

**Don't Go Upstairs**

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## Chapter 0: “For Those Who Missed *R.G.K.* ”

First of all, you didn’t miss much. Then again, you missed everything. Oh, well. Why don’t you stop reading *Don’t Go Upstairs* and pick up a copy of *R.G.K.*? Hmm? Or, perhaps you would rather read this cheesy catch up chapter and get to it. Seriously? Are you that conceited? Are you that pathetic? Are you that lazy? You mindless scumbag, I ought to send Gina Keller by your shabby shamle right now. You see? You have no idea what I’m talking about. If I told you I’d bust Tiffany’s father out of the mental institution and hand him your address, you probably wouldn’t get that, either. What if I threatened to send you to the devil himself? Would you have any idea what you are in store for? Of course not. So, read *R.G.K.*, you sorry sack of shit. I wrote it down. Now, why don’t you go read it? Then, you can read *Don’t Go Upstairs*. Those of you who read *R.G.K.* can skip this chapter. However, you might want to check it out anyway. It might refresh your memory. So, here goes.

If you insist on reading *Don’t Go Upstairs* without reading the first of Case’s Cases, you’re taking your sanity into your own hands. I cannot guarantee I can catch you up on every single detail beforehand. Why should I, anyway? You’re lucky you’re getting *this* piece of crap. Also, there are tons of spoilers in here. If you plan on ever reading *R.G.K.*, you should stop reading this... right now. The first question people ask me when I hand them a copy of *R.G.K.* is something along the lines of, “*R.G.K.*? What’s that?” *R.G.K.* stands for “Rube Goldberg Killer.” It also stands for “Regina Gracie Keller.” That clears it all up, right? Everything makes perfect sense now, yeah? Of course it doesn’t! That’s why I’ve never understood why people ask that. Knowing the answer, my response would actually be something like, “If I told you, you would just be more confused.” The title has nothing to do with the story. It also has everything to do with it. Get it? I would be surprised if you did.

First of all, you don't even know what a Rube Goldberg machine is, do you? Have you ever heard of a search engine? How about an encyclopedia? Have you ever heard of that? A dictionary, does that ring a bell? You might do some research on Rube Goldberg machines while you're *not* reading *R.G.K.* But, I suppose I could just tell you. Did you ever watch cartoons when you were a kid? Cartoons are the first things that come to mind when I think about Rube Goldberg machines. I'm talking about a certain cartoon cat and mouse. The cat was blue. The mouse was brown. I can't mention names due to copyright issues. I'll just assume you know the cartoon I'm talking about. Sometimes when the crazy, blue cat got tired of chasing the cute, brown mouse, he would build a better mouse trap. It usually began with something like a piece of toast. The toast flew out of a toaster. It smacked the edge of a knife. The knife was dangling from the top of a ladder. The knife nudged an iron. The iron slid down the ladder. It landed on a fireplace blower. The fireplace blower blew a windmill. The windmill wound a string. The string was attached to a stove knob. So, the burner turned on.

A bunch of other stuff follows. Finally, a cuckoo bird rolled out a bowling ball. The idea was that the bowling ball would squash the cute, little, brown mouse. Of course, the mouse usually nigger rigged something at the last second. This resulted in the bowling ball smashing the cat's head into his body. But, the principle is there. This is what I'm talking about when I say something is a "Rube Goldberg machine." So, now everything makes sense, right? You can start reading *Don't Go Upstairs* now, yeah? Let me guess, you need to know more. My God, why don't you just read *R.G.K.* It would probably be quicker. The last time I read it, it took all of six hours. You could just do that. Then, you could skip this stupid chapter. And, I could write the damn book. So, stop reading this, will you? No? Alright, I'll tell you more.

So, the book starts out by introducing Detective Case. Yes, his name is a play on words.

It's like a tire dealer named "Will" or a typist named "Presley." His full name is Louis B. Case. I intentionally did not reveal his middle name. Why? It's a joke. Get it? It's a JOKE. It's one of those funny things I do when I tell stories. It gives Detective Case some stature. It's just a JOKE. It's kind of a mystery, really. It's funny, right? He's a detective named "Case" whose middle name is a mystery. Anyway, Detective Case is described as a bright, intelligent young man. Supposedly, he has put away fifteen high profile murderers during a five year career. Apparently, he's done all this by the age of twenty-six. Yes, that part is a little thin. In fact, the majority of *R.G.K.* is pretty thin. But hey, it was my first book. And, everything in it is totally plausible if you think about it hard enough. Well, that's aside from the spells, curses, and Case's multiple trips to Hell and back. Wait a minute, what?

