She closed the notebook, tucking it into her bag. "People," she said simply.

Cedric raised an eyebrow. "People?"

She nodded, looking around the train. "Everyone has a story. Most people go through life never realizing they're the main character in their own little world. I like imagining what those stories might be."

He found himself smiling. "Alright then, what's my story?"

Matilda studied him for a second, tilting her head as if considering. Then, with a small, knowing smirk, she said, "You just moved here. You work too much. You don't go out much, and you pretend you like living in the city, but deep down, you miss something quieter." Cedric stared at her, genuinely taken aback.

"Am I wrong?" she asked.

"No," he admitted, shaking his head in disbelief. "How did you...?"

She shrugged. "Lucky guess."

But Cedric didn't believe in luck, not really. There was something about her, something observant, intuitive. He wanted to keep talking, wanted to know more about the way her mind worked, wanted to hear more of these little theories she had about the world.

So they talked. About nothing and everything. About how Luminaria was too big yet too lonely, about the best coffee shop she had ever been to, about how Cedric still couldn't figure out how to properly fold a fitted sheet.

It was easy, effortless, as if they had known each other for years. The train rattled on, station after station, and yet neither of them seemed in a hurry to leave.

But then, just as they were passing Maple Square, Matilda glanced at the window and let out a quiet curse.

"This is my stop," she said, grabbing her bag.

Cedric's stomach dropped. "Already?"

He should've asked for her number, should've at least asked her full name, but the words stuck in his throat. And then, before he could say anything or stop her, she was gone.

He sat there for a moment, staring at the empty seat next to him, the warmth of their conversation still lingering in the air.

Cedric never realized how quickly someone could become an absence in his life. One minute, she had been right there beside him, filling the space with her words, her laugh, her way of seeing the world. And then, just like that, she was gone. He had never asked for her number, not even her last name. Just Matilda.

It was absurd, how much he thought about her over the next few days. He replayed their conversation in his mind, dissecting every little moment, every word. He tried to remember every detail, the way she had tucked her hair behind her ear when she was thinking, the way she had smiled when he laughed, the way her notebook had looked so worn, so full of stories.

And now, she was just another stranger lost in the city but Cedric wasn't ready to let it go. He couldn't and for the first time since moving to Luminaria, he had something to look forward to.

The next day, Cedric boarded the Silver Line at exactly 6:37 PM, sliding into his usual window seat. He kept his eyes on the doors, his heart thudding in his chest every time someone stepped inside.

But Matilda never appeared. The next evening, he tried again. And then the next but she never showed.

He told himself he was being ridiculous. People meet on trains every day. They don't go searching for each other afterward. But there was something about the way she had looked at him, as if she had seen through him in a way no one else had. She had made him feel like a person again, not just another cog in the machine of the city.

So he searched for her. He started paying more attention at Maple Square, the station where she had gotten off. On the fourth day, he even got off there himself, wandering the surrounding streets, looking for anything that felt like her.

He stopped at a small bookshop, thinking maybe she'd be the type to browse old novels with pages yellowed from time. He walked into a coffee shop, hoping maybe he'd spot her with a cup of tea, scribbling in her notebook but he had no luck.

By the end of the week, Cedric had to admit the truth that he might never see her again. And yet, even as that realization settled in his chest, something inside him refused to believe it.

Weeks passed by and the city moved forward, indifferent to Cedric's quiet longing.

Work demanded his attention, filling his days with meetings and emails and the endless hum of office chatter. But at night, when he boarded the train, he still searched for her, until one evening.

It had been nearly three weeks since that first encounter. Cedric had finished work late, barely catching the last evening train before it shut down for the night. He wasn't expecting anything. He had almost stopped looking.

And then just as the train was about to depart Matilda stepped inside. She was standing near the door, looking around as if searching for something or someone. Cedric's heart leapt to his throat.

He stood too quickly, nearly knocking into the person beside him. He didn't care. He had found her or maybe it was the other way round.

But before he could call out to her, before he could even move toward her, the train lurched forward and she disappeared into the crowd of passengers, swallowed by the rush of people finding their seats.

Cedric's pulse pounded as he weaved through the train car, his gaze darting between the rows of passengers.

She had to be here, he said to himself as he reached the next section of the train, breathless, scanning the faces. He couldn't find her.

Was he imagining it, he thought to himself. Had he only thought he saw her because he wanted to so badly? Then just doubt was about to creep in, he spotted her notebook.

It was tucked under the arm of a girl sitting near the window, her back turned toward him. Cedric took a deep breath. And then, hesitantly, he stepped forward. "Matilda?"

For a split second, Cedric was afraid she wouldn't turn around. That maybe he'd made a mistake, that maybe this wasn't Matilda at all, just someone with a similar notebook, sitting in a similar posture, wrapped up in her own world. But then she slowly turned.

For a brief moment, she just stared at him, her expression unreadable. And then, as if a switch had flipped, her face broke into a smile.

"Cedric?"

He let out a breath he hadn't even realized he was holding. "I thought I'd never see you again."

She tilted her head slightly, a hint of amusement in her eyes. "Funny, I was thinking the same thing."

There was an awkwardness to the way they looked at each other now, different from their first meeting, when everything had been spontaneous and unfiltered. Now, there was expectation. Now, he had spent weeks thinking about her, imagining what he might say if he ever saw her again.

And yet, standing here, he realized he hadn't prepared for this moment at all. The train jolted slightly, making Cedric stumble forward. Matilda laughed softly, moving her bag from the seat beside her.

"Sit down" she said. "Before you knock someone over."

Cedric didn't hesitate. He slid into the seat beside her, closer than before, close enough that he could feel the warmth of her presence.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The silence wasn't uncomfortable.

"So," she finally said, tapping a finger against the cover of her notebook. "You were looking for me."

Cedric rubbed the back of his neck, feeling strangely exposed. "I... yeah. I guess I was."

Matilda studied him, her dark eyes thoughtful. "That's either very sweet or very concerning."

He chuckled. "Let's go with sweet."

She smiled again, but this time, it was softer.

Cedric took a breath. "I kept taking the same train. I even got off at Maple Square a few times, thinking I'd run into you."

"You got off at my stop?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

He shrugged. "I had a feeling you might be around. I went into a coffee shop, a bookshop. Just places I thought you might go."

Matilda laughed, shaking her head. "You really are something else, Cedric." She laughed.

"Well," he said, smiling, "you did say I should have asked for your number."

She sighed dramatically. "I did say that, didn't I?" There was something playful in her voice, but also something undeniably real.

Cedric hesitated, then nodded toward her notebook. "Still writing?"

"Always." She glanced down at the worn cover. "And you? Still navigating life in the big city?"

"Trying to," he admitted. "Though lately, it feels like I've been navigating something else entirely."

She looked at him then, and there was something unspoken in the air between them.

The train began to slow, the overhead speaker crackling to life.

"Next stop: Maple Square."

Cedric knew it was Matilda's stop.

She sighed, closing her notebook and slipping it into her bag. "Well, this is me."

Cedric felt a quiet panic rising in his chest. He had spent weeks searching for her, and now, she was about to disappear again.

"Matilda, uh..."

She paused, her hand gripping the pole near her seat.

He hesitated, then finally asked, "Would you let me buy you a coffee?"

She didn't respond right away. For a second, Cedric thought maybe she'd say no. Maybe she'd smile politely and step off the train and he'd never see her again.

But then she pulled out a pen, grabbed his hand, and scribbled her number.

When she met his eyes again, she was smirking. "Took you long enough."

And with that, she was gone. Cedric sat back in his seat, looking down at the ink on his hand, a slow grin spreading across his face.

Cedric could still feel the warmth of her presence, even though Matilda had stepped off the train. He stared at his palm, at the inked numbers that felt like proof that this wasn't a dream. He hadn't made her up in his mind; she was real, and now so was his chance.

He traced over the digits with his thumb, almost afraid they might disappear. It was funny, really. He had imagined a million ways their reunion might happen. But he had never pictured it being so... easy. As if the universe had finally stopped playing games with him and decided, "Alright, mate, here you go. Try not to mess this up."

The train doors shut, and the world outside blurred into motion again. But Cedric's world had stopped for a moment.

Then, with a deep breath, he pulled out his phone and, before he could overthink it, typed the number in and sent a message.

> Cedric: "I think I was supposed to ask for your number myself. You've saved me from my own bad decisions."

He hit send and waited for what seemed like an eternity. Then, just as the doubt began creeping in she typed back.

> Matilda: "I had a feeling you'd be too distracted overanalyzing my words to actually do it yourself. Thought I'd save us both some trouble."

He grinned.

> Cedric: "I promise I'm not usually this hopeless."

> Matilda: "I'm not convinced yet. You'll have to prove it."

> Cedric: "How about over that coffee?"

> Matilda: "Tomorrow, 10 AM. Bella's Café, near Maple Square."

> Cedric: "See you then."

He exhaled, his body finally relaxing against the seat. Tomorrow couldn't come soon enough.

Cedric arrived early. Way too early. It wasn't like him. He was usually the kind of person who cut things close, who rushed out the door with seconds to spare. But today, he had woken up, stared at the ceiling for a good ten minutes, then jumped out of bed like a man on a mission.

Now, he was sitting at a small table near the window, pretending to look casual while overanalyzing every single person who walked past.

Bella's Café was charming in a way most places in Luminaria weren't. It wasn't polished and modern like the chain coffee shops scattered across the city. It had a warmth to it, worn wooden tables, the scent of fresh pastries in the air, a small chalkboard near the counter with the day's specials written in slightly smudged handwriting.

Matilda walked in wearing a dark green coat, scarf wrapped loosely around her neck, a book tucked under her arm. She scanned the café, eyes landing on him almost immediately and she smiled.

"Didn't make you wait long, did I?" she asked, sitting across from him.

Cedric smirked. "Not at all. I've only been here an hour."

Matilda laughed. "An hour? I'm flattered."

The waitress appeared before he could reply.

"Tea?" Matilda asked, looking at him expectantly.

Cedric nodded, though he'd normally just grab a coffee. He liked the idea of matching her pace, sharing her routine.

When their orders were placed, she leaned forward, resting her chin on her hand. "So, Cedric-from-the-train. What exactly did you think would happen when you chased after me?"

He chuckled. "I wasn't really thinking. I just..." He paused, considering his words. "You ever meet someone and just... feel like you were supposed to?"

Matilda tilted her head slightly, considering this.

"I guess I don't think about things that way," she said. "I believe people come and go. Some stay longer, some don't. But nothing is ever really... meant to be."

Cedric took a sip of his tea, watching her. "And yet, here we are."

