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## From Kingdom Come

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.Cory Robinson

about 34, 313 words

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From Kingdom Come

By

Cory Robinson

I

“Boo! Did I scare ya? I’m sorry if I did, I am indeedly. I just never have an audience anymore and boy, oh, boy is it great to see you! I’m guessin’ that if ya here, you is here for a story? Well, do I have a story for you! What is it about? Well, it’s about da world endin’ of course! You know, that time when it all went it all went bad? Sure ya do! How could ya eva’ forget it? So where were ya? Me, I was on this very rowboat, paddlin’ down this here riva’, hopin’ to catch me some crawfish for dinna, and loving ma life. Hell, we all were lovin’ life, weren’t we? Well, if ya weren’t then I guess you either a red-belly liar or as dull as ma mama’s casserole! Anyway, I was listenin’ to dem birdies ova yonda and whistlin back to ma brothas and sistas when I went blind. I mean, I didn’t actually go blind, but I sure felt like I did. Instead, the whole world began to go

dark. That's right. The sun began to lose its light. Ya know, the darkness was neva supposed to happen so quickly. It was, what do those edumacation peoples call it? A solar eclipse! Yeah, that's it. Well, that eclipse thingamajig came on fast and ain't no one could have predicted that. But, I guess then they could never have predicted it to stay this long either. The shadows began to take the sunlight from every corna of dis Earth. Hell, it seemed like Death was right down here next to us and he was out for a vengeance. Dem sweet birdies I was listening to flew away and never came back. The crawfish stopped bitin too. In fact, most of the animals scattered to the last places of warmth, and maybe we peoples should have done the same. From then on out, you could only hear the melodies of, well, nothing. It was the first time in maybe all of history, where mama Earth closed her beautiful lips. In awe or fear, I can't really say, but everyone sure had a feelin. Everyone and deir mama had a reaction. And, my, oh my, did people get- well, I guess I'll save that for the story. But, I must warn ya, these are frightening watas we headin into. Because you may think you control dis here rowboat you now in with me, but lemme tell ya, I haven't steered dis thing in a long time. Wait, while I have ya here, take an oar, kick back and relax, and come take a look at that beautiful sky up ahead. Look how those fluffy purple clouds dance along the smog, the blood red aura of the sun, and the orange you glad you're alive sunset. As a matta a fact, do ya see those storm clouds headin our way? What a great sight! Why? Because every story needs a start, am I right? That dere is our start! So buckle up butter cup, and take dis here jacket cuz dem cats and dogs be on their way."

## II

A bolt of lightning lights up the sky and a crack of thunder sounds as the storms clouds now swirl as if a hurricane has now surreptitiously formed. And suddenly, the churning river shifts, flips on itself, collapses, and expands into a new setting. A desolate and jagged cliff top begins to appear through a sudden mist. The trees alongside its rocky edges are mangled and seem to be slowly dying. The pathway leading down the hill into an overgrowing valley looks as though it has never seen a loving hand. The rain continues to pound against this hill, as if nature wanted to get rid of it altogether. A quick glance may not have detected a figure hiding out amongst the rotting tress, but a man dressed in overlapping garments crouched within the thorned underbrush at the base of the tallest tree. The tree seemed to have years of life in its roots and yet, seemed to be the sickest of them all. Some of its roots were slowly ripping up from the ground they should have been nurtured by, but were now exposed to the harsh world we all call home. Just as the most blinding strike of lightening lit up the sky, a man jumped out of the brush with a sword. The lightning glinted off the metallic blade that had etchings of creatures from all over the world. The creatures seemed to run, dance, and pounce as the lightning continuously bounced off. Then, as soon as the flash gave way to the boom, the man thrust the blade straight into the air. Just when you would think the blade should sweep through the atmosphere, the blade instead sliced and pierced the sky, as if an invisible mass was just delivered a lethal blow. At this moment, the hooded figure twisted the entire sword and whispered its name, "Espiritaz," as delicately as would a person saying goodnight to their love. The entire sky above froze and stopped dead in its tracks. The wielder of Espiritaz now twisted the sword in the opposite direction and the sky above contorted and churned with resistance. The entire blade hummed with power until the ground the mysterious figure stood upon was vibrating. A wicked smile spread across his face like that of a pumpkin that was carved horribly wrong. Whatever he was trying to accomplish by bending the very fabric of nature with this magical instrument was working. That is until it all went wrong. The veiled man contorted and began to writhe. He lost

his grip on the blade. Espritiaz kicked back and the earth in which the man stood upon cracked with a large crunching sound and the sword let out a deafening screech, lit up and disappeared. The man let out a screeching, “EEAA,” and the hill that overlooked the grassy knoll below rumbled with the anger within this stranger. There was suddenly a pop and the cloaked figure disappeared from sight, just as a clap of thunder lit up the entire valley.

### III

The quaint, ranch with yellow siding and blue shutters was pounded by the storm outside. In fact, all of the houses in suburbia Albany, New York were facing down an angry storm that night. Colin Cook awoke to the thunder that masked the fist that knocked his mother down to the ground. It was at night that Clarke Cook would grow angry and violent towards his wife, Carmin. However, the darkness cannot hide all and as Colin grew older, so did his awareness of his father's behavior. Having just turned ten, Colin began to create his own ideas and beliefs, ever so slightly. He began to listen and hear the sounds of abuse that seeped into the walls like an infectious stain. But, he just never knew what he could do; he was a little boy after all. What strength did he have? That night however, something changed within him. Colin felt a surge of unbearable anger and before he knew it, he was out of his bed, in the hallway that connected his room to his parents and inside their bedroom, just as his father landed a whopping fist on her now bruised cheek. His father screamed, "He needed to be picked up from school at 2:30 pm and where the hell were you?"

"Honey, I was caught up at the school down the..." Carmin spat out as Clarke interrupted,

"Not there! Instead, I get a call in the middle of my job and have to go pick up your damn son. How do you expect us to pay for anything if I am always, cleaning up, your, messes?" With each pause in between his words, Clarke hit Carmin. Colin's mother tried to constantly speak out and defend herself, but the father's other hand was busy choking her.

Colin's eyes widened and his fists tightened to the point that his tiny nails drew blood from his palms. However, he did not feel any pain at this point; only anger. Colin cleared his throat to gain his father's attention in a desperate hope of stopping this nightmare. But this was not a nightmare and Colin was no longer sleeping. As this failed, Colin instead threw himself onto his father, whom immediately lashed out his arms. Colin was thrown back into the armoire that his grandfather had hand carved and crafted years prior. His thoughts quickly drifted to when he would hide within the coats and garments while his grandfather searched for him and be found soon after

as his childish laughter gave away his hide out. Those happy memories however were no longer present as they were replaced with those of the current reality.

Colin flashed back to the present as he felt his head collide with the corner and a sharp pain shot across the back of his head and extended right into his eyeballs. His eyesight momentarily dimmed from the impact, but refocused in enough time to watch his father wrap his hands around his slender neck. Colin was levitated from the shaggy carpet he used to race his toy cars upon and ripped into the hallway by the collar of his pajama shirt. However, his mother was on his father's back in seconds, screeching at the husband whom she lost a long time ago. This shift of weight caused the father to lose his grip on Colin and gave Colin the room he needed to squirm out and drop to the floor. Colin's entire body was now in a battle of flight or fight and for the life of him, he didn't know which one scared him more. Colin ran for the phone by the stairs in hopes of finding some aid for them, but was soon knocked to the ground by his father. As his father slowly back-stepped down the stairs with Colin's small ankles in his hands, Colin realized that he only had mere seconds before his father would isolate Colin and head back to finishing his job on the wife he claimed to love. His head swirled with emotions and ideas of what to do next, but all that he could do was quickly turn just as a deep, guttural "OORAW," fell out of his mouth. In that moment, words became a living force and knocked his father down the stairs lined with the family pictures from over the years. As Colin's father tumbled down the stairs, his mother raced to his side and held Colin tighter than he has ever been held before. After a few seconds of embrace, Colin fought against his mother's embrace and he broke free just enough to be able to peer down the stairs and at the base of the staircase lied his father, lifeless.

From there on out, Colin never regained his childhood. He and his mother covered up this incident as they knew what people would say. Murder would be scratched across their foreheads. So they took to telling family and neighbors that Clarke simply got up one night, left and never returned. Colin's mom took on three jobs after that night in order to put him through the remaining years of school. She continued on as the school nurse at Colin's elementary school, as well as cleaned the school at night while also babysitting for most weekends. Because of her workload she would try to be home as much as she could, but oftentimes would come back just as Colin would go to sleep. Colin tried every day to forget what he did and tried every night to shut down the nightmares that shook him from his slumber. He went onto to become a strapping young man, who grew into his father's looks. With shaggy strawberry blonde hair, a smile that could wipe away

any troubles, and his mother's eyes which looked as though jade were covered in moss and dusted with gold, Colin became a very popular face at school. In fact, in order to keep his mind of his darkest secrets, he tried to stay active within his school community. From his freshmen year of high school, he joined his school football team as this was always something his father wanted to see him do when he grew up. And sadly, Colin still tried to attain his father's pride he only ever received when he brought him over the bottle of Jim Bean whiskey. But oftentimes, a broken heart can quite literally kill. And Colin tried his best every day to keep the pain of cowardice inside its cage. But these days, those cages had a habit of prying themselves open.



### IIIIV

Reports all over the nation were reading of a massive storm affecting the United States that weekend. Because of the torrential rain, all of the Fourth of July plans were now cancelled. Theodosia Turner watched the small television that was centered in a decrepit living room. The paint was chipping and the furniture was decaying by the second. In all honesty, it could have used a feminine touch, but Theodosia's mother, Taylor, had left when she was five for a modeling gig in Vegas. From there on out, it was only ten-year old Theodosia, or Theo as everyone called her, her eight year old brother Tripp, and her father, Tyler. They lived in a tiny one bedroom apartment that they sublet from an old college friend of Mr. Turners, but it was clearly in complete disarray. That night, the storm was shaking the entire house. From the spot in which she was sitting, she could feel the whole foundation of the house tremble with each thundering blow. That night Theo felt increasingly worried, but could not recognize why she had such fear. What was there to be uncertain about?

Pictures and testimonies on TV of people from all over America shook Theo out of her head and into focus on this peculiar storm. It was about two in the morning and ten year old Theo always would come out for a snack of tea biscuits and luke-warm milk. She never slept well after her mother left and this was a lasting memory of her. As pictures of rising oceans breaking barriers and trees destroying houses flashed across her screen, she felt a wave of exhaustion overcome her and before she knew it she was in the only happy place she had left: her dreams. That night soon became a nightmare for the Turner family. A deafening boom woke Theo out of a restless sleep and a flash of lightning lit up the room just enough for Theo to catch glimpse of an intruder. Believing it was all a dream, Theo casually laid back down on the lumpy pillow and turned over for a more comfortable position. But instinct chilled her blood and pried open her eyes. Theo jumped to her feet in enough time to watch the burglar grasp for her hair, grab a chunk, pull and twist. Theo screamed in pain as the intruder attempted to drag her out of the apartment and into the storm outside. Tripp and his father came rushing out to make sense of all the commotion they

heard in enough time to see Theo attempting to fight off her attacker. Her tiny arms and frail build would not prevail against a crazed man. Just as she broke free, lightning flashed once again and glinted off the thin, sharp blade the intruder now brandished. Theo's eyes opened wide in anguish. She knew what this situation had become. Before she could think of what to do next or where to go, the man gave a fowl swoop of the knife and slashed Theo across the face. Her body fell limp as blood poured out from the wound that stretched from her right temple, across her eye, under her nose and just before her lip.

The intruder then moved onto Tripp as he raced for the landline on the dirty counter. In a desperate attempt to try and save his family, Tripp began to dial 911. However, the phone was ripped from his hand and thrown against the far wall. Mr. Turner charged at the intruder. He hoped to overpower the man, but his blade was too quick. He caught the father at his neck and silenced him at once. As the murderer then sucked the life from Theo's eight year old brother, Tripp still tried to grasp for the phone until his last breath. Theo woke up to her brother's whimpers, but forced herself to lie deathly still. As she felt the ground under the intruder's foot move, she sensed his approach, his realization of the crime, and his quick exit from the apartment. Carefully picking herself up and onto her knees with both hands on her gash, she crawled over to the only family she ever had, hoping to find some life. Realizing her father had moved on to the place the local priest always talked about, Theo crawled over to her brother and held the limp hand still reaching for the smashed phone. Tears streamed down her cheeks and stung her damaged socket. Overwhelming emotion overcame Theo and arose from deep within. Wanting to scream, plead, beg, or cry, Theo instead exclaimed, "Aooo," before she crumpled onto the floor. Police arrived shortly after to a strange noise was reported by neighbors to find the grizzly scene.

Life after that fateful night was never again the same for Theo. Any form of trust she had in anyone was scattered and destroyed. From there on out, Theo took to the streets, stole her meals, and ran from the law. Theo carried around the guilt of lying there like a coward as her family was killed. From living off the streets, Theo attained a very weathered look. She was skinny, not too fit, had long legs and jagged hair from the inexperienced bob she gave herself using the scissors she stole from Mrs. Murphy down the street. The scar never healed quite properly and a thin, serrated, white line danced across her face and around the pointed nose that always reminded her that she was a Turner. After being rushed to Vermont Medical, her eye was treated, but she was promised by her doctor that she would never see again from that eye. What was left was that of

one perfect sparkling silver eye that resembled liquid platinum. But, the milky eye seemed to still see it all. The blood dripping from the walls. The dead look in the eyes of her father. Her brother's hand still trying to grasp for the phone that was shattered on the far wall. She was blind in that eye, but the haunting memories did not obey their confines. She was ruined. But, it was in this tragedy that her life began.

## V

Hail was beating in the brick walls that lined the dimly lit alley way. The back end of the local shops were all closed down early in anticipation of the holiday weekend. Streamers and bunting could be seen floating down the street and clogging the gutters in the alley. This seemingly quiet and desolate setting was soon interrupted by the jarring noises of shouting and running. As each foot landed on the pavement, an eruption of greasy water resulted. Felix Fischer could be seen running alongside his classmates. Except, with each flash of lightning the terrified look in his eyes became more visible. This harmless scene soon turned into something out of the discovery channel Felix would watch every day when he returned home from school. It was the classic scene of the prey being chased by the predator into the inescapable corner. And this time, the corner was a crumbling brick wall, stained by the smoke and pollution from the surrounding restaurants and stores. As the group of neighborhood bullies closed off Felix's only exit with their bodies, his mind fell back upon the months past when he first moved to Baltimore, Maryland.

Florida was always his home from the moment he was born and his stomping grounds. But, his life was turned upside down when he had just turned ten and he, his four siblings, Finn, Fiona, Ferdinand, and Fran, were packed up and driven off to a place up north. His dad, Frank, had just received a new job placement in a major city and his mother, Faye, absolutely wanted her kids to have a fresh start. But, being the new kid is never easy. Felix started the 6<sup>th</sup> grade with a positive attitude and an uplifted chin. However, Bobby Baker was out for blood and Felix soon became the target for his immaturity. Felix would be ridiculed for his chocolate kissed skin, his stocky build, his lack of hair, and his pudgy nose. All traits that Felix's mother said made him were subject to laughter and mockery. However, words became actions as the year progressed and as the school year rounded into its closing days, Felix would often run home to avoid getting whirlies in the girl's bathroom or pushed to the ground out behind the rusted bleachers. As the pressure surmounted, Felix eventually cracked and the words of help came spilling out of his mouth and onto the floor where his parents stood. From there on out, Felix was never bothered by these

delinquents as they were punished both by the school district and their own parents. But, vultures have a way of finding their prey once again. That night, Felix snuck out of his house around the corner. Trying to grab some ice cream for his siblings, he quickly ran to the convenient store, slipped the cashier a crumpled ten dollar bill that had been given to him earlier that week for doing his chores, and set out once again for his home. While in the store, the forecasted storm began to drive people off the streets and to their homes and in minutes there was not a soul in sight. Felix paused at the glass door and observed the environment around him. Waiting to see if the rain would let up, he was soon disappointed with the realization that he did not bring an umbrella nor his rain jacket. Pulling the hood of his Miami Dolphins sweatshirt tight around his head and face, Felix took a deep breath and lunged out on the sidewalk. As he ran down the street, he watched as the stop lights blinked and shuttered with every gust of wind that threatened to shut down their life. He watched as the storm clouds swirled above. Felix observed the storm as he always did when hurricanes hit in Florida and at this moment, he was chilled with the realization that the storm tonight was no different. However, he was shaken from his thoughts by a voice at the end of the street.

“Yo, dweeb. Yo mama can’t protect you now.” Felix knew that voice from anywhere. He didn’t even have to squint through the blinding rain to know that Bobby had found him. This time alone. Felix’s entire body began to tingle. Before he even knew, his feet were carrying him around the corner he knew all too well and safely down the road past the last of the shops before the suburbs kicked in again. But his legs soon failed him as soon as he was stopped by one of Bobby’s followers. “You lookin’ to go somewhere. I can tell ya it ain’t home for you right now.”

Felix tried to back up as quickly as he could but instead slammed right into Bobby’s open arms. Felix observed for a split second the burn scars all over the arms that resembled that of cigarette butts. But, in the next second the Neapolitan ice cream he had just purchased was flowing down the street and into the gutter and Felix was searching for a way out. As one, two, three, more of Bobby’s followed after him, Felix began to tremble. From fear? From the chill coming off of his soaked clothes? Whatever the source was, the effect led Felix straight down an alleyway and into the worst place of all: a dead end. Felix tried to claw his way up the wall, but there was no use. He was trapped. It was either fight or be beaten. Felix’s world began to spin as he searched for a way to transport himself out of this situation. “Please.” His word was interrupted as he tried to gasp for air. He reached into his pocket for his inhaler. “Stop.” Another deep was halted by Boy

slapping the inhaler out of his hand. “No,” was uttered as Bobby’s foot came down on the tube and smashed it.

A rock hurtled out of the blinding rain and hit him square in the nose. He stumbled back as blood rushed down his face and onto his most favorite piece of clothing. Soon enough, pebbles and rocks were being hurled at him and were bouncing off the brick walls behind him. His only instinct was to cower and cover to protect himself. He gasped for air. He searched for escape plans. He prayed for some sort of help.