So, Case is working on a case. He's looking into the death of a college girl. Her face has been smashed in by a croquet mallet. Do you see the Rube Goldberg machine, now? Hmm? Case is working for Captain Ford. Ford is described as fat, sloppy, overweight, messy, chunky, disorganized, and grumpy. Also, he's a mean, old fart, and he thinks he knows everything. Well, that's every mean, old fart. While he's on the clock, Case's peers include Sergeant Paloni, Gary, Paul, Detective Crosier, Detective Vick, and Terrell. Sergeant Paloni is a funny name. Don't ask me how I came up with *that* one. "Paloni" is just something I throw into stories sometimes when I need a name. There were probably three or four other things named Paloni in *R.G.K.* It's possible there will be more in *Don't Go Upstairs*. That is, if I ever get to it. Gary is the department's forensics guy. I suppose every team of investigators has to have a nerdy, forensics guy, right? Paul is some mean, fat bastard that runs a gate at the police station parking garage. Don't ask me why the police station has a gate in front of the parking garage. Don't ask me why it has a parking garage for *that* matter. It just does.

Crosier and Vick were only necessary to cover an R.G.K. signature written in blood on a door. Case needs them to cover it real quick before it begins to rain. Terrell is another forensics guy. He shows up one time, two-thirds of the way through the story. Why? Nobody knows, really. I once theorized (I'm a mathematician, mind you) that the character Terrell had a purpose when I originally wrote *R.G.K.* I posit that his purpose has been lost to time. Perhaps, his purpose was deleted during the sixth re-write of the book. It may have been necessary. Maybe it made some other scenario work. Who's to say, really? Off the clock, Case frequents Richie's. It's a crummy bar on the outskirts of the city. It's run by some foreign guy. His name is Richie, oddly enough. He talks like Al Pacino as a Cuban. The first time Case goes into Richie's he has a short conversation with a young lady. He figures her for a hooker and shrugs her off.

Later, Case happens upon Captain Ford in the alley behind Richie's. Ford orders him to stay off his latest case. Case sees it as a simple warning. He shrugs it off, lights a cigarette, and drives to the police station. He's intoxicated, mind you. He's a detective driving down the freeway, intoxicated. Yes, the story is quite thin. Case arrives at the parking garage. There, he exchanges a few ugly comments with Paul. Then, he slides a card through a keypad, drives through, and parks. That's right. He uses a card to get in. I wish I could say I was smoking pot when I wrote this stuff. Unfortunately, I wasn't. I'm just that strange. Case goes inside. There, he finds Gary poring over evidence from Francine's murder. Did I mention her name? The girl with the hole in her face is named "Francine."

So, Case goes through some of the evidence. Then, he tells Gary that he's a douche. He does that throughout the story. All in all, Gary pretty much *is* a douche. Next, Case goes home to his fiancée. That would be... Gina Keller. Yes, she is the killer. Her name is also a play on words. Notice, her last name sounds like "killer." My mother came up with that. Case doesn't

even know his fiancée's first name is short for "Regina." It's a good way into the story before he figures that out. Indeed, it's very thin. Moving along, Case reveals to Gina that he'll be going to school with her the following morning. He plans to question some of the students about Francine. Gina is a college student just like Case's latest victim. Do you see the guilt written all over her? Hmm? On his way upstairs, Gina reminds Case they have a wedding rehearsal the day after tomorrow. Case wakes up with a hangover the next morning. He pushes on, though. He goes to the college with Gina. There, he meets Gina's friend, Tiffany. She's crazy. When Case tells her Francine is dead, she says something like "You mean that skank bitch?" She tells Case, "I caught her fucking my boyfriend in the bathroom down the hall." Yeah, Tiffany is awesome. She's my idealized girlfriend. She's also one of my favorite characters. Just don't call her "Tiff." That pisses her off. What Case doesn't know is I'll be hooking him and Tiffany up by the end of the book. Say what? Read on.

