

A Well Excavated Grave

by

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ABSTRACT

This collection, and subsequent beginning of a novel, roots itself in the speculation and depths of when humans confront death in unique ways. Each story ruminates of the wonderment of loneliness, death, and family through each story. The collection starts in a town that has no graveyard, and ends in a similar place where local legends become real. Place and class struggles underscore each story. The characters in the collection interact with ghosts, robots, and, ultimately, their inner selves. A mix of horror, elements of fantasy, and sci-fi bind these stories together with high and low notes of optimism and grief, but always tonally dark at the edges.

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Struthers, Ohio

Short story

Struthers Ohio has no official cemetery. This is not for lack of loved ones being buried in the backyard, or under chicken coops and marigold beds. Those don't count. There are no grave markers. They do have corner shops that dots others towns advertising stone engravings for the lowest prices. No, in Struthers Ohio when a loved one dies they have a funeral for the living, as all funerals are. Then the person is taken away to a neighboring town, possibly one that the dead person hasn't even spent much time in, and buried within the respectable religious ground.

One year, the night of the school dance was a lone exception in this town. Mr. Newsome was the social studies teacher. He taught each child fairly. He wore a threadbare grey suit and a maroon tie almost every day of the week. He had no family or friends other than the teachers and kids in the high school where he taught for 20 years. When he died of natural causes just after the school year started, they weren't quite sure what to do with his body. The townsfolk of Struthers did nothing at first. Until the night of the Homecoming dance one mid-fall evening.

No one knows for sure who brought the body of Mr. Newsome, but he stayed the whole dance long. Well, of course he would. The English teacher was in the corner dabbing her eyes with a tissue for this was the first dance in her whole career without Mr. Newsome. As the lights sparkled and fog machine reached the first row seats, he would not be by her side to tell the students to stop dancing so close to one another.

That's when she noticed his figure sitting in a metal chair on the side of the auditorium. He looked alive she recalled under the flashing lights. No odor could be

smelled over the artificial fog and sweating teenagers. The English teacher was so happy to see him she scooped him, and his grey suit, up in her arms and she began to spin him around. Momentarily, everyone forgot that Mr. Newsome just died a couple nights ago. Once the song was over, the French teacher and Basketball coach took Mr. Newsome by either arm and line danced with him. The beat picked up and the kids were so delighted to have their beloved Mr. Newsome back for the night. They all took up a conga line with him right in the middle. He livened up the spirit of the school. In fact, he was more enjoyed in death than in life. His hair was mussed for the first time instead of combed over. Someone pinned a corsage to his lapel. He seemed to smile so wide, one junior class member remarked. For each dance the whole school vowed to have Mr. Newsome at each and every one.

They all were thankful that their town had no cemetery and all agreed to keep it that way forever. No piece of land will be used for such sad tidings within the city limits. Only happiness should come out of death. The dead were meant for all to enjoy and celebrate with laughter and cheers.

Goat Heart

Short story

Most of the world doesn't wear white to a funeral. This I had to learn. Through the taxis, the airport, and connecting subway, I had forgotten. Others take to wearing black, and wearing it all the time.

My stockings, shiny flats, the dress with lace sleeves that brushed my knees, made me look like a doll among humans. For my departure back home.

When I arrived at the edge of my country that I should call my own, my white flats sunk into the Earth. The squishing wetness, one foot after another, was constant. The air clung and found a home among my curly strands. My trip through the countryside with a man quipping in a language I no longer spoke was the only person to offer condolences instead of the lifted eyebrow or unwelcomed gaze. Any cell phone service stopped working moments after getting into the car to get to the village.

This man, who I didn't care to learn his name, knew where I was from. I wasn't surprised. On the other side of the planet, no one knew the gaps in my teeth were a strong feature of my mamma's family. That my light eyebrows and wideset eyes were prevalent in most of my pappa's people. The man's small car rattled and shook so much I couldn't hear his prattling on. I make out just enough to piece together that I am the last arrive. One string of his clunky, old doggerels mused that I must have been missed so much. He knew it was my grandmother who passed. Who wouldn't know.

The blue veins under my skin glow brighter the closer I get. All of my insides come loose. I fingered the hem of the dress until the stitching is undone.

The driver tells me, "May you see your lost again," in the old speak.

I knew what to say because it has been a thousand times before I left, “The lost always come back.”

My tongue found the words quicker than my brain. Fissures began in my fingertips seeing the houses surrounding the cemetery.

I take my one suitcase out with me. Breathe the air thick with moisture. When all is quiet, the ocean sounds drift over the moors and cliffs and tickle up the spine. I won't be in this place long enough to hear such a song.

The village is already drunk off the procession. I cared not to see the white casket carried through the streets.

I could not see our small house for the church. The church, the largest building in the village. Fog-white with crude brick chimneys. Sharp edged toward the ever-cloudy heavens. My skin felt thick with sin.

I clutched my belongings for the night and stood behind them all. Another body in their best whites. Under the honeysuckle and thornwood. If I didn't move my feet I would sink right into the ground with the all the rest of the dead. But I have disturbed.

The priest continued her limericks about the light. She held her arms out and the robes dusted the ground. Hands in the crowd grasped my shoulders, my bare arms, and nudged the back of my calves toward grandma's casket. Hungry, bone-cold hands. One shoved a cluster of ransom flowers into my palm.

The casket, all birch wood and metals fastenings, sat before me. The priest smiled through her teeth at the sight of me. Her eyes left the bible pages, but she knew all the verses. Heavy ones meant to help my grandma travel onward. The last canto sliced through the incense smoke. I threw the flowers onto the casket.

In a dialect known and unknown, the priest asked if I would want Edel Merrick buried in the old family plot or the new land just across the way. I looked to where the priest motioned. Soft earth between the Renkin's place and a tuft of wild woods creeping in closer than I remembered. The makings of fence posts lined the field. Fresh iles of soil and various heights in neat rows. The church swells behind the priest.

The casket is not even close to the fence. The fence my gramma built herself. The one I sanded and painted in the waning heat when I was a girl. The priest was a good friend of my gramma's and her crinkled skin betrays her smile. No one else even went go near the cemetery. Under its stare I felt shapeless. On the plane ride back, I had not known what I would have chosen. Whispering and the questions rose up from each side around me.

"Old plot," I said.

Hushed breathing from the crowd hit the back of my neck. I turned to bear my teeth at them. Their faces were recognizable. They had the features of the family I left without word in the middle of the night. I stop, not wanting to adjust my eyes to their familiarity.

Right before they started their rabble, I thought I heard the ocean in the distance. Like my gramma always remarked hearing over her morning tea. Then they began. I did not want to entertain them. These villagers. These kin.

They wanted a show. I know what they wanted to see. A hungry show. The girl who left this place in one final spectacle.

The priest looked almost sad. She closed the big book and titled her head toward me.

“May you see your lost again,” she said.

“The lost always come back,” I said with more precision this time.

Fat, salted drops hit the top of my head.

“That will make it easier in some regards I suppose,” the priest said squinting into the sallow overcast.

The crowd lingered behind me despite the rain. I picked up my suitcase and rounded the casket. Not thinking about the dead, the church built with blood, the sunken graveyard, or what I had to do.

Gramma’s house sat just behind the church. I was convinced she constructed it to live in its shadow. The church that stood before it, away from the cemetery, collapsed in on itself one morning. No one was inside, but we were churchless for a good year or two before gramma got the spirit inside of her to build a new one. God told her directly to do so. So it was done.

On the Sunday morning the new church was set to open, my gramma asked me if I sinned. Over steaming bowls of oats I nodded and said I was of good conscious and didn’t sin. My gramma, all silver haired and paper thin, gave her approval to this.

My gramma oversaw each detail in the construction. She was there when the steeple went up. She was there when the stained glass, bright yellow, red, and blue, was put in. Material had to be gathered from miles away.

I mostly edged around the work area with Charlie the goat. I kicked around the leaves that fell from the trees. Charlie brayed and ate absently among the workers. The men and women worked for months constructing the pews, the doors, and alabaster statues of those who preached the loudest before us. Gramma bent over sketches and felt

each beam of wood under her hand. Just the day before, the last coat of paint dried and the last weed was trimmed.

The priest met my gramma over tea. They sat at the kitchen counter and talked money and all about sins. The funerals would be grand. The procession on the casket draped in pale silk to the drinking of the milk and liquor mixture in the tavern afterwards, would all circulate around the new church.

“Gramma, I must be tending to Charlie before church,” I told her before we left the house that first Sunday.

“No time for that now, Runa, they’ll be expecting us early,” Gramma said.

She clucked her tongue at me and adjusted my shawl on my shoulders. The morning fog had burned down to the tips of the grass. My fret about the sinning question gave way to a fretting about Charlie. I wanted to run to the barn, peek in and rub his coarse grey fur. Doing so always made me feel better. Some nights I stayed up long past my bedtime tossing and turning and worrying. My gramma mostly dismissed my fancies. The nail biting, the twisting of hair, the closing of curtains tight against the sun, she said I would grow out of it all in time.

Instead of feeling small and lonely I would grab Charlie out of the pen and walk through the yards until something inside me felt better. Charlie never complained. He’d wake and know what needed to be done to still my uneasiness. The thrumming of his heart and warmth.

Charlie was nowhere to be found even after the service. Sometimes I heard him when my window was open at night. *Meh-eh-eh. Meh-eh-eh.* I searched in the woods. I searched around neighbor’s haystacks. Through the vegetable fields. In other villager’s

barns. I cried myself sick. My grandma dismissed the faraway bleating I heard sometimes. She said it was someone else's goat lost in woods. That it was a sin to love an animal as much as I did. As much as it didn't feel like a sin, for how can that be a sin when I see others doing bad things all over town, I stopped fussing in front of her from then on. Grandma had knowledge I did not. She and the priest must know better.

It wasn't long before I saw Charlie the goat again.

Grandma's house smelled like her and the incoming rain. The distilled rosewater she made herself each spring. Her meager belongings were still in relative place since the last time I was here. The kitchen table always set for tea. Hand-knitted doilies, sugar cups, and something rot smelling from the sink. The sitting room with several pictures of our family in ivory frames. Me with Charlie the goat. Mud stained and smiling with my hands around his neck. Me and Audun at The Day of the Bear before he dressed in his furs and paint. I wore daisies tucked into my braids. I dressed in my funeral dress stitched from hoary, discarded fabric. I was to play the maiden that year. Audun was colorless until he painted himself brown and lush with furs stitched on his costume tight. The picture was from my last celebration of the day. Auden and I only had one or two milky honey drinks between us and my flushed cheeks gave that away.

This was all before I set my feet in motion. I tried not to count the years on my fingers.

They found grandma after a couple days, lying nap-like on the couch. I looked at the place she died. My last letter was resting on the table. I imagined her reading every letter I sent like this. On the desk, what was different was a box that had all my letters refolded in it. In so many words, I tried to describe parts of the world I saw to her.

Though I didn't offer to fly her out of here, and she never asked. I opened the desk because I knew that's where grandma kept her liquor. A nearly full bottle was inside. She never visited the tavern, but would spill the liquor into her morning or night tea when she was overstressed. The bottles went quicker as the church was built.

The stairs creak under my weight when I take my suitcase up to my old room. Everything was eerily the same, but I had expected that. I opened the window to remove the smell of new death and dust. The sheer curtains brushed my skin and the rain fell steadily outside still. From my view I could see the cemetery and the back of the birch casket. I put the bottle to my lips.

I wished I had some milk to mix the liquor with. A touch of sugar and honey too. I will celebrate my grandma going to the other side she was so obsessed with my own quite way. The cemetery land was so decrepit. The ground wasn't kept up. I knew it was only my grandma who tended the flowers for all our ancestors and family. For other villager's families. I squeezed the glass bottles and drank harder. Everything she did, everything I did. The villagers with sin. I wanted to stand in the church's pulpit and point and shout and every single last one of them. Take each one of them close, get their skin under my finger nails, and make them step into the graveyard. I drank more and crushed my palm into the window frame.

These people would let my grandma rot just outside the fence. Her casket will warp and bend and her body will spill out into the grass. The one who rebuilt the church. I can hear them all. They are inside the walls of the tavern like always. Celebrating the passing. Such a glorious day. The instruments they play, the same songs with sloppy words, echoed off the church.

My breath began to smell like hers. The sharp sting on nights she got the spirit in her. When grandma went on late into the night hollering about vice and virtue and choosing the path of light. I just wanted to be bold. To learn that skill elsewhere. But each night, my grandma taught me boldness.

I swore aloud in ways I forgot I knew how. All the sins of all my years clung to me tighter than my skin. I wanted to believe that my grandma knew this and was disappointed. I had to do her one last service if it was the last thing I ever did. I went back outside.

Someone, the priest or the new cemetery groundskeeper, left a couple shovels between the fence and the casket. I unlatch the gate's hinge into the burial ground. The wind brushed my hair into my face, but I did not hear my name called.

I grabbed the bars on either side of the box, dig my heels into the softening dirt, and heave the casket toward the opened gate. My shoes were too flat. They slipped as I dragged. I fell onto my bottom, once and then twice. The box was not as heavy as I suspect but when I set the box down and picked up, I could feel the thump of her head or mashing of legs against the sides. The grass in the yard almost reached higher than grandma's coffin. I fought my way over to our family plot. My hair stuck my neck and the lace sleeves of my dress tore. I wormed a path straight to the cluster of graves.

Grandma's stone has been there since my geepa died. My mam and dad's grave used to boast the prettiest of lilies. What followed that funeral was the two days of town drinking and singing the way of all flesh in the streets. I gathered my breath taking care not to look towards the church's foundation, and then set to get a shovel.

My whole body was gooseflesh and damp. Without knowing where and the space between graves, I dug where I thought best. A little ways from the rest of the bodies all align. The rain came harder as soon as I began hollowing out the ground. I felt alone. Gramma was so near and far away. Faster and faster my breath came out and I pummeled the ground.

Mud gave way to itself. The hole filled with slick earth. I wiped my brow and my nose that dripped. The night would come before I was done. Splinters burrowed into my hands and my stocking ripped. Muck wanted to spill out my body. The other villagers kept drinking their goat milk swirled with liquor and drumming their funeral songs. Fire burned in my hands and ache rose up my arms, so I joined in the singing of the songs.

But the rain came down. I was raw. I couldn't stop my signing the words of light. Of the dangers of sinning. I rested my head on the shovel handle. My gramma would be put in that new plot across the way. The thought made want to shut pupa tight in on myself.

I smelled wet animal before I heard it. I heard the soft bleating. Animals breathe differently than humans. They always have. Then Charlie the goat said my name.

"Runa," he said in a voice that belonged to someone I once knew. "You've come back." Gruff. And hoarse. I did not want to speak. He repeated my name. I sank to my knees in the mud.

"I don't know who I am speaking with," I said.

"Runa, it is me," his hooves made the ground squish and suck.

A head that was warm with coarse hair set itself on my shoulder. He said my name against my back and his whole vibrated unnaturally in saying it. My hand longed to

reach up and stoke the part between his horns. Charlie sniffed at me smelling the new lands I've been to and all the sins I've committed on each one. He took my hair in between his teeth and gnawed at the strands until it pulled on my scalp.

"Please," I choked out.

"Let me help you, Runa," Charlie said.

My white dress was coated in mire and the hole I dug was filling up with water. I crawled to get away from Charlie the goat. I tried to grasp at the slippery ground. His hooves scrapped at my calves.

"Don't go, Runa," he grunted. "Bring me more."

"I brought you too many," I said. "Audun was the last. I swore it." I flipped onto my back and scurried away from him and the hole that would consume me.

Charlie looked just like the last day I saw him whole on that first church Sunday when I was a young girl. Black, brown, and white furred. Clipped little ears that flicked back and forth. And those horns that stretched back from his head.

But then the heart in his chest glowed in the gathering darkness. Glowed like the last time I saw it ripped from its body at the Day of the Bears. It beat a pulsing red.

As I looked to the heart, I knew Charlie would help me. My grandma's grave site would be cut from the soil. She would be placed in, at peace, and the lilies could grow once again. There were so many villagers to choose from. The ones that made me lift my funeral dress after my geepa died to show them the what was kept underneath. The villagers who took money from grandma so she could never be out of debt to them. Some dress up on the Day of the Bears and blend into the rest of the crowd after they are done hurting people.

“But I am weak,” Charlie the goat said. The he animal sang *meh-eh-eh*.

I can tell he was weak. He didn’t loom about and tell me secrets that no goat should know.

The shovel sunk into the whole. I gripped its handle and rose up toward my former pet. I aimed towards his horns and struck him with the broadside of the tool. Charlie the goat stumbled and his hooves slicked across the wet earth.

“I’m so sorry for what my grandma did to you,” I told him. I had his horns in my hand like so many times I led him to water or to untangle him from a hay pile. He struggled some. He bleated a mix of goat and human words that I replay upon waking each morning. I took the shovel and stabbed at his chest. It dented and gave way. I pushed and pulled. No blood. Not like the last time I sat in this cemetery in my best funeral dress with mud slinking down my skin. I cried.

Charlie’s chest opened up and I could hear the heart. It was like the ocean so far away. I lifted it out and there was no more animal noise or dissolute human voice. The heart throbbed against me as I made a hole for it. Then I made another for Charlie. I marked his resting place with a rock. The morning sun began to rise and the rain stopped. The dirt stayed where it should One last nudge from Charlie I thought. Grandma’s grave was not deep enough. It may unearth. The villagers would have to deal with the upkeep now.

I went by the tavern to tell them so. Their bellies were full of milk and sauce. The priest, still in her robes, nodded as I told her that the sinners can pass through the cemetery once again. My own heart pounded at this notion, for it was what my grandma couldn’t see or know while she was alive, but sacrificed so much for.

Posthumous

Short story

I pivot and step through the alleyways. This part of the map was not familiar the first time, but now each flight of bird of its perch, each muffled voiceover, the sound of my husband's laugh comforts. I watch myself, hands-free, unsure of where to turn next. The Obliterator pistol feels real. The barrel comes up in my line sight of and I can almost feel the weight of it sometimes.

My head turns before I actually look down the other alley because that is where I almost run smack into my husband's avatar. His avatar is an exaggeration of himself, with his face ever so askew, in sleek green armor. *Don't laugh at me*, I say from a disembodied voice. Avatar him shrugs. *I wasn't*, he says back. The mouth of his avatar moves not quite matching up to his voice.

When it was my turn to align my own face onto the avatar, I broke into a fit of laughter. My avatar's face, though I couldn't see it, seemed to stretch too far in one direction over the oval head shape the game provided. I liked the end result and forever left it, not retaking the photo for my character.

The explosion sounds and my headset shakes from the first time I heard it. We both turn in the direction from where it came. I struggle to keep my eyes on him, always on my husband, though now I have strain my eyes in a different direction. He lifts his Double Barrel Phaser and looks to me. His avatar is emotionless, but I picture him smirking underneath it all anyway. I check the screen stats and pull up the map again.

That's the hideout, he says and it echoes all around me. I was ready. I sigh. *Let's get that last capsule, my love*, and it's the final thing he says. I mouth the words along.

Together, we break off into run through the crowd of NPCs. Similar faces line the streets and we push past them easily. I'm grateful the moments when he rushes ahead of me and I can see the back of him again. I look to him because the end is coming. I've memorized each small glitch, unnoticeable in the first play through, at the edge of the screen as buildings and people are rendered. The blown apart warehouse comes before us and my avatar pauses bringing up my HUD. I don't want to linger on my vitals and ammo. Before, I thought about switching out my Obliterator pistol but now I only think of him.

He turns to me in my hesitation perhaps checking his own HUD. I will never know. My avatar nods because I did then. Each of us go through an opening that was blasted out by the explosion. My head swivels in every direction taking in the destruction and new location. Searching for signs of the capsule we must retrieve. My throat constricts even though I will it not to. *Don't*, I tell myself separate from the action. I watch myself and my husband dash to separate corners. I watch as see the capsule peeking out from behind some rubble. I watch as I course towards it. The words I was going to say to my husband, lost.

A blast rings through my headset and red flashes on the screen before my avatar is down. An enemy was stationed on the floor above, waiting. I glance at the enemy's helmet before the screen fades to black.

I no longer hear my voice recording because I took the VR off my head frustrated and out of time. I briefly see my husband running towards me sprawled out on the floor. Then his laughter is cut off by my removal of the headpiece. I see temporary black. No sound. Then the credit screen flickers on and pounding theme music fill the void.

Do I want to replay my last saved game, the AI asks. I falter, wanting to continue more replays. The same replay. I don't care.

I pull the VR away from eyes and over the knotted bun on the crown of my head. I keep my eyes shut, against the mid-afternoon sun. The more I rewatch the saved games the longer it takes my eyes to adjust. I can't remember how many I've replayed in a row. A dozen, maybe more. I save my favorite for last. Where the avatar is most like him. The one where I don't respawn. When I open my eyes the apartment will be too empty.

If I keep them shut longer, he could be at the kitchen sink making us coffee. Energy to play once more and retrieve the capsule we were after together. There is no once more, or play again. I cling to his last words I can access. I want to witness the previous hundred play-throughs with me and him. Spaceships. Swords. Lasers. Building. Dragon-riding. Late nights wearing the leather down beneath us in our chairs.

The music loops over once again. I can hear it though the VR rests at my side.

No, I say aloud and the console listens.

Won't Go

Short story

If I had known I would see my dead best friend standing between the hawthorn bush and driveway across the cul-de-sac, I would have gone out the back door to school. She doesn't scare me – not any longer at least. The feelings I get when she appears probably don't even have a name. They are a mix of shock, and then awe. Then finally ease back to a baseline sadness. Curiosity, too, of course.

That isn't to say I don't enjoy her presence once in a while. But it seems like when I want or need her around, she isn't there. Instead she waits and appears as she pleases. Or maybe it's because I finally notice her drifting like breeze. I can't be sure of these things, or many things, when my nerves are grated wide open.

Like today.

If I gave it any thought, I should of known Skylar would be hovering just out of my line of sight. In the moments when I almost forget she exists, there she is in the present.

I've tried to track her appearance by the phases of the moon, the weather, the days, the night, certain words mentioned in conversation, people around or not around, and bad horror movie conventions. But, no. It doesn't matter. She has no rhythm. No calendar. Maybe I will look at the ancient Mayan calendars next. There's a pen in my pocket and grab it and scribble it on the back of my hand.

I shut the front door behind me. The wreath from the Fourth of July, even though we are rounding the fall months now, makes an awful scraping sound. I no longer feel the

urge to run after my best friend. She just disappears against the horizon when I do anyway.

But perhaps if I catch her off guard or run just fast enough – then what? I stop myself. In the beginning I did run after her. Each instance she seemed fixed more in time in that place. What would it be like to touch her? Did I even want to know if I catch her by the arm? Again, I feel things that have no words attached to them. A terror fills me, but something else too. Fascination and a strange comfort. This is what my therapist told me to do. To stop, feel the emotion in my head and heart. Identify the feelings I have in my stomach down each limb. I saw that therapist until I said I too many emotions and most of my emotions in fact don't have words. In that same session, because I was feeling comfortable I suppose, I asked what would happen if Skylar came back from the dead? The question was followed by a lengthy discussion on how my medication may need adjusted or maybe we should try a new combination of pills. So I told my parents that I don't think that therapist is helping, she's hurting my progress actually, and I can't see her anymore. My parents didn't agree at first but I promised them I'd do other things to help me cope with Skylar's death.

I lied to them. I always lie. It's the way in which the sounds of the words come out. Sincere. Remind them of my reputation. When I lie I don't want to turn my attention inward and asses how I am feeling. I just want left alone and that's too much to say sometimes.

When I take my eyes off of her I wonder if she looked more pink today. More *there*. My book-bag rests heavy on my shoulder and I adjust its weight. Something real to hang onto. Was it the light off of the morning dew or the dark green of the bush she was

next to? I tell myself not to look back. She won't be there. She never is on the second glaze.

She shouldn't be there at all.

And that's when I feel it. I feel my mind slip. Shift. This isn't normal. What if she isn't really there? I mean, of course, she really isn't there.

Sometimes the soft curls falling around her face, coming undone from her hair pulled back, sway in the wind. When there is no wind. Her face is unmoving, slack, and she's wearing her grey hoodie and black pants.

I bite the inside of my lip and shake my head. I try to think to myself that this is normal. Maybe I can tell someone one day. The burden of having huge knowledge about life and death seems too great to keep to myself.

But why does she watch me? Does nothing. Says nothing. Fixed stare. Neither standing nor floating.

I know what everyone would say if I even mentioned what I see. I know they will pump me full of medication and make me talk to a slew of doctors. The idea is comical to me. I'll forget all about her. Her. I've taken down all our pictures in my room. I go back and forth between wanting to trigger her appearance and never seeing her again.

On this first day of school, I don't want to face anyone and seeing her shook my core. I thought I was ready to see all the kids, new, old, those I never talk to, again. I am not now.

She won't be there, but she is here now. This middle area I have to live in. I make my way to the school; each foot step silencing the bird's awakening calls around me. Dread fills my stomach because I know at the morning orientation assembly her smile

will be projected in the auditorium for all the hundreds of people to see. The normal way she should be seen.