A crack of lightning touched down and knocked down a nearby electric pole just as Felix’s entire body shuttered and erected. With his next forced intake of air, Felix exhaled with a mighty, “PHAA,” that sent his aggressors off their feet and flying backwards. The high pitched sound transformed from transmitted noise into a physical energy Felix never knew he had. He didn’t even have to lay a hand on these boys in order to defend himself. An immense swell of pride rushed from Felix’s heart and flowed into every part of his body. If only he had looked up in enough time to see the cop car rush by, stop, back up, and turn into the alleyway. As Felix prepared to voice his explanation to the police officer, he looked down to find Bobby pull his hand away from his ear.

“Bobby, I didn’t mean to...” but he stopped as the calloused, hairy hand was full of blood that was now flowing down the pimpled cheeks of the aggressor. In fact, every last one of the tormenters were bleeding from their ears. As the cop paced over to Felix who was scared for his life, he too noticed the bloody situation the boys were in. Just as the cop asked Bobby to explain what happened, Bobby’s eyes widened with the realization that he had just lost something very dear to him: his hearing. In fact, all of the bullies that night would never regain one of their most precious senses. That night, Felix was led to a detention center and faced the most and only trouble he has ever been in. In a short amount of time, Felix’s young face, chocolate eyes, and sincere smile weathered and faded as he went from detention center to juvenile center. In and out of these horrible places took quite a toll and soon after, the only way to recognize the old Felix was in his thick neck, torso, and legs that he always had. He wanted people to see him and yet just wanted to be left alone. After a while, Felix faded to a corrupted shell of a teen who was feared by many. But Felix didn’t care, as it was easier to be feared than loved and eventually forgotten. His family tried so hard to take him to any specialist, but Felix eventually simply shut the world out in order to save him the heartache of reliving his problems. The storm passed that fateful night, but the

problems it caused would not be the end. These moments would test him beyond belief. They would test us all.

## VI

The roar of the storm outside was no match for power of the laughter between the two young girls inside. Maddison Montgomery was running after her younger sister, Mary, grabbing her by the waist and hoisting her onto her small, slender back. “Higher Maddie, higher!” Mary exclaimed as she squealed with the pure excitement that was accustomed to siblings playing together.

The smell of freshly baked pies wafted through the old craftsman styled house. Maddie’s mother, Margaret, was baking all of the pies that were supposed to be brought over to Maddie’s grandmother’s house for that upcoming holiday. But, the unrelenting storm took away all the promise that hopeful hearts had for a sunny Fourth. Instead, most of America was forced into their homes on this weekend. Maddie so desperately wanted to be out on the old family rowboat and paddling down the river. Her favorite moments were when she could simply run off, put on a life jacket so that her mom’s mind would be eased, grab a good book and a few of her mom’s delicious cookies, and drift for hours down the river. She never saw anyone while she was out there which often struck Maddie as peculiar, but she did enjoy the peace and quiet so she never debated the question. However, as grown up as she felt when she would steer the rowboat her grandmother taught her from the time she could walk, Maddie could never quite pronounce the river’s name for the life of her. Residents of her town knew its name for all its glory and the Chattahoochee River would embrace many visitors throughout its days. However, on that particular night the river began to swell to threatening levels from the surge of the rain pounding its depths. All those on the immediate river were forced to more inward places. Politicians and news casters from all over could be heard on the news and radio urging people to stay indoors. They had never seen a storm like this and wanted to keep their people safe.

Maddie continued to run around and play various games with Mary. In moments, the floor was molten lava that threatened to consume them and their house was a castle in which a sleepy dragon guarded with his fiery breath. When imagination began to dwindle, a roaring game of hide



and seek was started. As Maddie ran around trying to find Mary, she circumvented the small leak that was dripping down upon the coffee table. She ran into a downwind of sweet blueberry and smiled while she salivated. Madison's mother owned her own bakery and was always baking creations in the kitchen. Oftentimes, one could smell any number of delicious and scrumptious aromas wafting through the kitchen. But, she could never find the right amount of money to repair the leak. Tonight especially, there seemed to be a never ending stream of water finding its way through to the living room. They had gone through five buckets in three hours.

Maddie continued her search through the house, trying to find any trace of her sister that she could. Just as this sweet moment popped into her head, her sister popped through mountain of blankets that was beside the couch that was at the center portion of the wall. Maddie jumped back and awoke from her distraction. A mixture of anger, fear, happiness, and excitement raced through Maddie's mind as she hated being scared, but loved to have fun. Maddie went to grab Mary out from under the covers just as a deep rumble began and evolved. It shook the entire house. The lights flickered and different decorations her mom had used to brighten up the place fell to the ground. Maddie grabbed Mary. She knew what an earthquake was like from the simulations they did in school. Knowing to meet their mom in the bathtub, Maddie was ready to run with her sister in hand when she was covered in dust. Looking up, the leak turned into a crack. Powder from the sheetrock poured down and covered Maddie's long golden hair. She wiped the dust out of her fiery orange eyes and cleared the gunk out of her small nose. She then repeated this process with her sister, who looked almost identical to Maddie. The crack widened and pieces began to fall to the ground. Maddie's eyes widened with the realization of the situation.

She screeched, "Mol..." but could never finish that simple word. The entire ceiling above them collapsed inwards and right on top of the girls. Maddie tried to shield Mary from the blow. As the dust settled and the fragments of the house fell into their final resting places, Madison's mom came running in. She pried. She scraped. She clawed. Trying to dig her two daughters out, Margaret sobbed with unbearable grief. She finally located Maddie and woke her from unconsciousness. With only a slight head contusion and a laceration on her chin, Maddie miraculously made it out alive. So happy to see her mother's loving face and electric blue eyes, Maddie cried tears of joy that streamed down her face. The tears streaked away the dust and left Maddie looking like a statue with intentional tear tracks. But, Maddie's mind then shifted to the lack of grip in her right hand. Trying to squeeze as hard as she could, Maddie would never receive

a response again. As she quickly tried to stand up, Maddie was forced to let go of her sisters hand and came away with a gold bracelet that was made of intricate yet simple small leaves that connected to each other, tip to stem. Holding on tight to this family treasure that Mary had received at her first communion, she dug alongside her mother with her other hand. Trying to fight back tears and yet call out to Mary, Maddie's words turned into what seemed like a strange language. A painful, "Raaa," continuously flowed from Maddie's mouth until they reached Mary's little and broken body.

Maddie never regained any form of peace of mind from there on out. As the years passed, Maddie slipped further into OCD behaviors and suffered greatly from paranoia. She was marked as the weird kid and her mom tried every therapist they could, but no one could shake Maddie from her own mind. One could argue though that when the safest place in the world turns deadly, there is good reason to never trust again. Maddie wasn't crazy, but she was traumatized. And trauma has a way of making all the light in the world dim. Maddie became skinny and grew up to be a petite girl with a small nose and dainty hands. She was what they call a southern belle through and through with extremely polite manners. Growing up, she learned to be smart about the pain she felt every day and did not let it surface as much as she so desperately wanted as a way of protecting her loved ones and her mom most of all. But, they say the eyes are the windows to the soul and one could see that from that fateful night on, Maddie's eyes changed. When she was born, they looked as the very sun fell from the sky and right into her sockets. But, that night they dimmed and hardened. But just as Maddie's eyes darkened, so would the world too.

## VII

The hooded figure paced his way up the ragged hill that overlooked the valley. This time, his gaze drifted to a community built below. As the man crept up the side of the hill, he stopped and peered down upon the bustling village and breathed in the aromas of fresh breads, citrus, and raspberries. A massive log cabin could be found in the center of the community and people could be seen entering and exiting from various entrances. Lined down the pathway that led from the log cabin to the street far off, trees of all kinds glowed with the warmth of a million embers. Quite suddenly, the man's ear caught the noise of laughter and talking, cheering and yelling from the peoples below him. The man turned and his garment over his face fell slightly out of place, giving a glimpse into his eye. If you were there, you would have been able to not only see, but feel the utter hatred that emanated from this man. As the moon began to beget the sun, the light glinted off his grey eye, which seemed to glow red with the blood he looked to shed.

With a grunt and a snarl, the man then flung the tail of his garment behind him and quickly pivoted back to his path in seek of his destination. The setting surrounding him was familiar. In fact, it was the same hill that another hooded figure stood upon not so long ago. Could it have been the same man though? The wilderness surrounding him was even more overgrown than before. The thorn bushes had grown up and out. All of the trees were now dead and decrepit. Weeds had covered the entire pathways and all of the grass was now choked by the roots the tangled the only spots to place feet. It was a feat in itself to walk around this area, and yet the man seemed to be treading through the thicket with ease. As he murmured and spat angry words to himself, he approached the most central tree. Precisely eight years ago was the last time this man had visited and he was in fact the only visitor to this wasteland of nature. You would think he would do tend to the plants and nurture the environment. However, it seemed as though the only reason he visited was for his own bidding. The man now limped around the tree and placed his hand upon the center of its thick trunk. As soon as he did this, the place in which he touched began to glow and burn. He ripped his hand back from the tree and revealed his hand mark that now scorched the dying

bark. With another growl, he threw himself passed the tree and to the tip of the cliff where he once stood. In fact, just as last time, he brandished the same sword from eight years ago. Though time had passed, the sword did not look a day older. Espiritaz still hummed with the same power as it did the last time the man tried to use it for his gains.

The man picked up the sword and quickly slashed at the air. Different than before, he knew more than he knew then. Just as one would think the sword would simply swipe through the air and settle back beside the man, it left glowing marks in the air. A fiery red “X” now appeared before the man in the night sky. With a sigh, the man seemed as though he was ready to relax and rest. However, the man’s incantation was not finished just yet. With a deep breath, the man twisted his body back and jabbed the center of the “X” and pierced the sky once more. Espiritaz entered the sky and the tip disappeared for a moment until the man twisted the hilt and cracked the air open. Light streamed out from the splintered atmosphere. The blinding white light seared the man’s garments and forced him to stagger back and shield his eyes. With a pop, the light receded and disappeared along with the “X.” However, when the man returned his eyes to the place in which the sword once was, another figure began to arise from the ground and gain their footing on the vicious ground. However, pure white hair descended from the hood and down to the middle of the figure’s torso. This new face was clearly a woman. However, her face was completely hidden in darkness because of the hood she wore. As she turned to look beyond the cliff and down at the village below, she let out a laugh that reeked with pity and disgust. She then bellowed, “Mortals. Filthy swine. Disgraces to what they were intended to be. After we are done with them, this Earth will once again be pure.”

The man observed the arrows that were placed carefully in the quiver and associated them to the silver bow that dangled in her pale hand. Her tight grip on the base of the bow reminded him that any advance he thought he could try to win the bow from her would soon end with his death. Besides, they had a job to do and this was business. So, instead, he began to hum. A low vibration came from his vocal chords and emanated from his mouth. However, as the noise spilled out, the ground beneath him vibrated ever so slightly. The woman then too joined in and the ground began to tremble and crack. As their volume became louder and the intensity of their incantation swelled, the light began to fade and dim from the village below. In fact, their drone sept right into ground and spread like a wildfire in all directions from where they stood. Just as the power of their voices reached a level that threatened to crack, splinter, and level the ground in which they stood, they

both stopped and the man drilled his sword straight into the air, just as he did a stormy night eight years ago. Once again, the hooded figure twisted the entire sword and whispered its name, “Espiritaz.”

This time however, the Earth accepted this payment and the man began to swirl the sword with ease. As he began to twist counter clockwise the clouds in the sky stopped, froze, and then began to drift back as if on rewind. However, it was not just the clouds that were moving to the will of this powerful man. It was the entire Earth. The man began to pick up speed. Inhabitants of the trees and the log cabin below came racing out, unsteady on their feet. Because the whole world was moving opposite its normal axis, humans around the world sensed an unnatural shift. Quiet conversations of concern quickly turned into cries of help and pleas for answers as one hundred mile per hour winds sprang from nowhere. The woman watched as the people below ran to their homes for safety and laughed to herself from a deep part of her gut. She loved watching their fear and their pain. This was her true payment for her evil deeds. The man then began to tremble as the weight of Espiritiaz grew. He needed help to finish whatever task he was so focused on. Just as the sword began to kick back and fight against its controller, the woman picked up her bow and delicately reached behind her for an arrow. She ran her bony fingers across the metallic stem of the arrow and felt the bristles of hair that lined the end tip. Gently placing its center upon the string of the bow, she took great caution with her process. As the man began to breathe heavier and heavier, the woman seemed to move even slower in contrast to his clear pain. However, once ready, she said, “Now they will all pay their debts,” and released the arrow straight into the spot where the sword connected with the atmosphere.

The arrow began to glow and illuminate the sky around it. The light cast an eerie glow upon the woman and as the light emanated, it revealed a deathly parlor to her. If a witness were there, their blood would have ran ice cold from one look at the yellow of her skin, the bones that presented their every outline, and the veins that showed icy blue tendrils snaking her face. She was positively beautiful when seen by the naked eye. But, now she looked like the demons the humans below read of in their fantasy books. A wicked smile smeared itself across her face and the man below tried to smirk through the exhaustion and pain he just had to endure. It seemed as though the energy that the experiment took would be a piece of him he would never gain back. Hunched over, he joined his accomplice to wait and watch. Then as the sword levitated and the arrow slowly faded into the sky, the whole Earth began to glow. Night turned into day if only for a moment and

every bit of the environment stood still. As like the moment when humans stop dead in their tracks from awe or fear, the Earth mimicked this action and repeated for a little over a minute. That was until the whole Earth trembled and quaked. The humans would call it an earthquake. A phenomenon like never before. As the last bit of the arrow disappeared like a crisp dollar bill into a vending machine, Espiritaz was ejected from its resting place and deposited onto the now charred and dead grass below it. The whole hill in fact was now dead and decrepit. The rest of the night continued on as normal. The crickets chirped. The stars above twinkled. And the gentle southern breeze danced along the night sky. Feeling like he failed once again, the man began to whimper. However the woman cackled and screamed, “How dare you weep weak one! Although it may appear as though our task failed, be not mistaken. Nature itself will try to act strong. But tonight, we delivered Her a lethal blow she will not come back from. Tonight, we reclaimed this wasteland and the fools below will now answer to us.” Letting out a fierce, “EEAA,” the woman’s strange language echoed and reverberated off the valley below. Then with one final grimace, she said, “And so it begins.”

She vanished out of sight with a pop of light and a stream of smoke. As the man sensed his immediate solitude, he shifted uneasily, looked around as though considering what he just did, and took slow steps forward. Just when he should have stopped, the man stepped off the edge and plummeted. Just before the ground, he too vanished with sudden sparks that dissipated into the night sky.

## VIII

Colin sluggishly arose from his slumber. Wiping away the crust that collected from the tears he shed from the same nightmare he endured every night, he opened his eyes and glared at the ceiling above. Images of his dad tumbling down the stairs, breaking another bone at every step, flashed across his mind. Trying to quell his pain, he rolled over onto his side and pulled the covers around his neck once again. As the cool duvet synched around his neck, his body quickly tensed and jolted him from his rest. The pressure around his neck reminded him of the grasp his father placed around his neck. Although eight years had passed and Colin was just about finishing up high school, he could not shake what he did. “Will I ever be normal again?” he said aloud.

Just as this thought sprang up, demanded Colin’s attention, and crashed on his heart, Colin glanced to the corner of his room. He noticed something strange. Typically, Colin would throw his cleats off when he climbed into his bed late at night. They were in fact still there. But, the summer light would be shining through his window and illuminating the very section where they sat. Except, today that corner remained in darkness. Colin shoved this peculiarity to the farthest part of his mind and turned over to check his phone that sat on the nightstand alongside candy wrappers, a lamp with a lampshade that sat with a weird angle, and various coins and crumpled bills. Realizing that he was late for his weekend job, Colin rushed out of bed and threw on stale clothing that he had forgotten to wash. However, it wouldn’t have mattered if he did. His mother was so behind on work that the laundry room below Colin’s bedroom was filling up with clothing. The Cook family clearly had not recovered from the tragedy they faced years prior. Colin ran to the kitchen, still buttoning his wrinkled Oxford and attempting to tuck into his khakis. He was already late to his job at the local bank where his mom had a few friends who were managers. He was already on his bosses’ hit list and Colin desperately needed his job. His mother made just enough to get by between her multiple jobs, but Colin’s job gave his mother and he the availability to have money to fix the house that was aging alongside them.

As Colin raced to the kitchen, he grabbed the mail and threw the envelopes into his scratched satchel, grabbed an apple, and dashed for the door. He slammed the door behind him which forced a gust of wind into the front corridor of the Cook house. The air floated and gently engulfed the satchel that rested upon Colin's lower back, levitating one of the loose notes from the bag. Colin firmly locked the door behind him and ran down the path and to his rusty bike. Typically, Colin would deeply breathe in the air around him and affix his head to stand tall on his shoulders. After all, if you look confident and sincere, who could ever accuse you of killing your father? Colin did not realize two things. First, he missed the letter now on the mat below the alarm inside that had the handwriting of a Cook family member from Georgia with a specific notice of immediate attention ascribed on the letter head. And lastly, he did not take heed enough to pay special attention the now eclipsing Sun.

Colin rode past the street sign that stood at the corner of his dead end block. Bent from years of rough winds and worn down from the hail, sleet, and frost, Colin slapped the sign as he rode past the iridescent green sign whose white letters read, "Oak St." A trait he picked up when he was twelve and his mother finally let him out alone again, he found comfort in this. Racing past the neighbors he always distrusted out of paranoia of his secret surfacing, he kept his head down and pretended to concentrate on the road before him. Turning left, then making two rights, followed by one more left led him straight into town and right into a massive crowd that was surrounding a TV store. The flat screens were showing scenes from all over the world of mass hysteria and chaos in response to the phenomenon around the world.

"This just in, the British Parliament has issued a decree for the citizens of England to remain calm. There is nothing to fear!"

"Reports from China speak of the government searching for top scientists to report the recent discoveries of the sun."

"The President of the United States urges all Americans to remain steadfast in their patience with Congress as they try to sort through the environmental mess that has dropped into our laps."