Case tells Tiffany he'd like to talk to her and her ex-boyfriend when he gets a chance. Then, he stammers towards the registrar's office. He goes there to get a copy of Francine's schedule. Near the registrar's office, Case notices a janitor's door. It stands out because there is a pile of marbles in front of it. Case creeps towards the door and tries the knob. It's unlocked. However, Case can't open the door. That's because the janitor's body is on the other side. Case draws his gun and kicks the door open. The janitor's body pitches forward. And, a bunch of bowling balls go rolling around. Case notices a barstool cemented to the floor. The urge to vomit strikes him. Did I mention he has a hangover? I believe he has already vomited twice at this point. That's odd because he hasn't had anything to eat. Yes, it's quite thin. Oh, well. Case whirls around to take off. Unfortunately, he slips on the marbles. He's forgotten all about them. I imagine *you* did too, didn't you? Be honest. So, Case lurches to one side. There are

two lunch tables along the wall. He smashes into the first one. The first one smashes into the second one. The second one smashes into a ladder. The ladder has a bucket of paint on top. The bucket of paint strikes the end of a shelf. A trophy rests at the other end. The trophy falls to the floor. Case's forehead is in between. Get it? It's a Rube Goldberg machine.

Case goes directly to Hell. He does not pass a certain space, whose name is the opposite of stop. He does not collect two hundred smackers. He goes to Hell and gets tortured. Satan shows up. He is described as being three times the size of a human. He has the head of a goat. It bleeds constantly, from everywhere. Why? Why *not*? Who are you to question these things? So, Case gets tortured. Then, he snaps. He hops up and starts kicking everybody's asses. Next, he finds that his wounds have healed. Soon, the wounds of those whose asses he's kicked have healed. This property allows for eternal suffering. Get it? It's Hell, people. How else could suffering occur, eternally? Case meets the mysterious janitor in Hell. The janitor turns out to be a retired physician. His name is Dr. Lebowitz. He reveals that he was caught stealing pharmaceuticals.

Case awakens in a hospital. His trip to Hell was all a dream. Actually, it wasn't. But, it was. Um, it also wasn't. Whatever. Captain Ford, Sergeant Paloni, Gary, Gina, and Tiffany are there. Ford scolds Case for doing his job. Then, he tells him he's on leave. He instructs him to stop drinking. Then, he reveals that the letters "R.G.K." were found in the janitor's closet. They were written in blood on the back of the door. Ford doesn't believe the janitor's death is related to Francine's. After all, the mysterious letters were not found at her apartment. Ford informs Case that Paloni is in charge of the R.G.K. case. Then, he, Paloni, and Gary leave. Gina waves good-bye. Tiffany sees Captain Ford off with a salute. Yep, Tiffany's quite splendid. Once the others have left, Gina hands Case Francine's schedule. You see how guilty she is? She already

had it. Of course, Case never thinks of that.

Case, Gina, and Tiffany meet Chad Harris at a diner. Chad is Tiffany's ex-boyfriend. He's the one Tiffany caught in the restroom, having sex with Francine. They exchange some kind words. Actually, they are lucky not to get thrown out of the restaurant. Case lights a smoke. Tiffany snags it from him, immediately. She puts it out on her tongue. Ha, ha. Tiffany threatens to shove the next cigarette up Case's ass. Hee, hee. Case shrugs that off and asks some questions. He gets nowhere. To Gina's dismay, Case orders a beer. Remember, Captain Ford just ordered Case to stop drinking. Case orders a beer, anyway. Then, he excuses himself for a cigarette. Tiffany thanks him. Outside, Case imagines himself chatting with Tiffany. He does that. He has conversations with imaginary people. I based Detective Case on myself. Talking to himself is an unfortunate side effect, you see. Um... I've said too much. Case and imaginary Tiffany come to the conclusion that the R.G.K. killer has no motive. Case plans to check out the janitor scene after leaving the diner. He also reveals that he believes Francine's murder and the janitor's are related. He'd be right.

So, Chad takes a hike; Case and Gina drive Tiffany to her friend's house; and Gina drives herself to her and Case's apartment. Case bids her farewell. Then, he leaves for the college. He intends to check out the janitor scene. Gina is not so sure about the whole thing. She makes Case take her cell phone. She also makes him promise not to do any drinking. Case crosses his fingers and agrees. Then, he drives to Richie's and downs a couple of screwdrivers. The mysterious woman is sitting at the bar when Case gets there. She makes a couple of comments and leaves. Detective Case gets lit and heads for the college. Luckily, it's still open. Case arrives at the janitor's closet. He finds no marbles or bowling balls. A nearby camera lens has black spray paint over it. The stool is still cemented to the floor. Case hops onto the seat and



looks at the ceiling. He finds a circle of nail holes behind the door. Then, he realizes he's left Gina's cell phone at Richie's.