She exhaled a soft laugh. "Here we are."

Their drinks arrived. Steam curled into the air between them, mixing with the scent of cinnamon and fresh pastries.

Cedric traced the rim of his cup with his fingers. "I meant what I said, by the way. About looking for you. I know it probably sounds crazy, but I just couldn't shake the feeling that I wasn't supposed to let you slip away." Matilda studied him for a long moment.

"You know," she said finally, "most people don't actually follow their instincts like that. They let things go too easily. They assume they'll get another chance. But life doesn't always work that way."

He nodded. "Exactly. That's why I kept looking. Because if I didn't, I'd always wonder what if."

She took a slow sip of her tea, eyes still locked on his.

"You're quite the romantic, aren't you?" she teased.

Cedric shrugged. "I prefer to think of myself as an optimist."

Matilda smiled into her cup. "Optimist. Romantic. Same thing, really."

For a while, they just talked. About books, music, places they'd been, places they wanted to go.

She told him about her writing, about how she filled pages with fragments of thoughts that might never turn into stories. He told her about moving to Luminaria, about how he was still trying to find his place in the city.

And somewhere between the laughter, the teasing, and the shared glances over the rim of their cups, something fell into place.

Not in a grand, dramatic way. Not like the movies where the music swells and everything slows down. No, this was quieter it was like two puzzle pieces clicking together. Like something that had always been there, waiting to be noticed.

After they left the café, neither of them seemed eager to part ways, so they just walked and talked.

Through the narrow streets of Luminaria, past small bookstores, hidden alleyways, street musicians playing for coins.

It was the kind of morning that made the city feel alive.

"I never actually asked," Cedric said as they strolled past a bakery, the scent of fresh bread filling the air. "Why were you on the train that day?"

Matilda glanced at him, a hint of mystery in her smile. "Would you believe me if I said I was just wandering?"

Cedric raised an eyebrow. "So you just get on random trains for fun?"

"Sometimes." She shrugged. "I like seeing where I end up. No destination, no expectations. Just the journey."

Cedric chuckled. "That's... oddly poetic."

She grinned. "Well, I am a writer."

They walked in comfortable silence for a while. Then Matilda stopped, turning to face him.

"You know," she said, "I think I'm glad you chased after me."

Cedric's heart stumbled over itself.

He smiled. "Me too."

The sun was warmer now, brighter or maybe it was just her. Either way, Cedric knew one thing for certain, he wasn't letting her disappear again.

Run till dawn

The plan was simple. Get in, grab the cash and get out. No one gets hurt.

That's what Vinnie had said, over and over, like some kind of prayer. And like a damn fool, i believed him. I should've known Vinnie wasn't the type to follow plans. But there I was, standing beside him in the convenience store, gun in hand.

The store was empty except for the cashier, a guy in his mid-fifties with thick glasses and a paunch stretching the front of his red uniform shirt. He was exactly the kind of person we hoped for, someone that wouldn't fight back, someone who'd just do as he was told and let us walk out of here with the money. The fluorescent lights buzzed above us, casting everything in a ugly, sterile glow. A small TV was mounted in the corner, a local news anchor droning on about the heatwave sweeping the city.

Vinnie moved first, his boots thudding against the tile as he strode to the counter. "Open the register," he yelled, pulling his gun from the waistband of his jeans.

The cashier froze, his eyes darting between us. His mouth opened and closed like a fish gasping for air.

"Did you not hear me?" Vinnie slammed his free hand on the counter, making the guy flinch. "I said open the goddamn register!"

I shifted on my feet, my own gun feeling heavier by the second. My gut twisted. This was supposed to be quick, in and out. But me knowing Vinnie, he liked the power and control. He fed off the fear. I could see it in his eyes now, the way they glowed like something wild and dangerous.

The cashier fumbled with the register, his fingers trembling as he punched in the code. The drawer popped open with a soft chime, stacks of bills neatly arranged inside.

Vinnie grinned. "See? That wasn't so hard, was it?"

I stepped forward, my heart hammering as I shoved the canvas bag onto the counter. "Hurry up. Put the cash in the bag."

The guy nodded quickly, stuffing handfuls of bills inside. My palms were slick with sweat. We were so close. A few more seconds and we'd be out of here, tearing down the highway before anyone even knew what had happened.

The cashier started to hesitate, his hand dipping just beneath the counter. I saw the motion a split second before Vinnie did.

"He...he...hey...hey" I started, but Vinnie was faster. Then BANG!!!

The gunshot cracked through the store, deafening in the confined space. The cashier's body jerked backward, his glasses flying off his face as he crumpled to the floor. Blood pooled beneath him, dark and thick, seeping into the cheap linoleum.

Everything went silent. No buzzing lights, no humming refrigerators. Just the sound of my own ragged breathing and the high-pitched ringing in my ears.

I turned to Vinnie, my chest tight with panic. "What the hell did you do and why the hell did you do it?!"

Vinnie shrugged, blowing a wisp of smoke from the barrel of his gun. "He was reaching for something."

"He was scared!" My voice cracked, my hands shaking. "Jesus, Vinnie, he was just scared!"

Vinnie rolled his eyes. "Relax. Let's go."

I wanted to scream. Wanted to grab him by the collar and shake him, make him see what he'd just done. But there wasn't time for that. I could already hear a car pulling up. There were sounds of footsteps on pavement. I'm sure it was witness or someone who'd heard the shot.

I snatched the bag off the counter, my legs moving on instinct. "Let's go. Now."

Vinnie didn't need to be told twice. We bolted for the exit, shoving through the glass doors and into the humid night. The street was empty except for a single sedan parked by the curb, its headlights off, engine idling.

Vinnie yanked open the driver's side door and slid in. I barely had time to jump into the passenger seat before he floored it, the tires screeching against the asphalt as we tore down the road.

The city blurred past in streaks of neon and shadow. I gripped the dashboard, my pulse hammering against my ribs.

"You didn't have to shoot him," I muttered, staring out the window, my mind reeling.

Vinnie scoffed. "You saw him, man. He was gonna pull a gun or call the cops through some kind of button or somethin'."

"You don't know that."

He shot me a look. "Yeah? And if he had? What then? We'd be the ones on the floor bleeding out or possibly in jail" He snorted, shaking his head. "You're too soft, Derek. That's your problem."

I clenched my fists, biting back the words burning in my throat. Vinnie wouldn't listen. He never listened.

The bag of money sat between us, the crumpled bills peeking out from the opening. Blood money. Dirty money. Money that was supposed to set us free, but now it felt like a curse. We turned onto the highway, the city lights shrinking in the rearview mirror.

The road stretched ahead, dark and empty, swallowed by the thick night. The city lights faded behind us, their neon glow disappearing in the rearview mirror. Vinnie had one hand on the wheel, the other tapping anxiously against his knee.

I kept replaying the moment in my head, the gunshot, the way the cashier's body jerked, the sickening silence that followed. I could still smell the gunpowder, feel the weight of the air as life drained out of that poor guy. I shouldn't have let Vinnie pull me into this.

"You gotta let it go, man," Vinnie said, his voice cutting through the quiet. "What's done is done."

I clenched my jaw. "You didn't have to kill him."

"He was reaching for something, Derek," he shot back, gripping the wheel tighter. "I ain't about to sit around and get shot over a couple stacks of cash. You think this is a game?"

I turned to him. "No, Vinnie. I don't think this is a game but I don't remember signing up for murder."

Vinnie exhaled sharply and shook his head. "You're soft, man."

Maybe I was. Maybe I still had too much of a conscience left for this kind of life. I thought I could handle the adrenaline, the rush of doing something dangerous. But this? This was different. This wasn't just a robbery anymore. We were murderers. Or at least he was and I was riding along with him.

I stared out the window as we sped down the highway, the night air thick with the scent of asphalt and pine. We had to keep moving. We had to get as far away from that convenience store as possible before someone pieced together what had happened.

A mile marker zipped past. We were heading north, toward the backroads that wound through dense patches of forest. It was the fastest way out of town without hitting any major checkpoints but the plan wasn't foolproof. If someone had seen us leaving the store or got the plates, we were screwed.

I checked the speedometer. "Slow down. We don't want to get pulled over."

Vinnie scoffed but eased his foot off the gas, the needle dipping just below seventy.

We drove in silence for a while, the tension stretching between us. The only sounds were the hum of the tires against the pavement and the occasional rustling of the money filled in the bag sitting between us.

Suddenly from behind us, I saw red and blue lights flashing in the distance.

"Shit," I muttered, twisting in my seat.

Vinnie caught it too, his knuckles turning white against the wheel. "You think it's for us?"

I didn't answer. I didn't have to. We both knew it. The lights grew brighter, cutting through the darkness and they were closing in fast.

"Just stay calm," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "Maybe they're not after us. Maybe it's something else."

But then the siren wailed there was no more time guessing, no more hoping. They were coming for us.

"Hold on," Vinnie muttered, his jaw tight as he slammed his foot down on the gas.

The tires screeched against the road as we shot forward, the car lurching under the sudden speed. Trees blurred past, the road twisting ahead in sharp turns that made my stomach flip. The patrol car stayed right on our tail.

"This is bad, Vinnie!" I shouted, gripping the dashboard. "We can't outrun them!"

"Watch me," he growled.

The highway dipped, curving sharply into a wooded stretch with no streetlights, only the glow of our own headlights cutting through the darkness. The patrol car stuck to us, refusing to give up.

Up ahead there were another set of flashing lights. It was roadblock.

"Vinnie, stop the damn car!"

"Not a chance!"

I barely had time to brace myself before he yanked the wheel hard to the right, veering off the main road and onto a dirt path leading into the woods. The car jolted violently as we hit uneven ground, the tires kicking up dust and gravel.

Branches scraped against the sides of the car, the headlights bouncing wildly with every bump and dip. The sirens faded behind us, but I knew it wouldn't be for long

before they start following us again. They'd bring more of them. I knew that we weren't safe.

"Where the hell are you going?!" I shouted.

"Somewhere they can't follow!"

The dirt road narrowed, turning into something barely recognizable as a path. The car struggled, tires slipping over patches of mud and exposed roots. Vinnie fought the wheel, sweat beading at his temple.

We almost hit a massive fallen tree sprawled across the path like a barricade. Vinnie cursed and slammed the brakes. The car skidded to a halt, throwing us forward in our seats. The bag of cash spilled onto the floor, crumpled bills scattering everywhere.

We sat there for a second, breathing hard, listening to the silence of the woods. There was still no sound of the sirens.

Vinnie slammed his fist against the wheel. "Shit!"

I swallowed, my throat dry. "We have to go on foot."

