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CLOSE: A COLLECTION OF SOUTHERN GOTHIC SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT

Southern Gothic is a subgenre of Gothic literature, characterized by its setting in the American South and inclusion of macabre, supernatural, grotesque, and ironic elements. Authors of Southern Gothic used the genre to criticize problematic aspects of culture at the time of the Reconstruction Era. Three common features of this genre are its heteronormativity, death and decay, and inclusion of handicapped characters. This collection will challenge these tropes. The first story, *Life Keeps Going*, will include a mentally ill person, but stray away from portraying him as an innocent or a menace, a common dichotomy in Southern Gothic literature. The second, *That's Everything*, deals with death and decay, but contrasts the violent death commonly found in the genre by portraying a more peaceful death. The third story, *Witch One*, will challenge the heteronormativity of the genre by centering on a same-sex couple.

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Introduction

The genre of Southern Gothic began as a subgenre of Gothic literature, which was a popular genre of literature in England in the eighteenth century. Gothic writing was introduced as a way to criticize elements of society and culture that authors viewed as problematic. This early form of Gothic literature was characterized by romantic themes and the inclusion of many supernatural elements. The characters are often very flawed, or even grotesque, and are surrounded by stories of hauntings, death, and madness.

In the nineteenth century, Gothic literature made its way to America, where it became American Gothic. The most prominent authors of the beginning of American Gothic were Edgar Allen Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, who both write short stories in the genre. Poe's stories were often centered on death, and included characters that were darkly humorous and complex. Hawthorne created deeply flawed characters and used mystery and suspense throughout his stories.

Southern Gothic, as the name suggests, takes place in the American South. Although some stories do include other locations, by necessity they must begin or end in the South. This more specific genre of Gothic literature began in the 1920s with authors such as William Faulkner. However, it did not reach its height of popularity until the 1940s, lasting through the 1960s. The genre grew in response to the Reconstruction Era, which created a large amount of economic disadvantage in the South. Southern Gothic reacts to this disadvantage and marginalization, creating flawed characters and dismal, absurd situations. It rejects previous antebellum Southern literature, which would be far removed from the realities of that time.

Southern Gothic is characterized by a melancholy or spooky atmosphere, using the distinctive setting of the American South to its advantage. There are many historical buildings and architecture in the

South, which authors can use to create very interesting scenes. Sometimes the older houses will not be very well kept, giving the setting a sense of decay. Or, they may be near newer buildings, highlighting the juxtaposition of old and new, or history and modernity. Even the weather, such as the humid heat found in the Deep South, can be used to create a feeling of oppression and discomfort. These settings are often used to echo the state of Southern society as the author sees it. This, along with the use of the macabre, supernatural, grotesque, and ironic, are used to pursue social critique of the South.

One major theme found in Southern Gothic literature is that of the grotesque. A majority of Southern Gothic works include aspects that are grotesque, although they may be used in different forms. Some stories use physical grotesqueness, such as deformities or perhaps physical disabilities or illnesses. These features are easily recognizable by other characters and often lead to mistrust and rejection, as they usually represent a twisting of the soul as well, such as Lymon from Carson McCuller's *Ballad of the Sad Café*. Another form of the grotesque is moral grotesqueness. These characters do not show outward signs of their psyche, but they are nevertheless corrupt and immoral, like the Misfit and grandmother from *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. Other authors use the grotesque to mirror the absurdity they saw in Southern society, like Vardaman drilling holes into his dead mother's face in *As I Lay Dying* by Faulkner. The use of the grotesque in Southern Gothic is usually meant to illicit both sympathy and disgust from the reader.

One feature common in the genre is its widespread heteronormativity. As with much media, a great number of stories in the Southern Gothic style deal with opposite-sex relationships, such as *Ballad of the Sad Café* and *A Good Man is Hard to Find* and *Parker's Back* by O'Connor. This is likely a product of the time, as most works in the Southern Gothic canon were written in the early to mid twentieth century. Many stories do question gender roles, such as Miss Amelia's strength and high social standing in *Ballad of the Sad Café*, and there are some rare depictions of homosexual characters, such as Judith Fellowes from Tennessee Williams' *The Night of the Iguana*, though the narrative does not focus on her. However, the vast majority still includes heterosexual characters.

Another trope of Southern Gothic fiction is death and decay. Many stories in this genre include this, whether it happens to a person or the setting itself. In some stories, such as William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*, it takes both forms – in that story, the main character Emily's decline in health is mirrored by the decay of her own manor house. Though it can directly reflect the characters' own decent, in many cases the decay is merely a part of the setting. As Southern society is rich in history, it is inevitable that decay would be a part of life as time wears away antiquities. In many Southern Gothic stories, deaths come about violently, like in *Judgment Day* and *Greenleaf* by O'Connor.

A third interesting concept is the inclusion of handicapped characters, whether they have physical or mental illnesses. Although most Southern Gothic stories include eccentric characters, these characters have issues beyond the normal scope. Many stories in the genre focus on marginalized identities, such as people of color, women, or people with disabilities, who have been ostracized or oppressed by traditional Southern culture. These people were often cast as innocents, such as Benji from *The Sound and the Fury* by Faulkner or John Singer in McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. However, they also sometimes have a more negative connotation, becoming killers or otherwise doing harm, as in *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. In both instances, these characters are used to explore human nature and what it is capable of, often with unhappy outcomes. Many writers of Southern Gothic viewed the human condition with the potential to do harm, and because of their mental disabilities, these characters were more likely to exhibit that belief by either hurting someone or being hurt themselves.

The first story in this collection, *Life Keeps Going*, the main character, Marshall, has depression. The story centers on his struggles with his mental illness, and the ways that he tries to navigate his relationships with his mother and best friend. Throughout the narrative, the focus is on the way that Marshall tries to deal with and hide his depression, and where he places the blame for his distress and damaged relationships

This story deals with the trend in Southern Gothic of portraying mentally ill people as innocents. It explores what it means for a character to be “innocent”, while steering away from casting the character

as helpless, as this is not a helpful stereotype for mentally ill people at this time. Instead, it will investigate the complexities of responsibility for a person with a mental illness, as well as how much of his burden those around him should attempt to share.

Life Keeps Going deals with decay, but on a more conceptual level than is often seen in Southern Gothic. Much of Southern Gothic literature includes decay on a physical level, whether of an environment or a person. This story has the decay taking place in Marshall's mental health, affecting his sense of well-being and self-worth. Although decay of the mind can be seen in Southern Gothic stories, it usually presents as the erosion of a person's sanity, instead of their ability to derive enjoyment from their life.

The second story focuses on the trope of death. Titled *That's Everything*, it follows an old woman, Ida, as she reaches the end of her life and her interactions with her family. The main conflict centers on Ida's legacy and her preoccupation of passing her farm on to her children. Through her interactions with her family, this story illustrates how her own beliefs mesh or clash with those of her family members. Discussions of what Ida is to do with the farm reveal differing viewpoints, comparing Ida's older beliefs to her children and granddaughter's newer views. It also shows the effects of holding onto beliefs as society changes.

This story also works with the theme of decay, focusing on the physical health of the main character, but also touching on the state of society. As Ida's health deteriorates, more of her core values emerge to shape how her family deals with her condition. Ida's values will be compared against the common ideals of today's society, comparing what she deems appropriate to what society as a whole believes as a way to see where it has progressed or regressed.

In the third and final story, *Witch One*, deals with the issue of heteronormativity in Southern Gothic. This story is about two women, Mercy and Samira, in a relationship as they move into a new town. By focusing on a lesbian couple, this narrative provides much needed diversity to the Southern Gothic genre. It attempts to normalize the idea of a same-sex couple without dramatizing it unnecessarily. The women do not experience any crises in their relationship or feel conflict over their sexual identity, but

remain in a stable and healthy relationship. There are derogatory comments made about their relationship, but only from characters meant to be the antagonists.

This story will deal with the concept of the grotesque through the character of Police Captain Cade Ritter. He fits into the category of moral grotesque, where his twistedness is hidden beneath the skin. This character serves to highlight the racist nature of much of Southern culture. He also shows how religion and power can be abused, as these three things come together and are convoluted by Captain Ritter to cause harm to Mercy.

Witch One will also return slightly to Southern Gothic's roots by including more elements of the supernatural. As the title suggests, this story will contain and focus on witches. However, the supernatural element will still be fairly hidden, as the reveal of the witch constitutes the major climax of the story. This sense of mystery also calls up American Gothic and Hawthorne's technique of suspense.

This collection of aspects constitutes the basis of this collection because they all represent something about Southern Gothic that could use change. Some tropes became boring, such as the reliance on sudden, violent, and gory deaths. An interesting idea emerged to write a story where the characters saw the death coming and were allowed to react in different ways. This would give a new insight into Southern values surrounding death and the wishes of the dying. A story like this would be different from the vast majority of Southern Gothic literature already published. There were also some damaging aspects of the genre that could be changed, such as the way it dealt with the depiction of mentally ill people and compulsive heterosexuality. In a large number of stories with characters with mental illnesses, the figures generally fell into only two categories – deranged or innocent. A more nuanced view of mental illnesses was missing from the genre, which provided an opportunity for a new story about a more complicated mentally ill character. There was also a large amount of heteronormativity in the Southern Gothic genre. The lack of same-sex couples was understandable given that the genre was at its peak at a time when homosexuality was generally unaccepted. However, that lack created a space for more representation to be added.

These stories also deviate from the norm in Southern Gothic of ending stories on a tragic, unhappy, or ambiguous note. A large portion of classic Southern Gothic literature ends with little to no resolution for the characters. This aligns with the attitudes of the time period, when things were so run down and seemed hopeless. But this collection is set in more modern times and meant to reflect its ideals. Therefore, the stories have more hopeful and resolved endings, as is true to more modern ideals of storytelling. At this time, readers are more disappointed in an unhappy ending, and often feel cheated. They are more likely to use literature as a form of escape, and therefore do not like to be left with an unhappy ending. However, this does not mean that the story cannot examine serious issues. These stories remain critical of current ideals and societal beliefs. The only difference is that they offer some small hope at the end for the future.