Detective Case gets back to Richie's. Richie informs him that Gina has already called. Case orders another screwdriver and calls her back. She scolds him. Case promises not to do any more drinking. He hangs up and finishes his screwdriver, plus one more. Next, he drives to Francine's. He finds another R.G.K. signature, written in blood. It was hiding behind a door below the kitchen sink. In the living room, Case finds more nail holes in the ceiling. They're above a recliner where Francine was found. Case decides to go to the police station and re-check the evidence. This time, his card won't let him into the parking garage. Paul talks a little shit about it. So, Case empties a clip at him from his nine. Paul is behind bullet resistant glass. He ducks anyway. Then, he pops up and points at a camera. So, Case pops a couple of caps in the camera. He backs away and parks beside the police station. He skips up a fire escape and enters a door on the roof. He descends a staircase and finds Paloni's desk. He snags the Francine evidence and skedaddles.

When Case returns to the roof, he bumps into Captain Ford. Ford recovers the evidence from Case. He also takes Case's badge and gun. So, Case does what any person would do. He strolls down a lonely trail in the woods. Case and his buddies used to frequent the path when he was younger. At a certain spot, Case picks a nice, fat psilocybin mushroom. He's not alone. He puts his hand in his coat pocket. Captain Ford took his piece, remember. He orders two kids out of the shadows. The kids are Adam and Gabrielle. Case finds out they're fourteen. He figures they're in the woods in the middle of the night to do the same thing he is. So, he invites them to join him. Case takes them to an old shack he and his friends built. It's still intact. Next, Case, Adam, and Gabrielle eat some shrooms. Case has a terrifying, introspective nightmare. He goes

to Hell again. Satan comes out and greets him. Then, Case begins fighting off the dead. It's quite grisly.

There's a change of scenery. Case happens upon Dr. Lebowitz. That's the janitor, in case you've forgotten. Lebowitz helps Case come to an important decision. It's discussed later. Case wakes up. It's late in the afternoon. Adam and Gabrielle have been waiting for him to get up all day. Case realizes he's missed his wedding rehearsal with Gina. The battery on her cell phone went dead in the night. Case, Adam, and Gabrielle leave. Adam and Gabrielle ask Case to drive them to Tiffany's magic shop. Case is intrigued. As it turns out, Adam and Gabrielle hang out with Gina's friend, Tiffany all the time. It's a small world. Case follows Adam and Gabrielle's directions. At the "magic shop," he finds Tiffany in a white robe. A pentagram is dangling from her neck. She's a white witch, he finds out. She tells Case that Gina has called her several times to bitch about him missing the rehearsal. She hands Case a cordless phone, and Case calls Gina back. He gets an earful. He tells Gina he got fired. She tells him to get home. Case hangs up.

A pizza boy shows up. Case shrugs, pays the guy, and wanders into the magic shop. Adam runs up and snags the pizza. Case hands Tiffany her phone and has a look around. The shop is filled with magical daggers, herbs, and books on spells. The most interesting thing Case happens upon is a display case. It's filled with little, white dolls. Tiffany calls them "Berends." Adam and Gabrielle are sitting on barstools at the counter. They're stuffing their faces with pizza. Case asks for a stool. Tiffany goes through a black curtain behind the front counter. She returns with a stool for Case. She also has a list with five names. They're names of Francine's friends. Case asked Tiffany and Chad for lists the night before. Tiffany offers to pay Detective Case back for the pizza. Case waves her off. Tiffany finds out Case lost his job the night before.

She also finds out about the mushrooms. She disappears behind the curtain.

Case finishes a slice of pizza. He notices a stack of business cards on Tiffany's counter. Then, he remembers his revelation. It came to him in his dream the night before. Case snags a card and slithers through the curtain behind the counter. Tiffany is sitting on a barstool, shrouded in candlelight. She is startled. Case approaches her. She starts freaking out. By this time, Case has found out that Gabrielle and Adam are victims of child abuse. He figures Tiffany for the same. He eases across the dimly lit room, trying to calm Tiffany down. Case utters the right combination of words, and Tiffany melts in his arms. Case eases her to her seat. Tiffany is curious. She's not used to people being nice to her.