He turned to me, his eyes dark and unreadable. "You serious?"

"We don't have a choice. They'll find the car. We can't be here when they do."

His jaw clenched, but he nodded. Without another word, we threw open the doors. The air outside was thick with the smell of damp earth and pine, the woods stretching out in all directions.

I grabbed as much of the cash as I could, stuffing it into my jacket. Vinnie did the same. Well the rest we had to leave it.

We ran and ran, the forest swallowing us, the towering trees blocking out what little moonlight that remained. The ground was soft and uneven beneath my boots, every step sinking into damp leaves and moss.

I had come to a realisation that we no plan or destination. We had to keep on moving.

Vinnie was ahead, his breath coming in sharp, ragged gasps. "We should've stayed in the car."

I didn't answer, he knows that the car was a death trap. Here at least, we had a chance.

Suddenly we heard a voice, a heart stopping voice.

"FREEZE!"

I spun around and my blood turned into ice.

A flashlight beam cut through the darkness, landing on us like a spotlight. A cop who had a gun raised. Vinnie reacted first. He didn't freeze.

He kept on running, i stood there, my mind screaming at me to move, but my body refused.

"Get on the ground!" the cop barked.

Vinnie didn't listen. He darted into the trees, his feet pounding against the earth. The cop's radio crackled. Backup was coming and i had a split second to decide.

Stay and get caught or run.

Well i decided to run. I ran and ran i didn't even look back. Didn't check if Vinnie was behind me.

I just ran deeper into the woods, the world around me shrank to the pounding of my feet against the damp earth, the sharp burn in my lungs, and the cold bite of night air slicing across my face. The flashlight beam flickered behind me, bouncing wildly as the cop struggled to keep up, his voice barking commands that barely registered in my ears.

"Stop! Get on the ground! Don't make this worse!"

I didn't stop i couldn't. The branches whipped against my arms and face as I barreled through the dense forest, my boots still sinking into the wet, uneven ground. The moon barely peeked through the thick canopy above, leaving the woods drenched in shadows, every twisted tree limb and jagged root a potential trap.

Somewhere behind me, Vinnie had taken off in the opposite direction. I had no idea if he made it, if he was still running, or if one of the cop's had managed to bring him down. A gunshot hadn't gone off, which meant that he was still free but i couldn't think about that now.

I focused on my own escape, the adrenaline surged through me, masking the exhaustion that clawed at my legs. My jacket was heavy with the stolen cash i had stuffed inside, every bill a reminder of how this all went to hell in a single moment.

I leaped over a fallen log, landing hard on the other side, my ankle twisting slightly as I staggered forward. I gritted my teeth and pushed through the pain. The cop was still after me, his breathless curses and crashing footsteps told me that much.

Then suddenly everything went silent, i slowed down, my ears straining.

There was no more shouting, no more footsteps. Just the rustling of leaves in the wind and my own ragged breaths.

Had he given up? I thought. I pressed myself against the rough bark of a tree, sucking in deep, quiet breaths as I peered back the way I came. There was nothing, just darkness and the distant hum of insects.

Maybe i had lost him or maybe he was waiting. It was probably a trick or a trap. I couldn't risk it.

Pushing off the tree, I moved carefully now, my steps measured and deliberate. My pulse still thundered in my ears, but I forced myself to slow down. Panic had carried me this far, but it wouldn't help me now.

I needed to think and i needed to get out of these woods before the sun came up and the cops spread their net wider.

I decided to head south. The direction would take me back toward the highway, maybe to an abandoned gas station or an empty truck stop where I could steal a ride out of here.

But as I took another step forward, my foot suddenly sank in mud. It was thick, cold and wet.

I barely had time to react before my leg was swallowed up to the knee, my momentum sending me crashing forward onto my hands. The stench of rotting leaves and damp earth filled my nose as I struggled to pull myself free.

That was when i realized that it was quicksand. I cursed under my breath, my fingers clawing at the ground, desperate for something solid. My breath came faster now, panic curling around my throat like a noose.

Digging my elbows into the firmer ground, I pushed upward, trying to shift my weight. The mud sucked at my leg, reluctant to let go.

I twisted and kicked forced myself sideways. It worked but slowly and agonizing. I pulled myself free, my body trembling as I dragged myself onto more stable ground.

I lay there for a moment, my chest heaving, the night air chilling my sweat-soaked skin.

I had to keep moving, staggering to my feet, I shook off as much of the mud as I could and pressed on, keeping my steps lighter, more cautious. My body ached, exhaustion creeping into my bones now that the initial burst of adrenaline was wearing off.

Then I heard a twig snapping, the sound was close by. I froze, my heart slamming against my ribs. I knew that someone was nearby, it couldn't be an animal.

I swallowed hard, pressing myself lower into the shadows. The sound came again, it was careful and deliberate. Someone was moving through the trees.

And then i heard a voice, it was low and Familiar.

"Goddammit, Derek... you still breathing?"

"Vinnie?" Relief flooded me, quickly followed by anger. I crept toward the sound, spotting his shadowy figure leaning against a tree, chest rising and falling heavily. His face was slick with sweat, his shirt torn, but he was alive.

"You're an idiot," I whispered harshly. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Saving my own ass," he muttered, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "That cop was on my tail till I lost him back near the river."

I looked him over, noticing how he favored his left leg. "You hurt?"

"Twisted my damn ankle jumping down a ravine," he grumbled. "But I ain't dead, so I guess that's something."

I exhaled, shaking my head. "We need to keep moving."

He nodded, pushing off the tree. "Where we headed?"

"South, toward the highway. We find a car, get the hell out of here."

Vinnie hesitated. "And then what?"

I didn't have an answer. I hadn't thought that far ahead. But right now, surviving the next hour was enough.

"One step at a time," I said.

We moved carefully, the forest stretching endlessly around us, the trees looming like silent sentinels. The night was deep, the temperature dropping, our breath misting in the air.

We had no food, no water and no plan but we had no choice but to keep going.

The highway wasn't that far now, I could feel it. The forest around us had started to thin, the density of trees giving way to patches of open ground, the air carrying the distant hum of engines roaring down the pavement. The road meant escape, but it also meant danger.

Cops would be on high alert, patrolling for two fugitives on the run. Every passing car could be an unmarked cruiser, every truck stop a trap. But staying in the woods wasn't an option either. The sun would rise in a couple of hours, and the daylight would expose us.

I wiped my sweat-slicked forehead with the back of my hand, my body aching from the night's relentless sprint. My shirt was torn, my arms covered in scratches from the branches that had clawed at me like angry fingers. Vinnie limped beside me, his twisted ankle slowing him down, his breathing heavy. He was trying to act tough, but I knew he was in pain.

"We don't have time for you to be dragging your feet," I muttered, shooting him a glance.

He gave me a weak grin, eyes gleaming with exhaustion. "You try running with a busted ankle, see how fast you can go."

I shook my head. "We gotta figure out how to get the hell outta here, man. We can't just keep running blind."

Vinnie nodded but didn't say anything. His silence made me nervous. He had that look, the one he always got when his mind started going to dark places.

We pushed forward. The sound of the highway was growing louder. Through the gaps in the trees, I could see the faint glow of headlights flashing past.

Then I spotted a gas station.

Small, rundown, probably open 24 hours. A couple of trucks were parked by the pumps, their drivers nowhere in sight. The convenience store was lit up, the neon "Open" sign flickering in the window. A lone cashier sat behind the counter, staring at a phone, completely oblivious to the two fugitives creeping out of the woods.

Vinnie followed my gaze. "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Yeah. We need a car."

We crouched behind a dumpster, eyes scanning the lot. There were three vehicles, two semi-trucks and an old beaten-up sedan parked off to the side.

"That sedan looks easy to hotwire," I whispered.

Vinnie smirked. "Good thing you got experience."

I ignored the jab, this wasn't the time. "We gotta be smart. If we go now, that cashier might see us. We had to wait for the right moment."

Vinnie shifted uncomfortably, his hand going to his pocket. I knew what he was reaching for. The gun.

"Don't," I warned. "We ain't doing this again."

He clenched his jaw. "We might not have a choice."

"There's always a choice." He didn't argue, but the tension between us thickened like smoke.

Minutes passed. A truck rumbled to life, its driver climbing in and pulling out of the lot. The cashier remained lost in his phone, barely looking up as the vehicle disappeared down the road. This was our chance.

"Go," I whispered.

We moved fast but careful, sticking to the shadows. The sedan was old, probably from the late '90s. If I was lucky, it wouldn't have one of those anti-theft systems.

I reached the driver's side, yanked the door handle, it was unlocked. Luck was finally on my side. I slid in, Vinnie taking the passenger seat, his head on a swivel as he checked for movement.

I pulled the plastic panel beneath the steering wheel, exposing the ignition wires. My fingers worked quickly, stripping and twisting them together.

The engine sputtered. "Come on". I tried again and still there was nothing.

Vinnie cursed under his breath. "Hurry the hell up."

"I'm trying," I hissed.

I adjusted the wires, sparked them again and the engine roared to life.

A rush of relief flooded through me. I threw the car into drive just as the cashier looked up, his face twisting in confusion. He started to stand, reaching for something, it was probably a phone.

Vinnie didn't hesitate. He rolled down the window and aimed the gun.

"No!" I grabbed his wrist, shoving his arm down as he pulled the trigger.

The shot shattered the passenger-side mirror, but it missed the cashier. He ducked, disappearing behind the counter.

"Damn it, Vinnie!" I shouted, slamming my foot on the gas.

The tires screeched as we tore out of the lot, the old sedan lurching forward with a shudder. My heart pounded. That gunshot had just sealed our fate.

"He was calling the cops anyway," Vinnie grumbled, rubbing his wrist where I'd shoved him.

"You don't know that!"

Vinnie just looked out the window, jaw tight, saying nothing.

We sped down the highway, the gas station disappearing behind us. My hands clenched the wheel, my mind racing. We needed a plan. The stolen car gave us mobility, but it also made us targets. Cops would be looking for this vehicle within minutes.

"We need to ditch this ride soon," I said.

Vinnie glanced at me. "And do what? Walk the rest of the way?"

"We'll find another car. Something we can blend in with."

He exhaled sharply but didn't argue.

The road stretched ahead, empty except for the occasional headlights in the distance. The adrenaline was wearing off now, exhaustion creeping into my bones. But I couldn't stop. Not yet.

Then i saw red and blue lights. They were far behind us, but getting closer.

I swore under my breath. "We got company."

Vinnie sat up straight. "How many?"

I checked the rearview mirror. "One. Maybe two."

"Think they saw us?"

"They will soon."