No, I don't want to go to the first yearbook club meeting. I don't care about taking pictures this year. Someone else can do it. There's no talent in taking photos at a football game. No, I am not interested in the afterschool poetry workshop. I can't write it anyway. If I have to read one more poem about some kid cutting themselves, I'll freak out. No, I will not be returning to the Latin Society. I only joined because Skylar was in it. I didn't even register for Latin this year. The Gay and Straight Alliance group? No. I don't need to waste my time sitting in on meetings with random parents yelling at my advisor. Let me just get my stuff and walk home with my ghost. At least she doesn't talk to me.

No one is home at my house. I sigh a relief. School has started back up for dad and mom has been working afternoons for most of the summer. The microwave dings to signal my cheese pockets done. A car door slams shut from somewhere outside and it sounds too close. I peer through the curtain and see a car loop around the cul-de-sac and take off back down the road. I grab the steaming snack out of its sleeve and go to investigate.

I listen against the door and hear noise. For one brief second I think it could be Skylar. I don't know why my mind turned to her. As if she would suddenly decide to make noise outside the door. Or would she? Was I thinking of her as I stared into the microwave counting down the seconds? I can't remember, but my heart did a weird jump then sink at the thought. I grab the handle and open the door as quick as I can to catch her.

There is a person at my doorstep. Between almost dropping my cheese pocket and the human sight, I stand there not knowing what to do next.

“Hey, cuz, how’s it going?” she says.

“Hey,” I say and take a bite. I burn the roof of my mouth.

“Can I come in?” She shifts the weight of her suitcase. I’ve rarely see her caught off guard. I think back on the last time I saw her. It must have been last Thanksgiving when my brother was in town. Her and her mom stayed a few nights. Since then she’s shaved her head. Her hair was bleached white, but her natural color is an ashy blonde. I had almost forgotten that.

I move aside and let her through. “Where’s aunt Shelbie going?” I look out across the circular road as if I didn’t see the car leave before.

“Uh, home I guess,” my cousin says plopping down on the couch. The two live about four hours away. “Your mom and dad didn’t tell you I was coming?”

“No,” I say.

“You must have forgot,” she says.

I bite at the cheese oozing over the pastry lip. “I think I would remember them saying ‘Galina is coming to visit.’” I say this, but then glance sideways at the calendar on the wall. It’s still open to July so it’s of no help. My time is off. Is it some holiday week that I don’t know about? When is Labor Day?

“It’s not Galina anymore,” she says quietly. “It’s Kassian. Like my dad.”

“Your dad’s name is Frank,” I say. The doorway I’m leaning against my no support the weight I feel I am carrying.

“No, my real dad is named Kassian,” she says like she has said it a thousand times already. She has no fuse left.

“Holy shit,” I say. I don’t care that my mouth is full. “I thought it was the family just being dramatic.” I’m not sure of where to put my cousin. I am unsure how she fits into all of this.

“Nah, this part is true at least,” she is tugging at the sleeve of her jacket.

I swallow. “A couple people, I don’t remember who exactly, uncle Luke or cousin Reese, whatever, it doesn’t matter, said you had an abortion,” this was the thing I was most curious about.

Galina – no, Kassian laughs. And not in a way that made my statement seem like a joke. A frustrated, sad laugh. “I don’t even like boys let alone to get that far with one.” “Shit,” I to nothing and everything.

“Yeah,” she, or I guess it’s he now, says. “I like your shirt.”

I forgot what I am wearing so I look down at myself like an idiot. My brother’s faded t-shirt.

“Thanks,” I reply. “There’s tons of Joey’s old band t-shirts and sweatshirts upstairs. I don’t think he’d care if you got into them too. Some of that stuff was my dad’s I think.”

“I’d like that,” Kassian says and smiles.

“You want a cheese pocket?” I ask pointing to mine.

“Oh my God,” he says. “Yes, please. I don’t think I have eaten cheese since Thanksgiving here. Ya know, my mom being on the vegan diet. I’ve been living off of juices and smoothies.”

“Right,” I say thinking back on the tantrum aunt Shelbie threw during the carving of the turkey. She acted like she was surprised my dad brought out the bird and started cutting into it. Like she had never been to a Thanksgiving before. My dad stood there knife hovering over a drumstick listening to her go on and on about the mistreatment of turkeys around the holiday. I kind of agreed with her at the time since I think meat is weird anyway, but didn’t say anything. After aunt Shelbie going off about beaks and mangled claws, I sat there and pushed the white meat around and she sulked in the corner with her plain salad.

Not only did I heat up the cheese pocket for Kassian, I also gave him a two different flavored string cheese and cheese crackers. He kicked his combat boots under the table with joy. I suppose he did look thinner than when we last parted. He is probably wearing a band to his breasts down and the vegan juice diet would do that a person.

While he sat at the kitchen table and ate I dug through the bag of his old clothes he brought for me. Striped crop tops and girl jeans with holes ripped out of the knees. I thanked him. The clothes were wrinkled and looked like things Skylar would wear. It’s all stuff his mom bought him in a last ditch effort over the past year. Even before, Kassian was never a girly-girl. He never showed any interest in make-up other than the occasional black eyeliner. Never talked about boys like Skylar did. His sexuality never came up even though I suspected long ago she was probably a lesbian. But now that doesn’t matter.

My dad is the first parent to arrive home. He kept apologizing to Gal – Kassian. Even he kept getting his name twisted. Unlike grown-ups I don’t feel the need to

punctuate all my sentences before and after with a name. Let me run Joey's old sheets in the washer before you sleep on them, Galina. Goddamn it. I mean Kassian. G – Kassian, I really did think your mom was dropping you off Friday. I got off the phone with your mom over the past weekend and I thought she, sonofabitch, he would make for a great change of ace around here. You gotta give an old man a break, Kassian. Hope you don't mind sharing a bathroom, Gal – aw, hell – Kassian.

“Call me Kass if it's easier,” he says as my dad showed him how to use the tv remote.

I help my dad get Joey's old room in order. I vacuum and take the trophies off the shelves. I wipe down the dust. Each drawer is filled with Joey's forgotten stuff. I see green army jacket to claim for my own before Kass can find it. I see my dad eyeing the other tupperware containers full of Joey's clothes and I tell him to just leave them.

“God, I hope Kass isn't upset I keep get her, dammit, his name wrong,” he says. He stands hands on hips, his white button down rolled to the elbows.

“I think he will be fine,” I say moving things into the closet.

“It's just that two students in the middle are transitioning and I'm fighting like hell to make sure they're ok,” he fidgets with his tie. He looks tired even though it was his first full day back at school. “And I thought him coming here would be good for you. You aren't hanging around the usual gang. I can't imagine...”

“Thanks,” I say but it sounds more like a question. I was beginning to enjoy my solitude though.

“And aunt Shelbie. I know Kass has been acting out, but we’ll get him back on track. Mr. Alsairafi was kind enough to allow Kass to do some mail runs and filing. He’ll put his head on his shoulders straight, yet. Some practical work will do him good. You and Joey are turning out great, your mother and I must doing something right.”

“Yeah,” I say and want it to sound more optimistic than it come out. I don’t think I am turning out so great. If I were great, Skylar would be sitting with Kassian downstairs. If I were great, I would be on honor roll. If I were great, I’d start listening to those army recruiters coming into school like Joey did. If I were great, I would become president of all the school clubs I used to like. If I were great, I wouldn’t have skipped gym class and hid in the library telling the librarian I came from study hall to research my first assignment. If I were great, I would not see my dead best friend sometimes.

We don’t move for a good minute. We’re both probably thinking of what happens next or the not so distant past or the tv talking downstairs.

“Well, I best get done stair and put on some spaghetti so it’s ready for when your mom gets home,” he slaps me on the shoulder. “I was thinking garlic bread too.”

“Can you put some shredded cheese on the garlic bread?” I ask.

“Of course, great idea,” he said.

Myabe it was all the garlic and cheese, but I sat down on the recliner and opened my notebook. The other thing I took away from my therapy sessions was to write down what I am grateful for. More often than not, I wrote sad, emo poetry like so

Where does the time go

This one goes out to anyone who had ever lost someone

Carving and uncarving

He loves the consension

Loves the first bell of church, but not the last

The 14th station of the cross

Vibrations of bee hives

Each bad luck pennies coppering against one another

All the undone things to you

Heavy spirits of nonsense

Sites to learn then unsee

Reify the pools and lakes inside

Tiny tiny museums of pleasure

Time doesn't

it stays right here.

All I needed to was illustrate it. Add some swirls and abstract patterns. Maybe I would submit my work anonymously to the school newspaper. No one else but me could see Slyer was practically dripping from the page. Each word contained her image. But only to me.

My mom came home in a flurry of papers. Dad had called her and talked in hushed tones as I stirred the boiling noodles. I watched as Kassian poured extra Parmesan on top of the spaghetti. My mom asked him a bunch of questions and my dad tried to steer the conversation to less awkward subjects. He was very curious how the homeschooling works. Kassian assured him that it's mostly independent work on the computer.

I know my dad would not let this opportunity to see how this new age education works to him.

I have always been jealous of the fact that Kassian is homeschooled. I imagined her, or him now, waking up whenever. Drinking as much coffee as he likes then doing some random tests online. The rest of his day could be spent at the park or drawing or reading Anne Sexton. It all seems very glamorous to me. I tell my dad this. He stops mid-chew and looks to my mom. I'm not of middle school so I don't need to keep face there. My dad being the vice principal and all. No one cares if I show up tomorrow. I convince myself in less than half a second that this is the best course of action for me. Both parents didn't miss a beat and shot that request down. Mom pulled her hair down from her clip before answering though. I still have a chance. I can sleep in and do some essays or shit and look at pictures or whatever the hell they do online and then get to reading Sexton.

I went right to my room after dinner. I've had enough human interaction for one day and my head started to hurt from it all. I plug in my fairy lights and get underneath the afghan.

I lay there a few minutes knowing there is a new presence in the house. It seems like it should feel more strange than it does. I didn't realize until this moment how much I miss my brother around even though we didn't talk all that much when he was living here.

There was a soft knock on my door. The rapping startles me and my first instinct is to bury myself deeper in the blanket. I think it might be mom to have a talk or something. “Come in,” I say.

No one comes in. I must have been hearing Kass in the next room or something, but I repeat myself a little louder. I replay the sound in my head and wonder in defeat how I could have misinterpreted the sound. I feel silly for saying something aloud. Time for bed, I tell myself.

I unplug the fairy lights and that’s when I hear the door open. It doesn’t squeak but rather a whisper of a sound across the carpet. My body tenses. I sit up. “Skylar?” I say before stopping myself. My eyes are trying to adjust to the new darkness, to see if I can make out her new form. My bed bends under weight of a thing. All the breath in my lungs leaves. I can feel her. She is here. I’ve practiced a thousand different saying a million different question I would ask someone who has seen infinity. Someone who had seen the other side and flits between. My hands lifts up by itself and I brace for touch or what it would feel like if it slipped right through her crystal like skin.

“Isn’t that your dead friend’s name?” Kassian asks. I stop my hand from reaching across the dark any further. I did not expect an answer. My cheeks grow hot from embarrassment of even saying Skylar’s name. He adjusts his weight on the bed. I don’t say anything. The disappointment would be on my voice. He continues, “It’s okay. Maybe if you say the name more everything will feel better?”

The thought hadn’t crossed my mind before then. “It doesn’t matter,” I say. “What do you even know about that?”

“Your friend or about the dead?”

I shrug even though it's dark. I pull the blanket tighter around me. He wouldn't understand and I don't need someone else feeling sorry for me or hating me or whatever people feel towards me. "What are you doing in my room anyway?"

"Can I sleep in here?"

"Whatever," I say and roll over to my side to make room.

He shimmies more than I like to get situated under the covers. Despite the night, I keep my eyes open. This sharing of space should feel more awkward than it does. She's a he now. It's not like when we were little and my bed seemed as big as half of the room. My bed feels small. Each small lump digs into my back. When we were little kids Kass would stay in here practically all summer. We'd wake up with a film of sweat on our brow. Even if her, his, palm rested on arm I'd wake in the morning sunlight and carefully remove it. A sweaty print of heat would be left in its place.

"Before I deleted all my social media, I did pay attention to what you were up to," he says as a matter of fact.

"Why did you delete it?" I didn't want to admit that I didn't notice Kass had gone from all aspects of social media. I file through my memory bank. I guess I would have known that he shaved his head. That he started dressing more like a guy. That him and his mom weren't getting along. I had no idea other than from a random family member gossiping when they came to visit. Kass doesn't have any brothers or sisters and none of the family lives in that part of the state. I feel bad for the first time in a long time for being in my head so much.

"After the thirteenth or so message of how I should kill myself, I guess I didn't feel like keep them up," Kassian mumbles.

“Shit,” is all I can say. A part of me knows I should say sorry or something meaningful, but I know how cardboard those words can sound.

“But that’s why I came here, ya know?” he rolls onto one elbow and I can sense him looking at me. “Your mom got me a real job. I’m going to save up and go find my real dad.”

At first, I want to laugh at this statement. But I know this doesn’t not call for laughing. Kass is practically breathless after he says this.

“How are you going to do that exactly?” I say instead of laughing.

“By saving up,” he talks faster and more excited, “I will get enough to buy a plane ticket to Russia and find him.”

This sounds so simple when I know better. How can he not see that the world is more complicated than buying a plane ticket and finding a dad that does not even know you exist? It reminds me of the start of a fairy tale. The start of something romantic. A land where it always snows. He can read Russian authors on a train. Visit those domed castles. The more I think about I grow jealous once again and am filled with giddiness of how surreal. I want to believe him. I want to see him go to Russian and learn his native tongue. Russia seems so far away. Far away from ghosts and school clubs.

“How do you know,” I begin.

“I’ve done the research,” he moves his hands as he talks. Like it is some simple explanation.

Moonlight peeks in through the opening of the curtain.

And as certain as I am that there’s oxygen and gravity in the room, I am sure that my ghost is here too. The room feels so full of life. The moonlight ripples and she’s there.

Just beyond the bed. I know if I reach out, I will touch her. She's moonlight shaped. Kassian's breathing isn't level enough for him to be asleep. I whisper Skylar's name in the direction she's occupying. This perks Kass up and he looks out into the void of my bedroom. No light to see if he's fascinated or terrified or something else. I realize that I don't want either of them to leave. That being in the middle of them is the best and most alive I've felt since I witnessed Skylar's death. That Kass is a truer form of himself and I wanted to never be away from him again.

“Can you see her?” I ask Kass.

He holds his breath for longer than I expect. The moment where the world caves in and Skylar disappears.

Then he says the most validating thing anyone has ever said, “Yes.”

The Uncanny Valley

Short story

The decision to purchase a sex robot was wholly practical, I swear. Okay, the robot is not an actual sex robot. I didn't get some expensive model just to have sex with it. I'm not some gynoid. Maybe there is no difference between my model, the Ovid X, and a random robot that can be bought from the buy and sell site just to keep in their bedroom. Mine, I think, cost a lot more because of all the features. I paid more for the newest Ovid from the Automata Company because it is connected to my cell phone plan. I need it to be synced up with all the figures and data from my home business.

To be honest, I never thought I'd purchase one until I was at a vendor event in a gated development neighborhood. The night I purchased Galatea, I struggled to get my products in the car from the event. I sold well for once. In my downtime at the event, I watched a video that my upline in the company sent out to our team about branding yourself online. How to make my personality shine through in my product tutorials and demos. The park, nestled between the rows of houses, where all of the crafter and vendors were set up, had free coffee for us. I forgot to pack myself a lunch in a rush to get out the door and set-up in time for when the crowd started to arrive. I downed three cups of coffee to quell my stomach rumbling. That's when I saw a rival company's rep setting up.

They were done in less than I half the time I spent setting up. It wasn't a person who was managing the boxes and fabric for the candles to sit on. The movements were calculated, a lack of a reptilian brain. From set-up to tear down of her stand, her companion made it smoother than I had ever seen. I messaged my friend Madoc what I

had seen. Madoc texted back a few links, mostly from foreign countries, about hackers coding the robots to steal money and eventually to kill certain politicians. All of this I knew. I'm not a politician and I have no money, I wrote back.

The event that day was slow at first. I got caught up on all the infographs, updates, and webinars. Yes, all of our products are the same across the board, and the market is oversaturated, so we as reps of the company must find innovative ways of making ourselves stand out from all the rest of thousands and thousands of people who are doing the same thing.

The answer kept staring at me.

The other candle company, with subpar wax burning ingredients, had a steady stream of consumers at the table. The person's set-up wasn't anything amazing. It was just a personal robot. I knew it. I wondered what the robot's name was. The robot, dressed in tight clothing with hair pulled back, calculated the sales, the tax, and dispensed the e-lucre into the customer's account. Smooth. Easy.

The webinars I listened to kept saying words like “motivate,” “selling potential,” and “profit.” I've seen the success stories of the people in my company. At the conventions held in different fancy hotel lobbies. I heard first-hand about how people can work this job, less than part-time, and make triple what I make at my office job in a year. Buyers want more candles. Seasonal, universal, peculiar scented, and all the time. Especially around the One Holiday.

The One Holiday was still a few months away, but my company was ahead of the game and rolled out the candle scents early. The pre-orders were through the roof. I made posts on my social media business page. These scents were meant to remind the people of

their parent's week off of work. There was a scent to light for the gift exchanged or the decorations hung leading up to our holiday. Not everyone celebrated the One Holiday the same, depending on their family history, but Glitterati candles had that covered.

I walked over the other company's set-up at the craft show. Each candle had moisture droplets built up on the top of the wax. It said made from 50% beeswax and 50% soy on the label. I laughed to myself. Such unstable and unethical practices. Probably imported. My candles were 100% corn. Naturally derived and a portion of the proceeds went to the undeveloped communities that helped farm the corn. My company gave back. The owner themselves posted pictures all the time on the company's website.

Corn was a slower burn. Cleaner. Better for the environment. Corn made the flame look better in the house. It flickered better off the wall and cast a more neutral light. Each candle's fragrance was made with organic oils.

I sniffed the competitor's candle again. The company rep smiled at me from behind the table. They watched me come over from my table. Watched as I walked across the pavement, even though they were helping a customer pick out a fragrance for their son's new studio.

It was the robot who came over to help me. The thing was so lithe. The mouth moved better than a person's and it told me all about the company. There was something in the way it said their company's tagline. The robot even added a jingle at the end of it. A nice bell tinging to compliment the sale's pitch.

I could see the robot was dressed with the company's logo on the back of the shirt. It smiled nicer, more authentic than the human had. Despite my company, Glitterati, having better, state of the art glassware, I listened to the robot go on and about the thick

nature of their glass. The voice was genderless and perfect. It asked me the right questions. The questions I should be asking to anyone who approached my table. The robot's features were so defined and perfect. Wide eyed. It tilted its head ready for me answer the questions myself. The exchange reminded me of my first high school partner. Just if they were airbrushed and more tall and had a more soothing voice. I blushed.

I set the candle jar down and returned to my own set-up. Two people were mulling over a One Holiday edition scent. "My sets of parents didn't roast meat during the holiday," the one said turning over a candle in their hand.

"I also have cinnamon wreath and church incense over here," I said and directed their sight.

The person pursed their lips and I encouraged them to smell. "Yes, my parents did take me to our local universal church on Holiday Eve," they said.

The other person chimed in, "Didn't these candles have several of them explode? Like even severely burning a couple people and glass ruining their stuff?"

I balked. "Well, yes, but that was months ago," I said. "Glitterati has worked recrafting the glass, right here in America, with the best technology to ensure that doesn't happen anymore. Even if something...unsavory happens, our return policy is the best in the industry."

The person who called me out said something under their breath and shifted their bags from one hand to another.

"I can send you the policy directly," I continued. Without waiting for their answers, I screen grabbed the documents from my phone and pinged it out to each of

them. Whether they accept or reject the information, I didn't care. I wanted the sale. I needed to move forward. The webinars were still fresh in my mind.

The one holding the church incense candle inhaled it again. They shrugged. "I'll tak it," they said.

I wrapped up the candle and didn't feel great about myself lying to them, but I needed the sale. My school payments have been late the past few months. If I got the new position I applied for, I vowed to be more honest at the next craft and vendor show. I could sell Glitterati as extra income, maybe even have a decent savings, rather than rely on it to keep my e-lucre account in the positive.

After all, the season waned into the One Holiday portion of the year and the news predicts it to be the best one in years. People will spend more money on actual things versus tech. The webinars, the news, the launch of the One Holiday candles, gave me hope. I just needed a boost to become a mentor in the company. To have a team of people under me. That's why I signed up so many months ago anyway. My friend from high school was doing so well in Glitterati, if she could go it with a kid, then certainly someone not in a relationship or without a child, could be successful. I needed the new position in my office job or to move forward in selling Glitterati candles. The interest expanded on my loans more and more with banks merging.

I was the last one to pack up from the craft show. One of the only people who didn't have a second set of hands to help me load my stuff back into boxes and into the car. I struggled up the stairs several times. As soon as I returned to my apartment on the seventh floor, I ordered her.

The Automata Company continuously assures it's consumers that the Ovids cannot be hacked. The decapitation rampage in Japan was nothing more than shoddy, back-alley robots. I think a spokesperson was quoted saying that a kindergartener could alter the code for homemade robots if they chose. The chatter amongst certain lawmakers is requiring a special license for owning such tools, but bot rights leagues shut them down each time. The betterment for bots, or android/human activists argue that the robots cannot be owned once they are booted up. We humans merely guide them at the start of their hardware lifecycle. I thought all sides preposterous.

Before I actually saw her face, and there was something right in assigning her a gender, I didn't know what I would name her. I could have customized everything, and I mean everything, from the texture of her hair to the color of nipples. Even the shape of fingernails and all the things in between. The amount of hair under the belly button, if I selected a belly button. Did I want my Ovid X to have dimples on the small of the lower back? The order form was online and it started by asking me personal questions which I thought odd, but went with it. I filled it all out without giving too much credence to the dents in her knees. I just wanted something that was strong and would help me grow my business.

The Automata Company delivered her right to my apartment door. When I unwrapped her out of her plastic that uncanny valley closed within me seeing her for the first time. I named her Galatea.

The clothes I ordered for her arrived at my apartment the day before. Those I bought generic with free shipping. I was conscious enough to buy nice pieces that both she

and I could fit into. Nice blouses and pants that would make me stand out less in the rich women's neighborhoods as I try to sell them a scent way and various candles.

Before taking her to the Automata store, she had the basic robot functions. The manual and bot rights groups encouraged me to talk with her often. This way she could learn my habits and speech patterns. Play videos for her. Have her listen to music even when I wasn't around. Most robot tastes could be molded and formed as I evolved, even after I chose what music she would prefer from the website.

I told her her name, then my name. I became conscious of my words. Did I have a strange accent? I wouldn't want Galatea talking to someone, trying to sell them a candle, and that person thinking she was dumb. I searched on my home system for doctor's just talking about their field. I queued up motivational speakers and nonfiction audiobooks, so she could listen to them before she got used to my speaking.

After she was charged up, she lifted her arms and anticipated the way the clothes went on her form. I noticed the darker brown moles that were painted on the underside of her arm. A touch of artistry that I hadn't anticipated. There were many models of her kind that came before her, but I guess I only admired from afar. The ones I've seen at the grocery store, or on the train, even when I sell Glitterati scented wax at craft shows, I never paid too much attention to them. I probably passed so many that I didn't even realize were Ovid models. The whole point of them were to blend in to society and be a companion to those who needed them. Whatever that reason was. Sex, therapy, medical, or because someone wanted the newest tech. What did it matter me.

I did my research instead of sleeping. I read about companion robots for the elderly whose relatives could afford one. They were becoming a staple in hospitals,

especially in the wealthy areas of the country. The latest headline was about illegal baby bots being made and sold on the internet. The impending news about my promotion, and all the free coffee from the event, the thought of baby robots, had me too wired.

My office, my day job, I joke on the Glitterati forums, I go to five days a week has a strict no-robot policy. As soon as the Automata Company opened up their first patroned stores on each coast, the job revised their policy and procedures. Sackler & Daughters has many factions of the company, I only work in one their high-rises processing claims in front of a screen all day. They maintained that their interest was humankind first. Even if the robot is kept in the breakroom, it would send the wrong message to our clients about the misuse of employing diverse American humans. Unlike Madoc's workplace across the city, where the employees receive a percentage off their first robot purchase and monthly bot fee to have it equipped with the latest software and wi-fi.

The Glitterati candle company doesn't have a stance either way. On a forum, one team member said that the head of the company, Sancia Blue herself, has a robot companion. I believe it, because most millionaires and celebrities do have one in one capacity or another. Stunt double, personal assistant, lover. Some flaunt it, other don't mention them. Sackler & Daughters have many robots cleaning the glass on the outside of the building despite their policies. I can tell.

Yet, if don't get the position I applied for – less hours and a slight raise -- then I have to manage my time to commit more to the Glitterati candle company. The candles are the only thing keeping me out of Dorrit's for the Labor Impaired. If my loans get transferred to one more time...well, who knows.

I stare at Galatea sitting, waiting, expecting on my couch. The pang of buyer's remorse fills my stomach. My meager e-lucre account back down to zero. Eating stale bagels I hocked from the office breakroom. The clothes fit her so well. The collar is crisp. What would happen to her if I did go to Dorritt's? No, that's silly to think.

Galatea has been learning so much. Sackler & Daughters would do well to hire a team of robots to work for them. I shook my head at the thought. I liked having someone here already. I've lived alone for so long, not even a roommate in college. No matter which room I was in, I could feel her presence all around me. She was tapped into the speakers, the screens in each room, and my Skyn doss. Which I have said I could feel it's pulsing in times when my body is over stressed, but the doctor just laughs that notion off.

