

Chasing Shadows

By Michael Atkins

Chapter 1: "The Cell Phone"

Case drove down 1346. It was an eight lane freeway with a double left turn lane. Mainly, people used 1346 to get around the west end of the city. It was 11:45 in the morning. Everyone was out for lunch. So, 1346 was packed. Case drove a four door Cutler. It was an eighties model. It was painted brown. Case's car had a flat body with straight edges. It had bench seats. The fronts of the seats were trimmed with tan cloth. It was faded and ripped. Yellow foam poked out in places. The backs of the seats were covered with tan vinyl. So was Case's dash board. It was damaged from years of direct sunlight. So, it was faded and cracked. Case's Cutler had a tan roof liner and carpet. The carpet was decorated with pools of crunchy, dried cola stains. The roof liner was sagging in places.

Case's car also had a 350, V8 engine. That's what Case liked about it. His car could haul ass. Case leaned forward and looked through his windshield. He checked the sky. It was filled with grey. Case nodded. He eased into his seat and looked to his left. He was driving beside a brand new Cammy. It was shiny and black. Case figured the owner probably dropped forty grand or better on it. Case examined shimmering, perfectly positioned trim lying along the body of the car next to him. The car beside him was a grotesque, plastic piece of shit. It looked like a cell phone on wheels. Case searched for the driver. He peered through a one foot tall window as best he could. The window was tinted so dark, Case could barely see through. He spotted some pencil thin geek with short, red hair behind the wheel. He wore a pair of glasses. They had black, plastic frames that matched his car. The driver of the Cammy wasn't paying any attention to the road. He couldn't tear his eyes away from a thin, plastic rectangle lying across his palm. It was a smart phone.

Case rolled his eyes and shook his head. He stomped his gas pedal to the floor. There

was a shiny, maroon SUV in front of him. There was barely enough room between the SUV out front and the Cammy beside Case's car to squeeze through. Case swerved in front of the Cammy and stomped on his brakes. He watched in his rearview mirror. The Cammy came so close to the rear end of Case's Cutler, Case couldn't see anything but the Cammy's windshield. Then, Case heard the Cammy's tires squalling. The rear end lifted. Case could see the tip of the Cammy's trunk above its roof. The Cammy disappeared into the distance. It was quickly replaced by a tiny, white compact and a semi.

Case had short, brown hair. It was parted along the right side of his head. Case had bright, blue eyes and a warm smile. He wore a collared shirt. It was decorated with broad stripes. They were yellow and blue. A plaid, wool jacket lay over that. It was white and red. Black, corduroy britches were wadded around Case's legs. A pair of black sneakers was strapped around his feet. Case's sneakers had three diagonal stripes along each side. Case cackled. He lifted his left leg and smacked his thigh. He looked to his right.

"You think I should stop and get that guy a fresh set of drawers?" Case was surrounded by friends. Of course, they were all imaginary. Brandy sat beside Case. Case pictured her as being kind of nerdy. She had chin length hair. It was the color of a tomato. A pair of glasses with thick, oval lenses lay in front of Brandy's eyes. Brandy had irises the color of the sky. Her skin was pale. Her face was dotted with freckles. A yellow turtleneck and a pair of brown jeans were draped across her body. Brandy's jeans were a little short. A pair of yellow socks with brown polka dots was showing below the cuffs of her jeans. A pair of bulky, dress shoes was wrapped around her feet. They were brown, leather shoes with square heels. Brandy stared into Case's eyes. She was not amused.

"I think you should stop and apologize to that guy."

Case faced forward. "Oh..." he groaned. He checked his rear view mirror. "I think he should apologize to *us*." Case looked towards his passenger seat. "For endangering our lives." Vomit sat behind Case. He looked like a punk rocker. Vomit had hair made of long, blue spikes. The spikes were three inches tall. They poked the liner of Case's Cutler. A thin, chrome colored chain connected Vomit's left nostril to the left side of his bottom lip. A pair of black, plastic shades lay across Vomit's eyes. Vomit wore a thick, leather jacket. It was decorated with patches. The patches were advertisements for punk bands. Vomit's legs were painted with a pair of faded, ripped up jeans. A pair of black, leather combat boots was strapped around his feet. Vomit folded his arms along the backs of Case's front seats. He leaned forward and wrinkled his nose.

"Man, that fool sucks!" Vomit spat. "He's part of a corrupt system of capitalist thugs, tryin' to keep us all down." Case stared at Vomit in his rear view mirror. He scowled.

"Shut-up, Vomit!" Case faced the road. "No one cares what you think." Vomit smirked. He collapsed in his seat, rested the sole of his boot against the back of Case's seat, and stared out his window.

"Case, you know I'm righteous." He faced forward. "And play some X-Team, God damn it!"

"Tiffany does not like X-Team," Case replied. He looked over his shoulder. "You know that."

Vomit lifted his eyelids. "Tiffany's not here, sucka!" Big Mike sat next to Vomit. Case imagined he was six foot, five and weighed three hundred pounds. Mike was dressed like a biker. He wore a black shirt and a black leather jacket. A pair of fingerless, leather gloves was strapped around Big Mike's big, fat hands. A pair of shades with tall, dark lenses lay across

Mike's eyes. His face was solemn and tough. A pair of blue jeans was wrapped around Big Mike's big, thick legs. A pair of leather chaps was strapped around Mike's jeans. A leather dew rag was knotted around the top of his head. Big Mike didn't talk much. He was more of a listener. He sat with his arms folded across his chest. He reached across the back seat and swatted Vomit over the back of his head. "Ah!" Vomit shrieked. He leaned towards his window and stared at the side of Mike's head. Mike refolded his arms and resumed staring into space.

Case was picking up Tiffany. He was going to take her to lunch. He was pretty excited about it. Case *always* got excited when he and Tiffany spent time together. It didn't matter what they did. Tiffany was a knockout. She was beautiful, intelligent, caring, and sincere. She was like an angel sent from Heaven. Well... that's how Case felt about her. He noticed others didn't think much of her. Actually, Tiffany rubbed most people the wrong way. They felt like she was rude, obnoxious, and needy. And yeah, she was very pretty. She was thin and trim and cute. She had hair the color of charcoal. It sprouted from a line down the middle of her scalp and wrapped her face. Tiffany's soft, shiny hair dangled half an inch below her chin in the front. It became shorter along her cheeks. It was even with the bottoms of her earlobes in the back.

Tiffany's skin was soft and serene. It was the color of desert sand. It glowed like freshly stained pine. However, an intricate labyrinth of scars was hiding under Tiffany's clothes. In public, people rarely looked twice at Tiffany. But if Tiffany lifted a sleeve, people freaked. Or if part of Tiffany's back showed when she bent over, people started asking questions. Tiffany kept slashes and cigarette burns along her wrists covered with long sleeves. She garnished twisted shin bones and whip lashes with long, thick pant legs. She usually wore big, clunky shoes to protect her footsies. That was just an old habit. Tiffany wore a lot of sweaters and long blouses to hide hideous burn scars along her chest, belly, ribs, and back. Case didn't mind all

that so much. But, it took a little getting used to.

Case liked the way Tiffany dressed. He thought Tiffany's clothes demonstrated her personality very well. They characterized her as being cute and helpful and kind of shy. Other people didn't get that. Several people told Case they thought Tiffany dressed like a dork. Case shrugged. "But, she's *my* dork," he replied. Then, he looked the person over. He found something *they* wore and pointed out an undesirable characteristic. "And when's the last time you washed that shirt, stinky?" Tiffany's face was lovely to look at. The skin on her face was silky and smooth. Tiffany's eyes were dark brown. They were like shiny, black beans. The first time Case looked into Tiffany's eyes, he felt like he was being sucked into a black hole. Tiffany quickly looked away. She had a hard time looking people in the eye.

Tiffany waited in front of the university. She sat on a bench. It was a slice of concrete shaped like a rectangle. It rested on a stack of red bricks. Tiffany wore a blouse that buttoned up the front. It was the color of the sea. It was spotted with tiny prints of yellow and red roses. A long, thick sweater dangled from Tiffany's shoulders. It was maroon. It was woven from thick bundles of wool. Tiffany looked like she was wrapped in a basket made of licorice. Corduroy britches decorated Tiffany's legs. They were the color of rust. Shiny, black leather wrapped Tiffany's heels, toes, and insteps. Three inch bricks of black rubber were glued to the soles of Tiffany's feet. Rows of thick, rubber teeth were molded into the bottoms of Tiffany's clodhoppers.

Tiffany's britches were a little short. And, she was sitting. So, the cuffs of Tiffany's pant legs gripped the middles of her calves. A pair of long, white socks wrapped Tiffany's broken, bashed up shins. Thick, red stripes wrapped Tiffany's socks. Tiffany's legs looked like they were made out of candy canes. Tiny, silver links dangled from Tiffany's neck. They connected

near the middle of her chest. A shiny, black star hung from the links. It was attached to a thin, silver plate. The plate was also shaped like a star. So, the black star had a shiny, silver border. A silver hook clasped Tiffany's necklace behind her neck. It had a switch on the side that was the size of a pin head. The hook attached to a tiny, silver ring. A lock of Case's hair was braided through the ring. The lock of hair was braided into a hoop. Tiffany claimed it gave her talisman special power. She referred to this special power as "charm." Case thought Tiffany was nuts.

"Stupid Louis," Tiffany mumbled. The bench she sat on was erected on a grass field. Half the grass blades were the color of emeralds. Half of them looked like straw. A grid of sidewalk lay across the grass. A curb at the edge separated it from a parking lot. Tiffany smirked. She didn't *really* think Case was stupid. But, she was a little pissed at him. He asked all of Tiffany's professors for Friday off. He did it without even telling her. Now, it was Monday. And, Tiffany felt like she'd missed two weeks of school. She was so stressed, she couldn't see straight. A three ring binder lay across Tiffany's lap. Tiffany scribbled polynomials along the middle of a sheet of notebook paper. She looked beside her. Her calculus textbook lay beside her thigh. It was open one third of the way. There was a heading at the top of the page on the left side of the book. It read "Chapter 21: Quadratic Equations."

"Stupid, stupid Louis!" Tiffany rasped. She laid the tip of her finger beside a paragraph on the left hand page of her textbook. She read quietly. She raced across three separate definitions near the bottom of the page. Chunks of text filled Tiffany's eyeballs. Then, they wandered through her brain. They spotted Tiffany's ears and made a break for it. Tiffany looked up. She stared across the parking lot and shook her head. *"I'm gonna fail this class,"* she whispered. Tiffany's eyebrows pointed down the bridge of her nose. *"Then, I'm gonna cut Louis into little pieces... and bury him under the stairs!"* Tiffany fought off a smile. She knew Case

was just trying to help. Also, he needed Tiffany, Gabrielle, and Adam to help move their stuff into a new house over the weekend prior. It was kind of a two-for. Case's brown Cutler peeled onto the parking lot. It raced across chunks of pavement, swerved, and skidded to a stop near the bench. Tiffany dropped her binder on top of her book and hopped up.

"I'm killing him!" Tiffany snarled. She grabbed the front cover of her binder and flipped it over. Two months worth of notes, scratch work, and graded papers swirled out. They scattered along crunchy blades of grass and wadded into a ball. Some of Tiffany's papers floated away in a gentle breeze wafting across the campus. Tiffany dropped her eyes in her palms. "Damn it..." she groaned. She heard the door to Case's car close. Tiffany dropped to her knees. She began scraping sheets of paper together. She stacked them against the surface of the bench and shoved them into her binder. Tiffany scrambled across jagged blades of grass and swatted at sheets of paper that were blowing away. She raked as many together as she could and dropped them inside her binder.

Tiffany crawled across patches of grass. It rained that morning. Tiffany felt icy water droplets and mud digging into creases along the knees of her corduroys. Tiffany chased after a page of notes. She wrote them that morning. A black shoe with three white stripes down each side dropped on the page of notes. The piece of paper squashed between the sole of the shoe and a damp square of concrete. Tiffany froze. Her eyes followed a pair of black corduroys. They traced interweaving squares of red and white. They searched yellow and blue stripes. Tiffany's dark, cryptic irises focused on a pair of kind, blue irises. They were wise and inviting. They filled Tiffany's heart with warmth and courage. They made her feel like everything was going to be alright. Case smiled. The corners of his eyes crinkled.

"Hi, sweetie," he remarked. He knelt in front of Tiffany. He reached for the sheet of

paper between the sole of his shoe and the sidewalk. He yanked it out. Tiffany sat on her heels. Her lips quivered. She threw her arms around Case's neck. She laid her head against his chest and went limp.

"Hi, Louis," Tiffany sighed. Case noticed wads of papers dangling from his girlfriend's fingertips. He reached behind his back and tugged them away. Tiffany laid her palms against Case's back. Case added the page of notes he got from the ground to the papers he took from Tiffany's fingers. He stacked the papers against Tiffany's back. Tiffany lifted her head. She pinched her eyes shut and cackled. She took a breath. "That tickles!"

Case shook his head. "You're a klutz." He stood up. He held Tiffany's papers in his left hand. He offered Tiffany his right hand. Tiffany dropped her fingers in Case's. Case helped Tiffany to her feet. He looked at Tiffany's shins. "And, now you're all muddy." Tiffany looked down. She pinched the sides of her corduroys and looked them over. She sighed.

"I'm so stupid." Case laid his fingers on Tiffany's cheek. Tiffany looked up. Case smirked.

"Don't say that, honey." He kissed Tiffany's lips. He looked into her eyes. "You know that's not true." Tiffany gazed into Case's warm, blue eyes. She felt like someone kicked her in the chest. She stood on her tip-toes and lowered her eyelids. She laid her lips on her boyfriend's. She gripped Case's upper lip with the edges of her mouth. She and Case squeezed their lips together and pulled them apart. Tiffany stared into Case's eyes. She blinked. Case motioned towards his car with his head. "Come on. Let's go get something to eat." Tiffany looked at the ground. She nodded slowly.

"Okay."

Case drove like a screwball. Tiffany thought it was cool. Her boyfriend weaved through

lanes of compact cars, SUVs, pickups, and eighteen wheelers. He barely blinked. Tiffany sat in Case's passenger seat. She stared at the side of Case's head. Case glanced at her. He smirked.

"What the hell are *you* staring at?" The corners of Tiffany's lips lifted. She took a breath.

"Nothing." Tiffany licked her lips. "I've got a ton of homework to do."

Case nodded. "Yep. That's college, alright." Tiffany faced forward. Case zipped around a Vogg Schwaggin Lady Bug. It was a German car that was shaped like a dome. The Lady Bug's paint was the color of charcoal. Case flattened his accelerator pedal. He zipped in front of the Lady Bug and glanced around. Tiffany sighed.

"I don't know if I'm gonna be able to finish all these math problems Dr. Vincent gave us to do."

Case blew a breath through his lips. "Man, don't worry about that." He motioned towards his chest. "You've got the Case-meister!" He glanced towards his passenger seat. "I'll help you finish that silly Calculus crap." Case flicked his wrist. "That's kiddo stuff." Tiffany's lips wandered to the right side of her face. She stared at the floor. Thick, rubber soles along the bottoms of Tiffany's shoes rested on her back pack. Tiffany's back pack was made of black fabric. Tiffany stared at Case's temple.

"How *do* you know about that stuff, anyway?"

Case shrugged. "It's all right there in your book." He looked into Tiffany's eyes. "All you have to do is follow the instructions." Case faced the road. "I never understood why people have such a hard time learning math." He shrugged. "Reminds me of detective work." Tiffany stared at her lap. She exhaled through her nostrils. What Case said made her feel stupid. She didn't feel like getting into an argument about it, though. She looked up. Case drove onto a shiny, black parking lot. The parking lot surrounded the West End Village. The West End

Village was a strip mall. It was one mile from the university. All the buildings were stuck together. They were made of red bricks.

The buildings were arranged in the shape of a staple. The tops of the buildings were an awning for the fronts of stores. Columns made of red bricks supported the edge of the awning. Squares of chalk colored concrete lay below the awning. There was a restaurant near the east end of the strip. It was called "Habanero Joe's." It was the first place Tiffany and Case ever got together, alone. They met there by chance. Case was working as a detective at the time. He was working on a case, and he stopped at Habanero Joe's for lunch. To his surprise, Tiffany walked in behind him. Case was driving around interviewing people. Tiffany walked to the West End Village from the university. Case remembered thinking to himself, "My God... you walked a mile to grab lunch?" He didn't realize at the time that Tiffany had no driver's license. She could barely drive a car.

Habanero Joe's was a decent place to eat. It was a little expensive. But, Case wanted a damn steak. Rows of red bricks spanned the front of the awning above the entrance to Habanero Joe's. A logo lay across the bricks. The letters were long and curly. They were dark green. They were all lowercase. They were bordered by thin, green tubes. The tubes lit up at night. The "o" in Habanero Joe's looked like a habanero pepper. The habanero's stem was colored the same as the letters. The body of the pepper was orange. It was bordered by orange tubing instead of green. Two thick, oak doors covered the entrance. There were shiny, golden rectangles near the middles of the doors. They were push plates. Case and Tiffany wandered in front of the doors, holding hands. They laid their palms against the push plates. It was brisk outside. So, the golden plates were like sheets of ice. Tiffany and Case shoved the doors out of their way and wandered inside.

Tiffany and Case entered a waiting area. It was dimly lit. So was the remainder of the restaurant. The walls of the waiting area were painted white. The floor was covered with large, brown tiles. The tiles were spattered with black, grey, and red dots. A podium stood on the opposite end from the entrance. It was made of oak slats. Another Habanero Joe's logo lay along the front of the podium. It was colored the same as the one out front. It didn't light up, though. The letters were printed on a cream colored sign. Thick, oak benches lay down the sides of the waiting area. There was a double wide doorway behind the podium. It led to the dining area. It was surrounded by a wooden border.

A greeter wandered behind the podium. She was tiny. She could barely see over the top. She looked like she was sixteen, if that. Her skin was the color of porcelain. A mop of bourbon colored hair surrounded her head. It was chopped even with the bottom of her chin. It was shaped like a bowling ball. Case spotted a nametag on the greeter's shirt. It read "Jenna." All the employees at Habanero Joe's wore similar clothes. Jenna wore a black, button up shirt. It had long sleeves. Jenna's sleeves were rolled to her elbows. A Habanero Joe's logo was stitched along the upper, left breast of Jenna's shirt. Jenna's nametag was pinned below that. Her nametag was black with green letters. Jenna wore black jeans and black shoes. Jenna wore canvas shoes. They had white tips, white shoestrings, and white soles.

Jenna's jeans were a little long for her. The cuffs of her britches were wadded along her insteps. The backs of her pant legs were wrapped underneath her heels. Jenna stopped a foot from the podium. She lifted her right heel and pinched the back of her pant leg. She tugged the cuff of her pant leg away from the bottom of her shoe and lowered her heel. Jenna repeated the process with her other pant leg. She stood behind the podium and looked down. There was a stack of menus below the top of the podium. Jenna grabbed two. She laid them across her chest,

folded her arms on top, and looked up. Jenna had big, brown eyes. They were the color of Scotch. Jenna stared into Case's inviting, blue irises. She blinked.

"How many?" she asked. Case looked down. Jenna was at least one and a half feet shorter than he was. Case felt like he was standing on stilts. Jenna felt like she was looking at Case from the floor. She grinned. She had tiny, thin lips. They were the color of rubies. Case smiled. He showed Jenna his first and second fingers.

"Just the two of us," he replied. Jenna nodded. Her head bobbed like a cubes of gelatin dessert.

"Smoking or non-smoking?" she inquired.

"Non!" Tiffany half-shouted. Case glanced at his girlfriend. He smirked.

"This way," Jenna remarked. She whirled around and dashed through the dining area. Case and Tiffany fought to keep up. Jenna glanced over her shoulder. She noticed Case and Tiffany were lagging. She stopped and let them catch up. A grin split her cheeks. "Sorry!" she sang. "I'm not used to doing this. It's my second day." Jenna hobbled along. Case and Tiffany wandered behind her. The walls of the dining area were covered with oak slats. The floor was covered with the same tiles as the ones in the area with the podium. The top halves of the walls were lit with neon signs. They were advertisements for beer corporations. The dining area surrounded a bar. A chest high wall separated the dining area and the bar area. It was covered with slats of oak just like the walls. Oak barstools with swiveling seats bordered the bar. The seats were surrounded by oak back supports. High definition televisions bordered the ceiling above the bar. A different football game was showing on each one.

Booth tables were attached to the walls around the bar area. They had oak table tops and slick, oak benches. Windows lay along a wall at the back of the dining area. Wooden grids lay

across each window's glass pane. A row of trees lay beyond the glass. An overflow parking lot lay beyond those. Jenna stopped beside a booth table near the back of the dining area. She stepped aside and motioned towards the table.

"Is this okay?" she inquired.

"Yes, ma'am," Case replied. Tiffany stood beside him. Case looked at the side of her head. Tiffany stared in the general direction of the table Jenna brought them too. She just stood there, staring. She blinked. "Tiffany?" Case inquired. Tiffany looked up. Her eyes were hazy. Her eyelids were droopy. Tiffany spread them as best she could. Case pointed out the table with his head. "After you." Tiffany flapped her eyelids. She took a breath.

"Oh..." She took off. She plopped down on the bench closest to them and slid across. She felt dumb, again. Case had a knack for doing that to her. Tiffany squashed herself against the wall and slid her fingers through her hair. She slipped the front of her hair behind her ears. It slid right back where it started. Jenna laid the menus she grabbed on Case and Tiffany's table. Case sat beside his girlfriend. He looked down. The backs of Jenna's pant legs were wadded underneath the heels of her shoes again. Jenna flattened her toe against the floor. She pinched the back of her pant leg and tugged the bottom away from her heel. She did the same thing with her other pant leg. Case crinkled his eyes. He patted the edge of his and Tiffany's bench.

"Put your foot right there, Jenna." Tiffany came out of a daze. She looked towards the other end of the bench. Jenna stared into Case's eyes. She tilted her head and blinked. She laid the toe of her left shoe against the edge of the bench.

"What are you doing?" she asked. Case pinched the bottom of Jenna's pant leg with his thumbs and forefingers.

"That's driving me crazy," he remarked. He turned the cuff of Jenna's pant leg inside out.

He rolled it up her leg about three inches. He folded the first roll in half and pointed at the floor. "Now, the other one," he instructed. Jenna smiled. She laughed through her nostrils. She plopped her other foot on the edge of the seat. Case rolled up her other pant leg. "There you go. That's much better." Jenna plopped her foot on the floor. She pointed towards the other end of the dining area.

"I'll go find your waitress." She looked at Tiffany and grinned. Tiffany glared at her. Jenna's smile faded. She was confused. She knew she did something wrong. But, she didn't know what. Jenna looked at the floor. She folded her arms over her chest and wandered away. Case slipped off his jacket. He laid it across his lap and turned to Tiffany. Tiffany greeted him with an icy, demented gaze. Case slid his lips to the side of his face. He laid his fingers along Tiffany's shoulders.

"You hot in this thing?" Tiffany stared into her boyfriend's eyes. She shrugged a little. Case dragged Tiffany's sweater away from her arms. He reached across the table. He laid Tiffany's sweater and his jacket on the seat across from them. "You're jealous of the little greeter girl?" Case inquired. He plopped down in his seat and faced Tiffany. Tiffany stared into Case's eyes.

"What... was all *that* about?" Tiffany pointed towards the floor. "With the jeans and all that?"

Case fought off a smile. "She's a little shrimp-o," he replied. "Her pants are a little big. I thought I'd fix them for her." Tiffany stared into Case's eyes. She tilted her head. Case narrowed his eyes. "Tiffany, what do *you* care? She probably doesn't even have a driver's license y..." Tiffany shuddered. Her pupils dilated. She faced forward and laid her fingers over her lips. There was that dumb feeling again. A white flash scattered across the tops of the all the

tables. Thunder pierced the air. Case heard cackling. It was coming from the other side of the table. He looked towards the opposite seat. Vomit was sitting on top of Case and Tiffany's jackets. A grin tore his face in two. His eyes pinched themselves shut. Vomit tilted his head back and clapped his hands together. Blue spikes of hair dug into the back of his neck.

"Oh, my God!" Vomit managed to squeeze out. He gasped for air and faced forward. "Smooth move, chief." Case smirked. He imagined resting his elbow on the table, showing Vomit his knuckles, and raising his middle finger.

"Fuck you, Vomit!" he shouted inside his head. "You know what I meant."

Vomit exhaled an additional chuckle. "Right." He looked towards Tiffany's side of the seat. "But, *she* didn't think that was too funny." Case looked beside him. Tiffany stared at the top of the table. She closed her eyes. Case laid his fingers on Tiffany's shoulder. He leaned forward and kissed her cheek.

"*I'm sorry, honey,*" he whispered. "*That didn't come out right.*" Case squashed Tiffany's shoulder around in his fingers. Tiffany peeled her eyelids apart. She turned her head.

"Louis?" she inquired. She sniffled. She faced forward and wiped her eyes. Case exhaled a quiet sigh. Tiffany looked up. "Do you think I'm stupid?"

Case smiled a little. "No..." He was confused by Tiffany's question. He squinted. "You mean, because you don't have a driver's license?" Tiffany squished her eyelids together. She faced forward, laid her eyes in her palms, and shook her head. Case licked his lips. He waited patiently. Tiffany sat back. She exhaled a shaky sigh. She laid her arms across her chest and looked into Case's eyes.

"You don't remember what you said in the car?" Case stared back. He raised his palms.

"What did I say?" Tiffany sifted through thoughts. She knew what Case told her. But,

she couldn't gather up the words. She rolled her eyes and sighed impatiently. She laid her elbow on the table, dropped her forehead in her palm, and closed her eyes. Case thought carefully. He faced forward and folded his arms across his chest. He imagined Vomit sitting across from him. Vomit stretched his chin. He shrugged.

"Don't look at me, fool. I don't know *what* she's talking about." Case sifted through the conversation he had with Tiffany in the car. It was like reviewing a movie. Case rewound the video a little and pressed play. Then, he rewound a little further and pressed play. He came to the part about Tiffany's math homework. His eyes popped open. Vomit smirked. He tapped the table with his pointer finger. "That's it, G."

Case turned to Tiffany. "You mean because of the math thing?" Tiffany looked up. She sniffled. She looked like Case told her she won the lottery.

"You said you didn't understand why I have such a hard time learning it." Case smiled a little. He faced forward.

"Tiffany..." He blew out a chuckle. He faced his girlfriend. "You asked me how I knew about all that stuff." Tiffany stared into Case's eyes. She looked at her lap and nodded. Case shrugged. "I told you. It's all right there in your book. All you have to do is follow the instructions. I was demonstrating how I learn math." Tiffany looked up. Case looked away. He tilted his head. "And, yeah..." He faced Tiffany. "I don't understand why other people can't do the same thing." Tiffany licked her lips. She took a breath.

"I was trying to do that, earlier. I was trying to read some of those definitions in the chapter, like you're always saying." Case nodded. Tiffany shrugged. "But, I couldn't understand them." Tiffany laid the tips of her fingers against her temples. She wobbled her fingers. "It's like... the words got all scrambled inside my head." Tiffany looked at her lap. Case patted her

arm.

"You're probably just tired." Tiffany fought off a smile. She looked up. Case grinned. "Knowing you, you probably didn't get enough sleep last night."

Tiffany nodded. "I *am* tired." She licked her lips.

"I don't think you're stupid," Case remarked. "I think you're very intelligent." He shrugged. "But, it happens to the best of us. Sometimes, you get under the wire a little bit. And, things just don't make a lot of sense anymore." Case looked across the aisle. A young lady sat beside him. Case figured she was no more than thirteen. She had long, blonde hair. It was the color of buttermilk. A tangerine colored barrette lay across the top of her head. It kept silky, shoulder length strands out of her face. Broad, black and white stripes wrapped the young lady's upper body, arms, and neck. A pair of jeans the color of grass was wrapped around her legs. A pair of blueberry colored maryjanes was wrapped around her feet. They were slick and shiny. The young lady's elbows were plopped on her table. A pair of tiny hands the color of snow dangled from the cuffs of her sleeves. A smart phone was cupped between her fingers. It was bright red. The little girl was tapping the screen with her thumbs.

She looked at Case. Her eyes were the color of pool water. Her lips were like begonias. She gritted her teeth and smiled. Case smiled back. He turned to Tiffany. Tiffany looked into his eyes. Case motioned behind them with his head. "Let's get you a cell phone," he suggested. "After we finish eating." Tiffany thought a moment. She nodded.

"Okay." She and Case faced forward. Case slipped his arm around Tiffany's shoulders. Tiffany relaxed. She laid her fingers on Case's forearm and exhaled a heavy breath. Her eyeballs twitched. She patted Case's bicep. "Louis, wait," she remarked. Case faced her. Tiffany shook her head. "I can't get a cell phone. I can't afford it." Case smirked. He narrowed

his eyes.

"Did I ever mention that I was rich?" Tiffany smiled. She rolled her eyes.

"No, you're not." Case gazed into Tiffany's eyes. He felt like he was falling down a well. He laid his fingers on Tiffany's.

"You just pick out the one you want. Okay?" Tiffany exhaled through her nostrils. She pressed her lips together.

"Alright."

After lunch, Case and Tiffany wandered across the West End Village. There was a store on the opposite side of the strip. Floor to ceiling windows lay along the front of the store. A pair of sliding, glass doors covered the entrance. Raised lettering spanned an area above the entrance. They spelled "Horizon Wireless." The Z was red. The other letters were white. The Z was taller than the others. The top line of the Z lay above "Hori." The bottom line of the Z lay below "on." "Wireless" was spelled beside that. Tiffany checked out a poster. It covered a window beside the entrance. It was an advertisement for the iPhone 7e. It was made by Lemon Incorporated. The poster had a white background. White letters with black borders spanned a space near the top of the poster. They read "Our Most Advanced Smart Phone Yet."

Below that, there was a picture of a black screen with a face. The face had two white ovals for eyes. There was a pair of shiny, red lips below those. They were smiling. Rows of teeth were showing between the lips. A slick, white case surrounded the screen. It was the body of a iPhone. Tiffany folded her arms over her chest. She rolled her eyes and shook her head. She and Case wandered inside. Vomit colored tiles lay across the floor. The walls inside the store were made of the same red bricks that covered all the buildings in the West End Village. Case and Tiffany were greeted by a young lady with a tablet computer. She wore a white, button

up shirt with long sleeves. A black vest lay on top of that. A pair of black trousers wrapped her short, slender legs. The cuffs of her trousers rested on a pair of shiny, black shoes. Horizon Wireless' logo was stitched along the upper, left breast of the young lady's vest. A white nametag with black letters was pinned below the logo. It read "Stephanie."

"Hi!" Stephanie remarked. She welcomed Tiffany and Case with a pair of big, brown eyes and a cheerful smile. Stephanie's smile was made of bright white teeth wrapped with shiny, crimson lips. A white barrette connected Stephanie's ears across the top of her head. Long, brown hair flowed from the edge of the barrette to the small of her back. Stephanie laid her tablet across her arm. The back of her tablet was shiny and white. Stephanie poked the tablet's screen with a white, plastic stick. She looked into Case's eyes. "Have you been to Horizon Wireless before?" Case nodded. He reached inside his jacket. He showed Stephanie a cell phone. Stephanie squinted. She grabbed Case's phone and held it in front of her eyes. Case had an old flip phone. It was shiny and black. It was scuffed like a pair of work boots. There was a tiny window on the outside. A row of white digits read "12:54." There was a tiny, pink heart below the window. It was an old, scuffed up sticker. Four black letters lay across the surface of the sticker. They read "Gina." Stephanie handed Case his phone.

"You're needing an upgrade?" she inquired.

Case shrugged. "Nah, *this* one still works." He pointed at Tiffany with his thumb. "She needs a cell phone."

Stephanie poked her tablet with the white stick again. "I see." She looked at Tiffany. "Do you know what kind you're looking for?"

"How many different kinds are there?" Case asked. Stephanie smiled. She pointed at Case's flip phone.

"Well, we carry more than just those." Case returned Gina's old phone to a pocket inside his jacket. He looked at Stephanie and raised his palms.

"But, why?" Stephanie continued to smile. She rolled her eyes.

"Because, it's not twenty years ago!" Case nodded. He rolled his fingers like a fishing reel.

"Go on..."

"Why don't you just show me the one *you* like," Tiffany suggested. She smiled at Stephanie as best she could. It was hard. Sometimes, Tiffany didn't feel like smiling.

"Sure," Stephanie replied. She turned and wandered across the store. "This way," she instructed. Case and Tiffany followed. The Horizon Wireless store had a high ceiling. Rectangles of sheetrock lay across the ceiling. They were dotted with bean shaped holes. A steel grid separated the rectangles. Thin, white posts hung from the grid. White cones hung from the bottoms. The cones concealed light bulbs. There was a counter along the back wall. The top was trimmed with golden veneer. There were white cabinets below the counter. Electronics lay along the counter. Tent shaped placards lay behind the electronics. Bold, black characters were printed on the tents. They were product names and prices.

Slick, white tables were scattered throughout the store. The table tops were chest high. They were shaped like circles. The circles rested on thin, white posts. The posts stood on Xs made of matching posts. Tall, white stools surrounded the tables. The seats stood on white posts like the tables. The stools had round seats and back rests. They were covered with white vinyl. Stephanie, Case, and Tiffany sat around a table near the back of the store. Stephanie's back faced the counter along the back wall. Tiffany and Case sat across from her. Stephanie laid a white, plastic rectangle in front of Tiffany. It had a black screen. A pair of white ovals appeared at the

top of the screen. A pair of ruby red lips appeared below those. Rows of white dots were showing between the lips. Tiffany stared blankly at the screen. She blinked.

"Oh, my..."

The lips began moving. "Hello," the phone remarked. It spoke with a man's voice. It sounded calm, and confident. But, it wasn't *too* calm or confident. "I'm Trevor. I'm your new smart phone. Would you like to hear about my exciting new features?" Tiffany looked up. Stephanie smiled back. Tiffany stared into her big, brown eyes.

"No." Stephanie's smile faded.

"I'm sorry," the phone replied. Tiffany looked down. She stared between the two white ovals on the phone's screen. "I did not understand your response. Did you say, 'Yes'?"

Tiffany pressed her lips together. "Go away, please." A web browser filled the phone's screen. The web browser connected to a domain called "Searchie." Search results began filling the screen. They were images of naked Asian ladies. Tiffany's eyes popped open. She puffed out her cheeks. The smart phone began speaking.

"You searched for... 'Japanese'."

Tiffany looked up. "Um..."

Stephanie squinted. "What's it doing?" she inquired. She turned the phone so she could see it. She gasped. Case folded his arms over his chest. He slid his lips to the side of his face.

"Oopsie." Classical music began playing. It gushed out of Case's jacket. Case sat back and reached inside his coat. He took out Gina's old cell phone. He studied the tiny window on the outside. The clock digits turn into "Paloni - Headquarters." Case flipped open the phone. A screen covered the other side of the section with the window. Tiffany dropped Case's phone the day before. Long story short, the screen splintered. Case laid the top of his phone against his

ear. He swiveled the bar stool he sat on and looked away from Stephanie and Tiffany. "Yes, dear?" he inquired.

Sergeant Paloni sat in his office. He wore a crisp, white shirt with long sleeves. A red tie with yellow stripes lay across a row of buttons down the front of his shirt. A pair of brown trousers draped his legs. A pair of shiny, black shoes poked out of the bottoms of his trousers. Paloni had a thin, bony face. His eyes were dark and mysterious. His hair was black and shiny. It was slicked to the sides. Sergeant Paloni sat on his desk. His desk was near the window. It stood at an odd angle. The corner of the desk pointed towards the glass. Sergeant Paloni's butt rested on the corner. The soles of his shoes rested along the edges of bricks. The bricks lay across Paloni's window sill. The windows in the police station were made of two sections of glass. There was a top section and a bottom section. The bottom panes slid up. Paloni had his window open. Rain poured down the glass. It dribbled along the edge of the window sill.

Paloni's desk was a disheveled mess. It was an old, oak desk. It was thick and stout. Books, file folders, papers, pencils, pens, and paper clips were piled on top. A white keyboard, a black LCD monitor, and a white mouse were tangled among the clutter. The mouse was missing a button. Paloni didn't care, either. He never used it. Paloni felt like he operated better with his desk arranged that way. Plus, he didn't give a shit. Paloni's computer monitor lay on its back. The body of a black, plastic telephone lay on the screen. It was an old, rotary telephone. A knotted up, tangled up cord stuck out of the back. It was shiny and black. The receiver of the telephone lay between Paloni's left ear and shoulder. The twisted, ratty cord stuck out of the bottom of the receiver.

The fingers of Paloni's right hand were wrapped around a double meat, double cheeseburger. It was half eaten. Paloni pressed the cheeseburger against his lips. He ripped off

a hunk with his teeth and lowered the rest. He puffed out his cheeks and began chewing.

"Thup, Caith?" he spat.

Case crinkled his eyes. "Why don't you swallow and try again."

Sergeant Paloni smirked. He finished chewing. A bottle of Caine Cola dangled from the fingers of his left hand. It was a glass bottle. It was half drunk. Paloni put the tip of the bottle to his lips and tilted his head back. He washed down what was in his mouth and lowered the bottle. "Detective Case! What the hell are you doing?"

Case bobbed his head. "It's just plain old 'Louis Case', now. I don't have a special title anymore. Remember?"

Sergeant Paloni shoved half of what was left of his burger between his teeth. He ripped off a hunk and began chewing. "Wight," he conceded. "I fuh-got."

Case lifted his eyebrows. "Maybe you'd like to call me back in a few minutes when you're through eating?"

Paloni washed down what was in his mouth with soda. "Quit trying to change the subject, Case. *You* know why I'm calling."

Case made an "o" with his lips. "Did you win the lottery? I'll be damned."

"Case, I need an answer!" Paloni responded. "You said you'd call me back and let me know something."

Case looked at his girlfriend. She handed the white phone with the face to Stephanie. Stephanie laid a different phone across Tiffany's palm. It was smaller. It had a black case with thin lines of chrome. Tiffany looked it over. She smiled. Case looked away. "I'm with Tiffany," he explained. "Call back later."

Paloni had another mouthful of cheeseburger. His cheeks were puffed out. He tilted his

head back and pinched his eyes shut. "C-a-a-a-ith!"

Case sighed. "I talked to Tiffany and the kids. They're okay with it."

Paloni downed a swig of Caine Cola. "And, you?"

Case shrugged. "If you guys need me, you've got my number." Case closed his phone against his cheek. He returned it to a pocket inside his jacket. He folded his arms on the table and faced Stephanie and Tiffany. "Did we come to an agreement?" Tiffany looked up. She showed Case the phone with the chrome trim.

"I like *this* one. It's small and it's easy to use." She pressed her lips together. "And, it's cheap." Case shrugged. He looked at Stephanie.

"We'll take one." The outer corners of Stephanie's eyebrows drooped. She looked at Tiffany.

"You don't like the iPhone 7e?" The white rectangle Tiffany looked at first dangled from Stephanie's fingers. Tiffany pointed at it.

"Keep that thing away from me." She looked into Stephanie's big, brown eyes. "It's scary." A web browser opened on the iPhone's screen. It displayed images of red liquid in glass bottles. The phone began speaking again.

"You searched for... cherry syrup."

Case drove Tiffany down the freeway. Tiffany got two hours for lunch. She still had about an hour left. Case was still taking cases as a private consultant. But, he didn't have anything on his plate. So, he offered to take Tiffany home for a little while before driving her back to school. That way, she could change her muddy britches. The house was only a couple of miles from the West End Village. Tiffany held her new cell phone in front of her face. She tumbled it between her fingers. She looked at Case.

"I'm confused. This'll add thirty dollars to your bill each month? That's all?"

Case glanced at his girlfriend. "The phone's a hundred and thirty-five bucks. I'm paying fifteen dollars a month for that. Your plan's fifteen dollars extra per month. So, it's thirty dollars right now. But after nine months, it'll be fifteen dollars extra per month." Tiffany looked at her lap. She nodded.

"I'll pay you the thirty dollars a month."

Case licked his lips. "You don't *have* thirty dollars a month." Tiffany dropped her face in her palm. She shook her head. Case smiled. He laid his fingers on Tiffany's shoulder. "It's okay, Tiffany. I can afford it." He glanced in his rearview mirror. "For now." Tiffany looked up. She laid her fingers on Case's.

"Thank you." Case slipped his fingers away from Tiffany's. He curled them around the side of her neck. He tilted her upper body towards him. He kissed the top of her head.

"You don't have to thank me." Case let go of Tiffany's neck and found her hand. He slid his fingers through hers. "This way, we can always stay in touch."

Tiffany nodded. "Alright." She looked at her boyfriend. Case glanced back. He motioned towards his steering wheel with his head.

"You wanna drive us home?"

Tiffany took a breath. "Please don't make me do that." Case snickered. He gazed into his girlfriend's dark, mysterious eyes.

"How about the driveway? Will you drive us up the driveway again?" Tiffany fought off a smile. She exhaled through her nose.

"Oh... all-right!"

Case exited the freeway. He traversed a labyrinth of deserted roads. The last road he

came to curved towards a big, beautiful house. Case and Tiffany moved into the house over the weekend. One edge of the property faced the freeway. The other three were surrounded by miles of trees. A fence of square shaped bars surrounded the property. They were iron bars, painted black. Two big, heavy gates blocked the road. They were curved at the top. They were twice as tall where they connected as they were where they hinged. Case parked in front of the gates. He lifted a shifter attached to his steering column. He slipped his hand into the pocket of his corduroys. He tugged out a set of keys. Tiffany snatched them out of his hand.

"I got it!" Tiffany hopped out of the car and darted towards the gate. Case squinted, opened his mouth, and raised his palms. It was raining. So, Tiffany tried to be quick. She stopped in front of the right gate. She flipped through the keys she took from Case. There were three of them. Each was wrapped with a piece of clear tape. Two were labeled "door." The third was labeled "gate." There was a keyhole near the left side of the gate on the right. Tiffany slipped the gate key into the lock and twisted it to the right. She eased the right hand gate away from the opening in the fence. Case wandered up while Tiffany pulled. He eased the left hand gate out of the way. He and Tiffany returned to the car. To Tiffany's surprise, they both returned to the passenger's side. Tiffany reached for the handle. She stopped and looked over her shoulder. Case stared into her eyes. He motioned towards the other side of the car with his head. Tiffany sighed.

"I don't want to." Case narrowed his eyes. He slipped his arms inside Tiffany's maroon sweater. He grabbed her around the waist and lifted her off her feet. Tiffany gasped. "Louis!" she shrieked. Rain drops the size of gum balls spattered the backs of her legs and butt. They felt like chunks of ice. Case tightened his arms. Squishy, wool sleeves wrapping his biceps squashed against silk wrapping Tiffany's stomach. Tiffany kicked and squirmed. Case tossed

Tiffany over his shoulder. He grinned.

"Jeez, you're squirmy!" He hurried around the front of the car. Tiffany clenched the back of her boyfriend's jacket in her fists.

"I don't wanna!" she shouted. "Put me down!" Tiffany's thick, leather clodhoppers were really heavy. Case felt his girlfriend rock every time she kicked her feet. It made his ribs wobble.

"Tiffany, you're twenty-five years old," Case responded. "You're not gonna go through the rest of your life not knowing how to drive." Case ripped open his driver's side door. His right arm was strapped across Tiffany's back. He curled his left arm around the backs of Tiffany's thighs. Then, he bent over and eased his girlfriend through the door frame. He dropped her in the driver's seat and stood up. Tiffany sat, facing Case. Her legs dangled over the outer edge of the seat. She looked at Case from the tops of her eyes. She sighed.

"I don't want to learn how to drive," she whined. She swallowed. "Can't you just... drive me around for the rest of my life?"

Case pointed between Tiffany's eyes. "No." He pointed towards the windshield. "Now, turn around." Tiffany exhaled a heavy sigh. She turned herself and dangled her legs over the front edge of the seat. Case shut the door. It didn't shut all the way. So, he bumped it with his butt. He pointed through the window. "And, put on your seat belt!" Tiffany reached over her left shoulder. She dragged Case's seat belt across her chest. She shoved a buckle into a latch beside her hip. Case slid into the passenger's seat and closed the door. "I hate it when you don't wear your seat belt." Case reached over his right shoulder. He found the passenger's seat belt buckle and dragged it across his chest. Tiffany stared at the steering wheel.

"My dad never let me wear one." Case looked at his girlfriend. Tiffany looked into his

kind, blue eyes. "Sometimes, he'd get his old van going really fast. Then, he'd stomp on the brakes just for fun. That way, I'd slam my head on the windshield. Or, I'd bust my nose on the dash board." Case smiled a little. He remembered something Sergeant Paloni told him earlier.

"Quit changing the subject." He pointed towards the steering column. "Start the engine." Tiffany smacked her lips. She sighed and faced forward. She reached around the steering wheel and grabbed a hold of the ignition switch. She turned Case's keys forward and held them. The engine started. Then, the starter began stripping out. Case's eyes popped open. He showed Tiffany his palms and waved his arms around. "Whoa!" he shouted. "Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!" Tiffany turned back the keys and looked up. She seemed frantic.

"What?! What?! What?!" she demanded. She sat back and cleared her throat. "What did I do wrong?"

Case lowered his arms. "It's fine." He plopped his palms on his thighs. "Just... once the engine is started, you can let go of the key." Case sat back and sighed. "Okay?" Tiffany nodded. Her head bounced like a bag of rubber ducks. She reached for the ignition. "Hey..." Case rasped. He grabbed a hold of Tiffany's wrist. Tiffany froze. She looked at her boyfriend. "And, try to calm down. Alright?" Tiffany gazed into Case's eyes. She exhaled a shaky sigh. Case slipped his fingers around Tiffany's knuckles. Tiffany closed her fingers around his. "You know... I'm not gonna beat you over the head with a brick every time you screw something up." Tiffany forced a smile. She wobbled Case's hand.

"Okay, sweetie," she replied. She retrieved her fingers and laid them on the ignition switch. She turned the switch forward. As soon as the motor began running, she let go. She looked at Case. Case smiled. He replied with a single nod. He motioned towards the house with his head. Tiffany lifted her right foot. She wobbled it around. She looked up. "I-I can't reach

the pedals."

Case pointed between Tiffany's knees. "There's a lever between your legs." Tiffany reached between her shins. She wrapped her fingers around a flat, metal bar. There was a rubber sleeve over the tip. Tiffany pulled the lever away from the seat. She and Case pulled the seat forward six inches. Tiffany laid the toe of her right shoe against the brake pedal. She looked at Case and nodded.

"Okay." Tiffany reached behind the steering wheel. She grabbed a hold of the shifter and pulled it towards her. There was a row of letters below the speedometer. An orange pointer lay in front of the letter "P." Tiffany lowered the shifter until the pointer lay in front of a capital "O." There was a capital "D" inside of the "O." Tiffany released the brake. She laid the toe of her shoe against the gas pedal. The rear, left tire began skidding. A cloud of white smoke appeared. The cabin filled with the smell of scorched rubber. Case slid his lips to the side of his face. He looked at his girlfriend.

"Uh... Tiffany?" Tiffany looked at Case. She lowered the outer edges of her eyebrows. Tiffany let off the gas and stomped the brake pedal to the floor. She faced forward. She reached behind the steering wheel, pulled the shifter towards her, and threw it towards the ceiling. Then, she plopped her forehead against the top of the steering wheel.

"I can't do this." Case sighed. He reached across the front seat. He grabbed a hold of the shifter and dropped it into overdrive. Tiffany lifted her head. She grabbed the steering wheel and faced forward.

"Let off the brake," Case instructed. Tiffany lifted her foot. The Cutler began to roll. "Now, give it a little gas," Case suggested. Tiffany touched the gas pedal with the toe of her shoe. The Cutler idled up a little. Case nodded. "That's much better." He lay against the back

of the passenger seat and tried to relax. Tiffany drove down a long, curvy road. It was made of smooth, white stones. They lay between thick blades of grass. Most of the grass was green. But, there were patches of yellow. A blanket of brown leaves lay over the top. Huge, twisting oak trees were scattered amidst the grass. They were hundreds of years old. Tiffany looked around nervously.

"How am I doing?" she demanded. She glanced at her boyfriend. Tiffany misjudged a curve. The left side of the car raised six inches. The driver's side tires rode along the tops of grass blades. Tiffany gasped. "Oh, crap."

"Let off the gas," Case instructed. Tiffany lifted her foot. She jerked the steering wheel to the right. The Cutler zipped across the road. The left side fell. And, the right side lifted six inches. Case glared at his girlfriend. "Tiffany! Not so hard!"

Tiffany gritted her teeth. "Sorry!" Case laid his hand on Tiffany's. He eased the steering wheel to the left. The Cutler drifted to the middle of the road. Tiffany exhaled an impatient breath. "How did you do that?" Case reached across Tiffany's chest. He patted her left hand away from the steering wheel.

"Get rid of this hand." Tiffany looked at Case. She lowered her left hand. She laid it on her thigh. Tiffany squinted.

"Ten and two, right?"

Case shook his head. "Whatever. Just use one." Case curled his fingers under the fingers of Tiffany's right hand. He slid her fingers to the top of the steering wheel. Then, he let go. Tiffany noticed the Cutler heading towards the left side of the road. She eased the steering wheel to the right. The Cutler drifted to the middle of the road. Tiffany smiled. She looked at Case.

"Wow! That's *way* easier." Tiffany faced forward. "Why does everyone always say 'ten and two'?"