Although these stories deal with changing or addressing many aspects of Southern Gothic literature, the genre remains entertaining and intriguing. The inclusion of spooky elements to create a compelling setting and characters makes for an enjoyable and unique reading experience. The characters in Southern Gothic are usually odd or unusual, sometimes disturbed in some way, which, as a departure from popular fiction, can be very pleasurable to read. The discussion of morality in Southern Gothic also creates a fascinating read, as many times characters are allowed to engage in questionable actions without being outright condemned for them. The room for different interpretations and viewpoints is a refreshing and rarely seen phenomenon that is actually very common in Southern Gothic literature.

Chapter 1

Life Keeps Going

The final bell of the school year rang, sending students spilling out of the doors of the high school. Shouts and laughter echoed through the air as they left the square brick building behind them, looking forward to the long, warm days of summer.

Marshall watched as the stale midday sun baked down on their heads, their shadows flat and lifeless, more like those cartoon holes you can peel up and move around than outlines of real people. The heat haze already wafting from the gooey blacktop promised another scorching, muggy holiday. Instead of joining the rest of the students, he hung back in the shadow of the school's entryway. Though he was happy about the end to homework and hours spent stuck behind an undersized desk, the expanse of the summer seemed incomprehensible to him. The days stacked one on another, stretching out into the distance, almost as far away as the sun that beat down on them. He could barely imagine himself on the other side.

Someone walked up behind him, making him jump as they spoke without warning. "Looks like the summer's gonna be a doozy, huh?"

Marshall spun to find his friend Todd slouching behind him, his backpack slung across one shoulder and sweat already dotting his forehead. Todd gave him a lopsided grin as he walked up beside him.

Marshall wiped at his own brow, looking back to the parking lot full of kids. "Yeah, if it's this hot already, we're gonna melt before school can start up again."

Todd laughed, leaning against the opposite side of the doorframe Marshall stood in. "We'll be puddles before two weeks are up."

Marshall put on a goofy grin. “That wouldn’t be so bad. At least we wouldn’t have to worry about coming back here anymore.”

Leaning over, Todd checked Marshall with his shoulder. “Can’t say I’d be disappointed.” Shifting his backpack more securely on his shoulder, he squinted out into the quickly emptying lot. “Still, it’s only one more year. Then we can get out of here and really start our lives.”

“I’m going somewhere where it actually snows in the winter,” Marshall asserted, following Todd out to his rusting antique of a car for a ride home.

But beneath his smile, he felt an odd emptiness in his chest. The future. He knew he’d have to figure it out sometime. But it all just felt so intangible. Theoretical. As if it was something that didn’t really apply to him.

Shaking his head as if to dispel the thoughts, he threw his bag into Todd’s backseat and scrambled into the car. Todd turned the key and pulled out of the parking space and joined the slow-moving line of cars snaking down the school’s driveway. As they finally picked up speed, he stuck his head out the window, flipping his middle finger at the school and shouting, “See you in September, fuckers!” The car jerked back and forth as Todd let his hands off the wheel.

Marshall allowed laughter to bubble up in his throat as he grabbed Todd’s shirt, yanking his friend back into his seat, ignoring the way his heart had pounded for a second with something more like anticipation than fear.

“What do you think of this one?” Marshall’s mother asked, pulling up yet another information site for yet another university.

Marshall glanced at it, the bright colors and pictures of wide, sweeping lawns only serving to elevate his unease. He looked back down at his phone. “Sure, that seems nice.”

His mother let out a frustrated sigh. “Marshall, you’re not even looking. This is your future we’re talking about, you need to pay attention!”

Marshall groaned, shoving his phone into his pocket and slumping even further into his chair.

“Mom, it’s the summer. School just ended a week ago. I don’t want to look at this now.”

“I know it’s your vacation, and you just want to have fun,” his mother said, her tone remaining firm. “But you need to start looking at schools.” She pushed the laptop across the table towards him.

“Application deadlines will come up before you know it, and you need to figure out where you want to go.”

Marshall tapped at the trackpad, staring at the page sightlessly before spinning the computer back towards his mother. “I know it’s important, but I just want to relax for a little while before I get into this, okay?”

His mother frowned heavily, fixing him with a stare that he returned, but finally pulled the laptop back in front of her.

Marshall stood and walked towards the door, pulling his phone back out and rapidly tapping at the screen. “Todd’s gonna pick me up and we’re gonna hang out for the rest of the day.”

His mother watched him from her seat at the table, her arms folded across her chest. “All right. For now. But don’t think we’re done talking about this.”

“Yeah, sure, mom,” he responded absently, the door already swinging shut behind him.

He sat on the curb as he waited for Todd, running his hands through the fat, bright St. Augustine’s grass. Marshall knew that he should be starting to look at colleges. But every time he started to consider it, his brain shut down. He couldn’t imagine himself in a dorm, or a lecture hall. Besides, why would any of the schools his mom showed him want him, anyway? His grades were just average; his SAT scores weren’t anything spectacular. He had nothing special to offer that would make a school pick him over thousands of other applicants. He would probably just get rejection letters from any places he applied.

He poked at soft patch of asphalt where the road had been mended with his toe, watching as the tar squished up over the sole of his foot. He imagined what it would be like if the road melted all the way

through and he could put his foot right through it. The asphalt would bubble up around his leg, sucking him down until it closed over his head and he sank down into the earth. Then he wouldn't have to worry about colleges or his future, or his life in general.

Distracting Marshall from his thoughts, Todd pulled up in front of him in his beat-up car, rolling down the window.

"Your chauffeur is here," he said, tipping an imaginary hat.

Marshall clambered up from the curb, walking around the car and slumping into the passenger seat.

"Thanks, man," he said as the car rattled down the street. "My mom was nagging me about college applications and I had to get out of there."

"Dude, already?" Todd asked incredulously. "We've only been out of school like three days."

Marshall scoffed, staring out the side window. "I know right? I told her to chill for a while. Let me enjoy my last summer."

"You mean second to last, right?" Todd glanced at him briefly. "We still have the summer before we go to college."

"Oh yeah, duh." Marshall turned to smile at his friend. "At least we know I'm not going into any math-based majors."

Todd laughed, punching him on the arm. Marshall shoved him lightly in return, then turned back to the window, his smile dropping as he rubbed his bicep absentmindedly. The conversation had reminded him that he didn't even have any ideas for what he wanted to major in; he didn't have any interests to turn into careers.

"Let's stop all this school talk," he told Todd. "I don't want to think about anything today."

A grin spread across Todd's face. "I know just where to go to make that happen."

Todd grinned as they pulled up next to the wooded park down the street from his house.

“The old stomping grounds,” he said, climbing out of the car and propping his elbows on the roof.

“Remember when we used to run around in the woods and try to catch tadpoles in the pond?”

Marshall followed towards the rear of the car as he popped the trunk and rummaged around inside. “Yeah, man. What was that, second grade?” He gazed out at the trees crowding behind the swing set. “Feels like ages ago.”

“Bet we’d be better at it now,” Todd said, emerging from the trunk with a small net in one hand and two beers in the other.

Marshall cheered, “Score!” as he snatched a beer and popped the tab. The boys clinked the cans together and took a long swig in unison.

Propping the net over his shoulder, Todd led the way into the woods, starting a story about a video game he had just started. Marshall wandered along behind him, only half listening as he looked around him. The tall, straight trees stretched off into the distance, their foliage dimming the mid-afternoon sunlight into an artificial dusk. Marshall couldn’t help but think their rough bark looked like scabs. Between the trunks the ground was choked with underbrush, spiny bushes and creeping ivy spread across the forest floor so Todd had to swat at them with his net. Long brown needles littered the ground beneath them, muffling their footsteps as they continued towards the creek they played in as children.

With another sip of his beer, Marshall leaned down and grabbed a cluster of needles, spinning it between his fingers. His steps slowed as he ran the tips over the inside his wrist, from side to side then up and down, following the tracery of blue veins. He imagined the pointed tips were harder, sharper, slicing the skin to reveal warm red blood...

“Yo, slowpoke, c’mon!” Todd called from ahead.

Marshall dropped the needles as if he had been scalded. He took a generous gulp of alcohol, then jogged to catch up with Todd.

“You cool?” his friend asked.

Marshall nodded, waving his hand slightly. “Yeah, sorry, I was just thinking.”

Todd knocked him playfully with his shoulder. “I thought you said we weren’t doing that today.”

“Yeah,” Marshall murmured, giving him a half smile. He tipped his beer can back, taking another long sip.

After another moment of silent walking, they came across the creek from their childhood. They both stood looking at the skinny, shallow stream before Todd commented, “It’s smaller than I remember.”

Marshall had to agree. Where he had remembered a creek big enough to splash and play in, this waterway was almost nothing more than a muddle trickle through the woods.

“Well, I’m sure we didn’t exaggerate the amount of tadpoles we found in here,” Todd continued, waving the net in his hand. “I’ll go downstream and you go up and we’ll yell when we find something.”

With a nod, Marshall turned away, trudging along the side of the creek. The brown water gurgled along past him, dribbling past rocks and twigs, going nowhere fast. Kind of like his own life. Marshall never thought he’d be identifying with a stream, but the pointless meandering of the water felt like his own path, with no purpose and going nowhere fast.

As he wandered, Marshall found himself wondering how hard it would be to drown in the shallow creek. He had seen a CSI episode where someone had drowned in only a couple inches of water, but they had also been electrocuted, preventing them from getting up. There was enough water for Marshall to submerge his face, but he would have to hold himself down somehow.

“Marshall!” he heard faintly, snapping him out of his thoughts. “Marshall!”

He turned to see Todd jogging towards him, his brows furrowed in concern.