Madoc believes me. My heartbeat accelerates, and the Skyn doxx sends signals out to slow my breathing, regulate me heart, and calm my synaptic nerves. Better a small pulse than mind-altering drugs so many people are prescribed. Madoc refuses to switch over though. Addicted to sensations like so many others who have yet try a painless piece of hardware that connects us all together. Me, Galatea, the music I play for her, and all the information we could eat like air together.

Our morning meeting adjourns as usual at Sackler & Daughters. The first docket on the list is promotions and new hires needed for the influx of claims that will come during the One Holiday season.

The supervisors waste no time and announce the new shifting within the departments. My name is not called. Instead, they give the position to someone who only has an Associates, Bachelor's, and only one Master's degree. I stare out the window at the cleaner perched from the ropes. Wiping and unwiping.

My Skyn doss alerts me that my vitals are spiking. The sensor in my phone vibrates in my pocket. Then a different alert that I haven't experienced before. To calm the shaking in my hands, I pull out my phone and look to it. Galatea sent me a message that she received alarming statistics about my health just now and if she wants me to have her intervene. I'm not quite sure what that means. I could message her back and ask. I type: I will be fine, I just need to calm down through this meeting. The Skyn doss doesn't feel like its working. I can't balance myself.

The next time I look down at my phone there is queue of empowering words and famous quotes misattributed. Each one is so cheesy, but something feels so wholly innocent and pure in their nature. Galatea sends clips of animals, alive and extinct, doing cute things. Then she sends me snippets of the Glitterati candle webinars I have viewed so many times. The feeling of defeat subsides. I have her, I have a stock of candles, and the looming Holiday. My debts will be paid, someday, with Galatea's help.

The rest of day drones on. I am happy to get home and not just as a release from the cubicles and exhausting coworkers. Galatea even opens the door for me. There's a look across her face that takes me a second to decipher. She's showing concern. After barely even touching her all this time, I place my hand on her cheek and kiss her. Her systems delay, ever so briefly, to learn what she needs to do. Always to mimic me. I don't know why I did what I did. When I pull away, I smile at her. Close mouthed. I know there was sadness behind it because she does the same.

The City Without a Cemetery

Novel excerpt

Chapter One

Zola leaned out of her bedroom window squinting into the darkness that filled the backyard. Her eyes slowly adjusted to the moonless night. The usual sounds of the night met her ears as she strained to listen. Old Duke wasn't one of those dogs to bark at nothing she thought. She looked past the patch of drooping sunflowers that looked like grotesque figures stuck in slumber. The cornstalks on the fledgling acre of land barked slightly in the unfelt breeze. The scrape of their leaves sounded almost like they were whispering to each other between the dog's gruff barks. The outline of the woods was hardly visible against the clouded night sky, but Zola would be able to sketch the sharp-lined trees if she were blind. The summer cicada songs mingled with the autumn locusts' high pitched rasping. Just as she was about to hush Duke up at her feet, the phone in her hand buzzed.

There was the message she was waiting to receive, all lit up in full glory. She couldn't help but laugh to herself, blood rushing to all parts of her body. She stared at the image and debated how long was appropriate to wait to text back. Dizzied with excitement, the noise and old Duke's fussing was forgotten. She turned to the ornate full-length mirror in the corner of her bedroom. Zola stared at her body in the faded pajama shorts and white tank top. She mussed her hair, which she didn't relax all summer. In the humidity it spiraled around her face. She held up her cell in the mirror. One strap at a time, she lowered the tank top until it gathered around her stomach. The breeze reached

her window, rustling the curtains in the wake, and nipped at her bare skin. *Don't overthink this, don't overthink this.* Holding in her breath, she took a photo herself. She examined the picture. Low-lit from the neck down and her phone case's swirls of purple reflected back. Biting her lip, she hit the send button.

Out in the hall came a noise. A shuffling. The dog made an unhappy grumble at the back of his throat. Zola pulled up her straps and turned off the light. She hugged the phone to her chest, and snuck under the covers of her bed. The goosebumps along her skin did not abate. Outside spiders crawled in through the open window. For the first time all week, her nerves gave in to something new. She didn't wait for a reply text. That could wait for tomorrow. She didn't notice her dog's unease. Nor did she notice the subtle green glow that weaved through the stalks in the cornfield.

#

The walk to the bus stop wasn't so bad in early September. The leaves just began their change to be yellow tipped and golden in the early sun. Zola had to wear a hoodie in the morning but by the time the last afternoon bell rang, tying the hoodie around her waist was all she could do to save herself from melting. The scent of backyard barbeques from the holiday still hung onto the air. At the end of her dead end street, the other kids congregated, waiting for the bus. Every one of them was younger than Zola, but she knew most of them from riding her bike up to the convenience store and various birthday parties her mom made her attend to get to know the neighbors. She didn't talk to any of the young kids who seemed too enthusiastic to be starting their first day of school. Instead, she kicked at the gravel that pooled on the side of the road, and scrolled through her phone until the rumbling and screeching of the bus came around the corner. Still no

reply back from the picture she sent of herself last night. They had texted for hours yesterday. The conversation had been going on all summer; she and Declan had texted one another practically every day. Since it was the start of school, she figured that everyone, even Declan, was busy.

Weeks ago, she had messaged her friend, Carly, arranging to sit with each other come the first day of school. Admittedly, Zola didn't keep in the best contact with Carly all summer. Declan tied up most of her social media time and their other friend Maelle came over the house often. There just wasn't enough time doing honors course work, helping out with the corn field on her property, texting, and doing things with Maelle to then worry about what Carly was doing.

Once on the bus, Zola scanned the faces of each person and saw Carly's brown top-knotted hair in the very back. She secured her bag over her shoulder and made her way to the empty seat. Carly looked up and met Zola's eyes then looked back out the window.

"Hey," Zola said. She would have sat down, but Carly's messenger bag and notebooks were covering the other half of the seat. Carly folded her arms and continued to look out at a fixed point beyond the bus.

"Sit down," the bus driver hollered.

"Uh, can I—" Zola started to move Carly's stuff.

"No," Carly said with a biting tone. "If my mom finds out I'm sitting with you she will freak out." Carly said only briefly glancing toward Zola.

"SIT. DOWN." The bus driver yelled again.

Zola stared at Carly, the girl she knew since middle school, the girl who she sat next to in AP English class the last two years. What had Zola done? She scanned her memory of the past few weeks as best as she could recalled their last conversation they had in person or through text. The girls had acted out *Romeo and Juliet* while the whole room laughed at their over the top performance. The girl who she ran out of the class each time they analyzed *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* to refill their water bottles and laugh how parched they were.

The bus lurched forward and caught Zola off guard. She stumbled and caught the seat for support. The screech and hiss of the clunky bus added to the sounds of the nervous excitement of the students.

The bus rounded a bend and Zola almost lost her footing. Others on the bus were watching her, a guy and girl that were entering senior year seated in front of Carly, snickered, so she went to the middle of the bus to an empty seat and pushed against the window. She felt around in her bag for her earbuds, plugged them into her phone, and shuffled her playlist. Anxiety welled up despite the music and she tried to beat it back. Think of something else. Her thoughts turned towards Declan and nude pictures and unreturned messages, so that didn't help at all. Zola couldn't remember doing or saying anything to Carly that would cause that kind of reaction. Their moms knew each other, not too well, but they were always friendly with another. Zola had thought over every angle by the time the bus stopped at the high school.

The entering juniors, Zola's class, were to be the last graduating class from the old Sinclair High School building. Administration stopped doing any repairs on the building. This led to locker doors sitting unhinged, chipped wall paint in the labs, and,

when the sun was especially beaming, the ever present smell of animal that lingers after the biannual hosting of the circus in the school's gymnasium. The sprawling building once held upwards of a thousand students when Zola's parent's attended. Years of people moving out of the area had whittled student population down to about a hundred kids in each class. The new building, the elected administration promised, would be an incubator for the future generations with innovative technology to attract more families to the suburb of Sinclair. Zola always wondered what these convoluted statements meant about her class who are supposed to research on computers that only boot-up when the mood strikes them right. Library days are supposed to be filled with looking up articles for their papers, but the internet only worked sometimes on some of the old computers.

She exited the bus and tried to meet Carly's eye, but Carly pushed past her to a crowd of friends that loitered by the doors. Zola sighed. She scanned the gathering kids for any sign of *him*, Declan. Not that he would talk to her in public, but she hoped that maybe the summer changed something in him. Maybe something in the thousand texts would make him be around her. Especially after their conversation last night, could she hope to date him? She wanted to ask Carly what her next move with Declan should be because any time she brought the subject of boys, Declan, or dating with Maelle she changed the subject and waved her hand. Zola knew Carly was into all of those things and dated many of the people from school. Now that Zola sent the risky text to Declan, now what. She wanted ask Carly and didn't get the chance to.

She passed under the archway to enter the high school where the burnt red wildcat mascot sat crouched, surveying the students, teeth bared. Even it needed a new coat of paint.

Only freshmen looked at their class schedule, such an uncool thing to do, so Zola was conjuring her homeroom number and rest of the days schedule from memory. *Did they just laugh and look in my direction?* Zola thought about Carly and her friends she stopped to greet. Zola tried to brush it off chalking it up to paranoia after the bus incident. Self-consciousness saturated her thoughts. *Maybe it's my hair? Is it too crazy?* She stopped and looked at her natural hair, her frizzy curls, in a display case. She took out a hair tie and tied her locks into a low, tight bun. Nothing was off or weird about her clothes. It was a whole new outfit that she was wearing. New lace-up shoes and a short sleeve flannel under the plain hoodie and jeans. She turned and examined her backside, resisting the urge to shrug at her own reflection. The bell rang so she hurried along to homeroom.

Her homeroom was the French teacher's room this year and having had her the past two years, Zola knew what she could get away with. Ms. Amelie, not her real name but she insisted the student's call her that, was scattered brained yet loved to listen to student's stories. She valued a flare for the dramatic. They watched French films and listened to French music most days in class after working through the vocabulary and verbs. Zola found it all incredibly romantic despite the constant chastising from her mom who thought she should go into Spanish for practical reasons.

Zola spotted Maelle in the back of the room under a Renoir poster peeling down from one corner. The broad stroked ballerinas in pastel poufy skirts pirouetted despite the faded classroom. Maelle's head was laying on her backpack but as Zola approached, she could see she was just using it to hide the fact she was on her phone. They knew each

other since they were diapers and their moms went way back. But even so, Zola grew weary as she approached Maelle's desk.

"Hi, Mae," Zola said.

Maelle yawned and stretched, "Hey, Zo." She was clad in her usual school spirit hoodie and sweat pants. "What's up?"

Zola let out a breath and sat down next to her. "This is going to sound weird, but," and she told her about the morning bus ride with Carly. Ms. Amelie took role call and Zola lowered her voice.

"I never liked that bitch anyway," Mae said after listening to the whole story.

"Shh," Zola quieted her.

"Whatever," she said. Mae pushed up her glasses and yawned again. Mae seemed to think there wasn't much else to the story and began to look through her phone again.

"Could you just keep your ears peeled to anything out of the ordinary?" Zola pleaded.

"Yeah, sure. I'll see what's up. I have a basketball meeting after school anyway. Those girls always know everything. Sometimes *before* it even happens."

"Thanks, Mae." Zola said. "But, really, a meeting already?"

Ms. Amelia cleared her throat in that passive aggressive way when the class started to get too loud. The class settled for a moment and Ms. Amelia continued with the school rules and changes from the previous year.

Mae leaned toward Zola. "Yeah, but it's just talk about the homecoming float. I don't know why either. We end up using the same colors, the same frame, and wear the

same stuff every year. Only this time, I'll be at the top because I'm varsity." She said then leaned back clearly proud of herself.

"Truly, congratulations," Zola said.

Ms. Amelie got the students' attention again, "Ahem. Ecoute, students! Here are your lockers numbers." She gave the person sitting in the front desk of each row some papers. "Let's quickly, and quietly, go out into the hall and get situated before the first bell."

The class gathered up their belongings and shuffled into the hall each wandering a bit before finding their number. Zola stood before her locker, number 333, and sighed. The thing barely closed. It looked as if someone had smashed, or had been smashed, into it. Once upon a time, every other locker was painted in alternating red and black, the Sinclair High School colors, but that was long ago and chipped paint littered the hall. Clusters of beige-grey original metal showed through, scab-like. She almost asked Ms. Amelie if she could switch, but decided to just let it go. Once the lock was in place, she rattled it and it seemed like no one could get in so she gave the locker a kick. The people closest to her turned and glared, but the noise of everyone shuffling about hid the clatter for the most part.

"Sorry," Zola said to the inanimate object. "It's fine. It'll be fine." She looked to the people on either side of her.

The first period bell sounded. Mae came back over and stifled a laugh at the sorry state of Zola's locker.

Before the friends parted ways Mae said, "Rumor has it *you know who* is in my first class."

Zola barely contained her smile. Playing it cool she just shrugged. “I don’t know what you’re referring to, Miss Mae.”

“You two are so strange,” Maelle shook her head.

Zola was very aware of just how strange the situation was. She glanced at her phone and still no message from Declan. That was okay. It was Carly she was worried about. She would see her in her first class. Letting out an over-exaggerated sigh, she turned on her heel towards AP English.

There was still some flicker of hope of caught in Zola’s chest. Though, once entering the class Carly briefly met Zola’s eyes then cut away. The desks were arranged in a circle that was typical every year in Sinclair High School’s AP English classes. Most of the students had already taken up a seat. The room was bare except for some grammar posters that looked like they were from the nineteen eighties. Smiling white kids with even whiter teeth in stripped sweaters projecting just how fun grammar can be if used properly.

The bare walls were typical because every year the students got to decorate the room in correspondence with the Shakespeare play they’re reading that year. Freshman year was *Romeo and Juliet*, sophomore year was *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, this year was *Macbeth*, and senior year will be *Hamlet*. It’s how it’s always been at Sinclair High. The class ahead of the junior AP English group has won the room contest every year with their pricey decorations since one of the girl’s, Laney Baker, mom is a manager at the local craft store.

Carly and Zola had made a deal to step up their game this year one summer afternoon at the Hera park pool. There was still time for Carly to get over...whatever it

was she was mad about. Zola took a seat between Sofia Silvera, who missed a lot of classes last year because she always was getting sent to the office for dress code violations, and Maddy Hershberger, whose family was rumored to be former Amish. The past two years, Zola and Sofia worked on projects together and were friendly enough but Maddy usually shook like a small dog when anyone talked to her for too long. Maddy regarded Zola with wide eyes and tucked loose strands of mousy brown hair behind her ear. Sofia was texting at seemingly light speed but greeted Zola without looking up from her phone. Zola couldn't help but notice as Sophia crossed her legs that her shorts were way too short for the dress code. The teacher, Mrs. Martz, did not care. She sipped on her coffee and its scent filled the room. The woman was just a year out from retiring and talked too much of her dead husbands.

The last students filed into the class. The rest of the latecomers sat on the side of the room with Carly, who was flanked by Liam Meyers and Hudson James, laughing. When Zola glanced across the way to them, Carly was the only one with any decency to hide her face behind her hand. The two guys looked straight at Zola. She tried to distract herself from their snickering and whispers by shuffling her books around inside her backpack. No amount of distraction helped and her cheeks grew hot in spite of herself.

Mrs. Martz moved around to the front of her desk. "Alright, kids," she said coffee in hand. "Turn in your packet of essays from the readings you were assigned over the summer. We'll get to the good things like mad women in the attic after the formalities." The teacher shuffled from desk to desk as the students handed her their folders full of papers. "I look forward to reading your thoughts and analysis on that haggard Mr. Rochester and how he got what was comin' to him from good ol' Bertha."

Some of the students looked at each other in confusion wondering if they had read the same edition of Jane Eyre that Mrs. Martz had. She laughed and said to no one, “Oh, but the real challenge will be connecting Jane Eyre to Macbeth. Yes, sir. The real success you will be graded on will be if you can successfully take these two texts talk to and interact with each other. Oh, yes.”

Zola had the fleeting thought that Mrs. Martz was out of her mind. That all the years of teaching have finally caught up to the old bat.

“And let’s beat those senior whimmy whammies,” the teacher said. “They’ve won the classroom contest for far too many years,” she gestured and coffee spilled over the lip of the mug. “Though, last year they did make quite an impressive bedroom scene from the castle Inverness. But, ha! We will do better. This is my last year, kiddos. Make me proud.” She stacked the papers on her desk and propped open Jane Eyre in one hand. “You know what? Forget all that stuff going around in the circle and talking about your hopes and dreams bullshit. Take out your books and the first one who can identify a passage about how scummy Mr. Rochester is, gets first pick of character in the Macbeth performance.”

Mrs. Martz took a big, audible sip from her oversized mug. Zola placed her hand over the worn book. She flipped through the plot in her head. Carly, Liam, and Hudson were rifling through their books, but she could tell they were lost. Maddy chewed on her fingernails while scanning her book. Sofia brought her copy right up to her nose and her brow creased in concentration. Someone coughed. A cell phone vibrated from someone’s pocket. Zola swallowed hard then raised her hand.

“Your name?” Mrs. Martz asked.

“Z-zola,” she replied.

“Go on then. What would you like to call our attention to?”

“Chapter 26,” said Zola. “The scene where Jane and Rochester are supposed to get married, but two guys show up and let Jane know that Rochester is still wed to Bertha.”

Mrs. Martz set down her mug and smiled widely. “Ah, yes. Very good, Zola. First pick when we start digging into Macbeth. Well done. Now everyone turn to chapter 26. Let’s all take turns reading a passage aloud. I’ll start,” the woman licked her finger and started.

Despite the mad woman at the front of the room, Zola thought she may actually like the class. It was then that she dared a glance at the three over her propped up book. Liam didn’t even have his book open. He was watching Zola in a way she had never been looked at before. She felt it. A look of equal parts disgust and intrigue. Her skin crawled. She lifted her book to shield her own face from that look. The bell couldn’t ring fast enough. She dedicated the rest of the class time making notes within the margins every time Mrs. Martz discussed her own views of the text.

Before Liam, Carly, and Hudson could walk past her and chuckle some more, Zola made sure to be the first one out the door.

The rest of the day seemed to drag. Zola texted Maelle while she was in study hall rereading *The Yellow Wallpaper* since Mrs. Martz wanted them to start connecting the two books next week. Good thing she brought all the assigned books from the summer reading list since it was unclear what they would exactly be doing with the books, if anything. Last year, for AP English they were required to read the likes of *1984* and *Lord*

of the Flies then they never touched upon the books again which disappointed Zola. At least this year she would get to really know the stories.

Maelle didn't hear nothing yet. That's what the text said. Zola bit her lip debating whether or not to correct Maelle's grammar but then decided against it. She knew Maelle wouldn't care or learn from it. Though, Zola suspected that Maelle didn't hear anything because she was probably asleep through most of her classes.

No other texts were received. She scanned the last texts between her and Carly, but nothing was out of the ordinary. No one else was paying any attention to anyone else. Since study hall was so quiet, she dared open the last texts between her and Declan. The picture she took of her bare chest almost startled her. The picture Declan sent of himself didn't startle her as much. Even if her picture wasn't even as much of her, it still was so fully *her*. The wooden mirror, the handmade quilt on her bed, the freckles from hours in the sun, were all her. Studying the photo from Declan, there was nothing personal about it. Which was odd considering the subject matter. What she was looking at could be anyone's really. Average, no true defining features other than it was a light skinned guy. In the daylight, she wasn't as giddy about receiving the photo taken what she thought was carelessly.

It was the same through lunch. Zola sat with Maelle and her basketball friends. They talked of the new assistant coach and the homecoming parade. Zola laughed at the appropriate times and answered any question thrown in her direction. The general conversation between the players about basketball and members of the team she could barely keep up with.

“Aye, Zo, tell your mom I’m coming over this weekend to get my hair done,” Mae said as they threw the left over Mexican pizza away. Half the orange processed cheese slid off of Zola’s pizza and Maelle didn’t touch what the cafeteria described as a side salad.

“What do you need done?” Zola asked.

“Just some braids to keep it off my face during practice,” she said smoothing any fly-away hairs back. “And to keep my grandma off my back, duh.”

“Friday?” Zola asked.

“Yeah, is that good? Right after practice. And that Carly chick better not be there like last time.”

“Mae, you know she’s acting weird towards me,” Zola said.

She recalled the last time she had both friends over at her place the week after she moved in. Zola and her family had been in the farmhouse a week. In early May, Ohio had an abnormal 80 degree and sunny streak. The girls walked to the convenience store, about a mile from the farmhouse. Carly complained the whole time about sweating and getting sun burnt. Maelle rolled her eyes at every complaint. Carly was annoyed at Mae’s jokes and dancing about, who called to cars that drove by them. Carly shushed Maelle, saying for sure they’d get murdered by a serial killer who is looking for some teenagers to abduct. No serial killer was cruising around Sinclair at three o’clock in the afternoon, Zola assured Carly, then told Maelle to not holler at every car that zoomed past them.

Not even the red-mouthed sugar rush from the extra-large slushies broke the silent tension.

From that day on, Zola kept the two friends separate. No more group outings. There was the one pool party over the Fourth of July weekend, but so many other school kids were there – it hardly made a difference that two simultaneously orbited around Zola.

“Oh, right. Well, whatever. Who cares about that,” Maelle said in a dismissive tone bringing Zola back from daydreams of the summer that had just let out its last breath.

“I care,” Zola huffed. “Friday it is,” she confirmed and left the cafeteria.

Her heart was pounding by the time school let out and it was time to load onto the bus once again. *Just don't even look in their direction.* She heard Liam and Hudson laughing over the hum and rumble of the buses' engines towards the back of the line. Without looking, Zola knew Carly would be near them. Three months ago, Zola herself would be back there with them laughing at whatever was funny. Or at least pretending to laugh along. Maybe. At least that's what she told herself.

With her ear buds in, she hunched up against the window of the bus and put her forehead against the grimy glass. She cranked up the music loud enough that if anyone had anything to say about her, she wouldn't hear. The other students funneled out of each door from the school in lines, vein-like. Her eyes skipped over everyone, taking in none too close until her breath fogged up the window and each body blurred. There was an expectation that she would see Declan at least once. At the time, she couldn't pinpoint if this made her feel worse about everything, or if it was a welcomed relief.

Chapter Two

The bus dropped her off and a couple other kids, who ran past her so fast when the doors folded open that Zola thought they'd surely fall flat on their faces. They didn't, to her disappointment.

Because she was starting to break out in a sweat, she tied her hoodie around her waist and shielded her eyes from the afternoon sun. The only other house down State Street, across from her own slightly crooked two-story, was the brick ranch with the wheelchair ramp. As Zola got closer, the corn fields on each side of the road gave way to brownish green yards. No one seemed to be home. The neighbors stopped saying hi and going over to Zola's family house.

Once inside the house, a pang of anxiety swept through Zola as she slammed the door too hard behind her. *Maybe I'm just a shitty friend and that's why Carly is mad and I don't receive texts back.*

"Zola, is that you?" her mom called out.

"Yeah, it's me," Zola grumbled. She bolted towards the steps.

"Hey, wait a second," her mom appeared through the living room. She had that dark green sweatshirt on, rolled at the sleeves and oil-stained jeans on. That meant she was out in the barn all day or fretting amongst the cornfield. Her skin darkened even more out in the early autumn sun all day. Zola stopped, one hand on the banister but really hoped her mom didn't ask to help her outside. "How was your first day of school?" Baby Bean was on her mom's hip. Clenched in the toddler's fist was something gooey, leaking down the chubby arm.

“Crappy,” she said taking one more step up.

“Did something happen?” she asked, but her attention was already back to Baby Bean who was gumming the goo off her fist. “Why did you put your hair back? It was so pretty this morning.” The substance was running down the toddler’s polka dot shirt.

Baby Bean offered some to Zola. “Zo,” she cried.

“Nothing happened, mom,” Zola said. “I’ll be in my room,”

“Hold up, please,” her mom said holding up one hand. “As soon as your dad gets home we need to get to the nursing home. Grandpa had a fall earlier today.”

Baby Bean squealed and bounced up and down.

“But we just saw him yesterday,” Zola said.

Her mom clucked her tongue and furrowed her brow. “Zola Jade, don’t be so insensitive. We’re seeing grandpa whether you like it or –” she was interrupted by the crunch of tires on the gravel driveway. “Get ready while I get Bailey cleaned up,” she said and rushed towards the bathroom.

I can’t believe I have to go back to the nursing home again. It’s probably nothing. And besides, how can someone fall out of a wheelchair? Zola took off her book bag and fell on the couch. He didn’t even talk to us yesterday. Mom brought him a grilled sausage sandwich and he just sat in the courtyard and stared at nothing. Then she bit her lip. But what if he’s pissed about being in the nursing home and he’s just speaking to us less and less because he can’t stand the thought of us in the house without him?

Her dad came in through the front door. “There you are,” he said with a smile that didn’t reach his hazel eyes. “How was your first day back?”

“It sucked,” and she pulled one of the couch pillows over her head.

“Yeah, high school sucks,” he said, deadpan. “Where’s your mom?”

“Bathroom with Baby Bean.”

“Did she say how gramps was doing?”

“Nope,” she replied, muffled, inhaling the stale scent of the old pillow. *I wish I could just stay here and nap.*

Zola heard her mom’s voice, “Hi, babe. Do you need to change before we head off?”