Case shrugged. "Same reason they say to use one foot for both pedals." Case shook his head. "I don't do that, either." Tiffany parted her lips. She looked below the steering wheel. She touched the brake pedal with the toe of her left shoe. The Cutler eased to a stop. Tiffany looked at her boyfriend. Case stared back. He smiled. Tiffany faced forward.

"Hmm..." She studied the steering wheel. Tiffany lowered her right hand. She replaced it with her left. She looked at Case. "I like that better." Case raised his palm. He motioned towards the house.

"Try it." He faced forward. Tiffany stared through the windshield. She lifted her left foot and touched the gas pedal with her right foot. She looked like a professional racecar driver. The Cutler wove a perfect path down the middle of the road. Tiffany grinned from ear to ear. Her teeth parted. She began cackling. There was a hill near the middle of the property. Case and Tiffany's new house rested at the top of the hill. It faced north. It was a two story house. The outside was covered with crimson bricks. A shiny, wooden door stood in the middle of the front wall. The roof peaked above the door. A chimney of crimson bricks stuck out of the right side of the roof. The lower half of the house had a porch on all four sides. A roof sloped from the top of the first story. It shaded the porch. Shiny, black shingles lay along the top of the porch roof. They matched shingles along the main roof of the house.

Nine windows lay across the front and back walls of the house. Ten lay across the sides, since there were no doors on the sides. Strips of wood lay across the glass. They were painted tan. They formed plus signs. A wooden deck lay below the roof of the porch. Rows of shiny, wooden posts dotted the lower half of the porch's edge. One quarter as many posts supported the

roof. The rows of supports were separated by thin sheets of wood. There were openings in the supports in front of the front and back doors. There were panes of blue glass below the front and rear peaks in the roof. There were twelve panes on both sides. They were arranged in three sections of four. Each section had two panes of glass on the bottom and two on top.

A two car garage stood along the west side of the house. Like the house, it was also covered with crimson bricks. The roof sloped to the east and west. Two metallic, rollup doors covered the entrances. They were painted tan to match window frames along the house. The road of white stones led from the edge of the property to the garage doors. It formed a circular driveway in front of the house for parking. Tiffany raced to the edge of the road. She eased to a stop in front of the garage door on the left. She looked at Case and awaited his instructions. Case reached in front of her.

"Alright, hot shot," he remarked. Tiffany giggled. There was a visor above Tiffany's head. A remote for the garage doors was clipped to the edge. It had two buttons. Case touched the button on the left. The left door rolled up. Tiffany lifted her left foot. She touched the gas pedal with her right. The Cutler eased into the garage. Tiffany touched the brake pedal and eased the Cutler to a stop. She threw up the shifter and turned back the key. Case reached for the garage door remote. Tiffany got to it first. She touched the button on the left. The door closed behind them. Tiffany looked at Case.

"I can't believe I just did that!" she beamed. "That was amazing." Case unbuckled his seat belt. He slid across the driver's seat.

"You *are* amazing!" he assured her. He sat beside Tiffany. He turned his head and laid his lips on hers. Tiffany faced her boyfriend and closed her eyes. She tried to relax. Case caught her completely by surprise. Case closed his lips around Tiffany's top lip. Tiffany pressed

her lips together and tightened her jaw. Case pulled his lips away from Tiffany's and opened his eyes. He was staring at Tiffany's eyelids. They were smudged with brown eye shadow. Tiffany lifted her eyelids and looked up. She gazed into Case's gentle eyes. She blinked.

"Louis..." Tiffany groaned. She took a breath. "What are you doing?" Case smiled a little. He reached across Tiffany's lap. He pulled the driver's side door handle and shoved the door out of the way. He licked his lips.

"You *know* what I'm doing," Case replied. He unbuckled Tiffany's seat belt. He tugged Tiffany's seat belt buckle across her chest. He rested the belt buckle against the upper, left corner of her seat. Case slipped his left arm around Tiffany's shoulders. He curled the fingers of his right hand around the fingers of Tiffany's left hand. He gazed into her dark, shiny eyes. They were like two bottomless pits. "Why do you think I brought you home?" Tiffany searched her boyfriend's eyes. She lifted her head, closed her eyes, and pressed her lips against his. She pulled her lips away, looked up, and smiled.

"Okay." Tiffany slid over the edge of the driver's seat. She plopped her thick, rubber soles on the floor and stepped aside. Case hopped out and shut the door to his car.

The main building of Willow Junior High School was covered with golden bricks. Along the back of the main building, there was a pair of steel doors. They were slathered with peacock colored paint. They had flat handles. The handles were curved at the ends. There were long, thin windows near the middles of the doors. There was a pair of dumpsters beside the doors. One was tan. One was lime green. The dumpsters were spotted with rust. They had metallic doors. They were dented and bent. They didn't close all the way. Bags of smelly trash were poking out. The door handles were made of round stock. There was a window beside the dumpsters. It consisted of two rows of glass. Each row was four panes long. The panes were

separated by a steel grid. Thin, white mini blinds lay along the inside of the window. They were twisted shut.

There was an awning above the window. It was made of maroon fabric. The fabric was decorated with olive, canary, and light grey stripes. The fabric was ratty and faded. It was dotted with tiny holes. Rain was pouring from the sky. It dripped through the little holes. The awning connected to clips above the window. It hung at a forty-five degree angle. Triangles of fabric covered spaces between the front of the awning and bricks along the building. The Willow Tree Frogs' field house faced the back of the main building. It was covered with crimson bricks. A pair of matching doors faced the ones along the back of the main building. There was an alley between the field house and the main building. It was paved with cobblestones. The stones were shaped like bars of soap. The stones were four different colors. They were maroon, aquamarine, smoky, and charcoal.

A row of warped, faded telephone poles lay down the field house's side of the alley. There was a pole every twenty yards. Thick, black wires dangled from the tops of the telephone poles. Two slats of wood intersected the tops of each pole. L shaped bars were threaded into the sides of the poles. They formed makeshift ladders for servicing the wires. Adam Rhodes counted Ls on a pole across the alley. There were twenty-seven of them. Adam nodded. Gabrielle Griffin squatted beside him. They were crouched beside the dumpsters. The ratty awning above the window beside the door leaked like an old set of brass pipes. But, it kept most of the rain off Adam and Gabrielle's heads. Adam had shaggy, black hair. A pair of thick sideburns framed the edges of his cheeks. He had eyes like tree sap. They were wild and mystical and full of life. Adam wore a plaid shirt. It was checked with red and black. He also wore black jeans and red canvas shoes. A black leather jacket and a black back pack dangled

from his shoulders.

Gabrielle had beautiful, blue eyes and long, brown hair. Her hair was chopped into a row of bangs above her eyes. Her bangs danced along her forehead. The rest of her hair floated in gusts of wind. It looked like a campfire. Gabrielle wore a white blouse. It was spotted with red and brown diamonds. Mahogany colored, corduroy britches and brown leather boots wrapped her legs. A white sweater and a denim back pack dangled from her shoulders. Gabrielle's sweater was open in the front. Rushes of cool, damp air swirled under the awning above her head. They kicked Gabrielle in the chest. A cigarette dangled from her teeth. She closed her lips and inhaled. A wad of ash at the tip of the cigarette glowed orange. Gabrielle yanked the cigarette from her lips. She snatched it with the first and second fingers of her right hand. She handed the stogie to Adam. Adam plopped it between his lips and took a drag.

"Stop saying that..." he mumbled under his breath. Gabrielle's head turned to the left. She stared at the back of her boyfriend's head.

"Huh?"

Adam looked over his shoulder. "Tiffany doesn't need to know. It'll go away on its own. It always does!" Gabrielle gazed into her boyfriend's amber colored eyes. They looked like they were glowing. Gabrielle blinked.

"Adam, I didn't say anything!" Adam rolled his eyes. He faced forward and held the cigarette above his shoulder.

"Whatever..." he groaned. "You haven't stopped talking since we came outside." Gabrielle stared at her boyfriend's shoulders. They were wrapped in thick wads of leather. Gabrielle decided to hunch beside him. That way, he could see that her lips weren't moving. Sometimes, Adam thought Gabrielle was talking when she wasn't. She tried to keep her face

visible when she was around him. That way, he knew she wasn't. Gabrielle squatted beside Adam. She held the cigarette between her first and second fingers. She stared at the side of Adam's face. Adam glanced at her. Then, he went back to staring at telephone poles. Gabrielle plopped the cigarette between her lips. She began speaking. The tip of the cigarette bounced when her lips moved.

"What do you think I said?" she inquired.

Adam shook his head. "You didn't say anything," he replied. He stared at cobblestones woven along the ground. "Shut-up."

Gabrielle exhaled through her nostrils. "What did you *think* I said?"

Adam glared at his girlfriend. "You didn't say anything!" he shouted. He faced forward. Gabrielle sucked the end of the cigarette. The tip glowed orange. Gabrielle yanked the cigarette from her lips and tapped it with her index finger. A cylinder of ash dropped off the end. Gabrielle laid the cigarette between her boyfriend's lips. She crouched next to him and laid her fingers on his shoulders. Leather piled along his shoulders felt like chunks of ice. Gabrielle laid her head against the side of Adam's neck.

"I was *thinking* some things," Gabrielle remarked.

"Shut-up, Gabrielle," Adam replied. He snatched the cigarette from his lips with his thumb and forefinger. He exhaled smoke through his nostrils. "Don't start."

Gabrielle sighed. "We have to tell Tiffany."

"Would you STOP SAYING THAT?!" Adam shrieked. He tossed the cigarette across the alley like a dart. It slammed into the side of the field house and toppled to the ground. Adam sighed. He bowed his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. Gabrielle pressed her lips together.

"Adam, we need to get to class." Adam looked up. He turned his head and stared into his girlfriend's eyes. He looked like he was waiting for her to say something. Gabrielle stared back. She took a breath. "We need to get to class!" she repeated. Adam licked his lips. He nodded. The door closest to them opened. Ted came bursting out.

"Where is that piece of shit!" he shouted. "I'll kill him!" Ted opened an umbrella above his head. It was decorated with alternating bands of red and white. He wore a shirt decorated with orange and green bands, blue jeans, and a pair of black sneakers. A black, wool trench coat dangled from his shoulders. His head was wrapped in a black beanie. Curls of brown hair dangled from the bottom. His eyes were the color of rain clouds. Adam's head swirled around like a top. His eyebrows pointed down the bridge of his nose. His lips peeled away. A set of clenched teeth appeared. The corners of his lips curled into a smile. Adam snarled like a dog. Gabrielle tightened her fingers around Adam's shoulders. Thick leather stitched to the top of Adam's jacket creaked like old floor boards.

"Adam, don't..." Gabrielle whispered. *"Please."* Brittany flew out next. She was Ted's girlfriend. She scrambled through sheets of rain and stopped under Ted's umbrella. Cherry red coils dangled from her scalp. They swirled around her face and battered her lips. Brittany's eyes were like emeralds. They glittered across the top of her face like a pair of green lanterns. A rainbow colored beanie was strapped around the top of her head. A violet sweater, black jeans, and black, high heeled boots wrapped the rest of her body. Her cheeks were swollen and bruised. That's because Gabrielle beat her senseless a few days prior. Ted's nose was a little red and swollen, too. Brittany wrapped her arms around Ted's waist. She tilted her head back and cackled. It was the most hideous sound in the world. Brittany's laugh was nauseating. It was like a hundred sets of fingernails sliding across a chalk board. Ted pointed between Adam's

eyes.

"You're dead, Rhodes!" he shouted. He pulled away from his girlfriend's arms. He turned and handed her his umbrella. Then, he faced Adam and threw up his dukes. "Come on, mother fucker! I'm gonna rip your head off and stick it up your ass!" Brittany filled the air with gruesome giggles. Gabrielle crinkled her eyes and clenched her teeth. She rested her lips beside her boyfriend's ear.

"Adam, please!" she whispered. *"If I get in another fight, Principal Callaway's gonna send me to the detention center!"* Adam grinned like a psychopath. He ripped Gabrielle's fingers off his shoulders and tossed them away. Adam's eyes glowed like headlights. He hopped away from the dumpsters and stared into Ted's face.

"I don't think you've thought this through, pretty boy!" He raised his hands beside his cheeks. He spread his fingers and retracted them. His knuckles cracked. "If you think you can whoop *my* ass, you got another thing comin'!" Adam stopped five feet from Ted. Rain poured down his hair and face. It soaked his clothes. It beat his leather jacket like sacks of hammers. Gabrielle poked her head out. Her face was filled with horror.

"Adam!" she screamed. "Stop it!" Ted was soaked. He looked like he'd jumped in the pool with his clothes on. He ripped his beanie off his head. He held it beside him and wrapped his fingers around it. He wrung it out like a sponge. A cup of water dribbled from his fists.

"You should listen to your girlfriend, Rhodes," he barked. "I'm about to stomp a mud hole in your ass!" Ted returned his beanie to the top of his head. Adam crinkled his eyes and tilted his head. He continued to grin.

"You gotta be kiddin' me!" he shouted back. "I'm gonna rip out your guts and feed 'em to yer girlfriend, ya little bitch!" Ted narrowed his eyes. He stared into Adam's face carefully.

"What the hell?" he whispered. It wasn't like Adam to talk so much. Usually, he just started throwing his fists around. Ted didn't care much for Adam. But, there was one thing he knew about him for sure. Adam was a fighter. Not a talker. Ted got the feeling he wasn't looking into Adam's eyes. He was looking at something else. It was something... evil. Gabrielle sucked in a breath.

"Adam, no!" she shouted. Adam just stood there, waiting. Gabrielle rolled her eyes. She tilted her head back and sighed. She couldn't believe what she was about to say. But, she had to do something. She cupped her little fingers around her mouth. She aimed them at the back of her boyfriend's head. "Andre!" she called. Adam's head twisted around like a top. Adam stared at Gabrielle over his shoulder. His face looked like it was caved in. It was twisted up like an old tree. It was hideous and angry. Yet, it was painted with a sadistic grin. Adam tilted his head.

"What do *you* want, freak?!" Adam shouted. "Go get Daddy a beer! Then, maybe I won't KILL YOU NEXT!" Adam's head swirled around. Adam stared between Ted's cloud colored eyes. Adam's eyes glowed like a pair of cutting torches. "Bwuh! Ha! Ha! Ha!" he bellowed. "Wooooooh!" Adam stomped towards Ted. Icy rain water splashed around his red canvas shoes. Ted showed Adam his palms.

"Whoa!" he yelled. "Freak!" He began backing away. "Stay the hell away from me!" Adam charged. He roared like a wild animal. He snagged a fistful of Ted's jacket, reeled back, and popped him in the nose. Ted arched his back and fell on his butt. Adam held him off cobblestones dotting the road. He tightened his fingers around the front of Ted's jacket. Then, he bent over and pounded Ted between the nostrils. Ted's head wobbled like a rocking horse.

"You wanna fuck with me, bitch?!" Adam snarled. He popped Ted in the nose again. Ted's arms went limp. His head tilted back. Blood squirted from his nostrils. Adam bopped

Ted's nose again. "You gonna answer me, ya little shit?!" Adam used his fist like a hammer. He pounded Ted's nose again. He lowered his head and stared into Ted's bloody face. "HUH?!!" He bopped Ted's nose a sixth time. Gabrielle curled her arms around her boyfriend's biceps. She tugged on his arms as hard as she could.

"Adam!" she shouted. "For the love of God! You're gonna kill him!" Brittany joined Gabrielle. She wrapped her arms around Adam's waist and pulled him away.

"Ah!" Adam shouted. "You little skanks! I'll rip your cunts open!" He let go of Ted and fought to get away. "Fuck off!" he shrieked. He tightened his biceps and tried pulling them away from Gabrielle's fingers. "Get back!" Adam curled his fingers around Brittany's forearms. He tried tugging her arms away from his waist. "Get the hell off me, ya stupid slut!" Brittany let go. She backed away and showed Adam her palms. Gabrielle looked at Brittany over Adam's shoulder. She stared between Brittany's sparkly, green eyes and shook her head.

"Get out of here, Brittany!" she pleaded. "Get Ted, and go back inside!" Brittany dropped her arms. She blew out a disgusted breath.

"Man!" she shouted. "You two have problems." Brittany wandered beside Adam. Ted was coming to. He lay on his back, sniffing. He pinched his nostrils with his thumb and forefinger and lifted his head. He noticed Brittany coming. He raised his palm.

"Man..." he groaned. "What happened?"

Brittany threw her arms around her boyfriend's shoulders. "I have no idea," she replied. She helped Ted to his feet. She looked into Adam's eyes. Then, she looked at Gabrielle. "And, I don't wanna find out." Brittany dropped Ted's umbrella near the doors. She snatched it off the ground, threw it above her head, and scrambled inside. Gabrielle exhaled a heavy sigh. Adam scrambled away from his Gabrielle's arms and turned around.

"Man, what the hell?" he demanded. He looked around and blinked. He looked into his girlfriend's eyes. "Gabrielle?" he inquired. Gabrielle exhaled through her nostrils. She folded her arms over her chest and shivered. Adam held out his arms. He studied them. He looked up. "What are we doing out in the rain?" he demanded. "Why am I all wet?"

Chapter 2: "Mr. Case"

There were clocks everywhere. They lined the walls. Some of them ticked. Some of them didn't. There were round clocks, square clocks, old clocks, and new clocks. It was dizzying. Tiffany sat on a sofa. It faced the west. Thick, dark brown leather was stretched across the surface. It was the color of coffee. The leather was dotted with brass buttons. The buttons were pressed into the leather. So, the surface of the couch was a landscape of slick, tiny mountains. Arm rests down the sides of the sofa and legs below the sofa were made of thick, shiny oak. The legs of the sofa lay on a floor of checkered tiles. Half the tiles were the color of ivory. Half of them were the color of cola.

Tiffany sat in the middle of the sofa. She sat with her knees together. Thick, rubber soles along the bottoms of her shoes lay flat on the floor. Tiffany's left foot lay on a white tile. Her right foot lay on a black tile. Her hands were folded in her lap. Lee Case sat across from her. Lee was Louis Case's dad. Tiffany barely met him fifteen minutes earlier. She was alone in a room with a strange man, surrounded by clocks. Lee was certainly peculiar, too. He sat in a chair. It matched the sofa. Lee was thin like Case. He had short, black hair. It glittered with spots of silver. Lee wore a crisp, white shirt with long sleeves. It buttoned up the front. A pair of leather suspenders was strapped over Lee's shoulders. The suspenders were attached to a pair of grey slacks. Shiny, black socks and a pair of brown, leather shoes poked out of the bottoms of Lee's slacks. Lee's feet rested on an ottoman. Brass buttons and dark brown, leather bumps were stretched across the top and sides of the ottoman. Four tiny, oak legs poked out of the bottom.

Tiffany glanced at Lee's eyes. It was like looking into Case's eyes. Tiffany felt like a wrecking ball slammed into her chest. She lowered her head and stared at her lap. She exhaled a nervous breath. She raised her chin and studied the walls. A tall, rectangular clock hung behind

Lee's chair. It stood vertically. The body of the clock was made of oak. The clock had a circular, white face. The face was bordered by black Roman numerals. The hands were made of swirls of black rods. A golden pendulum dangled below the clock's face. It drifted from north to south once per second. It sounded like a person knocking on a desk. A digital clock was attached above the oak clock. Its body was a slick, black rectangle. It hung horizontally. Its width was half the height of the clock below it. Its height was the same as the width of the clock below. Tall, slanted, red digits lay across the middle of the clock. The day, month, and year were printed below that. There were so many other clocks, Tiffany didn't know which one to study next.

An oak coffee table stood between Lee and Tiffany. It was thick and heavy. It was long and skinny. The table measured four feet by two feet. The long sides of the table faced Tiffany and Lee. An assortment of items rested on top of the table. There was a puzzle cube, a Newton's cradle made of stainless steel, a tennis ball, and a stack of drawing paper. Crayons were scattered everywhere. The tennis ball was the color of a lime. The surface of the ball was thick and fuzzy. It was wrapped with narrow, white lines. A row of bold, black letters lay across the front of the ball. They spelled "Fielding." Lee looked across the surface of the table. He studied Tiffany's fingers.

Each of Tiffany's fingernails was painted a different color. Three rings rested on her fingers. A plain, silver ring surrounded the base of her left, index finger. Tiffany's name was engraved along the outside. Another silver ring wrapped the base of Tiffany's left, middle finger. A pentagram knotted across the top. Five tiny jewels lay inside triangles between points surrounding the pentagram. A white jewel represented divinity. A yellow jewel represented wind. A red jewel represented fire. Blue symbolized water. And, green symbolized earth. A

ring surrounded the base of Tiffany's right thumb as well. It was gold, dotted with tiny emeralds. The emerald was Tiffany's birthstone. Lee studied Tiffany's knuckles. They were jagged and uneven. Tiffany's little fingers were decorated with tiny, pale scars.

Her fingers jiggled like blobs of cottage cheese. Tiffany's arms, elbows, and shoulders shivered with icy apprehension. Lee could tell Tiffany was a nervous wreck. It angered him. It told him Tiffany spent the majority of her time in a state of complete torment. Anguish from her past filled her with agonizing fear in her present. Tiffany dreaded every action she took and every affair she attended. Everyday events people thought nothing of were torture for her. Lee felt pretty helpless. His son's poor girlfriend was a miserable, tortured, lonely wreck. Lee attempted to lighten the mood.

"I hate clocks," he remarked. Tiffany looked up. She glanced towards Lee's eyes. Then, she quickly looked away.

"Yeah," she replied. Tiffany swallowed. She swabbed the thighs of her tan corduroys with her palms. Her palms were soaked with nervous sweat. Lee squinted. He was annoyed with Tiffany's careless response. He didn't find Tiffany annoying, just her inability to connect. A notepad lay across Lee's lap. It consisted of a stack of canary yellow pages. Teal colored lines lay across the pages. The fingers of Lee's right hand were wrapped around a ball point pin. Lee laid the tip of the pin between the first and second lines along the top page of his notepad. He wrote "antisocial tendencies." He looked up. He smiled.

"Did you hear what I said?" he inquired. Tiffany continued staring at her lap. She licked her lips. She pinched her eyes shut and gritted her teeth. Lee relaxed against the back of his chair. He laid the pen on his notepad. He folded his arms across his chest and exhaled a peaceful breath. "Are you okay?" Tiffany forced her eyeballs to move. Her dark brown irises

floated to the bottoms of her top eyelids. She stared between Lee's pupils and exhaled a shaky breath. Her heart thumped in her ears.

"I'm-I'm-I'm..." Tiffany closed her eyes and swallowed. "I'm a little nervous." She forced her eyelids apart and glanced at Lee's face. Lee gazed back. He studied his notepad. He added "stuttering" below "antisocial tendencies." He scooped up his notepad and pen and stood up. Tiffany's heart raced. She gasped for breath. She watched Case's father stalk across the room. He wandered around the coffee table and stood beside Tiffany's knees. Tiffany shook all over. She twisted her head to the right and looked up. Lee sat beside her. He laid his notepad in his lap. He laid his left palm on Tiffany's left knee. He reached across his lap with his right. Tiffany's eyes popped open. "M-Mr. Case?" she inquired.

"Lee," he responded. Lee lifted Tiffany's calves with his palms. He rested the soles her shoes against the edge of the coffee table. The cuffs of her britches slid to the middles of her calves. The bottoms of Tiffany's corduroys peeled off a pair of candy cane colored stockings. "Call me 'Lee'." Tiffany's rugged, leather shoes were strapped around her feet with rows of bulky, rust colored boot laces. Lee untied thick, messy knots near the tops of Tiffany's clodhoppers. Tiffany pressed her lips together. She fought off nervous laughter.

"Mr. Case, what're you doing?" Lee looked up. He smiled.

"You're nervous," he explained. He returned his attention to Tiffany's shoes. "So, I'm helping you relax." He eased Tiffany's clunky shoes off her feet. He set them near the southeast corner of the coffee table. He laid them side by side. He rested Tiffany's feet against the edge of the table. Tiffany studied red and white stripes wrapping her insteps. She curled her toes, nervously. Lee sat back and relaxed. He exhaled through his nostrils. He laid his fingers on Tiffany's shoulder. Tiffany jumped. She glanced at the side of Lee's face. Lee pressed his lips

together. "This isn't going to work." Tiffany studied the rims of Lee's irises. Lee's eyes were kind and wise just like her boyfriend's. It filled Tiffany with hope and joy. She tried to relax. "I can't help you if you're going to be a nervous wreck like this," Lee continued. "I need you to trust me." Lee slid his fingers along Tiffany's bicep. The tips of his fingers brushed along thick strands of maroon colored yarn. Lee smiled. "Okay?"

Tiffany turned her head. She faced Lee as best she could. She tried to imagine he was just an older version of Case. Basically, he was. He was just like him. He was sweet and kind and very brave. Tiffany reached across her chest. She laid her fingers on Lee's. She lifted her head and looked into his eyes. The outer corners of Tiffany's eyes crinkled. The outer tips of her eyebrows sank. Big, fat tears rested along the edges of her eyelashes.

"O-Okay..." she whined. Tiffany sniffled. Her lips quivered. "I'll try." Lee slid his fingers away from Tiffany's. He swatted her eyelids with his thumbs.

"Lee," he told her. Tiffany stared at his eyes. Her lips parted. She exhaled, quietly. "Say it," Lee instructed. Tiffany closed her lips. She searched Lee's eyes.

"L-Lee," she squeezed out. Lee smirked. He patted Tiffany's fingers. He snatched up his notepad and hopped to his feet. He wandered across the room. Tiffany stared at peppered hair along the back of his head. "Lee?" she inquired. Lee looked over his shoulder. He laid his fingers on one of the arms of his chair. "Thank you for doing this," Tiffany remarked. Lee smiled. He nodded and sat down. He laid his notepad and pen across his lap.

"You're welcome, sweetie." Tiffany fought off a smile. She looked around.

"Um... You were saying something..." She looked into Lee's eyes. "Something about the clocks?"

"I hate them," Lee repeated.

Tiffany narrowed her eyes. "But, they're everywhere!" Tiffany lifted her legs. She slid her right foot under her left thigh. She rested the sole of her left foot between two leather mounds near the edge of the sofa. She folded her fingers over the tip of her left knee. "Why do you have clocks all over the walls if you hate them so much?"

Lee smiled. "I do that for my patients." He shrugged. "It gives them something to look at. That way, they don't feel like they have to focus on me the whole time."

Tiffany nodded. "So, you always see patients here? In your home office?"

Lee nodded. "Mm-hmm. Yes." Tiffany searched Lee's face. She nodded. Lee stared back. He rested his elbow on an arm attached to his chair. He rested his cheek in his palm. He looked at his notepad. He wrote "aphasia" below the first two lines. Tiffany bobbed her head.

"What're you writing about me?" Lee looked up. He shrugged.

"You wanna read it?" He offered Tiffany the notepad. Tiffany stared at it. She found Lee's eyes.

"N-No. That's okay." Lee returned the notepad to his lap. He smirked.

"Scared to look in the mirror?" Tiffany blinked. She looked at the floor. Lee returned his cheek to his palm. "Louis said you guys had a fight today."

Tiffany looked up. "Huh?" Her foot slid off the end of the sofa. She rested it on the floor. "What are you talking about?"

Lee squinted. "You mean you don't know?"

Tiffany spread her eyelids and blinked. "Know... what?" Lee licked his lips. He scanned his notepad. He wrote the word "delusions" below "aphasia." He studied what he wrote. He wrote a question mark beside "delusions."

"Hmm..." he groaned. He looked up. "He said you guys went to Habanero Joe's today."

Tiffany nodded. Lee lifted his head. He shrugged with his hands. "No fight?"

Tiffany's eyeballs wandered around. "You mean because of the waitress?"

Lee smiled. "Ah! You *do* remember."

Tiffany smiled a little. "Well yeah, but..." Tiffany looked at her lap. She fought to gather her thoughts. They were a jumbled mess. Tiffany felt like she was studying math definitions again. She looked up. "Well, I mean..." She searched Lee's eyes. She felt embarrassed. She forgot what she was talking about. Lee crinkled his eyes. He licked his lips.

"I'll be damned..." he muttered under his breath. He wrote "memory/concentration problems" below "delusions?" Lee slid his lips to the side of his face. He decided to put a question mark beside that one as well. He looked up. "Tiffany?" he requisitioned. Tiffany stared into his eyes. Her face was innocent and blank. She'd forgotten what they were talking about. She had no idea. Lee could tell. "The fight?" Lee inquired.

Tiffany took a breath. "Right!" Tiffany lowered her head. She laid the tips of her fingers against her temples. She looked up and smiled a little. "We weren't fighting! I mean... not really." Lee said nothing. He just stared. Tiffany's little smile faded. She felt like someone stuck vacuum cleaner hoses inside her ears and sucked the thoughts right out of her brain. She forgot what she was talking about again. She couldn't remember a thing. Lee licked his lips. He looked at his notepad. He scribbled out the question mark beside "memory/concentration problems." He looked up.

"I'm gonna have to get you on some drugs." Tiffany gazed into Lee's eyes. She sighed.

"S-S-R-Is?" Lee peered into Tiffany's eyes. They were dark and mysterious. Lee felt like he was looking at Tiffany from the bottom of a well.

"We'll start with those," he replied. "See where we get."

The furniture in Case's parents' living room looked the same as the furniture in Lee's office. There were two chairs, a sofa, and a love seat. They surrounded a thick, oak coffee table. The coffee table in the living room was shaped like a square. It measured four feet by four feet. It stood on four thick legs. The living room floor was paneled with slick, dark wood. It was the color of maple syrup. A thick rug lay between the coffee table and the floor. It was maroon. There was a fireplace along the west wall of the living room. It was surrounded by crimson bricks. An HDTV hung above the fireplace. It was big. It had a sixty inch screen and a slick, black frame.

Case's mom, Jenny, was watching a football game. That was typical. She was always watching a sporting event of some kind. The Vultures were a professional football team. They had a stadium near Case's hometown. The Vultures were playing the Pirates. It was a rival game. Jenny was lying on the sofa. She wore a tan t-shirt. It had a picture of a white prism. A ray of white light was going in one side of the prism. A rainbow was coming out of the other. It was a t-shirt for an old psychedelic rock band Case's mother was into. Jenny also wore a pair of dark blue jeans and a pair of maroon socks. Her hair was long and brown. I was chopped into a row of bangs above her eyes. Case's mom's eyes were similar to Tiffany's. They were so dark brown, they were almost black. They were like chunks of coal. Jenny was one quarter American-Indian. So, she had dark, glowing skin. She was short and pretty. Her face was always painted with a smile.

The sofa lay along the south wall of the living room. The Vultures' quarterback threw a short screen to a wide receiver. The wide receiver was number eighty-eight. His last name was Bryan. Bryan broke two tackles and dashed eight yards down the field. Jenny threw her arms in the air.

"Go, baby! Go!" she shouted. "Go, baby! Go!" Bryan ran an additional seven yards before being dragged to the ground by the Pirates' secondary. Jenny sat up. "Yes!" she screamed. She straightened her right arm in front of her and extended her fingers. "First down!" Adam and Case sat across the room. They sat in the two chairs. Case sat closest to the television. His eyes were glued to the game. Adam looked at the back of Case's head.

"Your mom's a weirdo," he remarked.

Case's mom looked across the room. "What?!" she demanded. She pointed across the coffee table. Adam looked at her, timidly. Jenny stared into Adam's glowing, hazel eyes. "What?" she repeated. Adam stared, quietly.

"Um..." he groaned.

Case looked over his shoulder. "She's kidding, Adam." He looked at Jenny. "Mom, tell him you're kidding! You're freaking the boy out!" Jenny smiled at Adam. Her cheeks creased. Her eyes got all crinkly. She flicked her wrist.

"I'm just kidding, honey!" She laid back and faced the television. "I *am* a little weird, sometimes." Gabrielle stood beside the fireplace. There were pictures along the top. Gabrielle picked one up. It had a dark, wooden frame. It was a picture of a young lady. Gabrielle figured she was Case's age or younger. She had long, crimson hair. It was a wavy mess. It swirled in a gust of wind. It brushed across freckles dotting the young lady's cheeks. The lady was brushing strands of hair aside with the fingers of her right hand. Her nails were painted black. The young lady wore a frilly, black dress. It looked Medieval. A pair of knees and calves poked out of the bottom of the dress. They were wrapped in white stockings. The stockings were wrapped with black bands.

The young lady's feet were stuffed into a pair of black boots. Her boots had pointed toes.

They looked like something a witch would wear. The young lady's lips were painted with magenta lipstick. Her eyelids were brushed with thick, smoky eye shadow. She had pale skin and big, blue eyes. Gabrielle was mesmerized by her eyes. They made the whole picture glow. The young lady's eyes were crinkly. A big, silly smile covered the lower half of her face. She was standing in front of a funnel cake stand at a carnival. She was bent over. Her left hand was on her thigh. Gabrielle showed the picture to Case.

"Louis?" she inquired. "Who is this lady?" Case looked at Gabrielle. He focused on the picture in her hands. He smirked.

"That's my stupid sister!" he shouted.

"Louis!" Case's mother shouted. Case and Gabrielle looked across the living room.

"Don't call your sister stupid!"

Case shrugged. "She *is*." Case's mom looked at the television. Her eyes popped open.

"Yes!" she shouted. She made a fist and drew it towards her chest.

"What's her name?" Gabrielle asked.

Case turned to Gabrielle. "Sam." Gabrielle stood next to Case. She and Case studied the picture.

"She's pretty," Gabrielle remarked.

Case slid his lips to the side of his face. "*She's stupid!*" he whispered. Jenny pointed across the room.

"Louis!" she shouted. Case smiled at his mom. He returned his attention to the picture Gabrielle held.

"She doesn't look like that anymore," he explained. He made quotes with his fingers.

"That was during her 'Goth' phase."

Gabrielle smiled. "Ah..."

Sergeant Paloni stared into a closet. A light bulb dangled above his head. It threaded into a ballast. The ballast dangled from a group of wires. A pull cord made of tiny, brass balls dangled beside the light bulb. Paloni wore latex gloves. They were cornflower blue. Paloni grabbed a hold of the ballast with his left hand. He tugged the pull cord with his right. The closet became painted with a dull, orange glow. Paloni folded his arms over his chest. Five fresh, bloody skeletons lay in the middle of the floor. They were piled in a jumbled heap. They were slathered with blood and chunks of flesh. The lower halves of the walls were also soaked with blood. The blood had been there for days. So, it was mostly dry. The smell coming from the closet was putrid and foul. It made Paloni's stomach churn.

Paloni looked at the floor. He was standing in a pool of blood. Luckily, he was wearing latex sleeves over his shoes. All the skeletons were facing the floor. So, Paloni couldn't see their faces. He bent over. He laid his fingers along the back of one of the skulls. He lifted the skull and turned it. Vertebrae and cartilage began crackling. Fluids began draining from the victim's spine. Paloni scrunched up his nose.

"Eeeeeeee..." he groaned. Paloni twisted the skull until it was facing him. His lips parted. He gasped.

Gabrielle sat in Case's lap. Case's hand rested on her shoulder. They watched the game. Cass, the Vultures' quarterback, handed the ball to a runningback. His name was Harrison. Harrison broke three tackles and fell into the end zone. Jenny sat up. She lifted her hands above her head.

"Touchdown!" she shouted.

"Yes!" Gabrielle shouted. She looked over her shoulder. Case smiled back. Gabrielle

pressed her lips together. "A touchdown's a score, right?"

Case squinted. "You don't ever watch football?" he inquired.

Gabrielle looked at her lap. "Shut-up." Case patted her back. He lowered his head. He rested his lips beside Gabrielle's ear. *"Why don't you go sit in ADAM'S lap?"* he whispered. Gabrielle turned her head. She peered at Case out of the corner of her eye. Case motioned towards Adam with his head. *"Look at him over there."* Gabrielle glanced at her boyfriend. He was looking down the hallway. Gabrielle figured he was waiting on Tiffany. He looked lonely and bored. Gabrielle was still upset with Adam because of what he did to Ted at school. She wasn't mad at him. She hated Ted and Brittany. But, she was a little worried. She didn't want to sit with Adam. He was out of control. Gabrielle wasn't sure what he might do next. She faced Case. She parted her lips. Nothing came out. A piece of classical music began playing. Case reached inside his jacket. He took out his phone and looked it over. A row of characters printed across the little window on the outside. They read "Paloni - Cell."

"Hmm..." Case moaned. He flipped open Gina's old phone and laid it against his ear. "Hey, Dick-Face!" he shouted. Case's mother looked across the room. Her eyebrows pointed down the bridge of her nose. Her nose crinkled. She pointed between her son's eyes.

"Hey!" she shouted. "Don't talk like that!"

"Case," Sergeant Paloni replied. "I got a little something for ya."

Case pursed his lips. He nodded. "Okay. I'm listening."

Paloni was still standing in front of the closet. He looked around. "We've got six skeletons in a house, downtown. Five in a closet. One upstairs, tied to a bed. No signs of forced entry. No trace of epidermis, muscle tissue, or organs that were removed."

Case squinted. "Just their skeletons? That's strange."

"Yeah," Sergeant Paloni replied. "Better bring Tiffany." Paloni slid his thumb over a pair of incisions. They were carved into one of the skulls. It was attached to a skeleton at the bottom of the pile. The incisions intersected. "The murderer carved inverted crosses into their skulls." Paloni stood up. He looked around and licked his lips. "Looks like some sort of ritual killing."

Brittany lived in a south facing house. It was in an upscale part of town. The floor of Brittany's bedroom was covered with fluffy, white carpet. It was like a floor made of cat hair. There were two windows in Brittany's bedroom. There was one along the north wall and one along the east wall. There were two black lights below each window. Each had a pair of florescent bulbs. The ballasts had orange toggle switches. They glowed when the lights were turned on. They were on. Black curtains covered Brittany's windows. Strands of hippie beads dangled across the curtains. They were decorated with rainbow colored swirls. The middle of each strand was tied to the sides of the windows. There was a poster of a peace sign on the left side of the north window. The word "peace" was written below the symbol. The letters and the symbol were colored like rainbow tie dye. The poster was black everywhere else. Brittany's black lights made the rainbow colors phosphoresce.

There was another poster on the opposite side of the window. It was a picture of an angry, grinning skull. It was enormous. The skull was decorated with cracks. It was surrounded by a black hood. The skull also glowed under Brittany's black lights. Brittany had a computer desk. It was tucked into the northeast corner of her bedroom. It had a curvy, silver frame. The surface of the desk was a giant pane of glass. A slick, white LCD monitor rested on the glass. It had a thirty-two inch screen. The screen was housed inside a slick, white case. A keyboard with a metallic body stood in front of Brittany's monitor. It had slick, white keys. A slick, white

mouse rested beside the keyboard. It lay on a mouse pad. The surface of the mouse pad was a square of rainbow colored tie dye.

A water bed was tucked into the southwest corner of Brittany's bedroom. It was beside the door. The bed had an oak frame. A thick, wool blanket lay across the surface of the water bed. It was decorated with rainbow colored stripes. There were four pillows. Two had pillow cases that matched the blanket. Two had black pillow cases. They were decorated with white daisies, pink begonias, canary yellow daffodils, and crimson roses. There was a rug at the foot of Brittany's bed. It was made of green wool. It was shaped like a marijuana leaf. It had seven sections shaped like tear drops. Each section connected at one of its tips. The opposite tips were spread in a circle.

There was an oak table between Brittany's bed and the door. A red, wax figurine rested on top. It was shaped like the Buddha. The sculpture of Buddha sat in the lotus position. Its palms faced Brittany's ceiling. A pair of incense sticks lay across the figurine's palms. A pair of tiny thumbs held the sticks in place. There were three drawers below each side of Brittany's bed. Brittany kept a water bong in the middle drawer on the side facing the south wall of the bedroom. The bong had a big, glass water container. It was green. It was shaped like a skull. It was decorated with black paint. Black circles were the skull's eyes. Black tear drops were its nostrils. A grid of black lines was the skull's teeth. The black paint was etched into grooves molded into the glass. The water bong had a chrome bowl and stem. It was removable. It was sticking out of the left side of the skull's face. A glass tube was molded into the opposite side. It lay at a forty-five degree angle. The tube was big enough to fit over a person's lips.

Brittany sat on her four pillows. Her back was a foot away from the west wall of her bedroom. She sat with her legs crossed. The bong rested in her lap. Brittany stuffed the bowl

full of pot. She and Ted spent the previous fifteen minutes picking out seeds and stems. Then, they crumpled chunks of marijuana leaves in their fingers until they were like grains of sand. Brittany packed the bowl with her thumbs. Then, she turned the bong one hundred eighty degrees. She lowered her head and rested her lips inside the glass tube. She gazed across the top of the water bong.

Ted sat across from Brittany. He gazed back. He looked angry and impatient. His nose looked like a big, fat strawberry. Ted's nostrils whistled when he breathed. He held the tip of a white, plastic lighter beside the bowl. He pressed a red button on the side. A thin, blue flame erupted from a metallic rim surrounding the top of the lighter. It looked like a tiny cutting torch. Ted slid the tip of the flame across shards of pot packed into the bowl of Brittany's water bong. The shards glowed orange. Brittany lifted her mouth off the edge of the glass tube. Then, she returned it. She repeated the process several times. The water bowl filled with white smoke.

"You good?" Ted inquired. Brittany glanced at her boyfriend's eyes. They were the color of fog. Brittany looked down and nodded. She pressed her mouth against the rim of the glass tube. Ted let go of the button on his lighter. He removed the bowl and stem from the bong. Brittany inhaled all the smoke inside the water bowl. She lifted her head and laid back. She rested her shoulder blades against the wall. Her shiny, green eyes popped open. She pinched her nostrils and lips with her fingers. She started snorting. Tufts of smoke dashed from her nostrils and mouth. Ted smirked. "Don't laugh!" he shouted. Brittany's lips curled into a smile. She fought off a series of giggles. Tears dribbled out of her eyes. She couldn't take it. Brittany lowered her fingers, tilted her head back, and exhaled. A cloud of white smoke gushed out of her lungs and filled the air. It smelled like a skunk. Brittany exhaled a couple of coughs. She swatted tears off her eyelids and looked at her boyfriend.

"*You're such an ass!*" she squeaked. She could barely talk. Brittany turned her head, cupped her fingers in front of her lips, and coughed. Ted sparked up his lighter again. He held it in front of the bowl.

"Quit screwing around," he instructed. "Man up." Brittany swirled her head around. Cherry red coils dangling from the rim of her rainbow colored beanie battered her cheeks. Brittany returned her lips to the water bong and waited. Ted torched the bowl. Water inside the glass skull began bubbling. It sounded like someone blowing bubbles in milk. The skull filled with white smoke. Ted removed the bowl and stem from the side of the skull. Brittany's lungs filled with pot smoke. It was like inhaling hot steam. It tasted putrid and foul. It burned Brittany's chest and throat. Brittany tilted her head back and exhaled. She began coughing. Tears dribbled from her eyes. Ted returned the bowl and stem to the bong. He fired up his lighter again.

"We're waaaaaaai-ting..." he teased. Brittany cleared her throat. She laid her mouth over the rim of the glass tube. Ted burned shards of marijuana to a crisp. Brittany filled the water bowl with smoke. She looked across the top of the skull. She patted Ted's fingers. Ted smirked. He killed his lighter and removed the bowl and stem from the bong. Brittany cleared the chamber again. She lifted her head. At least, she was pretty sure she lifted her head. It felt like someone across the room lifted *their* head. Brittany collapsed against the wall. She coughed out as much smoke as she could. Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. Coughs erupted from her lungs. Her chest heaved. Ted watched. Brittany's breasts were tiny. She breathed heavy and fast. Her breasts rose and receded. Then, they repeated. Brittany gasped for breath. She lifted her head and looked across the bed. She spotted her boyfriend's face. She roared with giggles.

"Ted!" Brittany squawked between laughs. "*Stop staring at my boobs!*" Ted couldn't stop. He wasn't going to stop... no matter *what* Brittany said. He gazed at violet strands of wool resting along his girlfriend's chest. Her breathing began to relax. Her breasts heaved slower. Ted looked up. Brittany's poppy, green eyes stared back. They were narrow and hazy. Ted blinked.

"What time are your parents coming home?" he asked.

Brittany shook her head, slowly. "*Late...*" she groaned. She closed her eyes, tilted her head back, and cleared her throat. She peeled her eyelids apart and peered into Ted's cloudy, grey eyes. "Like... one or two in the morning?"

Ted nodded. "That fuckin' Rhodes..." He looked away and shook his head. Brittany narrowed her eyes.

"Huh?"

Ted faced his girlfriend. "Look at my nose, man." He pointed at the center of his face. "It looks like someone dropped a brick on my face!" Brittany pinched her eyes shut. She tilted her head back and filled the room with giggles. She laughed until she ran out of breath. She felt a tickle in her throat. Her laughter turned into coughing. Brittany turned her head, faced the surface of her bed, and began hacking. "I'm gonna get him," Ted continued. Brittany cleared her throat. She looked up. Her face felt like it was being ripped apart. Brittany realized she couldn't stop grinning.

"Ted!" she shouted. "You can't..." Brittany closed her eyes and thought. "You can't..." She peeled her eyelids apart and fluttered them. She faced Ted. "What were we talking about?"

"I'm gonna get the boys together," Ted explained. "We're gonna take care of this, tomorrow." He narrowed his eyes. He looked away from his girlfriend and thought. "*What*

about Gabrielle?" he whispered. *"What if we just..."* Brittany stared at the side of her boyfriend's head. She tried to follow what he was saying. She felt disoriented and faint. She blinked.

"What are you..." she grumbled. Brittany swallowed. At least, she tried to. Her mouth and tongue felt like rubber. She had cotton mouth. Brittany forgot what she was going to say. She looked at her lap. It felt weighed down. Brittany realized her water bong was still in her lap. She looked up. Ted was facing the north wall, muttering. Brittany cleared her throat. She tried to swallow again. She mustered up enough spit to wash some skunk taste out of her mouth. "Ted?" she inquired. Ted stopped mumbling and faced her. Brittany narrowed her eyes. She looked confused. "Are you gonna smoke this with me?" Ted looked at Brittany's lap. He curled his fingers around the skull bowl. He lifted it and reached across the bed. He laid the bong beside the Buddha figurine on Brittany's end table. Brittany followed her boyfriend's movements with her eyes. Her eyes followed Ted until he was back where he started.

Ted stared into Brittany's eyes. He looked down. Pitch black denim wrapped his girlfriend's legs. Brittany took her boots off earlier. Her legs were folded like a pretzel. Ted spotted ten shiny, red dots between denim wrapping Brittany's calves and rainbow colored bands wrapping the surface of her bed. They were Brittany's toenails. Ted slipped his fingers under his girlfriend's calves. He grabbed a hold of her ankles. Brittany's emerald colored eyes popped open. She gasped. Ted rolled onto his knees. He dragged his girlfriend across the bed. He slid her knees between his and let go of her ankles. He grabbed her thighs. He dragged her until her hips were between his knees.

Brittany's arms rested on her chest. Brittany wasn't sure if she put them there on purpose or they just landed that way. She sucked air through her lips. She felt a smile climbing her

cheeks. Ted gazed into Brittany's glittery, green eyes. Her eyelids were drooping and lazy. She was stoned out of her mind. And, Ted hadn't taken a single hit. He could do just about anything he wanted to her. And, Brittany wouldn't be able to do anything about it. Ted fought off a smile.

"You fall for that every time," he remarked. Brittany choked back laughter. She rolled her eyes.

"Right... I *fall* for it." Ted smirked. He lowered his head. He laid his lips on his girlfriend's and closed his eyes. Brittany's lips tasted like a skunk.

Chapter 3: "Skeletons in the Closet"

There was writing on the walls. It looked like gibberish. It was written in blood. Any letters with spines, such as Ls, Ds, and Ps slanted towards the left. The handwriting was a scribbled mess. Sergeant Paloni read the writing to himself. *"Clyde was with Bonnie, who was with Peter, who was with Garfield."* Paloni studied a sentence below. It was senseless and repetitive. *"There is garbage in the walls above the garbage in the walls above the garbage in the walls above the garbage in the walls above the garbage in the walls."* It seemed like madness.

"Gotta be some schizo," Captain Ford interjected. Sergeant Paloni looked over his left shoulder. He was standing on a plane of crunchy, blue carpet. It lay across the floor of the victims' living room. Ford stood in a hallway. It was near the northeast corner of the living room. The house faced the east. The closet containing skeletons was beside Ford's right arm. Captain Ford was rather large. His face was flabby and puffed up. His cheeks and chin looked like grapefruits. His eyes were dull and grey. They were buried in his fat face. White hair clung to the sides of his head. A slick, shiny scalp lay down the middle.

Captain Ford's upper body was the size of a barrel. His midsection was as wide as a refrigerator. His legs were half the width of his midsection. They shrank near his knees. Near the bottom, they squeezed into a pair of scuffed up, brown leather shoes. A white shirt was wrapped around Ford's trunk. A pair of black trousers dangled from his hips. A red tie with yellow stripes dangled from his neck. A brown trench coat dangled from his shoulders. Ford folded his arms over his tie. "I don't know why you called Case on this one," he grumbled. "It doesn't seem paranormal to me."