I pressed the gas, the old sedan groaning as it picked up speed and the sirens blared.

"Shit," Vinnie muttered. "We can't outrun them in this piece of crap."

He was right. The car was too slow, too old. We needed an escape.

Up ahead, a side road veered off into the woods. It was barely visible, overgrown with weeds, but it was our only shot.

I took it and the tires skidded on the gravel as I turned sharply onto the dirt path, the sedan bumping and jerking over the uneven ground. The sirens faded behind us, but they wouldn't be gone for long.

Vinnie gripped the dashboard. "Where the hell does this road go?"

"No idea," I admitted.

But we didn't have a choice, the trees closed in around us, branches scraping against the car's sides. The road twisted and turned, barely wide enough for the vehicle. I kept my foot on the gas, hoping and praying that it led somewhere.

And then there was a clearing, an old abandoned barn stood in the distance, its roof sagging, its wooden walls weathered and cracked.

It was perfect, i killed the headlights and rolled the car to a stop behind the structure.

There was silence, no sirens or flashing lights. We had lost them.

Vinnie let out a shaky breath. "We should hide out here till morning."

I nodded, still gripping the wheel. My hands were trembling. We had made it through the night.

They made me do it

The old Foster home sat like a forgotten relic at the edge of Rosewill, its once-white walls now weathered and cracked by time. The neighborhood was quiet, as it always was on a Sunday evening, the gentle rustle of leaves in the wind being the only sound. But inside, something far darker was unfolding.

Billy Foster sat in the living room, hands trembling as he stared down at the blood-soaked floor beneath him. His father, William, lay sprawled across the rug, his lifeless eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. A pool of crimson slowly spread across the hardwood, an eerie contrast to the pale skin of his father's once kind face. His younger sister, Lucy, lay near the kitchen doorway, her small body crumpled in a grotesque heap.

Billy didn't move. He couldn't. His mind felt frozen, as if someone had pressed the "pause" button on his life, leaving him trapped in this nightmarish moment. His eyes flickered over the bodies, his heart racing. How had it happened? What had he done?

"They made me do it," he muttered repeatedly under his breath, like a broken record, as if saying the words over and over would make them true. He stood up shakily, his legs unsteady beneath him, and stumbled toward the kitchen sink to wash his hands. His reflection in the mirror above the counter startled him. His face was pale, his eyes wide and bloodshot. But the worst part? His hands were coated in blood—blood that didn't belong to him.

He sank to his knees in the corner, his body shuddering as waves of panic washed over him. He couldn't remember what had happened. The last thing he remembered was sitting down to dinner with Lucy and his father, laughter filling the house, a sense of normalcy. And then... nothing. A haze. A darkness that crept into his mind, clouding his thoughts, taking control. Had he done this? He didn't know.

"They made me do it," he repeated again, but the words were hollow now. He knew that no one would believe him. They would think him guilty. And he was. But why?

Outside, the sound of sirens approached, cutting through the thick silence. Billy stood up, wiping his hands on his shirt, but there was no point in trying to hide. The

police would find him here, standing in the middle of this nightmare. There would be no escaping it.

The front door slammed open, and Detective Maria Hawkins walked into the scene. She didn't flinch at the sight. She had seen it all before—brutality, violence, rage—but something about this case felt different. The family was well-known in Rosewill, respected, but the son... Billy was always a bit of a mystery. Quiet, introspective, a young man with more darkness in his eyes than a person should carry.

"Billy Foster," she said, her voice firm, as she stepped carefully around the bloodstained floor. "What happened here?"

Billy's eyes flickered toward her, his gaze distant. His lips trembled as he spoke, his voice hoarse. "They made me do it... They made me do it," he repeated, the words almost like a chant, as though saying them would somehow absolve him of the terror he'd just unleashed.

Detective Hawkins studied him carefully, her expression unreadable. She had seen plenty of cases where people claimed to be under the influence of something otherworldly—whether it was drugs, stress, or something else entirely—but this was different. Billy's words held a certain conviction, a fear that sent a chill through her bones. She crouched down in front of him, her eyes never leaving his face. "Who made you do it, Billy?"

He shook his head, his hands trembling again as he looked at her, his confusion evident. "I don't know... I don't know who they were, but I... I didn't mean to. It wasn't me. I didn't do this." His words were barely a whisper, the disbelief clear in his voice. "Please... I need help."

Hawkins studied him carefully. She had to admit, there was something in Billy's eyes—something that seemed almost... afraid. Could he really have done this? Was he truly the killer? Or was there something else at play here, something far more sinister?

Before she could ask him any more questions, backup arrived. Officers rushed through the door, taking in the scene. They quickly began securing the house, but Hawkins stayed close to Billy.

"I'm taking him in," she said, her voice steady despite the unsettling feeling in her gut. Billy made no move to resist. He just sat there, staring at the bloodstained floor.

Back at the station, Billy was placed in an interrogation room, still eerily calm, though the fear behind his eyes had not subsided. Detective Hawkins sat across from him, her gaze fixed on his every movement. Her instincts told her there was more to this story, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

"Billy," Hawkins said, leaning forward. "You're telling me that someone made you kill your family. But you don't remember who? Or why?"

He didn't answer immediately, his hands folded in his lap. He was exhausted, his mind a whirlwind of confusion. "I don't know..." he murmured. "It was like... like something took over me. I couldn't control it. The darkness... It was in my head."

Hawkins watched him carefully, her fingers tapping on the table. She had worked enough cases to recognize when someone was hiding something—or when they were telling the truth. Billy's story was strange, to say the least, but there was a sincerity to his words that made her hesitate. What had happened in that house?

"I need you to think, Billy," she said. "Try to remember what happened. You were with your father and your sister, right? You had dinner, everything seemed normal?"

Billy nodded, his expression distant. "Yes... we had dinner, we laughed... I remember telling my father I was thinking about getting a job. But then... it's all a blur. I don't know what happened after that."

The sound of footsteps echoed down the hall, and Hawkins glanced toward the door, a sense of unease creeping over her. The truth was just out of reach, like a shadow in the corner of her mind.

As Billy sat in front of her, his face pale and hollow with shock, Hawkins could feel the weight of the case settling on her shoulders. Whatever had happened in that house—whatever had caused this young man to snap—it was far from over. There

were too many unanswered questions. Too many shadows lurking in the corners of Billy's mind.

And as the hours ticked by, Detective Hawkins realized that there was something far more sinister going on than a simple murder. There was something deeper at work here. Something that no one—least of all Billy—could explain.

The truth wasn't clear yet. But it would be. And it would come to light. Soon enough.

The cold fluorescent lights above flickered as Detective Maria Hawkins leaned back in her chair, her eyes still fixed on Billy Foster. He sat in the corner of the interrogation room, his hands resting in his lap, his eyes vacant and distant. The room felt heavy, the silence suffocating. She knew she couldn't leave him alone for long—he was a time bomb, ticking away, his mind unraveling with every passing second.

Billy had been repeating the same mantra for hours: "They made me do it. They made me do it." It was as if those words were the only thing tethering him to some semblance of reality. But Hawkins wasn't sure whether they were a cry for help or an admission of guilt.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a knock on the door. Officer Marquez stepped in, his face grim. "Detective, there's something you need to see."

Hawkins stood up, following Marquez down the hallway to the small, cramped evidence room. Inside, the walls were lined with shelves filled with case files, boxes, and evidence bags. A single overhead light cast long shadows across the room, creating a sense of unease. Marquez led her to a table in the center, where a large evidence box sat, waiting for her attention.

"What is it?" Hawkins asked, her voice sharp.

Marquez opened the box and carefully pulled out a set of photographs, sliding them toward Hawkins. The first image was a picture of the Foster home—the living room, where Billy had been found in the pool of blood. But it was the next image that caught Hawkins' attention.

A close-up shot of the family's front door showed strange markings carved into the wood. Symbols. They looked almost like an intricate pattern, a design she had never

seen before. The symbols appeared to be scratched into the wood, as though someone had deliberately etched them in.

"Have you shown these to Billy?" Hawkins asked, her voice now low and tense.

Marquez nodded. "He doesn't remember anything about them. He didn't even seem to recognize them."

Hawkins' mind raced as she stared at the images. The marks didn't seem to fit the profile of a typical murder. They were too... deliberate, too calculated. She had worked enough cases to know that sometimes, a killer's method could reveal a deeper motivation, a psychological need. But this was different. It wasn't just about the murder—it was about something more.

"Do we know what the symbols mean?" Hawkins asked, her eyes never leaving the photographs.

Marquez shook his head. "We're still trying to figure that out. We sent the photos to forensics, but nothing has come up yet."

Hawkins was quiet for a moment, her mind turning over the possibilities. The marks were significant—too significant to be dismissed as random. They had to be a clue, something Billy might have seen or experienced in the hours leading up to the killings. But why had he carved them into the door? Was it some sort of warning? Or was it a sign of something far darker?

"I want to go back to the house," Hawkins said, her voice firm. "There's more here than meets the eye. And I need to understand what Billy saw before he went into that trance."

Marquez looked at her, his brow furrowed. "Are you sure? We've been through the house already. There's nothing new."

"There's always something we've missed," Hawkins replied, her voice cold and determined. "I'll be in touch. Let's go."

The Foster home felt even colder now that the crime scene had been cleared. The walls seemed to whisper, the floor creaking under their steps as Hawkins and

Marquez entered the living room. The pool of blood had been cleaned up, but the stench of death lingered in the air, thick and suffocating. Hawkins didn't flinch, though. She had seen enough grisly crime scenes to last a lifetime. This one, however, felt different. It wasn't just the violence—it was the eerie silence, the feeling that something was wrong in this house, that something unseen was watching her.

"Do you feel that?" Hawkins asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Marquez looked around uneasily. "Yeah. It's like... like the house is still haunted by what happened."

"I think it is," Hawkins said, stepping carefully across the room. She crouched down by the doorway, examining the spot where Billy's sister, Lucy, had been found. There was a faint outline in the dust, the mark of where her body had once lain.

Hawkins' eyes flickered over the space, scanning for anything out of place. It was when she moved to the far corner, near the stairs, that she noticed something odd. A small, almost imperceptible crack in the wall—barely visible unless you were looking for it. She ran her fingers along the crack, feeling a chill run down her spine. It wasn't just a crack—it was a hidden compartment. She pushed against the wall, and with a quiet groan, a small panel popped open, revealing a stack of old, dusty books.

Marquez stepped over and glanced at the books. "What are those?"

Hawkins picked one up, wiping the dust off the cover. The title was embossed in faded gold letters: *The Cult of the Void*. She frowned. "This doesn't look like something that belongs in a normal household."