Baby Bean shrieked. Lifting the pillow just slightly off one eye, she watched her dad take Baby Bean out of her mom’s arms as they kissed. It amused Zola to no end that her mom was slightly taller than her dad.

“Nah, I’m good,” he said still in his red polo and light khaki pants, the standard uniform at the Barton Brothers’ Automotive Parts store. “We should get going.”

“Zola, are you ready?”

She didn’t say anything, but discarded the pillow and got up and followed her family out. The wind chimes lazily clinked on the porch. Zola gave a sidelong glance at the brick ranch. She waited for her mom to start on a rant about the neighbor’s and their entertaining the gas company looking to frack the land. Zola’s family lived in the house for three months and she still wasn’t sure what fracking meant and why her mom all but cast off the new neighbors as friends.

“No matter what your grandpa says, just go with it,” her mom said after buckling Baby Bean into her car seat. “Okay, Zola?”

She looked up from her phone. “He didn’t say a word yesterday, what makes you think today he’ll want to talk to us?”

“Want?” her mom looked at her, rolling up her sleeves once again. Then she sighed. Between the frayed sweatshirt and her hair being so short, the shortest Zola had ever seen it in her life, exhaustion rolled off her mom. “Just promise me, okay?”

“Fine,” Zola said, but remained skeptical.

Pinebrook Home was only a short drive away, but once anyone makes it out of the flatland of Nebo and up the Overlook hill into the rest of Sinclair’s suburb, everywhere was a short drive. Zola had sung Christmas carols to the residents every year since she was in elementary school, so even before her grandpa went there for “rehabilitation,” she knew the place pretty well. Pinebrook looked like a mansion from the front: white columns, dark shutters with lacey curtains, and manicured bright green bushes. In the back was an addition where most of the elderly people stayed. The courtyard, where any resident who got visitors were taken on nice days, had a dry fountain, planters that the registered nurses took care of, and birdfeeders. Zola preferred it out there versus the stuffy, maroon-carpeted area that held all the bedrooms.

The family entered from the back entrance. Two elderly women sat in their wheelchairs positioned towards the glass door, seemingly poised to make a break for it as soon as door was left open for long enough. The T.V. in the common area blared with the news and others sat in the high-backed paisley chairs, some watching, others not. Zola and her family made their way down the pale yellow hallway to grandpa’s room. Her mom walked faster than normal, which made her own heart speed up.

In the room, the man Zola once knew as a tall, proud man who wore his button down shirts rolled up to the elbows, lay sunken in his bed. He never smiled much, but her mom always said how happy grandpa Leon was to carry Zola around in his arms. Just

yesterday he sat crumpled in his wheelchair staring at a fixed point somewhere over Zola's shoulder. She was sure then that he couldn't possibly be any more distant and look worse, but she was wrong. Now, he had a machine next to his bed and a steel table set up next to it that sat a chart and hospital-looking items.

“Daddy,” her mom said in small voice. “Daddy, we're here now.”

Zola watched as she took his cracked skinned hand in her own. Years of working on the farm where her, her mom and dad, and Baby Bean now resided. Grandpa Leon was always thick jointed and skeletal though deep, dark skin. But that was his whole body now. Zola tried to look anywhere but at the intimate action. She secured her eyes on Baby Bean who was strangely quiet, not sure what to make of the atmosphere. Her tiny velcro shoes dangled to and fro. This is what Zola looked at as she swallowed the lump in her throat. All she wanted was to make herself small, so she sat in the only chair in the room. Her mom was crouched down and her dad rested his hand on her shoulder. Zola felt far away, looking in.

Baby Bean broke the stillness by fussing about. “Dada,” she cried and threw the stuffed animal lamb she had been holding to the ground.

Her dad sniffed at the air then towards the toddler. “Bailey needs changed,” he said. “I'll be right back, honey.” He lifted the diaper bag onto the other shoulder and went out. Zola's mom gave no indication that she had heard him.

“Daddy, how are you?” her mom pleaded in an almost whisper. Then she stood. “I'm going to go get a nurse. They said he was talking all night long.” Mumbling more words under her breath, she left the room.

Soggy toddler diaper, long shut-in human bodies, and the sharp medicine smells all mingled together. Machines beeped and hummed. Somewhere an old woman moaned words that didn't sound quite like English.

"Baby girl," a gravelly voice came.

Zola looked up at her grandpa. The words awakened something in her that was missing for years. Her grandpa used to call her that when she was little. A vision of him showing her where to find the wild blackberry bushes came rushing back. Branches laced with thorns and seedy berries that they picked and filled to the top of a metal bucket. She'd forgotten.

"Grandpa?" she said quietly. She picked up her chair and moved it closer to the bed. Under the textured quilt his shallow breathing was erratic. After a several heartbeats, she decided she must have imagined it.

Then he lifted those heavy lidded eyes and actually looked right at her. "Baby girl," he said again. It sputtered out of him. He lifted his hand then set it back down again. Zola put hers on top of his and smiled. "There you are," he said from rusty vocal cords.

"Here I am," she said.

But his eyes continued to grow wide and bulge. Eyes so black and dry. Zola noticed the little red veins snaking towards the pupil. He sucked in a wheezing breath. She lifted her hand; she needed to go get the nurse.

"No," he said. His other hand, nails splintered and dirty, grabbed her wrist. "Listen, child." Catacomb breath blew around her as he lifted himself closer to her.

“Listen. Do not speak with the green man.” The grip was tighter than she would have guessed, but she was too afraid to shake him off. “Betsie talked,” he gulped for breath.

“What?” was all Zola could manage.

“Oh, how she whistled back.” He shook his head. His weathered skin was loose on him.

She slipped out of his hold. “Let me go get mom,” her voice shook.

“Zola, baby girl,” he said. “Don’t let me die here.”

She began to back away from the bed but she bumped into the chair. “I don’t know—”

“No!” he gasped. “There ain’t no cemetery here. Nowhere to put my bones. Zola, baby girl.”

The last glimpse she took of him, his eyes were frantically searching around the room for her. She swore he was sobbing, but as she ran down the hall it sounded more like an odd, throaty laugh.

Chapter Three

Zola thought she spotted a tall figure with ashy blonde hair make his way at the end of the hall a couple times during the school week, but he would shift in between the other kids without her catching a glimpse of the face. She compulsively checked her phone for messages, but by the end of the night, when it was time to close the window for the coming frost and dipping fall temperatures, she scolded herself. After reading an act of *Macbeth*, to try to stay ahead, she would turn back to the glow of her phone with images of ghosts in the garden swirling around her head. At this point, a few days, she

decided too much time has passed since their last text. Each night she paced thinking she should just delete the contact. He clearly didn't like what he saw, he left her hanging, something strange has gotten to both Carly and Declan and Zola should just cut losses. *As if it were all simple*, she thought. *Declan. What a stupid name.*

She scrolled through pictures he had posted online within the last week. There were only two. A close up of a scratched acoustic guitar. How ridiculous. *I know for a fact he can't play that.* Then a picture of orange and yellow flames against a blackened background with a caption that read "first bonfire of season!"

Posted two hours ago.

Ugh. His phone is definitely not broken.

It was a compulsion, a ritual she adopted every night: opening the text messages and tapping on his name. Hundreds of texts, proof that he was not imaginary as she was starting to imagine. She flipped through them with her thumb until it rouletted on a random one from mid-summer. She couldn't help but to reread it, a small sting of sweet longing ran through her whole body. Zola remembered each conversation. They usually had started out regular enough then made a slow transgression into talking about lips, thighs, and fingertips. Have you ever questions. Started normal, ended sexual. He wondered what her mouth tasted like. She responded with speculation of what his jawline would feel like if she caressed it. Declan sent description of what he was doing to himself right at that moment on the those star-filled hot nights. Zola reread what she said she was doing to herself, though in truth, she had gone downstairs to a dark kitchen and was toasting a bagel. She had revealed in the act, making up things she was doing and reading what he was doing. It excited her standing in the kitchen, alone, smearing cream cheese

as he typed. Excited her to know what he was doing, but not in the way Declan thought was excited.

The written exchange, paired with an undercurrent of frustration, made her body feel shimmery. Once she held his attention and shared these earthquake moments. She continued to read, impressed with her word prowess, with a bagel in hand and Declan's confessions in another. That power surged in a new way, different feeling than it had been in the summery moments. Under the comforter she tensed her legs and slid her palm along the hump of her stomach, beneath the waistband of her pajamas. She thought of possibilities and nuanced chosen words stolen from the light of day. Warmth gathered. Spiders weaved their silk in the corners. She pictured fragments of summer heat, glances, the pool party with glistening limbs, and turns of phrases. The pillows stifled her groans because it was always better than what she could put into so many letters.

Her breathing leveled. She turned the phone off then threw it on to her nightstand. Old Duke, who had been sleeping on the rug, woke up startled from the rattle of the phone. He looked at Zola, blinking.

"Sorry, boy," she said. His autumn red fur rippled in the dark. Her mom didn't like the dog in the house too much. She said it was just extra work vacuuming up his hair every day. Plus, he had been an outside dog his whole life. But Zola noticed the grey around his snout and how it was harder for him to get up after sleeping for a long time. Zola thought he deserved to stay in when it was nippy out. After a few pats, he put his head back down on his paws and was softly snoring. Not the least bit tired, she rolled onto her side trying not to think of fire and the falling leaves outside.

#

“Tell me one more time what Grandpa said,” Zola’s mom pleaded for the seventh or eighth time since the nursing home visit. After her grandpa grabbed her wrist and said those weird things, Zola went straight to the car and sat there until they were ready to go home refusing to go back into the room.

“He just said my name a few times, that’s all,” she said, again. The words he really had said echoed during the quiet moment’s Zola had to herself. A chill went through her.

“I don’t get it, I’ve been there every day I could this week and he hasn’t so much as opened his eyes more than a couple minutes,” her mom said. Morning orange sunlight streamed through the kitchen window where her mom stared out. “But I can’t get there today. I have so much work to do around here.” This sounded more of an aside to herself but Zola knew she meant outside, around the farm.

She changed the subject. “Can I have some coffee?”

“Sure,” her mom said then took a sip out of her mug.

The sugary creamer Zola poured in after cut through the strong taste her mom preferred. A smug smile stretched across her lips because this same time last year her mom would have said no to the coffee. Not even halfway through the steaming mug and she felt herself perking up.

“Here ya go, Beany,” Zola said and offered her little sister more star-shaped cereal. Her sister squealed and pinched at the puffy shapes. “I better get dressed and head on up to the bus stop,” she said and looked toward her mom.

“I think aunt Kiki will be with dad today,” her mom said still looking through the window.

“Okay...”

“I need to get that cultivator back up and running,” she paused. “What would daddy think? All that corn so dry. No wonder Kiki and L.J. laughed last time they visited.” She shook her head after peering out the window.

“Who cares what aunty Kiki and uncle L.J. think,” Zola said. “They wanted to sell this place off, remember?”

“You’re right,” Zola’s mom said. Happy and unhappy all at once.

“Should I tell Maelle to come over another day?”

Her mom’s gaze was back out the window towards the cornfield. “Oh, what?” she shook herself away from the window. “No, no. Hopefully it’ll rain and we can set up shop in the spare bedroom. Have a nice day, sweetie.”

Zola finished off the coffee and reached for the brown bagged lunch her mom had just packed her.

Before they had to move into grandpa’s farm her mom talked about the crooked cops and former judges running for office. Zola had seen the red, white, and blue signs on other people’s lawns. She had almost forgotten that this was the season her mom donned those shiny kitten heels and dry-cleaned suits and would come home for dinner flushed with anger or hope about some new candidate, each with their own short first name and long last name. Her black hair done up, spun like yarn and glossy, atop her head. The farm inspired so much passion at first. That first month in the old farm house on the

outskirts of Sinclair seemed pregnant with possibility, until grandpa got sick and became as much to care for as Baby Bean.

It didn't rain that day. In fact the sun was hot, burning off the grass blade's dew before it reached full peak in the sky. The bus ride had been stuffy with the unsettled bodies of fellow kids who went through the whole day without air conditioner – the school needed to save money for the new building they were constructing – that Zola stuffed her sweatshirt into her backpack and knotted her hair back. Her mood was turning sour about and she was tired of rereading the same conversation, where her and Declan, last left off. There was something tugging inside that if she lingered too long on the feeling, a white hot sear of shame would bloom.

She did her homework while waiting for Maelle to come get her hair braided, swinging slowly on the creaky wooden porch swing. Fridays were usually filled with social gatherings. Last year it was all parties, games, and house hopping with Carly every Friday and Saturday. Maybe that is why the first chance Zola got, she snuck into her parent's bedroom and stole a joint from the top drawer of their dresser. The room smelled of the faint herbal smell all the time regardless if her parent's burned candles and incense. Over the summer, her and Carly discovered where they kept their stash. The girls siphoned off of the weed just enough not to arouse suspicion. Every time Carly and Zola would show up to someone's house with it, they'd be some of the coolest girls in the room. People she never even met would talk to them. Zola admittedly loved that kind of attention. She patted her pocket and felt where the latest rolled up steal was. It was more out of nostalgia and boredom that she snuck some for herself.

Baby Bean played with an alphabet block set at Zola's feet and her mom was bustling about in the barn or in the cornfield. Many times Zola tried to help her mom, running fingers over the brittle stalks, or standing at the edge of the crops and scratching her head offering no advice but to sometimes just be a presence.

When the breeze pick up just so, the sound of the stalks whispering to one other caught in the breeze and it rather distracted Zola from her studies. What could grandpa have meant by a green man? Is that someone's name? She shut her book and chewed on her nail.

A big silver sedan turned in the driveway. Maelle and her grandma. The sound of the car drew out Zola's mom from wherever she was working. Dirty hands and all, her mom leaned on the car to speak with Mrs. Jones. Zola waved to the old woman with glasses that magnified her eyes threefold.

"Don't worry Mrs. Jones, I have a huge vat of spicy chili cooking up for dinner and some corn bread," her mom said. "I won't send her home hungry," Zola couldn't hear was Maelle's grandma said. "Just fine, just fine." And her mom let out a good laugh.

Mae greeted both Zola and her little sister who paid them no mind.

"Did you just get off of practice?" Zola said, scanning Maelle's loose Sinclair Wildcat t-shirt and basketball shorts.

"No, what makes you say that?"

"Nothin," she snorted. They all waved goodbye as her grandma pulled away though the light reflected off the windshield.

"Umm, Zo, can I talk to you for a second," Maelle whispered, not very secretively.

“Huh?” Zola raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

“And where’s your phone?” Maelle gestured about. “I’ve literally texted you twelve times since fourth period.”

“Pssh,” Zola thought the notion of texting was hilarious at this point. “Why bother turning the thing even on? No one responds to my texts. Yet there everyone is, posting selfies and pictures all over the damn place. Better the save the battery and not even look at it.”

Zola’s mom padded up the porch steps and set forth her demands, “Zola, will you get the moisturizer and extensions from the backroom?”

Maelle glared at Zola and made to protest with a click of her tongue because of their conversation getting cut off, but Zola hushed her up.

The women sat on the porch talking about hairstyles, the trash piling up in the corners of the school, and the looming homecoming dance. Maelle sat on the stoop with Zola’s mom behind her, comb in mouth. Mae eyeballed Zola and grew frustrated that wasn’t even able to text Zola whatever it was she needed to say because Zola was making notes in her book, not caring whatever was going on at whatever party was happening without them tonight. Whatever was bothering Maelle, Zola found ignoring her amusing.

“And just yesterday Temcia said she saw a rat scurry across the locker room after gym class!” Maelle cried.

Zola rolled her eyes.

Her mom believed everything that was coming out of Maelle’s mouth. “That’s a cryin’ shame,” her mom said. “When I was there they would never have let it get that far. But back then they knew what was what. Except the dress code, the administration was

always so strict. They didn't even let boys have long hair even though that was in fashion. If that's what you want to call it."

"Did dad have long hair?" Zola asked. She had seen some pictures of her dad from high school. Backwards hat, holding a skateboard in his wide legged jeans.

"He did try to grow it out but his hair is so thin and stringy I didn't let him get too far with that," she said.

Zola chuckled picturing the two of them in Sinclair High. The red and black lockers freshly painted, clean halls and the sports teams actually winning championships.

Her mom continued, "Maybe you two can stage a sort of student-run cleanup project before the dance?"

"Ha," Maelle let out a laugh. "I'll just be dancing among the paper wads and cockroaches. That won't stop me." Zola's mom pulled on a braid. "Ow."

"Sorry, but just hold still child," her said.

There was silence. Just the sounds of the toddler cooing and sounds of farm. Zola's mom asked of the girl's plans and if Carly was around. Maelle opened her mouth to speak but Zola cut her off. The last thing Zola wanted is for her mom to fuss about her when the farm needed so much attention.

"Just Maelle and me tonight," Zola said. "We decided to stay low. Go for a walk, you know. The usual." Which wasn't a lie. Not all of it.

"My girlfriends and I used to cut through the woods, just over there and hang out by the Black Crow tree and sm –" her mom stopped and coughed. "Looked towards Zola. "We'd just try to climb the tree and chill because in either direction you'll pop out by the Carchedi's deli or the little plaza by the train tracks."

Maelle hadn't heard of the Black Crow tree, and craned her neck around to give Zola and her mom suspicious looks. "That doesn't sound like fun to me at all."

"Who knows it's even there anymore," Zola's mom didn't hide the bitterness in her voice. "Our *lovely* neighbors may have chopped it down or sold their property. You have to cross the road and into the property just over beyond the barbed wire fence." She shrugged. "I mean, it's something to do since the weather is so warm. Instead of going back forth to the corner store."

Zola shut her book. Maelle side-eyed her like she'd been doing this whole braid session. With her fingers pinched, Zola made a smoking motion and smiled at her. Maelle clicked her tongue at her.

"Okay, all done, Mae," her mom said with one last sweep of her edges. She gathered the hair supplies and stood up. "I need a little time to wash up, let Bailey nap, and get the bread going. If you girls go walking, so just be back in about an hour or so. Okay?"

The two girls mumbled affirmations.

"You want to go to the woods and find the Black Crow tree?" Zola suggested.

Maelle touched her new do and said, "Hell no."

One of the things Zola loved about Mae was that she didn't need too much convincing to do something stupid. They stopped in the center of the road. That was the beauty of living on a dead end street; the street was a territory teenagers could freely possess.

The ground was dry and the neighbor's leveled their cornfields years ago. The field was still bumpy with pokes of crops coming from the ground. The whole stretch of

land used to belong to the neighbor's great-great grandparents, before they sold part of their land and the city cut through it with the road. They had sustained themselves on the land. Now the neighbors are in negotiation with a fracking company who will come in and drill for natural gas back in the forest. Of course, Zola's mom got wind of this transgression after they had moved and she still hasn't fully recovered that was the budding friendship of their only neighbors. Zola wasn't too sure what fracking meant or how it affected their land a few acres away but she recalled her mom crying on the couch after a confrontation with neighbors telling her dad that it was "rape of the land." So if it was enough to make her mom upset that's the only excuse Zola needed to be suspicious of it all.

"How's your grandpa doing?" Mae said. Zola couldn't believe that this is what her friend wanted to talk about.

Zola bit her lip. She told Maelle a little about what happened but mostly avoided the subject. Zola recalled what he grandpa said. "Say, have you heard of a green man?" she asked to avert the subject.

Maelle gave Zola a funny look. "No way."

"What?"

"Just today Temecia and Brittney was telling me about him," Maelle grew more animated as she talked. "They made him sound creepy as hell."

"How so?" Zola had almost told Mae of what her grandpa told her before she changed her mind.

"From what they said, he's a guy who had some sort of freak accident at the power plant and now lives in the woods," Maelle said. "Said he's all disformed and stuff."

He just camps out. Moves from place to place on train." Maelle stopped in her tracks.

"Oh God," she said.

"What is it now?" Zola asked.

"What if that guy is here, like in these woods right now," Maelle said and scurried closer to Zola.

"My mom has lived here her whole life and never mentioned anyone like him," Zola countered.

The girls continued through the woods. Everything was quiet except for Mae's mouthy breathing. Zola had explored this area a few times, she knew where to find the tractor path that would make for smoother hiking until they got to the Black Crow tree. The whole forest was still so alive despite being on the cusp of autumn. Birds sang. Chipmunks darted and garnered food for the winter. Dead leaves from years past crunched under the wheels and feet. Zola and Maelle zig zagged between roots and fallen pieces of tree. The trees seemed to bow in the direction that they needed to travel. The leaves and last gasp of the season smelled like sticky sweet decay.

Zola knew that her acreage and the neighbor's met at a flimsy wire fence somewhere between the evergreens and oak trees that her own property extend into the next town, which wasn't far, but the next town was had more farm land than Zola's family's displaced patch. In late spring her and her mom had surveyed the property to make sure no illegal hunting posts were set up. There were and it was more fun taking sledge hammers and saws to the wooden structures than Zola had anticipated. Maelle jumped at every crack and snap or creaking tree.

“Calm down, Mae,” Zola said. At least Maelle spilled about this green guy. Zola was sure that her grandpa must have seen him, or talked to him, at some point in time. Now all she had to do was figure out how and she could rest easy about him spouting off random creepy message at the nursing home. Maelle was easily spooked but Zola began to wonder if she wasn't much better. "Temecia and Brittney probably said that to scare you. They're always picking on you since you hang on them so much."

"Man, I do not," Maelle said and acted offended. "Temecia and Brittney also said that when the green man puts his hands on you, he electrocutes you and you die. There was something said about him walking up and down the state route."

"You mean the state route right on the other side of these woods?" Zola said mockingly.

"Not funny," Maelle said and pushed some brush out of their path.

Even though they had been walking around in a circle for the better part of the hour, Zola didn't let on that they were close to the train tracks and road. She remarked that the tree was just up ahead as Maelle stressed about the story that she had heard earlier.

"Okay, I think it's time we get on back," Maelle said. "Supper's gotta be on by now."

"But we haven't found the Black Crow tree," said Zola.

"Ya know, I think I've had enough stories for one day," she said as she made a show of turning around.

"You're going in the wrong direction," Zola said smiling.

Maelle stopped and looked around. "We've been following this here path the whole time."

"Are you sure?" Zola questioned. "My uncle used to have tons of four-wheeler paths around here crisscrossing back and forth on one another. I can see it from here."

Maelle groaned and stuck to Zola's heels.

The two rounded a thick patch of quaking aspens that buzzed as they picked up an unfelt breeze showing a little underbelly of light green with each flap of their leaves. The others trees didn't seem to grow where the Black Crow's roots fanned out. Between the aspens, with their white back and misshapen eyes cast in every direction, the long needled pines, and maples, holding their breath until the first frost, the twisted mass stretched its branches out so wide that they bowed and hung. The bark was darker than the rest and leaves pointed straight down.

Where Zola was silent in its presence, Maelle spoke. "Alright, there it is. Fantastic stuff. Time to go."

Thinking back, it was Zola's grandpa who brought her to the Black Crow tree. The man never said much. He liked to point at the trees and identify them. He would speculate about the weather and entertain Zola's childish questions about the animals of the forest. Animals that don't even live in Ohio or the northern hemisphere she came to learn later.

The area around the tree held the bones of people's ancestors and family pets. No markers. No evidence of the dead beneath their feet. Zola asked why and it wasn't until that moment, under a drizzly grey sky, that she realized that there was nowhere to bury the dead in Sinclair. Her grandmother, Betsie, was buried the next town over. In

Marshville of all places. Each Christmas her family would make the fifteen minute drive out the rural roads and put a crimson rose wreath on her grave. People used to make the trek out through their own woods to visit their people whenever they wished. There was a solace and an ancient energy that blanketed the place. The Black Crow tree hummed with legend.

Where was the rest of Zola's family scattered? She felt honored that her grandpa shared this history with her, but it filled her with a slight sadness and disconnect. That first day they sat amongst the deceased, Zola laid back onto the roots and stared up until her vision blurred at the edges while her grandpa spoke of farm animals that dies and were buried under need the tree and he said he heard that there were old time sacrifices to an entity called the Corn King. What was unusual Zola had come to realize much later again, is how little her grandpa speculated on the superstition. Before their trek out to the tree, and afterward, grandpa said very little in the ways of heresy. He reserved his talking to facts, to seeable events. At the time, she was too young to understand that not everything was tinged with magic. That her grandpa wasn't like her mom and dad who speculated. Blood sacrifices is something grandpa never mentioned again, and now under the weight of the thick tree, Zola regretted not bringing it up when she was older. She regretted that she hadn't asked him to show her this place again.

A sacrifice hasn't been made in years, if Zola believed that was true. Her grandpa sounded so sure. She believed him whole heartedly at the time then bustling about outside the forest, she had forgotten like a spell that didn't linger once she broke through trees again. There was a writhing deep underneath the ground, Zola could swear she felt it when she remained still. The sensation was the only thing stirring the forest.

The girls eased closer, Zola taking Maelle's arm closer where there was a small break in the branches. She sat on the roots of the tree and beckoned Maelle to do the same. With a flick of the wrist, Zola produced the joint and lighter from her pocket and whipped the clasp open with an audible click.

"Aw hell no," Maelle said. "I know you and Carly were into that stuff but count me out."

Zola put the joint between her lips and lit it. The sudden light in the canopy created an illumination of acne scar bumps on her cheeks as pulled on the joint. She exhaled after a few moments. Despite Mae's fretting, being under the Black Crow tree and the scent of the weed that engulfed her, was relaxing. For the past couple hours she didn't think of Declan, nuded pictures, or her phone.