Colin listened carefully and tried to make sense out of his surmounting confusion. He had absolutely no idea in his head as to what was transpiring before his eyes. As he searched for answers, his legs began to move on their own and transport him through the crowd. People angrily



shifted and pushed against Colin until they saw who he was and then gently regained their civility and cordiality. He moved so closely to the glass that stood between him and the forty inch and watched as images from all over the world flashed in and out of focus. But, the crowd soon forgot their manners once more and Colin's teachers, friends, teammates, and neighbors slowly pushed him back once more. As he distanced from the answers he so desperately wanted to know, he slammed into a rough looking girl about the same age as he. The pale girl with jagged black hair was crouching below the legs of the crowd, searching for those with their attentions diverted enough to take the contents of their pockets. He tripped right over her and tumbled onto the sewer grate which soiled his only clean shirt for work. Cursing the perpetrator and rubbing his head, assessing for injury, Colin quickly scrambled to his feet to protest whoever made him look so foolish. "And who do you think you are? Knocking people down? How rude can you be?" Colin screamed as he brushed off his clothing, trying to salvage his presentation. "I should-," But Colin's voice was cut off as his eyes fell upon a girl with bruises and grime all over her face and clothing accented by a jagged cut across her face.

"Don't mind who I am!" The girl spat at Colin and she began to turn away when Colin, without his intent, grabbed her arm and yanked her back. Colin looked into her only good eye and seemed to search for answers in the same way he wished to make sense out of all the chaos occurring. Then, without any hesitation, Colin reached into his pocket and ripped out all the money he had on him, pried open her hand, and forced the money into her possession. "What do you think you are doing? I will not accept your charity." But the girl did not give away the money and simply began to step away, realizing that the boy in front of her would not be accepting it back either. The two looked away, realizing that they were not alone, but then locked eyes once more. Then, Colin was pushed by a new face entering into the mosh pit and he looked towards the area in which the push came. When he looked back again, the girl was gone. Just as a dream fades once we awake, Colin's memory of her did as well.

A shrill noise ripped Colin's daydream behavior away. The alarm he always set for when he should have been walking through the doors to the Albany Community Bank was going off and Colin's entire face went pale. He was late. Running for his bike that was laid against the wall, he amounted his worn seat and raced for the bank, about twenty storefronts away. The whole town was adorned with flags, bunting and streamers for the fourth of July that was approaching that weekend. However, all of the decorations reminded him of the sins he caused this time eight years

ago. Colin rode up and tossed his bike into the rack in front of the bank and then reached for the bronze handle to the heavy glass doors that were monogrammed with the initials of ACB. His haste slowed to a professional prowl as he walked through the doors and straight to the side wall which lead to the back offices. As he kept walking, trying to not draw attention to himself, he noticed how busy it seemed to be in the bank. Although there were not lines out the door, the usual Friday crowd was nothing as compared to the amount of people at the desks seeking to withdraw from their accounts. Colin looked back down and kept walking until he was safely inside the back office. He grabbed for the pot of coffee and stifled an exhausted yawn just as he heard the click clack of the perfectly polished penny loafers Colin had come to dread. Turning around with a fresh cup of coffee, Colin placed a smile so wide, his face would have cracked if it were stone. "Good morning Mr. Bartholomew! I poured you a fresh cup of Joe. I believe you take it with two sugars and half and-," Brian Bartholomew, the General Manager of this branch of the Albany State Bank, silenced Colin with a raised finger. Mr. Bartholomew's polished fingernail accompanied an appearance that was almost too well-polished. His pristine blue pin striped suit was tailor cut to his frame and his hair shined from the pomade he placed in it every morning and finished with hair spray.

"Here, we do not tolerate consistent tardiness. Once was permissible, and twice was treated with a warning. Mr. Cook, this is your fifth offense. Therefore, I regret to inform you that at this very moment, you are no longer an employee of this establishment."

"But, Mr. Bartholomew, I need this-,"

"There are no BUTS in business Mr. Cook! There are only firm answers and nothing further. Now please be gone or I will have you removed."

Colin stood there motionless. Speechless. The first thought that ran through his mind was of his mother's smile as she said it would be okay, only to later hear her cry herself to sleep. How could her tell her he had lost this job? Colin attempted to defend himself one last time, but no words came out. He simply limbered away, past the crowds of anxious peoples and through the glass doors that once let in the light of promise. He went out to get his bike, but it was gone. Colin realized that he had forgotten to put the lock around the rack frame. So, he simply started to walk home with the afternoon sun moving towards dusk. The mob at the corner of the main street of town had slowly dissipated over the course of time it took for Colin to enter the bank and lose his job. As he rounded the corner that stopped him in the first place, an immense swell of anger rose

up from Colin's heart and began to create hot, stinging tears. He threw his head back and searched for answers in the sky. However, through the tears rolling down his face and falling off of his long eyelashes, Colin caught sight of the sun. There was a blemish upon it. A piece of it missing. He had read of these moments in his science books and knew that this was one of the first stages of a solar eclipse. However, what troubled Colin the most was that there was never any notice or mention from the news that this would happen. Suddenly, Colin came to the realization of what he was hearing and seeing when he was stopped by the crazed people. His eyes widened and his jaw dropped. An instinctual feeling stabbed him in the gut. Something was wrong.

Colin took off without hesitation to hopefully find his mom at home. Running past the houses that lined his route home, he caught glimpses of neighbors outside trying to make sense of the scene Colin had just saw or simply in their houses, looking through blinds and shades at the street before them. Colin finally made it to his street sign and came to a halt. He took a deep breath, trying to collect his upcoming thoughts and then took off again. He dashed for his house as fast as he could. Never being a runner with much endurance, Colin was amazed at the vigor that was springing forth from his very feet. Just as his foot touched the path, his mother opened the door with a dead look in her eyes. "Mom?" Colin said with intense speculation.

"Colin, hurry. Please, we do not have much time. Close the door behind you." Mrs. Cook said as she began to turn and walk away from the front door. Colin raced through the threshold of his house and followed his mother straight into the kitchen. Ripped apart and opened on the kitchen counter was a note that Colin had not seen earlier that morning. Obviously whatever was written in this letter was so troubling as to spook Mrs. Cook, who was a woman who had seen her fair shares of horrors in her life. Attempting to catch his breath, Colin gasped out words.

"Ma, what, is, the matter, with, you? Is, everything, okay?"

"Colin, please sit down and catch your breath, honey. Wait, why are you so out of breathe?"

"Long, story, but not, important. Please tell me, Mom!" Colin began to steady his breathing and his heart rate began to slow as well. That was until Mrs. Cook said,

"Oh, Colin. You have been such a strong boy in all of this. But, something has happened Col. Someone knows."

"Knows what Mom?"

“About your father’s death. What I am trying to say is that one of your father’s family members from Georgia knows the truth of what happened to him. And they are asking for us to come to them to attest to this truth or face the consequences.” Colin’s blood chilled and any moisture that was left in his mouth had now evaporated with no intent of return. He was trying to make sense of this situation. What is someone was pulling a prank? Or what if it was not intended for their eyes. But, all answers were answered when Colin began to read over the letter.

“Dear Cook Family,

We have been a family that has been broken for eight years now. Searching for answers, we finally found them. We know what happened that night in your house. We know about the cover up. And we have come to realize the dark secrets you have harbored at our expense. Written on this envelope is the address to our residence and we strongly you advise whatever is left of the Cook to family to make your way down here. We have a few more questions and expect you to answer them. If not, hell hath no fury like this family scorned and you will pay for your silence. Please arrive by tomorrow night or we will begin the measures of your punishment.

Warmest Wishes,

The Other Cooks”

Colin’s jaw would have fallen straight off his face and shattered on the floor if it could have. However, it just dangled open and no words came out. He was entirely speechless and felt like he would never talk again. His mother cut through the silence and with perfect clarity announced, “Colin. This is not up for discussion. Go upstairs and grab your duffel and fill it with three days of clothing. It is time we face our actions.” Within an hour, Carmin and Colin both climbed into the old Volkswagen, packed it with their clothing, enough food to allow them to not have to stop, water, and their nerves and drove off down the road and into the now setting sun that looked as though a bite was taken out of it.

## IX

Hands reach out of a swirling fog and wrapped around his neck. The grip tightens and the ligaments of his neck strain and pop under the pressure of the veiny fingers. The boy gasps for air as the thumbs dig into his trachea. His entire body writhes with the sensation of flight, but he does not have wings and there is no escape from the figure. Then, the hands shake and sprout fur. The process begins slowly, but gains speed until robust arms are covered in matted brown hair. The cracked fingernails of the attacker elongate, harden, gain a black tint, and sharpen at the edges. Blood begins to be drawn from the places where the claws meet skin. As the boy's life begins to fail and his vision darkens at the edges, a beastly face appears from the fog. He squints for better sight, but the added strain causes splintering shots of pain to race across his brain. If only he could just recognize the face. The boy thinks, "Is that a," but the thought is disrupted by a sudden jolt. The murderous paws throw the dying body into the air as Mrs. Cook hit a pothole that sent Colin up and off of the passenger seat. Startled from his nightmare, Colin patted the back of his neck to dry the cool sweat.

"Another dream with him in it?" Colin's mom slowly asked her son.

"Yeah. Uhm, it was the hands again. Except this time, well, I was even closer to dying. I could feel it. And. Well. This time he wasn't human. Or even a he maybe. There was some animal..." Colin's thought process was disrupted by his realization their surroundings. He looked around and saw undisturbed darkness. "Mom, where the hell are we?"

"First off, watch your mouth. You may be 18, but there is still no tolerance for foul language. That behavior died with your father."

Her harsh words were always a cover for the deep pain she had always felt. As Colin grew up, he became more aware of the trauma she endured. He was too young to have ever realized the emotional abuse she had accepted and the physical cruelty she hid in order to protect Colin's view of his father. At every point of her life, Carmin Cook had always put her son first, even if it meant

blocking her husband's rage. As the thoughts of his father's abuse raced through Colin's head as they always did, emotions began to overload his mind. Tears began to sting his eyes as he tried to adjust them to the black setting around him. Usually, when these episodes occurred, Colin would be able to isolate himself and hide it from his mother. He could not bear the thought of placing more sadness in her heart. Therefore, he shouldered his grief, pain, and anger all to himself. However, Colin was all too familiar with demons and their habits of releasing themselves from their prisons. Hoping to divert his mother's attention from him, Colin broke the silence by asking the question that was burning his tongue from the moment he put his seatbelt on in the driveway of their house.

“So, what exactly will we do when we get there, Mom. I know you want us “to right our wrongs and be upstanding citizens” but, we have no idea what we are walking into.”

“Colin, I am so sorry.”

“What?” Colin stammered in response to the unexpected apology.

“I don't think I have ever said that to you; actually said those words to you. But. I am so sorry for everything that I allowed. It was all my fault. Your father was just a charming man who always treated me like a princess. But then, he just changed one day. And I wouldn't let myself realize it. And out of all of us, you seemed to have paid the heaviest price. I will never be able to give you back your childhood. But, I can give you the rest of your life. I can give you a future of happiness. So whatever we are walking into, that goal lies on the other side of it. And God help anyone who thinks they can stand in the way of me giving that gift to you.”

Speechless in response to the most emotion his mother ever gave him, Colin could not prevent the tears now. Nor did he want to. He quickly leaned over to give his mother a kiss on her thin cheek, but was interrupted by another pothole. However, this time the tire could not withstand the fall and a loud pop filled the silence of the night around them. As if startled, the crickets grew silent. Mrs. Cook tried to hold control over the old van, but veered off into the grass and into a muddy stretch of land. Colin had banged his head against the window in response to the sudden impact.

“Damn. Oh my God. Are you hurt?”

“Mom.”

“How does it feel?”

“Mom...”

“Turn on that light so I can get a better luck at it!”

“Mom!”

“What?”

“I thought we established that we don’t curse.”

Carmin was shocked by her son’s sudden wittiness. She diverted her eyes from the cut on his earlobe and looked into his eyes. She was so busy trying to restore his childhood that she missed him growing up. He aged before her eyes and she never realized. A smile began to creep across her face and she softly began to chuckle. She placed her forehead against his, then dug into her pocketbook for an alcohol swab and band-aid. The two opened their doors carefully and stepped out of the truck into the soft earth beneath their car. Colin took out his iPhone and turned on the flashlight.

“See Ma! I told you these things would come in handy one day.”

Carmin rolled her eyes so hard they could have fallen out of her head if they weren’t fixed.

“Okay, Mr. Wise Guy. I hope you paid attention in driver’s ed because you are going to change the tire now.” Colin’s sarcastic smile quickly dropped away with the realization that he did not attend that week’s class because Mr. Bartholomew had threatened to fire him if he skipped another shift. Softly cursing under his breath and out of ear shot of his mother, Colin dragged his feet across the muddy ground and to the trunk. “I am going to go to the front of the car and try to get some reception on this phone, Colin!”

“Okay, Mom. But, you should know. Your phone is so old, Benjamin Franklin would probably have to tie it to a kite and hope for a bolt of lightning to power that useless brick.” Just as Colin spoke, a flash of lightning cracked the skyline and lit up the entire stretch of plains. With wide-eyes, Colin tried to busy himself with getting the spare out of the back in order to forget about how weird that situation was. However, Colin’s ear suddenly connected with a loud growl. At first, he kept working as he thought it was just the loud crack of thunder in accordance with the bolt. But, Colin’s blood suddenly chilled with the realization that the noise he heard was neither

nature, nor human. He turned around to see one light in the distance and hoped that it was someone that would help. The yellow orb was beginning to get larger and more pronounced. Colin managed to uncover three quarters of the tire when he felt the urge to go and check on his mother. As he rounded the back right corner of the Volkswagen, Colin caught sight of his mother at the front of the car. Her furrowed brow and determined eyes brought a smile to Colin's face. A moving figure caught Colin's eye from the left front corner of the car. Before Colin could make sense of what the figure was, a black mass was on the roof of the car and its jaw was open and its target was Mrs. Cook's neck. She was pounced upon and thrown forward, about three feet.

Colin dropped the tire and attempted to sprint to her. However, he tripped over the bouncing tire and plummeted to the ground. Luckily, his face broke his fall. There was a quick snap and blood flowed from the new gash across the broken bridge of his nose. Colin squealed with pain but still crawled forward on all fours. Mrs. Cook was thrashing in defense of the attack in between shrieks and spitting out the blood pooling in her mouth. Colin felt an energy within him he felt only once before. The memories of ten years ago began to once again invade Colin's mind. However, he was stronger now. He was braver or so he made himself believe for his mother's sake. In an almost instinctual manner, Colin began to rise with his hands and bring his chest forward and in one fluid motion, let out a deep, "OORAW" that shook the ground, shattered the windows of the car beside him, stopped the creature dead in its tracks and sent the animal hurtling backwards. However, Colin could not withstand the raw power that he just emanated and was forced airborne and backwards. The back of his head collided with a large, jagged rock. As he felt his skull crack on the impact of the rock, he suddenly focused on just how many stars he could see in pure darkness. He could hear the whimpers of the creature he just fatally wounded and the gurgling from his mother. But, he could not stay awake. He could not fix the situation anymore. And he could not help his mother, let alone himself. So instead, he simply drifted off with the lasting view of the twinkling lights from the heavens above.



## X

Theodosia let the motorcycle skid out from under her as she threw her body off of the stiff, worn out seat. The wheels kept on rotating, seeking the road they craved. Theo was running as fast as she could. She thought this detour would have been dark, quiet, and peaceful. With no living soul around for miles, it was the most wonderful feeling being so alone. And yet, when she turned the bend on the road now behind her, she was disgusted to see the one thing she was promised by an eerie side road: solitude. While running over to the horrifying scene she thought of her temptation to just drive by. She cursed under her breath. Put off that she had to be the one to clean up this mess, she scorned the victims she didn't know anything about. Just as she began approaching the car, her eyes rested upon what looked to be a boy on all hands and knees. Distrustful of the situation, Theo halted herself and had to stop her body from staying in motion. Hearing the noises of an animal feeding, she began to feel the fear she felt not so long ago. She could hear the sounds of the blood seeping and dripping. She could smell the stench of a dying body and almost could taste the metallic flavor of blood. She began to take slow walks forward when the boy jolted upwards. The impact of the strange noise hit her ears first, then landed upon her chest, which forced her feet upwards and her torso backwards and down to the moist earth below her.

“What the hell was that,” Theo thought, but then said aloud while slowly picking herself up. She felt the back of her head for injury and then moved to her knees. Out of the corner of her eye she now saw that the boy was now about thirty feet from where he once was. Theo was shocked. Confused. She began to run for the boy as she saw his head slumped against a large rock. After a few paces, her front foot fell hard and her back leg remained fixed to the ground. A low, growling sound emanated from behind her. No longer afraid of a fight, Theo turned around to see a wild panther pawing his way over to her. Licking its lips, the panther gently stepped over its latest victim and then began to charge Theo. She remained calm and still. Attempting to exude confidence, Theo locked eyes with the panther and tried to relate to it on some level. After all, she

was an animal too right? However, Theo began to lose concentration. Something was wrong. The eyes were not as she remembered them when she watched the Animal Channel through the window of the Anderson house. In fact, Theo did not think these eyes were animalistic at all. “Human,” were the words that dropped from her brain, into her mouth, and slipped out. Realizing her fatal mistake, she quickly darted for the car, but felt the claws of the beast sink through her leather jacket.

“Do you know how hard a good jacket like this is to come by?” Theo threatened the panther. As the panther dragged her down she grabbed on to the door handle and grasped a large jagged piece of glass that was left in the window well. Her hand began to ooze as the sharp edges sliced her pale skin. But, she did not let go. Theo gritted her teeth and bit down hard on her bottom lip to silence the pain. As the panther dragged her down and out onto the ground, it jumped quickly and tried to land a claw straight into her back. However, the panther was like every other thug that would try to steal from Theo when she lived on the streets. The first few times, she was ripped of the money she scrounged up and the times after that she had broken bones and bruised cheeks to prove for it. Then she learned. Theo quickly turned as the panther prepared for landing and jabbed the jagged piece of glass straight into the belly of the beast. A sorrowful squeal of pain ricocheted out of the creature's vocal chords and filled the silent night with the sound of death. Theo sighed and rolled on her side, throwing off the carcass of the beast that almost killed her.