Paloni shrugged. "What about the inverted crosses?" He faced forward. He looked

down. The carpet was crunchy because it was dotted with cola and beer stains. The living room smelled like old beer and cigarettes. "You know Tiffany is a practicing witch, right?" Paloni inquired. He looked over his shoulder. Ford closed his eyes. He shrugged. Paloni faced forward. There was a television in the southwest corner of the living room. It was very old. The frame was made of plastic and simulated wood. It stood on four chrome legs. The screen was positioned to the left. It had round corners. It was green when the television was turned off. The right side of the television was a panel of controls. It was black with silver trim.

The walls of the living room were painted white. The paint had a bumpy texture. The bloody writing Paloni read lay along the walls. It covered the walls from top to bottom. There was writing almost everywhere. Where there wasn't bloody writing, the walls were sloshed with blood. It dripped to the floor and pooled on the carpet. The blood was red and the carpet was blue. So, the puddles were violet. Paloni looked above the television. A list of animals was written where the south and west walls intersected. Some animal names were written on the left. Some were written on the right. Paloni read the list to himself. *"Antelope, deer, giraffe, donkey, sheep, kangaroo, zebra, bear, porcupine, skunk, squirrel, horse, goat, dog, cat, mouse, parrot, elephant, tiger, lion, hyena, chimpanzee, orangutan, gorilla, aardvark, rattlesnake."* Paloni looked at the floor. He curled his finger over his lips. He squinted and shook his head.

"Schizo," Ford repeated. Paloni looked over his shoulder. He turned his head to the right. He studied a couch. It lay near the northeast corner of the living room. The couch was covered with red fabric. The cushions were soaked with dried blood. Two pipes lay on the middle cushion. Paloni found them earlier. They were stuffed behind the couch cushions. One pipe was made of white ceramic. One pipe was made of red glass. It had chrome trim. The bowls of both pipes were stuffed full of marijuana. It was burnt to a crisp.

"And, the inverted crosses?" Paloni inquired. He stared between Captain Ford's smoke colored eyes. Ford lowered his arms. For a man, he had extremely large breasts. They were all scrunched up when his arms were folded. They fell and wobbled around when Ford dropped his arms. Ford trudged into the living room. Globes of fat hiding behind his jacket wiggled when he walked. They sloshed around like bags filled with gelatin dessert. Ford stopped and looked around. Paloni could hear him breathing. Ford struggled forcing enough air through his nostrils to remain conscious. Sometimes, he gave up and gulped air through his mouth.

"Schizophrenics are usually religious. That's a well known fact." Ford stopped pacing. He glanced towards Sergeant Paloni. "A lot of them believe in 'magical thinking'."

Paloni stared at Captain Ford over his shoulder. "What about the Pope?" he asked. He turned around. He faced Captain Ford and folded his arms over his chest. "Do you think *he's* schizophrenic?" Ford looked towards the west wall. A patio window took up most of the wall. It consisted of two panes of glass. A sliding glass door stood on the left. To open, it slid past a pane of glass on the right. A row of thick, vertical blinds lay in front of the glass. They were the color of ivory.

"Did you know that 1 in 100 people are schizophrenic?" Captain Ford requisitioned. He looked over his left shoulder. He found Paloni's dark, murky eyes. "Most of them don't even know it."

Paloni smirked. "So... you think it's a possibility?" Captain Ford forced a smile. It creased mountains of fat attached to the sides of his face.

"I think an unusually large number of Catholic priests like little boys." Ford narrowed his beady, little eyes. "Doesn't that seem strange to you?" Paloni looked away. He studied bloody writing and shook his head.

"It might." He glanced at Captain Ford. "To a schizophrenic."

"Ooooooooo..." Ford groaned. "Touche, sir." A voice called from the hallway. It was sarcastic and impatient. It was a voice that demanded attention and respect. It also conveyed boredom and discontent. It was the voice of Louis Case.

"Oh, Sergeant Pal-o-ni?!" Case sang. Paloni and Ford stared at each other. They narrowed their eyes and shook their heads. Paloni turned his head. He looked over his shoulder and found the hallway. Case's head poked around the corner. Case smirked. It was like nails on a chalkboard. Case was an expert at demonstrating irritation. It was second nature to him. His portrayal of dissatisfaction consisted of pure subtlety. Yet, any person in the room got the message. They realized Case wanted their attention. And, he wanted it immediately. Paloni exhaled through his nostrils. He turned and wandered across the living room. He stood beside the end of the red couch and folded his arms over his chest. Case retracted his head. He stood up and mirrored Paloni's gesture with his arms.

"What the hell is Captain Dick-Face doing here?!" he whispered. Paloni was overwhelmed with annoyance. It filled his thoughts like snow filling a television screen. He closed his eyes and pressed his lips together. He shrugged and looked between Case's endearing, arctic blue eyes.

"He's the boss," Paloni rasped. *"What am I gonna do? Tell him to leave?"* Case's eyebrows turned into a "V." His frosty, blue eyes conveyed anger and frustration. There was that subtlety, again. Case lifted his arm. He tapped Paloni's breastbone with his first and second fingers.

"Well, better you than me!" he shouted under his breath.

"Detective Case!" Ford called near the patio window. Case rolled his eyes. He peaked

around the corner. He gazed through Captain Ford's smoky, grey eyes. He gritted his teeth. It looked... sort of like a smile.

"Howdy, Bill!" he replied. He glanced around the living room. Bloody letters decorating the walls filled his eyes and tickled his brain. He faced Captain Ford. "Mind if I have the room for a minute?" Ford shrugged. He offered the room with his hands.

"It's all yours." Case exhaled, impatiently. He glared at Paloni. Paloni stared back. His expression was solemn and dull. It was *always* solemn and dull. Case considered Paloni to be a rather dull individual in general. He brushed past Sergeant Paloni and wandered into the living room. The first thing he noticed was the carpet. It was crispy and unsatisfying. Case stopped and looked down. The carpet was decorated with old cola and beer stains. Case blinked.

"You don't have to call me 'Detective'," Case remarked. He looked at Captain Ford. "It's just plain, old *Louis* Case nowadays." Ford stared between Case's eyes. He felt like telling him how wrong he was. He felt like enlightening him about the fact that he really admired the work he did. He felt like explaining how hard it was to work with such an explosive thinker. He enjoyed Case's input no matter how difficult it was to get along with him. He felt like telling Case a lot of things. He didn't figure that was too productive, though.

"You'll always be 'Detective Case', to me," Ford replied. He looked towards the hallway. "Is Tiffany out there?" Case smiled a little. It was for real, this time.

"She's in the hallway," he replied. "And, the kids." Ford nodded. He wandered across the living room. Case watched him out of the corner of his eye. He didn't trust that big, fat pig as far as he could throw him. And, that wasn't very far. He studied three sentences. They were slathered along the northwest corner. They were a foot above the floor. They read, "*Betty was born to Frank and Leslie. Frank was born to Jack and Harriet. Leslie was born to George and*

Nancy." Case thought about what that meant. The three sentences referred to ancestry. They demonstrated how all mankind originated from a single set of parents. At least, that was the first thing Case thought of. Case laid his elbow in his hand. He tapped his lips with his index finger. "Hmm..." he groaned.

Captain Ford stood beside Paloni. Tiffany, Gabrielle, and Adam stood beside the closet in the hallway. Tiffany wasn't subtle like her boyfriend. She gave up on subtlety long ago. She lost her innocence between kids picking on her and her father raping and torturing her. Somewhere along the way, Tiffany's dignity took a back seat to matters she considered more important... like surviving.

"Captain Ford, sir!" Tiffany sounded off. She lifted her fingers and flattened them. She laid them beside her forehead. "Tiffany Haynes, reporting for duty!" Tiffany lowered her fingers. She folded her arms behind her back. "Sir!" Paloni and Ford rested their elbows in their palms. They cupped their fingers over their lips and looked at each other.

"She's crazy!" Ford whispered behind his fingers.

"She's not THAT crazy!" Paloni whispered back. *"And, Case tells me she's on some new medication."* Tiffany's shiny, oak colored eyes slipped back and forth. They wandered from Sergeant Paloni's face to Captain Ford's. Tiffany was thinking a million thoughts a minute. It drove her nuts. It was a side effect of SSRIs. The pills Case's father prescribed turned her brain into a channel of random inquiries. Tiffany didn't know which one to respond to first. It was like trying to figure out which grain of sand to step on at the beach.

"Did you need me for something?!" Tiffany demanded. Ford and Paloni stopped jabbering. They faced Tiffany. Their fingers stayed in front of their lips. Paloni and Ford studied Tiffany's face. She looked bitchy. Her eyebrows were squashed in the middle. Her lips

were mashed together. Her forehead was all wrinkly. Tiffany retrieved her arms from her back. She plopped her palms on her hips. Ford stared between Tiffany's dark, mystical eyes. He felt a lump in his throat.

"Uh-oooh..." he hummed.

"Shut-uuuu-uup..." Paloni returned. Tiffany's eyes moved. They focused on Paloni's eyes and froze.

"You know, I can *hear* you two!" Tiffany shouted. "I know what you're up to! Don't think I haven't figured it out, yet!" Tiffany rolled her eyes. She looked away and folded her arms over her chest. "I mean, it's not like it's *that* big of a deal. You're just thinking out loud." Tiffany squinted. Her eyeballs wiggled back and forth. "Or, maybe *I'm* thinking out loud." She looked up. "I forget sometimes. Is there something I can help you guys with? Or, should we just stay out of your way?" She shrugged. "Maybe Gabrielle and Adam could help you out. Do you need anything moved or cleaned? They're pretty good at that kind of stuff." Tiffany licked her lips. "Unless, you're thinking about that *one* time. And then it doesn't really apply, I guess. I know that we've had our differences in the past..." Tiffany crinkled her eyes. She laid her elbow in her palm. She curled her finger over her lips. *"Wait a minute,"* she mumbled. *"How long ago was that?"* Paloni and Ford looked at each other. They said nothing.

"She's on drugs, guys!" Case called from the living room. Ford and Paloni looked over their shoulders. *"She hasn't had a chance to get used to them, yet!"* Paloni and Ford faced forward. Tiffany lowered her arms and looked up. Her eyes got all fiery, again. Her forehead got all crinkly.

"This is *your* fault, Louis!" she hollered back. "I told you, I can't take crap like this!"

"My dad's the one who prescribed them!" Case returned. Ford and Paloni looked towards

the living room. *"Why don't you point your finger at the person responsible?!"*

"You're still a dookie face!" Tiffany called back. Paloni and Ford faced Tiffany. Ford's fingers fell off his lips. He motioned towards the other end of the hallway.

"Come with me, Tiffany," he remarked. "There's something upstairs I'd like you to take a look at." Tiffany looked up. She stared into Captain Ford's cloud colored eyes. Ten thousand responses flooded her brain. She didn't know which one to say.

"Um..." she hummed. Captain Ford looked into Tiffany's eyes. He couldn't help but smile. He laid his fingers on her bicep. He nudged her along.

"Come on," he remarked. "It's alright." Tiffany felt goofy. She looked at the floor to hide a silly grin. The floor was covered with cheap, linoleum tiles. They were white with grids of tan colored lines. The lines made each set of nine tiles look like a game of Tic Tac Toe.

"Adam," Paloni remarked. Adam looked up. Paloni motioned towards the closet with his head. "Anything?" Adam looked to his right. There was a wall beside him. It was white like the walls in the living room. It separated the stairs from the hallway. There was a closet door below the steps. It was also painted white. Adam stared at it. His hazel irises focused on the plane of white paint. His pupils shrank. Adam had a bad feeling about the closet. Adam's thoughts were scattered by Tiffany and Captain Ford shuffling up the stairs. It made Adam jump. Paloni narrowed his eyes. "Well?"

Adam looked into Paloni's eyes. "The hell are you talking about?" he demanded. He looked at the door. "It's a closet. So, what?"

Paloni looked at the closet door. "You don't get any..." Paloni lifted his hands. He laid his fingertips against the door. "Impressions?" Adam stared at the door, carefully. He didn't know what was on the other side. And he didn't want to find out, either. Whatever was in the

closet, it made Adam's skin crawl.

"Just open the door, jackass," Adam replied. "I've got homework to do." Paloni flattened his eyebrows. He was not amused. There was a bronze colored knob near the east side of the door. Paloni grabbed a hold of the knob and turned it. He swung the door aside. Adam wandered towards the closet and peeked inside. Gabrielle followed. She laid her fingers on her boyfriend's back. She stood on the tips of her brown, leather boots and peeked over Adam's shoulder. Her big, blue eyes popped open. She inhaled a sharp breath. Adam felt like screaming. Instead, he just stared. His eyes searched the closet. Gabrielle laid her forehead against the back of her boyfriend's neck. She couldn't stand to look anymore. She turned her head. She found Paloni's eyes.

"Paloni!" she shouted. "Ewwww! That's gross!" Adam fought off a smirk. He studied the stack of skeletons Paloni found. There were five of them. Two of them were men's skeletons. Three of them were girls'. Adam pinched his eyes shut. He gritted his teeth. He wasn't sure why he thought two were guys and three were gals. There was no way he could possibly know that. He opened his eyes and looked around. The skeletons were caked with dried blood and chunks of flesh. "And, that smell!" Gabrielle complained. She stared into Sergeant Paloni's eyes. The outer corners of Gabrielle's eyes got all crinkly. "Do you smell that, Adam?!" Gabrielle laid her fingers over her mouth and nostrils. "Bleh!" Adam sighed. He folded his arms over his chest and turned his head. He looked at Paloni and shook his head.

"This is stupid," he remarked. "What could I possibly tell you about this closet that you can't figure out on your own?"

Paloni shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe you can tell me who murdered these people."

"Where's their skin?" Adam inquired. Paloni squinted. Adam froze. He wasn't sure why

he asked that question. It just kind of... came out. Adam faced forward. He stared at the top of a man's skull. He squished his eyelids together. Once again, there was no way he could possibly know whether the skull he was looking at belonged to a man or a woman.

"We're not sure what happened to their skin," Paloni replied.

Adam looked up. "Well, find it," he replied. He sounded impatient. "It has to be somewhere." Paloni stared at Adam's gold colored eyes. He thought about what Adam said. He lifted his chin and looked at the tops of his eye sockets.

"Hmm..." he groaned. Paloni's upper body was wrapped with a brown leather jacket. He reached inside his jacket and rummaged around. He took out a tiny pad of paper and a pen. He flipped through the pad of paper and found a fresh page. He squashed a button on the end of the pen with his thumb. Then, he made a note on the empty sheet of paper he found. He scribbled across the entire page. He wrote the word "skin" from the lower, left corner of the page to the upper, right corner. Paloni scribbled a giant question mark beside the letter "n." He looked up. "Interesting." Gabrielle's cheek and her palms lay along wads of slick black leather. They were wrapped around Adam's shoulders. Gabrielle lifted her head and peered into Paloni's eyes.

"Sergeant Paloni?" she inquired. Paloni lifted his eyebrows. "You're a weirdo." Paloni squinted. He returned his pen and notepad to a pocket inside his jacket.

"You two are weirdos!" Paloni responded.

The master bedroom was upstairs. It was wrapped with white wallpaper. The wallpaper was decorated with pink, vertical stripes. Cheap, shaggy carpet covered the floor. It was a jungle of tan and yellow swirls. The canopy was dusted with cigarette ash. There was a cruddy bed with a steel frame. It had four steel posts. A bare mattress lay along the surface of the bed. A sixth skeleton lay across the mattress. The skeleton's wrists and ankles were cuffed to the bed.

posts. The mattress was soaked with dried blood. An inverted cross was carved into the skeleton's forehead. A gold ring was wrapped around the skeleton's left ring finger. A tiny, white diamond was attached to the middle of the ring.

The bed was surrounded by malt liquor bottles, beer bottles, and wine bottles. Most were empty or half drunk. A wood table stood near the north side of the bed. That was the right side when facing the foot of the bed. The table was wrapped in cheap veneer. Two ash trays lay on top. One was made of white porcelain. The other was made of thick, green glass. Mountains of ash filled each one. Squashed up cigarette butts were poking out. A mirror lay between the ash trays. Two razor blades lay on top. They lay beside lines of cocaine and a couple of rolled up dollar bills. There was an open window. It lay along the south wall. That was on the left side of the bed. Turquoise drapes bordered the left and right edges of the window. They were transparent. They floated in a gentle breeze.

Tiffany and Captain Ford stood at the foot of the bed. Tiffany was uncomfortable. The ripped up, blood drenched skeleton was bad enough. But mainly, Tiffany didn't like being surrounded by drugs, booze, and the stench of stagnant cigarette ash. It reminded her of her father. Also, her big, clunky shoes were buried in shaggy carpet attached to the floor. It was like wading through quicksand. Tiffany was disgusted. She stood impatiently, awaiting instructions. The tender breeze wandering through the window was frosty and unpleasant. It made tiny hairs on the back of Tiffany's neck stand on end. Tiffany folded her arms across her chest and shivered. The smell of rain burned Tiffany's nostrils. It was sprinkling. But, it wasn't pouring down rain like earlier.

"I'm sorry it's so cold in here," Captain Ford remarked. Tiffany looked up. "We left everything in this bedroom like we found it. We're afraid to touch anything. The window was

open when we got here. And, the heater was turned off."

Tiffany nodded. "Louis will find that interesting."

Captain Ford squinted. "How do you know?"

Tiffany shrugged. "He always finds stupid, insignificant details interesting. He *lives* for stuff like that." She smiled. "He's a freak."

Captain Ford fought off a smile. "Well... I'll give you that." Captain Ford pointed at the skeleton. "This is the wife."

Tiffany faced the victim. "The 'wife'?" she inquired.

"Catherine Woodside," Captain Ford explained. "She's married to Lance Woodside. His skeleton and four others are in a closet downstairs." Captain Ford wandered beside the bed.

Tiffany watched him, timidly. She crept behind him. She was a bit apprehensive. Actually, she was terrified. Ford pointed at the victim's forehead. "You see this?" he inquired. Tiffany stared at Catherine's skull. She spotted an inverted cross. It was carved into the skeleton's forehead.

"Ah," Tiffany remarked. She looked into Captain Ford's eyes. "So, you called *us*."

Ford shrugged. "It was Sergeant Paloni's idea." Tiffany grinned. She flashed Captain Ford rows of glowing, white teeth. She felt silly. She wasn't sure why she did that. She looked at the skeleton to distract herself.

"If this was some sort of satanic, ritual killing, there must've been a purpose for removing the victims' skin." She looked up. "And, their organs."

Ford nodded. "Mm-hmm..." He laid his finger on his chin. "But, what purpose could there be?" Tiffany stared into Ford's cloud colored eyes. She shrugged.

"I hate to disappoint you..." A big grin ripped her cheeks apart. "I'm not really sure." Tiffany forced the smile off her face. She'd been doing that all night. She mashed her lips

together and wrinkled her nose. "Are you sure it's not just some schizo?" she inquired. Captain Ford's lips parted. He raised his palms.

"That's what *I* said!" Tiffany shrugged. She glanced at Catherine's skeleton.

"The ancient Egyptians used to remove the organs of people they mummified." She glanced at Captain Ford. "They preserved their organs in jars." Tiffany rolled her eyes.

"That's... all I got."

Case's voice cracked the air in two. "Ah-ha!" he shouted. Tiffany and Captain Ford looked up. Case was looking in a different direction. He was focused on the south wall. That was the wall with the open window. Case pointed at the window and wandered in. He swam through waves of fluffy carpet and stopped beside one of the drapes. He stared out the open window and folded his arms across his chest. "The heater is off," he remarked. He looked at Ford and Tiffany. "And, the upstairs window is open." He narrowed his eyes. "Isn't that interesting?" A grin cracked Tiffany's face in two. She looked over her shoulder. Captain Ford stared back.

"Told ya," Tiffany proclaimed.

"That gives us an approximate time of death," Captain Ford remarked. "That's about it."

Case nodded. "Yeah. I'd say Friday afternoon. When it was warm outside." Tiffany faced her boyfriend. She folded her arms over her chest and shivered. It was freezing.

"Me and Captain Ford don't think this was a ritual killing."

Case tapped his lips with his index finger. "Hmm..." he groaned. He stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Well, I hate to tell you this. But, you're both a couple of morons." He looked at Captain Ford. "Actually, I kind of enjoy it."

Ford flattened his eyebrows. "What do you got, Detective Case?"

"Paloni's right," he reported. "This *is* some sort of ritual killing."

Tiffany lifted her palms. "What? How do you know that?" Case pointed at the floor. He stared between Ford's shiny, grey eyes.

"Did you read any of the messages in the living room?" he requisitioned.

Captain Ford crinkled his eyes. "They're written all over the walls," he replied. "It's kind of hard *not* to."

Case held up his index finger. "Hang on a second." He reached inside his plaid coat. He took out a notepad. He flipped through a few pages and began reading. "Here are some of them," he declared. "*Clyde was with Bonnie, who was with Peter, who was with Garfield.*" He looked up. Ford and Tiffany stared back. Case continued reading. "*There is garbage in the walls above the garbage in the walls above the garbage in the walls above the garbage in the walls above the garbage in the walls.*" He looked up. "Anything?"

Captain Ford shrugged. "Gibberish." Case nodded. He searched his notes.

"*Betty was born to Frank and Leslie. Frank was born to Jack and Harriet. Leslie was born to George and Nancy.*" He looked up. "Tiffany?" he inquired. "Does that mean anything to you?" Case's girlfriend sighed. Her brain filled with responses.

"It's freezing in here," she complained. She rubbed thick rolls of maroon colored wool wrapping her biceps. Case looked down.

"One's just a list of animals," he explained. "*Antelope, deer, giraffe, donkey, sheep, kangaroo, zebra, bear, porcupine, skunk, squirrel, horse, goat, dog, cat, mouse, parrot, elephant, tiger, lion, hyena, chimpanzee, orangutan, gorilla, aardvark, rattlesnake.*" He gazed into his girlfriend's eyes. They were dark and murky like thick molasses. Case could see gears turning inside Tiffany's head. Tiffany squinted. She looked towards the upper, right corners of

her eyes.

"Well, that sounds like..." Tiffany faced her boyfriend. "It reminds me of Noah's ark."

Case smirked. "I *knew* you'd get that one." He tapped his notepad with the tip of his index finger. "These are biblical references," Case proclaimed. He looked at Captain Ford. "All of them." He skimmed through his notes. "*Betty was born to Frank and Leslie,*" he repeated. "*Frank was born to Jack and Harriet. Leslie was born to George and Nancy.*" He looked up. "You see? It's kind of like... a list of ancestors?" He blinked. "It's like in *The Old Testament*... when God declares man should go forth and multiply."

Ford narrowed his eyes. "*There is garbage above the garbage in the walls above the garbage in the walls?*" he repeated. "How exactly is that a biblical reference?"

Case squinted. "I'll admit. That one's a little vague." He shook his pointer finger. "It took me a while to figure out." He stared at rows of tan and yellow fountains lying across the floor. He cupped his chin between his index finger and thumb. "It almost sounds like..." He looked up. "A stained glass window, maybe?"

Captain Ford's big, fat face went dull. "Sounds ridiculous."

Case shrugged. "It sounds perfectly reasonable to me." He slipped his notepad into a pocket inside his jacket. "I'd be more than happy to consult with you guys on this case. Are you alright with that?" Captain Ford stared between Case's bright, wise eyes. He shrugged.

"Meh... What's the worst that could happen?"

Chapter 4: "Retaliation"

Case couldn't get Tiffany out of bed. Tiffany didn't have classes on Tuesday. But, she needed to do some research at the library. She was supposed to have her butt up at six o'clock. It was nearly seven-thirty. She was still snoozing. An oak bed rested in the center of Case and Tiffany's bedroom. It came from a bedroom built into the back of Tiffany's magic shop. Red bedding was stretched across the mattress and pillows. Tiffany's face was buried in the pillows. A thick, red blanket lay across her back. A maroon rug lay below the bed. A white pentagram was stitched into the rug. An oak table lay beside the bed. An alarm clock lay on top. It had a black, plastic body. A row of slanted, green numbers lay across the face of the clock. They read, "7:28."

Case stood in the doorway. A black shirt with a thick collar hung from his shoulders. White stripes wrapped Case's shirt. Wrinkles of denim wrapped his legs. They were the color of sea water. A pair of black sneakers poked out of the bottoms of Case's jeans. Three diagonal stripes lay across the left and right sides of Case's sneakers. They were white. Case wore his jacket from the day before. It was made of wool. The wool was decorated with red and white plaid. Case's right bicep rested against the door frame. His arms were folded across his chest. His ankles were crossed. The toe of his right shoe pointed at the left edge of his left shoe. Case stared at Tiffany, impatiently. He figured the SSRIs his father prescribed were causing hypersomnia.

"Tiffany?" Case called. His girlfriend didn't budge. Case slipped across imitation wood covering the floor. It was slick and dark. It was like a mirror. It cast a reflection of the soles of Case's shoes and blue-green jeans wrapping his legs. Case stopped near the foot of the bed. He laid the tips of his fingers along the edge of the bed. The surface of Tiffany's red comforter felt

slick and cool. It was squishy and thick. Case inhaled through his nostrils. "Tiffany?" he requisitioned. Tiffany didn't move. Case looked down. There were two mounds between his hands. They were Tiffany's heels. They were poking through the blanket. Case smirked.

He curled his fingers into fists. He lifted the end of Tiffany's comforter. He slid it up her calves and let go. The end of the blanket wadded behind the backs of Tiffany's knees. Cotton pajama pants wrapped Tiffany's calves. Her britches were decorated with vertical bands of canary yellow, tangerine, turquoise, lime green, and white. The cuffs of her pants were three inches short of her ankles. The soles of her feet were facing the ceiling. Stacks of flesh lay between Tiffany's heels and toes. They were like tiny staircases. Case slipped his fingers around Tiffany's left ankle. He eased her foot away from the mattress. He laid his fingers on the sole of Tiffany's foot. Then, he fluttered them. Tiffany's head popped up. Her eyelids peeled apart. She sucked in a breath.

"What's that you think is meaning?" she mumbled. She wiggled her foot. *"Huh?"* she grumbled. She looked over her shoulder. Her eyes popped open. *"Um, no..."* Tiffany faced the pillows. She jiggled her head back and forth. *"No, no, no, no, no..."* Case snickered. He returned Tiffany's foot to the mattress. He re-covered Tiffany's legs and dropped her blanket over the edge of the bed. He sat beside Tiffany's heels. He patted her calves.

"Wake up, sleepy-head," he remarked. Tiffany looked over her shoulder. She gazed into her boyfriend's icy, blue eyes. The outer corners of her eyebrows sagged.

"Oooohhhh..." she groaned. Her eyelids forced themselves shut. *"What time is it?"* Tiffany's head collapsed on a pillow. Case reached across the bed. He slipped his fingers under the other end of the blanket. Tiffany's fingers lay beside her shoulder. Case slipped his fingers around Tiffany's. He leaned forward and kissed her cheek. He rested his lips beside her ear.

"It's seven-thirty," he whispered.

Tiffany's eyelids crinkled. *"Mmmmmmmmm..."* she groaned. She inhaled through her lips. *"I don't wanna get up."* Case wiggled Tiffany's hand. He lifted his head.

"It'll be okay, sweetie." He rolled Tiffany's thick, red comforter off her shoulders. A long sleeved shirt dangled from her shoulders. It was beige. It was surrounded by vertical creases. Tiffany's shiny, black hair was chopped even with her chin in the front. In the back, it was cut to the bottom of her hairline. So, the back of her neck was exposed. Case laid the tips of his fingers along the back of Tiffany's neck. He slid them up and down Tiffany's pale flesh. *"Come on..."* Tiffany's lips curled into a smile. The corners of her lips forced their way up her cheeks. Tiffany inhaled through her nostrils. She peeled her eyelids apart.

"Oohh..." she groaned. She swallowed. *"All-right."* Tiffany lifted her head. She slid her legs towards her chest, sat up, and faced her boyfriend. She rested her palms beside her hips and sighed. She tilted her head back and closed her eyes. Case snickered.

"Tiffany?" he requisitioned.

"Mmmm..." Tiffany groaned. She forced her eyelids apart and lifted her head. She gazed into Case's eyes. She blinked, slowly. She leaned forward and offered Case her hands. Case curled his fingers around hers. He stood up and tugged Tiffany out of bed. The soles of Tiffany's feet plopped on the floor. It felt frosty and slick. Case laid his fingers on Tiffany's shoulder. He looked into her eyes.

"I'm gonna take Adam and Gabrielle to school," he told her.

Tiffany nodded. *"Okay."*

Case smiled. *"Don't go back to sleep. Alright?"*

Tiffany snickered. *"I won't. Shut-up."* Case laid his lips on Tiffany's. Case and Tiffany

gripped each other's lips and peeled them apart.

Adam and Gabrielle were in Mr. Saffron's class. Mr. Saffron was their Geology teacher. He was in his late sixties. Most of the students wondered why he didn't retire. Mr. Saffron was short and pudgy. His forehead was a stack of crispy wrinkles. His cheeks sagged down the sides of his chin. His chin was the size of a baseball. It looked like someone screwed a baseball into the bottom of his face. Mr. Saffron's eyes were pale and blue. It looked like he had cataracts. A pair of glasses lay in front of his eyes. They had thick, plastic frames. The frames of Mr. Saffron's glasses were the color of caramel.

Chunks of silver were glued to the top and sides of Mr. Saffron's head. His hair was a scrambled, disheveled mess. It was crunchy and stiff. Mr. Saffron slopped gel through his hair every morning before school. The problem was that he had a habit of raking his fingers through his hair throughout the day. Before long, his hair looked like an unkempt lawn. A white t-shirt hung from Mr. Saffron's broad, squishy shoulders. Thin, maroon bands wrapped his shirt. Maroon suspenders lay on top. They held a pair of sand colored khakis below a bulge near the bottom of Mr. Saffron's shirt. Mr. Saffron's fat feet were shoved into a pair of slick, black shoes.

Adam and Brittany were in front of Mr. Saffron's class when Brittany kissed Adam. Mr. Saffron's room was on the first floor of Willow Junior High. Adam and Gabrielle sat near the back of the room. White tiles with grey spots lay across the floor. There were windows along the west wall of the room. Adam's desk was near the southwest corner of the room. It was beside the windows. Gabrielle sat to Adam's right. Slick veneer was glued to the surfaces of their desks. Each of their table tops hovered on four chrome legs. Gabrielle and Adam sat in plastic seats. The seats also had chrome legs. Adam's seat was red. Gabrielle's was blue.

A thick sweater dangled from Gabrielle's shoulders. It was the color of a tangerine.

Gabrielle borrowed it from Tiffany. She was worried. The sweater was cut pretty low in the front. But, it looked okay. Gabrielle also bummed a pair of dark blue jeans from Tiffany. They were a little long. So, Gabrielle rolled them up at the bottoms. The rolled up cuffs of Tiffany's jeans lay along the tops of black, canvas shoes. They had white laces, white soles, and white tips. Adam was draped in black. He wore a black, button up shirt, black jeans, black socks, and black sneakers. His black leather jacket was wrapped around the back of his chair. Adam's hair was a black, shaggy mess. Normally, Adam spent time combing it and slicking it to the sides. But, he didn't feel like messing with his hair that morning. Rather, he slid it around with his fingers and gazed at his reflection. He grinned and left for school.

Adam looked to his left. Buckets of rain poured down the windows. The sky looked like mountains of black lint. White and blue flashes scorched the lint periodically. The windows in Mr. Saffron's room overlooked a basketball court. The court's floor was a slab of concrete. It was decorated with white lines. There were four goals. They were white with spots of rust. The rims had no nets. Mr. Saffron stood at the front of the room. A green chalk board lay across the front wall of the room. Cinder blocks covered areas of the wall above and below the chalk board. They were painted white. Mr. Saffron drew a cross section of the earth on the chalk board. He drew it in yellow chalk. He laid the chalk stick along a steel shelf below the chalk board when he finished. He picked up a white stick of chalk. He labeled his drawing in white.

Gabrielle watched Mr. Saffron carefully. A three ring binder lay on her desk. A sheet of notebook paper was showing. Gabrielle copied her Geology teacher's picture as best she could. She wasn't much of an artist. She began labeling sections of her drawing. A sheet of notebook paper lay on Adam's desk. He was drawing, too. But, he wasn't drawing a cross section of the earth. He learned about the crust, core, and mantle when he was in fifth grade. Re-drawing it

was a waste of time. Adam's fingers were wrapped around three pencils. He scribbled along the sheet of paper with all three. He wasn't drawing anything in particular. He was printing a hideous, scribbled mess. His eyes were wide and bright. His eyebrows pointed down the bridge of his nose. He gritted his teeth as he scribbled.

"Black..." he rasped. *"Shadow... Black..."* Adam felt a little strange. But then again, he *always* felt a little strange. In his mind, he saw shadows. Or, did shadows see him? Was there a shadow? Were there shadows? What is a shadow? Adam's teeth slid from side to side. Points along the tops of his teeth collided. *"Pitch black..."* Adam whispered. *"Black... Dark... Blackness..."* The points of Adam's pencils squealed. They sounded like a cello squawking. Gabrielle stopped drawing. She glanced at her boyfriend. She squinted.

"Adam?" she whispered. Adam bared his teeth. His lips began flapping. It looked like he was babbling to himself. Gabrielle stared at Adam's eyes. They were golden and bright. His pupils were the size of grains of sand. Adam's straw colored irises wandered with fierce precision. His eyes followed his pencil marks. Adam watched every stroke that came out. Each scribbly mark his pencil made was black and shiny. Adam carved strokes into the page. The marks were thick and dark. Adam pressed down so hard, he felt the tips of his pencils digging into the surface of his desk.

"Blackness..." he squeezed through rows of gritted teeth. *"Dark... Darkness..."* Gabrielle swallowed. She was very nervous. She just knew something bad was about to happen. Thunder whispered in the distance. It sounded like a drum roll. It began at the west end of the room. It rolled across the ceiling. It turned into a deep growl near the east wall. It shook the room. Some of the kids turned and whispered about it. Adam didn't seem to notice. He couldn't tear his eyes from the swirling mess he carved into his notebook paper. Gabrielle watched in a state of dread.

She felt like she was going to pee her pants. She faced forward. Mr. Saffron laid the white stick of chalk beside the yellow one. He faced the class and patted his palms together. Clouds of chalk dust spattered from the tips of his fingers. Gabrielle swallowed. She looked into Mr. Saffron's cloudy, blue eyes. She raised her hand. Mr. Saffron squinted. The outer corners of his eyes crinkled. He pointed across the room.

"What is it, Gabrielle?" he inquired. Gabrielle laid her arm on her desk. She motioned towards the door with her head.

"Can I use the restroom?" Mr. Saffron flicked his wrist at her. His hand was thick and meaty. His fingers were like sausages. His skin was thin, cracked, and crispy.

"Oh, sure," he replied. "Go right ahead."

Gabrielle nodded. "Thank you." She scooted her chair to the side and hopped up. She glanced at her boyfriend. Adam didn't seem to notice. His eyes were glued to his drawing. He scribbled on it in a fury. Gabrielle looked at the floor. She brushed past her boyfriend, wandered across the front of the class, and entered the hallway. There was a girls' room near Mr. Saffron's classroom. Adam waited for Gabrielle to use it the morning prior. That's when he smacked Brittany to the floor. The girls' restroom had a tall, wooden door. Tiny, yellow tiles were sprinkled across the floor. Rows of white tiles were cemented to the walls. The stalls lay along the south wall of the room. There were four of them. They were surrounded by white walls and doors.

Two white, porcelain sinks were attached to the north wall of the restroom. Chrome pipes curled out of the bottoms. They disappeared into the wall. Tall mirrors stood above the sinks. Chrome cylinders were attached along the left side of each sink. Chrome rods extended from the tops of the cylinders. There were buttons on the ends. The rods dispensed pink, liquid

soap. It smelled like vomit. A chrome box was attached beside the soap dispensers. It contained a stack of light brown paper towels. Gabrielle wandered in. She stopped in front of the sink closest to the door. She laid the tips of her fingers along the edge of the sink. The cuffs of Tiffany's tangerine sweater rested an inch above Gabrielle's fingernails. Gabrielle's fingernails were the color of strawberries.

Gabrielle looked into the mirror. She stared into her reflection's eyes. They were the color of the sky on a warm, sunny day. Thunder rolled across the ceiling of the girls' room. Gabrielle's bright blue irises floated to the tops of her eyeballs. Gabrielle stared at the ceiling. The thunder transformed from a light crackle into heavy bass. Gabrielle felt the sink shaking below her fingertips. She felt the floor wobbling below the soles of her shoes. She gazed at herself in the mirror.

"What am I gonna do?" she whispered. She looked at the sink. A chrome colored dome hovered above the drain. Gabrielle gazed at her reflection in the dome. Her reflection looked warped and distorted. *"I have to pee,"* she rasped. She lifted her head. She looked at her reflection in the mirror. She narrowed her eyes. She smelled skunk. *"Is that...?"* Gabrielle closed her eyes. She inhaled through her nostrils. There was no mistake. The girls' room smelled like pot. Gabrielle opened her eyes. All four of the stall doors opened. Four boys came stomping out. Gabrielle looked to her right. She stared at the reflection of the boy coming out of the stall beside the east wall. It was Ted. Gabrielle felt her heart thumping in her chest.

She swirled around. She backed against the sink. Her fingers dug into the edges. The other three boys were Lenny, Bobby, and Derek. Gabrielle knew them from other classes. Also, she'd been around them at parties. Ted stood on Gabrielle's left. A tie dye t-shirt was wrapped around his trunk. It was colored with red, white, and blue swirls. He also wore a pair of black

jeans and black sneakers. His black trench coat draped his shoulders. His black beanie was strapped around the top of his head. Curls of brown hair surrounded the rim. Derek came out of the stall beside Ted's. Derek was black. He had skin the color of chocolate. Thin, black braids dangled from the top of his head. His eyes were like coals. Derek wore a grey hoodie and a pair of gold colored khakis. His sneakers were obnoxious sculptures of canary yellow, cornflower blue, and lime green trim.

Lenny came out of the stall beside Derek. He wore a long sleeved shirt. It was decorated with red and black plaid. Light blue jeans wrapped his legs. They were dotted with holes and tears. The knees of Lenny's jeans were ripped completely open. So, his knees poked out. A pair of tan hiking boots was strapped around his feet. His hair was sandy. His eyes were like ice. Bobby came out of the stall on the west side of the room. Bobby was big and fat. He had bright, blue eyes like Gabrielle's. They were buried behind a pair of puffy cheeks. Bobby kept his head shaved. It was nearly bald. A plain white shirt was strapped to his floppy, upper body. A pair of blue jeans was painted to his wide, jiggly thighs. A pair of combat boots was strapped around his feet and the lower halves of his calves. Bobby's boots were threaded with white laces. A pair of black suspenders dangled from the waist of Bobby's jeans. They hung to his knees. A brown, suede jacket was wrapped around Bobby's shoulders. The collar of his jacket was surrounded by tan colored fabric. It had the texture of carpet.

Bobby held a pipe. It was made of chrome. He put the pipe to his lips with his left hand. There was a white, plastic lighter in his right hand. Bobby held the tip of the lighter against the bowl of the pipe. He rolled a wheel beside the tip with his thumb. His thumb landed on a plastic lever beside the wheel. A flame erupted from the tip of the lighter. Bobby scorched shards of pot stuffed inside the pipe's bowl. Lenny looked to his left. He laid his elbow on his stomach.

He smashed his shoulder against Bobby's arm. Bobby stumbled a bit. But, he didn't stop lighting up.

"Fool, you're a fiend!" Lenny shrieked. Gabrielle glanced towards the door. She knew she should do something. It had something to do with the bathroom door. But, she couldn't figure out what it was. Gabrielle turned her attention to Ted and Derek. They were the closest. They were so close, Gabrielle felt like backing away. She stepped away from the edge of the sink closest to the door. She ended up between two sinks. Gabrielle flattened against white tiles lying along the wall. They were like giant, square shaped ice cubes. Ted and Derek closed Gabrielle in. Ted stood on Gabrielle's left. Derek stood on her right. They laid their hands along the edges of opposing sinks.

"I thought fa show that bitch would run for it," Derek remarked. He stared between Gabrielle's eyes. Gabrielle stared back. It was like looking into a pair of black checkers.

"Nah, D," Ted replied. "She's scared shit-less." Gabrielle faced Ted. His eyes were the color of rain clouds. He grinned. "Look at her dumb ass. She's shaking!" Gabrielle exhaled an icy breath. She looked down. She glanced at her fingers out of curiosity. They were jiggling like gelatin dessert. Lenny popped the side of Bobby's fat face with his knuckles.

"Yo, fat-ass!" he shouted. "Puff, puff, pass!" He held out his hand. He motioned for the pipe. "Give me that mother fucker!" Gabrielle looked over Ted and Derek's shoulders. She felt her teeth chattering. Bobby slapped Lenny's palm. He left the pipe behind. Then, he shoved Lenny's shoulder. Lenny stumbled across the restroom.

"Don't call me fat, ass-hole!" Bobby shouted. "I'll sit on you!" Derek and Ted cackled over their shoulders. Gabrielle glanced at the door again. She knew she needed to do something. It had something to do with the door. But... what *was* it?! She felt Derek's thick fingers around

her throat. Derek's palms were like sand paper. Gabrielle's head whirled around. Derek lifted her off the floor and shoved her against the wall. Gabrielle's eyes popped open. She lifted her chin and stared at the ceiling. She exhaled a series of panicked breaths. She tried to think of something to say. She fumbled through thoughts. She attempted to think of a way out of the predicament she was in. Nothing came to mind.

"Oh, my God..." she managed to squeeze out. She heard the boys cackling. Gabrielle lowered her head. She looked around. Lenny raised the pipe. He held it above Derek and Ted's shoulders. Ted took it from him. He put it to Gabrielle's lips.

"There you go, Gabs," Ted remarked. "Suck on it." Derek had thick, puffy lips. They twisted into a horrific smile. Derek cackled. Lenny pointed at the crotch of his ripped up jeans.

"Suck on my dick too, bitch!"

Ted blew a breath through his lips. "Shut the fuck up, Lenny!" he choked out between cackles. "Hand me a lighter." Gabrielle turned her head. The pipe slipped away from her lips. She looked around and shook her head.

"No, guys. No," she pleaded. "Please! I-I always get sick when I smoke pot." She looked at Ted. Ted held up Bobby's white lighter. Gabrielle stared into Ted's fuzzy, grey eyes. She jiggled her head back and forth. "Ted, no. Stop!" Lenny gazed at the side of Gabrielle's face. He studied her expressions. He watched her big, blue eyes wander around. He looked at strands of soft, brown hair wafting along her cheeks. A row of bangs dangled above Gabrielle's eyes. They needed a trim. Lashes along Gabrielle's eyelids grabbed her bangs when she blinked.

"I forgot what a fine little thing Gabrielle was!" Lenny shouted. Derek, Ted, and Bobby busted out laughing. Derek looked over his shoulder. He shoved Lenny's ribs.

"Dude, shut-up!" he yelled. "You crazy!" Ted squeezed Gabrielle's cheeks between his

fingers and thumb. He turned her head. That way, she was facing him. Gabrielle gazed into Ted's eyes. She gasped for breath.

"*T-T-Ted...*" she gasped. Her teeth chattered like she was cold. Gabrielle forced a lump down her throat. "Don't. Please." Ted stuck the pipe between Gabrielle's lips. He looked at Derek.

"Hold her nose," he instructed. Gabrielle glanced at Derek. She clenched her teeth.

"Derek!" she grumbled. She grabbed a hold of his wrist. She tried to pry his fingers off her throat. Derek tightened them. Gabrielle smashed the back of her head against slick tiles along the wall. "Gah!" she shouted. Derek giggled. He clamped the fingers of his free hand around Gabrielle's nostrils. He squeezed them shut with his first and middle fingers. Ted ignited Bobby's lighter. He held the flame to the bowl. He watched it. It stood straight up.

"Breathe, Gabrielle," he instructed.

Gabrielle folded her lips away from the pipe. "Meh!" she shrieked. Lenny reached over Ted and Derek's shoulders. He pounded his fist against Gabrielle's stomach. Ted shoved the end of the pipe against her lips.

"Breathe, fucker!" he shouted. He watched the flame. It still pointed at the ceiling. "I'm gonna rip your fuckin' head off!" Ted checked the flame. It still stood up, straight. Lenny pounded Gabrielle's stomach again. Gabrielle took a breath. The flame sank into the bowl. Shards surrounding the rim glowed orange. Ted held the pipe to Gabrielle's lips until she started coughing. Smoke erupted from her lips. The lighter blew out. Gabrielle's heavy breaths threatened to blow the weed right out of the bowl. Ted looked at Derek. He lowered the pipe and Bobby's lighter. He motioned towards the floor with his head. "Alright, drop her," he instructed. Derek pulled Gabrielle away from the wall. He lifted her over his head, backed

away, and let go. Gabrielle's temple, cheek, shoulder, elbow, knee, and ankle collided with tiny, yellow tiles along the floor. It made the right side of her body tingle. Gabrielle pinched her eyes shut. She tilted her head back and groaned. Lenny dropped to the floor. He grabbed a hold of Gabrielle's shins. Bobby knelt beside him. He grabbed a hold of Gabrielle's arms just in case. He looked at Lenny.

"What are you doing, Lenny?" Lenny untied thick, white laces along the insteps of Gabrielle's canvas shoes. He glanced at Bobby.

"You gotta start somewhere. Right?" He slipped Gabrielle's shoes off her feet. He stacked them below the nearest sink. Gabrielle wore ankle high socks. The one on her left foot was lime green. The one on her right foot was pink. Lenny grabbed a hold of her ankles. Gabrielle wiggled onto her back. She sucked in panicked breaths. Bobby knelt beside Gabrielle. He crossed Gabrielle's wrists above her head. Gabrielle felt her arms digging into tiny tiles along the floor. Bobby looked to his right. Lenny rested Gabrielle's ankles on his shoulder. He reached for her waist. "I don't know about you guys..." he declared. "But, I'm tired of screwing around." He slipped his fingers under the waist of Gabrielle's jeans. They were fastened with a bronze colored button. Lenny slipped the button through a gash in an opposing flap. There was a zipper below the button. Lenny yanked it down the crotch of Gabrielle's jeans. Gabrielle lifted her head. She glared into Lenny's frost colored eyes. She gritted her teeth.

"L-Lenny!" she shrieked. "Stop!" Derek and Ted watched. Ted slipped his fingers under the rim of his beanie. He scratched the side of his head.

"Aw, Lenny..." he groaned. "You're gonna get me in trouble." Lenny looked up. He crinkled his eyes.

"You mean your girlfriend?" he requisitioned. He held out his palms. He looked around.

"I don't *see* Brittany anywhere!" he shouted. "Do you guys?"

Bobby pointed toward Gabrielle's jeans. "Ted, why am I not seeing legs yet?! What seems to be the hold up?" Derek and Ted cackled. Lenny grabbed a hold of Gabrielle's hips. He slipped his fingers under the waist of her jeans.

"Sorry, Bobby," he replied. "Got distracted, there." He yanked Gabrielle's jeans down her thighs. Gabrielle tried to pull her scrawny arms away from Bobby's fat fingers. It was like trying to retrieve a pair of leotards trapped under a car tire. Gabrielle pinched her eyes shut.

"Ad-a-a-am!" she cried. Lenny yanked the waist of Gabrielle's jeans to her knees. They bunched around her shins. Lenny grabbed Gabrielle's jeans where they bunched up. He slid them off her calves. He folded her jeans nice and neat. Then, he placed them beside her sneakers. Gabrielle wore white panties. They were dotted with tiny, pink flowers. Lenny laid his fingers along the sides of Gabrielle's thighs. He slid his fingertips along the edges of her panties. "Lenny, you freak!" Gabrielle shouted. "Stop it!" She wanted to kick him. But, her legs were like noodles. They just jiggled, helplessly. Gabrielle gazed into Lenny's eyes. They were pale and blue. Lenny gazed back. He grinned. His teeth showed. They were jagged and dotted with hideous, brown spots. Lenny lowered his head. He laid the tip of his nose along the edges of Gabrielle's labia. It made Gabrielle shudder. Tiny hairs along the back of her neck stood on end. Lenny inhaled through his nostrils. He sat up, tilted his head back, closed his eyes, and grinned.

"Ah..." he sighed. "Virgin pussy!" Gabrielle jerked at her arms. She didn't feel like fighting, though. She felt stoned. The room was spinning. Gabrielle felt like she was sinking into a pit. It was like she left her body behind. It didn't matter what happened to it. It only mattered for short bursts of time. During those bursts of time, it was like she was inside her

body. Then, she slipped away again. Ted pointed at Gabrielle's chest.

"Take her sweater off," he instructed. "I wanna see her boobs." Derek responded with a chest full of high pitched chuckles. He bent over and smacked his palms together. Bobby looked over his shoulder. He shook his head.

"I don't know if I should let go, Teddy. She might make a break for it." Lenny shrugged. He motioned towards Gabrielle's breasts.

"This chick ain't stacked or nothing, Teddy!" He looked up. "I mean, look at them little tater tots!" Derek bent over. He curled up his legs. He crinkled his eyes, clapped his hands, and cackled. Lenny shook his head. He pointed at Gabrielle's chest. "Man, I've seen contacts bigger than those!"

Bobby tilted his head back. "Oh!" he shouted. "Damn, Teddy! You think she's an A-cup, or what?"

Ted clapped his hands together. "That's what I'm sayin', motha fuckers!" he returned. "Let's find out, shall we?" Ted stepped over Gabrielle's hips. He straddled her waist with his feet and looked down. Gabrielle looked up. She shook all over. Her eyelids wiggled. Tears dribbled down her temples. She pried a pair of trembling lips apart.