She flipped open the cover to reveal a series of cryptic notes and symbols—symbols that matched the ones carved into the front door. As she flipped through the pages, her heart raced. The text was written in a strange, almost incomprehensible language, but the symbols were unmistakable. These were the same symbols Billy had drawn. Was it possible he had been influenced by these books? Had he been exposed to something... dangerous?

"Looks like we've found a lead," Hawkins muttered, her mind working rapidly. This wasn't just a murder—it was something deeper. Something dark, something with ties to a cult or a belief system that Billy had somehow become entangled with.

Before she could look further, her phone buzzed in her pocket. She pulled it out, her eyes scanning the text.

"It's from the lab," Hawkins said, her voice tight. "The symbols in the house—they match something from an old unsolved case from years ago."

Marquez raised an eyebrow. "What case?"

Hawkins didn't answer immediately. Instead, she stared at her phone, her stomach churning. If the case was connected to something older, then Billy's actions might not have been an isolated incident. There was a larger pattern here—a dark undercurrent that had been waiting to surface for years.

"We need to head to the archives," Hawkins said, her voice urgent. "This case is far from over."

Back at the station, Hawkins pored over the old files, the weight of the case bearing down on her. The connection was becoming clearer now. Billy hadn't been just a random victim of circumstances. He had been drawn into something. And that something was darker than anything she had ever imagined.

As the clock ticked on, Hawkins knew one thing for sure: whatever had caused Billy to commit such horrors, it was still out there. And it wasn't finished with him yet.

The cold, sterile atmosphere of the station felt stifling, and Detective Maria Hawkins couldn't shake the feeling of unease that had settled in her chest. There was something about this case, something about Billy Foster, that gnawed at her—like a puzzle missing its last piece. Each lead she chased seemed to only pull her further into the dark recesses of this mystery.

She sat hunched over her desk, staring at the file she had gathered on Billy Foster, the same file that contained the cryptic symbols, the old cult book, and the traces of a violent, unfathomable rage. The clock on the wall ticked relentlessly, mocking her as she tried to make sense of it all.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a knock at her office door.

"Detective, we've got something," Marquez called through the door, his voice laced with urgency.

Hawkins looked up, her eyes narrowing. "What is it?"

Marquez stepped inside, holding up a thick envelope, freshly sealed. "The lab sent us the results from the forensics on the book you found at the Foster house."

Hawkins took the envelope, her hands moving quickly to tear it open. Inside were several photographs and lab reports. She flipped through them quickly, her heart rate quickening as she scanned the findings.

"The book... The Cult of the Void ... it's not just a book. It's part of a collection. And the collection... it's been tied to several unsolved cases dating back more than a decade. Cases involving families, murders, and strange symbols like the ones we found at the Foster house." Hawkins felt a sickening twist in her stomach. She hadn't fully grasped the severity of what they were dealing with until now.

"These murders..." Marquez trailed off, looking over Hawkins' shoulder at the documents. "You're telling me Billy could've been involved in something like this for years?"

"We need to go back to the archive," Hawkins said, her voice tense. "This case isn't just about Billy Foster. It's part of something much bigger."

The darkened archive room was thick with dust and the smell of aging paper. The overhead fluorescent lights buzzed with an unsettling hum as Hawkins and Marquez sifted through files upon files, looking for any connection to the mysterious deaths.

Hours passed before Hawkins stumbled upon a particularly old case file, the yellowed edges of the folder telling her it had been dormant for years. She opened it carefully, scanning through the pages. What she found was both chilling and familiar.

The file contained a list of unexplained deaths from families all over the state, each case eerily similar to the Foster family massacre. The cause of death was never quite clear—no weapons, no signs of struggle, only blood and terror. And every family

involved had connections to a local church—a church that had since shut its doors, its ministers disappearing mysteriously, leaving no trace behind.

Hawkins' breath caught in her throat as she read the final page of the file: Symbols connected to an ancient, forgotten cult were discovered in each of the households. The cult's influence spread, manipulating vulnerable individuals into committing heinous acts.

"The Foster family wasn't the first," Hawkins murmured, her mind racing. "This cult—The Void—has been targeting families for years."

Marquez leaned over her shoulder, scanning the pages. "So what does this have to do with Billy? Why him?"

Hawkins stared at the file, her eyes wide with realization. "Billy wasn't just a victim in this. He was targeted."

Back at the station, Hawkins couldn't sleep. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw the symbols, the books, the dark void. Her mind kept replaying the footage of Billy's confused and broken expression as he sat in that interrogation room, repeating his words: "They made me do it. They made me do it."

There was a knock at her door, startling her out of her thoughts.

"You look like you haven't slept in days," Marquez said softly as he stepped inside, offering her a cup of coffee. "I brought you some caffeine."

"Thanks," Hawkins said absently, not even glancing at the cup. "I just... I can't shake the feeling that we're missing something."

"Billy?"

Hawkins nodded, rubbing her eyes. "He's not just confessing to the murders. He's trying to explain what happened to him. And the fact that he's so insistent on 'they made me do it'—there's more to this than just him flipping out."

Marquez frowned. "But what if he did it? What if it's all in his head? What if it's just... a breakdown?"

"If it were a breakdown, we'd have seen something—some warning signs. But we didn't. He was just... normal, until this happened. And the book, the symbols, the cult—they're all connected. This was planned."

The silence between them grew heavy as the weight of the case settled deeper into their bones.

"What's next?" Marquez asked quietly.

"We need to track down the church. The one the cult members were connected to." Hawkins' voice was steady, but her heart hammered in her chest. The answers they were looking for were buried in this shadowy underworld, and it was only a matter of time before they would surface—no matter how dangerous the truth turned out to be.

The church was located on the outskirts of Rosewill, its crumbling spires and broken stained-glass windows giving it an almost haunted appearance. The grounds were overgrown with weeds, the path leading up to the door barely visible beneath the tangles of wild grass.

Hawkins and Marquez stood at the threshold, staring at the decaying building. Every instinct in Hawkins screamed at her to turn away. This was the place where it all started. Where the darkness had rooted itself in the heart of the town, infecting everything around it.

Inside, the atmosphere was thick with the scent of mildew and rot. The pews were empty, the altar covered in dust. The only sound was the soft echo of their footsteps as they made their way toward the back of the church.

Marquez went straight for a stack of old records, flipping through them quickly. Hawkins stood by the altar, her eyes scanning the faded murals on the walls. They depicted scenes of angels, demons, and ancient rituals—symbols she recognized from the books.

"This place has been abandoned for years," Marquez muttered. "But someone has to know something. There's no way this cult just... disappeared."

Hawkins' attention shifted to the back of the room, where a small door led to what looked like a hidden basement. The door was slightly ajar, and as Hawkins stepped closer, she could feel the unmistakable chill of something wrong.

Her hand shook slightly as she pushed the door open.

Inside was a small room filled with old, rotting furniture. But what caught Hawkins' eye was the center of the room—a stone altar. On the altar lay a series of books, the same books they had found in the Foster home. But this time, the symbols on them were sharper, more intricate.

As she reached out to touch them, Marquez appeared at her side, his face pale. "Detective... I think we've found our answer."

Hawkins looked up at him, her voice cold. "This is where it all ends."

But even as she said the words, she knew in her gut that they were still far from the truth. This wasn't the end. It was only the beginning.

Billy Foster sat alone in his cell, staring blankly at the wall. His mind was a haze of confusion and fragments. He knew he had done something. He couldn't remember what it was. But there were shadows lurking, whispering to him from the corners of his mind. And they would never leave.

The scent of stale coffee and cold paper filled the air as Detective Hawkins sat alone in her office, the small lamp beside her casting a warm glow on the files spread across her desk. Her eyes flickered over the photographs from the church—the crumbling altar, the strange symbols, and the books that seemed to pulse with a hidden history. Something wasn't adding up. Billy Foster was in their custody, and yet, the case felt farther from resolution than ever before.

She ran a hand through her hair, frustration building inside her. Who is Billy Foster really?

A knock on her office door startled her, and she looked up to see Marquez standing in the doorway, his face serious.

"Detective, there's something you need to see," he said, his voice low.

"Not now, Marquez," she sighed, rubbing her eyes. "We're closer than we've ever been. I can feel it. But there's something we're missing, something in that church..."

"We need to see this," Marquez insisted, stepping inside and placing a file on her desk. "It came through just now."

Reluctantly, Hawkins flipped open the file. It contained a series of new photographs—surveillance footage from a gas station near Rosewill. The timestamp showed just a day before the murders. There, clearly visible in the footage, was a man Billy's age, wearing the same jacket Billy had been seen in the night of the murder.

"Is this really him?" Hawkins asked, her voice tinged with disbelief.

"At first, we thought it was just a coincidence," Marquez replied, "but we managed to track down the gas station clerk who served him. They confirmed it was Billy."

Her mind reeled as she processed this new revelation. If Billy had been out that night, far from the scene of the crime, then who—or what—was responsible for the murders?

"We need to bring him in again," Hawkins muttered, her eyes narrowing as she stared at the video footage. "We need to confront him with this."

Billy sat in the dimly lit interrogation room, his fingers tapping nervously on the cold metal table. His mind felt like a jumbled mess, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't remember the events of that night. He didn't remember what had happened in the house, or why he was sitting here in a police station. The last thing he could clearly recall was walking through the front door of his childhood home, his father's voice calling to him.

Detective Hawkins entered the room, closing the door behind her. She studied him for a long moment before speaking.

"How are you feeling, Billy?" she asked, her voice calm, but there was an edge to it—something that made him feel like she was trying to see through him.

He swallowed, his throat dry. "I... I don't know. My head is just... a blur. I keep having these dreams—these nightmares."

Hawkins took a seat across from him, her eyes never leaving his face. "Nightmares? About what?"

"About the house," Billy whispered. "About my family. The blood... I see it all. But I don't understand. I don't remember what happened, why they're gone. It feels like I'm losing my mind."

"You're not losing your mind, Billy," Hawkins said softly. "We're here to help you understand."

Billy's eyes darted around the room, as if searching for an answer that wasn't there. "I... I didn't do it. I swear. But I... I feel like I'm losing control. Like something is forcing me to do things."

Hawkins leaned forward slightly, lowering her voice. "Tell me about the nightmares, Billy. Tell me what you see."

Billy hesitated, his eyes searching the room before landing on her. "It's always the same... I'm in the house, and there's this... this voice. It tells me to do things. Horrible things. I don't know where it comes from, but I can feel it... inside me."