Theo had no words for any of it. The boy and the noise that he made. She tried to think back and listen to what she heard. Maybe he was just screaming loudly? But, Theo knew that was a lie the minute she thought it. And what were they even doing down this road? And on top of all of these questions, Theo began to think of the most important one. However, she was interrupted by the mother that was lying at the front of the car. Theo raced over to the victim and was shocked to see how much damage the vile creature had done. Mrs. Cook was losing coloring by the second and her eyes were fluttering, threatening to close at any moment. Theo did not know what to do or where to start. She could not even tell where the blood was coming from. It was everywhere. Then, Theo saw a tear form and slowly creep towards the edge of the mother's cheek. Theo took her own bloody hand and wiped the tear away, cradling the stranger's head in her lap. Mrs. Cook adjusted her eyes and slowly picked her chin up to greet Theo's face.

“You’ve been through a lot. I can see the pain in your eyes. Sorry. Eye? But, I can also see kindness,” Carmin slowly stated. Her words stripped away years of building walls. Theo’s cold heart began to defrost and melt.

“I don’t know you. But I am so sorry I wasn’t here sooner. I am sorry I wasn’t quick enough. I could have saved you,” Theo began to plead. But, she realized this slip of emotion, and straightened her back as her mouth began to form spiteful words out of habit.

“Hush, sweet girl.” A bloody finger reached to Theo’s face. “Don’t say something we both know you don’t mean. I never could have been saved. There is something you can do for me though. For my so,” her words were interrupted through chokes of blood. “For my, son,” She repeated carefully. “He could save the world if only it were an easier place to live in. I failed him. You don’t know me. Or us. But, please, tell him I love him. Stay by him. He was supposed to be someth...,” another pump of blood from her failing heart began to fill her lungs. “I don’t know you. But, there is good in you. Please show him that.” Her head fell to the side as she glimpsed in the direction of where Colin landed. “Goodbye, Col-,” but her words were silenced with her last breath.

Theo dropped the mother’s hand quickly and crab walked her way backwards at lightning speed. Her eye began to wince with the pain of resurfacing memories. Another person to add to the list of those she failed to save. She began to weep, ever so slightly. But then, the grief of years of a hardened shell began to force its way out. She could feel years of barriers falling down. Walls she placed for protection were crumbling from the kindness this dying woman showed her and the love she exuded for her son. As she wiped at her running nose, her ear caught the sound of rustling and sighing. Colin began to wake up from his concussion. Theo quickly wiped at her eyes, paying careful attention to her damaged one. With great speed, she threw herself to her feet and ran over the broken boy.

“No, no! Don’t get up that fast!” Theo demanded. Colin’s eyes adjusted to the new face in front of him and a various amount of emotions flashed across his face. Fear replaced confusion which was replaced by anger at being told what to do. In defiance, Colin stood up with the strength he could muster, but quickly crumpled in on himself. Theo caught him and fell with the weight of Colin’s muscular body.

“Now that this is awkward, I’m just gonna do the most obvious thing to do next. Hey there kid, my name is Theodosia Turner.” She tried to replace her anger with humor. Colin looked her in the eyes and for the first time in her life, Theo felt like someone was looking past her physical appearance and staring straight into her soul, searching for the person she was within.

“I, I’m Colin. Colin Cook. Who are, wait.” The realization of what transpired before his surprise slumber dawned on Colin and Theo watched as his face took on the realization that his mother was not by his side.

“Where is my mother?”

“Colin. I am. So.” She shook her head, trying to find the words to say next, but Colin cut her off.

“Where is she, what was it again? Theodore?”

Her deep sympathy was momentarily replaced with a quick pinch of anger.

“Theodosia. And your mother is just over there. At the front of the-,” but Colin was already on his feet and running. Theo took off after him screaming, “Now Colin, it is rude to not let people finish their sentences. Come back here! We need to talk.” But it was too late. She stopped just before him. Colin stood with his head motionless, his body still. Theo caught up to him just as he slowly fell to his knees beside her and was about to touch her neck for a pulse. As his fingers outstretched and extended to her level, he stopped right before her skin. He then twisted his head and looked over the rest of his mother’s body. Growing up, his mother always fixed every cut, bruise, and scratch he ever had gotten from roughhousing on the playground or clumsily falling over himself in the house. He so desperately wanted to return the favor and put Neosporin on her cuts and band aids on her scratches. But, these were not childhood calamities. His fingers twitched as he tried to place his hand on her hip, her heart, her forehead, her arm, or her chin. They simply floated above and did not land.

“When?”

“Only about five minutes ago Colin. She didn’t suffer too much. She-“

“Why you?”

“I don’t have that answer, dude. But, she told me to tell you how much she loved you. Colin, you have to believe me. I wish it were you by her side.” Colin began to weep from his gut. The grief shook his body and riddled his bones. Theo had to fight her own tears back as the last time she heard someone cry like such, was when they were her own tears. She attempted to place her hand on his back for a warm pat, but stopped. Theo realized that this new boy Colin she just met was more like her than most people in this world. She did not have to know him to know that he would understand her life from here on out. So she grabbed his hand instead and sat beside him.

After an hour or so, the two worked to place his mother in the ground gracefully. Digging with miscellaneous tools from the trunk and wrapping her in his favorite blanket, he lowered his mother into the earth below. Just as the last pieces of rock and soil were placed atop the fresh mound, the sun broke over the horizon. Fiery red beams shone over the lands and cast a fresh hew of hope over the broken and scarred mud around them. Colin did not look up, but instead remained transfixed on his mother’s locket that he took from the creatures gums. However, Theo let the sun blind her good eye and embraced the subtle warmth. But, she caught sight of the incomplete sun and all hope was lost to the cold reality. The world was falling apart around them. They all knew it, but few would say it. For the first time, Theo began to believe that something terrible was going on. And to make matters worse, she thought back to the most obvious question to be asked: what were panthers doing in Georgia?

## XI

After saying his final prayers, Colin said goodbye and turned for the car. Realizing the sudden movements, Theo quickly reacted.

“Where do you think you are going?”

“To finish the job.”

“What job? Dude. A freaking panther just attacked us. Like the kind you find in jungles.”

Colin stopped short and paused. As if he was about to say something, the moment passed and Colin continued to walk as he shook his head.

“Okay hot shot. So let me ask you a different question. What is this job? And why is it so important that you are rushing off to do it?”

“That is none of your business.”

“Like hell it’s not. My whole trip was just detoured, so I could save your butt.”

Colin whipped around and Theo thought she saw fire erupt in his eyes. Trying to mend the tension she just caused, Theo calmed her voice and lowered her temper.

“Look. I am sorry that your mom just died. I didn’t know her. I don’t know you. But, I want to help. And I never want to help. So let me help you.”

Colin tried to speak, tried to fight this moment of emotion, but instead turned around again towards the car.

“No.”

“Excuse me?” Theo exclaimed with sincere defeat. But, Colin simply got into the driver’s seat and started the engine. Theo ran over to the window and tried to open the door, attempting to force her way into the seat Colin occupied only a few hours ago.

“Don’t do this Colin.”

But, Colin looked in her eyes and for a moment, Theo glimpsed an image that she had never seen before. She saw herself. Colin broke the connection immediately and turned on the AC. Theo let go of the handle and simply watched as the car sped off to the side, straightened, and then accelerated down the desolate road.

The Volkswagen was speeding down the side roads of the country side as the dawn became morning. Colin felt the AC die out a while back so he let the wind cool the car through the shattered windows. His mind had not stopped racing since the moment he woke up. He was covered in mud, grass, and blood from both himself and his mother. With every pump of the break and step of the gas pedal, some dirt flaked off of the sole of his converse and landed on the floor mat below. Trying to fight back severe anger and deafening sorrow, he hummed along to the music that switch between 90s hits and static. The anxiety of having to face the writer of the letter still in the glove compartment become more threatening with every mile wasted. It was scary enough to have to face them with his mother by his side, but now, with her gone...but Colin could not finish that thought. He had been suppressing the obvious since he drove off and left the girl behind. He was alone. His family was all gone and the only person who seemed to actually show concern for him, he left in the dust. Colin passed another town, followed by another one, on the way to his destination.

As he thought more and more of the skinny girl who just appeared out of nowhere, an eerie feeling settled over Colin. “I’ve seen her before,” escaped from his lips. He furiously thought back in his past and tried to match the face with a memory but came up short. Maybe she just reminded him of someone. In the midst of being distracted, Colin did not see the vulture that was in the middle of the road. He was about to curse out when he heard his mother’s voice echo through his head telling Colin that cursing was a dirty habit. He veered off the road and his tires connected with a dirt path. However, the break in the old car must have exhausted their last bit of energy and released all of their fluid. He couldn’t stop the accelerating car. He swerved off of the dirt road and back onto the main road where he desperately pumped the breaks, hoping to bring them back to life. His mind raced back to his driver’s ed classes. The car then gave a loud pop and as the car shifted, he realized he would be driven head on into the trees the lined the side of the road. So, he

took a deep breath, reached over to the glove compartment, grasped the letter that caused this mess in the first place, and then dove out of the moving car.

Colin rolled along the gravel and shielded his head and face from the impending trauma. His body stopped just in time for him to look up and see the lasting memory of his mother slam into the wooden forest. Out of breath, time, and will, Colin simply laid back down. He thought to himself maybe he would just float away, or maybe he would just become the roadkill the vulture would come looking for next.

Colin's ear caught the sound of an oncoming engine and he quickly turned in just enough time to watch Theo roll towards him. Shocked that she found him once again, Colin quickly got up. However, his head forced him onto one knee as Theo pulled alongside him. "You know. It's do damn rude to just leave people in the middle of a field. I oughtta smack you. But, seems like your plan went up in flames. Literally." Theo continued to look on, but thrust a helmet into Colin's gut, knocking the wind out of him. "Get on. Seems like you need to be somewhere. So hop on the back and let's get you where you need to go." Colin realized that if he fought her, he would never make it to his vengeful family on time. Against his better judgement, he put the helmet on and began to place a leg over the bike. He hesitated. Theo sensed the pause and pivoted, glimpsed the crumpled paper in his hand, and was about to question what it was about. Instead, she smiled and reached out her hand.

"Okay."



## XII

The eclipsed sun was gently moving toward the horizon, bringing the moon up on the opposite side of the world. Colin clung to Theo's waist against better judgement. He almost fell off ten miles back, so he didn't dare let his pride get in the way again. Besides Colin giving directions, the two did not talk very much. Theo was the first to break the silence.

"So, uhm, I saw the paper in your hand. Must be important. And being that we both almost were killed by a jungle cat, I think we are past awkward small talk."

"It's nothing. I am just going to meet family for the first time. What confuses me is why you followed me."

Angered by the accusation, Theo retorted, "Woah, there. Followed? I happen to be going down here for a job interview."

"I don't mean this to come off rude. But, even before the mawling, you didn't look like you were dressed up for an interview."

"Who are you? The fashion police?"

Colin cracked a dry smile, but quickly suppressed it so as to not be caught doing it. He didn't know why, but he trusted this girl. She was a complete stranger. And yet, she was there for his family more so than the people closest to his mother and him. She risked her own life to try and help. However, he could tell when someone was lying. And she was lying about an interview. He decided not to press her. Instead, against all odds, he decided to do something he had rarely done before, if ever: share.

"I'm going down here because, well. Someone threatened my family. It's just me and my mom and I wanted to protect her. And she, me. So we packed up and came down here to confront them and stand up for ourselves. Then-," but he couldn't finish the sentence as tears choked back

the words. Theo sensed the emotion taking place behind her and extended a hand back to him. They passed a sign that read, “Welcome to Peachtree Corners,” as he grabbed her hand.

Theo revealed, “I’m not here for an interview dude. I’m coming down here to find someone. I guess we have a lot more alike than we thought.” Suspicion began to creep into her voice. “Even where our paths lead.” Her voice trailed off as the bike slowed, and her head turned.

“Why are you stopping?” He accused but then followed her head, looked to his right and found the road sign featured in the address enclosed in the envelope.

The two said simultaneously, “Birch Street.” Theo began to slow down as they approached the very sign that brought them down to Georgia in the first place. The bike crawled to a stop and in one fluid motion, Theo leaned to her side, dropped a foot on the ground, and nudged the kickstand into place. Theo was the first to state the obvious.

“Well, isn’t this just great? There is nothing here! The sun is just about to go down and there is not one building around here.”

“Now, Theodosia, hang on. We may have taken a wrong turn.”

Starting to yell, Theo screamed, “There weren’t any wrong turns. This was all a hoax. We were tricked. Don’t be so naïve. And don’t call me Theodosia”

“Who are you calling naïve? I am just saying, nothing ever is what it seems like. I am sure there is an explanation!”

“No, the only explanation is that we are surrounded by trees. Stupid trees. I am sick of them. Everywhere I look it is just more and more trees!”

Theo was enraged and in her anger, she ran off to the side of the road. Colin ran up after her just as she wound up her leg, drew it back, and released it into a tree that blended into the rest. “Useless weed.”

Suddenly, there was a large crunch and a crack. A ripple sent shock waves across the ground. Colin looked down just as the road began to blur and twist. Theo tried to speak but they couldn’t hear one another. In fact, the only sensation they could experience was sight at this moment. Carefully, each one came back. First, they felt a swift warm breeze fall upon their necks. Colin pivoted as fast he could and fell backwards with the sight before him. Theo’s mouth opened

to form a gasp that could not be heard over the transforming landscape. Sweet smells of apples, oranges, peaches, honeycomb, and freshly baked bread drifted across their noses and slowly activated their taste buds. Their eyes watched as a trees transformed into a bustling village. Wrought iron gates sat before a pathway lined by trees of all varieties which split off in all different directions. The main path then led and ended at the entrance to a massive log cabin that sat tall and proud at the center of the preserve. As their eyes adjusted to more and more of the village, their hearing slowly was greeted by the laughter of children, the conversations of adults, and the bustling noises of people at work. Colin then saw the sunset glint off of a tall sign that stretched from side to side of the stone pillars the gates connected to.

“Naleysi Fields,” Colin whispered ever so gently. After taking it all in, Theo rose to her feet, a lot more sheepish as compared to her frustration only minutes before. Colin rose to his knees, wiped the dirt off of his palms and joined next to her. “You couldn’t have hugged the freakin’ tree”

“Okay, so you do see it too. Great. Haven’t lost my mind yet.”

“The gates are closed though, so I am kind taking the hint-,” Colin’s voice trailed off as the iron gates creaked open and out. Unsurprised by any of this, he simply put his palm to his face and sighed.

“You have time for one more adventure, tree kicker?” Colin sneeringly spoke to Theo. She rolled her eyes and a smile danced across her face, making the white scar perk up at the corner of her blind eye.

“Only if it means I get to punch the punks who dragged us here in the first place.”

### XIII

They stepped together towards the gates. As they passed over the threshold, Colin almost expected to smack into a brick wall and the mirage to disappear. His crusty converse passed on through, followed by his other one. There was an expression on both of their faces that shifted between a bit of shock, a lot of fear and uncertainty, with a touch of happiness that they could not explain.

“Dude, what was in those burgers we got from the rest stop?” Theo questioned without taking her eyes off her surroundings. As she spoke the words, a Frisbee floated above her head and a child threw themselves into their path in hopes of catching the wild disk. He tripped over the logs that lined the walk way and knocked into Colin, who sensed the approach and quickly turned, caught the falling teenager and grabbed the descending disk all in one motion. That boy was stunned by the sudden motion

“Woah, that was insane! You have, like, cat like reflexes!”

“Uhm, thanks.” Colin stammered as the kid returned to his group of friends in the field behind the trees on the right. He then caught sight of Theo staring at him with a questioning look, and answered her silent question.

“I used to play football. Guess practice does pay off,” he stated with a toothy grin. Theo began to feel a weird sensation. Almost as if her heart began to fill once more, she felt like this kid she met along the way was like a long-lost brother to her; annoying, yet loving and caring at the same time. They both continued down the dusty path. Theo was the first to pick up on the looks the adults at the camp were sending their way.

“Colin. Do you see them all looking at us. Like we are, well, I don’t know.”

“I think you’re reading into too much. Let’s just figure out who to talk to. I’m starving and just want to go home.”

“Okay. But, look over there! That women. The blonde. She won’t take her eyes off of us.” As Theo finished her last thought, the blonde haired woman began to make her way over to the wandering teens. Colin interjected,

“Great, now look what you did! She’s coming over here.”

“Whatever you do, do not tell her why we are here, dude. Just ask where the bathroom is. That seems natu-.” But, the woman was now in ear shot, so Theo stopped her sentence.

“Hi there folks. Welcome to Naleysi Fields. What brings y’all in?”

Colin clears his throat and in a sentence just a little louder than a whisper, he asks, “Well, I was looking for the bathroom.”

“Wandered pretty far for a rest stop!” The women chuckled and sent rays of warmth through Colin’s veins. He hadn’t heard such rich laughter in months. Maybe even longer. In fact, Colin couldn’t even help himself and before he knew it, he gave out a chuckle that surprised Theo.

“Nice to meet you, Mam. My friend and I were just traveling through. We will leave as soon as he can go. Kid can’t control his bladder,” Theo said with icy intent. She was paranoid. Adults in particular, she would run from and avoid at all costs. The woman in front of her was a kind looking woman, probably just about in her 50s, with laugh lines by her mouth and eyes to cover up the worry wrinkles on her forehead. Theo wanted to laugh alongside Colin, but she could not bring herself to let her guard down.

“Okay, well then let’s find him a bathroom. And maybe I can get you a damp towel to wash up with,” said the woman in a peaceful, even tone.

Theo was taken aback by her statement. “Wash up?” she thought. Then, Theo began to realize that they hadn’t bathed nor washed off the night. She looked down at Colin, and then scanned over herself and gasped.

The woman quickly interceded. “Don’t you worry honey. Folks round here don’t bat an eye to this kind of stuff. Sure, you guys are a lil messy. But my kids have come home from soccer practice lookin’ worse.”

Colin smiled again, but then the most obvious question of all popped into his head. “Excuse me, Mam? I think I missed your name. I’m Colin Cook.” His words were finished with a jab from Theo.

“It’s alright! Y’all are safe here.” The woman extended her hand out to Colin, while also addressing Theo. “My name is Margaret Monroe, but everyone here calls me Mary. This was ma Daddy’s farm- his real pride and joy. I oversee it now and make a home for anyone who comes on by.” Colin reached out and grabbed her hand, which Mary then added her other hand to for a warm embrace.