“Dude, are you sure you’re okay?” he asked as he came to a stop beside Marshall. “I’ve been calling your name for like five minutes. You were just standing there staring at the water.”

Marshall shook his head, trying to clear the fog of his thoughts. “No, I’m fine, I just –”

Todd crossed his arms, shooting Marshall a disapproving look.

“Okay, yeah, sorry,” Marshall relented. “I’m just not feeling it, I guess.”

Todd looked disappointed for a brief second, then gestured at the creek with his net. “Yeah, I mean, what were we gonna do with a bunch of tadpoles anyway?”

“No, it was a fun idea. I just...” Marshall tried to reassure him. He sighed. “I don’t know.”

“Hey, it’s whatever. I can take you home, or we can just drive around and listen to music,” Todd offered, already facing back towards the road. “I still have the rest of the six pack in my trunk.”

Marshall looked at the beer in his hand, then threw the rest of it back and shrugged. “Yeah sure, that sounds good.”

The two boys turned and headed back to Todd’s car. Marshall dropped his can in the tepid water of the stream.

Though the sun continued to shine brightly, sending shimmering heat waves over the pavement, Marshall began to spend more and more time in his bedroom. He kept the door shut and the blinds closed, the only light the pale yellow of the sun that managed to seep between the slats of his shades. He would emerge from his room for meals, still in his sleep clothes with his hair ruffled and dark circles under his eyes, then immediately return after dropping his plate in the sink.

Well into the small hours of the morning, digitized gunfire could be heard spilling from the crack beneath his door along with the blue light from his television. The next day, his mother would detect no movement from inside until the afternoon.

“Well, look who’s finally emerged from his cave,” she commented one day as Marshall shuffled into the kitchen. “What are you doing in there that tires you out enough to sleep till one in the afternoon?”

“Nothing, mom,” Marshall mumbled, staring at the contents of the fridge. “I’ve just been up late playing games.”

“Have you been doing that multiplayer one with Todd?” she asked.

He shrugged one shoulder. “No, just by myself.”

“Why don’t you give him a call, see if y’all can’t get out of the house and do something?” she suggested.

Marshall closed the fridge without getting anything, turning to his mother with a groan. “Mom...”

“You’ve been cooped up in there all week.” She raised an eyebrow at him. “You need to get out.”

“Alright, fine. I’ll see if he wants to pick me up.”

As Marshall trudged back to his room, his mother called out, “And then after dinner we’ll look at schools again!”

Marshall grumbled loudly, pulling his door closed and locking it behind him. For a moment, he stood with his back pressed to the door, then crossed to his bed and flopped down on the covers. He picked his phone up from where it had been charging, staring at it blankly before unlocking it. Opening the messenger app, he pulled up the last conversation he and Todd had had.

It had been days ago, some pointless gossip about one of the senior football players hooking up with a freshman girl. They had joked that it was a useless move on her part, since she couldn’t even use him as a status booster around school, seeing as he had already graduated. Now Marshall couldn’t remember why he cared.

There had been nothing since. No text or calls, no voice through his headset as he shot virtual aliens. And honestly, why would Todd want to talk to him? Marshall understood his silence. He knew he was a bore to talk to, he knew he had nothing interesting to say. It made sense that Todd would stop texting him after school was over and they had no built-in topics of discussion. Without classes, homework, or sporting events, Marshall had nothing to contribute to a conversation.

Letting his phone fall back onto his bedside table, Marshall slumped onto his pillow, throwing his arm over his eyes.

He awoke hours later to a dark and silent house and a sharp pain in his shoulder. He hissed in pain as he lowered his arm from his eyes, the movement tugging at stiff and smarting muscles.

Carefully sliding out of bed, careful not to jostle his shoulder further, he snuck down the hall to the bathroom in search of Icy Hot. He rummaged through the medicine cabinet, searching through toothpaste tubes and sticks of deodorant, until his fingers brushed against a familiar bottle.

His hands stilled as he took in the orange pill container, the label on the front spelling out in bold letters VICODIN. There was still an almost half bottle left from his mother's surgery a year ago.

Forgetting all about his shoulder, Marshall gingerly picked up the pill bottle, taking it back to his room. He placed it on his bedside table and lay down next to it, turning on his side to study it. His mind whirled more energetically than it had all week, thinking and considering and planning.

The weak light of sunrise was peeking through his blinds before he felt sure in his decision, and let his eyes drift shut.

Marshall and Todd met at the mall a block away from Marshall's neighborhood, the uneven cement sidewalks connecting the stores mostly empty. Todd was sitting on a bench outside the video game store, watching the way the heat haze rising from the parking lot warped the cars parked there, but when he saw Marshall he jumped up to give him a quick one-armed hug.

"Hey, man, I haven't seen you in a while!" he said. "How are you?"

"Yeah, I've just been hanging out at home," Marshall said, carefully avoiding the question. He adjusted the backpack he had slung over one shoulder. "Want to head inside?"

Todd agreed, turning to walk into the store with him. He watched as Marshall walked straight to the counter and began to pull video games from his backpack.

"You trading those in?" he asked his friend.

"Nah, just selling them," Marshall told him, settling the limp pack back on his shoulders.

Todd looked between him and the games, aghast. "What, all of them?"

Marshall shrugged with a small quirk of the corner of his mouth. "Yeah, I never play them anymore. This way someone else can use them."

An employee finally came out of the back room, his uniform shirt dark under the arms and his upper lip greasy underneath its lank mustache. He quickly processed Marshall's games, handing him a stack of bills in return, and the boys sidled out of the shop. Marshall looked around him, a small smile on his face.

They wandered in and out of stores, skipping the low-ceilinged salons and smelly tobacco shops, while Marshall offered to buy anything that Todd showed interest in.

"I just got a fat stack of cash," he would laugh whenever Todd protested. "Let me spend it."

Several hours later, they emerged back into the parking lot, Todd carrying several bags while Marshall's hands remained empty.

Marshall stopped suddenly, swinging his backpack off his shoulders. "Oh, hold up, before I forget..."

He quickly unzipped the pack and pulled out the headset he usually used to play video games.

"I want you to have this," he told Todd, holding it out to him.

Todd's eyebrows rose in disbelief. "You're giving me your headset?"

"Yeah," Marshall said, pushing it out farther towards Todd. "I don't really use it much anymore, and you're always on the network."

Todd reached for it haltingly. "Are you sure?"

Marshall nodded, taking a step forward and placing the headset in Todd's hands. "I'm serious. I want you to have it."

Todd curled his fingers around the headset, slipping it into one of his shopping bags with a thank you. He returned Marshall's farewell distractedly, watching as his friend strolled through the roiling parking lot towards home.

Later that evening, Marshall's mother was in the kitchen cooking dinner, the window open to let the shrill drone of cicadas into the room. She was just stirring together a pot of meat sauce when the phone rang from the counter next to her.

"Hello?" she answered as she picked it up, pressing the receiver between her ear and shoulder as she continued to stir.

"Hi, it's Todd," Todd's tinny voice came through the receiver. "Have you talked to Marshall much today?"

"Oh, hi, Todd," she said, bringing a spoonful of sauce to her mouth to taste. She threw in a dash more salt as she told him, "No, he was out with you most of the day, then went straight back to his room. Why?"

There was a long moment of uneasy silence, and Marshall's mother could almost hear Todd fidgeting on the other side of the line. She put down her spoon, a sense of trepidation creeping over her.

"Todd? Is something wrong?"

Todd paused for another second before admitting, "I don't know. I just got a weird feeling from him today at the mall. He sold a bunch of his games and then wouldn't buy himself anything, and then he made me take his headset. He said he never uses it but we always used to talk while playing before these last few weeks. I don't know, he just seemed weird."

His words concerned Marshall's mother. She knew that Todd knew her son better than almost anyone, and if he was worried, there was likely cause.

Keeping her emotions in check, she said, "Thank you for telling me, Todd. You did the right thing. I'll go check on him right now."

"Okay." Todd sounded relieved. "Thanks. Would you have him call me later?"

"Sure thing, Todd," she assured him. "Bye now."

Todd said farewell and hung up, and Marshall's mother replaced the phone on its cradle. Making her way down the hall, she knocked on Marshall's door, waiting for his reply.

Hearing nothing from within the room, she pushed open the door, looking towards the bed where she assumed he was asleep.

“Marshall, honey?” she called softly. “Todd just called and –”

She cut herself off with a strangled cry, taking in his limp form, his skin pale and lips blue, his hand still clutched around an orange pill bottle that had until that afternoon been half full.

She rushed to his side, shaking him and calling his name until she pulled herself together enough to call an ambulance, her fingers shaking against the screen of Marshall’s phone.

Beside her on the bedside table sat a white piece of paper, folded and marked “Mom,” ignored as she tried to wake her son.

Slowly, the smell of antibacterial disinfectants and the sound of steady beeping came into focus as Marshall rose back to consciousness. He flexed his fingers and toes, stretching slightly before his brain caught up with him.

His eyes flew open as his stomach gave an odd, roiling flip. The stark white walls, the crinkly sheets tucked neatly over him, the monitor beeping in time with his still-beating heart – he was in the hospital, and he was still alive.

A tangle of emotions flitted through his mind. For a minute, all he felt was disappointment. He had taken the whole rest of the Vicodin bottle – he had looked it up, it should have been enough to kill him. His plan had been strong, or so he had thought, until his mother came it and ruined it.

But then he thought further, remembering his emotions as he lay on his bed, waiting for the pills to take affect. The shaking, the clamminess, the nausea, all had been terrifying. And as he trembled, all he could think about was Todd and his mother, and how much they would miss him, and how much he would miss them. He thought about applying to schools and how many experiences he wouldn’t have if he died.

He had just started living, and Marshall realized he didn’t want to stop just yet.

He shifted again, searching his hospital room until his eyes landed on his mother. She was slumped in a chair beside his raised bed, her hand covering his even in sleep.

“Mom?” he croaked, his throat feeling raw.