Hawkins' gut twisted as she listened, but she had learned long ago not to dismiss people's experiences—especially when they were wrapped in so much fear. The last thing she wanted was for Billy to spiral into a breakdown. She needed answers, and he might be the key.

"Billy, I need you to think. Focus on what you can remember. Did anything happen before that night? Anything that might explain why you're having these nightmares?"

Billy shook his head, his brow furrowing as if trying to pull a memory from the recesses of his mind. "I don't know. I don't remember. But I feel like I'm being controlled. Like I'm not the one in charge."

Hawkins could see the pain in his eyes, the fear and confusion that clouded his expression. Whatever had happened that night, whatever was haunting Billy, it

wasn't something he could explain. Yet, Hawkins couldn't shake the feeling that the answer wasn't just in Billy's mind—it was somewhere else. Somewhere darker.

The investigation moved forward, but the closer Hawkins got, the further the truth seemed to slip away. She revisited the church records, piecing together fragments of stories that didn't quite fit. And then, a breakthrough: One of the missing ministers had been traced to an old, abandoned house on the outskirts of Rosewill. Hawkins and Marquez set out to investigate.

The house was overgrown, its windows darkened by grime and neglect. The heavy air felt oppressive as they walked through the front door. Inside, the atmosphere was suffocating—a mixture of decay and something more sinister. The walls were lined with strange symbols, similar to those Billy had described in his nightmares. Hawkins' skin crawled as she studied the carvings, her flashlight flickering over them.

Suddenly, she stopped, her breath caught in her throat. On the floor, in the center of the room, was a pile of old, rotting books. She knelt to examine them, and her heart skipped a beat. Among the dust and pages, one book stood out—a familiar title. It was the same book they had found in the Foster house. *The Cult of the Void*.

"Marquez, get over here," Hawkins said urgently. "I think we've found our missing piece."

Marquez quickly joined her, his expression growing grim as he looked over the book. "What does this mean? Is this the same cult?"

Hawkins stared at the book, feeling the weight of its darkness. "This isn't just some coincidence, Marquez. Whoever was involved in this, whatever happened in that house, is connected to the cult. And Billy... Billy was just a pawn in their game."

Back at the station, Hawkins couldn't help but feel that they were nearing the end of the case. But in her gut, she knew the truth was much darker than they could ever imagine. Billy Foster's story wasn't over—it was just beginning.

As she stood in front of Billy's cell, watching him pace back and forth, she knew one thing for sure: Whatever happened that night, it wasn't something he could escape. And if the cult had gotten to him, then there were more victims waiting to be found.

But whether or not they would ever uncover the full truth—of how deep the darkness ran—was still uncertain.

Billy sat alone in his cell, staring at the blank wall in front of him. His body was exhausted, but his mind raced relentlessly. Every night, the same nightmares. The same terror. But he knew one thing now: he couldn't run from it. Not anymore.

As the days stretched into weeks, Billy realized that whatever had happened to him wasn't something that could be undone. He had killed his family, and the truth of it haunted him. But the truth wasn't his alone. It was a darkness that had been passed down, and it would never let go.

The only question now was whether or not anyone would ever fully understand the depths of the darkness that had consumed him.

And for Billy Foster, that was something he could never answer.

The Confession

The dimly lit chapel was silent, save for the faint flicker of the votive candles on the altar. The smell of old wood and melting wax permeated the air, blending with the faint scent of incense. Father Michael sat in the confessional booth, his hands clasped loosely in his lap, staring at the carved wood panel separating him from the empty space outside.

He had been at St. Anne's Church for over thirty years, guiding the faithful, offering solace, and hearing secrets buried so deep that they were uttered only in hushed whispers behind the safety of the confessional. Tonight felt different. The stillness carried an undercurrent of tension, a weight pressing against the air.

The heavy oak door creaked open, breaking the silence. Footsteps echoed through the chapel—deliberate, hesitant. Father Michael straightened, listening as the footsteps grew closer, until they paused just outside the confessional.

The booth door opened with a groan, and the figure on the other side settled into the seat.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," the voice rasped, raw and broken.

Father Michael shifted slightly. There was something unsettling in the tone, a desperation that clawed at the edges of the man's words.

"How long has it been since your last confession?"

The man hesitated, as if calculating the years. "Too long," he said finally. "Much too long."

"Take your time," Father Michael said gently. "What would you like to confess?"

The man drew a shuddering breath. "I've done things, Father. Terrible things."

Father Michael leaned forward slightly, his fingers tightening around the edge of his stole. He had heard countless confessions over the years, stories of betrayal, theft, even violence. But the raw anguish in this man's voice was unlike anything he had encountered before.

"Tell me," Father Michael said softly.

The man hesitated again, and then the words began to spill out in a torrent. "It started twenty years ago. I didn't mean for it to happen, but it did. I was young, stupid, angry. He... he looked at me wrong, said something I didn't like. I pushed him. Harder than I should have."

Father Michael's breath caught. "Are you saying...?"

The man interrupted, his voice rising in panic. "It was an accident, I swear! I didn't mean to kill him!"

The silence that followed was deafening. The weight of the confession hung heavy in the air, suffocating in its intensity.

"What happened after that?" Father Michael asked, his voice steady despite the turmoil churning in his chest.

"I panicked," the man admitted. "I hid the body. Buried it in the woods behind my house. No one ever found out. They just thought he ran away."

Father Michael closed his eyes briefly, a silent prayer forming on his lips. He had seen the missing posters years ago, remembered the heartbroken family pleading for answers. And now, here it was—the truth, raw and unrelenting.

"Why are you telling me this now?" Father Michael asked.

The man's voice cracked. "Because I can't live with it anymore. I see his face every night. Hear his voice. He doesn't leave me, Father. He's always there."

Father Michael took a deep breath, searching for the right words. "The burden you carry is heavy, but it's not yours alone to bear. Have you thought about coming forward? Telling the authorities?"

"I can't," the man said quickly. "If I do, it'll destroy my family. My wife, my kids... they don't know. They can't know."

"Keeping this secret hasn't spared you from suffering," Father Michael said gently. "And it won't spare them forever. The truth has a way of coming to light, one way or another."

The man didn't respond immediately. The seconds stretched into an eternity, the silence filled only by the faint creak of the wood as the man shifted in his seat.

"Will God forgive me?" he asked finally, his voice barely above a whisper.

Father Michael hesitated, the weight of his answer pressing down on him. "God's mercy is infinite," he said. "But forgiveness doesn't erase the consequences of our actions. True repentance requires accountability. It means making amends, no matter how difficult that may be."

The man exhaled shakily, the sound filled with anguish. "I don't know if I'm strong enough to do that."

"You are," Father Michael said firmly. "It's not an easy path, but it's the right one. And you won't have to walk it alone. I'll help you, if you'll let me."

For the first time, the man seemed to falter. His breathing hitched, and Father Michael could hear the faint sound of tears.

"I'm so sorry," the man choked out. "I never wanted any of this. I just... I didn't know what else to do."

Father Michael bowed his head, his heart aching for the broken man before him. "God hears your sorrow," he said softly. "But now, it's time to take the next step. Will you let me help you?"

The man didn't answer immediately. When he finally spoke, his voice was fragile, like a thread stretched too thin.

"Yes," he said. "Help me."

The man left the chapel shortly after, his steps unsteady but purposeful. Father Michael watched him go, a mix of relief and trepidation settling over him. He knew the road ahead would be difficult—for both of them.

The following day, Father Michael accompanied the man, whose name he now knew to be Thomas, to the local police station. Thomas's confession was met with shock, the weight of his words reverberating through the small, sterile room.

As Thomas recounted the events of that fateful night, Father Michael sat beside him, a steady presence in the storm. The officers listened intently, their faces a mixture of disbelief and solemnity.

When Thomas finished, the room fell into silence. The lead detective, a grizzled man with kind eyes, finally spoke. "Thank you for coming forward," he said. "It takes courage to do what you've done."

Thomas nodded, his expression a mixture of relief and fear. "What happens now?" he asked quietly.

"We'll investigate," the detective said. "If the remains are where you say they are, we'll confirm the identity and contact the family." He paused, his gaze softening. "You'll be charged, of course. But your cooperation will be taken into account."

Thomas swallowed hard but nodded. "I understand."

The days that followed were a blur of activity. The police found the remains exactly where Thomas had said they would be, buried beneath a grove of oak trees. The DNA matched the missing boy—Elliot Hayes, a seventeen-year-old who had disappeared two decades earlier.

The news sent shockwaves through the community, reopening old wounds and reigniting grief that had never fully healed. For Elliot's family, the discovery brought a bittersweet closure. They finally had answers, though they came with a pain that cut deep.

At Thomas's request, Father Michael accompanied him to meet Elliot's parents. The encounter was fraught with emotion, the weight of twenty years of silence pressing down on everyone in the room.

"I'm sorry," Thomas said, his voice trembling. "I know there's nothing I can say or do to make this right, but I needed you to know the truth."

Elliot's mother, a frail woman with tear-streaked cheeks, looked at Thomas with a mixture of anger and sorrow. "You took my son from me," she said, her voice shaking. "You robbed us of a lifetime with him."

"I know," Thomas said, his eyes filled with tears. "And I'll carry that guilt for the rest of my life. I just... I hope someday you can find it in your hearts to forgive me."

Elliot's father, a stoic man who had remained silent until now, finally spoke. "Forgiveness isn't something we can give you today," he said. "But maybe, one day, we'll get there. For now, we're grateful for the truth. At least we can lay our son to rest."

As Thomas faced the legal consequences of his actions, Father Michael continued to stand by his side. The courtroom was a solemn place, the proceedings heavy with the weight of two decades of pain and regret.

When the judge delivered the sentence—fifteen years in prison with the possibility of parole—Thomas nodded, accepting his fate without protest.

As he was led away in handcuffs, he turned to Father Michael one last time. "Thank you," he said, his voice steady despite the tears in his eyes. "For everything."

Father Michael nodded, his heart heavy but filled with a quiet sense of peace. "Take care, my son," he said softly.

Months later, Father Michael stood in the chapel once more, lighting a candle for Elliot Hayes. The flame danced in the dim light, a symbol of hope and remembrance.

The burden of the confession still weighed on him, but he carried it with grace, knowing that some wounds, though deep, could begin to heal with time, truth, and faith.

Falling back to you

The bell above the coffee shop door jingled softly as Patrick stepped inside, shaking the light drizzle from his jacket. The scent of roasted coffee beans and fresh pastries filled the air, wrapping around him like a familiar embrace. He hadn't planned on coming here, not this place, not tonight but something had pulled him in.