The three kept walking down the path towards the massive log cabin. Colin was mesmerized by the architecture of the cabin that was growing with every step made towards it. Theo on the other hand did not leave sight of Mary. As they passed down the lane, she noticed that Mary knew just about everyone. Then, Theo’s eyes darted to the people coming out of the trees that lined the pathway. Her mouth dropped. She had been so distracted on the people, that she lost sight of her most immediate surrounding. The maple tree to her left had a door. And so did the oak, spruce, fir, willow, and pine trees surrounding it. Her astonishment stopped her dead in her tracks, so abruptly that Mary noticed the halt.

“Ah, so you’ve discovered the living arrangements. Unique, huh? Don’t worry, we will cover that later in the tour.”

“Tour?” Theo exclaimed and darted her eyes over to Colin, who just shrugged his shoulders and kept on walking. Theo was about to fight it, but she couldn’t lie to herself. There was a bit of curiosity burning inside her head. Noticing that the two were now ahead of her, she ran to catch up to them just as Mary was explaining the camp a bit more.

“I was born and raised round here. It’s a place that all are welcome. We grow all of our own food on farms just over yonder.” She said as she pointed to the back corner behind the impressive cabin. “All types of fruits and veggies that excellent gardeners take delicate care of. Thank the Lord above that we have people with green thumbs in this world. There is a dock that you can access straight through that cabin up ahead that leads right into the Chattahoochee River. Magnificent river if I do say so myself, but I’m a little biased.” She released another earnest chuckle that even made Theo begin to defrost, but of course she quickly shut down the sentiments. “I grew up swimming through the currents of the Chattahoochee. Hell, my first swimming lesson

was being thrown into the depths and paddling like the family dog. Naturally, my kids learned the same way. The entire camp lies on 223 acres of hills, trails, forests, and of course rivers and creeks throughout. I have walked every step around it and have breathed in the air from every corner. You know, I am a part of this community, but this land becomes a part of you if you let it.” Mary’s face contorted and Colin observed a subtle look of pain flash across her face. However, he began to believe maybe he saw pain everywhere now. In order to distract the woman in case his suspicions were right, he added,

“Wow. Everything is just so.” He searched for the words and came upon, “Green. Natural. We don’t have much of this up in Albany. The suburbs are pretty closed off.” Suddenly, Theo stopped and a wild look grew on her face.

“What do you mean, Albany?”

“Well, that is where I am from...” Colin retorted with an awkward finish to his sentence. Theo knew something, but she was not letting onto exactly what she knew. A level of quiet suspicion began to plant seeds in her gut just like the woman beside her did while tending to the flower beds beside the steps up to the cabin.

“Oh, okay. I just didn’t know that about you,” she quickly added to cover up the accusatory language she had just used. However, she saved this memory in her mind and pushed it back, saving it for later. Mary interjected after Theo finished speaking and said,

“Well, all of your eyes haven’t left my Daddy’s favorite part of the whole campground. This log cabin started off as a two bedroom shack that my parents took me to as a weekend getaway. But, then hard times fell on my family, and well, this became home! So come on in folks. Make sure to put ya shoes in the rack beside so that Dalilah won’t have to clean the floors for a third time today. The bathroom will be on your left and down that hallw-, well hi ya Vik.” A balding man was walking towards them. He had a polite smile on his face, but had a worn exterior. His skin had a grayish tint to it as though he would combust the minute sun touched his skin. However, he had extremely intense grey eyes; as though the clouds that swarm before the worst thunderstorms hardened and set in his eyes. Both Colin and Theo couldn’t take their eyes off of them.

“Good evening. Pleasure to meet your acquaintance. I see you have met Mary.” He extended a hand out to Colin first. His old tweed suit jacket smelled of moth balls and a gentle breeze floated through the cabin, delicately carrying the must of the jacket and the musk of his cologne. Colin was instantly transported back to troubling times. The cologne smelled exactly like the brand his father would use. A lump began to form inside of his throat and threatened to bust out right below his Adam’s apple. As Victor reached for Theo’s hand, Colin spoke out.

“Excuse me, Viktor, was it? As you can see, a lot has happened today and I just would like to freshen up a bit. So, please excuse me. The bathroom was down this way, right Ms. Monroe?”

“Oh, no! Please, call me Mary! And yes Colin, I’ll show you the way.”

Colin rushed off beside her, looking over his shoulder to catch a glimpse of Theo, who began to squint her eyes, silently asking and accusing Colin of what was going on with him. What angered her more is that he left her with this stranger.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Well, actually I didn’t catch your full name.”

“Viktor Vevtushinkov. But, much like Mary, we go by first names here.” He cracked a smile that showed his thin, yellowed teeth. Viktor was by no means an attractive man. There was an air to him that exuded kindness. But, it was masked by a resting frown, and a weathered sense of empathy. His plump body was often rigid and Theo observed him as a man who enjoyed regimented consistency. “I am the property manager around here. I help Mary make sure that everything is running smoothly.” His eyes darted over the hallway Mary just walked down with Colin and then back to Theo. “But, most of the time, I am the one who keeps the camp going. Who makes sure that the lights stay on.” He gave a boastful laugh that made Theo uncomfortable. But, somewhere inside of her, she liked him for his honesty. “It looks as though you could use a washing too. Bathroom is the same way your friend went. Trying not to dilly dally, dinner is wrapping up in an hour or so.” Viktor glanced down at an old pocket watch and as Theo tried to analyze it for a closer look, he quickly shut it. Knowing she had been caught watching, Theo put on her nicest smile.

“Excuse me, Viktor. I want to get some of this blood off of me. Hope to see you later.” She paced away and down the hallway as Viktor began to walk off, but suddenly stopped. He turned



and faced the hallway where the two battered kids just walked down, smiled, and walked off and down the steps towards the next issue he would have to fix.

## XIV

After Mary left him with towels and fresh clothing, Colin turned on the water to the shower and waited. Steam carefully drifted around the room and began to fog the mirror. He couldn't bring himself to get in. He looked down at his shirt. His hands and his feet. They were covered. Ruined. His trembling hand touched his shirt and his fingertips rested on the blood stains as his mind flashed back to his dead mother in his arms. He reached to the back of his head and felt the dried blood on his hair as his eyes saw the landscape flying away from him. He felt the crack of his head against the rock. His hand reached out for the water and as the dried blood began to liquefy once more and drip off, Colin's eyes filled. He blinked away the hot, sticky tears. He could not open the chasm of emotion within him or he would never get out. He stepped into the shower, clothes and all. The warm spray of the shower rained over his head. He watched as the clear water on the white porcelain slowly darkened with tones of red and brown. Grass blades floated off his shoes and drifted down the drain. A sudden flash occurred and he saw the light leave his mother's eyes. The gleam that made her the prettiest woman he'll ever now drained out of her. Colin gasped and couldn't breathe. He ripped off his clothing trying to escape. But, there wasn't any. Now in his boxers, he let himself fall. His butt hit the bottom of the tub and his knees immediately came up to his chest. The cascading water continued to pour over his blonde hair as the last bits of his mother washed away and down the drain.

Theo was in the bathroom just across. She could not step away from the mirror. She stripped as soon as she entered the room and locked the door behind her. She surveyed her body in the mirror, assessing herself for injuries, tears, or breaks. For so long, the largest injury she ever saw was her eye. She had been hurt enough on the streets. But, she never had seen herself look this bad. Her back was covered in lacerations and bruising from the impact of the panther's claws. Her hands were sliced from the broken glass she pried at for a weapon. The sleeves to her shirt couldn't be protected by her leather jacket and were covered in the blood of a woman she never knew. And her boots were sticky from the blood and mud that flowed into them. She looked back

up again and into the mirror. The quiet was deafening. She had no more distractions from her thoughts.

“Why. Why didn’t you just ride on?” She asked herself aloud. She thought back to the moments when she stopped and immediately ran for them. She had never been that quick to help someone. She learned from an early age to lean on herself for support and let everyone else fend for themselves. So what was so different about now? About them? She closed her eyes and saw the image of Colin’s mother. Her shaking body, trembling for air. Her stammering words, searching for the right, final ones. But the most troubling memory Theo had was that as the mother died, her eyes did not weaken. She died with an intense fire behind her corneas, as though she knew it would all be okay. Theo tried to divert the situation, but she caught herself, knowing that there was no one in here to hide from. She paced around a few times, but then proceeded to walk into the shower. The water began to fall over her hair and warm her shoulders and chest. She picked up her hands with pain as they deep cuts were stinging. Then her eyes caught movement.

“What the...” dropped from her falling jaw as the cuts began to close and heal. She quickly looked over her entire body as bruises became pink, cuts became scabs that washed off, and her cracked fingernails became smooth and manicured. She was shocked. She quickly turned around and looked into the faucet. Assessing for anything out of the ordinary, Theo searched for answers. The water was healing her. Mending the breaks she had endured. Suddenly, a wild thought ripped through her brain and Theo raised her chin high and put her eye under the water. A smile began to grow across her face as the shower lasted. After minutes, Theo turned the water off, grabbed the white towel that smelled of warm vanilla, and stepped out onto the cool tile. She dried off in seconds and then turned back towards the mirror. She took one step, in intent to rush over to the glass, but the foot stayed and Theo froze. This was a moment she had been waiting for. She took a deep breath and tip toed over to the fogged mirror. She took a bit of the towel and began to wipe away the condensation. Once cleared, Theo raised her chin once again and stopped. She was still blind and the jagged white scar still accented her thin face. Her stomach dropped, her heart began to beat faster, the hair on her back stood on edge, and clenched fists met the glass, causing splintering cracks to run across the mirror’s surface. However, Theo didn’t get a chance to see her damage. She quickly turned her back, put on the fresh clothes Mary had left out for her, and left with her shoes in hand.

## XV

Two doors on opposite sides of the hallway opened at the same time. Colin and Theo both walked out and into each other. Both looked refreshed, but only in a bodily way. Emotionally, they both looked as though a war transpired behind closed doors. Their eyes connected, fell away, and reconnected as both silently conversed. Sometimes, words couldn't begin to cover what people actually wanted to say. So instead, the two turned and began to walk towards the lobby where they began. Mary was talking to another older woman next to the massive fireplace that the two passed by, but did not see. Theo's eye connected with the blazing fire that was centered within an ornately carved stone hearth. Creatures of all walks of life were delicately etched and engraved into the granite masterpiece. The wild nature of the flames danced around, sparking, disappearing in embers, and reappearing in an endless array of orange color. Colin looked around, also taking in his surroundings more carefully the second time around. His eyes took him upwards and around. He carefully began to turn his body in a clock wise motion in order to get the full picture. Mahogany balconies overlooked the entire area as rooms to closets and offices and places of community and secret extended far beyond where Colin's eyes could see. Theo then saw Colin's raised chin and so too looked up. Her eyes caught ornate chandeliers, all carved from teakwood, polished with oil to shine, and finished with live flames from each socket.

"Why, don't y'all just look dandy now? I am so glad we could get you into some new clothes. How do ya guys feel?" Mary exclaimed after walking up to the two astounded teens.

"Uhm, I guess fine." Theo matter-of-factly stated, but was quickly jabbed in the rib by Colin's elbow. She then added, "But, thank you very much for the hospitality." Sweet, savory, spicy, and succulent smells gently wafted into the lobby and Colin caught scent of it for the first time. His stomach sounded before his mouth could ask where the smells are coming from.

"Well, that sound is music to my ears. Let's get you into the mess hall for some grub." Mary led the two out of the lobby through the doors up ahead, and to the right. Both Colin and Theo realized that they hadn't eaten in a very long time. So transfixed on getting to their

destinations and finding out the truth, they forgot about their own needs. Both began to think back to their original mission as Mary opened the doors to a massive, but simple dining hall. Each picnic table within the hall had a classic red and white gingham pattern, hand sewn and draped on each. Walnut wood stools stood at each table with rope delicately woven to form the seats of the chair. Theo also surveyed matching chandeliers to those in the lobby hanging from the roof of the mess hall. However, the most eye catching part of the room is that all of the walls were floor to ceiling windows that allowed for the villagers to dine while seeing the wonders of the camp around them. Tables lined the windows filled with fruits, vegetables, breads, and desserts of all kinds while cooks continued to replace dishes and plates that were emptied by hungry people. The smells intoxicated Colin and he took an instinctual step towards the food without giving it a thought.

“Woah dude, let’s get a table first,” Theo said as she looked around trying to find a place for them to sit. However, she soon realized how packed it was in the hall. Flashbacks to elementary school flashed in her eye as she remembered the vicious nature of trying to fit in. Colin broke from his food trance and tried to find a table as well.

Mary interjected, “Oh why don’t you guys go sit with some of our newest additions to the camp? They too came today. Early this morning to be precise. I’m sure they would love some company! Follow me.”

“But,” Theo tried to protest, but Mary grabbed her hand and began to lead her and Colin to the table inhabited by two other kids, looking to be just about their age. She tried to speak up, but even Theo didn’t want to be rude.

“Hi ya, Maddie! Felix, I see you’ve enjoyed your meals. Not to fret. Keep on enjoying the food here folks. There is so much to go around. I grew up in a house where there was always a feast, so please join my family too.”

“Thank you very much Ms. I mean, Mary.” Colin’s goofy smile sprouted once more. Mary matched his smile, put a hand on his shoulder and for a moment looked deep into his eyes long enough for Colin to feel like she knew more than a stranger could have ever known. But, the moment was over as soon as it started and Mary walked off to another family.

The four just awkwardly stared at one another at first. Each opened their mouths at different points, but no words came out. Maddie was the first one to make a move and pulled out the stool

next to her as a sign of welcoming for the two. She first looked to Theo who didn't make a move. Colin saw the gesture and angry at Theo's denial of it, quickly thanked her and took up her offer. Maddie swiftly kicked Felix who went back to his plate, trying to get his attention away from the food and to the newcomers at the table. Felix quickly swallowed what was in his mouth, flashed a look of aggravation at Maddie, and then reached beside her and pulled out the chair for Theo. She cautiously sat down at the table of three. She turned to Felix and muttered a thank you in his direction and he grunted a sign of welcome to her.

"Hey there. New here too?" Maddie threw out into the awkward silence.

"Yeah. We arrived just two hours or so ago. Amazing place here," Colin responded.

"Sure is! Surprised to find it in the first place. I've paddled down the river many times before, but today was the first time I ever saw it."

Theo rose an eyebrow in confusion of her statement and decided to press on. "You mean, it just appeared. Out of nowhere?"

"Yeah. I live upstream just a little. My house connects to the Hooch and I've loved it since the day I could ride its currents. Felix here and I arrived at the same time."

Colin was intrigued. "So did Theodos, I mean Theo, and I." He was about to proceed with more information, but caught sight of a death glare from Theo. He immediately closed his mouth. Luckily, his stomach began to growl which gave him the diversion he needed to get out of the sticky situation. "Please excuse me. But I am starving." Colin rose from his stool and began to walk to the lines in front of him, but was interrupted by a Felix with a clear mouth.

"Sorry man. I got here and was starving too. I would suggest the pasta. It's dope."

"Thanks man, I will definitely try the, uhm, dope, pasta," Colin said as he released a boyish laugh that brought a smile to Maddie's face. Distrustful of the situation, Theo rose too and excused herself so that she could warn Colin about his stupidity.

"What in the hell was that, dude? I mean, don't be rude. But, they don't need to know your whole life story. And I am in that story. So watch your loose lips before you land us both in trouble."

"I was only trying to be friendly."

Theo's temper began to rise. "Do you remember the reason we are here in the first place? Your family was threatened. My eye is all because of-...", but her voice trailed off. She realized her anger made her share too much information. Attempting to cover up her slip, she retorted, "Your mom is, well, you know, all because of that stupid letter."

Colin's temper sparked now. "Who do you think you are? She's dead. You don't think I know that. But, get this 'dude.' Someone here is the reason why I am here. The address lead us here. So I intend to get close to every person if it helps me find my truth. You can be angry, distrustful, and rude, but I surely don't have to. I wasn't raised like that."

"I-." Theo was about to fire back, but then Colin's last words sunk into her head. Her family didn't raise her like that either. But, they weren't here anymore to remind her of what she should be doing. For so long, she lived on the streets to avoid being bombarded with questions, comments, and concerns about how she was doing or what they could do for her. She grew up, but was still a child who needed advice and care. But, the cold streets were not nurturing and the advice of the street urchins she met along the way could only carry her so far. Her eyes began to fill uncontrollably and she grew angry at the fact that she was showing emotion. Colin turned away from the food to look up at her after she cleared her throat. She turned away and pretended to be distracted by the zucchini to her left, but he caught her tears. He placed his plate down and dropped his hand on top of hers. Her head snapped around so quickly, she may have gotten whiplash from the impact. She attempted to pull it away, but he hung on.

"I'm sorry. I get it. For some reason, I have this feeling. That people here get it too. But, somewhere down this road we're walking, we're going to have to trust someone. I trusted you after all. And it has helped."

"We just have to be smarter. But, I do get it too. I, I will try to be, nicer," she said while rolling her eyes which both got them laughing. "Now, shut up and get some food. I'm tired of hearing your stomach growl."

Their attention shifted from their tension to the feast in front of them. Foods from all over the world were cooked and ready to be enjoyed. Stuffed grape leaves, all varieties of shellfish, fries covered in gravy and cheese, spanakopita, olives, pickles, assortments of breads, massive salads, paella, dishes of ramen and pho, sushi, falafel were just dishes to start with. Then, fresh fruits and vegetables were served in all different styles. Whole, cut, in sauce, on top of something,

in something, or dried and preserved, the creativity the chefs used was mesmerizing. Decadent chocolates, cheesecakes, macaroons, cakes, cookies, and pastries ended the feast all the way at the end. But, almost every country was represented in between. As Theo and Colin slowly walked by and read every card, they would think of something they would want to have and it would appear somewhere further down the table. Theo did not realize until she saw everything just how hungry she was. Since stepping foot on the campgrounds, she was on edge and extremely anxious about what she would have to do next. But, she forgot that if she was to do anything she would need to eat. They returned to the table with two plates and sat down. They both gave a grin to Maddie and Felix and Felix looked back at them, almost excited that he found people who love food as much as he does.

“So, how did you get here, dude?” Theo asked Felix as she dug into her miso soup.