At the sound of his voice she jerked awake, her gaze darting around the room before landing on his now open eyes. As soon as she saw he was awake, tears welled in her eyes, and she pressed her hand to her mouth.

“Marshall,” she whispered, her voice breaking. “Oh, Marshall...”

She threw her arms around his shoulders as best she could while he was still lying down, peppering his face with desperate kisses.

“I was so worried, baby, I was so scared. They pumped your stomach but you still weren’t waking up...” She took a deep, shaking breath, slowing her sobs. Leaning back, she looked at Marshall, searching his face for answers. “Why, baby? Why did you take those pills?”

Marshall squeezed his eyes closed, taking in a few rapid breaths through his nose. He knew his mother wanted answers, and deserved them after the terror she must have been through. Still, it took him a minute to muster up the strength to speak.

“I’m sorry mom,” he said weakly, opening his eyes to look at her. “I just... didn’t feel like I could do it anymore.”

His mother grasped his hand, studying his face. “Do what?” she asked.

Marshall glanced away, shaking his head slightly. “Look for colleges. Get out of the house. Pretend to be happy. Anything.”

Tears welled in his mother’s eyes, and she clutched his hand even tighter. “Oh, baby,” she said, choking back a sob. “I never wanted you to pretend to be anything.” She reached out, turning his face back towards her. “If you were struggling you could have told me. I would have listened.”

Echoing tears formed in Marshall’s eyes, though he tried to sniff them back. “I know, I just felt so useless,” he said, his voice breaking. “I couldn’t even fill out a college application.”

She wiped away his tears with the pads of her thumbs, smoothing his hair away from his forehead. “We’re going to get help, okay? You don’t have to do it all on your own.”

Marshall nodded, his face pinching as he finally let go of the sobs he was holding down. His mother wrapped her arms around him, holding him close to her chest as they cried tears of relief and grief.

When they both quieted, Marshall’s mother tucked the hospital blankets back around him and sat back down, keeping a tight grip on his hand.

“And maybe once we’re home,” she mentioned, “you can convince Todd to give you your headset back. I’m sure he’d love to hear from you.”

Marhsall couldn’t help but let out a wet laugh. “Yeah. Okay.”

Chapter 2

That's Everything

Ida always expected to die out in the field, something fast like lightning or her heart just plain giving out from the work. She never expected cancer. She never thought that her health would get worse and worse until she was too weak to lift a hay bale. Never anticipated that when she finally went to the doctors they would say it had spread throughout her body.

Metastasized, was the word they used. She made them tell her what it meant. They told her the cancer had begun a long time ago, in her womb (which explained why she hadn't noticed – she hadn't needed that in years) and spread to her bones and lungs.

The said they were sorry, that it was too far gone and she too old for them to do much at that point. They had offered her treatment anyway, pills and chemo, but she waved them away with an annoyed huff. No way were they filling her veins with modern mumbo-jumbo. She wanted to keep what little hair she had left; she wasn't going to be buried with no eyebrows. She was going home to die in peace, alone on the farm like she had been for years.

Well, that had been the plan, until she realized she had lost too much strength to haul her boney ass to the bathroom, let alone cook for herself or care for the animals. It was only then that she called her children.

At the moment only two were over – her two eldest, Martha and Jack. Her youngest, Eddie, was occupied with his cushy office job in Virginia.

She had made Jack go out to the fields to check on the cows and make sure the grain in the silos was keeping dry. Martha was just outside Ida's bedroom door, having a muffled conversation on the phone.

Ida strained to hear what her daughter was saying, but Martha hung up before she could force her old ears to make anything out.

“Are they on the way with that feed shipment?” she demanded as soon as Martha walked back into the room. “They’re late, did you tell them that? I shoulda cut ties with that company years ago, I kept telling myself...”

Martha cut off her mother’s muttered rambling with a sigh. “Yes, ma, I told them they’re late. They said they’d be out here within the hour.”

Ida grumbled, shifting to pull her fraying green crocheted blanket tighter around her waist with a suppressed wince. “Good, they better be. I ain’t never tolerated no slacking around here.”

It was a lesson she had tried to instill from a young age. Working a farm needed just that – hard work. Up at dawn, working until dusk. Her children never seemed to understand that. They were never grateful for the opportunity to make their own living, to understand that in order to keep food on the table they had to keep the farm up. When they were younger it was easier, she could make the chores into games. But once they got older...

“Yes, ma,” Martha agreed half-heartedly.

“Speaking of,” Ida continued, looking at the khaki fields she could just see through her dark wooden window frame, “where’s that brother of yours?”

Martha crossed her arms, putting herself between Ida and the window. “He’s not slacking, ma, you know how far away those silos are.”

When her mother continued to try to look out the window instead of at her, she let out a slow breath then said, “Besides, we need to talk about your state of affairs.” Her words were only met with a blank look. “Your will?”

Ida waved a blue-veined hand dismissively. “Oh, there’s no need to bother about that. I’m giving the farm to whichever of you kids’ll take it.”

“That’s not all there is to it!” Martha exclaimed in exasperation. “What about your savings, your stocks...”

Ida shushed her loudly, looking back towards the bedroom door. “I think I heard Jack.”

“You can’t have, you can hardly hear me when I’m three feet –” Martha started, but was cut off by the door opening to reveal the lanky figure of her brother.

Ida gave a self-satisfied smirk, causing Martha to roll her eyes. Fixing her gaze on Jack, she asked, “How’s the farm keeping?”

Jack slumped into the straight-backed chair near the door. “Same as yesterday when you made me check, ma,” he said wearily.

“I was just trying to explain to our mother that she needs to set her affairs in order,” Martha told him while staring at Ida.

The old woman retorted, “And I said that everything’ll go to whoever takes over here.”

“That’s not what you said!” Martha asserted. “All you said was that one of us was getting the farm...”

“The farm *is* everything.”

Martha and Jack shared a glance, Martha’s brows rising as Jack’s puckered into a frown.

Martha opened her mouth to speak again, but Jack cut her off. “Why don’t we talk about this later,” he said, standing again. “We should go meet that feed shipment. It’s coming, right?”

His sister nodded. “Yeah, it’ll just be –”

“We should go meet it.” Jack jerked his head towards the door, and Martha’s eyes finally widened in understanding.

“Right, sure,” she said, following him into the hall. “Ma, we’ll be right back in.”

Ida flicked her wrist at them. “Yeah, get on then. I’ll be here.”

As soon as the door closed behind her children, the muffled sound of their voices started up. Let them talk about her, Ida thought. They didn’t understand. They didn’t get what this farm meant. It wasn’t

just a way to make money. It was a way of life – it was her life, and had been since she was little. This farm had been in her family for generations. Didn't her children have any sense of family pride? Where had she lost them?

She blamed the new modern ideals that everyone was believing these days. The ones that sent all of her children off to college, even Martha, that made them reject the simplicity of farm life for the pursuit of "higher education." What could those universities teach them that they couldn't learn through hard work here?

Ida had taught each of her children herself, right here in the kitchen of this house. She gave them all the knowledge they needed – reading and writing, mathematics, some basic history. And better still, she had taught them the rewards of hard, physical labor and relying in one's own self. It had all gone well until Martha reached fifteen and started begging to go to high school. All her friends were going, she had said. They all thought she was a homeschool loser.

She had cried for weeks when Ida told her no. Finally her tears had made the old woman feel so badly that she had given in. And once Martha went, she didn't hear the end of it from her boys until they were in public school, too. From there it was one big mudslide into college and fancy jobs away from her.

Even as she fumed, she could feel her body growing tired again, her eyelids refusing to stay open. Without meaning to, she dropped into sleep, only coming to when she heard voices in her room once more.

"If we just lived in Pennsylvania or New York," she heard the rumble of Jack's muted voice say. "We could rent the land to a fracking company and make a shit ton of money."

Martha's exasperated tone answered him, "But we *don't* live up north. Fracking isn't an option."

Ida kept her eyes closed, pretending she was still asleep, but inside she was fuming. She thanked God that the farm was in South Carolina, because she would be damned if she let all that noisy, ugly equipment on her land.

Jack let out a frustrated sigh. "I know, I know. It was just a random idea. We've gotta figure something else out."

Ida decided she didn't want to hear any more and opened her eyes, doing her best to hoist herself into a sitting position.

"Ma!" Jack exclaimed, catching sight of her and rushing to her side to help her up. "How're you feeling?"

"Oh, just fine." Ida pushed his hands away, sinking into the pillows stacked behind her. "Not that you care much."

Her children looked at each other again, sharing a look that was part exasperation and part guilt.

"Ma..." Martha started.

Ida cut her off with a shake of her head. "Actually, I changed my mind," she told them. "I'm tired and I want you to leave."

"Ma, c'mon," Jack said, taking a step towards her again.

"I'm serious," Ida said, flapping her hands at them, her expression stormy. "Get on."

After a moment's hesitation, they decided arguing with her wasn't worth it, and both headed towards the door.

"We'll be back tomorrow, ma," Martha reminded her, pausing in the doorway. "Katie's coming up with me."

Ida ignored her, looking out the window towards her fields. She heard Martha let out a sigh before the door closed behind her.

The old women slept fitfully for the rest of the day and through the night, her dreams laced with the farm, her children, and huge, growling machinery. She was secretly relieved when she woke with aching bones and a dry mouth to find her family already there.

Martha and Jack were seated on two of the hodgepodge of chairs that had gathered in Ida's room since her diagnosis, conversing quietly, while Martha's college-age daughter, Katie, sat in the opposite corner, her fingers tapping nimbly at her phone.

"Any of you lazy bones want to get me a water?" Ida croaked, startling all three people into looking up at her.

"Ma, you're awake!" Jack exclaimed, standing immediately. "I'll get you a cup, hold on."

He grabbed the glass from her beside table and went into the bathroom, holding it under the tap.

"Morning, ma," Martha greeted, and Katie echoed, "Morning, grandma."