"P-Please, Ted," she pleaded. "Stop this." She glanced around the room. "I'm begging you guys." She looked into Ted's cloudy eyes. "I-I-I've never had sex before, Ted! You *know* that!" Derek fell to his knees. He bent over and hugged his stomach.

"Ah! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!" he roared. Ted dropped to his knees. He motioned towards Bobby with his head.

"Get up for a second." Bobby let go of Gabrielle's arms. He swirled around and knelt beside the top of her head. Gabrielle relaxed her arms. She tugged them away from Bobby. Ted

slipped his fingers under the bottom of Gabrielle's sweater. He slid it above her navel. Ted studied Gabrielle's stomach. It was silky and smooth. It was the color of cream. Gabrielle plopped the back of her head against the floor. She pinched her eyes shut.

"*Ted...*" she squealed. Ted grinned. He slipped Gabrielle's tangerine sweater above her breasts. Gabrielle was wearing a plain, white bra. Lenny peeked over Ted's shoulder.

"Ooooooooo..." he groaned. Derek whistled. Gabrielle tilted her head back. She gritted her teeth.

"It's an A-cup, you fuckers!" she shouted. She opened her eyes. She was looking at Bobby's face, upside-down. "Kiss my ass!"

"Awww..." Ted hummed. He laid the tips of his fingers on Gabrielle's stomach. Her skin was silky and smooth. It was warm and squishy. Ted slid his fingers along Gabrielle's ribs. "That's just fine with me, Gabrielle," he remarked. He slid his fingertips up the cups of Gabrielle's bra. Gabrielle exhaled a series of shaky breaths. She sounded like she was locked in a freezer. "You know, Brittany's an A-cup." Derek and Lenny cackled. Ted laid his palms on Gabrielle's boobs. Bobby reached over Gabrielle's face. He grabbed the bottom of her sweater. He pulled it over her head and slid it down her arms. He tossed it to Lenny. Lenny folded Gabrielle's sweater nice and neat. He laid it on top of her jeans. Bobby grabbed a hold of Gabrielle's wrists. He pinned them against tiny, yellow tiles along the floor. Ted looked into Gabrielle's eyes. He tilted his head. "Hooks?" he inquired. "Or, Velcro?" Gabrielle lifted her head. She spit between Ted's eyes.

"Bite me, douche bag!" she shouted.

Ted smacked Gabrielle's cheek. "You stupid little skank!" he screamed in her face. He laid his forehead against Gabrielle's left breast. He wiggled his head back and forth. Bobby,

Derek, and Lenny filled the room with giggles. Ted wiped Gabrielle's spit on the left cup of her bra. Then he reached behind her back. He grabbed a hold of two opposing strips. They were fastened along the middle of Gabrielle's back. Ted looked up. "Velcro!" he proclaimed. He ripped the strips apart. Gabrielle had never been so humiliated. She turned her head and focused on tiles along the floor. Her cheeks felt flush. Bobby let go of Gabrielle's wrists. Ted slipped her bra over her arms. He turned and handed it to Lenny. Lenny folded Gabrielle's bra neatly. He placed it on top of her sweater. It was quite a system.

Ted looked down. Gabrielle's breasts were the size of naval oranges sliced in half. Gabrielle had silky, white skin. Her boobs were like mounds of vanilla pudding. Ted wondered if they'd ever seen the light of day. Tiny, carnation colored cones were attached to the mounds. They were shaped like chocolate chips. Ted smirked. He lifted his fingers. He laid the tips of his fingers beside the tips of Gabrielle's tiny nipples. He pressed his palms against Gabrielle's soft, silky breasts. Gabrielle tilted her head back. She exhaled an angry breath through her lips. She was worn out. She was gasping for air. Her chest heaved. Her ribs shoved her tiny breasts against Ted's palms. Then, her boobs drifted away. Ted looked up. He motioned towards Bobby with his head.

"Watch out," he instructed. "I'm gonna teach her a lesson." Derek cupped his fingers over his lips. He lifted his eyebrows. He stood and pointed between Gabrielle's eyes.

"D-a-a-a-a-mn!" he yelled. "You in trouble now, girl!" Ted sat beside Gabrielle. He folded his legs like a pretzel. He motioned for Bobby and Lenny with his fingers. "C'mon, guys!" he instructed. "Get her on my lap." Gabrielle scrambled to get away. Bobby slipped his arms under hers. Lenny grabbed a hold of Gabrielle's ankles. Ted patted his lap with his palms. "On her stomach," he instructed. "Just throw her down, right there." Bobby and Lenny tossed

Gabrielle onto Ted's lap. A gush of air erupted from Gabrielle's lungs when she landed. She turned her head, timidly. She stared at the side of Ted's face, awaiting her fate. Ted smiled back. "Ah..." he sighed. He laid his left hand on Gabrielle's butt. Her butt cheek was like a warm, silky pillow. Gabrielle responded with a series of gasps through clenched teeth. She looked up. Ted slid his fingers along Gabrielle's panties. He rested them near the middle.

"You've been a bad girl, Gabrielle Griffin," Ted remarked.

Gabrielle sucked in a breath. "Ted, please stop this." Ted lifted his right hand. He gripped Gabrielle's nipple with his index finger and thumb. He twisted it. "Aaaaaaah!" Gabrielle shrieked. She tilted her head back. She wiggled along Ted's lap. She tried to squirm away. Ted held onto her nipple. He tugged her nipple towards his chest and twisted harder. Gabrielle submitted. She returned to the middle of Ted's lap and gasped for breath. Ted let go of her nipple. Gabrielle exhaled a few thankful sighs. Ted curled his fingers through soft, brown strands surrounding Gabrielle's silky shoulders. He wadded his fingers into a fist. Gabrielle winced. She looked up and awaited instructions.

"You're a bad girl," Ted continued. "So, you'll have to be punished." He lifted his left hand. He stared into Gabrielle's bright, blue eyes. He smacked Gabrielle's ass with his palm.

"Gah!" Gabrielle squealed. She began squirming. Ted tightened his fingers around locks of her hair. He lifted his hand a second time. He plopped it on top of Gabrielle's left cheek. "Gah!" Gabrielle protested. Ted felt heat below the palm of his hand. He looked down. Gabrielle's butt cheek was the color of strawberries. Ted bent over. He cupped his fingers over his lips. He filled the girls' restroom with cackles. Ted lifted his hand. He began beating Gabrielle's butt cheeks like a rug. Gabrielle didn't dare move. She didn't want Ted to give her another titty twister. Instead, she just lay there and took it. She'd had her ass beaten before,

anyway. Her father used to spank her with a leather belt until it bled. Then, he spanked her some more.

Ted stopped. Gabrielle shook all over. She sucked in frosty breaths and waited for whatever came next. She looked over her shoulder, timidly. Ted was staring at Gabrielle's back. He was frozen. Gabrielle exhaled a nervous breath. She lifted her head and looked at the side of Ted's face. Ted didn't move.

"Ted?" Gabrielle inquired. "What is it?" Ted looked into Gabrielle's eyes. He let go of her hair.

"Um..." he groaned. He looked down. He licked his lips. "T-Turn over." He grabbed a hold of Gabrielle's left arm. He flipped her onto her right side. Tears were streaming down Gabrielle's face. When Ted flipped her, tears dribbled off her cheeks. They dripped onto the floor. Ted laid his fingers along Gabrielle's left side. He stared at her flesh. Lenny leaned forward. He looked where Ted was looking.

"Hmm," he remarked. He looked up. "What are those, Teddy?"

Bobby stared at Gabrielle's flesh. "What *is* that?" Derek looked along Gabrielle's side. He folded his arms over his chest.

"Looks like someone already beat us to it, Teddy," he remarked. Ted swallowed. There was a pair of knife wounds between his fingers. They were old. They'd been there at least a couple of years. Gabrielle looked between Ted's eyes. She swatted tears off her cheeks. Her butt felt like it was on fire.

"Um..." she groaned. She sounded like she'd hurt her voice, screaming. She cleared her throat. "You mean those stab wounds?" she inquired. She looked around. "Is that what you guys are looking at?" She looked at Ted. Ted turned his head. He looked into Gabrielle's eyes.

Gabrielle sighed. "M-My dad did that," she explained.

Lenny raised his palms. "I don't care *what* her dad did to her," he proclaimed. He dropped his hands on his thighs. "I'm horny as Hell!" He grabbed a hold of Gabrielle's ankles. He dragged Gabrielle off Ted's lap.

"Ah!" Gabrielle shrieked. She slipped off Ted's thigh. Her temple bounced off the floor.

"So stay the hell out of my way, if you don't want none!" Lenny shouted.

Adam stared at his desk. There was a sheet of notebook paper on top. It was nearly covered with dark, shiny squiggles. They were made with number two, wood pencils. Adam could tell. He turned his head to the right. Three number two pencils lay beside the sheet of paper. Adam pressed his lips together.

"*Hmm...*" he hummed to himself. He looked beside him. Gabrielle's chair was empty. Adam had no idea where she went. He heard whispering.

"*Hey, Adam...*" It was Benny. Adam looked towards the chair in front of Gabrielle's desk. Benny had curly, blonde hair. It was a shaggy, tangled mess. He had icy, blue eyes and a pale, white face. His cheeks were covered with freckles. He wore a blue shirt with thin, orange stripes. He looked at Adam over his shoulder. He looked into Adam's eyes and bobbed his head. "*What happened to Gabs?*"

Adam shrugged. "*What do you mean?*" he whispered back.

Benny licked his lips. "*She's been gone like... five minutes. Maybe longer.*" Adam narrowed his eyes. He looked towards the front of the classroom. He spotted Brittany. Adam could see a rainbow colored beanie wrapped around the top of her head. Coils of crimson hair dangled from the rim. Adam looked beside Brittany. Ted wasn't at his desk. Adam's heart skipped a beat. He looked at Benny.

"Where did she go?" he demanded. *"The bathroom?"* Benny squinted. The corners of his lips curled into a smile.

"Adam, what are you talking about?" he inquired.

Adam smacked the corner of his desk. *"Benny, I need to know where she went!"* he rasped. *"I need to know right now!"*

Benny's eyelids fluttered. *"Well, uh... Well, yeah."* He licked his lips. *"She raised her hand and asked if she could go to the restroom."* Adam searched the front of the room. He spotted Mr. Saffron. *"And then, she left,"* Benny added. Mr. Saffron was drawing on the chalk board. He looked over his shoulder. Adam looked into Mr. Saffron's cloudy, blue eyes. He raised his hand. Mr. Saffron pointed across the room.

"What is it, Adam?" Benny faced forward. He began copying what Mr. Saffron drew on the board. Adam laid his arm on his desk. He threw his legs over the edge of his chair. He took a breath.

"Can I use the restroom?" he requisitioned. Mr. Saffron squinted. He looked at Gabrielle's desk. Gabrielle's chair was empty. Mr. Saffron pointed at Gabrielle's desk with a stick of white chalk.

"What happened to Gabrielle?" Adam felt like stabbing Mr. Saffron in the eyes. He didn't have time for questions. He licked his lips.

"Look, I've *really* gotta go." He glanced at his girlfriend's empty desk. "I'm not sure what happened to her." Mr. Saffron looked into Adam's eyes. He nodded.

"Well, alright." He looked around the classroom. "But, no more than two students at a time." He pointed around the room with his chalk. Adam hopped to his feet. He walked across the front of the room as quickly as he could. He glanced at Brittany as he passed. Brittany

looked up. Her sparkly, emerald eyes pierced Adam's thoughts. Brittany smirked.

"Better hurry..." she whispered. Adam glared at her.

Lenny stood in front of the sink closest to the door. Gabrielle faced him. She scrambled to her knees and looked into his eyes. She inhaled a shaky breath. She folded her arms over her breasts.

"L-Listen," she managed to get out. "I-I'm only fourteen. I'm too young for this." Lenny reached under Gabrielle's arms. He grabbed a hold of her nipples with his thumbs and forefingers. He twisted them. Gabrielle tilted her head back. "Gyah!" she squealed. Derek, Bobby, and Ted stood in front of the stalls. Derek and Bobby cackled. Ted folded his arms over his chest. He was regretting his decision. He didn't know Gabrielle had a pair of knife wounds below her ribs. It made him feel... differently about her. But he didn't know what to do about it, now. It was too late. His buddies were about to have their way with her. He exhaled through his nostrils. He shrugged. Gabrielle curled her fingers around Lenny's wrists. She looked into his eyes and gasped for breath. "Lenny! Stop!"

The door burst open. Adam came stomping through. He looked around the bathroom. He froze. Derek, Bobby, and Ted faced the door. Lenny let go of Gabrielle's nipples. He looked up. Gabrielle grabbed her chest with her arms. She looked towards the door, timidly. She gazed into Adam's eyes. They were the color of honey. They captured glints of light and glowed. They looked like a cat's eyes. Gabrielle wasn't sure what she was looking at. But, it wasn't her boyfriend. Adam's eyelids peeled away. The outer corners of his eyebrows lifted. The inner corners of his eyebrows pointed down the bridge of his nose. His pupils shrank. They became the size of pin heads. Adam's glowing, golden irises focused on Lenny. Adam's head turned to the left. Lenny stared into his caramel colored eyes.

"Oh, shit..." he whispered.

"Freak boy's here," Bobby remarked. Derek wandered out. He glared into Adam's face. A red shaft dangled from his fingertips. He pressed a tiny, chrome button on the side. A long, thin blade popped out.

"Fool, you 'bout to get jacked up!" he warned. He stomped towards Adam. "Gonna kill you, punk!" He swung the knife at Adam's face. It was like Adam saw ten moves ahead of Derek. His head jerked back a couple of inches. It was just enough to avoid Derek's switch blade knife. Adam's hands anticipated Derek's arm. Adam's fingers were around Derek's wrist before Derek realized he missed Adam's face. Adam twisted Derek's arm towards his chest. The knife swirled out of his fingers. Derek swirled the direction his arm twisted. Adam extended his arms and rolled his wrists. Derek sailed across the restroom. He crashed into rows of tiles on the other side of the room. Some of them cracked. "Gah!" Derek shrieked. Bobby, Ted, and Lenny's heads turned as their buddy flew across the room. Their eyes popped open. Their jaws dropped.

"Holy shit!" Bobby shouted.

"Damn..." Lenny added. Ted watched Derek crumple to the floor. Tiny shards of tiles toppled on his head. They twisted into braids dangling from his scalp. Derek's elbow struck the floor first. His hip bounced off yellow tiles next. His forehead smacked the floor last. It sounded like an egg shell cracking. Gabrielle watched Derek fall. Then, she turned her head. She faced her boyfriend. Adam stared across the room, blankly. He lifted his palm. Derek's knife landed right in the middle. Adam's fingers curled around the slick, red handle. Bobby and Ted raced across the room. They knelt beside Derek. Bobby grabbed Derek's shoulder. He shook it. Derek glared into Bobby's beady, blue eyes. He shoved his hand away.

"Fool, get off!" he shouted. Bobby glared across the room. He pointed between Adam's fiery, glowing irises.

"We're gonna kill you, Adam!" Adam's eyes were like saucers. His eyebrows sagged in the middle like he was angry. His lips ripped apart. They swirled into a hideous grin.

"ADAM?!" he snarled. Adam didn't sound like Adam. His voice sounded like it was pieced together from old tape recordings. It didn't even move with his lips. Adam gritted his teeth. A sinister growl erupted from the back of his throat. Adam sounded like a snarling, wild animal. He inhaled a hot, windy breath. "There is no Adam HERE!" Adam's head jerked back. His eyes pinched shut. He filled the room with windy cackles. His hideous laughter shook the walls of the restroom. White doors and walls surrounding the stalls began wobbling. Gabrielle, Ted, Lenny, and Derek felt their hair swirling around. Bobby's head was nearly bald. He didn't feel it. He stood up. He pointed across the restroom.

"Adam's standing right THERE, freak!"

Adam's peepers pierced Bobby's soul. "Bwah! Ha! Ha!" he bellowed. Adam held up Derek's knife. He squeezed it between his fingers. It shattered like glass. "NOTHING is standing here!" Adam began stomping across the bathroom. Yellow tiles dotting the floor began popping loose. "Do you hear ME?!" Bobby, Ted, and Lenny yanked Derek off the floor.

"Dude, what the hell?!" Lenny demanded.

"I don't know!" Bobby yelled back. "But, I'm not sticking around to find out!" Bobby and Lenny dragged Derek across the bathroom. They avoided Adam as best they could when they passed. They glanced at him out of the corners of their eyes. They scrambled towards the door and left. Adam didn't acknowledge their presence. He stared between Ted's cloud colored eyes. Ted stood where Derek fell. He faced Adam and folded his arms over his chest.

"Adam, what's happening to you?" he requisitioned. Adam's teeth mashed together. His lips receded. Air slid between his teeth and filled his lungs. His jaws parted.

"Adam is DEAD!" he shouted. Adam motioned towards the stalls. "DEAD!" he shouted. The stall doors swung open. They smacked the walls and rattled on their hinges. "DEATH!" Adam shrieked. "BLACKNESS! SHADOWS! DARKNESS!" Thunder rolled across the ceiling of the restroom. It turned into a boom halfway across. It shook the walls. Ted stared across the room, helplessly. He glanced at Gabrielle. Gabrielle looked over her shoulder. She motioned towards the door with her head.

"Get out of here, Ted." She faced her boyfriend. "I'll handle him." Ted inched across the restroom. He looked Adam and Gabrielle over as he passed.

"You two are freaks!" he shouted. The door closed. Adam and Gabrielle were the only two left in the room. Gabrielle was on her knees by the sinks. She laid her palms on the floor. She turned herself so she was facing Adam. She folded her arms over her chest, timidly. She gazed into her boyfriend's glowing, golden eyes.

"A-Adam?" she managed to squeeze out. Adam stared between Gabrielle's bright, sky blue eyes. He pinched his eyes shut. He shook his head. He opened his eyes and looked around. He blinked.

"Um..." He looked at his girlfriend. He studied her soft, silky skin. I was white and creamy. It was the color of buttermilk. Her hair was long and brown. It was chopped into a row of bangs above her soft, blue eyes. Her hair draped her shoulders. It lay across her back like a soft, fuzzy blanket. Gabrielle looked like an angel. Adam had no idea why she was in her panties. He realized he blacked out. He figured Ted and his buddies were responsible. Adam's heart was racing. He inhaled a deep breath and exhaled slowly. He inched across the room.

"Gabrielle?" he inquired. Gabrielle exhaled a sigh of relief. Adam stood in front of her. Gabrielle looked at him from the tops of her eyes. Adam dropped to his knees. He laid his fingers on Gabrielle's shoulder. He stared into her bright, blue eyes. "W-What happened?"

Gabrielle licked her lips. "You... You don't remember?"

Adam shook his head. "I, uh..." He looked around. "I remember leaving class... and running down the hallway." He looked into Gabrielle's eyes. "And then, I was *here*." Gabrielle exhaled a shaky sigh. She looked at the floor. Adam looked down. He noticed a red spot below Gabrielle's arms. He couldn't help himself. He laid his fingers on her wrists. They were crossed over the middle of her chest. "Gabs?" Gabrielle's head popped up. She looked into Adam's eyes. Then, she looked down. She focused on Adam's hand. Her heart thumped in her throat. Adam smiled. He could feel Gabrielle's heart beating through her wrists. He slid his fingers along the edges of her wrists. "It's okay, Gabrielle," he assured her. "Let me see." Gabrielle looked up. Her eyes were like saucers. She swallowed, nervously.

"Adam..." Adam gazed into his girlfriend's eyes. He grabbed a hold of her wrists. He lowered her arms and held them aside. Gabrielle's nipples were red and swollen. Her tiny breasts had bruises on them. The bruises were from Gabrielle's fight with Ted and Brittany the other day. Adam fought off a grin. He laid his fingers along the edge of Gabrielle's left nipple. Gabrielle winced. Her breast was tender and sore. She looked into Adam's eyes. She inhaled a frosty breath. "I-I still have to pee," she squeezed out. Adam smirked. He laid his fingers on Gabrielle's shoulders. He leaned forward and pressed his lips against hers. Gabrielle and Adam squeezed their lips together. Then, they pulled them apart. Adam slid his fingers along Gabrielle's smooth, silky shoulder. He laid them against the back of her neck.

"I'll watch the door," he replied. "Make sure no one sees you getting dressed." Gabrielle

sighed. She looked at the floor and nodded. Adam hopped to his feet. He slipped across the bathroom, wandered through the door, and closed it.

Chapter 5: "Huh"

Tiffany got her butt to the library. Her brain needed a break. Her thoughts were racing. Everything was lively. Colors seemed vivid. Tiffany felt dizzy. She felt depressed. Then, she felt elated. She slipped through a pair of heavy, wooden doors. She only opened one. She gripped a bronze lever and turned it towards the floor. She eased the door shut. She stood in a hallway. A thin, soft t-shirt was wrapped around her upper body. It seemed a little tight. A narrow band of stretchy, orange fabric bordered the neck. White, pink, yellow, and orange bands wrapped Tiffany's shirt. A thick, white sweater was wrapped around that. The bottom half was fastened with two big, thick buttons. The top half was open. So, a triangle of white, pink, yellow, and orange stripes was showing. Tiffany's black back pack dangled from her shoulders.

Sheets of tangerine colored denim wrapped Tiffany's legs. A pair of canvas tennis shoes surrounded Tiffany's feet. One matched her jeans. One was the color of a lemon. Thick, white bows strapped Tiffany's shoes over her insteps. The stench of coffee stung Tiffany's nostrils when she entered the hallway. Tiffany looked to her right. A pair of coffee machines stood beside the doors leading to the library. Sheets of shiny, black plastic covered the bodies of the machines. The plastic was decorated with graphics. Images of white, ceramic mugs covered the bottom halves of the machines. The mugs were filled with shiny, black coffee. Steam wafted from the surface of the coffee. "Cafe Espresso" was written along the upper halves of the machines. It was written with tall, brown letters. Chocolate colored bricks surrounded the room. Red-orange tiles lay along the floor. Black grout lay in between.

A sofa stood beside the coffee machines. It had a plush, leather surface. The leather was the color of coffee. A matching sofa stood on the opposite side of the hallway. Windows hovered above the sofas. Slats of aluminum lay across the glass. They were arranged like plus

signs. Tiffany needed a break from studying. She'd had her nose buried in books all morning. She was suffocating. Dark, shiny eyes above the apples of her cheeks focused on the other end of the hallway. Doors matching the ones she exited stood along the opposite wall. They led outside. Tiffany felt like breathing fresh air. She took a step towards the exit. The toe of her lemon colored shoe landed on the center of a mud colored tile. The doors at the other end of the hallway burst open. Cindy, Sandy, and Danielle wandered through.

Cindy had soft, blonde hair. It was the color of pasta. It was long and flowing. It reached the tips of her shoulder blades. When the doors opened, strands of Cindy's slick, silky hair drifted through the opening. It floated on blankets of air like bed sheets in a dryer. Cindy's eyes were like nickels made of seaweed. They lit up the hallway when Cindy's face appeared. Her lips were like slices of cherries. She wore a strawberry colored blouse. It was cut pretty low. So, her chest was showing. Cindy's skin was slick and pale. It was the color of coffee creamer. A soft, camel colored trench coat hung from her shoulders. Two rows of big, brown buttons strapped it across her belly. There were three buttons in each row. Royal blue khakis wrapped Cindy's legs. Suede boots wrapped her feet and the bottoms of her calves. They were the color of chocolate.

Danielle had thick, shoulder length hair. It was the color of ale. Her eyes were like drops of bourbon. Her skin was the color of desert sand. A rainbow colored sweater wrapped her trunk. Pecan colored jeans wrapped her legs. Points of cherry red boots poked out of the cuffs of Danielle's jeans. Sandy's hair was jet black. It was slick and shiny. It was chopped even with her chin. Sandy's eyes were like slices of lime. Shiny, strawberry colored lips dotted the lower half of her face. Her skin was the color of pine. Sandy wore a turtleneck sweater. It was wrapped with black and grey bands. A black leather jacket lay over that. Amber colored jeans

covered her legs. Tips of shiny, black boots stuck out of the bottoms of her jeans. Tiffany stared across the hallway. She watched the doors close behind Cindy, Sandy, and Danielle.

"*Oh, God...*" she mumbled under her breath. She squinted. Cindy, Sandy, and Danielle didn't seem like themselves. Something seemed... different. Tiffany wasn't sure what. Cindy, Sandy, and Danielle were giggling when they walked in. When they noticed Tiffany, the giggling stopped. They headed towards the library, quietly. Tiffany met Cindy's eyes. It was like looking at sea water on a bright, sunny day. Cindy's eyelids flapped. Her cherry colored lips curled into a smile.

"Um... Hi, Tiffany," she managed to say. Tiffany grinned. She couldn't help it. It was like her mouth had a mind of its own. Tiffany looked around.

"Hi, guys," she replied. She pressed her lips together. She swallowed, nervously. She just knew something horrible was about to happen. Cindy, Sandy, and Danielle stopped beside Tiffany. Cindy took a breath.

"Hey look," she remarked. "The other day..."

Danielle narrowed her eyes. "*When you acted like a psycho...*" she mumbled. Sandy jabbed Danielle's ribs with her elbow. Tiffany glanced at Danielle. She returned her attention to Cindy. Cindy shrugged up her shoulders. Wrinkles of camel colored fabric squashed her neck.

"I'm sorry about what I said." Tiffany looked into Cindy's eyes. They bobbed back and forth. It was like Cindy was thinking a hundred thoughts a second. She seemed nervous. It was pitiful. Tiffany looked at Danielle. Danielle was looking at the floor. She looked up, timidly. It was like looking at the bottoms of two shot glasses filled with whiskey. Danielle acted mean. But, Tiffany thought it was just an act. She looked at Sandy. Sandy's eyes were bright and wise. Her lime colored irises were the size of half dollars. Sandy blinked. She smiled, nervously.

Tiffany felt like she was on another planet. Things didn't seem like they usually did. Tiffany wasn't surrounded by people tormenting her. She was surrounded by people she knew. She was surrounded by... friends. Tiffany looked down. She held up her arms. She stared at thick, white wool wrapping her forearms. Cindy looked Tiffany over. She squinted.

"Tiff?" she inquired. Tiffany looked up. She was supposed to be infuriated by what Cindy called her. Nobody called her "Tiff" and got away with it. Or... something like that. Tiffany licked her lips. Her brain flooded with thoughts.

"Um..." she hummed. She looked between Cindy's seaweed colored eyes. "I, uh... I can explain about the scars on my arms." She looked at Danielle. She fought back a smile. It came out of nowhere. Danielle smirked. She showed Tiffany her palms.

"That's okay! Really." She folded her arms over her chest. She pressed her lips together and looked at Cindy. Cindy shrugged. She headed towards the library.

"I felt like telling you I was sorry," she added as she walked. Danielle shuffled along behind her. They wandered through the double doors leading to the library. The doors shut behind them. Tiffany looked at Sandy. Sandy bit the side of her bottom lip. She fumbled through thoughts. She pointed at Tiffany's left arm.

"W-What does it say?" Tiffany felt her heart thumping in her throat. She looked down. She slipped her fingers under the cuff of her left sleeve. She rolled her sweater sleeve up to her elbow. She stared at swollen, pink letters carved into her left forearm. She pressed her lips together. She showed Sandy her wrist. Sandy exhaled through her nostrils. She curled her fingers around Tiffany's. Normally, that type of gesture made Tiffany cringe. Instead, she relaxed. It felt kind of nice letting someone else hold her hand. It meant Tiffany didn't have to do anything with it for a minute. She could let it relax. She felt the corners of her lips sliding up

her cheeks.

Sandy studied Tiffany's forearm with her lime colored eyes. She laid the tips of her fingers along letters carved into Tiffany's skin. They spelled "Andre." Sandy slid her fingers across Tiffany's jagged, scarred up flesh. Her touch was soft and gentle. It was the touch of innocence. It made tiny hairs on the back of Tiffany's neck stand on end. Sandy had never seen anything like the scars on Tiffany's arm. It really... freaked her out. Tiffany didn't understand before. She did now. Sandy looked into Tiffany's dark, shiny eyes. It was like looking into a pair of black holes. Sandy squinted.

"Ex-boyfriend?" she guessed. Tiffany inhaled a deep, relaxing breath through her nose. She exhaled through her lips.

"My dad did that to me," she explained. The outer corners of Sandy's eyebrows collapsed. Sandy felt tears in her eyes. She looked at the letters carved along Tiffany's forearm. She inhaled a shaky breath.

"Oh..." she squeezed out. Tiffany laid her fingers on Sandy's. Sandy looked up.

"My dad's name is Andre," Tiffany added. Sandy looked towards Tiffany's eyes. Her lime colored irises bobbed, nervously. She let go of Tiffany's arm. Then, she leaned forward. She slipped her arms around Tiffany's waist. She rested her chin on Tiffany's shoulder. Tiffany felt wads of Sandy's leather jacket squashing against her body. Her jacket was soft and slick. Tiffany tried to relax. She slid her lips to the side of her face. "Um... Sandy?" she inquired. She felt Sandy's arms tighten. She heard her sob. Tiffany's eyeballs bobbed around. Her lips parted. "*Wow...*" she whispered. She slid her arms across slick leather covering Sandy's back. She laid the tips of her fingers along Sandy's shoulder blades. "It's okay, Sandy," she remarked. She patted Sandy's back. "It's alright, now." Sandy exhaled a shaky breath. She let go of

Tiffany's waist. Tiffany felt her ribs relax. Her organs unwound. Tiffany breathed a silent sigh of relief. She let go of Sandy, and Sandy backed away. She wiped her eyes and looked up.

"Um... I'm sorry I asked you about that the other day. I didn't know." Tiffany looked into Sandy's eyes. She squinted.

"I'm sorry you saw it." Tiffany grabbed the bottom of her sweater sleeve. She slid it to her wrist and straightened it. "I don't usually show people my scars. But the other day, I got hot." Tiffany rolled her eyes and shook her head. "I got hot. So... I took off my jacket." She shrugged. "I didn't mean for that to be such a big deal." Sandy nodded. She looked at the floor.

"Ah." She looked up. "You're acting weird, today." Tiffany crinkled her eyes. She smirked.

"You're acting weird!" she fired back. Sandy blew a laugh through her lips. She motioned towards the library with her head.

"I'll see you around, Tiff." There it was, again. "Tiff" was what Tiffany's dad used to call her. It sounded like glass breaking. It brought up bad memories. Tiffany felt a conditioned urge to retaliate. A grin tore her face in two. She lifted her hand and fluttered her fingers.

"Bye, Sandy," she replied. Sandy turned and walked away. She joined her friends in the library. Tiffany stood between a coffee machine and a sofa. She collapsed against a plane of chocolate colored bricks. She'd taken SSRIs before. She knew what they did. She knew how they worked. She knew what was coming next. Tiffany's eyes clamped themselves shut. Her lips parted. Her jaws split. Tiffany curled her fingers over her lips. She filled her lungs with air. She exhaled, impatiently. She felt like she hadn't slept in a week. The side effects were starting. First came yawning and sleepiness. Lethargy and boredom came next. Tiffany usually became uninterested in sex after that. She hated that part. She knew Case would hate it, too. Tiffany

made a fist. She laid the side of her fist against her lips. She yawned again. She sucked oxygen until it felt like she was like inhaling nails. Tiffany couldn't get enough air into her lungs. They weren't big enough.

A door at the other end of the hallway opened. Tiffany's head turned. Chad entered the hallway. He was Tiffany's ex-boyfriend. Chad had short, blonde hair. It was glued into rows of spikes. Sideburns bordered his face. A pair of black shades lay over his eyes. He wore a collared shirt with red and grey stripes, navy blue jeans, and black sneakers. A thick, leather jacket wrapped his shoulders. A notepad was tucked under his arm. The door closed behind him. He spotted Tiffany.

"Aw, crap," he whispered. He approached the library. Tiffany's mind filled with thoughts. She sifted through them quickly. She felt bad about the other night. She wanted to say something. But, she didn't know what. Chad was ten feet away. Tiffany stared at the lenses of his sunglasses. She bobbed her head.

"Hey, Chad," she remarked.

Chad turned his head. "Hey," he returned. He stopped three feet away. He looked Tiffany over. He narrowed his eyes. "You alright, Tiff?" he inquired. He realized his mistake immediately. He showed Tiffany his palms. A pair of blonde eyebrows lifted above the lenses of his sunglasses. "Tiffany!" he corrected. Tiffany smirked. She hadn't even noticed he said it wrong. She mashed her lips together to hide her smile.

"I'm fine," she responded. Chad looked down. It was hard to tell because his eyes were hidden by his shades. Chad studied Tiffany's tennis shoes. One was the color of a tangerine. One was the color of a lemon. It was silly. Tiffany didn't do... silly. Chad looked up. He squinted.

"Are you sure? You're not mad about the other night?" Chad felt like apologizing, too. He just... didn't feel like apologizing to Tiffany. He *hated* Tiffany. He thought she was a lonely, miserable freak. He felt like she needed to get out more and experience the world. He felt like she needed to grow up. Tiffany was confused by Chad's question. She figured he was mad at *her*. She was ready to explain that Chad should be mad at Case instead. She didn't understand why Chad cared if *she* was mad. She decided to explain herself. That seemed to be working for her. She showed Chad her wrists. They were covered by Tiffany's sweater sleeves. But, Chad understood what she was getting at.

"I didn't do it," Tiffany revealed.

Chad turned his head without looking away. "Huh?" he inquired. Tiffany exhaled through her nostrils. She slipped the fingers of her left hand under the cuff of her right sleeve. She rolled her sleeve to her elbow. She mirrored the process with her left sleeve. Chad rolled his eyes. He exhaled, impatiently. "*Oh, God...*" he mumbled. Tiffany smacked her lips. She showed Chad her wrists.

"Chad..." she groaned. "Look at them." Chad looked down. He studied scars along Tiffany's wrists. They started below her palms. They ended halfway up her forearms. Chad assumed Tiffany tried to commit suicide. He looked into her eyes.

"I've seen them," he remarked.

Tiffany shook her arms. "I know. I didn't do that to myself." She lowered her arms. "That's what I've been trying to tell you." Tiffany returned the cuffs of her sleeves to the bottoms of her arms. Chad slid his lips to the side of his face.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "You mean... someone *else* did that to you?"

Tiffany raised her palms. "Well, yeah."

Chad shrugged. "So... your father, again?" Tiffany looked at the floor. She folded her arms over her chest and shook her head.

"Um... no." She looked up. "No, he didn't do that to my wrists." Chad laid his notepad over his heart. He folded his arms on top.

"Go on." Tiffany stared through the lenses of Chad's shades. She fought off a smile.

"When I was fifteen, there was this boy..." Tiffany looked away.

Chad shrugged. "So, like a boyfriend?"

Tiffany looked into Chad's eyes. "No. He wasn't my boyfriend, really." Chad was confused. He didn't understand where Tiffany was going with her story. He hoped it would be over with, soon. He was really bored.

"So, he was just a friend?" Tiffany looked down. She laid the tip of her index finger on her forehead. She thought a minute. Then, she looked up.

"He used to... have sex with me." Chad raised his palms. He did it without lifting them off his notepad.

"So, he *was* your boyfriend." Tiffany dropped her forehead in her palm. She shook her head and looked up.

"I didn't really want him to..." She squinted. "I never *asked* him to have sex with me." Tiffany licked her lips. She folded her arms over her chest. "D-Do you understand?"

Chad's eyebrows lifted above the rims of his sunglasses. "You mean, he raped you," he suggested. Tiffany squinted. She looked away and laid her lips in her fingers.

"Well, no..." she replied. She thought a minute. She lowered her fingers and faced Chad. "I mean, yeah..." Chad chuckled. He tucked his notepad under his arm. He rested his arms at his sides.

"Tiffany, you're nuts!" he shouted. Tiffany hugged her neck with her shoulders. She looked away and lifted her palms.

"I... enjoyed it." She smiled a little. Her arms relaxed. Her palms rested on her thighs. Tiffany stared at the lenses of Chad's shades. She squinted. "Do you understand?" Chad laid the tip of his finger on his lips. He thought for a moment.

"So, you're saying..." Chad lowered his finger. He pointed the tips of his fingers at Tiffany. "You're like a... masochist?" Tiffany turned her head. She hid a grin behind her fingers. She shook her head and faced Chad.

"Well, I don't know about all *that*," she replied. She folded her arms over her chest. She looked at clay colored tiles along the floor. "I mean..." She looked into Chad's eyes. She squinted. "I don't even know what a 'masochist' is."

Chad turned his head without looking away. "You don't know what that means?" Tiffany blinked. She shook her head. Chad blew a laugh through his lips. He looked at the floor and shook his head. He slipped his right hand into his pocket. His left hand held his notepad. Chad looked into Tiffany's dark, glittery eyes. "It's okay, Tiffany. Um..." He rolled his eyes. "I don't really know a lot about that stuff, either." Tiffany exhaled through her nostrils. She looked down and laid her fingers on the back of her neck. She felt uncomfortable talking about that kind of stuff with Chad. Chad was very inexperienced, sexually. Tiffany could tell. And, *she* wasn't. But, that didn't mean she understood what Chad was talking about. Chad shook his pointer finger. "It's like S and M," he remarked. Tiffany looked up. She blinked.

"Um... huh?"

Chad raised his palms. "Like... bondage?" Tiffany squinted. Chad rolled his wrists. "Like, you enjoy... being someone else's bitch?" Tiffany raised her eyebrows. She had no idea

what Chad was talking about. "Or, like pretending to be their dog," Chad added. "Or, their slave?" Tiffany inhaled a long, relaxing breath. She sighed.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she admitted.

Chad smirked. "Like... a gimp?" Tiffany stared through the lenses of Chad's glasses. They were black and shiny. Tiffany shrugged. Chad exhaled through his nostrils. He reached for Tiffany's hand. He hesitated. Tiffany noticed Chad's hand inching towards hers. Then, it stopped. Tiffany got the idea. She laid her hand in his... reluctantly. Chad tucked his notepad under his arm. He squashed it against his ribs with his bicep. He laid his free hand on top of Tiffany's knuckles. He looked into her eyes and smiled. "Gimps," he repeated. "Get on the internet, and search for 'gimps'."

Tiffany nodded. "Okay, I will." Chad patted her knuckles. Tiffany slid her hand away from his. She folded her arms over her chest. Chad retrieved his notepad. He cupped it between his fingers and his forearm. Tiffany sifted through thoughts. "Well anyway... *he* did that to my wrists." Tiffany rolled her eyes. "His name was..." Tiffany squinted. She looked at the tops of her eye sockets. "His name was..." Tiffany unfolded her arms. She laid her palms on her kidneys. She looked into Chad's eyes. "Oh, shit..." Chad grinned. He raised his palms.

"Tiffany!" he exclaimed. "Really? You don't remember his name?"

Tiffany shrugged. "It was ten years ago, Chad."

"He cut your wrists!" Chad shouted. "He... assaulted you!" Chad leaned towards his ex-girlfriend. "*He... had sex with you,*" he whispered. He stood up. He laid his notepad over his chest. He folded his arms on top. "You can't even remember the guy's name?" Tiffany looked at the floor. She licked her lips. She clapped her hands together. She looked up and pointed towards Chad's chest.

"Wesley!" she proclaimed. "Wesley... Jones." She nodded. "That was his name."

Chad nodded. "So, he tried to kill you?"

Tiffany raised her palms. "He wanted us to commit suicide together." Tiffany pressed her lips together. "I'm over at his house one night... and I'm in his bedroom." Tiffany stared between shiny, black lenses covering Chad's eyes. "I'm like... hiding out from my dad. *You* know." Chad nodded. Tiffany looked at the floor. She scratched the top of her head. "Anyway, he leaves the room for a minute. And when he comes back, he's got this knife." She looked up. She put her palms together. Then, she spread them. "It's like a butcher's knife."

"Right," Chad interjected.

Tiffany nodded. "Anyway, he just starts..." Tiffany stared at tiles covering the floor. Her eyebrows fell in the middle. Her forehead wrinkled. "He stabs himself in the arm." She looked up. She pounded her forearm with her fist. "Just stabs himself, like that. And then, he carves a line up his arm... all the way to the bottom of his hand." Tiffany slid her fingernails down the sides of her arm. "Blood just starts gushing out," she explained. "And then, he grabs my hand. And, he drags it across his lap. And then, he stabs *my* arm." Tiffany slid her fingers up her forearm. "He cuts it all the way to my wrist." Tiffany pressed her lips together. "I remember his eyes. They were big and green and shiny. I remember-- I just kept staring into his eyes." Tiffany shook her head. "I didn't wanna look down. I could feel blood leaking down my arms. I could hear it dripping on his lap. But, I just kept... staring into his eyes." Tiffany swallowed. "And then, everything went black. And, I woke up in a hospital room." Chad nodded. He looked towards the library. Tiffany sighed. She forgot for a moment she was talking to her ex-boyfriend. She licked her lips.

"I'm sorry," she remarked. "Go ahead." Chad faced her. Tiffany motioned towards the

other end of the hallway. "I'm gonna go get some air. Then, I'm gonna come back in and do some more research." Chad nodded. He smiled.

"Okay." He turned and headed towards the library. He looked over his shoulder along the way. "I'm sorry about the other night," he remarked. Tiffany looked up. She shrugged.

"M-Me, too," she replied. Chad bobbed his head. He entered the library. The door closed behind him.

As it turned out, the Woodsides had a nosy neighbor. His name was Patrick Simms. He was single and lived alone. He was the one who called the police to investigate the Woodsides' home. He was worried because no one was going in or out of the house. He had no idea the Woodsides and three of their friends were skeletons.

"It's not like them," Patrick told Paloni and Case. "Normally, they've got people coming and going at all hours of the night. Their music keeps me up until two or three in the morning. I hadn't heard a peep out of them in three days." Patrick was a career oriented person. It was obvious from the way he dressed. He wore a high dollar business suit. It consisted of a navy blue jacket, matching slacks, a crisp white shirt, a pair of brown loafers, and a red and black tie. Patrick was in his mid-thirties. His hair was long and neat. It was the color of walnuts. It was glued from the top of his face to the back of his head with styling gel. His eyes were the color of sapphires. Case and Paloni met Patrick at Burger Land. Paloni felt like he was hiding something. Case figured talking to him was a waste of time.

"He was bonin' the guy's wife!" Case told Paloni. He and Paloni had fifteen minutes of chat time before Patrick showed up. "That's why he's not telling you everything!"

Paloni rolled his eyes. "Right. No chance he's got a flesh fetish. No chance." The trio was camped out beside a window. They sat at a booth table. Actually, they were at a Burger

Land, downtown. All it had was booth tables. The upper halves of the restaurant's walls were plastered with textured, white paint. The lower halves and the floor were stacked with blue tiles and white grout. The surfaces of the tables were covered with cheap, pale veneer. The benches were made of thick particle board. The seats had slick, blue surfaces. The backs were dark brown. A chrome box stood beside the window. It was a napkin dispenser. A white salt shaker and black pepper shaker stood beside the napkin dispenser. There was also a glass jar. It was filled with sugar.

Paloni wore a pale, yellow shirt. It was a dress shirt. It was crisp with long sleeves. A blue tie with white stripes lay over buttons along the front of Paloni's shirt. A brown, corduroy jacket lay across his shoulders. Black trousers wrapped his legs. Shiny, black shoes poked out of the bottoms. Yellow, paper cups sat in front of everyone. Burger Land's logo was printed on the sides. Paper doilies lay beside the cups. They contained condiments. A yellow wrapper lay in front of Case, Paloni, and Patrick. Half eaten cheeseburgers lay on top. Yellow, paper boxes lay beside the wrappers. They contained fries. Burger Land's logo was printed on the sides of the boxes. Case's box of fries was half empty. He dumped the remaining fries beside his burger. He scooped up three, dunked them in a doily filled with ketchup, and tossed them between his teeth. He pounded the table with his fist.

"Man, that would drive me nuts!" he remarked. He looked across the table. Patrick looked up. He nodded.

"I go through ear plugs like crazy," he replied. He picked up his cup. It was half filled with Caine Cola. Patrick put his drink to his lips and tilted it. Paloni had a double meat, double cheese burger between his fingers. He pointed it at Patrick.

"Those can be expensive," he added. He tore off a chunk of cheese burger. He laid the

cheese burger on his wrapper. He glanced at Case. He shook his head. *"No, they're not,"* he whispered. Patrick looked up. He nodded, slowly.

"I'll say." He looked at Case. "I'm going through... four, five pairs a week."

Case smiled. "I'll bet," he replied. Brandy sat beside Patrick. Brandy was imaginary. So, Patrick had no idea she was there. Brandy rested her elbow on Patrick's shoulder. She turned her head. Her chin hovered three inches above her forearm. Tomato colored hair brushed along Patrick's left cheek. Of course, he didn't feel it. But, Case knew it was there. Brandy studied the side of Patrick's face. She looked at Case. Her sky colored irises stared through oval shaped lenses. Brandy blinked.

"He's obviously lying," she remarked.

Case nodded. *"At most, he'd be going through one pair every week,"* he thought. He gazed into Brandy's glittery, blue eyes. He raised his eyebrows. *"I'd say he was doin' the wife!"* Brandy smiled. She rolled her eyes.

"You don't *know* that," she replied.

Case imagined raising his palm. *"Single guy?"* he thought. *"Career oriented? No social skills? I'd say he bumped into Mrs. Woodside when she got tired of smelling garbage lying around the house and decided to take it out. She was probably a huge slut..."* Brandy scowled. Case smiled. *"Come on! They were party people! You know she was a skank!"* Case picked up his cheese burger. He squashed it between his teeth. *"I'm betting she started making out with him right there beside the dumpsters."* Brandy looked beside her. She studied Patrick's face. She faced Case.

"I could see that. He *is* cute!" Case imagined chuckling. He didn't do it out loud, though. Brandy faced Patrick. "Maybe Mrs. Woodside was looking for a way out?" She looked

at Case. "Maybe she was tired of being around a bunch of druggies all the time."

Case imagined flicking his wrist. *"Whatever. She was after this dork's money."* He shrugged. *"You KNOW he's got a bunch!"* Brandy crinkled her eyes. She pressed her lips together. Paloni looked at the table. Patrick was drumming his fingers, nervously. It was getting on Paloni's nerves. He knew the man was lying about something. But, he didn't know what.

"So, you called the cops because the music stopped?" he inquired. He looked into Patrick's inviting, sky blue eyes. Patrick's lips parted.

"Um..."

"You never bothered to call the cops about the noise," Paloni pointed out. "But, when the noise stopped..."

Case pounded the table with his fist again. "Better get the cops over here!" he nearly shouted. Patrick faced Case. Case shrugged. He faced his cheese burger. It lay between his fingers. "I know. I'm the same way." He stuffed his cheese burger between his teeth. He looked at Patrick. "Gotta have exactly the right amount of bass knocking pictures off my walls when I go to sleep."

Paloni pounded the table with *his* fist. "Well, yeah!" he nearly shouted. Patrick jumped. He faced Paloni. Paloni squinted. "I mean, any other way is just unnatural." Patrick nodded. Brandy faced Case. Her elbow was still resting on Patrick's shoulder. Brandy narrowed her eyes.

"Is he a lefty?" she inquired. Case gazed into Brandy's frosty, blue eyes. He nodded.

"Right..." he thought. *"The handwriting on the walls..."* He reached across the table. He snagged a napkin from the chrome box beside the window. Patrick pointed towards the other

end of the room with his thumb.

"I'm gonna go use the restroom," he remarked.

Paloni nodded. "Oh, sure," he replied. "And, I was just about to ask you who your favorite rap singer was!" Patrick faked a laugh. Case laid the napkin beside Patrick's wrapper. He looked up.

"You got a pen, Patrick?" he inquired. Patrick reached inside his jacket. He took out a ball point pen. It had a chrome colored body. Patrick twisted the top half of the pen. A stylus extended from the tip. Case motioned towards the napkin with his head. "Would you sign your name for me, please?" Paloni looked at Case. He clenched his teeth.

"Case, what the hell?" he muttered between his teeth.

Case elbowed Paloni in the ribs. *"Shut-up..."* he whispered back. Patrick looked at Case and Paloni. Case and Paloni faced him. They grinned. Patrick looked at the napkin. He gripped his pen between the thumb, forefinger, and middle finger of his right hand. He laid the tip along the middle of the napkin. He laid the thumb and forefinger of his left hand along the edge of the napkin. He quickly scribbled his name on top. He looked up.

"Like that?" he inquired. He showed the napkin to Paloni and Case. Paloni studied Patrick's handwriting. He looked at Case. Case wasn't paying attention. He dunked a handful of fries in ketchup. Then, he tossed them between his teeth. He looked up. He motioned towards the restrooms with his head.

"Sure," he replied. "Go ahead." Patrick laid the napkin in front of Paloni and Case. He twisted his pen closed. He returned it to a pocket inside his jacket. Then, he slid over the edge of his seat and wandered across the restaurant. Paloni tapped the napkin with the tip of his index finger.

"Case, you didn't even look at it," Paloni whispered.

"He didn't kill those people, Paloni," Case whispered back.

Paloni raised his palms. *"How... do you KNOW that?!"* he rasped.

"Oh, for God's sake!" Case whispered. *"Are you kidding me?"* He pointed across the table. *"That man is right handed! He didn't write all those messages in the Woodside's living room!"*

"Shhh!!!" Paloni exhaled through his teeth. He glanced across the restaurant. *"Sh! Sh! Sh!"* Case dunked fries in ketchup. He shook his head.