“I was just on a trip down to Florida. But, I had some stuff to do in Georgia here for school. Instead of ruining my family’s trip, I decided to look at a college on my own and meet them later. The address to the school just led me here.”

Colin cursed at himself internally. He just got done preaching to Theo about trusting people, yet the minute Felix told his story, Colin felt a lie in the making. But, he just filled his mouth with the end of a cannoli. As time passed and the full plates became crumbs and leftover crusts, the mess hall began to slowly empty. The four exchanged innocent conversation about their fascinations with the camp and the places they came from. That was until Mary came back into the hall and directed them further.

“I hope y’all enjoyed your meals. Our chefs are just so lovely. Culinary scholars from all over the world, ya know. However, they will be closing up shop until the mornin’ so why don’t I lead you to your rooms for the night? They are just upstairs.”

Theo became confused quickly and raised her finger to speak. “Hey, Mary? I thought the rooms were, well, outside. I saw people enter them earlier like going into their homes?”

Mary let out a gentle laugh and reassured Theo. “All will become much clearer tomorrow. The second day is always a big day. And still part of our tour.” She raised a finger as a reminder/

Colin then joined in. “Well, why is that exactly?”



“Why, because tomorrow y’all get to choose if you want to stay or leave,” she added as she began to walk towards the doors she led Colin and Theo into not too long ago. “Now, I won’t answer any more questions. After all, you all look like you’ve had long days and when my kids looked like that, they went straight to bed so their dreams could reenergize them. They entered back into the room and Colin observed that it was empty except for large stairs that went into all different directions. Mary chose the one right in front of them and began to ascend the polished mahogany steps that were draped in running carpets that looked as though leaves blew in and settled upon them forever. She then led them into a hallway with a generous amount of doors and slowly led them each into a room. Felix ran into his room and was jumping into his bed even before the door shut. Maddie timidly peered in, smiled and thanked Mary for the hospitality, then carefully closed the door behind her. Theo glimpsed Maddie’s eye that rose from the floor and met hers just as the door was about to close and saw a flash of immense sadness behind the iris. The door closed and locked and Theo’s focus was broken. Mary then led her to her room and wished her sweet dreams. She too went in timidly, but then was overcome with fatigue, as though the room sapped away any lasting bit of energy she left for that day. She closed the door and went to sit on the bed and take off her shoes, but instantly fell asleep.

Mary led Colin to his bedroom and as he opened the door, she quickly added, “Homes can be temporary Colin.” He turned around to meet her face just as he spoke on. “I have noticed that you have been fighting something dark. Mother’s intuition. My own kids would show it all over their faces when something went wrong. But, I do have to say. Sometimes, things have to go wrong so we know when they are right.” She looked out the window next to Colin’s room and straight into the moon. “And sometimes we have to endure a dark night, to know what the light of the sun feels like.” Her transfixion on the outside world broke when Colin shifted uneasily on his feet. “Anyways, goodnight Colin! Best of dreams to ya.” A warm smile was the last expression Colin saw before he entered his own room, undressed and put on the soft pajamas that were left out for him, and unknowingly slipped into the dream world that interrupted his final thoughts of pain, confusion, and suspicion.

## XVI

She blinks and can see; out of both eyes. She runs to the cracked mirror and can see her full face. She quickly closes her left eye and can see through her right like always. But, she then closes her right eye and can now see through her left eye once again. Tears begin to stream down her face. Her silent prayers were finally answered. The scar had even healed to the point where it just looked like a subtle wrinkle. She turns the faucet on and cups her pale hands under the cold water, attempting to wake herself up from the dream. But, she was awake and this wasn't a dream. She looks up again at the mirror and observes the cracks. However, her eyes unfocus as the sun comes up and through the windows that did not have curtains. They readjust and sharpen upon the image of the sun in the mirror. It was even more eclipsed than before. Previously it had looked like the icon on the phones she saw everyone carry. But, now it looked like the circle had been cut in half. The light was strong, but its rays were not as bright as they had been before. But, what did she care? She had received her full sight once again. The rising sun ascends higher in the sky and the eclipse comes faster. Her whole room begins to darken and she flips the light on in the bathroom. She smiles once more and begins to envision what her life will be like from here on out.

The overhead lights begin to flicker and go out one by one. She whips her head upwards to see what was happening. It was if the whole world around her was darkening. The only light that remains lit after seconds was the one directly above her. She grasps onto the remaining clarity and leans in closer to the mirror. Her eyes dart to her cheek, where the scar used to cut through. Cracks begin to appear in her skin, just like the mirror she was looking through. She lets out an audible gasp and her bony fingers rush to her face. She touches her skin as it begins to flake away on the right side of her face. She attempts to patch it, mend it, and hold it together, but every attempt to salvage the damage makes the situation worse. She continues to try and stop it and her fingers works methodically, a gray patch appears at her cheek. One would have expected the skin to fall away and reveal the off-white hue of her skull. But, the skin falls away and reveals slate grey fur. Her eyes widen as the cracks become severe, chunks fall away, and the side of her face

transforms into a wolf. As she focuses on the image of a beast staring back at her, her sight begins to cloud in both eyes, dim, and slowly fade away. She runs out of the bathroom just as the light above her flickers and extinguishes, leaving her in complete darkness. Her foot catches the lip of the tile that was in the bathroom and her eyesight ceases just as she went plummeting to the floor she can no longer see.

Theo's head hit the floor first, but her left foot remained entangled in the sheets. The shock woke her up from the nightmare she was having. Still in the clothes Mary had given her, she did not remember falling asleep. She quickly ripped her foot free from its prison and ran for the bathroom. She quickly flipped on the lights and grabbed her cheeks. The mirror was perfectly smooth and her eye was still milky from the knife of her past. She let out a sigh of relief as one of the lights above her began to flicker. Theo panicked and ran out and to her windows. She ripped the curtains apart to reveal the gardens below that led to the dock that sat proudly within the river. Her world was not dark like her dreams led her to believe and she gave a weak smile. But, her eyes caught sight of the sun above the trees on the other side of the river. She began to back away from the window. Theo's pulse began to speed up as her mouth began to slowly drop, trying to speak words that would never be heard. Her good eye traced the outline of a half-circle and she ran for the door. She needed to get out of here and her body jumped into the flight mode she was used to from living on the cold streets. She grabbed the bag Mary had left with her clothing the day before, pulled open the door without haste, and ran through the threshold and straight into Viktor. Theo ricocheted off of his plump body and fell back into her room.

"Oh, I am so sorry! My apologies mam," Viktor exclaimed as he bent down and reached out a hand for Theo to grab onto. Rubbing her back as she accepted his hand and rose to her feet, she grunted,

"That's okay. What were you doing outside my door?" Her voice trailed off with an accusatory tone.

"I was sent by Mary to wake you all up for breakfast and heard a loud noise come from your room. I was about to knock when there was suddenly no door to knock on," he stated both apologetically and matter-of-factly. She stayed silent and Viktor took it as a sign to leave. He began to walk away and he turned to walk back down the hallway. Theo's guilt began to rise as she felt bad about treating him so unkindly. You would think after the years of stealing and

deception she would not feel guilt any longer. And yet, it always occurred in the same situations; when she hurt the feelings of someone.

“Well, I fell out of bed. Thank you for coming to check on me.” She finished her sentence as Viktor turned around and gave a sincere smile. He turned back around and continued to walk the hallway as a new thought popped into Theo’s head. “Does this camp happen to have TVs?”

“No, not in the main areas. I have one in my office. Why exactly do you need one?”

“Oh, I just like to know about the world around me.”

“Ah, so you want to know more about the sun.” Shocked that he knew exactly what she was insinuating, she began to blush.

“Uhm, yeah. I kind of do. I saw it this morning and I don’t remember it looking like that.”

“Well, that is because it didn’t. It has gotten worse over the past few days. You can stop by my office and watch the news. I almost always have it on. I like to know about the world too.” He let out a gentle chuckle, like that of a father laughing at his daughter’s antics. Theo did not respond, but simply shook her head. She began to follow him down the hallway as Colin came out of his room, putting one of his shoes on while cradling the other under his armpit. Realizing he was not alone in the hallway, he looked up as he saw Theo turn around to greet him.

“Oh. Hi! Good morning. Off to breakfast? I’ll join ya.”

“Hey Colin. I’ll meet you there. I just have to go down to Viktor’s office. Pick something up I left behind.”

“No problem. Want me to come with you?” Felix and Maddie both came out of their rooms. Colin’s eyes drifted over to Maddie, but then quickly back to Theo. But, Theo realized this and quickly added,

“No, I will just meet you all there.” Colin felt a little awkward, but he quickly dismissed his feelings and walked on down the hallway with Maddie and Felix. He turned the corner to his right as Theo followed Viktor off to the left and just before the wall would cover his view, he turned and glanced over his shoulder. But, Theo did not return the glance and instead, walked on without second thought. While the rest of the group headed for the mess hall, Theo began to grow nervous. Viktor seemed like a nice guy, but he seemed off to her. Like he was hiding something.

They headed to the main lobby and then proceeded to a spiral stair case that descended to floors below. Once again, there seemed to be various ways of getting around down there. Theo thought to herself, “Gee, I would not like to get lost down here.” She observed hallways that started out of nowhere and just continued on. After walking down an endless hallway, they turned at an ornately carved wooden door.

“Welcome to the humble abode,” he said with a toothy sneer. Theo observed a certain charm to Viktor. Something of a stern father that kept his kids in order out of protection. He fumbled around in his pocket and finally produced a key in which he poked at the door with, entered into the tumbler, and muttered under his breath.

“What did you say?” But the door swung open and interrupted her statement. Viktor entered and flipped on a switch which illuminated a massive office. Book shelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling. Ladders were placed on railings and were ready to be slid down the line for their next visitor. However, the most peculiar part of the entire office was that it was illuminated by fire. Not the typical fire Theo saw in the trash cans she and her fellow street rats made to keep warm. This light was warm and pure, giving the office a bright ambiance. As he proceeded down the office, towards his desk where there was an old box TV, Theo peered into one of the lamps which simply was a wood stand with a glass dome over it. She watched the flame dance, diminish and then spark back up. As her eyes watched the movements, one of the wisps of flame formed into a head. Theo blinked her eyes, but legs and a tail sprouted next. She threw her head to the side to look for Viktor, but he was stopped at a shelf peering at a book with a look of determination. She quickly looked back in enough time to see a wild stallion running around the confines of the dome, waiting to break free, but burning up before it ever came close to a chance. She stepped away and looked up and suddenly all of the lamps contained fiery creatures, crawling, swinging, pouncing, and running all around. Her mouth dropped as Viktor looked up and said,

“Ah. You came for the TV. Okay, let me see. The remote should be...” he fumbled with his desk and the mess on top of it. Some books and papers fell, while some keys and devices flipped or slid off. “Yes. Here we go. Damn job has me racing and running. I just never have time to clean.” He chuckled to himself and turned on the TV, which was programmed to come on with the news channel. A newscaster could be heard from where Theo stood, rambling about natural developments.

“There is still yet to be any indication of what we are seeing when we wake up to our Sun. NASA has sent out multiple units to monitor from space, while hundreds of organizations here are meticulously working towards a solution. Congress has not left in days, trying to reach a consensus on the budget that should be given to help the cause. Food trucks have been coming every few hours to deliver food to the Capitol, ensuring they are well fed and hydrated as these are some serious topics. The President of the United States has stated this to be a time in natural human history in which “we all should be asking questions and trying to discover the answers, as we all have a lot to lose if they are not fou...” Theo had been walking closer to the TV and observed the woman reporter grab her ear and her face go into shock. “This just in. There has been an attack on the Capitol. No. From within the Capitol.” The reporter broke character and whispered to the camera man while live, “How is that even possible.” Her eye reconnected with the people and she calmly stated, “Yes. There has been an attack on Congress from within the walls of the Capitol building. We are being told by the press secretary to the United States to ensure the people of the United States to remain calm. Our cameras will take you live into the building for an exclusive look at what is transpiring.” The picture cut out and flipped to a scene of chaos from within the building supposed to be a vision of peace and harmony. The camera from inside was visibly shaking, trying to catch every action happening. The camera panned over to the Speaker’s seat at the center of the room, but there was no inhabitant. Senators from all over were climbing over chairs, desks, or even themselves, trying to get away. Theo asked herself, “From what though.”

Then, the camera caught the source of the chaos. A bobcat was prowling on a desk, carefully maneuvering around the various objects still left on it. A senator was slowly moving back, one heel still on while the other was lost way back. She did not make any sudden movements, but moved at the same pace as the beast in front of her. Theo began to squint her eyes for more clarity, just as the bobcat could be seen licking its lips. The animal’s muscles tightened, its legs drew back, and the animal pounced just as the camera panned over to a man who began to scream and tear at his clothing. He fell off of one of the desks, his foot still on the head of another man he was trying to overcome in order to get in front of. His body hit the floor and bounced underneath and just out of sight. However, the leg was still able to be seen and Viktor closed in on the TV as the whole world watched the man convulse. The tight suit began to loosen and he slipped out of his shoe, shrank, and pulled away from the excess. Both Theo and Viktor were captivated by the picture in front of them. Theo’s body was shaking from the trauma of watching such a horrifying

event, wondering why the hell the news channel was still channeling the story unfolding. Viktor however had an intensity in his eyes that Theo observed as he drew closer and closer to the screen. He wondered why the camera man wasn't zooming in. Suddenly, there was a loud grunt and the man who had been trampled previously was charged by a wild boar. Theo gasped and jumped backwards. "That man. Did he just..."

"Why I suppose he did."

"What the hell is going on? I have to get to Colin."

"Now, wait. We cannot upset the campgrounds. I have worked too hard." He paused, realizing the selfishness in his tone. "Mary and I have worked too hard to keep this place a safe one. This is one of the few TVs on site and visitors typically do not see news. Therefore, they do not know any of this. You are to keep silent while I, Mary and I, sort this out."

"With all due respect, I do not live here. I am not a part of your community. And something is wrong. Terribly wrong. So shove it mister." Theo turned to jet out of the office, now uncomfortable. However, her foot stopped and remained frozen to the floor.

"Who did you learn such contempt for adults from? You stayed overnight. You are as much a part of this community as I am." Her eyes widened. Her scar twitched with the anger boiling inside of her.

"Excuse. Me. I was told I was given a choice" She exclaimed through gritted teeth. "Do not think you have the right to take that away." She spat the words at him almost as if she spit a silent amount of saliva at his feet. Viktor took a deep breath. His temper receded and the same charming, even tone that Theo recognized earlier came out once more.

"Theo, I am sorry. I do not mean to silence you or demand my wishes. But. This place was not built and created as it is today. Hard work. Sweat. Tears. And yes, lots of blood, were spent on this place to bring it to its glory. I agree. Something is very wrong. Mary and I will fix it. Have faith in that. Now I have to go and figure out what our world is coming to. If you'll excuse me."

"I will not excuse you because I am leaving first." She ran for the door and slammed it behind her. The force of the slam sent a breeze through the office and extinguished the flame closest to the door. Viktor grabbed his jacket that he laid down upon entering the office he always

kept warm and inviting. He grabbed his keys and slowly walked his way over to the door, catching breaths with every step. He was about to open the door when he turned towards the lightless lamp. His arm extended, his hand rose, and his fingers slowly unfolded until his fingertips rested on the cool glass surface. The flame sprang to life and a fish floated around, flipping its fins and tail as it swam around the inside. His arm began to move in reverse in a robotic fashion as a smile began crack his worn face. Then, in one motion he stepped, slid out the door, and closed it on his only place of peace.



## XVII

Theo stormed up the steps, stomped her way through the hallways she was just previously in and made her way back to the mess hall. “Missed breakfast for this crap,” she muttered under her breath as she turned the corner. The doors to the mess hall stood in front of her. She stopped dead in her tracks. She needed to leave. Colin needed to. Something was very wrong. Theo closed her eyes, gathered the determination she needed, and then proceeded in. Fresh cinnamon and the rich tones of baked bread danced across her nose. The sweet tang of citrus filled the room as did the pungent smell of sulfur from the trays of eggs, every style imaginable. She ripped her eyes away from the food, trying to break the trance her hunger put her in. Her eyes fluttered over to the annoying boy she trusted too much. Her mind raced as she tried to make sense of what it was about him that forced the years of training she put herself under to build airtight walls. She did not like him. He was too much of a pretty boy for her type. But, here she was, wanting to take on the world with him. Her thoughts were interrupted by Colin’s eyes catching hers. A goofy smile spread across his face as an arm rose and a hand waved her towards them. She paced over and was about to start right in when Colin said with a mouthful,

“You have got, to try, the cinnamon buns.”

“Dude. Swallow your food,” she said with a grin, which she quickly silenced so as not to break her mission.

“Theo, I saved ya a chair next to me. Figured the boys could make a mess over there.” Her southern twang was warm and inviting and Theo sat down next to here, not realizing her actions until she was in the chair. “I saved ya some of the good stuff. I was worried it would all be gone, so help yaself!”

“Thanks Maddie, but, I have something...”

“Hi ya kids! What’s shakin’.” Mary interrupted Theo’s sentence which made her temper rise once more. Colin’s eyes lit up. However, he quickly squashed his sentiments, remembering that he needed answers charm would not answer.

“So, you said today was a big day. I don’t know about these guys, but I would like to know what makes it so big. I have to be on my way soon and...” he scanned through the faces of people he was enjoying his meal with and they silently agreed so he continued, “seems like these guys have to be as well. So lay it on us.”

“Cutting to the chase I see. Just like ma daughter.” She let a warm chuckle go becoming, in Colin’s mind, a trait of hers. “No issue with that. Like I said, y’all can stay here as long as you’d like to. These campgrounds are welcome to the world. But, if ya choose to stay here, ya must be willing to learn.”

“Learn what exactly,” Felix chimed in which shocked Theo as she never heard him talk much. “I’m not very good at the learnin’ stuff.”

“That’s okay Felix,” Mary said with a joyful smile. “It’s not math, science, or even social studies.” Felix’s eyebrows raised as shock rippled through his mind. How did she know those were his worst subjects? He dropped his head to his plate and began to pick through his food with the side prong of his fork. However, his hand froze as another thought popped into his head.

“Well, if it is not any of those topics, then what we gonna be learnin’?”