Ida nodded back to them. "Brought your electronics with you, I see," she said to Katie.

The young woman barely kept herself from rolling her eyes. "I was just keeping myself occupied while you were asleep, grandma."

A grunt was Ida's response. "And you couldn't've talked to your mama and uncle?"

"They were talking about farm stuff," Katie told her.

"I see." Ida nodded, indignation sparking in her eyes. "And you couldn't be bothered to take an interest."

Martha huffed. "Ma, c'mon now..."

Just then Jack bustled back into the room with the glass of water. "Here you go," he said, holding it up towards Ida's lips.

His mother snatched the cup from his hands, sloshing some of the water over the side and onto her yellow-white sheets. "I can drink my own damn water just fine," she snapped.

After taking a small, shaky sip, she placed the glass back on the side table and let her head sink back onto her pillow. "So, what were you two saying, then?"

"We were trying to figure out how to get you to write your will," Martha said. When she saw Ida's brows lower, she held up her hands in exasperation. "Ma, it's important! We can get a lawyer in here today if you —"

“I’m not writing no will till one of you kids agree to take this place,” Ida stated, glowering from her bed. After a moment, she turned her head away, asking, “Speaking of, where’s that fool brother of yours?”

Martha slumped back into her chair, running a hand over her lips. “I called Eddie last night. He’s still tied up with office stuff.”

Ida harrumphed, hiding the knot in her throat. “Ungrateful boy, can’t even come home when his ma is dying.”

Martha grimaced, and Katie looked back at her phone in discomfort.

“It’s just that his job keeps him busy,” Jack spoke up, not quite believing his own words. “He’d be here if he could.”

A heavy, uncomfortable silence descended on the room. Ida blinked fiercely a few times, then turned back towards her family.

“Y’all checked on the farm yet?” she asked her children.

“Not yet, ma,” Jack told her, “we just got here a little while ago.”

Ida jerked her head towards the door. “Get on it then.”

Martha and Jack both rose reluctantly, leaving the room with assurances that they would be back soon.

When they were gone, Ida and Katie sat quietly for a moment. Katie fidgeted with the phone in her lap, drawing Ida’s attention back to it.

“Who were you talking to earlier?” she asked. “Your boyfriend?”

A small but warm smile appeared on Katie’s face. “Yeah, that was him.”

“You still with that same colored boy?”

Katie’s smile dropped as quickly as it came. “Gramma, you can’t say that, that’s really rude. It’s ‘black’ now.”

“Sure, alright.” Ida nodded dismissively. “But you’re still with him?”

“Yes, grandma, we’re still dating,” her granddaughter replied irritably.

Ida frowned. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather date a more respectable boy?” She could think of a few in the area, boys from good families that knew how to make an honest living.

Katie set her jaw. “No. Doran is plenty *respectable*.” She almost spit the word. “Besides, we love each other. That’s what I care about.”

Ida humphed. She could remember her own mama telling her to stay away from the colored boys that hung around the dime store, and she tried her best to teach the same lesson to her own children, even though everywhere was becoming more integrated all the time. When all three of her children had gone away, she had worried, especially for headstrong Martha, but all had brought home good, clean, wholesome partners. But it seemed they hadn’t given their children the same warnings she had given them. She would have liked to see her grandchildren following traditional values, but that’s what you got when you sent them all off to “liberal” colleges.

Over the next few days Ida kept to the same schedule, with her children coming in in the morning to look over the farm then stay until dinner. She still held out against writing her will, convinced that one of her children would come around sooner or later.

That was, until her body betrayed her. One morning Ida woke up and was too weak to lift her water glass, to even lift her own head. Jack and Martha took up permanent residence in her house, making sure that one of them was always at her side. The grandchildren visited – Katie, and Jack’s little ones – but never stayed long; they didn’t need to watch their grandma dying.

“Where’s Eddie?” Ida wheezed one afternoon, gazing blearily around the room, searching for her missing son.

A frown knit Martha’s brow. “He’s tied up with work, remember?” she asked gently.

“He’s not coming?” the old woman queried, her voice wavering slightly.

Jack took her hand from his seat at the side of her bed. “We can call him, if you’d like,” he suggested. “You can talk to him.”

Ida nodded as best she could. "I want to talk to my youngest."

Jack quickly pulled out his phone, tapping in his brother's number and putting it on speaker. As it rang, Martha pulled her chair up next to him, patting her mother's leg twice before concentrating on the phone.

Finally, the ringing stopped and a professional voice issued through the speakers.

"Edward Combs speaking."

"Eddie?" Jack said. "It's Jack."

There was a pause before Eddie spoke again. "Oh. Hi, Jack."

"I'm here with Martha and ma. Eddie, she's in a bad way," Jack said softly. "She wanted to talk to you."

"My boy," Ida rasped.

The second pause was longer than the first. "Ma," Eddie replied finally, little emotion in his voice. "I'm glad you called."

"Why didn't you come home, Eddie?" Ida asked, her old voice trembling with emotion she could no longer suppress.

"I'm sorry, ma," Eddie said. "I've been swamped with work, I told you."

"They wouldn't have understood your mother was dying?" Martha began angrily, but Ida quieted her with a hand over her own.

"Eddie," she said. "Your brother and sister won't do what I ask. Will you be a good boy and take the farm when I'm gone?"

"Ma, I already have a job here in Virginia," Eddie replied testily. He paused for a second, then continued, "But if Martha and Jack won't have it, I could take it off your hands. Maybe sell the property to build condos."

"Condos?" Martha exclaimed, while Ida's heart started to thunder in her chest. Her youngest son, her last hope, and he wanted to raze the farm to the ground?

“That close to Charleston, the real estate would be pretty prime,” Eddie continued, oblivious to the upheaval he had just caused. “I could get a lot of money by selling.”

Jack noticed Ida’s labored breathing, her mouth gaping like a fish’s, and snatched up the phone. “Eddie, how could you say that right in front of ma! She’s *dying*, for chrissakes.”

“I’m just thinking about the best economical option,” Eddie defended.

“The best...” Martha stood up from Ida’s bedside, dragging Jack towards the hall. “Ma, we’ll be right back. We need to give our little brother a talking to.”

The door closed loudly behind them, but Ida still strained her ears to make out their words. All she could hear was their voices, pitched low but strained with anger and frustration.

She tried to push past her panic and exhaustion, straining to find a solution. There had to be some way to preserve the farm. She couldn’t let it be destroyed, built over as if it had never been there.

After what felt like an eternity, Martha and Jack reentered the room. Jack’s phone was back in his pocket.

“Eddie...?” Ida queried.

Martha sighed as she sat back down. “Sorry, ma. He excused himself to go to a business meeting. He said he was sorry for upsetting you so much.”

Ida closed her eyes, feeling a wave of pain, both mental and emotional, wash through her.

“Ma,” Jack started softly, bringing Ida to look back at him. He fidgeted with his hands, wringing them together then fluttering them over her arm, as if afraid to touch her. “We have something to tell you.”

Her children looked at each other, holding one another’s gazes for a long moment before glancing away again. They each shifted in their seats. Ida felt a spike of dread for a moment, thinking they had decided they agreed with Eddie.

Finally, Martha continued. “We’ll take the farm from you, ma.”

Ida felt her heart settle back in her chest, sighing with relief. She leaned back onto her pillows and closed her eyes, sinking into a contented haze. Her children continued to speak above her, but the words turned to mush in her ears.

“We just have to figure out what to do with it,” Martha muttered, her brow darkening.

“We’ll figure something out,” Jack whispered, finally patting his mother on her hand. “This is what she needs right now. Look how happy she looks. I haven’t seen her look this relaxed since... well, ever, really.”

Martha cocked her head, studying Ida’s face. “Yeah,” she admitted with a small sigh. “You’re right, Jack. She doesn’t have to know all the details. That we’re taking it is enough.”

She laid a hand on Ida’s shoulder, squeezing gently to regain her attention, then shaking it slightly when Ida didn’t immediately respond. Ida shook her head and blinked, clearing away the fog that had overtaken her. Looking at Martha, she hummed questioningly.

“Ma, is there anything else we need to figure out?”

Ida shook her head. “No, the farm was everything.”

She took her daughter and son’s hands in her own boney ones, gripping them firmly. “I’m proud of the both of you, you know?”

Martha’s brow softened, and tears sprung to Jack’s eyes.

“Yeah, ma, we know,” he told her.

A warm glance spread among the three of them, then Ida turned to Martha.

“Now call that lawyer,” she told her daughter. “I can’t say much about a sound body, but I’m ready to put my mind at rest.”

Chapter 3

Witch One

The crunch of the gravel beneath our feet fell flat on the wide lane, the twisted trees on either side swallowing up sound. The Uber driver had dropped us off at the corner of the street, not wanting to leave the pavement for fear of ruining his undercarriage.

Though I wanted to argue with him, Sam held me back with a soft hand on my shoulder, and I complied with a sigh. We retrieved the cat carrier from the seat between us and our suitcases from the trunk, and the car slowly rolled away.

Now our luggage bumped along awkwardly behind us as we walked down the curving road. As we rounded the bend we slowed to a stop, gazing at the house in front of us.

It was a single story, its wooden siding dark with age. The gable over the front stoop threw the door into shadow.

“Home sweet home,” Sam muttered, pushing back her wide-brimmed hat to get a better look.

Linking our hands so my dark fingers alternated with her pale ones, I put on a brave smile. “It’s cute!”

She shot me an incredulous look.

“No really!” I exclaimed. “I mean, look at the wood siding. It’s probably original! Very rustic.”

“It looks like it’s gonna fall off.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Okay, it does kind of look like it’s going to fall over at any second. But we’re lucky your uncle paid off the mortgage before he died and left it to you. We can’t afford too much else right now.”

I regretted bringing up money as soon as I said it, not missing the guilty flash in Sam’s eyes.