"You sure?" She asked her friend. Zola didn't want to be the bad influence on Mae, but she didn't want to smoke alone either. From the previous parties all summer, the social aspect was really missing for her.

"Even if I wanted to, and I'm not saying I want to, but Brittany and Tamecia got busted last year for smoking and they almost got kicked off the team," Maelle said.

"But they didn't. They're still playing –"

"Pssh," Maelle made the dramatic noise in her throat. "Well, that's just because it's Brittany and Tamecia. We wouldn't have a chance to go state without them this year." Maelle jumped. "Ah! I felt something. There are probably some spiders or other crazy shit in here..." she said looking around.

The smoke laid heavy in the air. Burnt and animal-like. Zola looked to see what could have possibly touched Maelle's elbow other than a leaf. And they both saw it at the

same time. Zola stopped mid puff and Maelle retracted. Evidence that another person was here: empty beer bottles, paper products, and disturbed soil. None of it was dirty from time.

“Don't make that face, Mae,” Zola said. There was a laugh bubbling up inside, but she didn't want her friend to bad for being so jumpy all the time. "It's not the green man. I mean, think about. He's probably been dead a *long* time.”

“Time to go,” Maelle stood and started to march out of the veil of the tree.

“Just hold up a second. You're the one who got swept up in that stupid story from some upperclassmen girls,” Zola said remembering. “You know what? I'm glad you didn't text me that stupid story about green dudes electrocuting people in the forest earlier.”

Mae stopped. “Oh my God, that wasn't even it, Zo,” Maelle said. "I heard about the green man like three days ago at basketball practice. No, no, no." Maelle collected her breath. "What I wanted to tell you, and the texts will show that if you turn on your damn phone again, that apparently a couple of jackasses got ahold of some junior and senior girls' nude pictures and are going to set up a PicMe account and post them on Halloween. Let's get going now.”

Zola went cold. It took her a moment to get the words out. “Why...why would they do that?”

“I don't know. Some sort of prank, I guess. The other girls on the team were talking about it today. These dudes are being all fake and anonymous, of course. They're calling it The Reckoning.”

Zola rubbed her temples. She was hyperaware of the cool ground under her, dampness permeating her jeans, and the worms crawling through the dirt. Distant birds cawed at one another. “I’m too high to deal with this right now,” she said.

“Hey, I don’t know how they got the pictures,” Maelle brushed this topic off like Zola brushed the green man off. “The team thinks that someone hacked into phone accounts. I mean, we don’t have anything to worry about right, Zo?” Maelle looked to her for answers. Zola was fixed on fat, pink-brown worm struggling to bury itself. “Zo? Remember that time you didn’t feel good and I went to the mall and was shopping without you? I sent you some pictures of me in those bras and underwear in the changing room?” Maelle swallowed hard. “You, uh, deleted those, right? Like, are we cool with that?”

“Yeah, we’re cool with that,” Zola said softly. “I deleted them a long time ago.”

Maelle pretended to wipe her brow of nonexistent sweat. “Phew,” she said as if everything was okay. “My grandma would kill me. It’s not like I sent them to some stupid boy or anything. I mean, we’re good. I guess they probably got Sofia Silvera and Laney Baker. I bet that bitch Carly, too.” She laughed. It was forced and she stopped when the Zola didn’t join her.

Zola patted her pockets and stood. They were empty. “I don’t have my phone on me,” she said. “I must have left it on the charger.”

“It’s cool, Zo. There’s no way to know if they hacked in.”

Zola didn’t listen to her, instead kicked the leftover trash around. “I need my phone,” she raised her voice.

“It’s not here,” Maelle stared at her. “Like you said, you must have left it on the charger. No big deal.”

Zola put the damp paper to her lips and inhaled. Just as quick, she left out a cough and threw it to the ground. Her eyes watered and she paced in the space.

“Zo, did you...” Maelle started. “No way.”

Zola stopped her pacing and gave Maelle a look and Maelle continued no further with the inquisition.

“Screw it, let’s go find this green man,” Zola said with air quotes. “Maelle, please text my mom and tell her we will be a little late. Say we got turned around in the woods or something.”

Before Mae could reply, she left the Black Crow tree. The ravens disbursed from the top branches. Zola knew that this part of the adventure was ludicrous. They’d never find him but she wanted to keep moving. Delay the inevitable messages she’d have to send tonight. She put off sparking a conversation with Declan long enough. Clearly, he was not going text her after what she had last sent to him. Something was nudging at her and she wanted to push back at it. She thought of her grandpa’s warning from the nursing home. Then she shook her head to herself. Up until this afternoon, she had chalked her grandpa’s nursing home outburst to dementia. She heard the nurses use that word when speaking with her parents. Her mom cracked slightly with its mention each time. *Was there some sort of memory that grandpa was conjuring.*

Maelle kept close on Zola’s heels and the forest closed in around them. Despite the new fall air, perspiration collected along her hairline. Neither of them said anything for a long time. They passed a couple of deer hunting stands. One was stained a deep

blackish-brown color spread over the wood. They hurried past. More beer bottles and crumpled packs of cigarettes littered their way like bread crumbs to the gingerbread house. Light peeked in through the awning created by the trees above. Zola gritted her teeth with each thought of betrayal that seethed over her mind.

Recognition seized Zola. *Blackberry bushes*. So many of them thrived out here. The bushes flanked by so many Aspens and sprouting Maples created an illusion that the trees went on forever but the road, full of cars, would just be through the next parting.

“Help clear some branches, will you, Mae?” Zola asked determined.

Mae rolled her eyes and said, “You know, it’s going to get dark soon.”

“Just a little further,” Zola said.

They cleared a path. Maele went forward shoving sticks and checking for rocks.

“Uh, let’s turn back now –” Maele stopped and turned, her eyes grew wide, then she dropped. Disappeared down.

“Maele!” Zola cried and went forward, hands outstretched.

If Mae hadn’t slipped down, Zola wouldn’t have seen the drop-off. She crept toward the edge and looked down.

A once-blue, patched tent was set up among the trees. *A Magritte painting*, Zola thought. An illusion set right her backyard. Scattered about the deteriorated tarp and tattered rope were bottles and various trash. A couple long dead small animals hung from one of the ropes and swayed ever so slightly. Zola tried to speak, tried to ask if Maele was okay. Her friend was lifting herself off the ground. What if this person, if there was person still in the tent, had a gun or an underground bunker where he kept kidnapped

women? All the bravery left Zola's body and she prayed whoever lived in that tent was not there now. The edge of the embankment tapered down to the right side.

"Zo?" Maelle called.

"Shh. I'm coming down. Stay there."

The leaves were thick, almost quicksand like, as she shuffled through them trying to make the least amount of noise as possible and grabbing small saplings for stability. The fall must have only been about five or six feet but Zola repeated to herself, *Don't be hurt, please don't be hurt*. She was careful for roots and rocks not to trip herself when Maelle's voice echoed through the space, "Zola!"

Zola turned to tell her friend to shut up; she was going as fast as she could, when she saw that Mae's face had gone blank and her finger was raised in the direction in the tent. In one sweeping, fearful moment Zola saw the tent rustling and heard the zipper flap opening, slow and deliberate. It filled those hollow spaces between the trees with a rusty crank sound.

Maelle backed herself into the exposed rock from where she fell. Zola rushed over to her but her foot caught something buried just under the debris. She went down and pain bloomed in one knee. The smell of fecal matter and rotting filled her nose.

Movement out of the corner of her eye made her pause, fingers clutching textured earth, because she couldn't get herself to move. A person rose out of the tent.

"Get up," Zola hissed through her teeth. She all but crawled to where Maelle sat terror filled. She grabbed at her friend's arm and pulled her up.

"Oh my God," Maelle muttered. "Don't let him touch me."

Zola did want look, did not want see, but she did.

The person had rounded the tent with a limping gait. He wore too big jeans. Threadbare. And a flannel arbitrarily pulled over his body. One eye blinked at the girls, watery and blackened. Where the other eye should have been, was gouged out. The skin tight and sinewy. Grey-brown tufts of hair floated about his head. It was the lips that disturbed the most. His lips were engorged, misshapen. They clucked and spit in the direction of Zola and Maelle.

The pair ran back up the embankment, Zola never letting go of Maelle's arm damp with sweat. Without a word, Zola grabbed at the roots and rocks.

She had come to the brink of the forest and still managed to keep her grandpa's wish. She didn't speak to him. Despite her heart racing and breath rushing out of her lungs, there was a small ball of disappointment lurking somewhere just behind her swell of fear. Zola couldn't help but steal one last look towards the green man's space. He stood, head tilted, as if he was listening to the sound the girls were making as they ran back in the direction of home. It was probably the wind that made the whistling noise that sounded in her head.

Chapter Four

Because of the run home, Zola's panic waned a bit and was replaced by an evenly burning anger. In the shower, she let the water too hot wash over her body. She knew she'd be sore in the morning no matter what. Part of her wanted to believe that Declan had nothing to do with the so-called prank. The Reckoning. She knew it was too late but she went into the text message thread and then her into her pictures and deleted the picture of herself. The picture was very nice, she did admit to herself, her skin glowed a

golden brown and her freckles, prominent every summer, were still visible across her collar bones and shoulders. But that wasn't enough to keep the regret festering just below her skin.

First, she sent Maelle yet another apology text about how the afternoon went.

You're lucky I have a lot ass to break my fall, Maelle had replied instantly.

She realized now that she shouldn't have made her friend go that deep into the woods. Her mom was none too thrilled about them being out past dark. She was ten minutes away from her and dad hoping on the four wheelers and coming out to look for them, she said. The only saving grace was how busy her mom had been and the worry showed on her once smooth face. Baby Bean was fussy all night, too.

Zola got swept up in the adventure. Was she ever really going to talk to the green man? And about what? It was stupid, she thought in retrospect. *Please stay in your patch of forest. Don't electrocute us. By the way, do you have any idea why my grandpa, who had dementia, would warn me about you?*

Stupid. Stupid. And more stupid.

At the kitchen table, which leaned in any direction if one person sat at it, she endured her mom and dad's lecture about the consequences of getting lost in the woods. They didn't address the part about being taken away by the green man because she made no mention of him or his camp. It never seemed right to bring up. Zola made promises and listened intently as she ate her bowl of chili and two helpings of cornbread.

Before heading to her room, she grabbed a bag frozen peas and went up to her room, sprawling out on her bed. The picture of her and grandpa caught the lamp light differently. The frame was gilded and looked hand carved. It had been sitting on her night

stand, next to her stack of books and iron worked lamp, since she uncovered it at the bottom of a drawer when she moved into the farmhouse.

In the picture, her grandpa was holding her as she was a toddler. They were standing in front of the cornfield, the stalks tall and gleaming against a radiant blue sky. Zola's mouth was stained purple from the blackberry picking and smiled right into the camera. Her grandpa was not looking towards the camera but instead at his granddaughter as if he was carrying the moon in his arms. It must have been right after grandma Betsie died. Zola had spent most of the summer and fall at the farm after her passing. For the hundredth time, she wondered how he and the green man knew one another and why he gave that warning. She sighed. Oh well, it's not like she was ever going to venture that far out again anyway.

She positioned the frozen pea bag on her knee and looked at her phone. Her hand slightly shook. She laughed a little at all of it. It was amusing that she came face to face with the green man, who she didn't even believed existed since running from her grandpa, to being afraid of what a teenage boy thinks.

So she looked at the picture he sent of himself again. Zola didn't have any real life experience measuring the exposed lower half of Declan. He was obviously lying in his bed. His free hand wrapped around the base where the two different color fleshed met as if to make himself look bigger than he really was. She didn't doubt the validity that it was him. He felt so far away that she regarded the picture with a steady fascination.

When her and Declan exchanged numbers at the end of last year, she didn't have any expectations. When he actually did text her, not too many nights after sophomore

year had ended, she then made a silent pact with herself. She didn't want to seem desperate. The humiliation of being rejected is magnified the more people who know.

Channeling the rage that had been simmering since the night before the first day of school, she typed her message out.

Send.

She sat back on her pillows and thought about it all more. The curtains billowed from the open windows. She typed another message. All the silence that built up roared out. Immediately she felt better. She had reached out. What she really wanted was a response. A reassurance that he was not this cold person he had become through time. Zola shifted her bedding to get more comfortable since the tiredness of running about the woods was settling in. The phone vibrated and the sensation startled her.

Declan: what are you doing right now?

Zola: Nothing. Just getting ready for bed. Are you going to answer my questions or not?

Declan: can you come to my place?

It was some distant fantasy that was seeing light. Her blood ran bitter and fiery at all the thoughts. She didn't know what to say.

Declan: we can talk here. i have a fire going

After a long pause listening hard to sounds of the house, she replied. No more wondering and guessing, she was going to see this through.

Zola: Fine. I'm on my way.

She judged her dad had a couple beers after dinner because he worked overtime and had to be up early in the morning again tomorrow. Whenever his shifts were like that,

he enjoyed more than one Bomb City beer. Zola saw him drink two between her shower and bowl of chili.

She dressed in yoga pants and an oversized sweatshirt. She quietly slipped on her tennis shoes. In the hall she listened again.

Creeping past her parent's room, a loud rhythmic sound came behind the door. Her dad was snoring and she knew her mom would fast asleep as well. The house made its usual protests of creaking and cracking and although Zola wasn't completely used to it, she didn't let its protests stop her from sneaking out the back screen door.

Her dog, Old Duke, stirred at the sound of her padding across the lawn, lit up by moonlight. The dog slept half in, half out of his dog house. His ears perked up and he wagged his tail. A pang of guilt flashed through her middle. "I will bring you in later, boy," she told him. Duke must have understood because he let out a little whimper when she didn't stop to unleash him. He kept his dark eyes on her the whole time. "Don't look at me like that," she whispered.

The wind caressed her free hair and the darkness adjusted around her. She was able to see to get to the garage around the sunflower patch. Not thinking too far into the future, she lifted the garage door as gingerly as she could. She waited a breath looking up towards the house. Only her bedroom window's curtain moved. No other lights or movement besides the cornstalks bent to get a better view of this mysterious dark figure who dashed across the lawn at midnight. Once in the garage, she used her phone's light to locate the keys to the fixer-upper car. They were in a compartment in the tool box and, thankfully, her dad always pulled the car in so its nose pointed down the drive towards the road.

The 1989 BMW was promised to one day to be hers. It was moonbeam silver and a convertible. Her dad had driven it in high school then stored it for years. Ever since moving to the farm, and having room to roll it out in the long, wide driveway on top of a garage that easily held three cars, he got the surge of motivation to work on it again. Zola had her permit and her dad did let her drive the BMW. Only to the convenience store once in the summer, mostly she was learning in her mom's sedan. He just needed to do a few more things to it for her to be able to start driving it school. Senior year, he promised.

She opened the door to the red leather interior and reached over to put it in neutral. She heaved with all her might and dug her soles into gravel. The car gave way, stubborn at first, and then eased into motion. She got the car to end of the driveway and curved the steering wheel, easing it up the road. Her muscles had enough for one day so she got in and started the car. The engine was loud. The whole car shook more than the sedan she was used to. The steering needed more force behind it to drive the old car but she smiled to herself with exhilaration. She never had to turn on the lights before so she drove a while in the dark relying on her memory of the slight curves of the road. She pressed buttons and pulled everything she could. Eventually they popped on.

Although she didn't ask his address, she knew exactly where he lived. More than once over the summer she and Maelle, or Carly, would ride past his house. Just to see. just to look. They never saw anything exciting but it always threw them into a fit of laughs. Then they'd go driving past the next cute guy's house. She was aware that everyone in her grade knew that her family had to move to Nebo, that area down the hill through Yellow Creek Park, when most kids lived on the flat top of the hill after you

crossed the creek. Everyone in Nebo rode the bus or had their parents take them to school. Every said all the weird kids come from Nebo. Zola once believed this, too.

Well, truthfully she still did. She drove up the hill to one of the few stoplights in the whole city. Cops should have occupied her thoughts, not stories about the city of Sinclair and its history and all the strangeness that lay within its borders.

She pulled up to the white cape cod where Declan lived. It would have been too awkward pulling into the driveway, so she parked on the driveway and sent a text that alerted him she was here. It didn't hit her until then that she had no reason to trust him. That her coming to his house could be a prank in itself. She swallowed and hoped that wasn't the case.

The smell of bonfire filled the air. Leaving her small few acres of land, where only wildlife sounds stretched through the night, she heard the hum of electricity and clatter of human activity. It's only been a few months since she's been away from the bustle and she never noticed it at the time. To her, back then, the night was a comforting blanket but the noises unnerved her now.

In the back of the house was a wooden fence. Under all the street lights it was easy to see the latch. She hesitated only a moment before lifting it. The gate opened to reveal a flat squared backyard that the fence continued to contain. Situated in the center of the yard was the pyre and dirt that encircled it. A few chairs surround the flames, and in one sat Declan with his back towards the gate. Zola approached carefully. She bit her lip and fussed with her hair. The sound of the gate closing made Declan turn in his seat. He gave a wave and then turned back. She came up and stood near the pit.

“Have a seat,” he said.

She did. Grateful for the heat and the inconsistent light, so he couldn't see the flush that spread across her cheeks, Zola didn't know what to do with her hands. There was a cooler next to Declan and a can of beer in his hand. He tipped his head back, finished off the can, and crushed it. Then he tossed it off into the yard. At first, she felt dizzy being so near to him, in his yard, around the warmth.

She was never so close to him before. The distance was scary. This person knew her in ways no other has. This thought didn't disarm her; instead she sat back in the lawn chair, puffed her chest out and raised her neck. The action made him tear his eyes away from the fire and look at her. He took a long sip of his beer. Zola wanted him to bring up The Reckoning. Something inside her was too proud to fish it out of him.

“So, uh, are your – err – parents home?” she stammered.

He laughed. “Yeah, my mom's in there somewhere,” he pointed to the back of the house with the can in hand. “Probably passed out. My dad? I have no clue where he is.”

“Oh.” She was trying not to stare at him all illuminated.

Why is he not looking at me though? The fire held some powerful pull over his gaze. Scattered in the dirt mixed with ash were cigarette butts and fast food drink containers.

“Where are my manners?” he reached for a beer and held it out to her. “Do you want a beer?” Wetness from condensation dripped from his fingertips.

“No, thanks,” Zola said. That's all she needed, to be pulled over without a license and smelling of alcohol.

“Your loss,” he said and resumed his watch over the flames. He poked at them with a stick that leaned on the chair.

This was going nowhere fast. She allowed herself to study him. The flickering light made his eyes look less blue than they appeared in the daylight. The brilliant summery blonde in his hair faded into a color resembling dishwater. He sat with his knees spread too wide and his feet turned inward. *Who sits like that?*

Zola cleared her throat. “So, what’s all this talk I’ve been hearing about the so-called Reckoning?”

Silence, except for the pop and crack of sticks burning. It was strange to be among so many houses again. She could see into the house behind the fence, the unmistakable television waves of color filled most of the rooms. The garage next door seemed to be right up on the fence. Not even a foot separated them. Same thing on the other side of Declan’s house, too. One tree. All houses and the view inside of bodies rummaging or sleeping or cats looking out. His lips were so thin. Why did he purse them to make them look even tinier?

“Can I touch your hair?” Declan asked.

“What?” Zola heard him but couldn’t believe that was where he went. “No.”

She knew he liked her hair – through text he mentioned the fact on multiple occasions – yet it seemed invasive when spoken aloud. If he would have asked just a few short weeks ago, she probably would have welcomed the touch. Since her shower, she knew it was particularly spiraled. She fingered the curls and tossed them to the other side of her natural part.

He was looking at her again then he pulled out his phone. *That’s right, look anywhere but directly into a nebulous that contains whole universes.*

“You don’t talk like you’re half-black,” he said, phone still out.

“Oh my God,” Zola said put her hand to her face in exasperation. “You have got to be kidding me right now.”

Where was the boy who texted her goodnight? Where was the boy who talked about wanting to learn to play guitar then always asked her thoughts on the matter? Hope evaporated.

“Look, I didn’t mean that like how I said it,” Declan said.

Zola rolled her eyes, “Of course not.”

“For what it’s worth, I didn’t *share* your picture you sent me.”

There it was. What she wanted to know and didn’t all at once. Her stomach dropped. These types of revelations are ones she didn’t want to know from him. She reveled in his secrets, but this was a different entity. These were her secrets. If she wanted to share herself with more than one person, she would have. Since Maelle brought up the stupid Reckoning in the woods earlier, she knew she would be involved. She knew she would not magically be spared.

“You’re telling me that I’m going to part of The goddamn Reckoning though?”

He studied his phone hard and she saw his Adam’s apple move up and down.

“Some guys, they took my phone that night, after...well you know,” he said. “We were just back here having some beers before the first day of school. Just one last hurrah or whatever it’s called.”

“Some guys?” Zola wanted answers. “Just some random guys?”

“No,” Declan said. “My friends, I guess. I was too out of it to know what they were doing until the next day. I mean, now I have a better password set on my phone.”

“Oh, now. Great. Lots of good that will do.” She stared at him hard and narrowed her eyes. He did not return the look. “I want names.”

“Aw, I can’t do that to them,” he shook his head.

Her phone had been in her palm, weapon-like. She swiped her thumb and quickly stood up, closing the gap between them. On the screen, crisp and clear, was his dick and she held it close to his face.

“If you don’t tell them to stop with The Reckoning, me and Sofia Silvera will release our collected dick pictures on PicMe every time they post one of us,” Zola threatened. Her voice wavered and she hoped Declan couldn’t tell. “No, better yet,” she thought further, “we will send your naked pictures to your mom in a message. To your aunt in Pennsylvania. Your great-grandma in the nursing home will receive a letter that will unfold to show this. But we will not be anonymous.”

It was a bluff; she really hoped she wasn’t throwing Sophia under the bus by dragging her name into this. From the look on Declan’s face, Zola suspected it worked. In one final measure, she grabbed his phone out of his hand and dropped it into the fire. For a beat, he just sat there mouth agape. Zola walked away just as he scrambled to retrieve his phone.

#

The stars shown extra bright for her drive home. It was a strange mix of feeling bad with pinpricks of greatness amongst the dead dream that had floated above her head for so many months. She brought Old Duke in to sleep on the rug and he licked at her hand appreciatively.

They passed Baby Bean's room and she heard the toddler stirring. All three bedrooms were on the top floor of the farmhouse. A murmuring came from the other side of the door. Usually her mom or dad was pretty good about soothing Baby Bean in the middle of the night. The two must be really tired to not be up the instant she starts fussing. The toddler was just getting a handle for words, often calling things the wrong name and shortening words to the first syllable. *She must be up talking to herself.* Zola placed her hand on the doorknob and stopped. Her head spun from the crazy day, but still she knew that her sister couldn't speak in full sentences like it sounded. If her mom was awake, she would have flew down those steps the moment Zola closed the garage door.

The room went silent and that's when Zola turned the knob. Coldness had flooded Baby Bean's room. Duke went in first and sniffed at the ground. Baby Bean was sitting in her crib then looked at her sister when she entered the room.

"Hey, little one," said Zola. The toddler smiled up at her sister and cooed. Zola expected her skin to be cold but she was warm when she lifted her up. "You're going to sleep with me and Old Duke tonight." Baby Bean rubbed her eyes. Zola scanned the room. The window was shut tight and the closet was closed. The toy chest was left open with various toys and stuffed animals covering the floor. The mobile above the crib of butterflies and ribbons twirled slowly. The house was drafty, but Zola would figure out where the cold seeped in later. She was too tired to deal with it tonight.

On occasion Zola like the stay up and watch the sunrise, however this one was unplanned. She shut her own window which she had forgotten to close in her midnight flight. *I'll be shooin' spiders out of my room long into the winter.* She drew the shade and lace curtains. A hand knitted quilt that her grandma made always was kept folded at

the bottom of the bed finally got use as it swaddled the sisters in an extra layer of warmth.

Zola wanted tell Baby Bean a story about staying away from electric men who lived out in the woods. Or a story about men who watched the same sunrise with you from afar. One who will ghost away while keeping one string tied round their finger still tethered to your middle. Which one frightened the most? Baby Bean was just hatching out of the baby stage of life and Zola knew she wouldn't understand these stories. Because where night turned into morning and in the twilight before sleep, electricity and fire were made of the same matter.

Chapter Five

“Tawny, honey, no one is going to buy the corn even if we do get the cultivator fixed in the next couple weeks,” Zola’s dad said in the front seat of the car.

Her parents have been arguing over the corn, the farm equipment, and no rain the whole way to parade route. In past years, they just walked to the end of their block and set up chairs. Living in Nebo put an end to that tradition. Now they had to drive to get the annual Labor Day parade.

“I refuse to accept that” her mom said. “That acre of corn was once glorious and there’s still time to set it right. I’m going to be calling that tractor supply company I saw advertisements for tomorrow morning.”

Finally, she’s realized that she can’t actually fix every farm problem by look on the internet first or getting a book from the library.

“This is a step in the right direction, mom,” Zola said and flashed a grin in the rear view mirror.

Her mom knew she was being mocked. “That land will solve a lot of our problems you know,” she looked to her daughter and husband. “There are farmer’s markets springing up all over the valley. We’ll have a little stand set up and everything. Sure, it’ll be corn at first but there’s some fertile ground around the sunflowers and behind the garage.”