"He was bangin' Lance's wife, Paloni. I'm telling you." He gnawed the tips of the fries he dunked. He looked at Paloni. *"He might've been doing drugs with her, too,"* he added. *"She was into that."* Case lifted his cheese burger. *"I'm sure that's all it is."*

Paloni smacked Case's shoulder. *"Case, he is coming BACK!"* he rasped. *"Keep your mouth shut!"* Case showed Paloni his palm.

"All... right!!!" he whispered back. Patrick returned. He plopped down on the other side of the table. Paloni pretended to be chewing. He looked Patrick over.

"Well, that was quick," he remarked. Patrick shrugged. Case looked up.

"So were you fuckin' Lance's wife, or what?" he demanded. Paloni's eyebrows pointed down the bridge of his nose. His jaw dropped. He turned and shoved Case's shoulder. Case shrugged. He looked at Paloni.

"You *know* it wasn't him! Why do you gotta keep asking these stupid questions for?" He looked at Patrick. "He thinks he's so smart." Case's eyes crinkled. The middles of his eyebrows sagged. He glared at Paloni. "It's not smart! It's just stupid!" Patrick slammed his elbows on the table. He dropped his forehead in his palms.

"Alright! Alright!" he shouted. Paloni and Case faced him. Patrick took a breath. He lowered his arms and looked up. "Okay, I admit it." He pointed between Paloni's deep, dark eyes. "Me and Catherine... We'd been sleeping together..." Case slid over the edge of his seat. He stood up and wandered towards the exit. Patrick watched him leave. He returned his attention to Paloni. "We'd been sleeping together for almost two months," he continued. He folded his arms in front of his cheese burger. He stared at the table and shook his head. "She stopped answering my texts a few days ago." Patrick's bright, blue eyes popped open. "I... went over there..." He looked into Paloni's eyes. "I... knocked on the door. I wanted to see what in the world she was..." Paloni reached across the table. He patted Patrick's forearm.

"It's okay, Mr. Simms." He looked over his shoulder. Case was standing outside. His umbrella was open above his head. Buckets of rain poured on top. Lightning scorched the sky. Paloni faced Patrick. "You don't have to explain."

Rain poured from blankets of grey and navy blue. Case peered below the rim of his umbrella. He was surrounded by waterfalls. He studied clouds swirling across the sky. They looked like black and blue clusters of broccoli. They were ferocious and intricate. Case heard babbling. He looked to his left. A man was walking down the sidewalk. A shiny, black rain coat dangled from his shoulders. It was soaked. It had a hood. The hood was wrapped around the man's head. The bottom of the jacket surrounded the man's calves. Black rubber boots poked out of the lower rim of the coat. They squished when they collided with the sidewalk. The man wandered along, studying soaking wet squares of concrete.

He was speaking. But, it sounded like gibberish. Case narrowed his eyes. He tilted his head. He peered below the man's hood. He tried to catch a glimpse of his face. All he saw were two white circles. They were the size of half dollars. Case looked closely. The white circles

were the man's eyes. Case listened carefully. He tried to understand what the man was talking about.

"...less than obvious is the memory of the elephant," he jabbered. *"But, that's the gist of the brains of animals. The wrath of God shall wash the evils ashore. Blood will rain upon the faces of the non-believers..."* Case licked his lips. He dropped his hand in the pocket of his plaid, wool coat. He curled his fingers around a curved, rubber handle. It was the handle of a 9MM revolver. Case took a breath.

"There is garbage in the walls," he remarked. The man in the rain coat froze. He didn't acknowledge Case. Rather, he stood up straight and stared into space. *"Hmm..."* Case hummed. "Above the garbage in the walls, above the garbage in the walls, above the garbage in the walls." The hood turned. A pair of saucer sized eyes pierced Case's soul. The hood trembled. Panicked breathing scattered buckets of rain.

"The garbage in the WALLS!" the man shouted. "It's in the WALLS! It's in the WALLS!" Case extended his index finger inside his pocket. He found his revolver's trigger.

"Betty was born to Frank and Leslie," Case continued. "Frank was born..."

"To Jack and HARRIET!!" the man shouted. He lifted his left arm. He pointed between Case's eyes. "LESLIE was born to George and NANCY!!" Case ripped his revolver out of his pocket. He aimed it between the man's glowing, fiery eyes. He thumbed back the hammer.

"You have the right to remain silent," he remarked. The man's eyes widened. Case didn't think that was possible. He heard squealing. It sounded like a tea kettle. Case wasn't sure if it was the man in the rain coat... or himself. "Stop it!" he instructed. The squealing continued. It pierced Case's eardrums. It felt like needles stabbing his brain. "Shut... UP!!" he yelled. His revolver was in his right hand. He turned his head to the right without looking away. "Stop

doing that!" Case stuffed the index finger of his left hand in his ear. It didn't help. The man lowered his arm. He began bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"Non-believer!" he shrieked. "Non-believer! Non-believer! Non-believer! Non-believer! Non-believer!"

"The right to remain SILENT!" Case repeated. "Did you not understand me?!"

The man began battering his temples. "WAAAAAAAAA!!" he squealed. "You're a GOAT! I'm a SHEEP! You're a GOAT! I'm a SHEEP!" His knees bent. He began crouching. Case assumed he was submitting. He hoped he was, anyway. Case inched towards the man. He kept his revolver aimed at the man's hood. His face was hidden, again. He was looking at the sidewalk. He continued slamming his palms against the sides of his head. *"You're a goat..."* he babbled. *"I'm a sheep... You're a goat... I'm a sheep... You're a goat..."* The tip of Case's revolver was six inches from the man's head. Case reached down. He slipped his fingers inside the rim of the man's hood. The hood jerked back. A pair of saucers stared into Case's face. Case spotted a pair of tiny pupils at the centers of the saucers. High pitched squealing shattered his ear drums.

"AAAAAAAH!" Case screamed. His revolver slammed against his palm. It felt like someone smashed his hand with a bat. The man with the hood smacked Case's revolver out of his hand. It toppled ten yards and crashed into sopping wet concrete. Case stared at his hand. He slung it like a rag doll. "God damn it!" he shouted. He looked down. "You fuckin' dick-head!" He pointed between the man's piercing, wide open eyes. "Don't move!" Case felt freezing, sopping wet fingers swirling around his wrist. The man gripped Case's forearm and twisted it. He slung Case in the direction of his revolver. Case's butt slammed against a telephone pole. Case didn't even notice the telephone pole was there until it collided with his

cheeks. His knees crashed into sopping wet concrete. Water splashed his ocean colored jeans. His right temple collided with pavement. His ribs crushed his forearm. His umbrella hopped out of his fingers on the way to the ground. A wooden shaft was sticking out of the top. The tip of the shaft landed on Case's back. It poked his kidney. Case lifted his head off the pavement.

"Gyah!" he groaned. He looked down the sidewalk. The man in the rain coat was running away. Case pounded his fist against the parking lot. It made a splash. Case shoved himself to his feet. His umbrella slid out of the way. It had a wooden handle with a hook. The hook was standing up. It was beside Case's thigh. Case grabbed the hook and lifted the umbrella above his head. Water poured down Case's hair and jacket. Case didn't even notice. He searched the sidewalk beside the telephone pole. He spotted his shiny, nickel plated revolver. He scraped it off the ground and looked around. His ugly, brown Cutler was five yards away. Case looked down the sidewalk. His suspect was getting away. Case turned his head. He stared through the windshield of his car. He stuffed his fingers inside his pocket. He found his keys.

The man in the rain coat stomped across rain soaked concrete. There was a splash every time his heavy, rubber boots collided with the walkway at the edge of the parking lot. He inched towards the inner edge of the sidewalk. There was a telephone pole coming up. He was trying to avoid it. He heard the growl of a V8 engine. He looked to his left. His eyelids peeled back. The bumper of Case's Cutler crashed into soaking wet rubber covering the man's belly. It caused his bowels to cramp up. The man's back collided with the telephone pole. His spine snapped like a twig. His intestines collided with his kidneys. He felt them rupture. It felt like a pair of water balloons popping. The man felt fluid pumping out of his kidneys and filling his abdomen. The fluid was warm. It felt like it was cooking his bowels.

Case hopped out of his car and threw his umbrella above his head. He kicked the edge of

his car door. It collided with the door jam. Case aimed his revolver towards the telephone pole. The man's hood tilted back. His face appeared. It was the first time Case saw it. The man's eyes were like saucers. They stared at swirls of black broccoli swarming across the sky.

"AGGGGGGH!" the man gargled. Blood spewed from his lips. It began leaking from his nostrils. Case aimed his revolver at the man's throat. He stomped towards the front of his car. Each of his steps made a splash.

"You stupid bastard!" Case shouted. He stopped beside his front bumper. He lifted his foot above the hood of his car. He kicked the man in the ribs. "I told you not to move!" He kicked him again. "Dumbass!" The man in the rain coat vomited blood. It sounded like someone drowning. His head tilted to the side. It went limp. His eyeballs were peeled like bananas. Paloni stopped beside Case. Ice cold water splashed Case's jeans. Paloni stood below a blue umbrella with white stripes. He stared at the man in the rain coat.

"*Oh, God...*" he grumbled. He looked at Case. Case sighed. He looked into Paloni's dark, shiny eyes.

"I'm sorry, Paloni," he remarked. "I told him, 'Remain silent, and hold still'." Paloni narrowed his eyes. He wandered beside the telephone pole. He held his umbrella above the man with the rain coat. He laid his fingers on the side of his neck. He looked across the hood of Case's car. He spotted Case's warm, blue eyes through sheets of rain.

"Case, he's dead," he reported. Case stared into Paloni's eyes. He shrugged.

"Huh."

Chapter 6: "Purple Nurple"

The walls of Case and Tiffany's master bedroom were baby blue. They were bordered with white trim. Their bed lay in the center of the room. The head of the bed faced the west wall. There were two windows behind the bed. Plus signs of wood lay over the outer surfaces of the glass. They were painted tan. Raging, black clouds swirled between the corners of the plus signs. Rain drizzled down the glass. Tiffany lay along the south edge of the bed. A pair of pillows was stacked under her head. They were wrapped in maroon pillow cases. Tiffany's thick, maroon blanket lay on top of her. It was spread across the bed. Tiffany's arms lay on top. They were wrapped in soft, white sleeves. The sleeves of Tiffany's shirt were surrounded by vertical creases.

Tiffany's ribs were squashed between her elbows. Tiffany was reading a thick, heavy text book. The bottom of the book lay below her breasts. The covers lay along her fingers. Tiffany scanned math definitions printed along the pages. She sucked them up like a vacuum cleaner. It was nothing like the day before when Case picked her up for lunch. Tiffany's mind felt clear, engaged, and receptive. The back of Tiffany's head rested against the surface of a pillow. Her short, shiny hair lay along cherry colored fabric wrapping the pillow. It was spread out like peacock tail feathers. Tiffany's shiny, dark brown eyes rocked like pendulums. They stopped. Tiffany tilted her head back. She sifted through thoughts. She pinched her eyes shut and took a breath.

"You're an id-i-ot!" she shouted. Case was in the bathroom. It covered the south wall of the bedroom. Case stood in front of a porcelain sink. It stood on a porcelain post. A long, brass faucet stuck out of the middle of the sink, beside the wall. A long, brass handle was sticking out of the back of the faucet. Large, black tiles lay along the walls. Tan squiggles were drizzled

along the surfaces of the tiles. They made the tiles look like black marble. A large, oval mirror was attached above the sink. Case wore a black t-shirt. It was decorated with a picture of a tall, golden pyramid. A gold triangle covered the tip. The triangle was surrounded by long, white rays. The rays reached the edges of Case's t-shirt. A picture of an eye lay across the front of the triangle. It had a golden iris and a white pupil. Red, flannel pants were wrapped around Case's legs.

Case was brushing his teeth. A red, plastic handle was sticking out of Case's lips. The tips of Case's fingers were wrapped around the tip of the handle. They wiggled the handle back and forth. Case scrubbed the tips of his teeth with short, white bristles attached to the opposite end of the handle. Frosty, mint flavored suds gathered along the edges of his gums. It felt like there were red hot pins stabbing his tongue. Case yanked his toothbrush out of his mouth. He faced the sink. He spit a mountain of mint flavored foam on top of a brass plate covering the drain. He faced his reflection in the mirror above the sink. He flattened his eyelids. He lifted his eyebrows. He was not amused by his girlfriend's antics.

"Gina used to say that to me!" Case called back. He lifted his toothbrush. "A lot!" A grin tore Tiffany's face in two. Her eyeballs wobbled around.

"She was right!" she yelled. Case scrubbed the outer faces of his front teeth. He rolled his eyes. He bent over and spit into the sink. He faced his reflection. He smiled.

"I used to tickle her until she peed her pants!" he fired back. Tiffany's eyebrows jumped up her forehead. Her lips turned into an "o." Tiffany narrowed her eyes and thought about that. Her irises wandered to the right corners of her eye sockets. Her tongue stuck out of the left corner of her lips. Tiffany was reminded of her conversation with Chad. He asked her if she was a masochist. Tiffany wondered if he was right. She wondered if she might... enjoy being

tickled until she lost control of her bodily functions. She pinched her eyes shut. She tilted her head back and snickered. She laid her fingers over her lips until she stopped laughing. Case brushed his tongue. He spit into the sink. He faced his reflection. "Nothing to say, huh?!" Tiffany ripped her fingers off her lips. She pounded the mattress with her fist.

"You killed that man!" she shouted back. "You ran him down in cold blood!" Case lifted the handle behind the faucet. He rinsed bristles along the tip of his toothbrush.

"You left out the part where he... ASSAULTED ME!" Case called back. He lifted his head. He looked at the tops of his eye sockets. "Conveniently!" Tiffany made a fist in front of her lips. Her eyes forced themselves shut. Her jaws ripped themselves apart. Tiffany sucked in air until her lungs burned.

"Row!" she exhaled. "Man..." She looked around. Dots of blue paint along the walls began swirling. It was like being surrounded by television screens filled with baby blue static. Tiffany's eyebrows lifted. Tiffany mashed her eyelids together. She stared at violet swirls swimming inside her eyeballs. She stared them down until they turned green. She shook her head and opened her eyes. She looked around. The walls seemed normal again. Tiffany looked towards a doorway along the south wall. It led to the bathroom. "Paloni and Ford searched the body?!" she inquired. Case's head poked out of the doorway. He looked into Tiffany's eyes. He blinked.

"They didn't find anything," he replied. He flicked a light switch. It was inside the doorway. He wandered out. "No weapons, no billfold, no money, no pictures of his family." He stopped along the north side of the bed. He looked between Tiffany's dark, mysterious eyes. "No identification of any kind."

Tiffany shrugged. "So, you just... killed some guy? Nobody knows who he is?" Case

looked away. He shrugged.

"Whoops." Tiffany stared at the side of her boyfriend's head. She felt her heart thumping in her throat. She licked her lips.

"Louis?" she inquired. Case's head turned. He gazed into his girlfriend's eyes. He smiled a little.

"What, Tiffany?" Tiffany closed her text book. She dropped it beside her hip. She looked up. She stared into Case's kind, blue eyes. She swallowed, nervously.

"Tickle me," she demanded. Case blinked. He tilted his head.

"Huh?" Tiffany fidgeted. She fought off a grin.

"Mm..." she groaned. "Don't make me say it again."

Case narrowed his eyes. "You... want me to tickle you? Really?" Tiffany pressed her lips together. She looked away, shyly.

"You... said you would." She looked up. "Just a second ago." Case smirked. He pointed towards the restroom.

"You mean, when I was brushing my teeth?" he inquired. Tiffany swallowed. She nodded, slowly. Case folded his arms over his chest. He looked into his girlfriend's eyes.

"Well, I mean..." He rested his elbow in his palm. He cupped his chin between his thumb and forefinger. "I mean, I was just kidding around." Tiffany looked away. She snickered. "I, uh..." Case rubbed the back of his neck. He thought, carefully. "I didn't *really* tickle Gina until she peed her pants." Tiffany looked up. She heard hummingbirds in her ears. She felt her heart thumping. Case faced her. "One time, I tickled her until she started passing out." Tiffany inhaled through her lips. She exhaled a long, shaky breath.

"Tickle my feet," she requested. She lifted herself with her elbows. She curled her legs

towards her chest. She swallowed. "You know? Like you did to me this morning?" She crinkled her eyes. "Do you remember?" Case smiled. He exhaled through his lips.

"Yeah," he replied. "I remember doing that." He squinted. "Tiffany, what's this about?" Tiffany faced forward. She dropped her eyes in her palms. She sat up, folded her arms over her shins, and sighed. She faced her boyfriend.

"Louis, do you know what a masochist is?"

"Ah," Case replied. He looked at the floor and nodded. "Yes, I do." He looked up. He grinned. "And, you *are* one." Tiffany rolled her eyes. She exhaled a painful sigh.

"Yeah..." she replied. She looked into Case's eyes. "Thanks a lot!" Case gazed into his girlfriend's deep, dark eyes. He laid his knee on the edge of the bed. He reached across the mattress. He curled his fingers around Tiffany's bicep. Tiffany stared into Case's eyes. Her eyelids slipped up her forehead. "Louis..." she exhaled through a shaky breath. Case dragged his girlfriend across the mattress. Tiffany's legs turned into noodles. Her arms curled themselves over her chest. It was instinctual. Tiffany's arms were shielding her ribs and arm pits from being poked by Case's fingers. Tiffany could already feel them. And, Case hadn't even started yet. Tiffany crossed her wrists in front of her chest. She showed Case her palms.

"Um..." she groaned. "Oh, man..." Case ripped Tiffany's comforter off her legs and stomach. A pair of light blue flannel pants dangled from Tiffany's legs. They were decorated with white and black lines that criss-crossed. Case wrapped his arm around Tiffany's knees. He sat on the north end of the bed. He dragged Tiffany's legs across the mattress. He laid her heels in his lap. Tiffany tensed up. Her eyes popped open. She gazed helplessly into her boyfriend's big, blue eyes. She gasped for breath. She tried to do it quietly. The kids were sleeping across the hall. Case looked at his lap. Tiffany's feet were trembling. The nails of her left foot were

turquoise. The nails of her right foot were the color of plums. Tiffany's teeth chattered. The suspense was killing her. She wondered if she'd made a mistake. "L-Louis?" she managed to get out.

Case wrapped his arm around Tiffany's calves. "Yes, Tiffany?" he inquired. He laid the tips of his fingers along the soles of Tiffany's feet. He wiggled his fingers like he was playing a guitar. Tiffany's lips curled up her cheeks. Her eyes pinched shut. Tiffany mashed the back of her head against the mattress. She clamped her fingers over her lips to muffle her laughter.

"Oh, my God!" she squeezed between giggles. Case looked towards his girlfriend's face. He lifted his eyebrows.

"Call me an 'idiot'!" he remarked. He lifted Tiffany's legs. He laid her ankles on his shoulder. Then, he tickled the backs of her knees. Tiffany wrapped her fingers over her mouth. She weaved them like a wicker basket. She tilted her head back and arched her back. She felt funny. It felt like her brain was filling with blood. Tiffany opened her eyes. The walls looked like they were made of static again. Tiffany stopped laughing. She tightened her legs. Case felt them tighten. He stopped tickling. "Tiffany?" he inquired. He lowered Tiffany's legs and laid them across his lap. Tiffany's wrists were crossed over her chest. Her eyes were like saucers. The outer edges of her eyebrows squashed against the outer corners of her eyes. Tiffany stared at the ceiling and sucked air between her teeth. She turned her head. She felt like her head rolled the bed across the room. Tiffany stared into her boyfriend's wise, inviting eyes.

"Louis, I don't feel right..." she gasped. Case bent over. He laid his fingers on Tiffany's wrists. He studied her eyes.

"You feel dizzy?" he asked. Tiffany nodded. It felt like someone grabbed her shoulders and shook her. Tiffany felt her fingers tightening. She knew that feeling. It was likely to get a

lot worse. It happened to Tiffany when she got *really* stressed. First her fingers tightened up. Then, they began tingling. Then, they curled into a pair fists. They curled until Tiffany's fingernails dug into her palms. The tingling traveled up her arms and turned into paralysis. The same thing happened to Tiffany's toes, sometimes. The tingling traveled up her calves and paralyzed them as well. Tiffany had experienced it several times during her life. And, it was never pretty. When it got particularly bad, she began vomiting. She hoped that didn't happen. What Tiffany usually did was try to calm down. She was having a stress response to the dizziness. She tried to relax and let the dizziness wash over her. Case laid his fingers on the edge of Tiffany's face. He slid his knuckles along the apple of her cheek.

"It's the medication," he remarked. "S-S-R-Is can do that." He grabbed a hold of Tiffany's shoulders. He turned her and slid her across the mattress. Tiffany felt like she was floating down a raging river. Her head thumped with her pulse. Case returned Tiffany's head to the stack of pillows it was on earlier. Case felt Tiffany's text book digging into his knee. He reached beside Tiffany's ribs and picked it up. There was an oak table on Tiffany's side of the bed. Case laid the text book on top. He straddled Tiffany's stomach with his knees. He slid his fingers through her shiny, black hair and gazed into her eyes. He exhaled, slowly. "You okay?"

Tiffany swallowed. "Yeah..." She licked her lips. "Yeah, I feel better now." Case nodded. He leaned forward. He kissed Tiffany's lips. Tiffany closed her eyes and tried to relax. The tingling reached her wrists. But, Tiffany's fingers began to relax. Tiffany knew the tingling would go away, soon. Case lifted his head. He stared at his girlfriend's eyelids. They peeled apart. Case smiled. He laid his fingers on his girlfriend's shoulder. He slid them along her neck.

"I think you should stop taking those pills," he suggested. "Try something else." He looked at the tops of his eye sockets. He looked down. "A different brand, maybe?" Tiffany

nodded, timidly. Her head pounded. She felt Case's fingers sliding away from her neck. She snatched them out of the air. She squeezed them like a vise. She gazed into Case's shiny, blue eyes. She inhaled a shaky breath.

"Don't stop..." she whispered. Case's hand felt like it was underneath a car tire. Case peered into his girlfriend's eyes. They were like deep, dark wells. Case nodded, slowly.

"Don't move..." he whispered back. He yanked his fingers away from Tiffany's. He slid his arm between Tiffany's back and the mattress. He lowered his head and laid his lips on the side of her neck. Tiffany closed her eyes. She tilted her head back and inhaled a slow, relaxing breath.

Thirteen steps led from the upstairs hallway to the downstairs floor. Shiny veneer covered each one. It blanketed most of the floors in the house. Red carpet lay down the centers of the steps. The stair case was wide at the bottom and narrow near the top. Wooden rails framed the edges of the steps. They rested on posts of wooden spirals. They curved away from the stair case near the bottom. Gabrielle appeared at the top of the stairs. A turquoise blouse wrapped her upper body. Flannel showered with red and black checks draped her legs. Gabrielle's blouse had really short sleeves. Most of her arms were showing. They were the color of vanilla pudding.

Gabrielle folded her arms over her chest. She gripped her biceps. She was freezing. Gabrielle slid her palms along her biceps. The downstairs area of the house was cloaked in darkness. Gabrielle stared at the inside of the front door. It was the color of espresso. Black and white tiles lay along the floor of the kitchen. The black tiles looked like soot in the dark. The white tiles were like ash. They became the color of talcum powder. The black tiles looked more like graphite. The sole of Gabrielle's foot landed on the middle of a black tile. Each one of her

nails was painted a different color. The nail of her big toe was banana yellow. The next one was kiwi. The next one was strawberry. The next one was egg plant. The nail of Gabrielle's pinky toe was painted cornflower blue.

Gabrielle cupped her fingers in front of her lips. Her eyes closed. Her lips pulled themselves apart. Gabrielle inhaled quickly. She exhaled slowly. She looked towards the refrigerator. She was hungry. Gabrielle wandered across the kitchen. She passed a bar with a green, marble top. It separated the den and the living area from the kitchen. Wooden cabinets bordered the ceiling. They matched the stairs and the downstairs floor. Tiny, green tiles lined walls below the cabinets. They matched the counter top along the bar. There were five cabinet doors. Gabrielle opened the one in the middle. Four white, porcelain bowls were stacked behind the door. Gabrielle grabbed one off the top. She shut the door.

There was a counter below the cabinets. It matched the bar. Gabrielle laid the bowl on the counter. She opened a drawer below the bowl. It contained silverware. Gabrielle snatched a shiny, silver spoon. She dropped it in the bowl. She grabbed the rim of the bowl and turned around. She wandered across the kitchen and laid the bowl and the spoon on the bar. Gabrielle studied them carefully. Her eyelids closed. They drifted apart. Gabrielle was about half asleep. She spun on the balls of her feet. She lost her balance. She shifted all her weight to her right leg. She lifted her left leg to act as a counter balance. She almost kicked herself in the spine. Gabrielle froze. Her eyes were the color of blue jays. They floated to the tops of her eye sockets. Gabrielle studied the cabinet doors. All five of them were open.

Gabrielle's sapphire colored irises shifted like shutters. They focused on shiny wood bordering the cabinet doors. Raspy cackling eroded Gabrielle's ear drums. Gabrielle plopped the sole of her left foot on a slick, frozen tile. Tiny hairs along the back of her neck stood on end.

Gabrielle's lips quivered. She exhaled a shaky breath.

"Ga-BRI-elle....." someone whispered. Each syllable of Gabrielle's name sounded like it came from a different side of the kitchen. Each one sounded like it was spoken by a different person. The syllables sounded like recordings spliced together. Gabrielle swallowed. She turned her head, slowly. She peaked over her shoulder. Adam's black sneakers surrounded the bowl Gabrielle laid on the bar. The toes of Adam's sneakers pointed at Gabrielle's shoulder blades. Gabrielle's irises were like circles of blue gelatin dessert. They followed charcoal denim wrapping legs sticking out of the shoes. They studied a raven colored shirt wrapping a torso above the legs. Gabrielle's jewel colored eyes traced crinkles of tar colored leather wrapping arms sticking out of the torso. They spotted a row of limestone colored fingers. They were wrapped around a glass cylinder. It was the color of molasses. A red and white label wrapped the middle of the cylinder. It read "Wise-Bud." Gabrielle's eyes froze. Whispers of cackles pierced her thoughts.

"My little BROWN haired princess...ss...ss..." the voice hissed. It sounded like a snake. Gabrielle gritted her teeth. Her legs felt like noodles. Gabrielle forced her irises to the tops of her eye sockets. She stared into a pair of fierce, penetrating eyes. They were the color of pumpkin pie. Gabrielle felt a weight on her chest. It felt like cold, clammy fingers wrapped around her heart. Gabrielle peered into ghastly, demonic irises screwed into the middle of her boyfriend's face. It was like being stabbed in the eyes. A shiny, cherry colored cap was folded over the tip of the glass cylinder in Adam's fingers. The tip of Adam's thumb lay below sharp edges bordering the cap. It flipped towards Adam's wrist. There was another hiss. The cap hopped off the top of the glass neck. A white outline was etched across the top of the cap. It was shaped like a bow tie. "Wise-Bud" was written down the middle.

The cap was rose colored on top. It was gold on the bottom. It rolled through two feet of empty air. It reached a peak and submitted to gravity. It toppled down the edges of Adam's knuckles. It plopped on the middle of Gabrielle's forehead. The bow tie faced the kitchen ceiling. Pointed edges surrounding the cap dug into Gabrielle's flesh. Gabrielle cringed. She hugged her neck with her shoulders. She straightened her arms, curled her fingers, and flattened her palms. Her teeth chattered like she was stuffed inside a freezer. Gabrielle pried a pair of trembling, salmon colored lips apart.

"A-Adam?" she squeezed out. Adam's lips parted. His teeth were mashed together. A snarl escaped through gaps between his incisors. Adam sounded like a wild animal about to strike. Gabrielle winced. A short, frightened breath escaped her lips. Gabrielle lifted her fingers. They wiggled like a handful of worms. Gabrielle laid the edges of her trembling fingertips along jagged edges surrounding the bottle cap on her forehead. She yanked it off. Spirals of chocolate colored glass surrounded the tip of the cylinder wrapped in Adam's fingers. Adam pressed the edge of the spirals against his lips. He closed his eyes and tilted his head back. Beer poured along the edges of his teeth. Frosty, barley flavored suds sprinkled his tongue and dribbled down his throat. Gabrielle studied the brown, glass bottle glued to her boyfriend's palm. A head of camel colored foam appeared. It followed icy, golden ale to the tip of the bottle. It disappeared into Adam's mouth.

Adam lowered his head. He yanked the tip of the bottle off his lips. His eyelids peeled apart. Circles like peanut butter focused between Gabrielle's eyes. They wandered along the bridge of her nose. They hobbled down trembling, carnation colored lips. They slid along a chin the size of a ping pong ball. They stopped on a plane of buttermilk colored flesh. It was outlined by a sheet of turquoise colored cotton. The neck of Gabrielle's blouse was as wide as a

basketball rim. Gabrielle faced her boyfriend. She'd been standing in place so long, there were hot spots on the tiles from the soles of her feet. She lifted her hands. She laid rows of trembling fingers along warm, silky flesh bordered by her shirt. Gabrielle inhaled an icy breath. It was like inhaling nails.

"Adam, stop!" Gabrielle begged. She backed away. She pressed her lips together. "P-Please!" She panted like a dog. She looked into Adam's glowing, caramel colored eyes. "Stop looking at me like that!" Adam's teeth parted. He burped. A cardboard box dangled from the fingers of Adam's other hand. It had a slick, red surface. It was etched with the same logo as the bottle cap. Five glass cylinders were sticking out of the box. They each had shiny, red caps. The soles of Adam's sneakers slipped over the edge of the bar. They collided with slick tiles along the kitchen floor. Adam's legs didn't buckle. They didn't feel the collision. A whimper erupted from the back of Gabrielle's throat. Her feet shuffled towards the other end of the room. They seemed to have minds of their own. Gabrielle's shoulder blades collided with a frosty, steel plane at the other end of the kitchen. It was the door to the refrigerator.

Adam's teeth collided. His lips peeled away. They curled into a frightening grin. A pair of thick, black eyebrows pointed down the bridge of his nose. His pumpkin pie colored irises focused on Gabrielle's sapphire colored irises. Adam's slick, black sneakers stomped towards his girlfriend. The empty beer bottle dropped from his fingertips. It bounced along tiles covering the floor. Gabrielle glanced towards the west side of the kitchen. There was a doorway beside the refrigerator. It led to the laundry room. Gabrielle knew she should do something. It had something to do with the doorway leading to the laundry room. But... Gabrielle couldn't figure out what it was. She fumbled through thoughts. She looked at the floor. Little, rainbow colored toenails looked back. Adam's ugly, black sneakers surrounded them. Gabrielle shrugged up her

shoulders. She crinkled her eyes. She heard hummingbirds in her ears.

Adam's fingers curled around Gabrielle's throat. They felt like tubes of ice. Gabrielle lifted her chin. She tilted her head back. The back of her skull collided with slick, stainless steel wrapping the refrigerator. Gabrielle exhaled a series of short, frightened breaths. Adam lowered his head. He pressed his chin against his girlfriend's. The tip of his nose lay against the tip of Gabrielle's nose. Adam stared into Gabrielle's eyes and snarled. Gabrielle's teeth chattered.

"I'll shatter your SOUL!" Adam rasped. *"I'll rip your GUTS out and bleed you like a stuck PIG."* Gabrielle whimpered. She mashed her teeth together. She forced a mouth full of nervous saliva down her throat. She tilted her head. She stood on her tip-toes and closed her eyes. She pressed her lips against Adam's. She wrapped her lips around Adam's top lip and mashed them together. She felt Adam's fingers go limp. They slid down her neck and drifted away. Gabrielle sucked her lips away from Adam's. She eased her head back and opened her eyes. Tears dribbled down her cheeks. She stared into her boyfriend's frightening, golden eyes.

"Adam, I love you..." she squeezed out. She sucked in frosty air. *"I-I-I need you to stop this!"* Gabrielle swatted tears off her cheeks. She slid long locks of shiny, scotch colored hair away from her face. She swallowed. "G-Get control of yourself." She focused on slick nail polish covering her toenails. *"P-Please, Adam..."* Gabrielle watched tears drop from her eyes. They plopped between her big toes. Adam stared at the top of his girlfriend's head. It was a field of golden strands. Adam pressed his lips together. He crinkled his eyes.

"Mmmm!!!" he growled. He reached behind him. He curled his fingers into a fist. "Guh!" He slammed his knuckles against the refrigerator. They whizzed beside Gabrielle's cheek. Gabrielle felt a rush of wind as they swirled by. She didn't lift her head. She glanced at Adam from the tops of her eye sockets. Adam pressed his knuckles against shiny steel along the

front of the refrigerator. He shoved himself away from his girlfriend. He whirled around and stomped towards the bar. Gabrielle looked up. Adam's knees bent, slightly. He hopped over the bar like it was a hurdle. It didn't even slow him down. He stomped around the bottom of the stairs and twisted a knob along the edge of the front door. He yanked the door out of his way and stomped outside. The sound of rain poured through the doorway. The door slammed shut. Gabrielle looked at the floor. She plopped rows of trembling fingers over her lips. She felt like someone had their fingers shoved down her throat.

The hall bathroom was at the top of the stairs. Large, white tiles lay along the floor. Large, black tiles covered the walls. Tan swirls were etched across the surfaces of the tiles. It made the tiles look like marble. There was a window along the back wall. It looked like the windows in Case and Tiffany's bedroom. A claw foot bath tub lay below the window. A potty stood along the wall to the right of the window and tub. A porcelain sink stood beside that. It hovered on a porcelain post. Gabrielle stumbled in. She fell to her knees. Her arms collapsed on the toilet lid. Her face fell on top. Thankfully, the lid was down. Gabrielle forced her fingers below the toilet seat. She flipped the seat and the lid out of the way. Then, she slipped her fingers through her hair. She wadded it into a knot behind her head.

Gabrielle got her hair out of the way just in time. She began gagging. She felt her bowels convulsing. A fountain of sour, burning hot liquid erupted from her lips. It poured into ice cold water filling the toilet. Gabrielle's spew hit the water so hard, water and chunks of vomit splashed over the rim of the bowl. It shot up the back of Gabrielle's throat. It made her nostrils burn. Gabrielle stopped vomiting long enough to take a breath. She tilted her head back and gulped freezing cold air through her lips. Gabrielle could taste her vomit. She could smell it in the air. It made her gag. Gabrielle lowered her head. She felt her intestines squashing against

her stomach. Another steaming hot, pink fountain shot from her lips. It couldn't pour into the potty fast enough.

Gabrielle stopped vomiting. She inhaled a sharp breath. She choked on vomit surrounding the top of her throat. She began coughing. She cupped her fingers in front of her lips. She coughed searing hot chunks of undigested goop all over the palm of her hand. Gabrielle panted like a dog. She stared at her vomit drenched fingers. They jiggled like cottage cheese.

"Son of a bitch!" Gabrielle snarled. A burp forced its way through her lips. Gabrielle gagged. She faced the toilet water. Another clump of vomit popped out. It plopped in the water and splashed the sides of the toilet bowl. *"Oh!"* Gabrielle groaned. She slung vomit off her fingers. She tried not to breath through her nose. She eased back and sat on her heels. She dangled a row of shaking, wobbly fingers over the rim of the toilet. She didn't want to get any vomit on her clothes. Gabrielle puffed up her cheeks. She exhaled a cool, relaxing breath through her lips. She looked to her right. A porcelain bowl hovered above her eyes. It was the sink.

Gabrielle plopped the palm of her clean hand against frosty tiles lying along the floor. She forced herself to her feet. She laid the vomit hand in the sink. A long, golden faucet was sticking out of the back of the sink. Gabrielle lifted a golden handle behind the faucet. Ice cold water poured down her fingers. Chunks of hot slime rolled off her fingertips. Vomit spiraled through a brass screen covering the drain. Gabrielle's nostrils were on fire. They burned at the top. Gabrielle snorted. She tasted barf. She hacked up a loogie, lowered her head, and spit into the sink. There was a clear plastic bottle beside the faucet. A black, plastic pump was threaded into the top. The bottle was filled halfway with liquid soap. It was the color of sea water.

Gabrielle squirted soap onto the palm of her hand. She squashed her palms together and wove her fingers into knots. She swirled her hands until creamy, white suds gushed through her fingers. Gabrielle laid her fingers under frosty water pouring out of the faucet. She rinsed the suds off her hands. She lowered the faucet lever and looked beside the toilet. Her vomit was everywhere. It sloshed over the edge of the toilet bowl and dripped down the sides. It dribbled all the way to the floor. Gabrielle inhaled through her nostrils. She smelled puke. She exhaled through her lips. Gabrielle flicked water off her fingers. There was a roll of paper towels beside the soap dispenser. It stood on a chrome stick. A chrome ball was threaded on top of the stick.

Gabrielle unrolled a couple of sheets of paper towels. She dropped to her knees. She used the paper towels to sop up her vomit. There was a trash bin between the toilet and the sink. It was made of black, wire mesh. A thin, tiny trash liner wrapped the inside. Gabrielle dropped the paper towels into the trash bin. She grabbed a couple more paper towels and soaked them with water. She swabbed the floor, the sides of the toilet bowl, and the rim. Gabrielle sopped up the water with a couple of dry paper towels. She tossed the second and third sets of paper towels on top of the first. She yanked the liner out of the trash bin. She tied the top into a knot. She tossed the trash liner beside the door. Gabrielle sniffled. She tasted vomit.

She reached above the toilet bowl. A bronze lever was attached near the top of the toilet tank. Gabrielle lowered it. Her vomit swirled down the drain. It was replaced by a bowl of freezing cold water. Most of the vomit smell went down the drain as well. Gabrielle relaxed. Her back rested against the porcelain pole holding up the sink. Gabrielle thought about her boyfriend. She remembered watching him stomp through the door. She sighed. She lifted her left hand. She pressed the tips of her fingers together. She fluttered her fingers beside her face.

"Where did he GO?" she whispered. Gabrielle mashed her teeth together. She

swallowed. She felt her bowels cramping up. Gabrielle wrinkled the bridge of her nose. She decided she should stop thinking about Adam. It was making her sick. A large, oval shaped mirror hung above the sink. A medicine cabinet was hiding underneath. Gabrielle stood and faced the sink. She gripped the edge. She looked into the mirror. She looked like shit. Her eyes were puffy and dark. Her hair was a wavy, tangled mess. Gabrielle grabbed the edge of the mirror. She flipped the mirror like a door. Gabrielle grabbed a red tooth brush. She held it below the sink faucet and lifted the lever. She lowered the lever and tapped the tooth brush against the edge of the sink. Gabrielle grabbed a squishy, plastic tube. It was a tube of tooth paste. It was white along the edges. A skinny, red strip lay across the top. White letters were printed along the red strip. The spelled "Cold Kate."

Gabrielle closed the mirror. She spun a white, plastic cap off the tube of tooth paste. She laid a line of white goop along rows of slick, white bristles attached to the end of her tooth brush. She returned the cap to the tube of tooth paste. She laid the tooth paste beside the shiny, bronze faucet. Gabrielle couldn't get the taste of puke out of her mouth quickly enough. She scrubbed her teeth in a fury. Then, she laid the bristles of her tooth brush along the back of her tongue. She brushed her tongue like she was scrubbing a rug. Sour putridity was replaced by red hot, mint flavored suds. Gabrielle lowered her head. She blanketed the bronze screen covering the drain with a puddle of white foam. She lifted the faucet lever. She rinsed her tooth brush and tapped it against the edge of the sink.

Gabrielle laid her lips against a torrent of ice cold water gushing from the faucet. She slurped water and swished it across her teeth. She tilted her head back and gargled. She tasted vomit. Apparently, some was hiding along the back of her throat. Gabrielle hacked up another loogie. She spit mint soup and chunks of vomit into the sink. She lowered the lever behind the

faucet. She returned her tooth brush and the tooth paste to the cabinet behind the mirror. Then, she closed it. Her palms rested on the edges of the sink. Her eyes focused on the shiny, bronze cover lying across the drain. Gabrielle exhaled a heavy breath. She shook her head. Her eyes burned. Her lips quivered. She was worried about Adam. She didn't know where he was. And, she didn't know what to do.

Case was wondering what the hell was going on in the bathroom. His head poked through the doorway. He focused on long strands of carotene knots. They poured down the back of Gabrielle's turquoise blouse. Gabrielle stood in front of the sink. Her head was down. Case heard her sobbing. Gabrielle lifted the fingers of her right hand. She laid them over her eyes. Case's eyes crinkled. The outer corners of his eyebrows sagged. He wandered into the restroom. He laid his fingers on Gabrielle's shoulder.

"Gabs?" he whispered. He felt Gabrielle jump. Her fingers dropped off her eyelids. Her head swirled around. She looked into Case's wise, blue eyes. She inhaled a cool, mint flavored breath. She exhaled slowly. Her lips wiggled. Her eyelashes were sopping wet. Case lifted his fingers. He laid them along the edge of Gabrielle's cheek. "Gabrielle?" he inquired. "Are you okay?" Gabrielle faced him. She sighed.

"Louis..." she groaned. She curled her fingers around Case's. She sandwiched his hand between hers. She slid Case's knuckles across her cheek. She lifted them above her eyes. She laid them on her forehead. She pressed Case's warm fingers against her cold, clammy flesh. She lowered her head and closed her eyes. Case exhaled through his nose. He laid his free hand along the edge of Gabrielle's swirling, messy hair. He slid the tips of his fingers down auburn knots framing Gabrielle's face.

"Did you throw up?" Case inquired.

"Mmmm....." Gabrielle groaned. She opened her eyes. She looked at Case from the tops of her eye sockets. She licked her lips. "Is it that bad?" Case snickered. He laid his palm on the back of Gabrielle's head.

"It's okay, honey," he told her. He slid his fingers away from Gabrielle's. He laid his fingers between Gabrielle's shoulder blades. "Come here." Gabrielle went limp. She collapsed against the mystical pyramid printed on the front of Case's t-shirt. She wrapped her arms around Case's waist, laid her cheek on his chest, and closed her eyes. Case lowered his head. He laid his chin on the back of Gabrielle's head. "It's alright..." Gabrielle felt warm, gooey tears dribbling out of the corners of her eyes. She sniffled. Case laid his lips along a crease down the middle of Gabrielle's hair. He kissed her scalp. "You don't seem sick," he remarked. Gabrielle exhaled through her nostrils. She peeled her eyelids apart.

"*I-I'm not...*" she groaned. She slid her thumb across the edges of her eyelids. Case nodded.

"So, what happened?" Gabrielle laid the tips of her fingers below her eyes. She swatted tears off her cheeks. Case let go. Gabrielle stood up and looked into his eyes. She plopped her hands on her hips and sighed. She motioned towards the hallway with her head. She swallowed.

"Close the door." Case studied Gabrielle's big, blue eyes. He turned around. The door to the bathroom rested against the north wall. Case grabbed a golden knob at the edge of the door. He swirled the door towards him. He turned the knob, laid the door against the door frame, and unrolled the knob. He turned around. He looked into Gabrielle's eyes and waited patiently. Gabrielle looked down. She laid her palms on her stomach. She wadded the bottom of her blouse in her fingers. She glanced at Case from the tops of her eye sockets. Case squinted. He had no idea what Gabrielle was up to. Gabrielle exhaled a shaky breath. She lifted the bottom of

her blouse. She rolled it over her head and pulled it away from her long, brown hair. Case's eyes popped open.

"Um..." he hummed. "Gabrielle?" Gabrielle wadded her shirt into a ball and dropped it beside her feet. She squashed her arms against her ribs and stared at the floor. She licked her lips nervously. Case lifted his palms. "Gabrielle, what the..." He focused on Gabrielle's chest. Her nipples were purple and swollen. They looked like someone nearly tore them off. Gabrielle looked at Case from the tops of her eye sockets. Her irises wobbled.

"L-Louis?" she inquired. Case stepped forward. He laid his fingers on Gabrielle's slick, creamy shoulder. He stared at her swollen, tender breasts. They looked like a pair of plums. Case exhaled through his nose. He slid his fingers along Gabrielle's bicep.

"Jesus, Gabrielle..." Gabrielle pressed her lips together. She crinkled her eyes.

"Mmmm....." she groaned. She laid her fingers on Case's. "There's more." She lowered Case's hand and turned around. Case felt nervous. He wondered what else there could be. Gabrielle raised her fingers. She exhaled a shaky breath. She closed her eyes and swallowed. Case took a breath.

"It's okay, Gabrielle," he assured her. "It's alright. You can show me." Gabrielle forced her eyelids apart. She looked down. A thick, white bow was tied near the middle of her flannel britches. Gabrielle pinched a couple of strands dangling from the middle of the bow. She pulled them away from her waist. The bow came untied. Gabrielle breathed nervously. Case fought off a smile. "Don't worry," he added. "I've seen it all." Gabrielle exhaled a nervous laugh. She peaked over her shoulder. She looked at the floor. She slipped her fingers inside the waist of her pajama pants. She slid the waist band of her britches over her hips. She held the waist of her pants around the middles of her thighs and bent over. She pinched her eyes shut and mashed her

lips together.

"Mmmm....." she moaned. She felt like her bowels were tied in knots. She looked over her shoulder. She focused on Case's eyes. "C-Can you see it?" Case bent over. He plopped his hands on his hips. He studied Gabrielle's butt cheeks. They were smothered with swirls of red and violet. Case looked closely. Most of the bruises were shaped like a person's palms.

"Oh, Gabrielle..." Case groaned. He stood up. He cupped his fingers in front of his lips. He looked into Gabrielle's eyes. "Who did this to you?" He narrowed his eyes. "It wasn't Adam, was it?"

Gabrielle sighed. "No!" she groaned. She stood and pulled her pants up. She tied them around her waist and looked at the floor. She slid strands of swirling, brown hair away from her face. She folded her arms over her breasts. They felt like they were stuck full of thumb tacks. Gabrielle tucked the tips of her fingers under her arms and looked over her shoulder. "Ted did it. And, some other boys at school." Case looked at the floor. He spotted Gabrielle's blouse.

"Oh, *that* piece of shit," he remarked. He snatched Gabrielle's shirt off the floor. He gripped it with his thumbs and forefingers. He slung it through the air like a bed sheet. He stopped and stared at Gabrielle's turquoise blouse. He pressed his lips together. "Were you raped?"

Gabrielle pinched her eyes shut. "N-No." Gabrielle opened her eyes. She stared at white tiles covering the floor. She wrinkled her eyes. "They were, um..." She lifted her head. She laid her fingers over her lips. "They were getting back at us." She lowered her fingers. She slipped them under her arm. "Adam beat the crap out of Ted, yesterday." Case looked Gabrielle's blouse over. He realized it was inside out. He rolled the bottom through the neck. He flapped Gabrielle's shirt like a bed sheet again.

"Didn't we... go through something similar?" Case studied the back of Gabrielle's head. "Like... last weekend?" Gabrielle sighed. She turned her head.

"Um..." Gabrielle looked into Case's eyes. She licked her lips. "It uh... Adam didn't..." She rolled her eyes. She exhaled, impatiently. "Adam beat him up. But, it wasn't *really* Adam. It was... just Adam's body."

Case squinted. "You mean... Andre?" he guessed. "Andre's still knocking around in there?" Gabrielle faced forward. She dropped her forehead in her palm.

"*I don't know...*" she whined. Case found the bottom of Gabrielle's blouse. He grabbed the rim with his thumbs and forefingers. He stretched it over Gabrielle's head. He slid the front of Gabrielle's shirt over her face. He reached inside the neck, slid his fingers under her hair, and pulled it through. Gabrielle slid her arms through the sleeves of her blouse. She slid her fingers through her hair and turned around. She laid the tip of her index finger against her lips. She looked into Case's warm, wise eyes. "The cabinets moved."

Case slid his lips to the side of his face. "The... cabinets?"

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. "I mean..." She lowered her head. She pinched the bridge of her nose. "I mean, the doors." She looked up. "Downstairs. The doors on the kitchen cabinets?" Case folded his arms over his chest. He nodded. Gabrielle raised her palm. "I was going to have a bowl of cereal," she explained. "I got a bowl from the middle cabinet, and a spoon. And, I went, and I laid them on the bar." Gabrielle laid her fingers between her eyes. She squinted. "And, I turned around... And, when I looked back..." Case pointed his fingers at Gabrielle. He spread them.

"They were open?" Gabrielle sighed. She laid her palms on her kidneys.

"All of them." She licked her lips. "And then, I heard laughing. And, I turned around.

And, Adam was standing on the bar." Gabrielle exhaled through her lips. She narrowed her eyes. "What do think that means?" Case curled his finger over his lips. He looked at the floor.

"Hmm..." he moaned. He shook his head. "I don't know." Case thought for a minute. He looked up. "Tiffany." He looked towards the master bedroom. "I need to talk to Tiffany." Gabrielle's sparkly, blue eyes popped open. Her eyebrows jumped up her forehead. She showed Case her palms.

"No, you can't!" she shouted. "You can't! You can't tell her!" Case squinted. He lifted his palms.

"What?" he demanded. "Why not?" Gabrielle looked at the floor. She tapped her forehead with the tips of her fingers.

"Not... Not, yet." She looked up. "Please. You can't tell her." Case stared into Gabrielle's eyes. He slid his lips to the side of his face. Gabrielle sighed. She rolled her eyes. "I-I promised Adam I wouldn't tell. Okay? Just... give me some time." Gabrielle dropped her forehead on the tips of her fingers. "I need... time."