“Mercy, I—”

Shaking my head, I cut in. “No, no, I’m sorry I brought it up. I know you’re doing all you can with the freelance editing. It’s me that has to find a job.”

The joking mood gone as soon as it came, we both stood in silence until the chill of the approaching night began to seep beneath our light jackets.

Squeezing our joined hands, I nodded towards the shadowed front door. “C’mon, let’s get inside. The sun is starting to set.”

We cautiously passed under the dim eaves, setting our suitcases in the entryway and making our way into the first room. The space was still cluttered with furniture left to Sam along with the house, their dark patterns and outdated styles speaking to the old bachelor who had lived there.

Placing the cat carrier down on the floor, we watched as the little black cat cautiously stepped out into the room, his body close to the ground and nostrils quivering.

“What do you think, Zephyr?” I asked, crouching down and running a hand along his sleek body. “Smells like old guy, huh?”

I picked the cat up, and we all settled into the musty leather couch. Zephyr was content to be held in my lap for a while, but soon enough he decided he was ready to explore and wriggled out of my grasp.

“I’m sorry we had to come here,” Sam said softly, her fingers twisting in her lap, eyes cast down.

I reached towards her, covering her fidgeting hands with my own. “Babe, stop worrying so much,” I told her gently. “We’ve talked about this already.”

“I know but...” She turned to me, meeting my gaze earnestly. “I know this is what we have to do for now, to keep ourselves afloat. I’m used to it here, but I’m still worried for you. There’s so little opportunity around here, it’s so small. And everyone has that same small-town mentality.” Her brows furrowed as her ire grew. “Close-minded, intolerant, racist...”

I squeezed Sam’s hands, stopping her before she could get too far into her rant. “I know you’re worried, but I promise it’ll be okay. Do you know why?” I asked her.

She shook her head.

“Because we’ll be together.”

Sam shook her head and laughed at my sappy pronouncement, but wrapped her arms around me, pulling me close. We leaned our heads together, looking out the window at the encroaching forest. I closed my eyes as I felt Sam’s lips quickly peck the crown of my head.

We stayed like that for a long moment, then I pulled away, standing up and going into the entryway for our suitcases.

As we made our way to the back bedroom, Sam said, “I hope Uncle Jeb’s furniture isn’t as rickety as the rest of the house. I don’t want the bed collapsing under us in the middle of the night.”

The sound of my laughter echoed out onto the empty gravel road.

~ ~ ~

I decided to search for a job the old fashioned way, and spent the next week wandering in and out of shops with a handful of printed résumés. A few places took them, though I could tell by the way the managers look me up and down that I wouldn’t be getting any calls from them. Others rejected me out of hand.

“I’m sorry ma’am, we ain’t hiring anyone right now.”

“What do you mean?” I accused, pointing behind me to the small placard in the window. “You have a ‘Help Wanted’ sign up right there.”

The man scratched the back of his neck and wouldn’t quite catch my eye. “Oh, yeah, we were lookin’, but we found someone to fill the position.”

I didn’t believe that for a second, but I forced a smile onto my face. “I’m glad to hear that.” I slid a résumé over the counter. “Here’s a copy of my résumé for you to keep, just in case something else opens up.”

Before he could refuse it, I turned and left the shop.

The sign was still up in the window at the end of the week.

Sam I had warned me I would have difficulty finding work in this town. But the reality still stung.

Every night I came home despondent, and Sam would immediately kiss me soundly, then take my remaining résumés. “Let’s see if we can’t tighten these up, huh?”

By the week’s end, I must have had the most well written résumé on Earth. We both knew the résumé wasn’t the problem, but it made Sam feel better to help in some sort of way, and I enjoyed pretending that a few loose phrases were what prevented me from finding work. I also relished the time we spent together, red pens in hand, giggling and making up nonsense references from Olivia Benson at the SVU or experience from my time at NASA’s secret base on the moon.

Sam’s silly imagination bolstered me through the days of rejection, until the tinkle of a bell announced my arrival at a tiny corner bookstore. The inside was a labyrinth of tall bookshelves, the first of which was filled with various versions of the Bible. I wound my way through the maze until I found myself at the counter. When I found no one in sight, I rang the little brass hand bell sitting next to the prehistoric cash register.

There was a long moment of silence, and I started to consider leaving when a door opened behind the far end of the counter and a plump woman emerged.

“What can I do for y’all?” she asked as she walked over, taking off her glasses to let them hang on the chain around her neck and placing her hands on her hips.

“Hello, my name is Mercy.” I held my hand out to shake, and she took it in a loose grip. “I just moved into town with my, uh, I mean with Samira Walker.” Shit. I hadn’t meant to mention Sam.

But instead of deepening, the woman’s frown softened. “Oh, little Sam. Haven’t heard about her in a long while. She’s moved back in town?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I nodded. “She inherited her Uncle Jeb’s place.”

The woman nodded. “Was sorry to hear about his passing. Now what was it you were looking for?”

I shook myself, getting back on track. “Oh, yes. Well I just arrived this week, and I’m looking for work. I was hoping to inquire if you had any open positions.” I rattled off the rest of my prepared spiel, praying that just maybe this woman would give me a chance.

My heart thundered as she looked me over appraisingly. “I’m Agatha. Actually, I’ve been hopin’ to find some help around here. D’ya have any experience shelving books?”

I felt disappointment begin to seep in, but this was the first position I had been offered since moving in. I wasn’t going to give it up.

“Not, with shelving, no. But I was a secretary at one of my previous jobs, so I have a lot of experience with keeping information organized and accessible.”

I handed Agatha my résumé, and she peered at it through her thick lenses. “I see you have quite a few previous jobs listed here. What happened?”

I could see the suspicion begin to form in her eyes, so I rushed to explain. “It’s basically the same story at every place. This economy isn’t very kind to girls with liberal arts degrees.”

Thankfully, she nodded in understanding, taking her glasses off again. “Well you certainly seem qualified. And you speak very well.”

I fought to keep my smile on my face as she considered something for a moment.

“Actually, I have another job you could do. I’ve been runnin’ this place myself for a while, but keepin’ all the records is startin’ to get too hard for my old brain,” she told me wryly. “You seem like you could handle that.”

It took valiant effort to quash down my excitement. “Yes, ma’am, I certainly can,” I told her.

“Well, alright then. When can you start?” she asked.

My heart soared, and I couldn’t keep the grin off my face. “Immediately!”

A small smile finally formed on Agatha’s face. “Well then. I usually take Sunday off, you know, so how does Monday sound?”

“That sounds perfect, Miss Agatha, thank you so much!” I gushed.

“Sure thing, hon. Be sure to be here right at eight. There’s a lot of work for you to do.”

I started to back away, still beaming. “Of course, of course, I’ll see you then! And thanks again, I’m so happy to start working for you...”

Agatha sent me away with a wave, and I practically skipped through the bookshelves. Before I even got out of the store, I was pulling out my cell phone and tapping on Sam’s picture in my favorite contacts list.

As soon as I heard the line connect, I blurted out, “I did it!”

“You did it?” Sam queried, confused, but a split second later it clicked. “You got a job! Oh, babe, really?”

“Yes!” I squealed. “I found this little bookstore, and the woman who runs it needs help with her records. I told her I could totally handle it since I’ve been a secretary.”

“Baby, that’s fantastic!” she exclaimed. I basked in the praise, ecstatic at finally finding work in this new place.

“I don’t have to start until Monday, though, so we can finally give Sylvan House a proper housewarming.”

I could almost feel Sam’s sweet smile through the phone. “I think I packed some candles and incense we can use.”

~ ~ ~

I rode to work on a bike we found the garage at Sylvan House, parking it out back and making my way straight into the back room.

“They already know my face around here, so I’ll stay at the register,” Agatha told me. “Besides, I need your young eyes in the back there.”

I knew what she was really saying – if I worked register, there was the distinct possibility that people wouldn’t buy anything. And few enough came into the store already, from what I’d seen.

But Agatha was right; I had a lot of work to do. There were stacks of old order forms and bushels of receipts waiting to be filed on every surface. It took me that first week just to clear off the desk.

Then that second Monday after I started, I got a call from Agatha – she was sick with a stomach flu, and couldn't come to the shop that day. It was up to me to run the register.

Honestly, I relished the opportunity to get out of that cramped little office. And the big windows that lined the front of the store let in a refreshing amount of natural light.

As expected, I spent the morning sitting behind the counter, reading my own book as I waited for the first customer of the day. It was approaching lunchtime when I finally heard the bell over the door tinkle.

Sooner than I expected, a man appeared from among the shelves and came up to me. He looked to be in his mid thirties, his blonde hair slicked to his skull, and a crisp white uniform hugging his shoulders.

“Hello, Officer,” I greeted, surprised to find a policeman in the store and immediately put on edge, though I did my best to hide it. “What can I do for you?”

“Actually, it's Captain. Captain Cade Ritter.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “Are you new?”

I nodded quickly. “Yes, sir. I just started here last week. I only recently moved to town.”

“Sure,” he nodded easily and continued to the counter. I let myself relax a little.

“It's my mama's birthday next week, and I was thinking about getting her a book. Thought I might stop in on my lunch break.”

“That's very sweet of you,” I smiled at his thoughtfulness as I got up from my stool. “What were you thinking of getting her?”

Captain Ritter leaned against the counter. “I thought that you would be able to figure that out for me.”

A little put aback, I asked him, “Okay, well, what does she like to read?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “Not sure.”

He was getting his mother a book without even knowing what she liked? “Well, let’s start simple then,” I said. “Does she like fiction or nonfiction?”

Another shrug. “I never really pay close attention to the books she’s reading. I just know she always has one with her.” He waved his hand dismissively. “It’s probably something like Stephen King or whatever it is old people read.”

Great. There went the picture of the thoughtful son I had conjured up. “Okay. Well, I know that books by him and Mary Higgins Clark are usually pretty popular with adults. Why don’t I go grab a couple and you can choose which one you think she’ll like?”