Behind the garage, some lingering orchard trees remained. Zola had to rake up the apples that fell to the ground before the wasps could swarm in. Most of the apples were bug infested and a quarter the size of a regular apple before they fell to the ground. Zola tried to wrap her mind around her mom’s vision. Burlap table runners, hand painted signs, and baskets overflowing with harvest. Customers making casseroles and jams out of the vegetables and fruits. *It all sounds like more work for me.*

They parked at her dad’s place of employment, Barton Brothers’ Automotive Parts. Tools and advertisements for various car related items hung in the windows. A coworker of her dad’s came out and the two men talked, as if they didn’t see each other five or six times a week as it was, and he remarked, like he did every time he saw the girls, how fast they were growing. Each member of the family propped open their chair on the devil’s strip of grass in front of the part’s store and waited for the annual parade to begin.

Zola did not want to be there and wondered how many other juniors sat with their family during the Homecoming parade. Not many, she assumed. Maelle would be furious with her if she didn’t see her out. Zola tried making all sorts of excuses and just riding

her bike at least on her own. Surprisingly, it was her dad who said no hooked with the justification that they all needed to do more as a family.

The people of Sinclair propped mini American flags in their yards, atop their fold out chairs, languid in their hands, and the September heat seemed to wilt each one. There wasn't a cloud in sky. *Why the American flags, Zola pondered. Must be standard for a parade about anything.* She donned her sunglasses and put her earbuds in.

The firetrucks were first. Out of the side of each of the trucks a couple of firefighters in tight uniformed shirts hung onto the side and threw candy to the kids. Next were the different high school sports team's floats. The football rode on the back of a truck wherein the platform was decorated as a football fields complete with yellow goal posts.

Innovative, Zola thought.

At the back of the sports pack was the girls' basketball team. Their float was two levels high and this year they made that second level into a superhero Wildcat soaring through the air to deliver the winning slam dunk into the hoop, according to the score board behind it. Maelle didn't look deterred from the oppressive midday heat. She was wearing her basketball uniform and had a cluster of red and black balloons in each hand. When she saw Zola and her family Maelle danced and waved and yelled to Baby Bean. With her earbuds in, the fast bass bumping provided a strange and ironic music video quality to the spectacle.

The Homecoming court drove up next not even bothering to wave to the crowd by this point on the end of the route. Each girl was dressed up in dark and dated dress suits holding a bouquet of carnations or gerbera daisies in varying colors in her lap. The cars

were polished with some meathead sweaty guy driving trying to look cool. Zola was thankful for the dark sunglasses because Carly couldn't see where Zola's eyes focused. Carly's brown hair was freshly highlighted and curled in a half up do. She must have gotten a spray tan because Zola noticed her skin was an unnatural color for her. At last Laney Baker rounded the bend in the most expensive convertible car belonging to the richest of locally famous families. Her bouquet was the largest, her hair the shiniest, and her teeth were unsettlingly white and large. The residents who volunteered their services to drive the girls around for the day made up of about a dozen of the same last names that were thrown about at any community gathering. These families prided themselves on keeping business in America with hackneyed commercials that run late at night with cheesy accompanying theme songs. The only thing worse than the forced end rhymes of the songs was their annoying kids who will grow up and ride in the same oversized convertibles one day clutching flowers.

It was the sight of Laney Baker's underwear that made Zola's time, the heat, the risk of seeing Declan, her dad's nagging about doing things as a family, worth it. Bright white fabric shown through a ripped seam straight up the back of Laney Baker's skirt as she bent slightly forward to gather her light brown curls off her neck. Zola stifled her laugh with her fist but before the elation could fully course through her the sound of her music was ripped suddenly from her ear.

"Zola," her mom scolded and didn't need to say another word.

Zola rubbed her ear for dramatic effect even though the sensation didn't hurt. Her dad was complaining about the sun and heat.

“I don’t think you rubbed enough sunscreen on my neck, Tawny,” he said already turning for inspection.

Her mom’s attention was occupied. She clicked her tongue and, at first, Zola thought it would be about their ongoing fight about music but she followed her mom’s sight line to where leather seat met stark white contrast.

“Poor girl,” Tawny said. Only Zola could hear. She rolled her eyes skyward. *Poor girl? Yeah, right.* “Honey, I don’t always think about bringing sunscreen with me in September,” her mom said. “Come one kids, let’s get home before your dad turns into a lobster.”

Baby Bean laughed at this image.

Zola stood up and brushed off her shorts. Baby Bean first studied then picked at one of the hard candies on the ground. “That’s nasty Baby Bean.”

Not missing a beat, her sister plopped the piece of candy into her mouth and gave Zola a smile. Zola sighed and held out her hand. Baby Bean’s hand curled into her big sister’s. The sound of a text message came from Zola’s phone.

Maelle: party tonight in Marshville. i’ll pick you up in a couple hours

Zola: I don’t feel like going. Anyway, I thought you never wanted to go into any woods of any kind any time soon? Wasn’t that your exact quote?

Maelle: i say a lot of things. come on! please!!! you OWE me!

It was hard to argue with that. She was actually astounded her friend was willing to go back into the woods so soon after their encounter with the green man.

Zola: Okay. One party, then we’re even. Got it?

Maelle: thanks girl 😊

The City Without a Cemetery

Chapter Six

Despite Zola's stomach being in knots, she suggested to get tacos anyway. They were a source of weakness for Maelle. Anything to stall in inevitable confrontation that was surely to ensue at the party. Zola was quick to agree to go to a party. There was always something edging on the extraordinary that could happen. Although, most parties she dragged Maelle to resulted in one drink and disappointment. Her classmates were quick to get drunk and the atmosphere of possibility dissolved into the darkness.

The sun set and night loomed and Zola wanted to stall. She wanted to take her mind off Carly, who would surely be there, and Declan who could possibly be there. Things with Carly had gotten worse. Ever since Zola demanded answers from her former friend, she couldn't help but feel a wedge drive further into their relationship. The relationship was still salvageable if Zola managed to keep her mouth shut and her feelings in check. At least that is what she kept telling herself all week.

It would be a long time before the witnesses in English class forgot she called Carly a toad. Zola cringed at herself. She needed to put away the Shakespeare and do something normal. It struck her that she never attended a party without Carly by her side. In fact, it was Carly who drove them since she rarely drank and her parents never seemed to care how late the pair stayed out.

Even worse though was the prospect of Declan being there. Unlike her seeing Carly on a daily basis, she had not seen him at school or otherwise since she gently dropped his phone into the fire pit that night he asked her to come over. Part of her wanted him to grovel and be sorry. Maelle reported back the next day that his phone was

charred, but still in working order. Not that Zola should care, she repeated to herself. Declan breezed about just in the corner of her peripheral vision it seemed. One second he would be there, the next not. He would say he'd be at a place, and then never show. Sometimes he wouldn't say anything and show up early or be the last to leave other times. If Zola hadn't studied his features up close she would swear he was a wisp. Yet, in the flickering of the fire's light, his hazel eyes seemed more grey than mossy brown. His usual blonde hair, darker and ashy. It must have been a trick of the ever-moving orange glow and suburban street lights.

The one question that still clung onto to her like a shawl trailing in the wind was the prospect of her, and other girls, ending up on that website. An anxiety that surges and swells which each odd glance or whisper in school hallways. As much as she tried to steel herself against her classmates, doubt seeped through her. Maybe whoever was behind the Reckoning, whoever was trying to expose her classmates and probably herself, was convinced by Declan's plea for amnesty. If not, would she really try to expose the guys in the same way? None of it seemed right. But if it went that far, she knew she would title the PixPage "The Plague."

There was no guarantee that Declan even said anything. He proved he was the most unreliable person in the world. Countless times she thought of texting him, but always refrained. Interacting with him made her grimace. Zola reconciled with herself she just always needs to be wound tight in order to strike. Otherwise, she chooses inaction.

Zola thought of all these things and that's why she suggested getting tacos. Tacos seemed like an appropriate way to put off being in a social space with your former best friend and guy who you talked intimately with, but was definitely not a boyfriend.

The old BMW rattled so much she thought it would fall apart the longer she sat at stop lights. Taking it to the Marshville party was a reward for actually helping her mom with yard work. The chicken coop never looked so kempt. It was all worth it even though she patted the dashboard occasionally and whispered for the car not to die. That was just something else she did not need.

Thankfully, Maelle was more than pleased to get some tacos. "Hell yeah," Maelle said. "My grandma made tuna noodle casserole. Blech. I gave most of it Whiskers and Spankey. Those cats will be fuming up the whole house by the time I get back."

Silvera's stayed open late and served the best, cheapest tacos on the main strip through town. Often after various sports games and dances, the general student body would fill the other chain restaurants that surrounded Silvera's. Last year though, Sophie Silvera invited some of the girls from AP English to her family's restaurant. The place has been around forever, but often went unnoticed because of the paint store on one side and a gun and ammunition store on the other side in the small plaza. Sophie's family treated the small group of girls to fried ice cream and homemade guacamole. Zola has been hooked ever since.

The restaurant, with its flickering red sign, greeted the girls. Warm and spicy smells filled the small space. Sophie came around the corner and stopped when she saw Zola and Maelle.

“Oh my God, what are you guys doing here?” Sophie said and slumped her shoulders forward.

“Aye, Soph,” Maelle said. “We we’re just in for some tacos.

Zola just managed a small wave.

Sophie looked back and forth at them. Then she sighed and took the pen out of the knot she kept her dark hair pulled into. “Chicken and cheese, right?”

“Yes, please,” Zola said.

Sophie scribbled. “Sit anywhere. It’ll be out in a few minutes.”

The only other person in the restaurant was an older man sitting by himself at one of the booths. The pair sat in the corner underneath a fake window that showed a strange countryside. Maelle talked about working out in the school’s gym with Brittany and Temecia in preparation for basketball tryouts. Zola let her friend talk at her and her mind drifted since she heard the story twice already.

The girls’ basketball team tolerated Zola sitting at their lunch table and lingering around their circle. Even though Zola attended every basketball game Maelle sat on the bench at, she never felt connected with the other girls. At lunch they sometimes laughed at her one-liners and other times one of them would ask her opinion on something. Yet ever since the news of the Reckoning, Zola noticed everyone a bit more on edge. The threat of putting nude photos up on the internet was only brought up once one day at lunch. Every girl on the team dismissed the idea. None of them seemed worried. Only Zola. She feared maybe she would be the only one exposed. Would anyone recognize her freckled chest dotted like constellations? Would anyone recognize the hollow of her collarbone and the way her curls of hair brushed her shoulder?

“Zo – hey, what’s going on?” Maelle snapped her fingers in front of Zola’s face. “You’ve been staring at the weird picture on the wall for the past 5 minutes. Is this about your grandpa? Did something happen to him?”

“What? No,” Zola responded. “Well, I mean, not that I know of.”

She deliberately avoided the last couple weeks going to the nursing home to visit him with her family. It would only be so long until she ran out of excuses not to go. Zola was getting quite comfortable in the glass bubble she constructed around herself. The worst was Zola knew how disappointed her mom would be in her giving so much thought to boys who couldn’t even muster a simple text back once in a while.

Maelle looked her up and down. “I know you’re not worried about that snotty dude.”

Okay mom, Zola almost said, but before Zola could answer Sophie came to the table with their tacos. She set a plate in front of them and two glasses of ice water on either side.

“Look,” Sophie began in a hushed tone, “I couldn’t get you any alcohol. My aunt is in the kitchen tonight.”

“It’s okay, really,” Zola said.

“Yeah, no worries, girl,” Maelle said rubbing her hands together in anticipation. “We’re going to eat and run then get our drink on in Marshville.”

“Are you going, too?” Zola looked up at Sophie.

When Zola called Carly a toad in English class, Sophie found her in the hallway afterwards and she laughed *with* Zola. Not *at* her, like she thought most of the other kids

did. Whenever Carly, or her two cohorts, Hudson and Liam, said something particularly stupid in class, Sophia whispered to Zola, “ribbit, ribbit.”

“Hell no, I’m not going to that,” Sophie said. “That’s why I agreed to work until close. Just so I wouldn’t be tempted to go, ya know?”

“Aren’t you and Hudson a thing?” Maelle asked with her mouth full of taco. Zola wondered if she ever filtered any thought before she spoke it aloud.

Sophie didn’t say anything for a moment. Zola waited. She hated to speculate that she and Sophie had more in common than their banter in AP English. Hated to speculate that it was in fact Liam and Hudson were this looming threat. If Zola were more like Maelle she would have asked Sophie about the Reckoning a long time ago. The florescent light made Sophie look tired. Her usual perfect black eyeliner was smudged. Her polo shirt and khaki pants were wrinkled. The Sophie Zola mostly saw was always so put together. Her hair done just right, eyeliner at a curl, and always the same silver hoops that dangled from her ears. Instead, she looked more worn down.

“Not any longer,” Sophie said. And that was it. She didn’t elaborate and Zola didn’t blame her. Before turning and going back, she ripped off the receipt tab. “See you two party people later.”

Zola ate her taco, but the food did not curb her unease like it usually did.

After they left their money on the table Zola tried to find Sophie one last time. Just to say goodbye. Just to say something else.

“Come on, Zo. Let’s go,” Maelle said holding the door open, letting the wind and dusk of the evening flow inside.

Chapter Seven

The smell of bonfire filled the car. The thin sweatshirt Zola grabbed would be worthless against the cold settling in. There were no street lights so far into Marshville, just acres of forest and quarries. Zola barely had her foot on the gas. She anticipated a deer or rabbit to hop out of the trees at any second. The trees stretched on and on despite the dirt road.

“Where is this place again?” Zola asked side-eyeing Maelle in the passenger seat.

“It’s gotta be right around here,” Maelle answered squinting her eyes. “Aye! There’s Tamecia and Brittany. I’d recognize those sets of skinny legs anywhere.”

Zola then noticed the two girls walking along the side of the road. Suddenly, she didn’t feel overdressed because the two of them were wearing high-waisted shorts and cut off t-shirts despite the approaching October.

She eased the car to a crawl. Maelle rolled down the window and yelled at her friends. Tamecia and Brittany pointed to an opening in the trees Zola hadn’t noticed before. She thanked them by waving, but they probably didn’t even see her.

The old car bounced with every bump and they felt every divot. Maelle clung to the door’s handle bar.

“This still isn’t as bad as running for our freaking lives from that creature-dude,” Maelle said.

This was the real first party of the year, so most people would be there. All week Zola weighed her options. What would people remember more, her being there or not

being there? The mixed girl who sent a picture of her boobs to an asshole and he may or may not be putting the picture on the internet. The reasons to be laughed at were endless. She didn't need to add to her growing shit list right now, so she decided to go and endure anything anyone had to say. But maybe if she could find herself back into the fray with Carly and Liam and Hudson, then perhaps she could at the very least convince them, nicely, not to post nude pictures of others on the internet. Maybe. She had to at least try.

“I don't even think that 'creature-dude' would even be able to run after us,” Zola said.

“Are you nuts? He almost grabbed me.”

“Mae, you were too busy fussing to even look around,” Zola scoffed. “He was limping. I don't think he could see that well,” Zola said and looked for a good place to park the car. Somewhere she wouldn't get boxed in. The headlights swept over the other cars and bodies of people heading in the same direction. The direction of the colossal bonfire. Some cars and people she recognized and some she didn't. She opted for a place between two evergreens. An easy getaway when Maelle got tired in an hour, like she always did.

“Oh, well, when you put it that way I guess old green dude sounds a hell of a lot better than Declan,” Maelle laughed to herself.

“Really, Mae?” Zola snapped. “Why do you always have to say things.”

“You love me,” she said. “And now that I am your only friend left in the whole school...”

They each got out of the car. Zola tried to ignore all of Maelle's comments. None of it was helping.

“Just remember where we parked, will you?” Zola said as she adjusted her hoodie and secured the keys. “And I have friends,” she added more to herself.

Maelle looked around at the woods then to the stars. “Okay, the car is right between some big trees in the pitch dark under the Big Dipper. Sure.”

Zola had plenty of comebacks, but if Maelle was in a feisty mood she wasn’t going to egg her on. Maelle’s attitude was the least of her worries.

Navigating parties was tricky even when Zola was in Carly’s good graces. It was Carly who knew most people. Different kids from other grades would breeze in and out of their path. Carly wasn’t particularly pretty. She kept her brown hair highlighted blonde. She wore average, mostly comfortable, clothes. Even though she held a grudge against Zola, she continually wore a light purple shirt Zola gave her for her sixteenth birthday.

The difference between the two girls was Carly loved being involved and in the attention. There was never any hesitation in her smiles and her welcoming body language. Sometimes, Zola got dragged along to be a tree in the school’s production of *A Street Car Named Desire* because Carly was vice president of drama club. Sometimes Zola sat with her friend at the Spanish Club’s bake sale because no one else showed up when Zola never took Spanish. Each time, there was a secret gratitude Zola held for her friend for making her come out of her world of reading and watching her little sister.

When it was Zola and Maelle, Zola found herself the one at least trying to be the friendlier of the two. Maelle just didn’t give anyone her time, especially guys. She wore thick glasses because she falls asleep with her contacts in so much. The only clothing items she owned were basketball shorts, sweat pants, and red and black Sinclair High

School shirts. The endeavor of getting back into the collective consciousness's favor for any hope of dismantling the Reckoning would be hard.

Plan A: threaten Declan with dick pictures in a similar social media heist.

Plan B: infiltrate the system, win back the friends lost over said nude pictures, and show them just how undeserving she is of being one of the girls shown on the internet.

Plan C: call the cops and tell them everything.

Zola couldn't decide which plan was faultier. Releasing nude photos of the guys, assuming she could get more than Declan's, just didn't sit right. Plan C was Maelle's brilliant idea. There was not too many more humiliating things Zola could think of than explaining the situation to strangers and telling her parents what happened. The only worse thing she could imagine was searching her own name and her nude picture popping up in the search. Forever.

Even if Zola called the police anonymously and if they took the claim seriously, all she could envision was the Marshville cops. All two of them, were both Sinclair High School graduates. They drank and smoked right along with the high schoolers. Most of the time they were at parties to hook-up with girls.

The heat from the fire was immense. It threw waves that disturbed and distorted the people gathered on the other side of the flames. Zola could see why some of the people were dressed in less clothes than the autumn weather permitted.

"You want beer or moonshine?" Maelle asked. She tugged on Zola's sleeve toward the kegs.

"Moonshine," Zola said. Not that she knew exactly what moonshine was, but anything was better than beer.

Temecia and Brittney were standing around the other basketball players. Maelle slapped them all on the backs. Everyone had a drink in their hand. *If this is a cult initiation, at least we're all going down together.*

She was handed a plastic cup and in the dim light she could see chunks floating in the drink.

Maelle studied Zola's face, "What? It's apple pie moonshine."

"If you say so," Zola said. The cinnamon overpowered her senses and she refrained from chewing the chunky matter. "I hope that was apple," she muttered.

No one else was dropping dead, so she continued sipping the drink. She scanned the crowd. It wasn't hard to spot Liam and Hudson standing among a crowd of girls. Not too far from them sitting on a log, between the other Homecoming court people, was Carly. As if by cosmic coincidence, when Zola took in her former friend, Carly looked straight back at her.

Don't look away, don't look away.

Carly not only looked away, she curled her lip in disgust.

The act made Zola feel small. This whole thing was a bad idea. Any hope was an ember dying out inside her.

When she looked away from Carly it was then she saw Declan near the base of the fire poking at it with a couple other people on either side. The tendrils sparked and parted, and he lifted his gaze towards her. Zola squared her shoulders and puffed out her chest. She relaxed her legs for a casual, but firm stance. At least she tried. It was strange having the different dual watchers. One of them just pissed her off and the other made her sad.

Suddenly, the plan seemed stupid. Or maybe she would try another day. *The season I wasn't myself*, she thought.

“You know what? I’m not feeling very well,” Zola said.

Maele didn’t hear or ignored her. Carly’s group laughed at something until it reached to tops of the trees. Liam and Hudson disappeared, but Carly kept right on sitting like the toad she was. The laughter didn’t let up.

Zola walked a bit around the basketball girls away from fire, the lost yet familiar glances. The earth was soft beneath her. The whole world smelled of burning. She leaned on a tree and almost discarded her moonshine, then thought better of it and to just hold onto the cup and swirling liquid for accessory purposes. She could feel the night breeze as it flowed through the leaves. Muffled chatter of the crowd just beyond the tree line disturbed her viewing of pinpricked stars. *I wonder how many miles I am from my own forest? Not many*, she mused.

The cluster of stars with their ancient names kept shining on. It was one of the reasons Zola loved living a few miles from the middle of the suburb: the clear night sky.

A group of teenagers, out in Marshville, around a bonfire begged for scary stories to be told.

A thousand naked pictures to a thousand different people wouldn’t stop Maele from liking Zola, so she wondered why she made an appearance among the rest of them. There were plenty of kids from different schools here. The ground was more even than when they went to the Black Crow tree. She needed to go visit her grandpa, not worry about what the kids in school thought of her. If Zola had company, her grandpa’s outbursts wouldn’t freak her out so much.

The suddenness of twigs breaking somewhere behind her broke her out of her daydreams. Leaves moved unnaturally and whispers carried like smoke through the air. Zola stilled and strained to hear what could be behind her. There was more than one hushed voice coated with moonshine.

“Hey, Zo –” Maelle’s voice came broke through the crowd.

Zola was startled but didn’t show it. “Over here,” she said not too loud.

“There you are,” Maelle appeared. “Sophie showed up. But, uh, you should come out of your hiding spot.”

The scene and the clearing with the roaring fire, somehow changed since Zola stepped out. No more laughter. Most were looking at Sophie who stood with her hands in her jacket pockets. She was still her work khakis.

It was anticipation before a fight. Too quite. Someone coughed. Someone snickered. A couple people looked anywhere but at Sophie. The log where Carly was just sitting, now Hudson teetered on it. He leaned forward and then back ever so slightly. When he did this, his brown hair shifted into his eyes and he didn’t bother to swing his head to one side like he normally did. His arms were crossed in front of him. Taunting.

Hudson and Sophie were always on and off again. Zola never bothered or cared to keep up with the couple, but she sensed there was a piece of the puzzle she was unaware of.

Sophie spoke, “You’re the one who told me to come here. Let’s not get that fact twisted.”

Hudson and a few of his friends laughed at this. Zola could see Carly in the back sipping on her drink, looking utterly amused by the spectacle.

“It just proves that I can send you one message and you come crawling,” Hudson said.

“One message?” Sophie responded. “Try a hundred. And you said *you* wanted to talk.”

“We’re talking aren’t we?” He knew everyone was listening and watching.

Sophie was aware of the audience that listened and watched the exchange. “This is stupid.”

“Why don’t you tell them what you came up here to talk about?” Hudson uncrossed his arms and gestured toward the party goers. “Huh, Soph?”

“I’m going home,” Sophie said and turned to walk out of the clearing.

Zola held her breathe and hoped that was the end of the awkward confrontation. It was like being invited in to an intimate conversation in the most non-private of places. She felt for Sophie, but couldn’t look at anything else.

“Hold on a sec, Soph,” he said jumped off the log. “So-So girl.”

Zola could tell he wasn’t just swaying back forth on it taunting, he was swaying because of how drunk he was. The pet name he used in a mocking manner, in front of all these people made her skin crawl. His posture was off and Liam grabbed him by the elbow to steady him. Of course, it was a laugh and all joke.

Just go, Sophie. Just go.

Hudson continued when Sophie stopped, “This bitch right here can’t even make up her mind to be with me. One minute she’s all over my dick the next minutes she’s a frigid ice queen. Is... isn’t that right, Sophie girl?”

Sophie opened her mouth once then shut it again. A look of pure hurt came over face. A couple people in the crowd made some noises. Some snickered. A couple girls on the basketball team Zola stood by made a throaty hum and whispered to one another.

The heat from the fire licked at Zola's face and the back of her sweatshirt was damp. She searched Maelle's face. The friends met eyes and Maelle shook her head slightly. At least Zola knew she wasn't part of the mob. She hoped Sophie didn't think less of her.

But Sophie didn't move and Hudson swayed by the fire. Laughing at nothing, or something just to himself. It was as if Hudson was winding up and here it came. Zola closed her eyes as if it would hide her from the words or fallout.

"Listen up," he went on. "Hey, even you ass-hats over there. Yeah, you. Listen up." He paused and Liam said something in his ear then brushed him off. "Nah, man. Everybody listen!" He spun around and almost tipped into the fire. Zola would welcome this distraction from the scene he was creating. Of course, not to severely maim him, just give him a small scare.

He didn't fall, but a couple of his guy friends gathered around him. Morphing into one teenage guy-blob of basketball shorts and t-shirts. He chuckled at his almost-fall and the others thought it was hilarious. The whole thing was hilarious, yet Zola and a couple others shifted uncomfortably.

"Each and every one of you," Hudson pointed then thought better of it and shook his head. "No, every one of you stupid bitches." He spun grotesquely around again. The dirt and ash kicked up under his feet. "Each of you sluts is going to be exposed." With

that he pointed to random girls. Zola wanted to shrink. His finger swept over the girls' basketball team.

"Good luck with that, asshole," a female voice called from somewhere in the crowd.

"You think I'm joking?" he raised his voice. "You all have been whispering about it. And if you try to cut off one of our sources, one of our *phones*." Hudson's eyes burned deep into Zola, "Those skanky, slut photos that all you girls just love to take will be sent to two more people." For dramatics, he held two fingers up in a mock peace sign for everyone to see.