"You've got one day," Case told her. Gabrielle looked up. Case raised his fist. He extended his index finger. "One." He lowered his hand. He folded his arms over his chest. "Then, I'm asking her for help." Gabrielle exhaled through her nostrils. She looked at the floor. She nodded.

"Um, alright." She crossed her arms. "I, uh..." She pointed towards her bedroom with her thumb. "I'm gonna go back to bed." Case squinted. He laid his fingers on Gabrielle's bicep. Gabrielle licked her lips. She looked up. Case gazed into her eyes.

"Gabs..." he moaned. He smirked. He motioned towards the master bedroom with his head. "Come sleep with us tonight, honey. It's okay."

Gabrielle crinkled her eyes. "N-No..." She looked down. She licked her lips. "No, I can't do *that*." She looked up. She motioned towards Case and Tiffany's room. "I'll... wake up Tiffany."

Case shook his head. "No, no. She's on that medication. She, uh..." Case licked his lips. "She sleeps like a rock on those meds my dad gave her." He shrugged. "You can't wake her up. It's weird." Gabrielle slid the tips of her fingers across her forehead. She slid them back and forth. She exhaled through her nose.

"I, uh..." She pressed her lips together. "Um..." Case laid his fingers on Gabrielle's shoulders. He turned and led her towards the door.

"Come on," he instructed. "Come sleep with us." He patted Gabrielle's shoulder. "I'll keep you safe. I promise." Gabrielle whimpered. She threw her arms around Case's waist. Case wrapped his arms around her shoulders. Gabrielle took a breath.

"Okay, Louis." She rested her head against Case's ribs. "Alright." She looked up. She blinked. "Thank you." Case laid his lips on Gabrielle's forehead. He kissed it.

"You're welcome, sweet heart." Case slid his fingers through Gabrielle's hair. He tried to smooth it out a little. Then, he led her through the doorway to the restroom. He reached beside the door frame on the way out. He lowered a light switch.

Chapter 7: "Skeletons in the Attic"

Paloni wore a crisp shirt with long sleeves. It was the color of blueberries. A row of tiny, translucent buttons strapped Paloni's shirt across his chest. A black tie with thin, white stripes lay over the buttons. A pair of shiny, black trousers was strapped around his waist. Shiny, black shoes poked out of the cuffs of Paloni's trousers. They crept along warped, faded boards. Corners of boards rubbed edges of three inch nails connecting them to rafters. The boards creaked like an old staircase. All the creaking drove Paloni nuts. His teeth felt like they were being sanded. The ceiling sloped from a purlin down the middle. Two of the ceiling's edges met edges of the floor. Walls shaped like equilateral triangles filled spaces between the floor and adjacent sides of the ceiling.

The ceiling was blanketed with human bones. A line of ribcages lay down the peak of the roof. The ribcages' breastbones were parallel to the purlin down the middle. Femurs were tacked to two by fours sloping from the edges of the purlin. Tibias were attached below the femurs. Fibulas were attached below those. The bones were obviously old. They were pale and dry. Sheets of cobwebs dangled from the ribs. They looked like ripped up dryer sheets. Grey spiders with long, skinny legs scampered along wobbly edges of cobwebs. Large windows lay along the triangles at the edges of the roof. Strips of grey wood bordered the windows. They were dotted with patches of peeling, white paint. Matching strips of wood were woven across the windows. Squares of glass lay between the strips of wood.

The windows were bordered with white dots. They were the size of tangerines cut in half. They were knee caps. Carpals, metacarpals, tarsals, and metatarsals surrounded the knee caps. They made the knee caps look like tiny, white suns. Humerus bones were attached to the borders surrounding the windows. Paloni stopped in front of one of the windows. He stared

through squares of glass. The sky was furious and alive. It looked like it was filled with plum, navy blue, and charcoal colored lint. Water poured from edges of boards along the top of the wall. They stuck out one foot further than the wall. Radish and carrot colored squiggles scorched the colorful canopy occupying the sky. Thunder rattled squares of glass stacked in front of Paloni's shiny, black eyes.

Paloni looked to his right. Ulnas and radius bones lined an intersection between the edge of the ceiling and the floor. Paloni faced the window. He looked down. Skulls were stacked along the bottom edge of the wall. They were arranged in a nice, neat row. They faced Paloni. Paloni laid his elbow in his palm. He cupped his chin between his thumb and forefinger. He studied the skulls' foreheads. Inverted crosses were carved into each one. Paloni exhaled through his nostrils. He looked over his shoulder. Vertebrae lay along the bottom edge of the wall on the other side of the room. They were mixed together. But, they were arranged largest to smallest. Paloni faced forward. He looked at the floor. He laid his fingers on the back of his neck.

The nail of Gabrielle's big toe on her right foot was teal. The next one was bubble gum pink. The next one was tangerine. The next one was the color of red wine. Gabrielle's pinky toe was chartreuse. The sole of Gabrielle's right foot lay across her left instep. The sole of her left foot lay along a round, oak post. It was one of four posts connected to the bottom of a chair. Seaweed colored jeans wrapped Gabrielle's legs. They were a little short. The cuffs reached the middles of Gabrielle's calves when she was sitting. Gabrielle's thighs rested on a slick, oak plane. A black turtleneck was wrapped around her upper body. Thick, charcoal colored fabric lay between Gabrielle's shoulder blades and a wall of thin, oak cylinders. The wall of oak shafts was sticking out of the back of Gabrielle's chair. The top was bordered by an arc of oak.

Gabrielle sat at an oak table with a round top. A white, porcelain bowl rested in front of Gabrielle. Droplets of milk dotted the inner surface of the bowl. Soggy grains of Wheetie Puffs were sprinkled along the droplets of milk. The bowl of a chrome colored spoon lay along the bottom of the bowl. The spoon's handle rested along the rim. Gabrielle's fingers surrounded the bowl. Strawberry colored nails along the tips of her fingers dug into slick oak along the surface of the table. Gabrielle tapped the nails of her index fingers against the table, nervously. Her sky blue eyes focused on the opposite end of the table. Adam's honey colored eyes stared back. They looked like they were glowing. Knots of wadded up, shaggy, black hair framed Adam's face. His black leather jacket and a black, button up shirt draped his upper body. Soot colored jeans wrapped his legs. His sloppy, black sneakers poked out of the bottoms. Gabrielle gazed into her boyfriend's eyes. She swallowed, nervously.

"A-Adam?" she squeezed out. Adam stared, coldly. He didn't budge. Gabrielle cleared her throat. *"Um... Are you in there?"* Adam's irises were frozen. His eyelids collapsed. Then, they receded. Gabrielle exhaled a shaky sigh. She slid the tips of her fingers across the table. She curled her fingers around her boyfriend's. It was like grabbing a fistful of frozen worms. Gabrielle inhaled through her lips. *"Adam, we have to talk to Tiffany,"* she remarked. The left side of Adam's upper lip lifted. It quivered. Adam sucked in a cold, frosty breath.

"Tiff...ff...ff..." he squeezed out. Gabrielle exhaled through her nostrils. She licked her lips.

"I'm telling her." She wobbled Adam's hand. *"I have to ask for her help."* Adam's fingers closed like a vise. Gabrielle heard her knuckles cracking. She felt like someone parked a car tire top of her fingers. She whimpered. She crinkled her eyes and gritted her teeth. Adam glared into his girlfriend's eyes. He leaned forward.

"I'll KILL you..." he snarled. His teeth mashed together. His lips curled into a smile. A collection of maniacal cackles erupted from the back of his throat. It didn't sound like Adam laughing. It sounded like seven or eight people were sitting in his stomach, giggling. Gabrielle felt her arm sliding across the table. She felt her shoulder being pulled out of its socket. She fell forward. Her cheek collapsed on her bicep. She flattened her palm beside her lips and pressed it against slick oak covering the table. Gabrielle stared into her boyfriend's eyes. She pleaded with her eyes.

"Adam, stop!" she yelled. "Please!" Adam responded with more insidious laughter. Gabrielle sighed, impatiently. She gripped the edge of the table. She tightened her bicep. She tugged her fingers loose and slipped them away. She slid into her seat and stared across the table. Adam's hideous smile faded. His arms and fingers went limp. He went back to staring. It made Gabrielle uncomfortable. She felt like Adam was undressing her with his eyes. She wouldn't mind that so much if Adam was himself. But, he wasn't. Basically, a stranger was undressing her with his eyes. And, it didn't seem like Tiffany's dad. Gabrielle was sure of it. Whatever was trapped inside Adam's body wasn't human. It was something else.

Case stopped behind Adam. Gabrielle looked up. Case wore a navy blue shirt with thin, white stripes, sand colored khakis, and black sneakers with diagonal stripes. His red and white plaid jacket was wrapped around his shoulders. He peered across shaggy, black hair dangling from Adam's head. He gazed into Gabrielle's eyes. He squinted. Gabrielle rested against the back of her chair. She folded her arms over her chest. She exhaled a heavy breath. She shook her head, slowly. Case pressed his lips together. He bobbed his head.

"You guys ready to go?" he inquired. Gabrielle slid over the edge of her chair. She grabbed her spoon and empty cereal bowl and headed towards the sink. Adam stared into space.

He looked like a zombie. Case stood beside him. He laid his palm on wads of thick, frosty leather wrapping Adam's shoulder. "You ready, buddy?" Adam's head turned a little. His shoulders bobbed.

"Meh," he grumbled. A clip of classical music erupted from the left breast of Case's coat. Case reached inside his jacket. He took out Gina's old cell phone. He looked at a tiny window on the outside. It read, "Paloni - Cell."

"Hmm..." Case moaned. He flipped open his phone. The hinge shattered like glass. Tiny chunks of broken plastic sprinkled shiny veneer along the floor of the dining area. The upper half of Case's cell phone had a cracked screen. It rested between Case's fingers. The lower half had a keypad. It dangled from a pair of tiny wires connected to the upper half. The lower half swooped like a pendulum. Case watched it carefully. His irises glided from one side of his eye sockets to the other. He gripped the bottom half of the cell phone with his free hand. He held the bottom of the keypad in front of his lips. He held the top of the screen against his ear with his other hand. "Wussup, dude?"

Paloni rested the tips of his fingers against a square of glass. A torrent of rain water poured a foot away. Tiny droplets from the waterfall splattered the glass below Paloni's fingertips. They kept it frosty and cold. Paloni held a slick, white rectangle against his ear. A pair of thick, black eyebrows pointed down the bridge of his nose.

"Don't 'what's up' me!" he exclaimed. "You're lucky you're not in jail right now, you murdering psychopath!"

Case wrinkled his nose and parted his lips. "So... I can't say 'what's up'?" He shrugged. "Why not? Is that like... part of my probation or something?"

Paloni's tar colored eyes popped open. His fingers dropped off the glass. He stepped

away from the window and faced the adjacent wall.

"'Probation' is a good word for it," Paloni replied. "You'll be lucky if that's *all* you get!"

Case narrowed his eyes. "Paloni, you know damn good and well that guy was your guy."

"No, I *don't* know that!" Paloni shouted.

"Well, you at least..."

"I don't know *shit*, thanks to you!" Paloni added. "I'm standing here, surrounded by old, dusty bones, not knowin' nothing."

Case grinned. "My, my..." he groaned. "Who licked the butter off *your* biscuit?"

Paloni made a fist with his free hand. He parted his lips and scrunched up his nose.

"Who licked the...?" he repeated. "Who... What the...?" Paloni stomped the sole of his shiny black shoe against old, creaky boards along the floor. "You... licked the fuckin' butter off my biscuit, ass-hole! YOU did!"

Case scooped the pieces of his cell phone into his left hand. He wrangled them in front of his lips and ear. He laid the index finger of his right hand against the tip of his chin.

"So what you're saying is, I ate the frosting off your donuts?"

Paloni smacked his thigh with his palm. "What... frosting...?" He swatted the air with his fist. "Yes! Yes, you ate the God damn frosting off my donuts!"

"I stole the sausage patty off your egg sandwich?" Case requisitioned.

Paloni lowered his head. He gritted his teeth. His eyelids peeled off his eyeballs.

"*Case, I'm gonna KILL you!*" he squeezed through his teeth. "*I am going to KILL you!*"

Case pinched his eyes shut. He cupped his fingers in front of his lips and chuckled. He opened his eyes and cleared his throat.

"Give me the address, Paloni. I'll be there in half an hour."

Case's scotch colored Cutler swerved and turned sideways. The Cutler's tires skidded across an inch of ice cold water. The car turned three hundred and sixty degrees. It stopped half an inch short of a soaking wet curb. Rain poured over the surface of the Cutler. White lightning scorched colorful clouds swirling across the sky. Thunder cracked the air in two. There was a door along the floor of the attic filled with bones. A pair of scuffed up, brown leather shoes was parked beside the door. A pair of fat ankles burst from the top. They turned into a pair of thick calves. The calves became knees. They were twice the size of the ankles. The knees led to a pair of thighs. They were as big around as basketballs. Grey slacks with thin, white stripes were wrapped around the legs sticking out of the shoes. The edges of a long, brown trench coat surrounded the thighs.

The door in the floor flopped open. It slapped old, creaky boards beside the scuffed up, brown shoes. Case's head popped out of a square hole in the floor. His eyes crinkled. His hand appeared in front of his lips. Case swatted dust away from his face and coughed. He looked up. Captain Ford looked down. His brown trench coat was wrapped around a crisp, cornflower blue shirt. A yellow tie with red stripes lay down the middle of Ford's shirt. Ford's smoke colored eyes stared into Case's sky blue eyes. Case gritted his teeth. He twisted his lips into a grin.

"Hello," he remarked. Ford narrowed his eyes. He forced his mouth into the shape of a smile.

"Hi." Case plopped his palms along the edges of the attic door. He felt old, dry splinters digging into his hands. Case climbed a row of stairs leading to the door. He stood on the opposite side of the door from Ford. He lifted the door with the toe of his sneaker. The hinges groaned like grouchy, old men. The door sank into the hole in the floor. It sounded like two cars colliding. Case looked up. He studied ribs along the peak of the roof. He perused sheets of

cobwebs dangling from gaps between the ribs. He watched long, thin spider legs wobbling the edges of the cobwebs. Case looked across the room. Paloni was standing in front of a window. A tangerine colored flash illuminated squares of glass along the window. The flash made Case's eyes burn. Whispers of thunder swept between boards along the attic floor. Crackles wiggled bones tacked to the ceiling. Paloni's back rested against uprights supporting the ceiling. His arms were folded across his chest.

"Thanks for coming, Case," he remarked. Case licked his lips. He traced the ceiling with his eyes. He looked between femurs, tibias, and fibulas attached to the rafters. The spaces between the rafters were filled with incomprehensible gibberish. It was written in blood, just like the writing at the previous murder scene. Case skimmed bits and pieces. *"The first day was the evening and the morning,"* he read. *"The evening and the morning were the second day. The third was the evening and the morning. The fourth was the evening and the morning. The evening and the morning were the fifth day. The evening and the morning were the sixth. And, the seventh was the end."* Case looked at the floor. He shook his head.

"Gibberish," Ford remarked. Case looked over his shoulder.

"Obviously, the man was a religious schizophrenic."

Ford narrowed his eyes. "Is there... any *other* type of religious person?" Case looked up. He read more delusional drivel. *"Six heads, six horns. One head, three horns."* Case looked below that. *"Four heads, four horns. Three heads, six horns."*

Case smirked. "Any prints?" he inquired. He looked at Paloni. Paloni lowered his arms. He slipped his hands into the pockets of his slick, black trousers. He crept towards Case.

"In this room," he replied, "there are at least sixty different fingerprints, thirty distinct sets of hair, and human bones belonging to at least eighty different people." He stopped beside

Case. Case narrowed his eyes. He tapped his chin with his index finger.

"And, how many different fingerprints on the bones themselves?"

Paloni nodded. "We thought to check that. The bones are the same as the rest of the room. Multiple prints on each bone."

"Bizarre," Ford added. Case looked beside him. He found Ford's beady, grey eyes.

"There's more," Case replied. Paloni rested his elbow on his palm. He cupped his chin between his fingers.

"What do you mean?"

Case faced Paloni. "More bones," he explained. "More bodies." He looked at Ford. "A lot more. There have to be."

"You're telling me there's more than *this*?" Paloni requisitioned. Case faced him.

"This is just a glimpse," he replied. "We're looking at a tiny piece of the puzzle, here." He looked at Captain Ford. "There's a place somewhere that makes this look like a... broken down spook house at a carnival."

"Where?" Paloni demanded.

"It's hidden," Case replied. He looked into Paloni's soot colored eyes. "And, very well." He squinted. "The man I hit with my car..."

"The man you slaughtered!" Paloni corrected.

Case tilted his head. "Did you find his fingerprints on anything?" Paloni traced ash colored boards along the floor with his eyes. He licked his lips.

"That's the one fingerprint we *didn't* find." Case nodded. He smirked.

"I'm glad *you* find this so amusing, Case," Ford remarked. Case looked up.

"He's your man. I'm telling you."

"This other place," Ford replied. "Wherever it is, we need to find it. And, fast."

Case nodded. "I agree. I guarantee you'll find this man's fingerprints all over it." Paloni rolled his eyes. He raised his palms.

"You can't *know* that!" he shouted. "There's no way you could possibly know that!"

Case looked into Paloni's cold, dark eyes. He sighed, impatiently.

"I heard the man speak, Paloni," he replied. "I'll *always* know he was the man who did this." He motioned towards the bloody etchings along the ceiling. "He was the man who wrote these messages. I know that for certain." Case smacked his palm with his index finger. "I know he was violent and unstable." He smacked his palm with his index finger and middle finger. "And, I know from the way he spoke that he was a hopeless schizophrenic." He smacked his palm with his index finger, middle finger, and ring finger. He folded his arms over his chest. "You should've seen the look on his face when I recited some of the things that were written on the walls at the first crime scene."

Ford exhaled through his nostrils. "Well unless you took some pictures of that or caught it on tape or... something, we'd better get to work proving that man did this." Case faced Ford. "The D-A's breathing down my neck," Ford added. "She wants to bring you in on manslaughter charges right now."

Case lifted his eyebrows. "Right..." he replied. He looked at the floor. He rolled his eyes. "Never mind..." He motioned around the room with his fingers. "All *this* nonsense." He looked around. "This is no big deal, here."

Paloni bobbed his head. "You know that's not the way it works, Case."

Case shook his head. "I wanna see the man's body," he remarked. "Have they processed the body, yet?" He turned, bent over, and lifted the door.

"They haven't had a chance," Ford explained. Case hopped through the hole in the floor. He laid the soles of his sneakers along a pair of steps leading to the attic. He looked up.

"Then I'm gonna go down there and rip his body apart..." Case mashed his fists together. He tore them apart. "Rip out all his bo-o-o-o-o-nes!" He gritted his teeth. "Nail them to the walls, and process the body my-SELF!!" Case stomped down a row of stairs. *"You guys coming?!!"* he shouted below the attic. Captain Ford looked into Paloni's eyes. He mashed his lips together. He puffed up his cheeks. Sergeant Paloni showed Ford his palms.

"He's joking, Captain Ford." A pair of ivory colored eyebrows shot up Ford's forehead. He rolled his eyes.

"Right..." He looked towards the hole in the floor. "We should just... let him go. No point in following him or anything." He looked at Paloni. Paloni looked back. He slid his lips to the side of his face.

"Hmph..." Paloni scampered around the edge of the door. He dropped through the hole in the floor and skidded down the steps. Ford followed. He squatted carefully and sat on his knees. He pinched his eyes shut and gritted his teeth.

"Errrrrrr!" he grumbled. He squeezed through the hole in floor and reached for the steps. He almost didn't fit. His slick, bald head and tufts of white hair surrounding it disappeared through the hole. The door lifted. It flopped into the hole in the floor. It sounded like a sarcophagus closing.

Chapter 8: "Friends Like These"

Ted was freaking out. He didn't know what to think. He kept imagining the incident with Adam and Gabrielle the day before. It replayed in his mind like a film being looped. Ted was worried sick. He hadn't thought things through. He was concerned with payback the day before. That's all he was worried about. Now, he had to face the consequences of his actions. And to top it off, he didn't have much to show for it! He and his friends ripped off Gabrielle's clothes and humiliated her. They would be in deep shit once anyone found out. But, that's all they did. They didn't even get any satisfaction out of it. Adam interrupted them and made their futile attempts at revenge seem like nothing at all. It was nauseating.

Ted and Brittany stood in a Willow Junior High hallway. They stood in front of a wall filled with lockers. There were two rows of lockers. The lockers were built into the wall. They were covered with thick, steel doors. The doors were painted the color of caramel. Black knobs for combination locks were attached to the middles of the lockers. Crimson and umber bricks filled space where there weren't lockers. Large tiles lay along the floor. They measured four feet by four feet. They were dotted with black, tan, white, and yellow spots. Red filled space between the blotches. Chrome lines lay between the tiles. Ted's shoulder blades rested against a pair of slick, frosty locker doors. His black trench coat dangled from his shoulders. It blanketed a black t-shirt with a large, white icon. The icon resembled a skull. The lower half of Ted's body was wrapped with amber khakis and black sneakers. His black beanie was strapped over the top of his head. Curls of walnut colored hair surrounded the rim.

Brittany rested against Ted's left shoulder. She wore a long sleeved shirt. It was wrapped with black and olive green bands. Navy blue jeans surrounded her legs. Tips of rust colored boots poked out of the bottoms. Brittany's jade green eyes studied tiles along the floor.

She swallowed nervously. She took a breath and looked up. Cherry red coils of hair bounced along her cheeks.

"Ted, I have something I need to tell you," she remarked. Ted stared at a row of lockers on the opposite side of the hall. He was lost in thought.

"Not now," he replied. Brittany exhaled through her nose. She looked at the floor and folded her arms over her chest. Derek stood to Ted's right. A black hoodie wrapped his upper body. Baggy, crimson corduroys wrapped his legs. His repulsive, brightly colored sneakers poked out of the bottoms. They were wrapped with canary yellow, cornflower blue, and lime green plastic. Lenny stood beside Derek. He wore a thick, long sleeved shirt. It was decorated with yellow and black plaid. A pair of faded, black jeans wrapped his legs. Both knees of Lenny's jeans were ripped open. Black hiking boots were strapped around his feet. Bobby was nowhere to be seen. Ted asked Bobby to meet him there. But, he didn't bother to show up. Derek rested his shoulders against a pair of lockers. He folded his arms over his chest.

"Pussy!" he shouted. The hallway was filled with students. They were on their way to classes. There were five minutes before the first class began. Ted happened to know that Adam and Gabrielle passed that section of the hallway on the way to their first class. That's why he was waiting for them there. Brittany looked up.

"This is stupid, Ted! You don't know what he's gonna do, next!" Ted turned his head. He didn't look at his girlfriend. He barely acknowledged the fact that she was in the room.

"Shut-up, Brittany..." he replied. He faced forward and stared into space.

"Brittany's right, Teddy," Lenny remarked. He leaned forward and looked at his friend. "Did you see those tiles poppin' up off the floor? That fool's a freak!" Ted's head swirled to the right. He glared into Lenny's ice colored eyes.

"Shut-up, Lenny!" Ted turned his head. He rested the back of his skull against a slick, frozen locker door and stared across the hallway. "Y'all fools get lost if y'all don't want none!" He licked his lips. "Go find Bobby or some shit! I don't care!" Derek smashed his fist into a locker door. Skinny, black braids battered his cheeks.

"BULL shit!" he shouted. Lenny and Brittany jumped away from the wall. They faced Derek. Ted continued staring into space. Derek looked at Lenny. He turned his head and stared between Brittany's emerald colored eyes. "Ain't no one goin' nowhere until I get my hands on that punk ass bitch!" Derek rested his back against a pair of locker doors. He folded his arms over his chest. "I paid thirty bucks for my motha fuckin' switch blade!" Lenny smirked. He bobbed his head.

"He also threw you across the bathroom! Don't forget about that!"

Derek looked into Lenny's cold, frosty eyes. "Oh, he gonna pay fuh dat!" He grabbed Lenny's wrist. He laid the tips of Lenny's fingers on the middle of his slick, tar colored forehead. "Feel that." Lenny slid his fingers along his buddy's forehead. There was a mound the size of a prune. It was swollen from when Derek's forehead smashed into the floor. Lenny scrunched up his nose. He parted his lips.

"Damn, Derek!" He lowered his hand and stood beside his friend. "That's a swollen up bitch!"

Derek looked to his right. "You tellin' me, homie! When them fools come walkin' by..." Derek turned his head. Lenny looked where Derek was looking. Adam and Gabrielle were fifteen feet away. They were walking down the opposite side of the hallway. Gabrielle looked to her left. She spotted Lenny, Derek, Ted, and Brittany. She froze. Adam's head turned like a top. A twisted smirk was painted across his face. Adam's head locked in place. His feet stopped

side by side. It was almost as if he expected to find Ted and his friends standing there. Adam's lips peeled apart. His teeth were mashed together.

"Hi, guys!" he shouted. "How's it hangin'?!" Adam's smile faded a little. His eyes crinkled. Adam searched the wall where Ted and his friends were standing. "Where's Bobby?" Adam pointed at Ted. He grinned like a lunatic. "Is he scared of me?!" Adam's lips curled up his cheeks. It looked like his cheeks were about to rip apart. "Huh?!" Ted gritted his teeth. He pounded his fists into a pair of locker doors. Some of the other kids stopped. They turned and watched. Ted pointed between Adam's glowing, peanut butter colored eyes.

"Fuck you, Rhodes!" he shouted. A black back pack was strapped over Adam's shoulders. Adam's fingers swirled under the straps of his back pack. His arms spiraled in front of him like they had minds of their own.

"Woop! Woop!" Adam hooted. His back pack swirled across the hallway. It crashed into a pair of doors above Ted and Derek's heads. Derek hopped to his right. Ted hopped to his left. The boys turned their heads and looked up. They watched Adam's back pack crash to the floor. Some of the other kids laughed. Clatters filled the hallway. They sounded like hard candies falling down wooden stairs. Everyone stopped laughing. They looked around. Ted looked beside him. The knobs on the lockers were swirling back and forth. Ted's cloudy, grey eyes popped open. He hopped away from the wall.

"Whoa!" he shouted. Derek, Lenny, and Brittany jumped back and watched the lockers. Other students noticed the locker knobs, too. The knobs stopped turning. Slick, black latches lifted above the locks. The doors swung open randomly. They began crashing into each other. Some of the other kids in the hallway shouted. Some threw their fingers over their mouths and gasped. Gabrielle slipped her fingers around thick, ice cold leather wrapping her boyfriend's

arm. Adam's head turned. He stared into Gabrielle's sky blue eyes. A hideous grin tore his face in two. Gabrielle's eyes were big and sad. A pair of walnut colored eyebrows pointed towards the outer edges of her eye sockets.

"Adam, stop!" she shouted. "Stop this! Please!" Adam's eyes went dull. His smile faded. He faced Ted and his friends. The lockers stopped battering each other. Other students began scrambling away in a panic. Lenny joined them.

"Aw, dude!" he shrieked. "Fuck this shit, man! Nuh-uh!" Everyone except Ted, Derek, Brittany, Gabrielle, and Adam left. It was just the five of them. Ted and Derek flattened against frosty, open doors along the wall. They stared at Adam and froze. They awaited his next move. Brittany stepped away from the wall. She stood in front of her boyfriend and stared into Adam's eyes. They made her feel uneasy. They seemed like they were glowing. They were the color of honey. Adam's pupils shrank. They became the size of grains of sand. Brittany stared into Adam's eyes. She inhaled a sharp breath.

"Adam, what..." She looked over her shoulder. She looked at Ted. Ted looked at the floor. He licked his lips. Brittany faced forward. Adam stared back. He grinned. Brittany inhaled a shaky breath. "Adam, what's happening to you?" Brittany faced Gabrielle. "Huh?" Gabrielle stared back. She turned her head. She looked towards Brittany's boyfriend. Brittany studied Gabrielle's eyes. She looked over her shoulder.

"I'm gonna tell Principal Callaway what you did," Gabrielle remarked. Brittany faced forward. She looked into Gabrielle's sea colored eyes.

"Huh?" she inquired.

"Fuck you!" Ted shouted. He stepped away from the lockers. He looked at Gabrielle. "I didn't do nothin'!" Brittany watched Gabrielle. She narrowed her eyes. Gabrielle glanced at

Brittany's emerald colored irises. She laid the tips of her fingers along the bottom of her crow colored turtleneck. She lifted it above her breasts. She wasn't able to put on a bra that morning. It hurt too much. Brittany peeked at Gabrielle's breasts. They were puffy and bruised. Her nipples were swollen and purple. Gabrielle's boobs looked like a pair of plums. Her nipples were like red grapes. Brittany's eyes popped open. She folded her fingers over her lips. Derek looked away. He looked towards the other end of the hall.

"Aw, damn..." he groaned. He turned and slipped away. "I'm out, G." He slid down the wall of the hallway and disappeared around a corner. Gabrielle lowered the bottom of her turtleneck. Brittany looked over her shoulder. She dropped her hands. She looked into her boyfriend's eyes.

"Y-You guys raped her?" she inquired.

Ted showed Brittany his palms. "I... I didn't... I didn't..." Brittany swirled around. She faced her boyfriend and swallowed. She looked at the floor. She folded her fingers over the top of her head. Ted took a breath. "Brittany..." Brittany looked up. She pointed at Ted.

"N-No!" she shouted. She shook her head. "No." She began backing away. "Mm-mm." Brittany faced the floor. She wiggled her head back and forth. She turned and looked up. She peered into Gabrielle's warm, blue eyes. She inhaled a frosty breath. She exhaled slowly. "Mm..." she squeezed out. Her lips quivered. She reached up. She laid her fingers on Gabrielle's shoulder. "I... I, um..." Gabrielle licked her lips. She motioned towards the other end of the hallway with her head.

"Get out of here, Brittany," she instructed. Brittany stared at multicolored dots along tiles across the floor. She nodded, nervously.

"Mm..." she groaned. "A-Alright." She slipped away and wandered down the hall. She

folded her arms over her chest and rubbed her biceps. She was freezing. Ted looked at Gabrielle. Gabrielle stared back. She shrugged.

"I, um... I'm telling him." Ted's eyebrows collapsed in the middle. He bobbed his head.

"Bullshit, you're telling!" he yelled. He started towards Gabrielle. Adam sprang to life. He hopped across a pair of tiles.

"Hoowah!" he shouted. He laid his fingers along thick, black fabric wrapping Ted's biceps. He grabbed a hold of Ted's arms and slung him away.

"Raaaaaah!" Ted shouted. He flew across the hallway and crashed into a wall of cold, steel doors. He crumpled to the floor in a heap. Books, pencils, pens, and spiral notebooks toppled out of lockers along the wall. They tumbled towards the floor. Half of them smacked the back of Ted's skull. Ted folded his arms over the top of his head. He leaned forward and buried his face between his knees. Adam started towards him. He felt a set of soft, warm fingers collapse on his shoulder. He stopped and peaked over his shoulder. Gabrielle's sapphire colored irises scattered Adam's thoughts. Gabrielle gazed into her boyfriend's freakish, golden eyes. She swallowed, nervously.

"Adam, I have to tell Tiffany what's going on."

The stench of coffee burned Tiffany's nostrils. Lady bug colored tiles filled her eyes. A pair of ruby colored ballerina flats lay near the middle. They bordered the edges of Tiffany's insteps. Arcs near the front covered her toes. Tiffany lifted her big toes. The tips of her shoes lifted. Tiffany laughed somewhere near the back of her thoughts. But, she didn't feel like displaying her emotions. Others might notice. Tiffany's cherry colored flats were flimsy and thin. Tiffany enjoyed slipping them on that morning. She hadn't worn them in months. Now, she felt silly and vulnerable. She worried she might need to kick something. If she forgot she

was wearing her flats, she would hurt her foot.

Denim the color of robin eggs wrapped Tiffany's legs. A thick sweater wrapped her upper body. It was wrapped with thick, radish colored bands and thin, white bands. Tiffany felt like she hadn't slept in a month. Her mind was filled with random thoughts. It felt like she was swimming through a sea of bed sheets. Every time Tiffany ripped a bed sheet out of her way, another plopped over her eyes and wrapped her head. Flashes from the past couple of days haunted Tiffany's memories. Tiffany remembered talking to Cindy, Danielle, and Sandy the day before. She remembered Danielle treating her like she was some kind of a freak. Tiffany gritted her teeth. She felt like punching Danielle in the nose.

She remembered showing her Andre scar to Sandy. Tiffany felt Sandy's arms around her waist. She felt her ribs cracking under the weight of Sandy's embrace. Tiffany cringed. Cindy, Sandy, and Danielle gave her the creeps. Tiffany's eyes crinkled. The outer points of her eyebrows pointed towards the outer corners of her eyes. Tiffany felt sad. She felt lonely. She wanted things to go back to the way they were the day before. Everything felt fulfilling and happy and alive. Everything fell into place and made sense. Tiffany felt like she belonged in the world. Or, something... Tiffany lost track of her thoughts. She began counting red orange tiles along the floor.

She stopped. She pinched her eyes shut, shook her head, and looked up. A thick, leather sofa lay along the opposite side of the room. It was the color of coffee. Chocolate colored bricks were stacked behind that. A window filled a space above the couch. Slats of aluminum lay across the glass. They formed a plus sign. Water poured down the glass. The sky was filled with black. A white flash illuminated squares of glass surrounding the aluminum plus sign. A heavy, wooden door opened near the other end of the hallway. Alternating sections of turquoise

and charcoal colored nylon poked through. They wrapped the top of an umbrella.

Cindy's soft, pasta colored hair floated below the bands of nylon. A shiny, black stick held the nylon sheets above long, flowing strands of hair. Irises like aquamarine nickels floated below the canopy of pasta colored hair. Tulip colored lips were painted below those. Cindy wore a thick, colorful sweater. It consisted of waves of slate, gold, rust, and seaweed colored fabric stitched together. Cindy's sweater buttoned down the front. It was bordered by wide bands of black. The front fastened below her chest. So, Cindy's buttermilk colored chest was bordered by a black "V." The top of a turquoise blouse filled the bottom half of the "V." The bottom of Cindy's sweater consisted of mostly slate and charcoal colored waves. They wrapped Cindy's hips. Cindy's legs were stuffed into charcoal colored jeans. Crinkles of shiny, black leather wrapped her legs from the bottoms of her knees to her ankles. From there, the crinkles smoothed out and wrapped Cindy's feet. They became black points near the ends.

Danielle snuck in behind Cindy. She tried to stay under her friend's umbrella. Hair like ale surrounded her face. Scotch colored irises searched charcoal and aquamarine bands contesting ice cold rain drops. Danielle was bundled in a thick, wool coat. It was the color of a pomegranate. Six shiny, silver buttons fastened Danielle's coat across her chest. There were two columns of three. Danielle's coat was long like Cindy's sweater. The bottom surrounded her hips. The bottom half of a black skirt floated below the bottom of Danielle's coat. Argyle socks wrapped Danielle's thighs and calves. They were decorated with black, white, and grey diamonds. Thin, red lines wove across the middles of the diamonds. Danielle's shoes were like boots without necks. They were slick and black. They had thick, high heels like screw driver handles. Danielle's shoes were woven across her insteps with thick, black shoe laces.

Sandy wandered in behind her friends. She held a solid black umbrella above her head.

A black stick descended from the middle of the umbrella canopy. It turned into a hook and curled in front of Sandy's tiny fingers. Slick, jet black hair surrounded Sandy's head. It stopped short of her neck. Irises like slices of lime and lips like tiny chunks of cherries decorated her pine colored face. Sandy's black leather jacket wrapped her shoulders. A pink blouse was buttoned below that. It was dotted with tiny, red roses. Raven colored jeans draped Sandy's legs. Tips of shiny, black boots poked out of the bottoms of her jeans. Tiffany didn't acknowledge the girls' presence. She stared at the sofa across the room. She looked like she was in a trance. She studied shiny, tar colored fabric. She blinked.

"Well if it isn't my good buddy, Tiff!" Cindy belched. She shredded Tiffany's thoughts. It gave Tiffany a headache. It filled her with annoyance. Tiffany narrowed her eyes. She glanced in Cindy's direction. Cindy closed her umbrella. She held it beside her and shook it. Icy droplets of water splattered slick, red orange tiles along the floor. Danielle studied Tiffany's expression. She squinted.

"Hey, what happened?" she demanded. Cindy narrowed her eyes. She flattened her lips.

"Who died?" Tiffany looked up. She looked towards Cindy's seaweed colored irises. She shrugged. Danielle bobbed her head.

"Huh," she remarked. She and Cindy wandered towards the library. They entered through a heavy, wooden door. It closed behind them. Sandy buttoned a thin, nylon strap around the canopy of her umbrella. She plopped the tip of her umbrella against the middle of a mud colored tile. Tiffany stared at the floor. Sandy studied strands of slick, black hair sprouting from the middle of Tiffany's scalp.

"What happened to you?" she inquired. Tiffany continued staring at the floor. Her eyelids collapsed. They receded. "You were all cheery, yesterday. Now, you're like *this* again."

Tiffany looked up. She glared between Sandy's lime colored eyes.

"Like what, Sandy?!" she demanded. "Huh?! What's that supposed to mean?"

Sandy pressed her lips together. "Mm..." she grumbled. "I'm... I, uh... I don't know."

Tiffany focused on a pair of tomato colored tiles below her ruby red flats. "I'm no different now than I was yesterday." She looked up. *"You're* the one who's different! You're all acting like a bunch of stuck up bitches, again." Sandy exhaled through a pair of tiny nostrils. She turned and walked away. Tiffany watched her until the library door closed behind her. Then, she went back to staring at the floor. She thought back to the day before. She tried to remember what Sandy did. She tried to remember how she acted. Tiffany pressed her lips together. Creases appeared along her forehead. Her memory wasn't working very well. She remembered it being a lot better than it was. That was about all she remembered.

Tiffany remembered Sandy touching the letters carved into her arm. Her little fingers were filled with curiosity. It was the touch of innocence. Tiffany rolled her eyes. She sighed. Sandy wasn't any different than she was the day before. Tiffany's reaction was all that was different. Tiffany's head turned to the left. Her eyes focused on a pair of double doors covering the library. She felt like telling Sandy she was sorry. She felt like apologizing to Sandy's friends, too. Tiffany felt tears gathering along the edges of her eyelids. She faced the tiles. She dropped her eyes in her palm and sniffled.

"Damn it," she whispered. She exhaled a shaky sigh. Tiffany sat up. She relaxed against puffs of coffee colored leather wrapping the back of the sofa she was sitting on. She slid the tips of her fingers along the bottoms of her eyelids. She folded her fingers together. She laid her lips on top. *"I'm sorry, Sandy..."* A door near the other side of the hallway opened. Tiffany exhaled through her nostrils. She looked towards the right corners of her eyes. She spotted Chad. He

was on his way to the library. The sky was pitch black. Yet, his shiny black shades were draped over his eyes. Tiffany found it so annoying. She faced forward. She rolled her eyes and shook her head. Chad wandered down the hall. He stopped in front of Tiffany. He wore his black, leather jacket. He wore a blue shirt with thin, white stripes underneath. Black jeans and black sneakers covered his lower half. Tiffany shook her head. Her lips were still pressed against her fingers. They wobbled her hands. Chad bobbed his head.

"Sup, Tiffany?" he inquired. Tiffany's tar colored irises lifted. Tiffany stared at Chad from the tops of her eye sockets. She shrugged. Chad squinted. Tiffany could barely tell because Chad's eyes were hiding behind the lenses of his sunglasses. Tiffany noticed crinkles near the edges of Chad's eyes. "You've been crying?" Chad requisitioned. Tiffany sighed. She rolled her eyes and focused on the floor. She lowered her hands and folded her arms over her lap. Chad was carrying a notepad. He laid it against his chest and folded his arms on top. "Is it... Danielle and them?" he asked. "Did they do something?"

"Leave me alone, Chad," Tiffany demanded. She sniffled and looked up. "Go away, and leave me alone." She looked down. She lifted her legs and folded them like a pretzel. Chad bit the corner of his lip. He narrowed his eyes.

"Tiffany?" he demanded. Tiffany exhaled impatiently. She looked up. "Are you on something?" Tiffany stared into the lenses of Chad's shades. She sat back and laid her palms on her knees.

"I was," she sighed. The outer corners of her eyebrows pointed towards the outer corners of her eyes. "But, it started making me dizzy. So, I had to stop taking it." Chad exhaled through his nostrils. He nodded, slowly.

"Well, just... keep trying," he suggested. He shrugged. "M-Maybe you'll find something

else that works for you. You know?" Tiffany looked down. She exhaled a frosty breath. She looked up and nodded. Chad motioned towards the library with his head. "I'll tell Cindy and them to leave you alone."

Tiffany rolled her eyes. "I don't want them to..." Tiffany's eyebrows pointed down the bridge of her nose. She stopped talking and pressed her lips together. Chad smirked. He pointed towards the library with his index finger.

"I'll tell them you said you're sorry, then," he remarked. "For whatever stupid, cold hearted shit you said to them a minute ago." Tiffany fought off a laugh. She looked at the floor and nodded.

"Okay, Chad." She looked up. "Thank you."

Chad bobbed his head. "It's alright." He headed towards the library. He glanced over his shoulder along the way. "Find some other medication that works, alright?" Tiffany faced him. "The whole world will be better off," Chad added. "I'm tellin' ya!" Tiffany fought back a smile. She looked at the floor and shook her head. She heard the door to the library close. Tiffany's slick, black back pack lay beside her left thigh. It began vibrating. Tiffany jumped. She felt her heart thumping in her throat. She looked beside her. She heard *Graveyard Tombs* coming from her back pack. *Graveyard Tombs* was Tiffany's favorite song by Pentari. The music coming from Tiffany's back pack was a clip Tiffany and Case made after they bought Tiffany's new smart phone.

Tiffany unfastened a black buckle along the back of her back pack. She flipped open a vinyl cover. She slipped out a slick, plastic rectangle. She laid it across her palm. An L.E.D. display faced her. It was bordered by thin lines of chrome. The display was black. An icon flashed near the bottom. It was a picture of a tiny, white telephone. It was surrounded by a

white circle. A telephone number was etched above the icon. It was the number to Willow Junior High. Tiffany knew it by heart. Tiffany's smart phone wobbled her hand. It jiggled her wrist. It filled the hallway with high pitched guitar squeals, thumps from bass drums, and crashes from cymbals. Tiffany stared at the telephone icon. She raised her palm.

"What... am I supposed to do, again?" she whispered. She slid her lips to the side of her face. *"Did that lady even tell me?"* Tiffany laid her thumb on the white telephone. It disappeared. Tiny, grey dots surrounded Tiffany's thumb. Tiffany's lips parted. *"Um..."* Pentari continued playing. Tiffany figured she still hadn't answered the incoming call. She slid her thumb outside the circle of dots. They disappeared. A red bar appeared. A white telephone icon printed on top. The music stopped playing. Tiffany's phone stopped vibrating. Tiffany licked her lips. She laid the top of her smart phone against her ear. She rested the bottom beside her lips. "H-Hello?" she inquired. Gabrielle's voice filled Tiffany's ear canal.

"Tiffany?" Gabrielle responded. Tiffany smiled. Ceramic colored teeth glowed below Tiffany's shiny, raspberry colored lips.

"Hi, sweetie," Tiffany replied. She looked around. She felt uncomfortable talking on a telephone in public. Tiffany was all alone.

"Tiffany, I need to talk to you," Gabrielle remarked. Tiffany looked at lady bug colored tiles along the floor. The outer corners of her eyebrows pointed at the outer corners of her eyes.

"Well what happened, honey? What's the matter?" Tiffany heard Gabrielle sigh. She took a heavy breath.

"Um... It's Adam," Gabrielle explained. *"I think, um..."* Tiffany heard a painful sigh escape Gabrielle's lips. It sounded like she was crying. Tiffany lowered her head. She laid her forehead in her palm.

"Gabrielle?" she requisitioned. "What? What happened to him?" Tiffany heard Gabrielle clear her throat.

"I think he's possessed." Tiffany's eyes crinkled. She dropped her hand and looked up. She faced the sofa on the opposite side of the hallway.

"What do you mean?" she demanded. "What's he been doing?" Tiffany's eyeballs wobbled back and forth. She fumbled through thoughts. She wanted to gather as many facts as she could. She didn't know enough about what was going on. She needed to know what she was dealing with and fast.

"Mmmm....." Gabrielle moaned. *"He, um... He's not himself, Tiffany. He's beating up other kids and chasing them around. Taunting them."* Gabrielle took a breath. *"He gets this... look on his face, like..."* Tiffany heard Gabrielle sob. *"Like he's some kind of lunatic, or something..."* Tiffany could tell Gabrielle took the phone away from her face. She heard her sniffing. Tiffany stared into space. She furrowed her brow.

"Anything else?" she demanded. Gabrielle exhaled a long, exhausted breath. Tiffany heard the telephone lift and rest beside Gabrielle's face.

"Mmmm....." she groaned. *"L-Like what?"*

Tiffany lifted her palm. "Like... superhuman strength?" she suggested. "Or, voice changes? Or, psychic abilities?" Tiffany rolled her eyes. "Well I mean, more than usual?" Tiffany heard Gabrielle gasp.

"Like... telekinesis?" she asked. Tiffany's eyes popped open. She heard hummingbirds in her ears. The walls seemed like they were shaking. Tiffany's throat filled with a lump. She swallowed, hesitantly. She cupped her fingers over her lips. She didn't want anyone to hear what she was about to ask. It was too terrifying. She spoke in a shaky rasp.

"You mean... He's been moving objects with his mind?" Tiffany heard Gabrielle swallow.

"Yes," she replied. Tiffany lowered her head. She slid her fingers through strands of slick, black hair dangling over her eyes. She wadded her fingers into a fist. She licked her lips.

"W-When Louis picks you guys up from school, you have him bring you straight home," Tiffany instructed. She exhaled a shaky breath. She lifted her head and pointed at her smart phone. *"Got it?"* she demanded. *"Don't go anywhere else. Just have him bring you guys straight home."* Tiffany heard Gabrielle gasping for air.

"Y-Yeah," she managed to squeeze out. *"O-Okay, Tiffany. Straight home. Got it."* Tiffany sighed. She stared at the sofa across the room.

"I love you, sweetheart," she remarked. Gabrielle exhaled a nervous laugh.

"I-I love you too, Tiffany," she replied. Tiffany swallowed. She lowered her smart phone. She stared at the screen. It was black. The red bar with the telephone icon appeared. Tiffany touched it with her index finger.

Chapter 9: "Darkness Crept Into the Shadows"

Tiffany, Gabrielle, Adam, and Case's living room was located at the east end of the house. It was enormous. The room measured thirty feet by twenty-five feet. Case and Gina's squishy, blue sofa lay along the east wall of the living room. Their love seat stood across from that. It took Case a while to get used to them being there. His ex-fiancee turned out to be a murdering psychopath. But, Case got over it after a couple of days. A rear projection television stood along the north wall of the living room. It was positioned between the sofa and love seat. It was old. It had a full frame screen. It measured 62 inches from the top, right corner to the lower left corner. The television stood on a pair of large speakers. The police station was going to throw the television away. So, Case took it home with him.

A coffee table stood between the love seat and the sofa. It measured four feet by four feet. It was made of dark oak. It stood on four thick, oak legs. The table was old and beaten up. The floor of the living room matched most of the downstairs floors in the house. It was covered with slick sheets of pine colored veneer. The sheets were cross hatched. Chocolate colored lines lay across each square. The lines on each square lay perpendicular to the lines on the square beside it. A clock was attached above the sofa. It had a round, white face. Black, Roman numerals bordered the face. A pair of golden hands pointed at a pair of numerals. The clock had an oak frame. A rectangle of oak was attached to the bottom. A golden pendulum swung in front of the oak rectangle. It filled the living room with quiet ticks. The pendulum sounded like drum sticks tapping a wooden block.

Tiffany wandered in. She stood at the north end of the coffee table. She bent over and grabbed the edge. She dragged the coffee table towards the television. She stopped a foot away. She plopped her palms on her kidneys, tilted her head back, and sighed. She lifted her left foot.

She laid her left calf across her right thigh. She gripped the edges of her cherry red ballerina flat. She slipped her shoe off and lowered her foot. Tiffany repeated the process with her other shoe. She laid her flats near the middle of the coffee table. A can of salt lay on the middle cushion of the sofa. It was wrapped with a navy blue label. A picture of a little girl was printed on the label. She wore a yellow dress, white stockings, and yellow maryjanes. She held a yellow umbrella above her head. Salt poured over the surface of the umbrella.

A little, white doll lay beside the can of salt. Two black Xs were stitched along the middle of its face. Tiffany called the doll a "Berend." She made it herself. She sold Berends in her magic shop. Tiffany stood beside the sofa. She snatched the can of salt off the middle cushion. She turned on the balls of her feet and wandered towards the middle of the floor. The top and bottom of the salt can were made of white cardboard. On the top, there was a shiny steel rectangle near the middle. Tiffany slipped her thumbnail under the rectangle. She pried it back. The rectangle was the edge of a spout. Tiffany tilted the salt can. She surrounded herself with a circle of salt. She left a one foot opening. Then, she returned to the sofa. She closed the can of salt and sat down. She folded her legs like a pretzel.

Tiffany dropped the can of salt on the middle cushion of the sofa. She picked up the Berend and laid it in her lap. She looked up. She heard Case. At least, she hoped it was him. Case stood beside the love seat. He looked into Tiffany's eyes. He squinted and bobbed his head.