“Are you kids done with your breakfast? I would like to show you.” The four glanced around the table at one another, trying to read whether or not this was an acceptable offer. Colin glanced to Theo who looked suspicious, but eager. Theo saw that Colin needed this opportunity to press for answers. They silently agreed to hear the woman out while Maddie and Felix both began to rise and follow her out. “Well then.” She said with a bright smile. “These are my favorite days.” She turned and proceeded out with the four teens in tow. She would wave and pat diners on the back, telling them she will catch up with them later, asking them how they feel, or to get another plate to hold them over until lunch. She was a warm, smooth, and caring person, yet somewhere deep inside, Theo could see an agenda. But, Colin could see it too and this kept his guard up.

Maddie on the other hand was just glad that she could be away from the house for a while. She had floated down the Hooch a hundred times, hoping for a quick escape from the memories

the four walls provided her at home. Just when she was ready to destroy the boat and never sail again, a current took her swiftly downstream and slammed her right into a dock. Yet, the boat did not crack and sink but simply stayed put, as though an invisible tether roped itself around the boat hooks. Maddie was knocked over by the impact and when she rose up once again, the entire landscape that was empty before was now replaced with the massive log cabin she was walking out of currently. At first, her thoughts were dazzled and confused at the same time. But, it was place of escape. Her mother could not make her feel as though she is damaged or broken. But, deep down she knew she was and her mind wandered as it always did. It never quite rested as the normal ones her family told her about did. Instead, the moments when she felt joy and wonder again were quickly crushed by thoughts of losing those she loved most. She never grew close to anyone specifically for the reason that they too may have the sky fall on them. She looked down at her hands and could see the bones in her fingers, a trait that was custom to her body. With this thought, she quickly put her hands in the pocket to her romper. Mary led them down the great stairs and out to the grounds once more. However, Naleysi Fields was no longer the quiet village they walked into. There were noises emanating from every corner of the area. Colin's pulse began to rise as he felt like he was actually within the shows on the animal planet. Felix eyes darted to the trees on the pathway and they were quiet and dark except for the daylight shining through. There was no one to be seen.

“Uhm, where did all the people go?”

“They are still here Felix. However, training picked up as per usual today.”

“Training?” Theo added in. “What do you mean training?” Her temper began to rise once more.

“Well, training to help control just that,” Mary rebutted. Theo's face reddened and her eyes sparked with anger.

“Control what? What are you insinuating?”

“Your temper. It is not a bad thing. But, if left uncontrolled, you will...”

Maddie's curiosity peaked. “Will what?” Mary turned around to all of them and said with a soothing voice,

“All will be shown to ya in a few minutes. Patience kids. It’s a virtue ya know!” Colin was eager to find out answers. For days now he hasn’t slept because the questions he had kept him up. He had no time for patience. Patience was a virtue lost years ago.

“With all due respect, I have to be on my way soon. So if you have to show us something can we get on with it?” Theo looked over to Colin, who had never quite snapped like this. She reached for his arm and grabbed, stroking it with her thumb. However, she did not know why she did this. It wasn’t in Theo’s nature to be comforting. She quickly took her hand back, but Colin did not really notice as he was flustered by all the distractions appearing before them. Mary continued to lead them down the pathway and towards the trees on the right. The five of them walked in between a large willow tree and a fat maple tree. When they got past the forest of leaves, Maddie’s eyes connected with a massive group in front of her. She stopped short immediately and being that Felix was still distracted, he slammed right into her.

“Hey! Why’d ya stop? I was walking...” his sentence hung in his mouth and did not go any further as he too spotted the group in front of them. Felix watched as they all moved in silent motion alongside one another. Quick kicks, sharp jabs, and tight left hooks were being thrown all around. However, Felix was most confused by the fact that all of their eyes were closed. Each and every person were practicing kickboxing, boxing, and martial arts all the while doing it with their eyes closed. “Woah.”

“You got that right, Felix! This activity is pretty darn amazing. I’m not too great at it myself so I can respect someone when they really master it. Agnostics some fella called it way back when and it kind of stuck. The most interesting part however is before the fighting begins. But, I won’t give away all the secrets. You will have to come back to see more.” Felix made a mental note to come back to this class. He shuddered with the flashback of the bullies he faced not so long ago. His fists tightened under the jacket that hung over them, but he released them quickly so no one could see it. “Moving right along kids. There is still more to see!” That wrapped around the group, careful not to get in the way of any of the combatants. As they walked further and further through the grounds, Maddie began to see more and more of the trees that people would return to once dinner was over. She was fascinated by these dwellings and her curiosity began to burn within her.

“Will we ever get to see the inside of some of those trees?” asked Maddie with an innocence in her voice.

“Why of course ya will. But not just yet. That comes later!” Mary added while holding up her finger at the end of her statement. “Now over here, we have my favorite activity. Meditation! Oh, and can’t forget the yoga that comes after it. Some people fall asleep and they don’t get seconds in the mess hall if the leader that day finds out. But, it is an event that wipes away all of your troubles and brings a little peace to our troubled world.” Maddie’s attention was diverted from the quaint tree line by the quick, but deep ding of a gong. She listened to Mary’s words and found herself stepping towards the group in front of her. She let her heel fall, but then she stopped as she knew they were just on a tour. Yet, her mind drifted to her thoughts and how she always wanted an escape from them. She made a promise to herself to come back again and join in. After all, she needed any help she could get with her mind. “Ya know, people think the most important skill to know is fighting these days. But, a sound mind can really win our largest battles. And the battles we face within our always the hardest to overcome.” Maddie’s eyes twitched and darted as she caught Mary’s glance at her. It was like she knew. But, how could she. “Okay, moving right along! We have some more to see. And of course, that is only the classes today. There will be all different ones every week. Except for the weekends of course. Those are meant for family and friends and Lord knows we all need time for that.” Collectively the whole group shuddered, as they found themselves thinking about their lonely lives and the family and friends they lost along the way. They turned and began to walk down a path back towards the log cabin. Mary began to talk about many other activities such as archery, gardening, baking, cooking, and rowing. “Those are just a few of our basic ones. Most people love ‘em but of course, we are heading to one of the hardest activities.”

Just as she said it, an eruption of animal noises filled the air. Colin’s ears perked up trying to find the exact location. However, there was no one in sight. They crossed behind the cabin and kept on walking down the path. “Where are those noises coming from?”

“What noises,” Theo interjected.

“The monkey ones. And lion, dogs, and I guess I hear a rhino in there.” They all looked at Colin like he was on fire. But, Mary reached her hand out and placed it on Colin’s shoulder. He turned around to look at her.

“Don’t chu worry, Colin! Very few people can hear it right away because we place this activity in a silent area. It masks the noises so as not to upset the people on the outside of these

grounds. Can't have the people of Peachtree Corners thinking we are in the middle of some jungle or rainforest." Theo quickly looked at Colin and shared a simple smile, followed by a saddened look.

"Well, what is it then," Theo asked as they began to approach what seemed like the source of it all. A circle of people of all ages were grouped around what looked like a dummy. It was made out of leaves and twigs and stood within the middle, at an angle as though it was placed on unlevelled ground.

"This is our Onomonic class. This is one of the most important activities anyone can do at Naleysi. Here ya find your voice. And I'm not talking about those who learn to talk for the first time. I am talking about the true voice within. Each of these people have found and channeled the animal we have within us all. Later on you will too, I can promise ya." The four looked around and shared glances of the deepest confusion they have had yet. "But, that is the easy part. The hard part is letting that part of you come out without letting it overcome ya. You all have it inside of you. But, if left unchanneled. Well, you could become the beasts we all fear most." Her words began to settle and Colin shuddered a bit from the impact of them.

"What happens when that does in fact happen, Mary?" Colin opened his mouth before he could even contemplate whether or not he wanted to know the answer.

"Well, I hope this doesn't upset ya. But, I do want to give you answers. To all of you. Ya see, if you let the savagery we all have within us consume you, you lose your humanity for good. Very few people in the entire history of the world have ever been able to come back from their savage side. However, we try to teach ya here to never run that risk and instead become one with it. Channel it for protection, security, or even safety. It is a hard task, but everyone must do this at some point and some do it even more than others." As she said this, she put her hand out which hit an invisible wall, but then passed on through. Colin stepped with her, wanting to know what lied beyond. Maddie, Felix, and Theo both walked cautiously behind, fearing what they would hear. However, as Theo entered, the wall closed behind them and all of the noises of the environment around them silenced as well. All could be heard was the heavy breathing of those involved in the activity. Without warrant or notice, a man stepped forward and bellowed a massive "RAWA" that sent the dummy in the center flying backwards. As it soared through the air, it was about to land

on a young girl. Colin's impulses sparked and he began to run to block her, but Mary grabbed his arm and pulled him back. "No Colin."

"What are you doing?" He viciously spat at her. But, an even "SSSA" emanated from her clenched teeth and slit mouth. Colin watched as the even noise stopped the dummy, levitated it, changed the trajectory and then finally threw it back towards the other side.

Theo stepped forward and said, "Did she. That little girl. She didn't just send it flying away. She was able to alter complete motion." Mary rested her wrinkled, small, yet dainty hand on Theo's shoulder.

"That's Jesse. She is a mighty strong young woman. A natural for sure and only twelve."

"Only twelve?" Maddie said with both wonder and shock.

"Yes. But, she was also born at Naleysi. There's a whole medical wing up at the Lodge. But, that is off topic. Each animal inside of us can be used in different ways. Your more ferocious animals have the ability to create centripetal force, knocking down their enemies so quickly they will be incapable of retaliating for a while. Although, I have seen some people release their voice too wildly and the effects ricocheted and sent them hurtling backwards." Colin took a step back. He was starting to wake from the nightmare that has been his life. His eyes dimmed and were replaced by the images of the night his father died. His ears heard the noise that he created as his father fell down the stairs. He now knew for sure that he was the one responsible for the death of his father and the destruction of his family. The images shifted to the dark sky that overlooked the fields where his mother died. The same noise was heard once more and Colin felt the crack of his head against the bolder. His hand reached for the back of his head and tears weld up in his eyes.

"My fault" he whispered under his breath. Theo heard him say something and turned to ask him what it was. She saw his face and the pain upon it. She began to walk over to him. The people in the circle became louder and the noises from each became more persistent. Colin was now back in the present, but was overwhelmed by the stimulation. His head began to throb, the world began to spin, and his knees began to buckle. He could see Mary talking more, but could not hear her over the pounding in his head. Before he knew it, Colin dropped to the ground, his eyesight dimming. He watched as Theo rushed to his side, Maddie screamed, Felix gasped and tried to run

out of the circle for help. Then his eyes flicked to Mary's face. Her sweet smile was upon her face once again. He watched as her mouth made the words,

“Rest child. You are always safe here.” Then, he looked up to see the sun that was now even less of a half circle. Just as the physical world was getting darker every day, his was too.



## XVIII

Colin awoke to the sensation of someone watching him. His body jolted up, but his brain did not. He suddenly grasped his head and groaned as he fell back down to the pillow. With the light slowly fading from the setting sky, the sunset sent warm rays through the window pane and into the small, but comfortable room he's grown to know. Two days seemed like two weeks. Time just seemed to move slower here, almost like the water of the Hooch behind the cabin. Colin slowly turned over to find a small man in a seat in the corner of the room. The light seemed to be everywhere but in the corner, but Colin disregarded this observation as tricks his eyes were playing on him. He slowly leaned up on his right forearm and lifted his upper body. As his eyes adjusted, Colin caught sight of the figure of Viktor. His mind flipped and he questioned his presence in the room.

"Uhm, hi." Colin slowly spoke.

"Hello Colin. I hope I didn't startle you. I wanted to make sure you were okay," Viktor added with a tone of concern in his voice that Colin found surprising. Why exactly he didn't know. But, nonetheless, Colin did not have the utmost trust in this man. He looked like a kind grandfather type, but Colin felt somewhere deep inside that Viktor had a cruel core.

"Fine. I'll be fine. I mean, I don't really know what happened. One minute I was upright and standing. The next I was looking up at the sky. I had this pounding headache like none I've ever had before," Colin began to say and kept talking, almost involuntarily, then slowing by the end.

"It seems as though you had a lot going on upstairs, kid. It happens to the best of us. Too much stimulation," Viktor said empathetically. "Has everything been okay since you got here? We pretend like it is not a world of its own, but it is a lot."

“Like I said. Everything is fine,” Colin said with a determined finality in his voice. But, his eyes seemed to give it away. His body was shut off, but his eyes yearned for answers. A tiny thought popped into Colin’s head as Viktor began speaking again.

“Well, son, I have been around the block quite a bit. Had kids of my own. And I know that kids your age always have a lot going on. So tell ya what. My door is always open and you stop on by if you ever want to...”

Colin interjected, “So. This seem like a place not many just so happen to accidentally show up to. I mean. Clearly there is a reason for the world being like it is now. So clearly there is a reason this place appeared to me and Theo.”

Viktor paused for a while and created an awkward silence between the two. Colin would try to say something more, but his throat would only make the starting noise to a sentence and drop off. After choosing his words carefully, Viktor began with a smile. “My boy. How you remind me of myself. The genuine curiosity. The desire for answers. I have been searching my whole life. But, you are also alone. I can feel that.” Colin began to protest, but Viktor quickly interjected. “Kid. That isn’t an insult. Isolation is a terrible existence. But, it can also teach the strongest warriors how to rely on themselves. And Colin, you and I both know that is going to be the largest asset we all can have with our world how it is. It’s dying ya know? But, I think you already knew that.” Colin slowly shook his head in agreement with Viktor’s statements because after all, he knew that this was not just a global warming phase or a natural phenomenon. Quite honestly, this was a natural disaster and the worst was yet to come. “You don’t seem to trust me,” Viktor casually slipped into conversation. “I get it. I am a stranger. Hell, we all are to you. But, let me give you something to have trust in. A piece of me as a peace offering. My world started addicted to alcohol. I was born to a couple who had no respect for life. They would drink themselves to sleep every week and then start again on Monday. On the December day I was born, I wasn’t left on the cold streets of St. Petersburg. I was left in a house for two weeks uncared for and waiting to die. Then, one day I was wrapped in a rag and left in an alley. I was scooped up by a local nurse who found me crying from both cold and withdrawal. When they got me into the orphanage, they were all unsure of whether or not I would make it through the night. Colin, that was the darkest night I can remember. My whole world was dimming and I was just an infant. Yet, I can still remember the chill on my bones and the death creeping towards my soul. I grew up extremely ill from the

addiction to alcohol. It was the only gift I ever received from my parents. I bumped around from foster care to foster care, but between the pneumonia I would catch every year and the health issues with my bones from malnourishment, there weren't any foster parents willing to care for me. They couldn't afford it. Then one day when I was right around your age, I received word that an American couple wanted to adopt me. Time moved so slowly. I wanted so badly to have a fresh start and an actual shot at happiness. Then, I was on a boat. Then I was on the docks. And then I was in the blue Ford heading towards Charleston, South Carolina. My parents never changed my name, but taught me to be proud of where I came from. They were the first people to ever love me like I dreamt of. They provided the warmth of the sun in the darkest of winters. So Colin, I tell you this as a lesson. I know that you must have seen some horrors in your life because Naleysi Fields only appears to those who have felt heartache and faced down adversity. But, even if the sun falls out of the sky, have hope. For I can tell you that the light finds its way back to us when we least expect it.

Colin laid there speechless. He let his arm go limp and his body fall back to the pillow. His mind was threatening to implode. His heart began to become sad once again, but not for himself this time. He had judged Viktor so viciously, yet he could never have imagined the pain behind his wrinkled face. Every line he had seen on the older man's face he now wondered when and where it was created. Colin leaned back up with tears in his eyes, feeling such contempt for his judgement. Viktor jumped into action and over to the side of Colin, "No. Don't you dare weep for me. I will not allow it. I have had a good life despite my childhood. And I have come here and worked towards building this place so that others, especially you kids, can try to make something of this world." Colin breathed in deeply and simply shook his head in disbelief of what he just heard.

"With all of that said, and may I say I had no idea, what do you know about the world? What is going on?" Colin slowly began to add in.

Viktor looked towards the window where the moon was now brightening in the dusk sky. "To be quiet honest son, no one quite knows. That sun is eclipsing at a slow pace, more than it ever has. Typically these events only transpire for a few hours. It's been days. And well, have you talked to Theo much?" Colin's eyes widened.

“What does she have to tell me? What does she know that I don’t?” Colin threw the words into the air like fire.

“Well, she had come to my office looking for these answers and we saw on my TV that, well, chaos is starting. Maybe out of fear of the sun. But, the human race is transforming. Seems that as every day becomes darker, our very souls are mirroring that affect. There was this man and then there wasn’t.”

“Excuse me? What does that even mean,” Colin added with an angered confusion in his voice.

“Sorry. Let me rephrase. Again, there was a man and he fell off a desk and then he wasn’t a man anymore. I didn’t quite see it. But, within a few blinks of an eye, a wild boar was in his place. And it was not just him.”

“So what does it mean.”

“Colin, if I knew I would tell ya. Honest to God, I don’t know what is going on.”

Colin stayed silent for a few moments and then began to think of another thought. “Do you think Mary would know?” Viktor could sense in his voice a trusting bond between the two and became uncomfortable.

“No offense Colin, but if I don’t know, it is unlikely she will. She is too busy around here to stay up to date on outside information.”

“Oh. Okay then. Maybe I will ask if the time is right later. I think I am good to go for now. My head is feeling better.”

Viktor looked at Colin with a thankful expression and began to stand. “Well that is great to hear. You did take a nasty spill. But, we do have our evening plans soon. Specifically for you, this will be a transformative night. We love our new recruits.

“Wait. What? Recruits? I didn’t sign up for anything.” Colin spat back. Viktor now standing began to slowly walk towards the edge of the bed. Colin trailed his bare feet up through the covers, gradually bringing them closer to him.

“Well, you’re going to need to start growing up Colin and making quick decisions. This is the real world now for you at your age. And there is no time for precaution. What I have learned from life is that you do not get second chances, but sometimes you do not even get firsts. You have to decide in the moment what you will do to get ahead and sometimes even stay alive.”

“Okay, but this is just a camp. It’s like summer camp on steroids.”