Maybe it was the cold, or the way the city felt unusually quiet for a Friday evening. Or maybe it was just the exhaustion of another long day spent working a job that didn't excite him anymore. Whatever the reason, he found himself standing at the counter, running a tired hand through his slightly damp hair, waiting for a coffee he hadn't even been craving.

The barista slid the cup toward him with a polite nod. "Black, no sugar."

Patrick muttered a thank you, gripping the warm cup as he turned, already scanning the room for an empty seat. That's when he saw her.

At first he didn't recognize her. Just another person in a café, another face in the crowd of strangers he passed every day. But then, something tugged at his memory. The tilt of her head. The way she tucked a strand of chestnut-brown hair behind her ear. The faint smile as she looked down at her phone. A small, almost imperceptible gasp caught in his throat. His fingers tightened around the coffee cup. It was Emily.

His feet didn't move. For a few seconds, he just stood there, frozen, the world around him dissolving into a blur of warm lighting and quiet conversations. It had been years ten, to be exact since he'd last seen her. Since they had said goodbye in a way that neither of them had wanted but had somehow let happen. And yet, she was here, sitting just a few feet away, completely unaware of his presence.

He thought about walking out. Turning around and slipping into the rain before she could notice him. But before he could decide, she looked up and their eyes met.

It was like a spark flaring in the middle of a dark room—bright, unexpected, impossible to ignore. For a moment, neither of them spoke. Neither of them moved. Patrick saw it all in her expression—the flicker of recognition, the widening of her

hazel eyes, the way her lips parted slightly as if she were about to say something but didn't know where to start.

Then, she smiled. "Pat?"

His heart knocked against his ribs. No one had called him that in years.

He forced a breath, then took a step forward, his voice slightly hoarse. "Emily."

She looked just as he remembered, and yet so different. The same deep-set eyes, the same dimple on her left cheek when she smiled. But there was something new about her too—an air of maturity, a quiet confidence in the way she carried herself. She wasn't the seventeen-year-old girl he used to know. And he... he wasn't the same either.

"Wow." She let out a small laugh, shaking her head as she leaned back in her chair. "I can't believe this."

"Me neither." He hesitated, then gestured toward the empty seat across from her. "Mind if I sit?"

"Of course not." She tucked her phone into her bag, giving him her full attention as he settled into the chair. For a moment, neither of them spoke, both unsure where to begin. Patrick took a slow sip of his coffee, more for something to do than anything else.

"So," Emily finally said, her voice lighter now, almost teasing. "Are we really going to pretend this isn't completely insane? Running into each other like this?"

Patrick let out a soft chuckle, shaking his head. "It is insane."

"Good. Just making sure I'm not the only one freaking out a little."

He smiled, feeling some of the initial awkwardness fade away. It was strange, the mix of familiarity and unfamiliarity. She was someone he had once known better than anyone. And yet, right now, she felt like a stranger. A stranger he desperately wanted to know again.

She wrapped her hands around her cup, eyes studying him carefully. "So... how have you been?"

A simple question. One that held an entire decade's worth of answers.

"Good. Busy." He paused, debating how much to say. "Work takes up most of my time. It's nothing exciting, just marketing stuff. And you?"

She smiled, tilting her head slightly. "I teach. High school English."

Patrick raised an eyebrow. "No way."

"Yes way." She laughed. "I know, I know. Me, a teacher? Feels weird, right?"

He shook his head, smiling. "No, actually. It makes perfect sense. You were always the one who actually enjoyed analyzing books while the rest of us just tried to sound like we knew what we were talking about."

She laughed again, a sound so familiar it sent a pang through his chest. Then, the conversation shifted naturally, effortlessly—back to the past.

They talked about high school, about the late-night phone calls that lasted until dawn, about how they would sneak out on school nights just to sit by the lake and talk about everything and nothing. Emily brought up the time Patrick got detention for skipping class to take her to see a movie. Patrick reminded her of the time she made him run through the pouring rain just because she thought it was sweet.

"It was sweet," she defended with a grin. "We were young, carefree..."

"We were freezing," Patrick corrected, but he was smiling too.

They reminisced about their old friend group, about the teachers they had loved and the ones they had hated, about the stupid things they had done that seemed so important back then. And as they talked, it was as if no time had passed at all.

But then, the reality crept in. The years that had separated them. The choices that had led them to different paths. The fact that they were no longer seventeen, no longer those kids who thought love could conquer anything.

Emily stirred her drink absentmindedly, her smile fading just slightly. "Did you ever think about high school? About... us?"

Patrick's fingers tightened around his coffee cup. He inhaled slowly, his gaze locked on hers. "All the time."

Emily exhaled, her fingers tightening slightly around the warm ceramic mug. She wasn't sure what she had expected Patrick to say, but hearing those words—so direct, so unfiltered—made something shift inside her. She glanced down, watching the slow swirl of foam in her latte, as if the answer to all the questions she hadn't asked lay somewhere in that whirlpool.

"All the time."

It was a confession. A truth wrapped in a decade of silence, delivered across a table stained with coffee rings and nostalgia. And yet, what did it really mean? That he still thought about their late-night conversations? That he wondered, as she did, what might have been? Or was it something simpler—just two people looking back at their youth with the kind of fondness that softened the edges of reality?

She finally looked up, her hazel eyes searching his face. "I do too." The words left her lips before she could second-guess them.

Patrick leaned back in his chair, exhaling softly, his fingers tapping lightly against his cup. "I figured you might." He gave a small smile, though there was something almost hesitant in his eyes. "I mean, we spent years practically glued together. Hard to forget something like that."

She nodded, a wistful chuckle escaping her. "God, we were inseparable, weren't we?"

Patrick smirked. "People used to joke that we had our own language."

"We kinda did." She smiled, tracing the rim of her mug. "I remember the way we could just... look at each other and know exactly what the other was thinking."

Patrick's expression softened. "Yeah." A pause. "That doesn't happen with just anyone."

A silence settled between them, not uncomfortable, but weighty. The kind of silence that carried a thousand unspoken words. Outside, the rain had picked up, soft droplets pattering against the café window, streaking the glass in thin, winding rivers. The glow of the streetlights reflected off the wet pavement, and for a moment, Emily felt like she had been transported back in time—back to the nights when they'd run through the rain, laughing, breathless, unbothered by the cold.

Patrick must have been thinking the same thing because he suddenly chuckled, shaking his head. "Do you remember that time we got caught in a storm walking home from the diner?"

Emily grinned. "How could I forget? My mom was furious when I got home drenched. She thought we'd been up to something."

"You know we were," Patrick teased, a playful gleam in his eye. "We were being reckless idiots, dancing in the rain like we were in some kind of movie."

Emily laughed, tucking her hair behind her ear. "It felt like a movie. Everything back then did."

Patrick nodded, his smile fading just slightly. "Yeah. It did."

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The weight of the years between then and now settled over them, and Emily could feel it pressing against her chest.

She cleared her throat, shifting in her seat. "So... what happened, Pat?"

Patrick blinked, clearly caught off guard. "What do you mean?"

She let out a small, almost exasperated laugh. "Come on. Us. We never really talked about it. One day we were making plans for the future, and the next... we weren't."

Patrick sighed, rubbing a hand over his jaw. "Life happened, Em" His voice was quieter now, more reflective. "You got accepted to that university in New York. I stayed here, working odd jobs, trying to figure out what the hell I was doing with my life. And before we knew it, months had passed. Then years."

Emily swallowed hard. "Yeah. But it wasn't just distance, was it?"

Patrick looked at her for a long moment, then shook his head. "No. It wasn't." He hesitated. "I think... I think I was scared."

She tilted her head slightly. "Of what?"

He exhaled, his fingers tightening around his cup. "Of losing you. And somehow, in trying to avoid that, I lost you anyway."

The words hit her harder than she expected. She had spent years wondering what had gone wrong—if there had been a moment, a choice, a single misstep that had sent them down different paths. But maybe it had never been one thing. Maybe it had been a slow unraveling, tiny fractures forming until one day, there was nothing left to hold onto.

Emily nodded slowly, her voice softer now. "I think I was scared too. Scared that if I held on too tightly, I'd just be making it harder for both of us."

Patrick let out a humorless laugh. "So we both let go, thinking it was the right thing to do."

"And here we are," Emily said quietly, a bittersweet smile on her lips.

Patrick studied her, something unreadable in his expression. "Do you ever wonder what would've happened if we had held on a little longer?"

Her heart stop beating for moment. It was a dangerous question, one she had asked herself too many times over the years. She looked down at her coffee, watching the steam curl into the air.

"Yeah." She finally looked up, meeting his gaze. "I do."

Another silence stretched between them, but this time, it was different. Heavier.

Finally, Patrick sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I don't regret knowing you, Em. Not for a second."

Emily smiled, a genuine, soft smile. "Me neither."

They sat there for a while, the past lingering between them, thick with memories and unanswered questions. And yet, for the first time in a long time, Emily didn't feel like she was drowning in the what-ifs.

The hum of the coffee shop had faded into the background, the conversations of other patrons reduced to a soft, indistinct murmur. Outside, the rain had settled into a gentle drizzle, the streetlights casting long, golden reflections across the wet pavement. Emily traced the rim of her coffee cup with her finger, her thoughts swirling as much as the foam in her half-empty latte.

Patrick was staring at his own cup, his brows furrowed slightly, lost in thought. She wondered if he was thinking the same thing she was—about the way time had shaped them, how they had drifted so far apart only to find themselves sitting across from each other again, like no time had passed at all.

Finally, he exhaled, shaking his head slightly. "You know what's crazy?" he said, his voice soft but steady.

Emily lifted her eyes to meet his. "What?"

He leaned back in his chair, running a hand through his dark hair. "That after all these years, after everything... this still feels so easy. Like we just picked up from where we left off."

A small smile tugged at the corner of Emily's lips. "Yeah," she admitted. "It does."

Patrick chuckled, shaking his head. "I mean, shouldn't this be weird? Shouldn't we be stumbling over our words, struggling to find something to say?"

Emily shrugged. "Maybe. But maybe we were always meant to find our way back to this—to each other."

Her own words surprised her, and for a moment, she wished she could take them back. But Patrick didn't laugh or brush it off like a silly thought. Instead, he looked at her—really looked at her—the way he used to in high school, like she was something worth understanding, worth knowing in ways that went beyond just words.

"Maybe," he murmured, his fingers tapping idly against his coffee cup.

The weight of their history pressed down on them, the space between them filled with memories that neither of them could erase. And yet, as much as Emily wanted to hold onto this moment, she also knew that the past had a way of romanticizing itself. It was easy to sit here and remember all the good parts—to think about the late-night walks, the endless conversations, the way he used to make her laugh until her stomach hurt. But the past also carried its fair share of silences, of misunderstandings, of choices that had led them to where they were now.