“Yeah, sounds like a good idea.” He leaned back against the counter, pulling out his phone and immediately starting to text.

I grumbled to myself as I made my way through the stacks, taking several books from each author down and carrying them back to the counter. This guy couldn’t have done this himself? It wasn’t that hard to wander around a bookstore and pick out a book for someone.

As I rounded the counter again, I plastered a smile on my face. “Here we are.” I spread the books out in front of him. “You can just look through these and see which one your mom might enjoy.”

He barely glanced at them before tapping the one closest to his hand. “This one is fine.”

I looked at the book, then back at his face. “Are you sure? You didn’t even read the blurbs.”

Captain Ritter waved his hand dismissively. “Yeah, the cover looks like something she’d have.”

I gritted my teeth to make myself keep smiling. I had come to the conclusion that this man was actually the least thoughtful person I had ever met. Still, I had to keep up my customer service façade, so I just stacked up the remaining books and brought the one he chose over to the register.

As he dug his wallet out of his back pocket, he said, “The Captain stuff is just while I’m on the clock, by the way. You can call me Cade.”

I nodded briefly to him. “Mercy.”

I reached for his credit card, but he held it back. “So where d’you live?”

Shit. Should I tell him? He's a police captain, he'll figure out if I'm lying.

Reluctantly, I admitted, "My girlfriend inherited property from Jebediah Walker."

Captain Ritter's – I couldn't bring myself to call him Cade – eyebrows rose. "Old Jeb's place?"

Then he narrowed his eyes again, backtracking. "Wait, girlfriend?"

"Yes," I said shortly. "Sam Walker is my partner."

A leer stretched across his mouth. "Well," he said smugly, putting his hands on his hips. "Isn't that interesting. I didn't think Sam would ever show her face around here after her family disowned –"

"That'll be \$17.98." I interrupted, snatching his card from his hand. I knew it was rude, but I couldn't stand anyone gossiping about Sam. "Would you like a bag?" I asked, already sliding the book into one, and handing it and Captain Ritter's receipt over to him. Anything to make him leave faster.

"Interesting," Captain Ritter said with a smirk, looking me up and down. My skin began to crawl. "Maybe I'll see you around."

With that, he turned and left, relieving me of the burden of having to respond.

At least I had an interesting story to tell Sam that night.

~ ~ ~

I had hoped to never see Captain Ritter again, but for a man who seemed so uninterested in books, he showed up in the bookstore increasingly frequently.

He obviously had money to spare; he bought something every time he came in, including a King James Bible on two separate occasions.

"Wouldn't you rather buy a different version?" I asked as he set the second one down on the counter. "We have some nice American Standard Versions..."

Captain Ritter shook his head with a crooked smirk. "No, the King James is the best version. Don't you think?"

I hummed non-committedly, stretching my hand out towards his purchase, but he kept his hand on top.

“Have you been to church yet?” he asked. “I haven’t seen you there.”

I groaned internally. I hated people asking about my religion. “Not yet,” I shook my head with a fake smile. “Been too busy unpacking and settling in.”

“Shame,” he said, finally letting go of his purchase. “You really should come out.”

I just smiled wider and reached over for the Bible. As I did, my necklace swung loose from my jacket, the pendant clacking onto the countertop.

Captain Ritter reached for it, ignoring me as I tried to jerk back, and lifted the small stone with a hole through it in his palm. “This is nice. Where’d you get it?”

I pulled the necklace from his hand, smoothing the long leather cord back down. “Sam made it for me.” I said. I hoped the reminder that I was already committed would make him leave. “It’s an adder stone, for good luck and protection.”

Even though I just wanted him to go, I couldn’t help but recount the memory. “I found it, but Sam made it into a necklace for me. So I could be protected wherever I went.”

Captain Ritter snorted derisively. “Sounds like a bunch of hocus pocus to me. Don’t tell me you really believe that New Age-y shit.”

My brow furrowed in irritation. “It’s no different than believing wearing a crucifix can protect you from the Devil.”

“Oh, c’mon,” he said. “One’s religion, the other’s just mumbo jumbo.”

I looked at his Bible, then gave him a feral smile. “If you say so. I might have a little more first-hand experience, though. Your total is \$12.99.”

He blinked, then quickly fished his card out of his pocket. As he held it out to me, he looked at me suspiciously out of the corner of his eye.

I took perverse pleasure in watching his discomfort. I was even happier when he didn’t show up for a couple days, although that was diminished when Agatha gave me a talking to when she heard the

gossip. Oh well – if Captain Ritter was dumb enough to believe I had a run in with the Devil, I certainly didn't want anything to do with him.

~ ~ ~

It took a month, but finally I burst through the front door, waving the check Agatha had just given me in my hand.

“Guess who just got paid?” I sang.

Sam's head popped around the door to the kitchen, her hands gripping the doorframe. “Well, it definitely wasn't me.”

“Well, this girl just got her first paycheck from the bookstore. And guess what that means?”

Sam let out an exaggerated gasp. “We can stop living on ramen noodles?”

We laughed together and I said, “Go make a list. I'm going to the grocery store tonight,” sending her skipping back into the kitchen.

~ ~ ~

Sam accompanied me to the grocery store, walking beside me as I pushed my bike, planning to use the milk crate strapped over the rear wheel to help carry things home.

We meandered through the near-empty store, pushing each other and giggling as we threw groceries into the cart, trying to keep with healthy options but ending up with a number of sugary sweets anyway. The cart had a squeaky wheel and constantly veered to the left, but it only made us laugh as we leaned heavily on the push bar to correct its path.

We finished up quickly and made our way up to the checkout area, sliding the cart into the only lane with its light on.

I placed the groceries on the conveyor and Sam gathered them up after they were bagged, carrying the first load out to the bike to pack them into the crate. The cashier continued to chat with her friend who was standing next to the magazine rack and snapping her gum.

When she finally looked up at me, a look of recognition came into her eyes. “Hey don’t you work at the bookstore?”

I nodded warily, unsure of how she would know that, as I had never seen her before.

“I’m in the same prayer group as Cade, he talks about you all the time,” she told me. “You should come sometime.”

I couldn’t stop myself from grimacing slightly. I didn’t like the idea of the police captain thinking and talking about me while I wasn’t there.

“He’s right,” the cashier continued with a giggle, oblivious to my discomfort. “Your hair is so fluffy. Can I touch it?”

“No,” I said shortly, making her drop the hand she had reached out towards me. “I don’t like people touching my hair.”

The woman’s lips pulled into a pout. “Alright. No need to snap at me.”

She continued to ring my groceries up in tense silence until she got to the bag of cat litter I had placed at the end of the conveyor. Her interest piqued again, she asked, “You have a cat, too?”

A smile spread across my face. “Yep, little Zephyr.” Unable, as usual, to keep from gushing about him, I pulled out my phone and showed her my lock screen, where the adorable kitty sat looking up at the camera. “He’s just the best cat you could ask for. He came with Sam when she moved in –”

I trailed off when I noticed the odd look on the cashier’s face. Her smile had become strained, and her eyes flicked between me, the phone, and her friend.

“Oh, he’s a black cat.”

I refrained from rolling my eyes, but just barely. “Yes, that’s right.” I put my phone away and took my change from her outstretched hand, then gave her my slyest grin. “But he’s harmless. It’s me you have to look out for.”

The cashier's face blanched and she shot her friend a startled look. I gave the friend a wink, she grabbed my cart and walked towards the door. As I walked away, I heard the two women break out in hurried whispers.

I stomped out the door and over to the bike, where Sam had finished loading the groceries into the milk crate strapped over the back wheel. How could they still believe stuff like that? Zephyr was the sweetest cat you could ever ask for, with the mellowest temper. As if he would ever bring anyone harm.

But as soon as Sam asked me what was wrong, I started to regret my reaction. All Sam wanted when we moved here was to keep a low profile, and I had done the exact opposite by adding fuel to the gossip mill. First with my comment to Captain Ritter at the bookstore, and now my little threat...

And as a black woman in a small town in the Deep South, the odds were already stacked against me. I cursed my inability to keep my mouth shut.

"Nothing, babe," I reassured her, linking our hands together. "The cashier just said some things."

Sam turned back towards the store, an exaggerated scowl on her face. "Want me to teach them a lesson?"

I laughed, tugging on her hand as I turned back towards home. "No, no, it's fine." I thought for a moment, then told her, "She's the second person who invited me to church."

Sam gave a derisive snort. "Of course. Everyone around here is all about the church. If it's the same preacher, which wouldn't surprise me, you'd absolutely hate it. He's a real fire-and-brimstone type, all Old Testament, pillar of salt, 'thou shalt not suffer a witch to live' shit."

I bumped her with my shoulder. "That must have been hard for little Sam."

She shrugged. "I got through it." Suddenly she stuck out her tongue, jostling me back. "But I'm not going back in that church, I'll tell you that."

~ ~ ~

Even after grocery shopping, I still had a little extra money left over from my paycheck. I decided to get something special for Sam; we were both dying for some reading material, and since I now worked for a bookstore, I had the means to get any books I wanted.

I went ahead and put in the orders for a couple titles, slipping the money for them into the cash box at the end of the day. I wasn't keeping them a secret from Agatha, necessarily, but I knew she would think the selections were odd. I didn't want to damage her fair opinion of me.

When the books finally came, I immediately stashed them in my bag. I couldn't wait to get them home to Sam.

The weather was beautiful that day, and I had opted to leave my bike at home in favor of a walk. I only made it halfway home before my fingers began to itch to crack open one of the books. Sitting at a nearby bench, I pulled a book out and settled it in my lap. Sam couldn't blame me for getting over-excited.

I flipped through it at random for a minute, admiring the detailed drawings inside, before turning back to the beginning. I had barely started when a shadow passed over the pages.

Looking up, I found Captain Ritter standing over me.

"Oh," I said, less than enthusiastic to see him. He hadn't been to the store in a couple of days, and I had hoped he interest was finally dying down. "Captain Ritter, how are you?"