Viktor pondered this thought then responded. “You see Colin, yes it is a camp. The whole world is welcomed. But, while this camp appears to those who have been through the wringer, it just does not pop up for everyone. It takes a specific person to feel its presence and be lead to the fields. Ah, but I have given away too much. All will be revealed later. However, I will leave you with this. I am old enough to know that something has changed in the heavens of our world. And something is coming. While I am not sure what exactly, moments will lie ahead of us all that will test us. Test us right down to the core. Make sure you continue to seek out the answers you are looking for Colin. But also remember that some of them, only we can answer for ourselves. Now, get up you have been milking that head for far too long.” Viktor gave out a warm chuckle that made Colin jolt a bit. Previously, they had been forced and cold, at least to Colin. But, here and now, it filled Colin’s head with a warmth he hadn’t felt in a while. Viktor excused himself and Colin laid there for only a few moments more. He had so many questions and so many thoughts swirling around his bruised head. What was happening in the world? How could Viktor feel these changes? What was he hiding? What were the all hiding? But then, an even more troubling though passed through Colin’s head. He realized he would have to go down to an event with all of the camper goers. So, what was he going to wear?

## XVIV

He got up from the bed with a cold sweat in the crevices of his body and ran for his closet. A wardrobe of Henley's, jeans, jackets sneakers were all placed inside. How did they know his sizes? He was never one to worry too much about his appearance, but right now, he was terrified of being in front of a large crowd again. As he thought, Colin began to realize how much he let the judgement of others affect his life. After his dad died. Well, after he was murdered by him, he constantly worried about people finding out. From that moment, Colin constantly put on a show in order to divert people from the truth. Right down to his appearances, he worried about how people would perceive him. Because eon wrong move, and everyone could find out. Colin shook his head and grabbed the first thing his hand connected to. He ran into the shower realizing dinner was just about over and he needed to be down to the main campfire. He hastily washed himself of the troubles of the early day and promised himself he would not show any weakness tonight. Whatever it was he would not let himself become a fool.

Colin put on his fresh clothes and ran for the door. He hoped to at least catch the tail end of dinner and manage to get a few scraps in. He opened the door, ready to book it downstairs and to the mess hall. As the door slammed behind him, it woke a sleeping Madison and she was startled awake. "Oh, Lord."

Colin turned around quickly, startled himself y the sound of another human. He looked straight and then down to find Maddie, now in a floral top, off the shoulder, with frills on the sleeves, light jeans, and a show with a small heel of some sort on it. Scrambling to get up, she was throwing in words, separated by breaths taken trying to stand. "How, are you, Colin? I was, so worried, about ya." Now standing just below eye level of Colin, she rushed him with a hug that Colin was not prepared for.

"Woah. Who said I wanted a hug. I don't do hugs," Colin said with a suppressed smile.

Maddie backed off and at first seemed concerned that she had just overstepped some boundaries. Then, a sassy smile came over her face which disregarded the previous though. “Well, ya just got one and you’re pretty good at it. So.”

Colin was taken aback by the sudden attitude, but a quick feeling of interest overcame him. He was confused by the feeling, but soon found it felt very much like the time he had his first crush on Penny Pickleman. He thought back to this girl and quickly shuddered at the time she heard him talking in his sleep at a sleepover. That was the last time he called her his girlfriend and the last sleepover he went to. “Well, uhm, thanks.” His daze was halted by a plate of food Madison was giving to him. “Wow. I could kiss you.” Both of them backed away ever so slightly from each other. Maddie blushed almost immediately and Colin started to laugh nervously. “No, no. I, uh, won’t do that. I just like food. A lot. And, I mean thank you. Not that I wouldn’t want to kiss you. Oh my God. I’m just going to go now. Sorry for the awkwardness.” Colin wiped away the sweat off his brow from the tension before him and began to turn as Maddie grabbed his arm.

“You think this is the first time an awkward boy flirted with me? Don’t ya worry Colin. Just friends right? Anyway, eat up. Apparently Mary has something big for us tonight. I wonder what it’s going to be. I think they are going to make us sing a camp song solo and I honestly wanted to swipe some of the boos from the buffet just to get through that. If that is the case, cover your ears. It will not be pretty.” Maddie continued on as the two walked down the hallway and to the stairs. Colin picked up his grilled cheese and a hot dog and tried to interject at points. He would peer over to see Maddie talking in tangents about how she has been enjoying the grounds, her extreme pleasure with all of the lotions and perfumes in her bathroom, and the wonderful clothes that appeared in her closet too. Colin really enjoyed her company as it was like seeing the morning sun freshly breaking over the horizon. As he listened, he caught scents of what he thought to be honeysuckle drifting through his nostrils, but only for a moment until the smells of his food overtook the sweet scent. Normally, people would have been annoyed by the constant focus of conversation on oneself, but Colin loved it. For once, the focus was not on him.

“So, have you been doing?” Maddie asked and Colin’s happiness crashed. He hated this question. What could he say? Hey Maddie, I am actually scared to death right now and am a pathetic loser? Yeah that would be a great start to any friendship. So Colin settled with a simple,

“I’m tired. Was hungry, but thanks to you, I don’t have to worry about that.”

“My pleasure,” Maddie added with a sweet tone. Realizing that she has been so nice and he sounds like he not only woke up on the wrong side of the bed, but thrown off it, Colin decided to ass a little more.

“Honestly, I am really curious and a little terrified for what the plans are tonight.” The two were walking through the rooms with all of the doors that branched off into several areas. The mess hall doors were closing and a few residents were walking out, faces content with the food they just ate. “I feel like I just keep getting teased with more and more here. What we are doing, what it is for, why they do it, why this camp even exists, what the world is coming too...” Colin’s voice trailed off and he quickly glanced to his right to see Maddie’s eyes looking at his. Colin peered into the fire of the orange and the nurturing color of green that swirled around her irises, ended by the stark white of her cornea. He felt a rising discomfort in his stomach that crept up his throat, but also could sense the intimacy of this moment. He broke the moment with a “Sorry” and quickly glanced up. He never realized until now that most of the ceiling was glass, giving sight to all underneath of the stars above. “As you can tell, I think a lot.”

“I understand that more than you’ll ever know Col.” Maddie’s voice changed which got Colin’s attention instantly. He sensed a longer story behind, but did not press. He simply shrugged it off, placed an arm on the top of Maddie’s back, careful not to let it slip any further down, and flicked this thumb. Maddie’s head perked up and a smile danced across her delicate, but narrow face. For the first time, Colin could see features of sadness and pain beneath the beautiful yet simple small features that framed her face. He was about to add words to his actions, but he realized they were about to open the door and walk outside where a large group of people were already gathering. They walked outside side by side and began to walk towards the crowd. The smell of burning ambers and the musky smell of scorching bark greeted their noses. Maddie breathed in the scent and gave out a large sigh. “Gosh, do I love the smell of a raging fire. It reminds me of summers when I was a kid. So careless. So free from the worries of growing up, ya know?”

Trying to add humor, Colin added, “We are only 18 Maddie.” He chuckled after saying these words and Maddie punched him in the arm and then laughed herself. The delicate force hit Colin and he felt a happiness he never knew start to rise. Confused by this emotion, he pushed it to the side just as Mary caught sight of them.

“Hi ya, guys! I have been looking all over for ya. Col, how ya feelin?”



“Much better Mary, thank you. I used to faint as a kid all the time. Just had a spell I guess.” He looked to Mary to see if the lie took and she let no sign of acknowledgement pervade. He breathed a sigh of relief as Mary pressed on.

“You kids come with me. I’m gonna nudge a few folks away until I can get you guys to the center.”

“Wait. Why the center? I don’t want to be anywhere near the center!” Colin began to fall back, but Mary grabbed his arm and dragged him along.

“Oh stop ya complainin. It won’t be too bad at all. Trust me, ya gonna wanna be right smack there when it comes time.”

Maddie looked over to Colin with a look of concern, but an overwhelming manner of delight. If his small counterpart could be fearless in the situation, he could manage some of it too. As Mary worked them through the crowd, people smiled at the two of them and exchanged looks of excitement. Maddie even began to get worried that she rowed herself right into a cult. Her mom told her they were a nasty thing and she started to become less afraid of them and more afraid of what she’d tell her mom when she got back. The crowd began to thin as the light of the fire grew. Pretty soon, Mary was leading them through the crowd break and straight towards the massive bonfire. Colin’s eyes illuminated with the wisps of fire and reflected the strands of smoke fading into the sky above. He couldn’t make out many faces as the light became so intense with the change of light. However, as they adjusted, he made out the faces of Theo and Felix. Theo came running up to him as he rounded the fire.

“Hey dude. What’s shaking? How are you feeling?”

Colin added with a comfort of a familiar face, “Good. Headache, you know? It’ll go away once the food hits. What did I miss?” The last sentence he gave had a bit of urgency that only Theo picked up on.

“Operation Panther is still a go. Don’t worry man,” Theo added.

Colin was about to ask about her word choice when he saw in Theo’s eyes the message of, think and don’t ask. Realizing she was talking about the information they were both trying to get as to why they were there settled onto Colin’s clueless brain and he just smiled and laughed to

divert from her comments. “Hey Felix. How are you doing?” Colin peered over to a distracted Felix.

“I’m doin okay man. I hate crowds. I like to know I have an escape,” Felix said with a nervous smile and laugh. Colin slowly walked over to him and wished to comfort him in any way he could. Colin knew that feeling all too well. But, something about Felix confused Colin. He was a big kid and even Colin was intimidated by him. So what was he so afraid of? Someone bigger?

“It’ll definitely be okay Felix. Only thing you have to worry about is me beating you in how many s’mores I can eat. I’m an animal for sweets.” Felix laughed and began to feel more comfortable, knowing he had someone who seemed to be his friend. His mom always worried about Felix because he was always alone. She taught him you’ll find a friend and hang onto them. They will help you survive. Felix heard her voice in his head and became sad that he hadn’t told her one word about him leaving. They had no idea where he was. But, it was better this way. He was better on his own.

“Okay kids, take a seat on one of the logs around the fire. The four of them carefully maneuvered the blazes of fire and perched themselves on a log. Felix slumped over as soon as he sat down, Maddie sat upright and almost too proper for her own good, Theo stretched out her legs and let the heat warm her jeans and combat boots, and Colin sat with his legs crossed together on the ground close to him. “You think you’re ready? Quiet everyone!”

Theo drew in her legs, almost ready to jump if need be. “Okay, what is all this about? You have been teasing us with these secrets all day. What is so special about a camp fire?” The crowd erupted into laughter and Theo became angered by the embarrassment she was feeling. She didn’t think it was a joke, but why did people find it so funny? Mary herself was laughing from her belly, but soon quieted herself and began shushing everyone around her until a general quiet came over the rest of the campgrounds.

“Oh, Theo. Always the one who asks questions. Don’t worry, that’s good. Something I do all the time. Anyway, it’s been a secret because we generally like the element of surprise. Otherwise, you can think too much about it and ruin it all.” The four thought to interrupt with the question of what they could ruin, but the authority that Mary was giving off seemed to keep them quiet. “You see Theo, this fire is not just for s’mores and sing a longs. Although we do that round here too, it is so much more. This here is the fire of life. The very fire that keeps our soul’s burnin

and our bodies goin. We all have it within us, of course a lot less hot and visible, but still so strong. I know you have all had your questions. Your concerns. And I have heard them all. But, tonight is time for answers. You see kids, this is not just a camp you go to for summer. This is a community. A village. We here at Naleysi Fields are here to show you what you have inside. My daddy built this place from the ground up alongside some wonderful men and women who believed that there was more to humanity than what reaches the eye. You see, we are animals too kids. Most of our humanity is social constructed by what lies beyond those gates ova yonda but, it is not all so civilized when hell comes knockin at ya door.” Colin peered over to his right and saw Theo staring into the fire, almost as if looking for answers in there. He looked over to his right to find Maddie looking all around at the stars above. Felix was out of sight by the fire, but in that moment, Colin saw Viktor break through the crowd. His eyes met his and Colin gave a wave. “And that is why we are here friends. Because all of our savage ways have a way of coming out in one way or another. Think of the last argument you had. Or a moment of severe stress. Also think of a time in which ya went through some severe sadness. Did the blues get to ya too much? Then ponder a moment when you felt such joy, your heart could explode. These aren’t emotions that only we human beings have. Animals all across the world feel them too. However, when untapped, they can become mortally dangerous. They can in fact overtake your humanity and transform you into the very beasts you are about to see.”

Theo lept up of her log. “Wait what? What do you mean by that?” For the first time since they have known her, Mary expressed anger. Only slightly, but the sound of annoyance crept into her voice.

“Theodosia Turner. I am trying to explain this all to you. I can’t do that with all ya interruptin.” With every word, the aggravation subsided into a pleasant sentence. It was almost as if Mary became a mother scolding her child, teaching them a lesson. And for Theo, it did indeed teach her a lesson. Theo sat back down slowly, shaking off the dust of the scolding and nursing her pride.

“Well, I am sorry. Just have, questions. It is scary just staying somewhere and trusting all of you.” Theo went with the truth to get out of this one. Mary padded over to her and laid her wrinkled, but smooth hands on Theo’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry child. Ya see, everyone here at some point was sitting on these here logs. They didn’t choose this place either. It chose them. Ya see, Naleysi Fields is for everyone, but not everyone is for Naleysi Fields. It only will appear to those who have the best hearts despite enduring the trials of life.” Colin looked over to Theo, wanting to say something, but realizing he could never have begun to explain his encounter with Viktor in this moment. He became almost angry at Mary for stealing his thunder. But, he figured it was her camp and it was her secret to tell. “And when it does, it means it’s time for you to learn. Learn to become the warriors of the natural world around ya. See, that is why we have these classes and exercises. It teaches you to hone the abilities you all have. We all have them within, but thousands of people live their whole lives and die never knowing they had them. But, almost all of you at some point have probably found a time when the animal inside of you came to the surface, knocking on the cages we place them in to get out.”

Colin thought back to what he saw in the circle and how the sounds he heard sounded much like his own. Suddenly, his whole body shuddered with the realization that this was what Mary was talking about. Whatever was in him was breaking free the night his father died. The night his mother was killed. Colin began to quiver once again and the fire in front of him darkened around the edges just as the sun did earlier that day. However, this time Colin would not let the confusion and pain take over. He took a deep breath and as he exhaled, leaned up to see expressions on his counterparts faces that he knew matched his own. Mary was right. They all did go through something that brought forth whatever Mary was talking about. “So, I am assuming you are all wondering what exactly is within ya. And it’s very simple. It is the animal of a distinct animal. Much like the animals we see in our world today. Except these are merely spirits. Wisps of the physical creatures all around us. And you can find out tonight which beast ya got stewin around inside of ya.” Maddie gasped immediately after her statement. Felix seemed to become excited that over the fact that he had an animal inside of him. But, for a very rare moment, Theo and Colin’s ideas aligned and centered around the fear of facing down the very connection to the worst nights of their lives.

“So, ya ready. I can answer more questions later. But, the night is getting late and we want you to have time after to think it all over after.” Mary began to circle them. She watched as their expressions switched from concern, to confusion, to excitement, back to fear all the while their

eyes sized up the crowd in hopes of being able to break through them for an escape. Colin was the first to speak.

“Okay. Fine. I don’t know why, but I do trust you. So what do we have to do.” Mary smiled at him, closed her eyes and turned around to watch the crowd. When she finally got back to Colin whom was growing impatient with her pause, she said,

“Breathe.” Colin’s jaw dropped and his eyes quickly scattered all around him. Maddie interjected.

“Uhm, could you repeat that. I think I misheard you.”

“No you didn’t sweetheart. I said breathe. It’s that simple. Of course you just have to do it right into the fire. Don’t worry, it won’t burn ya. The first time I did it, I nearly cried because I thought my eyebrows were clear gone after it. But, alas they were not.” Mary looked over to Felix who seemed to be having trouble finding his words. “Don’t worry Felix. You don’t have to take a test or anything. It is that simple. A deep inhale and an even exhale straight into the fire.” Theo began to get ready to stand again, but Colin leaned over to her and snapped, trying to get her attention.

“Do it again and you’ll lose it.” Realizing his faulted move, Colin laughed.

“Sorry. I needed to get your attention. But, if you’re feeling what I am, its trust in her right now. You know there is some truth behind what she is saying and that is scaring you. But, maybe this is our best next move in operation panther.” A simple smile cracked her hard exterior and like siblings conniving against their elders, Theo shook her head in silent agreement. Theo stood.

“Okay Mary. Obviously this is important to all of you. So I will start. Show them all there is nothing to fear.” Deep inside, those words were empty as Theo was terrified of seeing the source of his most frightful time, eye to eye. Mary stood where she was and proclaimed over to Theo across the fire,

“Okay then! Get low and close to the fire.” Theo dropped to her log and leaned forward onto her knees. The fire glowed against her pale skin and sent shadows across her face, darkening all of the creases and sharpening the scar across her face. She wondered what this moment must be like for all of the others who had both good eyes. But, she couldn’t pity herself. This was a

moment of truth she feared for a while now, but wanted. “Now when you are ready, take a nice long breath in. Hold it for a second and let it gather its strength, but only for a moment and then release.” Theo did exactly what Mary had suggested. She breathed in the musky air and almost coughed at the agitation of the smoke in her lungs. Tears filled her eyes from the smoke, but she fought them back and held the air. Then, when she almost felt the right moment, she exhaled. Before her eyes, the fire swirled, almost unnaturally. Her breath manifested itself in the fire, almost as it does in the cold air. But, it danced around and dove, leapt up, popped, disappeared, and then reappeared in a staccato motion. Then, just as her head followed the air flow around, it compacted, solidified into one shape and then transformed. Legs sprouted from the orb, which then separated into four and elongated onto a body. A head appeared on one end and a long tail on the other. In seconds, a wolf was running around the fire in front of her. The moving image in front of her was like watching a live stream from animal planet. Except, this image was entirely made from the contents of the fire before her. Two embers that should have risen and dissipated formed the eyes and its tail was crackling with the fire it was made of. Theo watched in amazement as the rest of the crowd drew closer as the being grew in size for all to see. The last image of the wolf before her was that of a crouching howl, pointing skyward to the moon above. Then, the animal disappeared and rose to the top of the fire where it sparked out of existence and disappeared with a crack of smoke. Theo’s eyes were the widest had ever felt them to be and she tried to speak, but noise did not come out. She stood, backed away from the fire and back stepped until her boots hit the log and her body slumped into it.