"How did you get here?" he inquired. Tiffany stared into Case's baby blue eyes. They were kind and inviting. Tiffany's coffee colored irises pointed towards the kitchen. Tiffany bobbed her head.

"Sandy drove me." Case's eyebrows lifted. He turned his head. Sandy stopped beside

him. Her black, leather jacket lay across her arm. Case studied Sandy's blouse. It was pink, dotted with red roses. Sandy looked into Case's eyes. Sandy's eyes were the color of lime slices. A pair of tiny, cherry colored lips below Sandy's irises curled into a smile.

"Hi, Detective Case," Sandy remarked. Case looked at Tiffany. He smirked. His eyes crinkled.

"What about the other two? Are they here?" Tiffany's eyes popped open. She pointed between Case's eyes.

"N-Noooooo!" Case snickered. He looked to his right. Sandy continued grinning. She rolled her eyes. She wandered by Case and entered the living room. She looked at Tiffany and sat on the love seat. She laid her leather jacket across the closest arm rest.

"They're not *that* bad! Jeez!" Sandy turned her head and looked up. She focused on Case's eyes. "*She's* the one who's so crazy." Case laughed. Tiffany looked at her lap. She laid the Berend on its stomach.

"Shut-up." Sandy pointed across the room. A pair of thin, raven colored eyebrows slipped up her forehead.

"Case, she was perfectly normal yesterday!" She licked her lips. "Now today, she's..." Sandy faced Tiffany. She bobbed her head. "She's like this, again." Case folded his arms over his chest. He watched his girlfriend.

"Yesterday, she was on S-S-R-Is," Case explained. "She had to stop taking them."

Sandy nodded. "I know. Chad already explained that to me."

Case lifted his eyebrows. "Chad?" he inquired. Tiffany inhaled a deep breath. She sighed and looked up. Case pointed at her. "You've been talking to Chad Harris?" Tiffany narrowed her eyes. She tilted her head. Case shrugged. "Without swear words?" Tiffany

looked down.

"Shut... up!" Sandy and Case looked at each other. They snickered. Tiffany shook her head. She looked beside her. Her necklace lay on the arm of the sofa. It consisted of a series of silver links. There was a tiny clasp near one end of the links. A lock of Case's hair was braided through a silver hoop. The hoop was connected to the other end. The lock of hair was tied into a loop. A shiny, black star was clasped near the middle of the links. A silver plate was attached to the back. Tiffany grabbed the ends of her necklace. She turned and showed it to Case. Case wandered across the living room. He grabbed the ends of Tiffany's necklace. He reached behind Tiffany's neck and clasped the ends together.

"How long have you known about this thing with Adam?" Tiffany whispered. Case backed away. He bent over, laid his palms on his knees, and peered into Tiffany's shiny, dark eyes.

"Gabrielle told me last night," he whispered back. Tiffany exhaled through her nostrils. She narrowed her eyes.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Case shrugged. *"Gabrielle told me not to say anything."* Tiffany shook her head. She faced her lap.

"And, you obeyed," Tiffany replied. The Berend's back was fastened with a safety pin. Tiffany removed the safety pin. She laid it beside the can of salt. Case laid his fingers on Tiffany's shoulder. Tiffany looked up.

"I told her she had one day," Case whispered. He grinned. *"And, apparently she didn't even make it that long!"* Tiffany smiled a little. She licked her lips.

"Where are those little brats?"

Case motioned towards the west end of the house with his head. *"Gabrielle's trying to get Adam out of the car."*

Tiffany crinkled her eyes. *"He won't come into the house?"*

Case pressed his lips together. *"He... hasn't said one word since I picked them up."* He shrugged. He stood and folded his arms over his chest. *"I don't know WHAT he's up to."*

Adam and Gabrielle were in the garage. The back door of Case's Cutler was open. Adam was glued to the back seat. His shoulder blades sank into puffs of golden fabric along the back rest of Case's back seat. Adam's thighs mashed rust colored bumps along the seat surface. His sloppy, black sneakers lay loosely on crunchy, bronze colored carpet. Adam's head was slumped to the side. His left cheek lay along the top of the back rest. Glowing, caramel colored irises focused on the driver's side of the back seat. A hideous arc of gritted teeth lay below those. Adam grinned like a lunatic strung out on drugs. He lay collapsed in the back seat, staring into space.

The rear, driver's side door was open. The toe of a red, canvas sneaker was pressed against shiny, slick concrete below the door. A row of thick, white laces was strapped across the instep. The toe of a similar shoe was pressed against concrete beside the first one. The second shoe was blue. A pair of buttermilk colored ankles was sticking out of the necks of the shoes. Seaweed colored jeans wrapped legs above the ankles. A thick, black sweater wrapped a torso above the jeans. Two feet of soft, walnut colored hair wafted around shoulders near the top of the sweater.

"Adam!" Gabrielle shrieked. She stood next to Case's car, bent over the back seat. Her tiny, little fingers were wrapped around swirls of ice cold leather wrapping her boyfriend's arms. "Get out of this fucking car, now!" Gabrielle tugged Adam's wrist. Adam didn't budge.

Gabrielle had eyes like robin eggs. They were wide, fiery, and impatient. They focused on Adam's honey colored eyes. Droplets of sweat dotted Gabrielle's pale, soft face. Gabrielle was worn out. She'd been dragging her boyfriend around all day. He fought her every step of the way, too. Now, he was fighting Gabrielle's attempts to get him into the house. Gabrielle stared at her boyfriend's eyes. Adam stared into space. It was like he was on another planet. Gabrielle swatted long, soft strands of hair away from her face. She tugged her boyfriend's arm.

"Adam, come on!" she shouted. Adam's head bobbed like a rag doll's. Adam continued grinning and staring into space. Gabrielle exhaled a sharp, impatient breath. She slammed her boyfriend's arm against the back of the seat. She laid her left palm on the surface of the seat. She laid her right palm on the back. She looked into Adam's eyes. A pair of golden eyebrows pointed towards the outer corners of Gabrielle's eyes. Wrinkles creased her forehead. The corners of her lips pointed towards her chin. *"Adam... please..."* Gabrielle whined. She lowered her head. She laid her eyes on the tips of her fingers. *"Mmmm....."* she groaned. She sniffled. Gabrielle returned her palm to the back of the seat. She looked into Adam's cold, dead eyes and exhaled a shaky sigh. *"You have to come inside the house with me, Adam..."* Gabrielle groaned. She swallowed. Adam continued staring into space. He didn't budge. Gabrielle pounded the seat with her fists.

"Please, Adam! So, Tiffany can fix you!" Gabrielle laid her knuckles below her eyes. She slid them across her bottom eyelids and sniffled. Gabrielle lowered her hands. She gazed into Adam's glowing, honey colored eyes. She slipped her fingers around Adam's. It was like grabbing a handful of ice cold snakes. Gabrielle exhaled a shaky breath. *"All I want is my boyfriend back..."* Gabrielle felt a column of frozen fingers around her neck. Her eyes popped open. Her fingers dropped off her boyfriend's. They wriggled through the fingers clamped

across her throat. A pair of thick, bushy eyebrows pointed down Adam's nose. Adam's pupils shrank to the size of pin heads. Bursts of sadistic laughter erupted through Adam's clenched teeth.

Adam shot across the back seat of Case's Cutler. He carried Gabrielle across the garage by her neck. He slammed Gabrielle's shoulder blades against a door leading to the house. Adam pressed a cold, frozen forehead against Gabrielle's hot, sweaty forehead. The tip of Adam's nose squashed against the tip of Gabrielle's. Beads of Gabrielle's sweat dribbled off the ends of Adam's eyelashes. They splashed Adam's cheeks. Adam peered into Gabrielle's eyes. His teeth crashed together. They slid back and forth. They sounded like a mortar and pestle. Four distinct voices erupted from Adam's lips, simultaneously.

"Why?!" the voices snarled. *"Why do you want him back?!"* Gabrielle gasped for breath. Enough air squeezed through her throat to keep her conscious. Gabrielle pinched her eyes shut. She tilted her head back and inhaled a series of panicked breaths. Adam squeezed Gabrielle's neck. He shook his girlfriend. Gabrielle exhaled terrified, breathless shouts. She gripped Adam's cold, lifeless fingers and looked down.

"S-Stop!!" she begged. "Stop!" Adam shoved Gabrielle against the door. His eyes popped open. They pierced Gabrielle's pupils and peered into soul.

"WHY?!!" Adam demanded. *"Why do you want Adam back?! TELL me!!"* Gabrielle shook all over. She felt like she was about to piss herself. She felt her legs jiggling. The heels of her sneakers bounced along the bottom of the door. Gabrielle stared helplessly into Adam's horrific, terrifying eyes. She inhaled a shaky breath.

"W-Why do I want you back?" she inquired. She licked her lips. "Why? You wanna know why?" Adam's lips spread. They slipped up his teeth. A quiet, low pitched growl erupted

from the back of his throat. Gabrielle inhaled and exhaled a couple of shaky breaths through her nose. She swallowed. She forced her head forward. She felt Adam's fingers tightening around her throat. Gabrielle laid her lips on Adam's and closed her eyes. She felt Adam's lips close around hers. She felt Adam's fingers loosen. Gabrielle sucked Adam's lips, eased her head back, and opened her eyes. She gazed at Adam's pumpkin pie colored irises. She blinked. "I love you," she replied. "I love you, Adam." Adam's eyes forced themselves shut. Adam lowered his head. Gabrielle slid down the door. The soles of her shoes flattened against slick concrete. Adam's fingers dropped off her throat.

Gabrielle inhaled cool, refreshing air. She slid her fingers along her neck and inspected the damage. She stared at wadded strands of shiny, black hair knotted along the top of her boyfriend's head. She slipped her fingers around his. Adam's head popped up. His glowing, scotch colored eyes popped open. Gabrielle motioned towards the house with her head.

"Come on, Adam," she begged. "Come inside the house." Gabrielle glanced over her shoulder. She looked back. "Please, Adam! Tiffany's waiting for us. She knows how to fix you!" Adam's upper lip lifted. Rows of gritted teeth appeared. Gabrielle heard ten or more distinct voices speaking at once.

"Tiffany..." they snarled.

Tiffany fastened the white doll in her lap with the safety pin she removed. She looked up. Case and Sandy looked over their shoulders. Gabrielle led Adam beside the love seat. She stopped next to Case. Adam's flame colored eyes spotted the circle of salt on the floor. His eyebrows slipped up his forehead. His eyelids peeled back. Adam stopped walking, stared at the incomplete circle, and snarled. He sounded like a vicious animal about to attack. Tiffany studied Adam's eyes. Her heart skipped a beat. She tossed the Berend aside and hopped up. She

looked at Case.

"We have to get him inside that circle." Case stood up. Sandy followed. Adam's head turned. He stared between Case's eyes.

"No one's moving anybody!" he shrieked. His voice sounded like plates of glass crashing into concrete. Case looked at Tiffany. Tiffany stared back. She swallowed.

"Grab him!" she instructed. Gabrielle's eyes popped open. She hopped beside her boyfriend and wrapped her arms around his waist. Adam wriggled like a worm.

"Braaaaaah!" he shouted. He tugged at Gabrielle's wrists. Case wrapped his arms around Adam's shoulders. Sandy stood on the opposite side from Gabrielle. She hugged Adam around the waist. Adam squealed like a dog that got hit by a car. He tried to tear away from Case, Sandy, and Gabrielle's arms. He slung the trio around like bed sheets. Multiple voices erupted from Adam's lips. "You'll NEVER catch ME!!" they shouted. "Never! Never! Never! Never! Never!" Tiffany ripped out a clump of Adam's hair. Adam's eyelids peeled. His jaws ripped themselves apart. His pupils focused on the chunk of hair in Tiffany's fingers. "Bleeeeeh!" Adam shouted. "What're you DOING?!! You can't do ANY-thing with that!!" Tiffany motioned towards the circle of salt with her head.

"Quick!" she yelled. "Get him inside!" She pointed at the floor. Case, Sandy, and Gabrielle studied the circle. They noticed the one foot gap in the border. Adam laid against Gabrielle, Case, and Sandy's chests. He lifted his legs. He swatted them like he was riding a bicycle.

"That's NOTHING!" he shrieked. "Nothing at all! Useless GIBBERISH!!" Case, Sandy, and Gabrielle tossed Adam through the gap in the circle. He landed in the middle on his butt. Tiffany stopped beside the gap when Adam landed. She filled the gap in the circle with an

additional dash of salt. She stared at shards of slick, black hair attached to the back of Adam's head.

"Sulk!" she shouted. Adam's head swirled around. He snarled at Tiffany over his shoulder. Sandy hopped behind Tiffany. She laid the tips of her fingers on Tiffany's back and peeked over her shoulder.

"Tiffany, what the *hell* is going on?" she demanded.

Tiffany glanced over her shoulder. "I told you, Sandy. He's possessed." Adam scrambled to his feet. He stomped towards the edge of the circle and stopped. He looked around. He pounded his fists against a circle of air surrounding him. Case, Gabrielle, Tiffany, and Sandy felt the floor shake.

"AAAAHHHH!" Adam shouted. He pounded the circle of air again. Tiffany, Gabrielle, Case, and Sandy felt their knees jiggling. "AAAAAAAH!" Adam's head wobbled. His eyeballs searched the room. "Let me OUT!!" he demanded. "Let me out! Let me out! Let me OUT!!" Tiffany hurried towards the couch. Adam's pupils attached to a black blur below the soles of her feet. It was Tiffany's shadow. Adam's shadow spilled over the edge of the circle of salt. Tiffany's foot landed on the spot where Adam's shadow spilled out of the circle. Five turquoise colored nails were attached to the tips of Tiffany's toes. They turned into five tiny charcoals. Adam tightened his fingers. He gritted his teeth and snarled.

"Ah!" Tiffany shouted. It felt like someone strapped a shackle around her ankle. Tiffany's legs turned into noodles. Her knees collided with slick veneer. Tiffany took plenty of spills in her day. She knew how to fall. She folded her arms in front of her face to protect her eyes, nose, and lips. Her elbows crashed into the floor. Her face squashed against her biceps and forearms. Tiffany exhaled a sigh of relief. She lifted her head and looked over her shoulder.

She spotted Adam's shadow. It was wrapped around her ankle. It looked like a strand of blurry, black rope. Adam growled through a set of clenched teeth.

"I'm gonna rip your fuckin' GUTS out, you whore!" he shouted. The shadow receded into the circle. It tugged Tiffany's ankle along with it. Tiffany felt like she was being reeled in by a fisherman. Adam slipped his fingers around Tiffany's calf. His fingernails dug into baby blue denim wrapping Tiffany's leg. "Then, I'll hang you from the CEILING, peel off all your FLESH, and watch you BLEED!!" Tiffany stared into Adam's glowing, honey colored eyes. She gritted her teeth and wrinkled her nose.

"Shit!" she shouted. She wrapped her fingers around the black star dangling from her necklace. Cold bursts of air blasted her in the face. It made hairs along the back of her neck stand on end. Slick material along the floor felt like sheets of ice against Tiffany's arms, shoulders, and the soles of her feet. The jewel attached to Case's hair was burning hot. It felt like someone just pulled it out of the microwave. Tiffany squeezed her talisman in her fist. Sharp points of silver along the edges dug into her palms. Tiffany held the clump of Adam's hair in front of her lips. "Nip!" she screamed. "Nip! Nip! Nip!" The shadow around her ankle snapped like a twig. Tiffany tugged her calf away from Adam's fingers and scrambled away. Adam focused on black blurs swirling below Tiffany's body. Thick, bushy eyebrows pointed down the bridge of his nose. His teeth mashed together.

"Eee-AAHH!" he shouted. "Shadows! Blackness!" Case reached across the top of the circle of salt. He slipped his fingers through Adam's thick, shaggy hair. He made a fist. Adam reached up. He curled his fingers around Case's. When he did, Case shoved Adam across the circle. Adam's face collided with the cylinder of air surrounding the circle. It was like crashing into a brick wall. Adam's head bounced back. His feet slipped off the floor. His legs swirled

into a knot. His arms crashed into each other. Adam flipped backwards and landed on the back of his skull. His knees bonked him in the nose. His spine uncurled and flattened on pine colored veneer covering the floor. Gabrielle watched her boyfriend collapse. She looked up and smacked her lips. She pressed her palms against Case's kidneys. She shoved Case away.

"Louis, don't do that to my boyfriend!" she shouted. "Stop!" Case glanced over his shoulder. He motioned towards the circle of salt.

"Well, tell your boyfriend to keep his damn hands off my girlfriend!" Sandy stared at the salt circle. She lifted her pointer finger.

"It was a... like a shadow... actually." Adam scrambled to his feet. He began snarling. He pounded air surrounding him. Case spread his arms. He peeked over his shoulders and backed away. Sandy and Gabrielle stayed behind his arms.

"Stay back, guys," Case instructed. He pointed at black blurs below their feet. "Watch your shadows. Don't let them cross the circle."

Gabrielle nodded. "Yeah..." she remarked. She lifted her hand. She extended her pointer finger. "He keeps saying that. About the shadows." Tiffany returned with the Berend. She stopped in front of Case. She faced Adam. She laid the Berend's stomach on her palm. She gripped the safety pin between her thumb and forefinger. Case wandered up. He snaked his arms around Tiffany's waist. He laid his lips on the side of her head. He kissed Tiffany's temple. Tiffany felt a smile creeping up her cheeks. She tried to stay focused. She unbuttoned the safety pin and shoved the lock of Adam's hair inside the doll.

"What do you think you're doing, Mr. Case?" Tiffany inquired. Case kissed Tiffany's temple three more times. He laid his cheek against hers and focused on the Berend in her hands.

"Nothing," he replied. "Don't mind me." Tiffany refastened the safety pin. She looked

up. Adam was grinning. He stood perfectly still, facing everyone. His arms were folded over his chest. His eyes glowed like floodlights. Tiffany inhaled through her nostrils. She exhaled through her lips. She reached up. She laid the tips of her fingers on the black star attached to her necklace. Case laid his fingers on Tiffany's. His girlfriend's fingers were trembling. Adam's lips receded. His teeth were mashed together. They pried themselves apart. Three different voices rasped separate words, one right after the other.

"More. MEANINGLESS. Lies." Tiffany stared into Adam's fierce, furious eyes. She held the Berend beside her lips.

"Rut-pack," she commanded. Case heard hummingbirds in his ears. He gritted his teeth. He crinkled his eyes.

"MUMBO jumbo!" Adam shouted back. "Mumbo JUMBO!!" Tiffany narrowed her eyes. She slipped her fingers away from Case's. She took her star with her. She laid the silver plate along the back of the emblem over the face of the Berend. Adam's nose crinkled. His eyes pinched themselves shut. "Raaaaaah!" he snarled. He bowed his head. He plopped his palms over his eyes.

"Evil!" Tiffany commanded.

Adam's head wobbled. "Bullshit!" he barked back.

Tiffany's eyebrows pointed down the bridge of her nose. "Evil!" she repeated. Adam threw his hands away from his face. He glared into Tiffany's eyes.

"Bullshit! Bullshit! Bullshit! Bullshit! Bullshit!" Tiffany sighed, impatiently. She yanked her star off the Berend's face. She patted Case's arms. Case lowered them. Tiffany balled her fists beside her hips. She stomped across the living room. She stopped inches from the circle. She glared into Adam's eyes.

"I command you to *leave!*" Tiffany snapped. Adam's head tilted back. His eyes clamped shut.

"Uh! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!" he cackled. He faced Tiffany and peeled his eyelids apart. "*Suck me!*" five separate voices howled back. "*Suck MY dick!*" Tiffany's hand developed a mind of its own. It rose from her side. It swung across the circle and flattened out. Tiffany's palm crashed into Adam's cheek. Tips of multicolored nails at the ends of Tiffany's fingers raked Adam's flesh. Adam's head twisted to the side. His ears rang. Adam lowered his head and closed his eyes. He laid his fingers on his cheek and growled like an angry dog. Tiffany grabbed her star. She laid it against Adam's forehead. Adam's skin sizzled like bacon on a hot skillet. Adam dropped his fingers and looked up. He peered into Tiffany's cold, black eyes.

"Tell me your name!" Tiffany demanded.

"Bah!" Adam barked back. "Bah! Bah! Bah!" Tiffany lowered her head. She glared into Adam's scrunched up, wrinkled up face.

"What's your name, freak?! What are you doing inside my Adam?!" Adam mashed his teeth together. He forced his lips into a hideous grin. Several voice erupted from Adam's lips simultaneously.

"*Fuck me!*" they shouted. "*Fuck me, you SLUT!!*" Adam tilted his head back. But, he was unable to pry it away from Tiffany's talisman. "Ah! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!" he howled. Tiffany's nose wrinkled. The inner points of her eyebrows collapsed. Tiffany yanked her star off Adam's forehead. She laid it against her chest and backed away. Adam collapsed. He fell to his knees and gasped for breath. Tiffany sighed. She folded her arms over her chest.

"How did you do this?" she requisitioned. "How did get inside of him?" Adam curled his fingers through his long, shaggy hair. He balled them into fists. He began cackling. He

tilted his head back and pierced Tiffany's eyes with his.

"Bah! Huh! Huh! Huh! Ha!" Adam forced his lips into a grin. "You have *nothing!*" he snarled. "Nothing! Nothing! Nothing!" Adam shook his head from side to side. He stopped and faced Tiffany. "Nothing you can do with all your little powers!" Case stood behind Tiffany. He watched Adam, carefully. He plopped his hands on his hips and exhaled through his nose. Gabrielle stood beside him. She watched her boyfriend, helplessly. She laid her palms against her kidneys and sighed. Sandy stood on the other side of Case. She laid the tip of her finger against her lips.

"What was that other thing, Tiffany?" she inquired. "You put something else in there before you put Adam's hair." Tiffany studied Adam's behavior. She pressed her lips together. She unfastened the safety pin along the Berend's back. She reached inside. Adam's fingers lifted. They plopped against his cheeks. They curled into fists.

"Ah!" a hideous, howling voice snarled. "*What are you DOING?!*" Tiffany retrieved her fingers. A wad of black cloth came with them. It slithered out like a hideous, black snake. Adam's head turned. His lips peeled apart. His jaws opened. His eyelids peeled like bananas. Everyone heard a voice screaming. It was Adam's. A charcoal colored mist erupted from Adam's lips. It looked like a cloud of black cigarette smoke. Tiffany exhaled through her nostrils.

"That," she replied. The black mist drifted away from Adam's lips. It poured out like liquid. Tiffany watched it. She shook her head. "Whatever *that* is." It was pouring down rain outside. Every window in the house was filled with black. Violet and teal flashes burst through the windows for fractions of seconds. Crashes of thunder rattled the walls, floor, and furniture. The black mist swirled away from Adam's face. Some of it turned. There was a puff of black

smoke at the top. It seemed like the mist's head. A pyramid of glowing, amber colored triangles appeared near the top of the mist's head. There were three of them. They blinked like eyes. A giant hole appeared below the mist's eyes. It began snarling.

"Bleaaaaah!" it shrieked. *"Put me back, you cunt! Put me back! Put me back!"* Adam shook his head. He laid his fingers over his eyes. He groaned. He turned his head, opened his eyes, and looked around. His eyes were hazel. They always looked sort of weird. But, they seemed normal again. They weren't glowing like they had been. Tiffany looked into Adam's eyes. She motioned beside her with her head.

"Adam!" she shouted. "Get out of there! Get outside the circle!" Adam crinkled his eyes. He raised his palms.

"Tiffany what the hell are you talking about?" he demanded. "Have you lost your friggin' mind? What circle?" Gabrielle stepped forward. She cupped her hands around her lips.

"Adam!" she shrieked. "Listen to her! Get out of the circle, now!" Adam was very confused. He slid his lips to the side of his face. He looked down. There was a line of salt on the floor. Adam's eyebrows lifted. He figured Tiffany made a circle of salt. He assumed that was what everyone was talking about. Tiffany did that, sometimes. She was a superstitious moron.

"Huh," Adam remarked. He heard snarling. It sounded like an angry dog. Adam's head twisted around. Adam peeked over his shoulder. He spotted the black mist. It was floating behind him. Three orange eyes near the top of its head stared straight through Adam's soul. Tiffany pounded her thighs with her fists.

"Adam, you dick!" she yelled. "Getcher ass outta there!" Adam stared curiously at the mist above his head. He squinted. His teeth parted. His lips curled into a smile. He raised his

palms and faced Tiffany.

"Tiffany, what the hell?" he demanded. "What is that? Like a projector?" Tiffany's arms went slack. She faced the ceiling and closed her eyes. She curled her fingers into fists beside her temples.

"Adam!" she shouted. "You know that thing is REAL!" She lowered her head and dropped her hands. She motioned towards the circle. "Will you PLEASE get out of there?!" Adam looked at Tiffany. He pressed his lips together. He blinked.

"Hmph," he replied. He shrugged. "What-ev." He stepped over the edge of the circle of salt. The hole in the mist's face ripped apart. A ferocious squeal erupted from the hole. The three glowing, golden eyes above the hole popped open. The mist's head wobbled like gelatin dessert.

"REEE-arr!" the mist shrieked. It swam towards the edge of the circle. It wanted to re-enter Adam's body. The mist ran into an invisible border above the line of salt. It flattened against the border. It looked like its face was pressed against a cylinder of glass. "Buh!" it shouted. Adam stopped beside Tiffany, Case, Gabrielle, and Sandy. He studied Sandy's lime colored eyes. Sandy stared back, blankly. She blinked. Adam smiled.

"You have pretty eyes," he remarked. Adam heard lips smacking. He looked beside him. Gabrielle stared into his eyes. She slid soft strands of hair away from her face. Her sky colored irises wobbled, shyly. Gabrielle licked her lips and swallowed, nervously. Her boyfriend's eyes looked normal again. It made Gabrielle's heart skip a beat. Adam snickered. He wrapped his arms around Gabrielle's shoulders. Gabrielle's head tilted back. Her eyes closed. A heavy sigh erupted from her lips. Adam turned his head. He laid his lips on the side of Gabrielle's face. He kissed her temple. "You have pretty eyes, too," Adam remarked. Gabrielle's eyes crinkled. Her

forehead turned into a staircase of flesh. She threw her arms around Adam's waist. She tightened them like a vice.

The mist peeled itself off the invisible wall surrounding the circle of salt. It floated towards the center of the circle and stopped. A pair of black blobs poked out of the sides of the mist. They were shaped like snakes. They were the mist's arms. They folded below the mist's face. The mist looked like a person folding their arms over their chest. The hole below the mist's pyramid of eyes ripped apart. Five voices began speaking simultaneously.

"Adam is MINE!!" they shrieked. Adam looked over his shoulder. He studied the gathering of black smoke in the middle of the salt circle. He turned his head. He looked up at Tiffany.

"Tiffany, what is this thing you've got rigged up over here?" He looked over his shoulder. He returned his attention to the coal colored mist. "Is that like a... hologram or something? That's a really neat trick!" Tiffany stared at the back of Adam's head. Her eyebrows flattened. Her hand developed a mind of its own, again. It floated away from Tiffany's side. It swatted Adam over the back of his head. Adam's face squished up. It looked like he'd bitten into an onion. Adam's arms fell off Gabrielle's shoulders. Gabrielle let go of his waist. Adam turned and folded his arms over the back of his head.

"Ow!" he shouted. He looked into Tiffany's cold, dark eyes. He rubbed the back of his skull. "What the hell is wrong with *you*?" Gabrielle threw her arms around Adam's waist. She laid her cheek against the side of his neck. The outer corners of her eyebrows pointed at the outer corners of her eyes. The corners of her lips pointed towards her chin.

"Mmmm....." she groaned. She sniffled. *"It's okay, Adam."* She tugged her boyfriend away from Tiffany. *"Come here..."* Gabrielle steered Adam a few steps away. She laid her

cheek against his chest and pinched her eyes shut. Adam felt her go limp. She was shaking like a stack of canned cheese. Adam sighed, quietly. He wrapped his arms around his girlfriend's shoulders. He kissed her forehead. Then, he laid his cheek along Gabrielle's scalp.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. *"I don't remember what happened."* He licked his lips. He stared at the column of slate colored smoke inside the circle of salt. *"I really don't have any idea what's going on."* Gabrielle's lips trembled. Gabrielle pried them apart. She lowered her head and tightened her arms.

"It's ok-a-a-a-a-y..." Gabrielle whined. She sniffled. She slid her fingers along Adam's ribs. *"I told you, it's okay."* She turned her head. She slid the tips of her fingers across her eyelashes. She pried her eyelids apart and looked up. She swallowed, nervously. Adam stared at Gabrielle's irises. Big, fat tears gathered near the corners of her eyes. They wiggled away from Gabrielle's eyes and wandered down her cheeks. Adam puffed up his cheeks. He turned his head and exhaled, nervously. He hated seeing his girlfriend cry. It made *him* want to cry.

Adam focused on Gabrielle's eyes. He laid his thumb along her lower eyelid. He slid it across. He repeated the process with Gabrielle's other eyelid. Gabrielle's bangs were soaked with sweat. They were twisted into sopping wet clusters along her forehead. They looked like little amber colored pieces of licorice candy. Adam wasn't fully aware of what happened during the first part of the day. Bits and pieces were missing from the previous couple of days. But, he knew something bad happened. His little girlfriend had obviously been through a lot. Adam exhaled through his nostrils. He lowered his head and closed his eyes. He laid his lips on Gabrielle's. Gabrielle closed her eyes. She tilted her head and relaxed. Adam gripped her bottom lip with his lips. Gabrielle closed her lips around Adam's top lip. She squeezed them together. Case stood to Tiffany's left. He stared at the gathering of black mist inside the salt

circle. He folded his arms over his chest.

"Tiffany, do you have any idea what that thing is?" he asked. Sandy wandered up. She stood to Tiffany's right. She rested her palms against her lower back. Tiffany pressed her lips together.

"It's obviously some kind of demon," she replied. She looked to her left. "But, I have no idea how it got inside of Adam." The hole below the black mist's eyes turned into a crescent. The middle of the crescent lay along the lower part of the mist's face. The tips of the crescent pointed towards the mist's eyes. It looked like the mist was grinning. An insidious cackle echoed along the walls of the living room. It was annoying and ferocious. The mist's laughter was like a pack of angry, barking dogs. The demon stopped giggling. He began speaking.

"You have no idea what you're dealing with, Tiffany Haynes." The mist shook its head. "No idea." Tiffany stared into the mist's trio of eyes. She flattened her eyebrows. She licked her lips. She stepped away from Case and Sandy. She pointed near the middle of the triangle of glowing eyes.

"I know *exactly* what I'm dealing with!" Tiffany shouted. "You think you can fool me with your idiotic trickery?" Tiffany folded her arms over her chest. She glared into the demon's face. "All you little demons and wraiths and spirits and faeries think you're so clever. You outwit a couple of people by knocking on the walls and throwing some pillows around and opening a couple of cabinet doors. And, you think you're so smart." Tiffany's eyebrows pointed down the bridge of her nose. Her dark, shiny irises focused on the pyramid of glowing eyes at the top of the mist's face. "It's not smart, you idiot! It's just stupid!!" Tiffany showed the demon her palm. She shoved her fingers aside like she was tossing a baseball. "It doesn't mean anything! It's not intimidating! And, it's not scary! And, it doesn't make you stronger than me

or more powerful or more intelligent! It just makes you *weak!!*" The black mist snarled. Its snake shaped, smoke arms unfolded. One of them pointed between Tiffany's fiery eyes.

"*Fuck you, Tiffany HAYNES!!*" six separate voices shouted. Tiffany pointed near the middle of the demon's eyes.

"Fuck YOU, pussy!" she shouted back. She lowered her finger. "I would call out *your* name. But you can't even tell it to me, you useless coward!"

"Bah!" the black mist snarled. It smacked the invisible wall surrounding the circle with one of its arms. "I'll sodomize you with a sledgehammer! I'll rip your cunt with my fists!"

Tiffany bobbed her head. "How about if I call you 'Misty'?" she inquired. "Like a little girl!" The mist's honey colored eyes narrowed. The hole below his eyes became a grin.

"In the afterlife I'll make you my slave, Tiff." Tiffany squinted. Her eyebrows collapsed on top of her eye sockets. "I'll keep you shackled in a catacomb of Hell where I'll torture you for days. Then when I'm finished, you'll crawl to me on your knees through a pool of your own blood. You'll beg me to let you suck my dick. And if I'm in a good mood, I'll pull it out and watch you choke on it." The corner of the mist's grin tore up its cheeks. "You'd like that, too. Wouldn't you, Tiff?" Tiffany looked at the floor. She hugged herself. She rubbed her biceps with her palms. Case watched his girlfriend, quietly. He stared at the pyramid of glowing, flame colored eyes gathered at the top of the mist's face.

"Shut-up, Misty," he remarked. Sandy stood to Case's right. She folded her fingers over her lips. She faced the floor and giggled, quietly. The gathering of graphite colored smoke glared into Case's eyes. It snarled. It faced Tiffany.

"Put me back inside Adam," it demanded. "Or, I will tear you limb from limb." Adam and Gabrielle stood in each other's arms. They faced the black mist. Gabrielle exhaled a shaky

breath. She laid her fingers over her boyfriend's heart. Adam laid his fingers on hers. Tiffany looked up. She furrowed her brow.

"Why do you like Adam so much, Misty? Isn't there someone *else* you should be terrorizing?" Gabrielle's golden eyebrows collapsed in the middle. She lowered her hand and made a fist beside her thigh.

"Yeah?!" she screamed. The black mist began cackling. It erupted from the back of the mist's throat. It began bouncing off the walls of the living room. It pounded Tiffany, Case, Sandy, Adam, and Gabrielle's eardrums. It was like a gangster wannabe parked his low rider in the living room and turned on some rap music. The mist demon folded its arms over its chest. It stared through Tiffany's eyes.

"You really have no idea, do you Tiff?"

Tiffany tilted her head back and rolled her eyes. "Tiffany!" she shouted. She faced the circle of salt. "It's 'Tiffany', you freak!" The mist grinned at Tiffany. It shook its head.

"Adam is mine. He's all mine." Adam looked around. He squinted.

"Are you guys still talking to that stop motion video Tiffany rigged up in the living room?" he inquired. He faced the gathering of smoke inside the circle of salt. "You know that thing's fake, right?" Gabrielle focused on the side of her boyfriend's face. She plopped her little fingers over his lips.

"*Adam, shut-up!*" she rasped. Tiffany focused on the black mist's pyramid of eyes. They were like triangular shaped holes with morning sunlight showing through.

"Why do you have to infect my Adam?" Tiffany demanded.

Ten voices erupted from the mist's mouth. "*Because he's SPECIAL!*" they shrieked. The mist floated towards Tiffany. It crashed into the invisible wall surrounding the circle. "*Why are*

you QUESTIONING ME?!!" The mist backed away a couple of inches. It thrashed its arms around. *"You don't question ME! You give me what I WANT!! NOW!!"* The windows flashed white. White flashes filled the cylinder surrounding the black mist. The mist's head tilted back. Beams of tangerine colored light projected from its eyes. *"AAAAAAAH!!"* it shouted. The gathering of black smoke dissipated. It disintegrated and floated towards the ceiling. The mist crashed into paint covered sheet rock and disappeared. The entire house breathed a sigh of relief. Tanks of excess air gushed out. A black haze that hung over the house since Adam entered suddenly lifted. Case stepped forward. He looked at Tiffany.

"What happened?" he inquired. "Where did it go?" Sandy stood to Tiffany's right. She faced the circle of salt and plopped her hands on her hips.

"Yeah?" she demanded. "What did you do?" Tiffany stared into space. She shook her head.

"It doesn't matter." Tiffany slipped her hand into the front, right pocket of her jeans. She took out a handful of dirt. She tossed it at the circle of salt on the floor. "Nepo!" she commanded. She dusted her palms and turned to Case. Case shrugged.

"What do you mean it doesn't matter?" Tiffany faced her boyfriend. Her eyebrows collapsed in the middle. Her eyes popped open. Wrinkles creased her forehead. Tiffany looked furious. She held her hand in front of Case's face. She pounded her palm with her fist.

"I mean it doesn't matter!" she shouted. Case winced. Tiffany stared at him, angrily. She lowered her hands and turned. She studied the circle of salt on the living room floor. "That thing might be a huge jerk. But, it's right." Tiffany looked into Case's eyes. The outer corners of her eyebrows pointed at the outer corners of her eyes. She laid her hand over her heart. "There's a limit to what I can do. I'm only human." Case faced his girlfriend. He took her hand.

He laid his other hand on top. He looked into Tiffany's tar colored eyes and nodded.

"Okay." Tiffany stepped towards him. She threw her arms around Case's waist. She laid her cheek against his chest. Sandy folded her fingers in front of her thighs. She hugged her neck with her shoulders and stretched her arms. She stood on the balls of her feet.

"So..." she began. Tiffany lifted her head. She looked over her shoulder. Case looked up. Sandy smiled. She lifted her palms. "Same time, tomorrow?" Tiffany fought off a smile. She let go of Case's waist and wandered away. A clip of classical music spewed from Case's jacket. He reached inside. He pulled out Gina's old phone and looked it over. Paloni was calling. Case noticed the hinge of Gina's cell phone was missing. He peeled the phone apart. He laid the lower half along his palm. He rested the upper half against his fingers. He held the phone beside his face.

"Yes, dear?" he inquired.

"Case," Paloni replied. *"This is hopeless."*

Case squinted. "Everything's hopeless," he replied. "Nothing's hopeless."

Paloni sighed. *"I'm going for a walk. I need some time to think things through."* Case exhaled through his nostrils. He licked his lips.

"Where are you?" Case looked up. Tiffany returned with half a sheet of notebook paper and a ball point pen. The piece of notebook paper was ripped violently along the bottom. Tiffany looked at Case. She stopped. Case faced her. He bobbed his head. Tiffany's eyes crinkled. Her lips slid up a row of gritted teeth.

"Louis..." she groaned. "Get a new phone."

"I'm downtown," Paloni remarked. There was a click. Case pressed his lips together. He lowered his hand. He gathered the pieces of Gina's old phone and snapped them together.

Tiffany's fingers landed on top. Case stared at them. Tiffany's nails were all different colors. Glints of light bounced off her rings. They scorched tiny, purple spots onto Case's retinas. Case looked up. He stared into Tiffany's dark, mysterious eyes. Case felt like he was falling down a well.

"One that doesn't say 'Gina' on it," Tiffany suggested.

Case smirked. "This one still works." Tiffany narrowed her eyes. She pointed between Case's eyes.

"Get rid of it!" she ordered. She turned around. She handed the ripped up piece of notebook paper to Sandy. Sandy looked it over. She smiled. "Number for my new smart phone," Tiffany explained. Sandy looked up. She nodded.

Chapter 10: "Two of Each Kind"

Downtown was lonely. It was dark. It was freezing. Rain poured from the sky. Walking around was like walking through a field of waterfalls. Paloni walked alone. He did his best thinking on his own. He wandered below the crisp canopy of a shiny, black umbrella. It was the only column of dry air for miles. Paloni's umbrella took a beating. Paloni was worried. He wasn't sure his umbrella would hold. A shiny, black post descended from the middle of the umbrella. It curled around Paloni's knuckles. Slick, black shoes wrapped Paloni's feet. They slid through two and a half inches of ice cold water. Tiny waves rolled away from the edges of Paloni's shoes. They dissipated three feet away. Thick, rubber soles along the bottoms of Paloni's shoes collided with squares of cracked, jagged concrete. The squares of concrete fluttered like flags below ripples of ice cold rain water.

White flashes illuminated crests of tiny waves. Dull, cracked sidewalk below Paloni's shoes flickered white for fractions of seconds. Paloni stopped. He looked to his right. Whispers of thunder tapped Paloni's eardrums. Paloni stared at a reflection. It was a reflection of swarming, ash colored clouds. Violet colored squiggles raced along the surface. Crackles scattered columns of rain water. Paloni remembered he was standing in a two and a half inch lake. He wondered if he might get electrocuted.

Paloni turned. The reflection of raging clouds was cast by a pane of glass. It was shaped like a giraffe. A long neck of glass filled the left edge of a rectangular frame. The glass was curved along the opposite edge. It curved away from the top of the neck. The curve collided with the right edge of the frame, near the middle. The bottom of the glass pane was split by an equilateral triangle. The pane of glass used to be a rectangle. But, pieces were missing. Paloni looked around. The rectangle of glass he studied was part of a row of windows. There were five

of them. Two of the windows were covered with particle board. The windows were cut into a short wall. The wall was made of warped, wooden siding. The wood was faded and old. The slats of wood were drifting apart. Wood was missing in places. The siding was dotted with chunks of white paint. What little paint was left was peeling away.

Paloni looked up. The roof of the building was covered with patches of tar colored oak. They were ancient. Paloni figured they were nearly a hundred years old. They were cracked, rotted, and caving in. A column of siding erupted from one edge of the building. It was square shaped. Like the wall facing Paloni, siding surrounding the column was dotted with blotches of peeling, white paint. Four tall, rectangular windows surrounded the column. Thin slats of wood lay across the windows. Some were missing. Some were dangling from the edges of the windows. A pyramid of rotten, oak tiles was stacked on top of the column. It matched the rest of the roof. Paloni's coffee colored eyes focused on a space between the pile of tiles on top of the column and a window facing him. His lips curled into a smile.

"Case was right..." he groaned. "That son of a bitch."

The bottom of Case's acorn colored Cutler lay along a rippled surface of muddy water. The water filled an old street beside the sidewalk. The body of the car looked like it was floating down a river. Tangerine colored flashes illuminated crests wandering away from the Cutler. The front tires of the Cutler collided with a curb beside the old building Paloni found. They rolled up the curb and turned. The rear tires followed. Case parked the passenger tires of his car on a flooded field of grass. The driver's side tires rested on shards of busted concrete. They used to be slick sidewalk. The passenger door opened. Little, pine colored feet plopped down in two and a half inches of freezing cold water. Five turquoise colored nails were attached to the tips of the right foot. Five plum colored nails decorated the other. The pair of tiny feet was attached to

a pair of glowing, sand colored shins. The shins were decorated with rows of deep, jagged scars. Cuffs of sky blue jeans were folded six inches above the scars.

Tiffany sat with her legs dangling over the edge of Case's front, passenger seat. She looked down. She lifted her big toes. They were so cold they were tingling. Tiffany looked over her shoulder.

"Louis!" she yelled. "This water's cold!" Case sat behind the wheel. He grinned. Rows of pearl colored teeth appeared between his lips.

"Yeah, it's a little wet out here." The driver's side door of Case's Cutler opened. The tip of a black umbrella poked out. The umbrella popped open. It tilted and hovered above the door. A pair of copper colored hiking boots appeared. They sank into freezing cold water flowing across the sidewalk. They were strapped around Case's ankles with radish colored boot laces. The cuffs of Case's khakis were stuffed into the tops of the boots. The rear, passenger door of Case's Cutler opened. Gabrielle's head poked out. Her baby blue eyes focused on soft blades of grass swirling below a canopy of water. A pair of bourbon colored eyebrows slipped up her forehead.

"Wow..." she moaned. The rear, driver's side door opened. Adam's legs plopped over the edge of the seat. Adam shoved himself to his feet, turned, and closed the door. He stood below Case's umbrella and looked around.

"I need a smoke," he whispered. Case looked down.

"You need a kick in the nuts," he replied. Adam smacked his lips. He raised his palms.

"Louis!" he exclaimed. "What's that supposed to mean?" Case squinted. He folded his arms over his chest. He kept his umbrella above his and Adam's heads.

"What day is it, Adam?" he inquired. Adam's eyebrows lifted. His hazel colored irises

floated to the left corners of his eyes.

"Uh..." he groaned. Adam's eyes crinkled.

"It's Wednesday," Case remarked. Adam looked up. His lips parted. Case stared into Adam's eyes. "You didn't even know it was Wednesday, did you?" Adam stared into space. He looked into Case's eyes and shrugged.

"I, uh..." Adam pressed his lips together. He looked away and scratched the back of his neck. *"Wednesday?"* he mumbled under his breath. *"Wednesday..."*

Case took a breath. "You know Adam, denying your abilities... It used to be kind of funny to me." He shrugged. "I always got a kick out of it. You know?" Adam looked up. He nodded.

"Okay?"

Case inhaled through his nostrils. "But, now. This thing with Gabrielle..." Case lifted his fingers. He tapped his lips with the tip of his index finger. "It's pretty serious." Adam turned. He rubbed the back of his head.

"Yeah..." he groaned. "I know." He lowered his hand. He looked into Case's eyes. "I know how serious it is."

"You could've killed those guys," Case added. "Who knows?" Adam looked away. He rolled his eyes.

"I know." Case laid his hand on Adam's shoulder. Adam looked up.

"I need you to be a man," Case whispered. Adam narrowed his eyes. Case smirked. He lowered his hand. *"I need you to accept this ability of yours and respect it."* He searched Adam's honey colored eyes. He licked his lips. *"You have to be more responsible with it. Okay?"* Case lifted his pointer finger. He wiggled it. *"Ted and his friends... they attacked*

Gabrielle because you broke Ted's nose." Adam folded his arms over his chest. He nodded.

"L-Luckily, I got there and stopped them."

"Right," Case relied. "But, what if you hadn't?" He pressed his lips together. "I mean... who knows what those guys would've done to her." Adam sighed. He looked into Case's eyes.

"I, uh..." He squinted. "I'm sorry, Louis." Adam looked around. He faced Case. "I let you down, huh?" Case exhaled through his nostrils. He smiled.

"It's okay, buddy," he replied. He patted Adam's shoulder. "Just... tell Gabrielle you're sorry." Adam stared into Case's eyes. He squinted. "Alright?" Case demanded. Adam cupped his chin between his thumb and forefinger. He motioned towards Case's chest.

"That's what you want me to do?" he inquired. "You want me apologize to Gabs?"

Case stared into Adam's eyes. "Trust me," he replied. He looked towards the building Paloni found. He turned and walked away. Adam stared through trickles of rain. It wasn't raining nearly as hard as it was when Paloni showed up. But, it was still raining quite a bit. Adam watched plaid fabric surrounding Case's back. It floated across gusts of cool wind. Case stopped beside the front, passenger door of his Cutler. He faced the car. Tiffany sloshed out. She stood below Case's umbrella and shut the door. She looked to her right. Case looked over his shoulder. He spotted a message. It was written near the top of a column near the rear of the building. It was etched above the window facing the street. It was written in red paint. It read, *"Pitch it within and without with pitch."*

"It's from Genesis," Tiffany remarked. Case faced her. Tiffany looked into Case's eyes and licked her lips. "The story of Noah's ark."

Case nodded. "Even *I* would've never noticed that." Adam stared into space. Glimpses of murky, flowing water swatted the edges of his pupils. Adam barely noticed. A tiny whimper

scattered his thoughts. It sounded like a little puppy yipping.

"Adam?" it barked. Adam's head turned. Adam spotted his girlfriend. She was standing beside the back bumper of the Cutler. Adam looked down. The cuffs of Gabrielle's blue green jeans were folded to her knees. Gabrielle's ankles erupted from two and a half inches of ice cold water. A pair of tennis shoes dangled from the tips of Gabrielle's fingers. One was red. One was blue. Adam searched his girlfriend's eyes. They were focused on the ground. They were staring at Adam's feet. Gabrielle inhaled through her lips. She exhaled a slow, heavy breath. *"Adam, how are you doing that?"* she demanded.

Adam squinted. *"What are you talking about?"* He looked down. A pair of sloppy, black sneakers was strapped around his feet. Thick, white soles were attached to the bottoms. They rested on the surface of the water. Adam stared at the soles of his shoes. He tilted his head. *"Hmm..."* he groaned. Gabrielle gasped. Adam looked up. Gabrielle curled her fingers over her lips. She looked into her boyfriend's eyes. Adam grinned. *"Oh, Gabrielle!"* he snarled. *"Don't be ridiculous!"* Adam looked down. *"I'm obviously standing on a high spot in the sidewalk."* Adam heard sloshing. Ripples and tiny waves crashed against the soles of his sneakers. Adam looked beside his feet. Ten different colored toenails appeared below the ripples. They were Gabrielle's. They were parked beside the soles of Adam's shoes. Gabrielle's nails floated on the ends of buttermilk colored insteps. Ripples floated away from Gabrielle's ankles. They rolled above bones along the tops of Gabrielle's feet. Adam looked up. Gabrielle's sky blue irises scattered his thoughts. Gabrielle took a breath.

"Adam, you're standing on top of the water..." she whispered. Adam looked down. He studied the soles of his shoes.

"No..." he whispered back. He looked into his girlfriend's eyes. *"You're crazy!"*

Gabrielle inhaled through her nostrils. She moved her foot. Adam looked down. Gabrielle lifted her left foot. She slipped it out of the pool of icy rain water. She laid the sole of her left foot on the tip of Adam's right sneaker. Adam's lips parted. He took a breath.

"You're standing on top of it..." Gabrielle rasped. Adam looked up. Gabrielle stared back. She blinked. Adam exhaled a long, slow breath. He lifted his palm. Gabrielle looked down. She laid her fingers in her boyfriend's palm. Adam tightened his bicep. Gabrielle laid the sole of her right foot on the tip of Adam's left sneaker. She stood on the balls of her feet and looked into Adam's eyes. She swallowed nervously. *"You're not even wet,"* she gasped. She reached behind Adam. She laid her tennis shoes on top of Case's Cutler.