"I told you, call me Cade when I'm off the clock," he said, gesturing to his pale blue polo and khakis. I smiled, but didn't correct myself.

"I'm not bad," he said, a small smirk forming on his lips, his hands deep in his pockets. "Better for seeing you."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes and bent my head back over my book, hoping he'd get the hint and leave.

"So," his voice sounded again, and I let out a tiny sigh before looking back up. "What'cha reading?"

“Oh, I don’t think you’d be interested,” I deflected.

I started to get up, shifting to the side to get around him, but he moved with me. Suddenly, he bent down and grabbed the books from my hands.

“Hey!” I cried, reaching out to take it back, but he danced out of my reach with a leer.

Holding the book in front of him like a preacher, he read the title. “*The Earth Path: Grounding Your Spirit in the Rhythms of...* What the fuck?”

I stood from the bench and snatched the book from him, my face pinched in anger. “I told you you wouldn’t be interested.”

“Is this more of that witchy bullshit?” he asked with a sneer.

I felt rage and resentment form in my chest, bubbling up and over until I couldn’t contain it.

“You know what’s bullshit? Pretending there’s some all-knowing, all-seeing deity out there that condones your horrible, racist, misogynistic behavior,” I said, my voice rising to a shout.

“You really are some pagan weirdo,” he said, his voice a mixture of incredulity and anger. He wiped his hands on his khakis, as if touching my things had tainted him somehow. “You deserve to burn in Hell. Stay the fuck away from me, freak bitch, or I’ll fucking kill you.”

“Not a fucking problem.” I turned on my heel and marched away, keeping my head high even after I lost sight of him.

I didn’t break stride until I reached home, knowing that if I stopped to think about it, I would break down. I let my bag – filled with books that only moments ago had given me so much excitement – thump to the floor, and made my way slowly into the living room.

Sam sat in an armchair, her lithe frame facing away from me, typing away on our shared laptop.

I walked up behind the chair and slid my hands into her dark hair, letting it slither through my fingers and fall back down her shoulders.

“I’m glad you let your hair grow out,” I murmured, rubbing my fingers into Sam’s scalp. “It looks good.”

With a smile and a slight blush, she turned around to face me. “You think so?” Her smile disappeared when tears began to well in my eyes. “Babe, what’s wrong?”

“I think I really fucked up,” I admitted, unable to keep the tears from overflowing.

Through my crying, I told Sam what had just happened with Captain Ritter. Pulling me around the front of the chair, she enveloped me in a crushing hug, dropping light kisses on the top of my head. We stayed that way until my tears ran dry.

“You shouldn’t go in to work tomorrow. He might come in to harass you again,” Sam said, rubbing slow circles on my back.

I pulled back. “What? No, that would mean he wins!”

“Mercy…”

“No! The bookstore is *my* workplace,” I asserted. “If he doesn’t want to see me, then he shouldn’t come in.”

We argued for a while longer, and though I knew Sam only wanted to protect me, nothing she said could change my mind. I was going back to that bookstore in the morning.

My surprise books sat, forgotten, in the entryway.

~ ~ ~

The next morning, I walked to work again. I wanted to prove something to Captain Ritter, and to myself; I wanted to show that I was not afraid.

As I walked, I noticed the church in the distance, its tall steeple piercing the calm blue of the sky. I felt the bitterness rise again in my chest and sped up, eager to put the building at my back.

Agatha was the same when I came in, giving me a short but kind greeting as I made my way back to the office. I was relieved that Captain Ritter didn’t seem to have spread gossip – I wasn’t sure how Agatha would have reacted to his story. The day passed slowly, if uneventfully, although each muffled chime of the bell above the door set my heart pounding.

Finally, the workday was over, and I made my way back towards home. The roads were unusually empty, but I was happy for the chance to be alone with my thoughts.

As I passed out of the business part of town, I suddenly realized that one pair of footsteps had been following me for a while – the clack of a pair of women’s shoes. I glanced behind me as nonchalantly as I could, and confirmed my suspicions – several yards back, a woman was keeping pace with me. I tried speeding up my gait subtly, and heard the clacking increase in tempo as well.

A cold sweat broke out on my forehead. I glanced around to try to find an escape route, and noticed a man had come abreast of me on the other side of the street and was now walking at the same speed, unabashedly staring at me.

I reached a street corner, and in my second of hesitation, the man crossed the street towards me. I hurriedly turned the opposite way, my movements accompanied by the comprehension that I was being herded.

As I walked, I wracked my brain for some kind of escape plan. We had moved into an unfamiliar part of town; I was unsure of which direction home was in anymore, and the only way I would be able to find my way again would be to retrace my steps – past my pursuers. Running forward posed just as much risk, as I never knew whether my next turn would be into a dead end, or head first into the trap I was being driven towards.

I had just made up my mind to try anyway when a figure stepped from behind a wall. My muscles froze as I recognized him – Captain Cade Ritter.

I turned to run, only to find even more bodies blocking my way. Now that I could see her face, I recognized the cashier from the grocery store, with her friend now beside her. The rest were men, and though I recognized none of them, their clothes gave them away as Captain Ritter’s friends.

They advanced towards me, forming a human cage and making me stumble backwards into Captain Ritter. He caught my upper arm in a bruising grip and spun me towards him.

“I warned you I was going to kill you, you frigid freak,” he said, his voice cold.

I twisted and struggled, trying to pull my arm from his grasp. “Why are you doing this?” I gasped.

“The Bible warns against witches, and I follow the Lord’s word as best I can.” Captain Ritter laughed cruelly, looking around at his posse. “We’ve all seen or heard your twisted ways, haven’t we?”

They all nodded, none more vigorously than the cashier. “That’s right!” she piped up. “You threatened us! *And*, we saw that picture of your familiar.”

For a moment, I forgot to be scared in my bewilderment. “You mean my cat? That’s fucking absur-”

Captain Ritter shook me so my teeth clacked together. “Shut *up*, witch,” he snarled. “No one wants to hear your poisonous words.” He gestured to his cronies. “Pick her up and take her to the stake.”

At his words, my blood ran cold. They were serious. They actually thought I was a Biblical witch.

The surrounding men reached for me, but I struggled away, swinging my fists and feet with all my strength. But try as I might, I couldn’t fight off so many of them. They grabbed my hands, my clothes, my hair. I still writhed in their grip, desperate, until one of their fists connected with my mouth, sending my head rocking back. I tasted copper, then everything went black.

The next thing I knew, I was upright again, but my arms were stretched painfully behind me, and something solid was digging into my back. My eyes flew open, focusing on Captain Ritter’s leering face just in front of me. He was flicking something between his fingers, and as I watched, a small flame sprang to life from the old silver lighter he held.

I began to struggle again, my knees knocking into the bundles of twigs and kindling propped against them.

Captain Ritter reached up casually and slapped me, pain blossoming on my cheek. I sucked in a ragged breath, anger boiling up in my chest and beginning to replace fear.

“You’re going to mess up our hard work,” he taunted. “We set this all up just for you.”

He wiggled his fingers, passing them quickly back and forth through the flame. If the stunt was meant to make me afraid, it didn't work. Sam had done the same thing a thousand times, held the fire even closer and for longer.

“So, any last words, *witch*?” he drawled.

I looked around at the gathered faces, the same hateful, savage look twisting all their features. God, I almost felt sorry for them.

“Only one,” I answered Captain Ritter. I tilted my head back and screamed as loudly as I could. “Sam!” I called. I knew, even as far away as she was, I would be heard. She would hear me and come. “Samira!”

Captain Ritter let the lighter fall to his side, the small flame flickering out, then threw his own head back in a loud guffaw. “Did you hear that, y'all?” He turned to the faces behind him. “About to die, and all she can do is scream for her dyke girlfriend.”

A few voices brayed and jeered with him. “Get on with it!” one called.

“Time for you to die, little witch bitch,” Captain Ritter sneered at me, his fingers clicking the lighter back to life. “Say your prayers. Not that they'll help you much, now.”

Slowly, he lowered his hand towards the kindling piled at my feet, but stopped when a fat drop of water splatted onto the hay in front of him.

His brow furrowed and he turned his face towards the sky to take in the angry purple and green clouds that had rolled in out of nowhere. They churned and seethed above us, turning the afternoon to midnight, the only light the sickly yellow glow of the street lamps and the tiny flame in Cade's hand.

“Shit,” Cade mumbled to himself, quickening his movements. He stooped once more to light the kindling, but scrambled backwards as a huge black crow swooped at him with a loud caw. “The fuck!” he yelled, dropping the lighter as he scrambled back to avoid the crow's reaching talons.

It dropped straight onto the hay that made up my pyre and immediately caught, already starting to spread. My heart gave one agonized thump of terror before the crow turned from Captain Ritter to snatch up the burning clump and deposit it over the crowd.

The bird quickly turned and came back to me, perching on top of my pole and pecking me lightly on the head.

The familiarity of the action made me start to laugh. It started out low, but grew in volume until it was nearly hysterical.

“What are you doing?” Captain Ritter asked. He tried to keep his voice angry, authoritative, but I could hear it tremble. I could see the fear creep into his eyes.

My laughter became a manic grin, the gash on my lip opening with new blood.

“It’s not me, you soggy fuck,” I spit, blood-flecked spittle flying from my lips. I looked up to where the roiling clouds were darkest. “Sam’s coming.”

I looked down the street, and with one last peal of thunder, she appeared – my Sam, dust swirling around her feet and her long, dark hair twisting and curling in the wind.

I began to chuckle again under my breath. No matter how ass-backwards this town was, they had gotten at least one thing right.

There was a witch in their midst.

It just wasn’t me.

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May 2013 to Aug 2013

SKILLS & ABILITIES

Copy Editing, Technical Writing, Review Writing, Creative Writing
Experience with Microsoft Office Suite

HONORS

Dean's List 4/7 semesters
Paterno Fellows Scholar