She swallowed hard, deciding to ask the question that had been sitting on the tip of her tongue since they sat down. "So... what about now? What's your life like, Pat?"

Patrick smirked, shaking his head slightly. "That's a loaded question."

Emily laughed softly. "I've got time."

He exhaled, resting his elbow on the table, his fingers rubbing against his jawline. "Well... after you left, I kind of drifted for a while. Tried a bunch of different jobs, none of which I actually liked. But eventually, I landed in construction. Started off just doing labor, but I worked my way up. Now I manage a crew."

Emily tilted her head, impressed. "That's amazing. Are you happy?"

Patrick hesitated, and that pause told her more than words ever could. "It's... stable," he admitted finally. "Pays well. Gives me something to do. But is it what I pictured for myself back in high school? Not really."

Emily frowned slightly. "What did you picture?"

Patrick let out a soft laugh. "I don't know... something different. Something bigger." He sighed, shaking his head. "But I guess life doesn't always go the way we think it will."

She nodded, understanding that more than she cared to admit. "Yeah. It really doesn't."

Patrick studied her for a moment, then smirked. "Okay, your turn. What's life like for you?"

Emily exhaled, leaning back in her chair. "Well, after college, I stayed in New York for a while. Got a job at a publishing house, editing manuscripts, working crazy hours. It was... exciting, at first. But after a few years, it started to feel like I was running on a treadmill—always moving, but never really getting anywhere."

Patrick raised a brow. "So you left?"

Emily nodded. "Yeah. Moved back a few months ago, actually."

Patrick's expression shifted slightly, like he was just now realizing how recent her return was. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Emily hesitated, wrapping her hands around her cup. "I don't know. I guess I didn't think it would matter."

Patrick scoffed lightly. "It would've."

The certainty in his voice made something tighten in her chest.

"So what now?" he asked. "Are you planning to stay?"

Emily bit her lip. "I think so. At least for now. I needed a break from the city, from the constant noise and pressure. I figured coming back home might help me figure out what's next."

Patrick nodded slowly. "Home has a way of doing that."

She looked at him, realizing something. "You never left, did you?"

Patrick gave a half-smile, shaking his head. "Nope. Thought about it a million times, but somehow, I always stayed. Not sure if that makes me loyal or just stuck."

Emily reached across the table, her fingers brushing against his. "I don't think you're stuck, Pat. I think you just found something that felt solid. And there's nothing wrong with that."

His eyes flickered to their hands, to the place where her fingertips lightly rested against his knuckles. He didn't move away.

"You always did see the best in me," he murmured.

Emily smiled. "Because I know you. And I know you're not the kind of person to settle unless you choose to."

Patrick exhaled, his thumb grazing the side of her hand just barely before he pulled away, leaning back.

"So what now?" he asked again, but this time, the question felt bigger.

Emily swallowed, feeling the air shift between them. "I don't know."

Patrick smirked. "That makes two of us."

A comfortable silence settled, but there was something else beneath it now—a quiet, unspoken possibility. Maybe life hadn't worked out the way either of them had expected. Maybe the paths they had taken had led them away from each other for a reason. But sitting here now, with the rain still falling softly outside, Emily couldn't help but wonder if some things—some people—were meant to find their way back.

The rain had finally stopped by the time they stepped out of the coffee shop, the scent of wet pavement filling the air. The streets glistened under the dim glow of the streetlights, reflecting the golden hues of the world around them. A cool breeze carried the last remnants of the storm, brushing against Emily's skin as she pulled her coat tighter around herself.

Patrick stood beside her, hands shoved into the pockets of his jacket, gazing up at the sky like he was searching for something. Maybe an answer. Maybe a sign. Emily wasn't sure.

"Feels like old times, doesn't it?" he murmured.

She turned to him, arching a brow. "What does?"

A smirk played at his lips. "Us. Walking like this. After the rain."

And just like that, she was eighteen again, slipping her hand into his as they walked home from the diner after a late-night study session. The streets had been just as quiet, the world just as still, like they were the only two people left in it.

She exhaled, shaking her head. "Yeah, it does."

Patrick started walking, and instinctively, she followed.

Their footsteps fell into rhythm, neither of them in a hurry, as if they were trying to stretch this moment for as long as possible.

"Do you remember that one time we got caught in the storm after school?" Patrick asked suddenly. "We ran all the way to your house, completely soaked. Your mom made us hot chocolate."

Emily laughed, the memory crashing over her like a wave. "And you refused to take off your wet clothes because you thought borrowing my brother's hoodie would make you look ridiculous."

Patrick grinned. "It was three sizes too big!"

"You looked like a lost kid."

"I looked like an idiot."

She nudged him playfully, and he chuckled, shaking his head. "That was a good day."

Emily sighed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "There were a lot of good days."

Patrick's smile faltered slightly. "Yeah... there were."

And then came the silence—the one that always seemed to creep in whenever they got too close to the truth, too close to the edge of something neither of them were sure how to handle.

Emily slowed her pace, her heart hammering in her chest. "Pat..."

He stopped, turning to face her. "Yeah?"

She hesitated, chewing on the inside of her cheek. "Why did we let it go?"

His expression softened. "You mean us?"

She nodded. "I mean... we had something, didn't we? Something real."

Patrick exhaled, running a hand through his hair. "Yeah, Em. We did."

She searched his face, trying to find the answer in his eyes. "Then why?"

He let out a humorless chuckle. "Because we were young. Because life got in the way. Because you had dreams, and I didn't want to be the one to hold you back."

Her throat tightened. "You wouldn't have."

Patrick looked at her, his gaze unreadable. "Maybe not. But back then, I thought you deserved more. More than this town, more than me."

Emily's chest ached. "That wasn't your choice to make."

"I know." His voice was barely above a whisper. "And I've regretted it ever since."

The confession hung between them, heavy with all the years they had lost.

Emily swallowed hard, her eyes stinging. "I would've stayed, Pat. If you had asked me to, I would've stayed."

Patrick closed his eyes for a moment, like he was trying to erase the weight of that truth, but when he opened them again, all Emily saw was regret. "I didn't want you to have to choose."

Her heart ached for the boy he used to be, for the man standing in front of her now, carrying the weight of a decision made years ago.

"And what about now?" she asked softly. "If I told you I was staying... would that change anything?"

Patrick inhaled sharply, his jaw tightening as if he was trying to keep his emotions in check. "Emily..."

She shook her head, stepping closer. "I'm not asking for promises, Pat. I just need to know if you still..."

"Em i never stopped."

His words hit her like a gust of wind, stealing the breath from her lungs.

Emily blinked, her heart racing. "Then what are we doing?"

Patrick let out a soft, broken laugh. "Trying to figure out if the past is worth chasing, or if we're just fooling ourselves."

She let that sink in. Because as much as she wanted to believe that what they had could be rekindled, the truth was, time had changed them. They weren't the same kids who used to dream about forever. They had lived, lost, and learned in the space between then and now.

She took his hand, threading her fingers through his like she used to.

"I don't know what's going to happen, Pat. But I do know that I don't want to leave this time without at least trying."

Patrick stared at their hands, then at her, something shifting in his expression—something raw, something real. "You sure about that?"

Emily smiled, squeezing his hand. "I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

For the first time that night, Patrick let out a deep breath, like he had been holding it in for years. And then, slowly, he smiled—a real smile, the kind that reached his eyes, the kind that made her feel like they had a shot at this after all.

They started walking again, hand in hand, the streetlights casting long shadows behind them.

Maybe they wouldn't have all the answers tonight. Maybe it would take time to figure out who they were now, how they fit into each other's lives after so many years apart.

But for the first time in a long time, Emily felt like they weren't just reminiscing about the past. They were stepping into something new.

About the author

My name is Tinashe Joseph Chiwara, but I prefer to go by Joseph. Growing up, I never thought I'd become a writer, but life has a way of surprising us.

It all started when I was 14 years old. My teacher asked me to present my essay in front of the class, and I was taken aback. Not because I was shy, although I was, but because my teacher's reaction was unlike anything I'd ever seen before. She was impressed, and her words of encouragement sparked something within me.

As I delved deeper into the world of writing, I discovered that it was more than just a hobby – it was my sanctuary. I found solace in creating stories, worlds, and characters that were entirely my own. It was a way for me to express myself, to process my thoughts and emotions, and to make sense of the world around me.

When I'm not writing, you can find me sitting around listening to music or taking long walks around the neighborhood. I'm not much of a social person, and that's okay. I've learned to appreciate the quiet moments, the stillness that allows me to reflect and recharge.

Writing these stories has been a way for me to connect with others, to share my thoughts and feelings with those who may be going through similar experiences. It's a way for me to say, "You're not alone," and to offer a glimpse into my own world, a world that's full of wonder, magic, and possibility.

As I continue on this writing journey, I'm reminded that stories have the power to transform us, to challenge our assumptions, and to inspire us to be better versions of ourselves. I hope that my stories will do the same for you, dear reader.

Thank you for joining me on this journey, and I look forward to sharing more of my stories with you in the future.

My Other Works:

I'm thrilled to share with you my other published works, each one a labor of love that explores the human condition in unique and captivating ways.

Map to Home

My debut novel, "Map to Home," is a heartwarming and gripping tale of family, love, and resilience. The story follows the Collins siblings as they band together to save their ancestral farm from a ruthless businessman. With its richly drawn characters, vivid settings, and poignant themes, "Map to Home" is a must-read for anyone who's ever fought to preserve their heritage and their sense of belonging.

Whispers of Willow Creek

In "Whispers of Willow Creek," I weave a mesmerizing mystery that explores the complexities of friendship, trauma, and redemption. The story centers around two inseparable best friends, Miles and Bridget, who embark on a perilous quest to unravel the truth behind the disappearance of a boy named Ethan, which occurred a decade ago. As they dig deeper, they begin to confront their own dark pasts and the secrets that have haunted their small town for years. With its intricate plot, relatable characters, and atmospheric setting, "Whispers of Willow Creek" will keep you on the edge of your seat until the very end.

These stories, like the ones in this anthology, are testaments to the power of fiction to transport us, to transform us, and to connect us with others. I hope you'll join me on these journeys into the human heart, and that you'll discover new worlds, new characters, and new insights that will linger with you long after you finish reading.

And by the way please tell me which story stood out/ resonated with you the most? Please feel free to email me at josephchiwara123@gmail.com telling me about your favourite story.

**Liked the anthology? Please
consider leaving a review and
don't hesitate to tell share with
others.**