Maelle grasped her wrist and squeezed. Zola's pulse surged through her whole body, and more than the heat from the bonfire flushed her face. The crowd rabbled in response.

"Ya'll should know better."

"He's going to get his ass kicked."

"Girls shouldn't be exposing themselves like that."

"Who in their right mind would send nudes to dudes in this school?"

"You should have known this would happen."

"That is messed up."

"What did Sophie do to him?"

"Can he do that? Isn't that, like, illegal?"

These words spun about her. Zola was rooted in place. Her eyes sought Declan. She needed to see his face, his reaction to this admission. He stood away from Hudson and the other boys, staring almost far away into the fire.

“Fuck you,” Sophie said real quiet. Over the crackling of the fire, Zola still heard, everyone heard the fracture in her voice.

“Ha ha ha,” Hudson laughed. “Try again, Soph. It’s all starting with you. The biggest slut of them all. The Reckoning. Follow the account. It’ll go live soon. On Halloween, we’ll be trick or treating all these double-crossing sluts. And for anyone thinking about telling the cops, be my guest, ‘cuz it ain’t me behind The Reckoning. I’m just a humble bystander trying to give all you people a warning,” Hudson pulled his phone out of the pocket and unlocked the screen. He waved it around. “Hey, Toby. Hey, Gordon.”

The cops leaning on a car, who laughed and slapped their knee with all this information, stood and took Hudson’s phone from him. They both looked at it, amused. One scrolled on the phone and the other looked on. They were in civilian clothes. Zola thought of grabbing Maelle and Sophie and cutting through the woods back to her car and speeding fast away from here. She knew it would solve nothing, but just to get away from the flames, the snickering, and boisterous show.

“Nothin’ here that we could see,” said either Toby or Gordon. Zola didn’t know which was which.

Someone placed another drink in Hudson’s hand. He drank it sloppily. Foam ran down his chin. His brown bangs were matted to his forehead from the frenzied talk. The light reflected in his usually light eyes. Zola never saw him so lit up. His sidekick, Liam was eating the energy too. Each stood a little taller. Each one’s smile was a little fuller.

Soon they’ll all remove their clothes and clasp hands and chant around the fire, she thought.

“Ha. So follow the account as the person beside you gets exposed – yeah, that’s right,” he said. “Walk away, Sophie. Just like you always do.”

Zola saw Sophie’s hand come up to her face and wipe away a tear before it could run down her cheek. Then in an instant the trees folded around her and she walked into the dark.

A couple of Hudson’s friend clapped him on the back. But Liam disappeared. Probably to relieve himself or to get more alcohol for them. It was then Zola looked at Carly sitting on the log. Carly didn’t look as pleased as she did before. Her face was rather stoic. Zola fought off the urge to send her text. She was sure she blocked number her anyway.

The message would be a call to put a stop to all of this. It would be a question of why she’s hanging around Liam and Hudson so much. She should ask why she’s just sitting there on a log, *like a toad*, instead of doing something. Then Zola brought her hand to her forehead. She might as well text herself that question. She swallowed the bile and moonshine at the back of her throat. Sophie was the only one to stand up to the guys. But did she really believe Hudson and his gang were not behind The Reckoning? Who else could it be?

“I’m ready to go,” Zola said to Maelle.

“Alright. Let me finish this and find Temecia and Brittney and say goodbye.”

Others had the same thought. People inched toward the car. The energy ebbed away from the boys who started the ruckus. Drinks were poured out. The ringleaders noticed.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Liam said as he reappeared through the tree edge. “Where do you guys think you’re going? The night is young.” He then spoke low into Hudson’s ear.

“Let’s gather around,” Hudson continued to make a spectacle. “Come on. It’s a perfect night for scary stories.”

But people trickled out from the party anyway. The fire was dying out since Declan was tending it, just sitting on the ground playing with the charred stick.

Zola tried to blend in with the shadows. Hudson looked at the back of Declan then at Zola. Hudson went to where Declan sat and put his hand on his shoulder and said something to him. Declan met Zola’s eyes for the first time since that one night at his house. She tensed.

To her horror, Declan got up and moved around the fire and headed right in her direction. She looked around for Maelle. She spotted the back of her friend’s braided head, but Declan was in her space before she knew it.

He almost said something then thought better of it then kicked the dirt. Deciding not to dart into the woods, Zola furrowed her brow and crossed her arms. The smell of sickly sweet moonshine and smoke clung to his clothes. There was a mixture of revulsion and curiosity. A mix of being flung out of orbit and knowing a stranger so well. Well enough to know he will always be a stranger. An exchange of moments and space filled with knowledge of another.

Don’t look at him too long. Don’t do it.

“Can I help you?” she asked him. She tried to tinge her words with poison.

“Uh, hi,” he said.

She waited a beat longer. “Well?” *Have attitude. Be like mom. Yeah right, my mom would have punched him a long time ago. What do I do? I sit and check my messages a hundred times a day and imagine all the things I should say – then don’t.*

“The guys are going to Zombie Road,” he said. “They, uh, said if any girls go with them, they won’t post their pictures on the internet.” He shrugged.

He shrugged.

“Zombie Road? Why should I? Why should I believe anything you or they say?”

“Well, I mean, I guess I’ll go too,” he said not answering the question.

“Oh good, so you can be accessory to murder,” Zola said.

Declan smiled. “Ya know, its stuff like that I miss. You’d just say stuff like that and it always made me laugh.”

“Oh my God,” Zola threw her hands up. There was too much to say. When there was too much, she shut down. She wanted to say it all at one or nothing at all. “Why? What could possibly be in Zombie Road beside ritual sacrifice?”

“Ritual sacrifice?” Declan asked and smiled more. “What’s that?”

“You have got to be high right no –” she stopped talking.

Hudson continued his rant. Except his voiced was more slurred. “Any slu – I mean *girl*,” Hudson said.” Lady. Any lady who wants to go to Zombie Road, right now, and light the soul flame, right now, will not be exposed. You will not feel The Reckoning, I swear it.” With that statement Carly got up off the log. She talked to a few people with her hands buried deep into the pockets of her hoodie. She was rallying, Zola thought. Then Carly joined Liam and Hudson to form their trinity again.

More talk among those who stayed.

“See? Come on. It might be fun,” Declan said as if there was nothing to lose. As if it was all a fun, flirty Saturday night. Maybe he had vision of them all stopping and making out on the Americana bridge with their lights out as the shadow figures pressed upon the car. Maybe he wanted to push her shirt up and the sounds of screaming whistled through the tunnel below.

Or perhaps the guys wanted to spray paint the girls’ names on the bridge so that each one of them would be murdered by the ones who inhabit that deep, lightless tunnel.

Maelle slid up on Zola’s side and didn’t acknowledge Declan’s standing right in front of her.

Maelle said, “Well, what do you want to do?” She turned and said it as a breath.

Zola gritted her teeth. “You can’t be serious,” she said. “Why would I go anywhere with *them*?”

“I mean, what if they’re not lying?” her friend was trying to play the game. “I’ll go too. Temecia and Brittney already decided they’re going.” Maelle’s words meant to comfort, but Zola scowled at her. “I’m just tryin’ to look out for you. I know I would try just about anything so my tits weren’t out there on the –”

Zola groaned.

“Yeah, I’ll make sure they keep their word, Zo,” Declan said.

“I know you didn’t just speak right now,” Maelle turned to him and gave look that would chill corpses.

“Whoa...I’m just saying,” he said and trailed off.

“Maybe if you didn’t share everything with your boys, we wouldn’t be in this mess right now,” Maelle said. The she started with her hand gestures, “Did you ever think

of that? And I saw that skinny little dick of yours, so you shut up before I bust your lip open.” Maelle’s raised voice attracted the attention of Liam and Hudson.

With an audience, Maelle was brave where Zola found her voice when it was directed at just one other person.

“So,” Liam said, “are you all coming?”

“Fine,” Zola said.

Hudson cut in and said, “Maybe you should be the first one to light the soul flame.” Then he winked at her.

A look came over Declan’s face like he remembered something. “Come on Hudson, why do you always gotta go there?”

“Maybe as soon as we get there I’ll spray paint your name first on the bridge,” Zola said directly to Hudson. “I’m sure there’s an old red spray can in the trunk from when my dad makes touch ups on the car.”

Some in Sinclair and surrounding areas knew that if a name was spray painted onto the bridge, black-eyed zombie people came for you. Sometime before Zola’s mom and dad graduated high school, a body of a 12 year-old girl was found less than a mile from the bridge. The night before the girl and her older sister drove over the bridge and stopped. The older sister turned out her lights to frighten her little sister. The girls shrieked. The older sister grabbed at her sister, but the 12 year-old was happy to just be hanging around her big sister to get too freaked out. So, the older sister wrote the other’s name on the side of the bridge. After the cursive name was complete, the older sister said that she would be visited by the shadowed zombies that lay dormant under the bridge. Having thoroughly terrified the 12 year-old, the sisters went home. In the morning, the

younger sister was not in her bed. The city, and neighboring towns, combed the area. When the older sister told the police of the previous night's whereabouts, they then discovered the mutilated body.

Immediately, they arrested the green man who was still living with his elderly mother a few miles away. No evidence ever connected him to the murder. In fact, the autopsy revealed that it was most likely multiple people who committed the crime. They never caught who killed that 12 year-old girl.

Chapter Eight

Zola couldn't believe she was driving to *Zombie Road*. She chewed at her nails. The not-so-brilliant plan she came up with was disturbingly coming true. If she just fit herself back into the mold of her former friends, maybe she could avoid those pictures of herself on *The Reckoning* site. The driver's side window was opened a crack and the wind whistled in. She followed the few other cars in front of the car and there were a few headlights in the rearview mirror. The back country roads never saw this kind of traffic especially, so close to midnight. Or maybe only so close to midnight.

In the summer, Zola and Carly drove through *Zombie Road* just as the sun set. They didn't stop, only slowed down since Carly drove. They giggled and went back to her place and watched scary movies. The next time, a group of students went there in the middle of the afternoon. They trekked through the creek that went under the bridge. Some made jokes to as why it might be called the *Americana* bridge. Zola thought back on it and probably shouldn't have laughed alongside of them. Liam and Hudson dared one

another to run through the bridge's darkness. Slippery stones and the tiny current made each attempt worth video recording on cell phones.

This venture didn't have that shimmer of summer fun. No, this night had too little of stars, the forest was too thick, and the air too heavy. Before, there was a sense of adventure with tingles of excitement. This line of cars was more like a funeral procession.

I could turn back. I could always turn back. It seemed like turning back was the last thing Zola should do. *I always turn back. I'm always turning away from the gleam of life.* If she just walked straight on, all will be reconciled. Maybe The Reckoning will never come.

At least Maelle was by her side.

"I sure as shit ain't gonna light no soul flame," Maelle said as she looked out the window to blur of monochromatic night time. "Nu uh."

"No one said *you* have to. *You're* not the idiot who sent...who sent..." Zola let it go unsaid. She didn't need to say anymore.

"Hey, listen to me," Maelle put her hand feather-light on her shoulder, "I know you know this, but you didn't do anything wrong."

Those were the words that Zola needed to hear. Words that connected something broken inside her. Of course, Zola knew that, but she a thousand times doubted herself and her own actions. In her worst moments, she believed she deserved to be put out there. She believed for a second that she wasn't worthy of a person who texted back. There were specific sins she committed against her friends, like Sophie. She wasn't afraid to light the flame. No, she was afraid that if she truly did win back Carly and fall under Liam and Hudson's spell, that she would have nothing to atone for.

“Zo – please we have to stop at the cemetery,” Maelle pleaded.

“Mae, we don’t have time for superstitions. It’s getting late.”

“Please, Zo. I got to know. It’ll make me feel better.”

“Just real quick okay? I want to get this whole thing over with.”

The sign for the Marshville cemetery, old English letters faded on a white sign, came up a minute later. Zola veered to the right like they did in the summer when they first visited Zombie Road. The cemetery marked the beginning of Zombie Road that winded over the Americana bridge and ended where the ghost lights are said to be spotted when the moon is just right. They didn’t go that far down the road, but vowed to try to encounter the orbs on another night that hadn’t happened yet.

If the statue of the Virgin Mary’s hands at the cemetery gate hands were open, you could pass through without harm. However, Zola had heard the legend backward and forward. Sometimes people said if the statue’s hands were closed meant it was safe to cross. Just another urban legend. She shook her head at Mae’s need to see. Her friend was so on edge, she would believe that the moon was made out of cheese at the point.

There were no street lights out here. The hum of the other cars going down the road and the faint bumping of their stereos was all that could be heard when Maelle rolled down her side window. Maelle pulled out her cell phone and activated the flashlight. Zola squinted into the dark. Just beyond the metal fence post, to the side of the cemetery, stood a glass box. Headstones reflected her headlights back. She vaguely remembered the last visit with her grandfather where he told her he couldn’t die in Sinclair because there was nowhere to bury him. There were plenty of cemeteries, plenty of places to lay to rest. She bit the inside of her lip and pushed the image of her grandfather dying out of her mind.

“Shit,” Mae said. “Oh hell no. Zola we gotta go back. We gotta go home.”

“Huh? What do you see? I can’t see a thing,” Zola said. But that wasn’t true. She saw Maelle’s flashlight reflecting off the glass box that held the Virgin Mary.

“Oh, shit. We can’t go. Her hands, Zo. Her hands.”

Maelle shifted the angle of the flashlight and Zola saw. The statue of the Virgin Mary was praying.

“Mae, she looked like that last time we came here,” Zola said.

“No, she didn’t!” Maelle hand shook. “Her hands were open. They were open, I’m telling you.”

Zola looked at her friend skeptically. “I remember you fussing, but I don’t remember why.”

“Because, if her hands are praying that means we shouldn’t pass.”

“This little detour to the soul flame was your idea,” Zola yelled. “Remember you just said *maybe they aren’t lying*. Roll up that window. We need to catch up. I’ve had my fill of stories and dumb legends and we still have to go light a freakin’ soul flame”

#

When they reached Zombie Road, the other cars pull off onto the grassy space before the trees thicken. Lights from the cars illuminated the bridge. The colored graffiti was a stark contrast to the blackness they pushed against the headlights. Zola could see that fewer people than she imagined followed the procession this far. Some had the same idea, to just turn around and go home.

It was Sophie's brush of the unseen tear that held in Zola's mind. After this whole ordeal, she decided would message her and reach out. The rolling and unsettling in her stomach was more than the moonshine.

Zola saw Temecia and Brittney get out of the silver Chevy in front of her own car. Maelle hesitated. Her hand gripped tight on the door handle. She said "Jesus, Lord," under her breath over and over. Zola assured her that they would be in and out in no time. Light the stupid abandoned gas line or whatever then they would hightail it home.

The midnight hour approached fast, and Zola knew she was testing the limits of her curfew. Her phone showed no new messages from either of her parents, but she figured her dad had to open the auto parts store and her mom was going to an anti-fracking meeting.

Then she spotted Carly with Liam and Hudson. Declan lingered at the start of the bridge like he was waiting for her. The cops didn't tag along.

Not sure if that is a good or bad thing.

"You don't really have spray paint in the trunk, do you?" Maelle questioned Zola.

"Yeah, but I don't intend on using it," Zola said.

Maelle stuck close to Zola's side as they joined the group meandering on the bridge. The temperature dipped and Zola hugged her arms to herself. She carefully avoided Declan and his half-smile. This was just like the summer, but everything was mirrored and inverted. Someone passed a jar of moonshine around still. Zola stood away and ran her hand over the chipped paint of the bridge. Years of carelessness crumbled beneath her trace.

Again, she wondered which name scrolled, printed, initialed, was the 12 year old girl's who was found dead not too far in any direction of where she stood. If her name was ever even written on the bridge. The legends were certainly there before her murder and there are plenty of names Zola thought, even if she couldn't quite make them out. If it the whole thing really was true, many more people would be dead around the area.

Symbols of eyes, triangles, and what appeared to be the sharp lines of crowns or horns. Chunks of the bridge split and cracked opened. Nature was reclaiming the space once again with the weeds and thistles growing through the concrete.

With the appearance of the moonshine jars, the others began to get rowdy again.

Click, click, click.

The fast sound was the unmistakable tinny shake of a spray paint can. Hudson strolled onto the bridge carrying a red can. The crimson that matched the BMW she drove.

"Where did you get that?" Zola asked.

"Your trunk, duh," Hudson said. He still slurred his words but his inflection was undercut with something more sinister. "You told me you had it. Jeez, I thought you were supposed to be smart or something."

Carly chuckled. Zola gave her a look. Maelle whispered curse words under her breath.

"Can we just get this lighting of the soul flame, or whatever, over with?" Zola crossed her arms.

"What are ya?" Hudson goaded. "Scared or something?" He looked Zola up and down then at Maelle.

The cold was beginning to bother Zola. Anything that this night could offer dissipated as the hours grew longer. The country was too quite beyond the light of the car's headlights. If this one act satiated Hudson's witch hunt, she could put away her pride for a moment.

Carly spoke, "Yeah, Hud, let's go find this thing and see what it could do. I'm freezing."

He didn't speak; he just tossed the can of paint from one hand to the other. Liam sipped on moonshine and Temecia and Brittney huddle close to one another. Declan leaned on the bridge like he was at park in the middle of the afternoon. The few others talked low amongst themselves.

"Fine," Hudson finally said. "If none of you are scared then –"

In one quick motion he popped off the cap, kneeled down to the bridge area closest to him, and sprayed.

Zola could see his arm moving and she knew he would stand and it would be her name. The gathering held their collective breath except for Maelle who grabbed her arm and swore. Beneath the hiss of the aerosol, she thought she heard Declan say, "That's not cool, dude."

Hudson stood. He was laughing. Liam stepped forward to admire his friend's work.

It was a half attempt at cursive, shoddy and it dripped freely.

"You *asshole*," Carly said through clenched teeth.

The lettering, as bad as it was, read *Carly*.

Zola was confused and bit her lip. Her ex-friend looked at everyone just as confused.

“What?” Hudson mocked. “You afraid or something? Who the fuck cares. Everything is just a dumb, stupid legend.” He swayed on his feet, but Liam held him firm.

“I have never done anything to you,” Carly said motioning to her warped name that covered layers of black, green, and white.

Hudson didn’t seem to care. “It doesn’t matter,” he said. “None of it matters. I’m going to write every one of yours na – ”

He didn’t finish. In two long strides, Zola closed the distance and snatched the can from his hands. She threw it into the creek. With a clank and a splash, the can was gone. For the first time since confronting Carly in English class, she stared directly into her friends’ eyes.

“Anyone got a lighter?” Zola said to everybody.

“Sure do,” either Temecia or Brittney said.

Hudson was dumbfounded. Liam passed him a jar of alcohol to diffuse whatever he was about to say. Declan smiled at Zola even though she wouldn’t look at him directly.

“Let’s find the gas line and get this over with,” Zola said.

Chapter Nine

There were several small paths that veined off Zombie Road. Last time they were all here, they explored one or two before getting bored and turning around. It was hard

enough to see with all cellphone flashlights zipping about through the trees and brush. Zola held on to Maelle who every so often whimpered about a noise off in the distance. What she heard above the murmur of the group Zola chalked up to fright and imagination. Their feet kicked empty bottles of alcohol and cigarettes.

“It’s not on this path, let’s turn around and go through that one on the right side,” Zola said for others to hear.

This all better be worth it or I will spray paint Hudson’s name on that bridge.

Then she thought of Carly and her name scrolled among the symbols. Carly hadn’t said a word and when a light passed over her face she looked pale and tired. She kept fiddling with the pieces of hair that escaped her pony tail and went into her eyes. Had this been a different time, had Zola not cared so much for what her former friend might say, she would have taken her hand and they would have been gone far away from here.

The next path started out like the last one, except doubt crept under the skin of everyone. They were a little more silent and the alcohol and its affect were wearing off.

Something snapped under Zola’s foot and Maelle stopped in her tracks. They both looked down and saw an animal carcass. Not one, but many. Different sizes scattered and rotting.

“Holy shit,” Maelle said and tugged on her friend’s arm. “Let’s turn around.”

“I think we’re on the right trail,” Zola said thinking of the marrow and fur on her soles.

It was then they came upon the gas line. Zola wasn’t sure what she expected from hearing the words “abandoned gas line,” but it was an odd sight in the middle of the

woods. So strange, that she knew immediately that the pipe-like, graffiti colored structure had to be what they were searching for. It stood in a clearing. No moon shown down upon it.

“*That’s it?*” someone behind her said.

“Ugh, this is so stupid,” said someone else.

“All of you, shut the hell up,” Hudson said. “Don’t you know what happens when you light the soul flame?” He didn’t wait for anyone to answer, “They say a zombie appears beside you.” He lowered his voice and curled his fingers like claws.

Zola approached the gas line. Maelle let go of her arm and stayed quite the distance away. Zola circled around it. There was a small hole and when she held her breath she could hear a soft whistle coming from the depths of the earth.

“Hey, I thought they call it the soul flame because you’ll be visited by a soul who couldn’t cross over to the afterlife or some shit,” Declan said.

“I’ll kick your ass and see where you go in the afterlife you –”

Zola rubbed her temple. “Can I get that lighter?” she said and looked around.

“Temecia? Brittney?”

They handed her a lighter and a wave of nausea swept over her. The video recordings started rolling on the cell phones. Not used to the rough mechanics of the lighter, Zola flicked it one, two, three times. The flame stuck and she moved it in front of the hole.

A great *whoosh* sounded and for a moment the fire caught the gas and turned an icy blue torch. Zola stumbled back. Maelle screamed and few people gasped and jumped.

Then silence. Zola waited almost afraid to turn to one side or the other. Then she laughed.

“Aww man, no zombies or ghosts,” Liam said.

“Who’s next?” Hudson asked.

Carly stepped forward and Zola handed over the lighter. “Good luck,” she said to her.

The same loud rush of elements merging echoed through the forest. One after another all the females present, except for Maelle, took turns lighting the soul flame. *No zombies. No ghosts. Just idiots appear before the flame.*

Hudson, Liam, and another guy or two dispersed to relieve themselves in the woods.

“That wasn’t so bad now was it,” Delcan said as more of a statement than question. “It’s actually been kind of fun.” He inched closer to where Zola and Maelle stood as the last girl lit the flame without ceremony or attention paid.

“You better light it, too,” she said to him. “Ya know, just in case. For fun.” Zola put the lighter in Declan’s hand. His expression was blank. But nonetheless, he walked over and lit it. He not very casually looked over each shoulder for good measure.

Just as Zola began telling Maelle to start back to the car, commotion came from just past where the flashlights wouldn’t reach.

“What are they going on about?” Maelle asked Zola.

“I have no idea,” she said. “Probably something related to dicks.” She did admit that it was peculiar chattering and noises that came from the few who went into the woods. “I don’t care what they see or what they’re doing though. They witnessed me

lighting the flame. Now all they need to do is keep their word. Watch for those dead animals again – ”

“Oh my God.”

“What the fuck?”

“Jesus.”

They materialized again with a new body in their ranks. Even with the cell phone lights dancing and striking off the new person Zola recognized him. For the second time in just a couple weeks, she was near the green man.

She swallowed, yet her throat was dry. Maelle all but pulled Zola out of the clearing. “Wait,” Zola hissed.

The green man wore the same flannel and baggy jeans caked with dirt.

“Look at this motherfucker we found spying on us,” Hudson said. “Huh, buddy? What were ya doin’ out there?”

“Someone get this...man...a cigarette,” Liam said. “Any moonshine left? Anyone?”

Most of the others had looks of revulsion towards the man who came out of the woods. They visibly curled away. Except the ones who pulled him from his spot. It was a big joke to them.

Once again, Zola couldn’t look away. The green man struggled with lighting the cigarette in his swollen lips. His whole face was weathered, cracked and the skin pulled too taut in others. The space where his left eye should be, looked infected. His nose resembled a piece of ground meat. Zola felt a mixture of pain and sickness.

“What’s wrong with his face?”

“Nah, man. I’m out.”

“Hurry take a picture, you gotta send this, Garret.”

So she decided she seen enough. She couldn’t stand the man’s chapped fingers as he guzzled the moonshine. She couldn’t stand that Hudson and Liam got out their phones and were posing for pictures with him.

Zola, for a moment, closed her eyes to all of it. It was too much to watch. Too surreal. The moonshine made her head swim up near the stars somewhere. There had to be some other green man her grandfather told her not to go near. It couldn’t be this hermit who lived out in the forest. If only she could ask him again.

“Hey, do your little song for the audience. Maybe I’ll give you a dollar *this time*,” Hudson said to the green man. He rustled around in his pocket and produced a few bills.

Zola thought they acted too casual. She wondered how many times Hudson, Liam, and the rest have partied out Marshville and they attracted the green man. The more the night creeped on, the less she cared about winning Carly back as a friend. Marshville was a few miles from her family’s property. *Is he living around here? Did we scare him out of his previous encampment?*

After Zola and Maelle went back into the woods and saw the green man the first time, word spread around school of the indecent. Maelle fell on her backside and couldn’t practice with the team for a couple days. Without much interrogation, Temecia and Brittney got the whole story out of her. Then suddenly, the whole school knew of the encounter in the woods.