She laid her fingers on tufts of ice cold leather wrapping Adam's forearm. She slid them towards Adam's wrists. The surface of Adam's jacket was bone dry. Adam's arms receded. His fingers wrapped around Gabrielle's. Adam's fingers were warm and comforting. Gabrielle's fingers were like ice. They were soaking wet. Adam looked up. He noticed his girlfriend was shivering. He studied her hair. It was drenched. Her bangs were stuck to her forehead. The ends of her hair dangled around her shoulders in thick clusters. Adam sighed. He slipped his fingers away from Gabrielle's. He laid the tips of his fingers against his girlfriend's cheek. He gazed into her big, blue eyes.

"Gabrielle..." he sighed. Gabrielle's lips forced themselves into a grin. Adam laid the tips of his fingers against Gabrielle's temple. He slid them along cinnamon colored, soaking wet strands attached to the side of her head. *"That stuff with Ted and them..."* Adam squinted. *"Y-Yesterday... Right?"* A laugh escaped Gabrielle's salmon colored lips. Gabrielle pressed her lips together and nodded. Adam looked down. He laid his fingers on Gabrielle's shoulder and sighed. Gabrielle searched her boyfriend's eyes. She laid her dripping wet fingers against

Adam's cheek.

"What?" she whispered. Adam looked up. Gabrielle lowered her fingers. She laid them against Adam's chest. *"What are you trying to tell me?"* Adam studied his girlfriend's eyes. He exhaled slowly.

"This, uh..." Adam shrugged. *"I mean..."* Adam looked down. He laid the tips of his fingers against the middle of his forehead. Gabrielle grabbed a hold of Adam's wrists. She shook them.

"Adam, what?!" she rasped. *"What is it?!"* Adam looked up. He pressed his lips together.

"It's all my fault." Adam sighed. *"It's all my fault, Gabrielle."*

"Oh, Adam..." Gabrielle groaned. She slung rain water off her fingers. She patted Adam's chest. *"No, sweetie! It's not your fault."* She laid her fingers on Adam's cheek. She gazed into his eyes and shook her head. *"No..."* Adam looked down. He exhaled through his nostrils. He looked at Gabrielle from the tops of his eye sockets.

"Yes it is, Gabrielle. It's ALL my fault." He rolled his eyes and shook his head. *"All of this."* Gabrielle exhaled a heavy breath. She grabbed a hold of thick leather dangling from her boyfriend's shoulders. She stood on her tip toes, closed her eyes, and laid her lips on Adam's. She slipped her top lip between Adam's lips. She gripped Adam's bottom lip with her lips. Adam closed his eyes. He squeezed his lips together. Adam and Gabrielle pried their lips apart. They tilted their heads and pressed their lips together again. Gabrielle tightened her lips, pulled them away, and opened her eyes. So did Adam. Gabrielle gazed into her boyfriend's eyes. She exhaled a heavy breath.

"I forgive you!" she whined. She looked around. She wondered if anyone was watching.

No one was around. Gabrielle's sky blue irises found their way back to her boyfriend. Gabrielle swallowed. She laid the tips of her fingers against her chest. *"I forgive you, Adam..."* she moaned. The outer corners of Gabrielle's eyebrows pointed at the outer corners of her eyes. Gabrielle lifted her fingers. She laid them against Adam's cheek and stared into his bright, golden eyes. *"I missed you so much."* Adam searched Gabrielle's eyes. He smirked.

"I know you did," he whispered. He reached beside his cheek. He curled his fingers around Gabrielle's and tightened them. *"It's okay. I'm right here, now."* He pressed his lips together. *"I'm right here."* Gabrielle leaned forward. She laid her cheek against Adam's chest and closed her eyes.

The building Paloni found was an old church. It was abandoned over fifty years prior. The main building contained a small chapel. The floor was covered with old, rotten boards. So were the walls. They were old, cracked, and caving in. They were the color of cigarette ash. They were soaked with rain water because of the patchy roof. Remnants of pews were stacked along the walls. They were made of rotten, ash colored wood as well. At one time, they were chocolate brown. They were polished to a mirror shine. Now, they were smashed, broken, and littered with graffiti. Case and Tiffany stood in an open doorway. Case looked around. Tiffany dropped her cherry red ballerina flats on a pair of shattered boards. She lifted her left foot and wiggled it. Droplets of freezing cold rain water splattered rotten planks of wood. Tiffany slipped her left foot inside her left shoe. She repeated the process with her right foot and right shoe.

Case stared at the back of a pew. The pew lay against a wall along the other side of the room. The back was littered with fluorescent spray paint like the backs of the other pews. A message was smeared across a row of tangerine colored, Olde English letters. The message was not meaningless, gangster wannabe trash like the rest of the messages. It was religious,

schizophrenic chicken scratch. It was written in red paint, like the message outside. The message read, *"Men multiplied. Daughters were born. Men multiplied. Daughters were born. Men multiplied. Daughters were born."* Tiffany unrolled the bottoms of her baby blue jeans. She draped the cuffs of her jeans around her ankles. She stood and looked across the room. She squinted.

"Hmm..." she moaned. She looked at Case's temple. "Also from Noah's Ark." Case turned his head. He stared into Tiffany's glittery, syrup colored eyes. He peered over the top of Tiffany's head. Captain Ford stood in a dark corner. His shiny, cloud colored eyes glowed like a pair of tiny flash lights. Ford lifted his hand. He greeted Case with a quick wave. Then, he lowered his big, fat arm. Tiffany looked to her right. She spotted Ford. She and Case crept towards the corner. The floor of the old church protested. It groaned under the weight of Tiffany and Case's steps. Case and Tiffany surrounded Captain Ford. Ford motioned towards his feet with his head. Case and Tiffany looked down.

Ford was standing on an old, faded rug. It was from the fifties. The rug was decorated with a navy blue rectangle. Gold patterns shaped like flower pedals were woven along the edges of the rectangle. Amber diamonds made of intricate loops filled gaps between the golden flower pedals. Similar shapes surrounded a rust colored square near the middle of the rug. It was surrounded by a scotch colored border. A rust and scotch colored border surrounded the blue rectangle as well. The rug was soaked with patches of dried mud. The corners curled towards the middle. Case dropped to his knees. His girlfriend copied him. She and Case slipped their fingers under the nearest edge of the rug. They rolled it towards Ford's scuffed up, chestnut colored shoes.

Tiffany gasped. She studied the edges of a square cut into floor boards below the rug.

They were the edges of a door. There was a notch cut into a board beside Case and Tiffany's knees. A bronze border surrounded the notch. Tiffany laid her fingers along the edges of the border. She slid them across. Case looked up. He stared into Ford's smoke colored eyes.

"I told you it would be hidden well." Ford forced his lips into a smirk. He bobbed his head.

"Hmph." He looked up. Adam and Gabrielle wandered through the doorway. Gabrielle stopped. She studied pews stacked along the wall across the room. Adam headed towards Case and the others. He didn't stop to look around. Tiffany curled her fingers inside the groove along the edge of the door in the floor. She pulled the door towards Captain Ford's feet. It groaned like a set of old stairs. A pair of thick, rusty chains pulled tight when Tiffany tilted the door past ninety degrees. Tiffany moved to the adjacent edge from Case. She and Case stared through a square hole in the floor. A row of rotten, ash colored steps descended from the edge of the hole beside Ford's legs. Tiffany rested her fingers along the edge of the door.

Ford looked down. He noticed Tiffany's fingers. It was hard not to. Each one of her fingernails was painted a different color. Her thumbnail was painted teal. The nail of her index finger was orange. The nail of her middle finger was plum. The nail of her ring finger was banana yellow. The nail of Tiffany's pinky was painted lime green. A gold ring dotted with emeralds was wrapped around Tiffany's thumb. Ford studied Tiffany's knuckles. Each one faced a different direction. The knuckle of Tiffany's middle finger was actually turned sideways. It was cracked and misshapen. Tiny, pale scars littered the surface of her skin. Long, thin scars lay along the top of her hand. They fell over the edges of Tiffany's second and third knuckles. They continued down her fingers. Tiffany looked up. She could tell Ford was lost in thought. He was looking at something beside the door. He lifted his head. He glanced towards Tiffany's

dark brown eyes. The outer edges of Tiffany's eyebrows squashed.

"Captain Ford?" she inquired. "What is it? What's the matter?" Ford stared into Tiffany's cold, dark eyes. He felt like he was falling down a well. He looked away. He showed Tiffany his palm and shook his head.

"Nothing. Don't worry about it."

The old church Paloni found was deceiving. On the surface, all that was showing was a tiny, abandoned building. Cars probably sped past it all the time. Under the floor of the chapel, there was an enormous basement. Case knew the man he killed had a large store of bodies somewhere. But, he underestimated the sheer magnitude of it. The basement below the church made most high school football stadiums seem small. The row of stairs leading from the chapel was just the tip of an iceberg. They descended twenty-five yards below ground level. Walking down the stairs was like walking down one of the great pyramids of Egypt. They were wobbly, creaky, and ancient. Entering the old basement Paloni found was a terrifying, tedious ordeal. A wobbly, splintery handrail beside the stairs was the only comfort that kept Case and Tiffany going.

Paloni called a team out to the site before contacting Case. They brought in a generator, a series of extension cords, and a collection of spot lights. It was the only way to get enough light into the enormous basement to see what was down there. What was down there was the most hideous thing Paloni, Captain Ford, Case, Tiffany, Gabrielle, or Adam had ever seen. It was beyond horrific. It was a depiction of pure evil. It was a slap in the face to all of humankind. Tiffany and Case were able to understand what they were dealing with once their heads were through the hole in the chapel floor. Spot lights scattered along a floor of soft dirt at the bottom of the basement stairs turned hideous blackness below the church into a tourist

attraction. It was like exploring an old bat cave.

The first thing Case and Tiffany laid eyes on was a line of femurs. They were ten yards from the stairs. The femurs were supported by tibias. The tibias were arranged like uprights. The femurs were like a long railing. They curved away from the stairs. They straightened out and continued into the basement. The railing rested on top of a base made of ribcages. The railing reached a point three fifths of the way up the stairs. Columns of ribcages curved away from the femurs. They arched towards the middle of the basement. They were stacked all the way to the floor. The fountain of ribcages curved away from the stairs like the railing made of femurs. They formed a curved, truncated pyramid below the railing.

Tiffany and Case didn't say a word to each other. They let their eyes do the talking. They crept down creekly, wobbly steps, mesmerized by the gory sight below the chapel. Skulls were stacked along the railing made of femurs. A skull was attached above each tibia upright. Inverted crosses were carved into the foreheads of the skulls. A deck made of humerus bones was woven below the railing of femurs. It began below the tibias and extended into the basement. One third of the way into the basement, the femurs became radius bones. Ulna bones were used for the last one third of the deck. Four trapezoids made of spinal cords were arranged like walls near the middle of the deck. There was a small, square shaped hole. It was near the middle of the wall of spinal cords facing the stairs. It was like a window. Case figured the hole was about one and a half feet by one and a half feet.

Case and Tiffany reached the bottom of the stairs. They looked over their shoulders. Adam wandered along behind them. He reached the bottom of the stairs, turned, and faced them. Gabrielle came down last. She stood behind Adam, timidly. She laid her fingers along thick leather wrapping Adam's back and peeked over his shoulder. She stared at the mountain of

human bones from the tops of her eye sockets. Spot lights attached to shiny, chrome posts surrounded the base of the sculpture of bones. An aluminum ladder rested against the edge of the railing along the top. The ladder lay against an edge where the railing became perpendicular to the stairs. Paloni stood on a step one third of the way up the ladder. A forensics guy named Gary stood at the bottom of the ladder. Paloni was talking to him over his shoulder.

Gary was a skinny, nerdy looking guy. A pair of glasses with thin, chrome frames and thick lenses lay over his eyes. Gary was so thin, his cheek bones poked through the sides of his face. His skin was milky white. His hair was the color of a coconut husk. The top was long and shaggy. It reached the tips of Gary's ears. The bottom of his hair was shaved pretty short. Gary had eyes like blueberries. He wore a flannel shirt with long sleeves. It was decorated with yellow and black plaid. The yellow fabric was the color of custard. The black fabric was crossed with thin, red lines. Gary wore a pair of navy blue jeans and a pair of black canvas shoes. His shoes had white, vinyl tips. A pair of cornflower blue, latex gloves was strapped around Gary and Paloni's hands. They stopped talking. They looked towards Case, Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle. Paloni licked his lips. He bobbed his head. Case bobbed his head back. He looked at Gary. Case hadn't seen Gary since Adam killed his fiancée. Seeing him brought back bad memories. It brought back some good ones, too. Paloni pointed over Case and Tiffany's heads.

"I need the psychic," he demanded. Case and Tiffany looked over their shoulders. So did Adam. He searched a dark corner beside the base of the stairs.

"Right..." he groaned. He looked over his other shoulder. He looked into his girlfriend's eyes. Gabrielle gazed back. Her eyelids collapsed. They receded. Adam shrugged. "When's the psychic gonna get here?" Gabrielle tilted her head back. She rolled her eyes and exhaled an

impatient sigh.

"Adam!" Paloni yelled. Adam faced forward. Paloni licked his lips. He pointed at a stair below his feet. "Up here. Follow me." Adam exhaled through his nostrils. He wandered away from Gabrielle's fingers. Gabrielle lowered her hands. She pressed her lips together. She crinkled her eyes.

"Mm..." she whined. Adam brushed past Case and Tiffany. He headed towards the ladder. Tiffany cupped her fingers around her lips. She looked at Paloni.

"How long is it?!" she demanded.

Paloni furrowed his brow. "What?!" he called back.

Tiffany pointed at a column of ribcages. "The ship," she explained. She lowered her finger. "The ship made of bones!" Case raised his eyebrows. He leaned towards his girlfriend and cupped his fingers in front of his lips. He aimed his voice towards Tiffany's ear.

"The one filling the room?" he whispered. *"Ya think?"* Case stood up straight and shook his head. Tiffany looked into Paloni's eyes. She raised her palms.

"How long is it?"

Paloni shrugged. "What difference does it make?" Gary cupped his fingers in front of his lips. He aimed his voice towards Paloni.

"What a stupid question!" he whispered. Paloni looked down. He pointed at the top of Gary's head.

"She is not stupid, Gary," he replied. Tiffany folded her arms over her chest. She flattened her eyebrows. She glared at Gary, the forensics guy. Case turned his head. He looked his girlfriend over. He could always tell when someone pissed her off.

"Oh... Tiffany," he remarked. "What the hell?"

Tiffany shook her head. "That guy thinks I'm an idiot." She wandered towards the others. She motioned towards the sculpture of bones. "About... a hundred and fifty yards long?" she requisitioned. Adam stopped at the base of the ladder. He, Gary, and Paloni looked towards Tiffany. Gary squinted. He raised his palms.

"Uh..." Tiffany pointed towards the deck of the skeleton ship. She wiggled her finger from side to side.

"I'm guessing... twenty-five feet wide?" Gary stared at Tiffany in awe. He nodded, slowly.

"And, fifteen feet high," he added. Tiffany stopped. She folded her arms over her chest and looked up. She stared at rows of ribcages stacked together. She swallowed, nervously. She shrugged up her shoulders and shivered. Case wandered up. He stood beside his girlfriend and looked her over. He laid his fingers along the edge of her bicep. He slid them up and down.

"What're you thinking, Tiffany?" he inquired. Tiffany turned her head. She looked into Case's eyes.

"It's Noah's ark," she explained. She returned her eyes to the sculpture of bones. She shuddered at her own words. "It's Noah's ark made out of human bones." Tiffany pointed at the ribcages. Case looked where she was pointing. "Three hundred cubits long..." Tiffany looked at Case. "Do you know what a cubit is?" she inquired. Case shook his head. Tiffany licked her lips. She pointed at her elbow and showed it to Case. "It's supposed to be the length from a person's elbow..." Tiffany lowered her arm. She pointed at her middle finger. "To the tip of their middle finger." Tiffany dropped her arms at her sides. "It's about eighteen inches." Case looked at the top of his eye sockets. He laid the tip of his index finger against the tip of his chin.

"Okay. So, fifty-four hundred inches..."

"Right," Tiffany agreed.

Case licked his lips. "Four hundred fifty feet..." Tiffany nodded. Case pointed at her. He shook his index finger. "A hundred and fifty yards." Tiffany grabbed a hold of Case's forearm. She stared into his eyes and took a breath.

"It's Noah's ark," she gasped. She swallowed nervously. She turned and faced the mountain of human bones. Case did the same. Tiffany studied columns of ribs. She licked her lips. She swirled around and headed towards the stairs. Case's head turned like a top. He stared at shiny, black hair flopping along the back of his girlfriend's head.

"Hey!" he called. "Tiffany?!" Tiffany whirled around. Her arms dangled lazily at her sides. She stared into her boyfriend's eyes and sighed.

"Louis, I... I'm sorry," she replied. She showed Case her palms. "Look, I..." Tiffany looked towards the skeleton ship. She swallowed and faced Case. "I wanna help you guys out with this. But, uh..." Tiffany motioned towards the mountain of bones. Her palm dropped lazily on her thigh. "I mean... there's a limit to how much I can take." Tiffany pointed at the bones. She shook her index finger. "And, I think this is it." Tiffany turned around. She grabbed a hold of the splintery, shaky guard rail leading from the chapel. She wandered around the wobbly railing and hurried up the stairs. Case watched his girlfriend scamper away. He pressed his lips together. He puffed up his cheeks. He looked beside him. Gabrielle's warm, sunny eyes stared back. They wobbled, anxiously. Gabrielle shrugged.

"It's okay, Louis. I'll help you." She rolled her eyes. She exhaled a nervous breath. "As disgusting as this is!" Case smiled. He patted Gabrielle's shoulder and turned around. Paloni and Adam were headed towards the deck. Case cupped his fingers around his lips.

"Did you find that man's fingerprints?!" he hollered. Paloni glanced at Case. He faced

forward and shook his head.

"Yes, dick-head!" he shouted back. "They're all over this stack of bones! Gary just confirmed it." Paloni stopped. He looked into Case's eyes. "You were right, Case."

Case flattened his eyebrows. "Of course I was right!" he shouted back. He faced Gabrielle. He patted her shoulder. Gabrielle faced Case. Case reached inside his jacket. "Take this," he instructed. He held up a small notepad and a tiny, ballpoint pen. Gabrielle held out her palms. She laid them together. Case dropped the notepad and the pen in Gabrielle's hands.

"And, go walking around the ship." Case pointed towards the ribcages. Gabrielle looked where Case pointed. "Do you see the little messages?" he inquired. Gabrielle studied columns of ribs. She crinkled her eyes.

"Um..."

"Look closely," Case instructed. Gabrielle searched crusty arches of bone. Her sky blue irises bounced along the rims of her bottom eyelids. Gabrielle noticed writing. She focused on a gathering of ribs. Nine of them had words written on them. Gabrielle couldn't read them from where she was standing. She was going to have to get closer. She looked at a stack of ribs beside those. Eleven of them had words written on them. Gabrielle looked down. She spotted three ribcages with words below those. Her eyes popped open.

"Oh, my God..." she groaned. She looked into Case's eyes. "I didn't even see all that!" Case smirked. Gabrielle faced the ark made of bones. She swallowed. "This is going to take a while."

Case motioned towards the mountain of calcium sticks with his head. "I'll take this side," he suggested. "You take the other side." He faced Gabrielle. "We'll meet at the stern."

Gabrielle squinted. "The 'stern'?" she requisitioned. "The hell does that supposed to

mean?" Case chuckled. He pointed towards the bone ship.

"The back side of the ship." Case pointed the tips of his fingers at the side of the ship facing them. "This side is called the bow," he explained. He reached inside his jacket. He took out another notepad and a tiny, ballpoint pen. Gabrielle blew a breath through her lips.

"Damn it..." she sighed. Paloni stood inside the area surrounded by spinal cords. It was a large area near the middle of the ark. He looked at Adam through an eighteen inch by eighteen inch opening facing the stairs to the chapel. He motioned beside him with his head.

"In here, Adam," he instructed. "I need to show you something." Adam gazed into Paloni's dark, shiny eyes. He poked his head through the hole in the spinal cords. He looked around.

"Hmm..." he groaned. He breathed through his nostrils. A faint stench tickled his olfactory system. It was the stench of death. Paloni studied Adam's behavior. He folded his arms over his chest, impatiently.

"Adam, come on," he demanded. "Inside." Adam searched rows of bones below Paloni's shiny, black shoes. He lifted his eyebrows.

"Is it safe?" he inquired.

Paloni stomped radius bones with the heel of his shoe. "Solid as a rock," he assured him. He motioned beside his shiny, black shoes with his head. "Come on." Adam stared through Paloni's eyes. He exhaled through his nostrils. Adam poked his foot through the opening in the spinal cords. He laid the sole of his sneaker along the edges of radius bones. His knee felt like it was being sawed off. Adam grunted. He gritted his teeth and looked down. He inhaled a sharp breath through his teeth. Paloni watched Adam, carefully. He smirked. "Everything alright?" he asked. Adam looked up. He pressed his lips together.

"Fine," he replied. He peeled his lips apart. "Everything's just fine." Paloni nodded. He shrugged.

"Well, come on." Adam lifted his foot. It felt like it was stuck full of straight pins. Adam studied the floor. The radius bones were slick and white. They were picked clean. Adam wondered how long it took the man Case killed to do that. Adam exhaled a heavy breath. He laid the sole of his sneaker on the floor. His leg felt like it was made of rubber. Adam gritted his teeth. He shoved his head and his upper body through the hole in the spinal cord room. He laid his other sneaker beside the first. His legs felt like they were being twisted apart. His chest felt like someone was pounding it with a baseball bat. His eyes felt like they were filled with glass. Adam lowered his head. He laid his eyes in his palms and stretched his jaws apart.

"AAAAHHHH!!" he shouted. He gritted his teeth, bent over, and curled his fingers into fists. "EEEEERGGH!!" he shrieked. Gabrielle was beside the room, below the deck. She walked along, studying messages written on ribs. Her boyfriend's shouting made her skin crawl. It made her want to kill Paloni. She looked up. Her head tilted back. Gabrielle stepped away from the base of the ark and studied the border of femurs surrounding the deck. She grasped the pad and pen Case handed her between the first and second fingers of her right hand. She cupped her fingers around her lips and aimed them towards the deck.

"Adam?!" she cried. "What is it?! Are you alright?!" Adam turned. He stood up straight and faced a wall made of spinal cords. He curled his fingers around jagged spikes made of bone. He gritted his teeth, crinkled his eyes, and jiggled his arms.

"RAAAHHHH!! GAH!" Paloni watched Adam, carefully. He folded his fingers in front of his face. He laid them on the tip of his nose.

"Look at that..." he whispered. Adam pinched his eyes shut. He laid his forehead against

chunks of bone sticking out of vertebrae.

"God damn it!" he snarled. He shoved himself away from the wall of spinal cords. He swirled around and raced towards the window. He stared through Paloni's eyes as he scrambled away. He shook his head like a top. "I've gotta get out of this room, Paloni," he grumbled. "I'm sorry." Paloni showed Adam his palm. He bowed his head.

"It's okay, buddy," he replied. "Go ahead." Adam shoved himself through the tiny window. It felt like he was trying to shove a basket full of wet laundry into a shot glass. Paloni lowered his hand and lifted his head. He laid the tip of his index finger along the tips of his lips. He looked around. "Hmm..." he groaned. Gary's head poked through the window. Reflections of ivory colored shafts rolled across the lenses of his glasses.

"What's up?" he demanded. Paloni studied vertebrae covering the walls. He babbled to himself. His head spun like a top. Paloni's eyes focused on the lenses of Gary's glasses. Paloni lifted his index finger. He pointed it between Gary's eyes.

"This room's off limits," he instructed. He shook his pointer finger. "No one comes in here except me, Case, and..." Paloni looked beside Gary. He studied a space between Gary's shoulder and the edge of the window. Paloni narrowed his eyes. He licked his lips. "Where's Tiffany?" he asked. He looked at Gary. "I need Tiffany, Gary. I need her in here, right now." Gary shrugged. He motioned towards the stairs with his head.

"I saw her leave a little while ago," he explained. Paloni squinted. His lips and teeth parted.

"She left?!" he demanded. "W-Where'd she go?" Paloni started towards the window. Gary licked a pair of thin, salmon colored lips stretched along the bottom of his face.

"Sh-She went back upstairs." Gary hopped out of the way. Paloni was coming at him

like a freight train. "Back into the chapel," Gary added. Paloni curled his fingers around fuzzy flannel wrapped around Gary's bicep. He shoved Gary aside.

"Get the fuck outta my way!" he shouted. Gary scrambled away from the window. He swirled around. He stared at shiny, black hair slicked down the back of Paloni's head. He folded his arms over his chest and narrowed his eyes.

"*Dick-head*," Gary muttered under his breath. Paloni stomped to the edge of the deck. He plopped his forearms along femurs surrounding the end of the deck. He looked over the edge. He spotted Case. Case wandered along the side of the ship, taking notes. Paloni cupped his fingers around his lips. He aimed them at shiny, wheat colored hair lying along Case's scalp.

"Case!" he shouted. Case finished writing. He looked up. Paloni threw his hands out at his sides. "Where's your girlfriend at?! We need her up here!" Case shoved his notepad and pen between the first and second fingers of his right hand. He raised his palms.

"I'm sorry, Paloni," he explained. "She couldn't take it. She left."

Paloni shook his fists. "She left?!" he shouted. He stood and turned. He raced towards the bow of the skeleton ship. "We're down here searching this football field stacked full of bones, and she fuckin' leaves?!" Case's eyebrows pointed down the bridge of his nose. He aimed his index finger towards the edge of the railing made of femurs.

"Hey shut the hell up, nut sack!" he fired back. "I'll never forget the first time *you* walked into a crime scene!"

Paloni rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Oh, here we go!" Paloni hopped over the end of the railing. He began scrambling down the ladder lying against the bone boat.

"You remember that, Gary?!" Case demanded. He looked towards the walls made of spinal cords. Gary's head poked over the edge of the railing. Fingers wrapped in cornflower

blue latex curled over the edge. Gary nodded.

"Oh, yeah," he replied. "I remember, alright." Paloni slid to the floor. His slick, black shoes collapsed on mounds of loose dirt. His knees buckled. Paloni laid his palms on his thighs, shoved himself to an upright position, and darted towards Case. He pointed his index finger between Case's eyes.

"Case, we don't have time for this!" he shouted. "I need to know I can count on you guys to be here at a moment's notice!"

"I remember that little girl, Paloni!" Case yelled back. "The look on her face! She was only twelve, remember?!"

Paloni pointed between Case's eyes. "Shut-up, Case!" he screamed.

Case bobbed his head. "And yes, I even remember you!" he added. "I remember you stopped in the doorway. Next thing I know, the whole room smells like your piss!" Gary laid his forehead along the tops of his knuckles. He began cackling. Paloni stopped ten feet from Case. He pointed between Case's warm, blue eyes.

"Case, this isn't the same thing," he fired back. "You know it's not! The stakes are way high on this one! And, I need her here. Now!" Case crinkled his eyes. He motioned towards the stairs.

"The... damn stairs are over there, dipshit!" he yelled. "What the hell are you running over here, for?"

Paloni held out his hand. "Give me your car keys," he demanded. Case folded his arms over his chest. He studied Paloni's eyes, carefully.

"My car keys?" he requisitioned. "What... Why?"

Paloni mashed his teeth together. "Case, give me your damn car keys!" he shouted

through clenched teeth. "I don't wanna have to come back down here for them!" Case shoved his fingers into the front, right pocket of his khakis. He stared into Paloni's eyes and mashed his lips together. He narrowed his eyes.

"Uh..." he groaned. Case ripped his fingers out of his pants pocket. He patted his front, left pocket. "Um..." Paloni's eyes popped open. His head swirled around and faced the stairs. His body followed.

"SHHHIIIT!!" he shouted. Paloni raced towards the other end of the basement. "Damn it! I don't have time for this crap!!"

Case lifted his palms. "Paloni, will you relax?!" he called. He chased Sergeant Paloni to the stairs. "She won't leave! She can't even drive!" Paloni and Case raced to the doorway leading outside. Paloni got there first. His head poked through. His eyes rolled to the tops of his eye sockets. His head tilted back. Paloni exhaled a long, disgusted breath. Case scrambled across creaky, ash colored boards lying along the floor of the chapel. He stopped beside Paloni. He stared between showers of ice cold rain drops. His Cutler was gone. There was nothing beside the chapel except a lake of freezing cold, muddy water. Paloni lifted his palm. He motioned towards the empty spot beside the church.

"She can't drive, huh?!" he yelled, impatiently. Paloni spun on the balls of his feet. He disappeared into the chapel. His head shook with disgust. "*Call her on her cell phone!*" he called from the chapel. "*Tell her we need her ass back here, now!!*" Case plopped his palms on his hips. He studied ripples wandering along the surface of frozen, tar colored water.

"That little bitch..." Case remarked. He grinned. Little creases decorated the outer corners of his eyes. "Good for her!"

Adam stood beside railing made of femurs. He stood between a pair of skulls decorated

with inverted crosses. His arms were folded over his chest. He peeked over the edge. He watched long, silky strands of hair wafting along the top of his girlfriend's head. It was the color of acorns. Adam focused, carefully. He watched groups of soft, golden strands dance along the apples of Gabrielle's cheeks. He imagined moving them. He imagined laying the tips of his fingers along Gabrielle's temple and sweeping strands of hair aside. He could feel his girlfriend's slick, carotene strands gliding across his knuckles. Adam watched carefully. His girlfriend's hair rippled. It looked like a collection of fingers swam through her long, golden locks. Adam heard hummingbirds in his ears. Little hairs along the back of his neck stood on end.

Gabrielle was copying messages scattered along the side of the skeleton ship. She swatted at her hair. She thought she felt something. But, she wasn't sure. She looked up. She gazed into her boyfriend's bright, gold colored eyes. She smiled. She stuffed Case's notepad and pen between the first and second fingers of her right hand. She folded her fingers over her heart and stood on her tip toes. She spread her fingers and pointed them towards Adam. She moved her lips like she was speaking. She mouthed a series of words, *"I love you..."* Adam swallowed, nervously. Life was a bitch. It never stopped. Just when Adam didn't think his life could possibly get any more complicated, it always found a way. Adam gazed into Gabrielle's eyes. He forced a smile. He folded his fingers over his heart. He spread them and motioned towards his girlfriend.

"I love you, too..." he mouthed back.

Case's Cutler skidded along the surface of a quarter inch of rain water. The rain water was pooled along a concrete driveway. The Cutler spun one hundred and eighty degrees. It scooted another ten feet in reverse. The Cutler's tires traced the shape of an "S." The rear tires came close to hitting a walkway beside the driveway. The walkway was three inches thick. It

was also made of concrete. Tiffany lay behind the wheel of the Cutler. She was a wreck. She was always a wreck. She laid her wrist below a black plastic knob. The knob was attached to the end of a shifter behind Case's steering wheel. Tiffany tugged the knob towards the steering wheel. She smacked it towards the ceiling of the Cutler. She battered Case's car keys with the edge of her fist. The keys turned towards her chest. They were dangling from the steering column of the Cutler. Tiffany swiped them from Case's pocket when he wasn't paying attention.

Tiffany collapsed. She spun and faced the front, passenger's seat. The back of her skull plopped beside a bourbon colored, vinyl head rest. It was attached to the top of Case's driver's seat. Tiffany's shoulder blades crashed against a squishy, worn out back rest. White and radish red stripes wrapping her sweater squashed between the back of Case's seat and Tiffany's sweaty, scarred up flesh. Tiffany's arms collapsed against her ribs. They felt like they were stuck full of thumb tacks. Tiffany's fingers refused to work. They were tied in knots. Tiffany's rainbow colored nails dug into her palms. Tiffany couldn't uncurl them. She was used to it. It happened to her sometimes when she got really stressed out.

"Mm....." Tiffany moaned. Her eyelids forced themselves shut. Tiffany felt like passing out. But, she didn't have time. She was too busy. She dragged rows of frozen, clammy toes across crunchy, cola stained carpet glued to the floor of Case's Cutler. Turquoise and plum colored nails were attached to the tops. They were like teal and violet ice chips. Tiffany laid her footsies along a mountain down the middle of Case's front floor board. They wiggled like gelatin dessert. Tiffany jerked her fists off her hips. Apparently, that's where they landed. Tiffany pried her eyelids apart. She spotted her flats. They were lying in the passenger's seat. Tiffany peeled her shoulder blades off the back of the driver's seat. She reached across the seat surface and battered the heels of her shoes. She knew better than to try and grab them. She

couldn't pry her fingers apart.

Tiffany's cherry red ballerina flats tumbled over the edge of the passenger's seat. They landed between Tiffany's insteps. They battered bones along the tops of her feet. The bones in Tiffany's feet tingled like her arms. Tiffany's feet felt like they were stuffed full of thumb tacks, too. It was unbearable. It was nauseating. Tiffany felt like vomiting. Her bowels were tied in knots. Tiffany felt so nervous and stressed out, she felt like someone was pounding her intestines with a sledge hammer. Tiffany stuffed her feet inside her shoes. She laid the edges of her fingers along the top of Case's inner door handle. She laid her shoulder against the door and tugged her fingers towards her hip. Tiffany shoved the door out of her way. Her arm collapsed in a pool of frosty rain water. Tiffany collapsed on top. Rain battered her cheek, her eyelids, and her temple. Tiffany felt freezing cold water dribbling up her nostrils. It burned. Tiffany felt water soaking into the sleeve of her sweater. She knew it was because she was lying on top of it. But, Tiffany couldn't do anything about it. She could barely move.

Tiffany's head wobbled on its own. It hopped off soaking wet sidewalk and wiggled like a wet dog shaking off water. Tiffany's shiny, black hair was drenched. It smacked her cheeks and chin when her head shook. It sort of woke Tiffany up. Tiffany peeled her eyelids apart and looked around. She used her forearm to lift herself. She took a breath. She dragged her feet off Case's floor board. Her ankles collided with soaking wet concrete below the Cutler. Tiffany sighed with hopeless satisfaction.

"Okay, then..." she rasped. Tiffany scrambled to her feet. She dragged herself to the walkway beside the Cutler. She collapsed against a thick, oak door. It was the color of tar. It was shiny and new. Six rectangles were carved into the surface of the door. They were arranged in two columns. The top two rectangles were so short, they were almost squares. The middle

rectangles were the tallest. The size of the bottom rectangles was somewhere in between.

Tiffany's fingers were still tied into a knot. Somehow, they curled themselves around a cold, steel knob. Tiffany's cheek flattened between the middle rectangles carved into the door.

Tiffany felt her breasts pressing against one of the rectangles to her left. She felt her knees buckling. Tiffany exhaled a heavy breath. It made bubbles in a sheet of water flowing down the surface of the door.

Tiffany swallowed, nervously. It made her feel like vomiting. Tiffany slid her arm up the surface of the door. She used her free arm. She didn't dare move the arm attached to the fingers around the knob. That arm was the only thing keeping her upright. Tiffany managed to hammer the edge of her fist against one of the top two rectangles. She hoped someone would answer. She never considered the possibility that no one would answer.

"Oh, shit..." Tiffany mumbled under her breath. *"That'd be about right..."* Tiffany felt like she did the night before when she was with Case. She didn't feel dizzy. She was just having a stress reaction. It started the moment she laid eyes on the mountain of bones below the chapel Paloni found. Tiffany tried to calm down. She tried to ease her breathing. It didn't help much. But, Tiffany didn't know what else to do. She inhaled a deep breath through her nostrils. She exhaled a slow, shaky breath through her lips. Tiffany's ankles were tingling. Her calves began cramping up. She felt the doorknob turning. It pulled away from her fingers. Tiffany flattened her palms against slick rectangles decorating the surface of the door. She collapsed against the door to hold herself up. The door swung open. A corner along the bottom of the door crashed into a rubber stick. It was sticking out of a wall beside the door. It was designed to keep the knob from punching a hole in the wall if the door swung open.

Case's father stood on the other side of the door. He wore a crisp, long sleeve shirt. It

was the color of blueberries. Brown, leather suspenders were strapped over the shoulders of Lee's shirt. They secured a pair of slick, black slacks around his waist. Argyle socks wrapped his shins. They were black. They were decorated with gold and silver diamonds. A pair of leather moccasins wrapped Lee's insteps. Lee let go of the knob as soon as he felt weight against the door. He didn't want to get his nose broken. Lee watched his son's girlfriend stumble through the doorway. She flattened against the door and jiggled. She wrangled her wrists on top of the door knob to keep herself upright. She looked like she was having a seizure. Except, she was conscious. Lee studied Tiffany's behavior. He laid his index finger against the tip of his chin.

"Um..." he groaned. White and radish colored stripes along the back of Tiffany's sweater faced Lee. Tiffany's sweater was soaking wet. It was stuck to her skin like a giant, striped bandage. The rain water soaked into Tiffany's sweater made it transparent. Straps from a radish colored bra showed through the fabric. Lee looked down. Soaking wet denim the color of robin's eggs was pasted to Tiffany's calves and thighs. A pair of squishy, sopping wet ballerina flats were wrapped around her feet. They were the color of cherries. Tiffany peaked over her shoulder. Curly clusters of slick, black hair battered her cheeks. Tiffany gazed into Lee's bright, wise eyes. Her eyelids were barely open. The outer corners of her eyebrows pointed towards the outer corners of her eyes.

"M-Mr. Case..." Tiffany groaned. She felt like she was gagging. She choked tiny droplets of rubbery saliva down her throat. It was the closest thing she had to spit. Lee stomped across slick, maple syrup colored boards lying along the floor of his living room. He wrapped his fingers around Tiffany's biceps. Tiffany relaxed her arms. She slipped away from Lee's door and collapsed in his arms. Lee crinkled his eyes. He was confused by Tiffany's behavior.

"Lee," he replied. Tiffany blew a shaky laugh through a pair of heavy lips. Lee dragged Tiffany away from the door. He laid the tip of his moccasin against the inner corner of the door. He nudged the door towards the front porch. It snuggled into its frame. A long, leather sofa lay along the wall beside the front door. Dark, slick leather was stretched over the surface of the sofa. Bronze buttons pressed the leather into a matrix of puffy, leather mounds. Lee dragged Tiffany to the sofa. He bent over and wrapped Tiffany's arms around his neck. Tiffany tightened her arms a little. She was barely able to hang on. Lee slipped his arm below Tiffany's knees. He lifted her off slick, wood slats covering the living room floor. He laid Tiffany on the sofa. He rested the back of her head against a slick, bumpy arm rest beside the door. Lee reached towards the other end of the couch. He slipped Tiffany's soaking wet shoes off her feet.

"Okay, Tiffany," Lee remarked. There was a thick, oak coffee table beside the sofa. Lee sat on the edge. He dropped Tiffany's flats beside him. He studied Tiffany's face. Her eyes were pinched shut. The bridge of her nose was wrinkled. Her lips quivered like she was cold. Lee folded his arms over his chest. "So, what happened?" Lee demanded. Tiffany hugged her neck with her shoulders. She lifted her fists. She wiggled her tight, tingling fingers helplessly.

"*Mm.....*" she groaned. She shook her head, slowly. Lee leaned forward. He curled his fingers around Tiffany's. They were frozen. They were soaking wet. They were also closed tight. It struck Lee as odd.

"Hmm..." he moaned. He dug below Tiffany's fingers. He tried to wrangle his fingers under hers. Tiffany's fingernails felt like they were glued to her palms. Lee squinted. "What... Grab my hand," he instructed. He studied Tiffany's face. Tiffany turned her head. She peeled her eyelids apart. She looked into Lee's sky blue eyes and swallowed.

"*Emm....*" she grumbled. She swallowed as best she could. "I-I can't." Lee laid the heel

of his palm on top of Tiffany's knuckles. He curled his fingers over hers. He tried to pry them away from her palm. Tiffany's fist felt like it was molded out of steel. It wouldn't budge.

"Why?" Lee demanded. "What happened to you?" Tiffany crinkled her eyes shut. She shrugged up her shoulders and cringed. She felt like she was going to throw up.

"I don't know..." she whined. She cleared her throat, turned her head, and ripped her eyelids apart. She focused on Lee's face. "I'm having like a... panic attack? I guess." Tiffany looked away. She shook her head, violently. "I don't know, Mr. Case... It happens to me sometimes." Tiffany tilted her head back. She inhaled a heavy breath. She exhaled impatiently. "I start... worrying about something. And then, I can't stop. And then, I just start stressing out about it." Lee tugged Tiffany's tight, tense fingers in front of his eyes. He studied them, carefully. He licked his lips.

"I, um..." Lee looked at Tiffany's face. "Who told you this was a panic attack?" he inquired.

Tiffany shook her head, slowly. *"I don't know, Mr. Case..."* she grumbled.

"Lee," Lee replied.

"Lee," Tiffany sighed. "Sorry." Lee shook his head. He dropped Tiffany's fist on top of freezing, soaking wet fabric wrapping her belly. He slid his fingers along the top of Tiffany's thigh. He pressed down. He studied Tiffany's face.

"Does that hurt?" he asked. Tiffany tightened her face. She wrinkled her nose.

"Yeah!" she protested. "My legs are *killing* me!" She swallowed, nervously. "I feel like I've been running a marathon. I just got done... climbing up and down these stairs at this old church with Louis and the kids." Lee grabbed Tiffany's knee. He squeezed it with his thumb and the tips of his fingers. He studied Tiffany's face.

"And, that?" he inquired.

Tiffany gritted her teeth. "Gyah!" she protested. She peeled her eyelids apart. She looked into Lee's eyes. "Mr. Case, stop! Please!" Lee nodded. He let go of Tiffany's knee. He curled his fingers over his lips and thought a moment. Tiffany sighed. She relaxed the back of her skull against the arm rest of the sofa. Lee licked his lips.

"I don't think this is a panic attack," he remarked. He stood up. He patted Tiffany's knee and wandered away. Tiffany managed to open her right eye. She aimed it towards the opposite end of Case's parents' living room.

"Well I mean... I'm just stressing out about stuff," Tiffany explained. "You know?"

"Did stressing out make you feel bad?" Lee called from another room. Tiffany wasn't sure where he was. She couldn't focus her eyes well enough to keep track. *"Or, did feeling bad make you stress out?"* Tiffany pinched her eyes shut. She thought carefully. She couldn't concentrate. She felt like throwing up.

"Well, uh..." she managed to get out. "Well, I don't know." Tiffany heard Lee sitting on the edge of the coffee table. She turned her head and looked up. Lee offered her a glass. The bottom half of the glass was filled with orange liquid. Lee gazed into Tiffany's dark, mysterious eyes.

"Drink this," he instructed. Tiffany furrowed her brow. She reached towards Lee's hands. She laid her knuckles against the side of the glass. She blew a breath through her lips.

"I-I can't even grab it." Lee reached behind Tiffany's head. He pressed his fingers against soaking wet clusters glued to Tiffany's scalp. He lifted Tiffany's head off mounds of leather lying along the arm of the sofa.

"It's okay, sweetie," he replied. "I'll help you. Okay?" Tiffany groaned. Her bowels

protested. They felt like they were being ripped apart. Tiffany laid her arms at her sides. She shoved herself off the surface of the sofa. Lee laid Tiffany's lips against the edge of the glass. He tilted it towards her face. Tiffany took a couple of sips. Wrinkles creased her forehead.

"Meh!" Tiffany protested. Lee lowered the glass. He slipped his fingers off the back of Tiffany's scalp. He laid them between her shoulder blades, instead. He mashed soaking wet fabric against slick, scarred up skin wrapping the small of Tiffany's back. Tiffany studied the glass. A pool of translucent, tangerine colored liquid lay along the bottom of the glass. "What is that stuff?" Tiffany grumbled. Her tar colored irises wandered to the right corners of her eyes. Tiffany studied Lee's face. Lee smiled.

"It's Pediatrin," he explained. "And, I want you to drink it. Okay?" Tiffany faced the glass. She inhaled through her nose. The tangerine colored liquid in the glass smelled like gelatin dessert. That's about how it tasted, too. Tiffany wrinkled her nose.

"Well, it tastes terrible!"

Lee licked his lips. "I don't think you have depression," he explained. He tilted his head. He wrinkled his eyes. "Well I mean, you may have depression." Lee looked into Tiffany's eyes. "But, I don't think that's your biggest problem." He laid the rim of the glass against Tiffany's lips. Tiffany gripped the edge of the glass with her lips. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back. Lee tilted the glass towards Tiffany's nose. "I think you have some sort of electrolyte imbalance." Lee watched the last droplets of Pediatrin disappear into Tiffany's mouth. He eased the glass away from her lips. He laid it beside Tiffany's shiny, red shoes. Tiffany licked her lips. She wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"That stuff is horrible!" she yelled. She relaxed against Lee's palm. She bent her knees. She slid the soles of her feet along slick, leather mounds wrapping the surface of the sofa. She

froze. Tiffany stared into space. Her eyelids drifted away from her eyeballs. Her bowels felt like someone let the air out of them. Her gag reflex switched off. Saliva began pooling below her tongue. Tiffany lifted her eyebrows. She fluttered her eyelids. Lee smirked. He slipped his fingers away from Tiffany's back. He laid his knuckles along the apple of her cheek. He slid them along the tip of Tiffany's cheek.

"Feel better?" he inquired. Tiffany's head turned like a top. Her eyes focused on Lee's.

"Oh, my God!" she shouted. She looked down. Her fingers went slack. They began wiggling away from her palms. Tiffany lifted them. She curled them and squeezed them tight. She straightened them and turned them over. She studied the tops of her fingers. "Mr. Case!" Tiffany squealed.

"Lee," Lee replied. "I want you to call me 'Lee'." Tiffany laid her fingers in her lap. Her thighs were wrapped with soaking wet denim. Tiffany looked into Lee's baby blue eyes. She took a breath.

"Lee," she repeated. She looked towards the other end of the coffee table. She spotted her cherry red flats. She noticed the empty glass beside them. "Lee, what was that stuff?" she demanded. She studied Lee's face. "Huh?" Lee leaned forward. He slipped one of his arms around Tiffany's waist. He slipped his other arm around her shoulders.

"Come here, sweetie," he replied. Tiffany wrapped her arms around Lee's waist. She exhaled a heavy breath. She laid her cheek against Lee's chest and relaxed. She felt her bones unwind. She felt her muscles relax. She felt like sets of dumbbells dropped off her shoulders. It was the most amazing feeling Tiffany ever experienced. She let herself unwind. She collapsed in Lee's arms and went limp. She took a breath.

"So, you mean I have an electrolyte imbalance?" she inquired. Lee nodded. He relaxed

his arms and eased back. Tiffany copied him. She folded her legs like a pretzel and faced Case's dad. Lee gazed into Tiffany's eyes. He folded his arms over his chest and smiled. Tiffany swallowed. Saliva lubricated her throat. "So, what do I do?" she demanded. "Do I need to see a doctor or something?" Lee flicked his wrist. He reached behind him.

"You're getting dehydrated," he explained. "That's what's causing all of your symptoms." Lee handed Tiffany a bottle. Tiffany laid it in her lap. It was a clear, pint sized jug. A light blue label was wrapped around the base of the bottle. A navy blue oval was printed across the front. White letters were printed across the oval. They read "Pediatriin." Photographs of orange slices, cherries, and slices of bananas were printed below that. Tiffany looked up. She licked her lips.

"My symptoms?" she inquired. She swallowed. "Like what?" Tiffany had an idea what "her symptoms" were. But, she wanted to hear them explained, clearly. Lee lifted his eyebrows.

"Like, your unusually high level of nervousness, your paranoia..."

Tiffany wrinkled her eyes. "I'm not paranoid!" she fired back.

Lee grinned. "Your psychosis," he continued. "Your sleep disturbances, your... inability to make friends and connect with other people, difficulty concentrating..."

Tiffany nodded. "You mean, on my math homework?" she asked.

Case's father licked his lips. "Trouble with math?" he inquired. "Like, you read something carefully, and you can't understand it? Like, the words just jump right out of your head?" Tiffany stared into Lee's eyes. She nodded. Lee shrugged. "Oh yeah, that's possible." Lee motioned towards Tiffany's chest. "And apparently, episodes of localized paralysis... accompanied by severe aches and pains." Lee smiled. He laid his palms on his thighs. "Which, you failed to mention, by the way!" Tiffany pressed her lips together. She shrugged. Lee also shrugged. "It's okay. I'm sure you've lived with this condition your whole life. You probably

didn't even know a lot of those things were abnormal."

Tiffany exhaled through her nostrils. "You mean like, my leg and my knee just now?"

Lee shrugged. "Not to mention your fingers, toes, arms, and legs cramping up and becoming paralyzed!" He reached towards the sofa. He wrapped his fingers around Tiffany's knee. He squeezed. Tiffany studied Lee's fingers. She looked up.

"I... I don't know." She lifted her palms. "It doesn't hurt, now." Lee reached across Tiffany's lip. He tapped the bottle he gave her.

"Take this home with you," he instructed. "Drink a little every day. That way you don't get dehydrated." He licked his lips. "I don't know if that's your only problem. But, it's definitely a big part of the problem." Tiffany looked down. She studied the bottle Lee gave her. The first thing she thought about was her father. She wondered if he might have the same problem. Lee stood up. He wandered around the end of the coffee table. He pointed between Tiffany's eyes. "And, call your boyfriend!" he instructed. Tiffany looked up. "He called three times asking if you showed up over here. He said you're not answering your new cell phone. He's worried sick about you." Tiffany smiled. She looked at her lap and nodded.

"Yes, sir."