Maddy Hershberger stopped Zola in the hall after class and told her she saw the green man one, too. Her and her dad were driving down the highway late one night and

he was walking down the road trying to hitch a ride. Her dad said they couldn't pick up the hitcher because he was the green man and his dad used to party with him. Maddy described the blue track suit the green man wore with yellow stripes. Zola doubted she actually saw the real green man, but she didn't say anything.

The green man plucked the cigarette from his misshapen mouth. Then he began whistling. The high pitches caught on the subtle breeze that weaved through the trees. The low tones dug out a hole in Zola. The song was somber. It sped up then slowed down in a single breath. Tears stung the edge of her eyes. The sound could stir animals from slumber.

In the dim light, she could see Maelle's brow furrowed and Carly placed a hand over own mouth her eyes glistened. Declan was looking up at the sky.

Yet, Hudson and Liam howled with laughter and broke the green man's concentration. He messed up, sputtered, and then stopped altogether. His good eyed blinked fast and one hand reached out for some money.

"Just give him the dollar, dude. Then let's go back to my place. We can drink more beer there," Declan said.

Hudson acted as if he was going to give the green man the wad of cash, and then he pulled a single dollar from the stack and held it out. "That was shit. You could do better than that. Maybe next time I'll give you more," Hudson said. "I mean we gave you cigarettes and booze already."

The dollar bill floated past the green man's hand, down onto the ground. This made them laugh even louder than before. The man bent down even though he trembled. No one shone light on the ground as he felt around for the money.

“Enough, okay?” Zola said even though her voice shook. Her emotions were raw from one humiliation after another at the hands of these people.

The laughing stopped and the attention was on her. She crossed an invisible line over to where Hudson and Liam stood. They towered over her.

She flipped her flashlight on and saw the bill. She picked it up herself and waited for the man take it from her hand. It’s like he moved in slow motion, underwater. The green man steadied himself on a sapling and pushed himself up, wheezing the whole time.

“Of course. You’re always to one to say something,” Hudson said.

Liam chimed in too, “Yeah, I kind of liked your silent treatment this school year.”

“Maybe she just wants to suck ol’ Greeny’s dick over here,” Hudson said.

“Did you send him tit pics, too, Zola?” Liam snickered. “Why do you care so much about this homeless freak?”

She restrained herself to see Declan’s reaction. She felt exposed already, The Reckoning or not.

The choices she made to be silent have led her to a space she didn’t like to be. A space where she witnessed degradation for the sake of entertainment. Choosing to be away from these people gave her the clarity to see them or maybe since she stepped away she finally sees them. Had they always been so belligerent? Did she choose to overlook their side comments? Was Carly ever her best friend? Her whole life before the summer seemed too far away to be her own story. There was a time she joked along right beside them and she ignored Maelle’s messages because she was some girl who liked to copy her notes and talk about basketball all the time.

The night always reveals and conceals what it wants. If anything, Zola was thankful.

“Zo...la.”

Confused, she looked at the green man. He wasn't much taller than her and his mouth moved again. “Zo...la.”

The voice was thick and wet. It took everything in Zola not to recoil. She wouldn't let the others see her do that.

“I knew it!” Hudson said. “Greeny just loves the young girls.”

“Stop it, Hudson. You're sick,” Maelle spoke up.

Then the green man reached out to Zola, palm down. He pulled back his sleeve ever so slightly. Zola froze and watched his fingers twitch. But Declan appeared and shoved the green man back. “Hey man, don't be touching now,” Declan said.

How ridiculous, was the first thing Zola thought. *You'd think this is funniest thing Hudson and company ever saw. This will be the night to go down in their memories as the most fun they ever had by the sounds of them.*

The green man coughed and was unsteady. Zola grabbed his arm and kept him up. This was the closest she's been to him.

“Declan, move,” Zola said.

Declan looked at her with the most expression she's ever beheld. She walked with the green man. She was taking him, herself away from these people. Not thinking, she just back tracked on the carcass strewn path. The people standing around gave them wide girth to leave.

Their exit was slower than she'd like. The green man hobbled and limped. Every piece of forest rubble caused him to almost trip. Maelle chased after her shining her flashlight. A string of more composite swear words than she comprehend escaped her friend's lips.

Behind them, she could hear the group and hoped they just stayed away. They reached the road. She let go of the man's arm and he slouched on the nearest car.

"Now what?" Maelle asked.

Zola turned to the green man, "Are you okay? Can I take you anywhere? A hospital or friend's house?" She really didn't expect an answer and the words "friend's house" sounded awkward because she knew better. No answer.

"What!" Maelle cried. "Zo – no way." And despite it being the darkest part of the night, the white of eyes shone. "Just leave him over there," she gestured to the other side of the road where more forest lived.

"Leave him?" Zola furrowed her brow. "Mae, he's hurt. We have to do something."

"Hell no. Nu huh. No way."

"Then just get a ride home from Brittney and Temecia. I'm going to take him to the emergency." Zola took in his eye socket oozing pus and his labored breathing.

"I can't just let you go with him either!" Maelle said and paced around. "And what if you end up dead or murdered?"

"That's pretty much the same – never mind," Zola said. "I think I hear them coming. Decide now"

Once again, she gingerly guided the man towards her car. He was in bad shape. He groaned and made low, rumbling sounds. At the car, she put him into the backseat where he could lay until she arrived at the ER. Before she moved the seat back up she could see his head hanging at an uncomfortable angle. She removed her hoodie and bunched it up. Not wanting to touch his head, she kind of pressed the fabric to his face and he shifted. He blinked up at her.

“Goddamit, woman, you will never be able to repay for this shit,” Maelle said. She lowered herself into the car as if would turn back into a pumpkin at any moment.

I hope I don't regret this.

The engine turned. Movement of silhouettes came out of the woods, but Zola swung the steering wheel hard and peeled out in the opposite direction.

Chapter Ten

Maelle gagged. The air was cold, but she rolled the window down even further. Zola told her twice now to stop being so dramatic. The car's interior smelled of moss and wet leaves with a note of sickness and something dead. *Why does he have to smell on top of everything else?*

“The whole school will be talking about this Monday,” Maelle said.

“I know,” Zola said. “But it can't get much worse, can it?”

She expected Maelle to say something snarky in response, but she remained quiet.

The green man was silent, too. She looked back at him when they made a stop.

Maelle gagged again.

“Zo –”

“I’m dropping you off,” Zola said. She put up her hand to stop her friend from speaking more. “The hospital is five minutes away, you know this. I’ll be fine. He hasn’t moved a muscle this whole time. He’s passed out.”

Maelle gave her friend a skeptical look. “I just...whatever. You never listen to nothing, so why start tonight when you have a homeless dude in your backseat.”

“I have my cell phone. I’ll text you as soon as I drop him off,” Zola said. They turned and then arrived in front of Maelle’s apartment complex.

“You better sanitize this car or I am never getting in it again,” Maelle said as she exited.

Zola waited a beat because she always liked to watch Maelle get to the door to know she’s safe. Maelle knew what Zola was waiting for. Instead of going to the main door, she just shook her head and pointed in the direction of the hospital.

Soon, her friend would be in her warm bed. Of this, Zola was envious. As much as she was looking forward to helping someone in need, something tugged at her being. There was something that told her that the night was just beginning. But she brushed the feeling away as fast it rushed in and concentrated on getting to the ER.

She only ever went to the hospital when her little sister, Baby Bean was born. At a stop sign she looked up direction how to get there. It figured she took a wrong turn somewhere.

The houses were familiar because all houses in Sinclair look similar. No faux mansions or new construction, just house after house that looked like a couple of grandparents lived in it. It didn’t matter who actually lived in it, they still looked like a house a grandma took care of.

No other cars were out on the road. No house lights on. Zola looked at her phone to get her bearings and planned out the next few turns. She set the phone down then adjusted her rearview mirror.

The green man's reflection stared back at her.

His eye rolled about. Tufts of hair were silver in the street light.

A shiver surged through her.

"Uh, sorry," she said, voice hoarse. "We're almost to the emergency. Not too much longer now. Just hold tight."

"Zola," he said with clarity this time.

One of the boys must have said her name a couple times. He picked it up that way she reasoned with herself.

"Yeah, I'm Zola," she said making her voice work. "What's yours?" She tried not to look into the mirror at him too long. She didn't anticipate an answer.

He said, "Richard." The gurgle was all but gone from his speech.

"Nice to meet you, Richard. Now let's get moving," she said. Her foot went on the gas pedal but the car didn't move. It didn't even lurch forward. The dashboard lights flickered once, twice then went out. The engine went dead. She turned the key. Nothing.

One by one, the streetlamps and floodlights went out at the top of the street until a moment later she was swallowed by darkness.

Not complete blackness, but a faint glow allowed her to see.

She reached for her phone, but it wouldn't turn on. The chartreuse glow filled the car from within. From the backseat. She lifted her eyes to the rearview mirror again.

"Don't be afraid, Zola. This is me," the green man said.

Zola was too freaked out. She tried the door handle but couldn't get out of the car. The whistling she heard back in the forest started again. The soft glow and the whistling together soothed. Something inside of her was slipping. If she just closed her eyes. If she just whistled back.

“Look I don't know what's —” she stopped short.

His hand reached out to her again. “I can make the hurts go away. Betty Jean.”

The name jarred Zola. It was her grandmother's name. She heard her mother say it a thousand times. They gave the name to her little sister. It conjured the picture she looked at everyday on the way up the stairs to her room in her house. The only picture that her grandma and grandpa had from their wedding day. An old formal photo where her grandma smiled bright. The rest of the pictures weren't displayed when they moved into the farmhouse because she never looked directly into the camera anymore. So, grandpa didn't put them up. Only the sepia colored wedding photo. Betty Jean was a smiling young woman with rich dark skin and her hair in an up-do. Betty Jean with lace gloves and a collared, hand-sewn white dress.

Thinking of her felt good and Zola could not imagine any of the pictures where the family went to the beach. Her mom as a baby, and all her aunts and uncle, beaming at the camera while Betty Jean looked at the ocean. No, she saw those pictures, too, but they didn't come to her. Only goodness.

“How do you know my grandma's name?” she turned to look at him for answer. That's when his cool hand found her bare shoulder. She felt the callouses then that sensation melted away.

Everything melted away. Her grandma's sadness. The images of her friends hurting people. The look on her mom's face when she balances the checkbook. The failing crops of corn on the farm. Her grandpa's dementia. The emotions she felt being push and pulled by Declan. Carly's rejection. The photos of herself for all to see. None of it mattered because it slipped away so easy.

That isn't right, she thought to herself. She shook herself free from the green man's grasp before it all fell away. Before the glimmer lit itself within her.

The prospect of feeling nothing was worse.

"No," she said to him.

The lights in the car and street burned back to life. The *ding, ding, ding* of messages came from her phone.

"I'm sorry, Zola," the green man said. He opened the door and squeezed out of the car.

She felt as if her lungs were filling with air after almost drowning. *Breathe*. After looking out each window she couldn't tell which direction he headed in. Was he still limping?

This time when she put the key in the ignition, the car started up. The gas pedal worked. She texted Maelle back that she was fine. She was heading home. No she didn't quite make it to the hospital. She'll call her as soon as she wakes up tomorrow. Her hand wasn't steady enough to type anything more elaborate.

The next message was from Declan. Of everything, that was probably one of the more weird things of the evening. She didn't bother reading it. She took one look at the name and decided she didn't have enough energy.

The surprising message was from Carly. The message read, “Be safe ok? I want to talk when you get a minute. Please text back soon.”

That has to be a trick, Zola thought. There has to be some ulterior motive. Then she bit her lip and thought better of it because everything up until the start of the school year would have her believe in the boy she liked and one of her best friends.

Chapter Eleven

Once Zola showered and gave the BMW’s backseat a preliminary cleaning, she laid in her bed unable to sleep. She checked on Baby Bean in her crib, nothing amiss with her. Duke was happy to come in the house with her. He wagged his tail all the way up the steps to her room. For a moment, Zola paused and touched her grandma and grandpa’s wedding photo. A new regret of not knowing her swelled in her chest.

Betty Jean never seemed incredibly remarkable to Zola. Actually, it was only her mom who was close to her grandmother. Besides, it wasn’t like Zola ever met or knew her grandma outside of what her mom told her. In the morning, she would ask her mom some questions about Betty Jean.

A song was stuck in Zola’s head. A song of old and young. She couldn’t quite catch any of the words, just the melody. She hummed it as she lay in bed. Humming wasn’t helping the song. Instead, she softly whistled it in the dark.

The whistling startled old Duke from his spot on the rug. He gave a gruff bark, as if answering her back. She didn’t even realize what she was doing. “Sorry, boy,” she apologized. There were too many images behind her eyelids. She couldn’t calm herself.

Normally, she would just scroll through her phone looking at old messages, pictures, and stuff people were saying online. *Not tonight. Maybe I'll just chill out with that for a long while.*

She nestled in deeper under the comforter. The sadness she tried so hard to stave off seeped in through the cracks.

Old Duke let out another small bark. "Hey, shh," she said still beneath the covers. But he yapped again. "Duke. Be. Quiet." She snaked her hand out from the warmth and tried to find his fur. He wasn't there.

She looked from beneath the covers and the dog was gone from his spot. Instead, the dog was looking towards the window. He barked again.

Ready to take him back outside, she threw off the covers. The dog sometimes barked outside at an animal, but what could possibly catch his attention on the second story window of the house? Then he crossed the room from one side to another, agitated. The only sound Zola could hear were Duke's half growl, half whimper and his nails clicking across the hardwood floor.

Maybe if she opened the window she could hear something scuttling in the yard or the trash cans. The fresh air flooded the room. There was a sound. A car. *Not so weird*, Zola thought. The neighbor's could be going or coming home from work. He worked different sets of hours. Occasionally, people don't realize the street ends in a dead end. They have to turn around in a small dirt loop at the bottom of the street, or in either house's driveway, lest they run right smack into a tree or two.

Zola suspected it was the latter. She just about closed her window when the car's tires screeched and they peeled out. Old Duke went crazy with barking. The only thing

Zola could think to do was take him back outside because that is surely what her mom would do once she wakes up. In her fuzzy slippers, Zola followed Duke down the steps and to the back door.

Once downstairs, she heard the creaking on floorboards and knew her parents were up. Baby Bean cried so they would go there first. At least Zola could put the dog out then face the firing squad and play twenty questions. She formulated answers to common questions they asked in her head to make her night sound as believable as possible.

Leave out actual green people, the soul flame, and moonshine.

Before Zola could tie Duke back up on his tether, he took off into the yard. The action was so unlike the dog, it took a second to compose herself before she took off after him into the night. She cried out his name.

She saw him curved around to the front yard then she lost him. She cried out again. To her surprise, he barked. The bark came from the cornfield. The corn was dry and the leaves on the stalks crumbled under a touch. Any day now her mom would attempt to level the crop and start again new for next year.

Zola cursed under her breath at her mom for putting off the inevitable and letting the corn brown and wither into nothing. So now she had to go search for her dog in it.

Her slippers were already wet with dew, but she plunged forward. She called to Duke again and he answered. Only this time another came on the trail of the bark, a human noise. At least, Zola thought it could be human. The sound was a choke, or an attempt at a wail. Zola picked up her pace trying to keep her direction straight. She knew just how easy it could be to get turned around. The moon was out she kept it in front of her and the road perpendicular to her side.

The stalks cut at her skin. Razor thin, smooth licks across her arms. *The road should end soon. Where is he? I must have got turned around.*

The light from the back stoop of the house came on and her mom called out for her.

“I’m in the cornfield,” Zola hollered back. “I have to find Duke.”

Blood and her own breathe pounded in her ears. Was Duke just running in circles? Did he already turn back? Before she gave up, she heard the strange sound again. But it sounded like it was all around her. Above. Below. Within. Her dog could not be making that noise.

Zola headed toward the road, so she could loop back into the field and try again. As soon as the corn stalk gave way to a stretch of grass, she could see a heap midst the strip and Duke paced around the shape. There was no mistaking it was a human. The animal and human crying mixed together created a scratching sensation on her skull. It was the worst sound she ever heard up to the point in her life.

The moon was the only light and her eyes wouldn’t focus. She couldn’t take in what she was seeing. The figure wore a pastel purple, long-sleeved shirt and jeans. The brown straight hair had come out of its ponytail and stuck to person’s face. Zola knew the clothes. Zola knew the person who lay between the cornfield and the dead end road, but she could think it let alone say it. The scene didn’t make sense to her. It wasn’t real.

What was real is the text that seemed like she just read. Real was the fact that her former friend hated her for sending nude pictures. Hope that they would put everything behind them was real.

People who glow green were not real. Guys who could not bother to acknowledge certain truths were not real. Not real was the prospect of nude pictures of yourself and your friends were on the internet.

And certainly, a former best friend lying with blood splattered across the shirt you got her for her birthday was real.

“Carly,” Zola choked out.

She fell to her knees. Zola didn’t dare to move her, but couldn’t stop her fingers from lifting those bangs out of her face. They were always in her face. Zola’s hand came back and she looked at her fingertips. Dark blood stained them. The world skewed.

Even when her mom gave birth to Baby Bean, Zola was in science class. Her aunt came to pick her up to be with her mom and dad, but by the time they arrived, Baby Bean was clean and a full-fledged person.

There was so much blood as her sight adapted to the moonlight. Some rational part of her told her what to do. Without hearing herself, because all the sound went out, she yelled for help. Old Duke howled. She screamed for her mom. She said Carly’s name over and over and vaguely wondered how they got to this point.

Maybe she should have let that emerald-colored glow sweep herself away. Nothing would feel better than this. Being nothing was an easy choice in all of her decisions. Is that what her grandma chose? She shook her head in disbelief that the Green man, some hermit skulking about the woods, could give or take away anything.

Shouts of her name *Zola, Zola, Zola* and lights cut through the dark. Her mom was here. She could release her Carly’s hand. Her mom knows what to do and how to fix

things. Words came from her mom's mouth, but the ones she clung onto were, "let's stay here with her. Let's just stay with her right now."

Chapter Twelve

Zola hated hospitals. She hated buildings that resembled hospitals. Like the nursing home her grandpa stayed in. Something about the stark white walls and scent of sick bodies and sterilization made her realize her grandpa was never getting out of that nursing home. The thought sent her deeper into more sadness than before.

Zola wondered if even doctors and nurses like hospitals. In the waiting room, she could see them flitting about from room to room or chatting with one another.

Her head rested on her mom's shoulder though and she tried to think about anything else. Anything besides her friend's blood on her hands. The feeling that her friend had died in her arms. It may be a feeling that will come creeping back up before the moments she tries to sleep for the rest of her life. A feeling of being helpless. Of fragility. Finality.

The Styrofoam cup of coffee grew cold but she still clutched to it. She was anything but tired. The morning shone through the windows. A whole night lived. Zola's mom said little. Just sat straight in her chair bearing Zola's heavy head. With no make-up on, Zola saw her mom's wrinkles from years of smiling. In the same place her grandma had them. Betty Jean. Could Zola bring up a homeless man with twisted features said her grandma's name just hours before?

The worst part was the police's questions. She gave her official statement with as many details as she could possibly remember. There was no mention of the green man or

her having him in the car. As soon as she was able, she texted Maelle everything that happened and what she told the police. The story was as follows

Maelle and Zola went to eat tacos. They went to the Marshville party. No they did not drink. Yes, Carly was there. No, she was not sure who she came with. From there, they went to Zombie Land. Yes, Carly was there. They didn't stay long, they realized it was getting late, so Zola dropped Maelle off at her apartment then went home. As soon as Zola got home she discovered Carly in the cornfield because her dog led her there.

Zola could only hope that everyone else the police question said similar things. But all of that was more or less her evening. Everything else was too dream-like.

This is what Zola told Carly's parents too. It didn't feel great leaving out details to a man and woman she knew so well. Bringing up the drinking, the Green man, the reason to go to Zombie Land, were things Zola couldn't say aloud. Carly's parents were in her hospital room talking to the doctors and nurses probably. Something about surgery and x-rays and determining the damage.

It was only after she answered everyone's questions that she realized this could have been a way out of the Reckoning. Maybe it wasn't too late. Her mom's shoulder was warm and her breathe was deep and steady. Zola could tell her mom about the plans to post pictures on PicMe on Halloween. Then she remembered the look on the cops faces last night. The PicMe is up. But there was nothing amiss. Zola followed the page to make sure she knew what was going down. The cops did nothing because there is nothing to do. That is, until the nude photos, and God know what else these people have, are posted. Then the screenshots will happen. Zola out her head back down on her mom's shoulder.

“What, honey,” her mother started. She stopped short because Carly’s parents came up to them.

The looked as if they hadn’t slept in years. Color was gone from their face as they told Zola’s mom about Carly’s condition. Many stitches. Some bruising around her torso. They didn’t much look to Zola, but there was a thank you for finding her when you did attached to their clinical report.

Maybe they waited for Zola to say something. She didn’t. Zola’s mom said good words because she always knew the right words to say.

“Come, Zo,” her mom said. “Let’s go home and get some sleep. There’s nothing else we can today.”

In the car, Zola slumped against the door. The word bruised escaped her mom’s lips. It was a mix of a question and statement.

When they arrived to the farm, there was evidence of others who have been. The cornfield had been disturbed by people gathering evidence and looking around to fill the gaps in Zola’s account of last night.

“Don’t look over there,” her mom said and took her by the shoulders. “Not yet.”

Her dad was in the kitchen with food made. She wasn’t hungry. He ran towards her and hugged her. The words he said were soothing, Zola guessed, but her mind was asleep. She registered Baby Bean cooing at her. Nothing changed in her world. Zola envied that.

They let the dog sleep in the house, no fuss made at all. Zola put her phone on the charger and slept for what seemed like three days.

The last thoughts before slipping into sleep were not of the thin line of death, but a peaceful green glowing image from some dream she couldn't place.

On Sunday, Zola felt some semblance of being human. She sent a text to her mom that she wasn't going to church, but she would make sure to eat something and rest some more. The reverent text back from her mom was full of concern and relief.

Social media was crowded with pictures from the party. Nothing with the green man. Declan posted a picture of the fire. The caption read "Fire will consume us all." Deep.

When she scrolled past a picture of Carly and a couple of other girls next to the bonfire, her heart lurched. What happened, Carly?

Before long, she heard her family pile in to the car and set off to church then to the nursing home to visit grandpa. Like most Sundays. Quickly, she washed her face because she swore she could still smell the smoke from the fire on her. She dressed in any random clothes she grabbed out of the closet. Duke got excited by her flurry of activity, so she let him out in the yard before she grabbed some breakfast bars to eat in the car.

She was on autopilot driving to the nursing home. With her hoodie pulled up, she made sure to avoid the regular nurses who usually greeted her. When she got into her grandpa's room, she closed the door. The chair was already pulled up close to his bedside. The old man lay on his back, the thin quilt pulled up to his chin.

Zola swallowed. He looked worse than she last saw him a couple weeks ago. He skin was less rich brown, the lines in cheeks were deeper and his hair looked more fine and greyer.

“Grandpa,” she said to him. What if he doesn’t open his eyes? What if he just sleeps and ignores me?

The moments ticked by. Then just as she was about to turn to leave his eyes flickered open. Not even like he was coming out of sleep. Zola sat forward in the chair, but kept her distance in case his hand snaked out of the blanket and gripped her wrist again. She repeated herself. He stared up at the ceiling longer. Any hope of her getting something, anything from him dissipated.

What had she expected? A conversation with someone who doesn’t recognize his own family? Her questions answered by a person who just stares the hours away? No, she didn’t expect any of that. Zola wanted to tell someone about what she saw the other night. The one hundred times it almost passed through her lips, would have been a burdened lifted. She didn’t need advice, but maybe a glimpse of the person her grandpa was before the disease settled in. A flash of him came out before, why couldn’t it happen again?

She decided to stand. His eyes were dilated and he hardly blinked. She stood right in his line of vision to the ceiling. This was the longest she looked at him in this room. Many times her mom would tell her just to talk to grandpa. Zola never believed it. Grandpa was far away. On a different planet now. Talking to him like her mom did every week, giving a recap of all of their lives through the week, embarrassed Zola just hearing it. Chatter from orderlies and carts being pushed made Zola hesitate. But time was running out. So she started. Everything that happened since she was last in this room, she told him. At first, it was awkward talking to someone who doesn’t respond or show any recognition that they are being talked to.

“Someone got a hold of some...pictures...of other people...that they have no business having,” she said. “They’re going to put them on the internet, which will be a very bad thing.” Then it became more comfortable for her. “You should have seen Maelle’s face. Maelle, remember she almost blew her hand off with a firecracker at the last Fourth of July you were living at the farm?” Zola laughed. Even as she told him about the party, he just blinked. When she got to the end, finding Carly’s body in the cornfield, her voice wavered. “But, he said her name,” Zola said then touched his shoulder. “Why did he say her name to me, grandpa?” Her eyes filled with tears that were burning all weekend.

“Betty Jean?” her grandfather spoke.

“Yes,” Zola said. She wiped the tears from her face.

“Betty Jean,” he said again. His eyes focused on Zola. “You’re here.”

“No,” Zola said. “I’m Zola, grandpa.”

He didn’t reach for her but wriggled under the quilt. Then he began sobbing. A dry sob. “But he killed you.”

“No, I’m Zola.”

“He killed you, and I will kill him,” he said and thrashed against the bed.

“Shh,” Zola tried to calm him. “What are you saying?”

“That bastard,” her grandpa said. “When I find him, I’m going to finish what I started.”

“Who? Who killed me?” Zola questioned him further.

“The green one.”