Tiffany shows Case a row of scars across the top of her chest. It's a row of twenty cigarette burns. Her father put them there. Case's suspicions are confirmed. Also, that's why she put the cigarette out on her tongue the night before. She tells Case she can't stand it when people smoke around her. Case changes the subject by asking for some business cards. Tiffany takes him to an office across the shop. She makes him up a batch. Case has her type "Louis B. Case, Private Detective." Then, he asks Tiffany for something to help him sleep. She's an herbalist, after all. Case says he's going to quit drinking. But, he has trouble sleeping without alcohol. Tiffany gives him a couple of teabags of her best sleeping potion.

Case says his good-byes and heads for the parking lot. As he's fumbling with his keys, he makes a decision. An image of Tiffany's cigarette scars flashes in his mind. Case decides to quit smoking. He does it for Tiffany. He tosses his smokes into a trash can beside his car. Then, he heads to the apartment. Gina greets Case with an icy set of fingers around his throat. Case furrows his brow. Then, he straightens her out. He explains that he's going to quit drinking. He also tells Gina about the mushrooms and his private detective idea. Gina calms

down. Case downs a cup of Tiffany's sleeping potion and crashes. The next morning, there's no coffee. Case could care less. He doesn't drink it. On the other hand, Gina is in an uproar. Case has a chuckle about it. Then, he offers to run to the store and get some. Gina is most grateful.

Case hops in the car. As he's waiting for the car to warm up, he tries to think of anyone he's met that has the initials "R.G.K." He thinks about Gina. Her middle name is Gracie. To him, that makes her initials "G.G.K." It's close, but it's no match. Little does Case know, Gina is short for Regina. He'll know soon enough. Gina gets her coffee. Then, Case and Gina return to the college. Case snags a revolver, first. It's taped to the bottom of a table in the kitchen. Then, they roll. At the school, Case is approached by Chad. Chad hands him a list of Francine's friends. Between that and Tiffany's list, Detective Case has seven friends to question. They are Sandy Falk, Danielle Wallace, Cindy Schumacher, Greg Sanders, Tye Walker, Craig Phillis, and Armando Sanchez.

Tiffany shows up while Chad is hanging around. An argument ensues. This time, Case ends it. Chad goes on his merry little way. Then, Case and Tiffany chat for a minute. Tiffany wanders inside. Case watches her until the door closes behind her. Then, he races to the car to have an argument with himself. He's confused. He's having feelings for Tiffany. His imaginary companion asks him why he quit smoking. Case punches the steering wheel a few times. He shakes it off and goes inside. He spots Paloni and Gary in the registrar's office. He hides behind the door. Once Paloni and Gary are out of sight, Case goes in. He gets class schedules for Francine's seven friends. Then, he questions them. He gets nowhere. He ends up at a diner for lunch. A greeter asks Case how many people are in his party. Tiffany pops up behind him and answers, "Two." Case swallows hard. He sits down to lunch with Tiffany.

Tiffany tells Case she was supposed to meet Gina for lunch. But, she never showed. So,

she's walked to the diner. Tiffany and Case have a happy little meal together. Towards the end, Case asks Tiffany about hexes. He tells her he believes to be hexed. He believes he's had a string of bad luck over the past couple of days. Tiffany explains about curses. But, she can't say that Case has been hexed, necessarily. Case gets a call on Gina's cell phone. It's Sergeant Paloni. He asks Case to meet him at another murder scene. Case offers to drive Tiffany back to school. She agrees. She does not agree when Case tries to pay for their meal. She insists on paying him back for the pizza he bought the night before. She is... quite adamant about it. It draws stares from the entire restaurant. Case swallows his pride and agrees. He takes Tiffany to school. Then, he heads to another murder scene. There, he meets up with Paloni, Gary, Vick, and Crozier. Case tells Paloni about the R.G.K. signature he found at Francine's. Paloni has no idea about it. He makes a note.

Case and Paloni examine the victim. She is a girl named Betsy. She's tied to a computer chair. There's a pick axe sticking out of her head. Case and Paloni find a silver necklace in her mouth. An emblem attached to it reminds Case of Tiffany. It's a pentagram. Detective Case drives to Tiffany's magic shop. He's greeted by Gabrielle and Adam. Tiffany comes out in her white robe. She has her pentagram necklace on. Case confronts her with the necklace from Betsy's mouth. Tiffany holds her emblem next to it. The emblem from Betsy's necklace is inverted. Tiffany explains that it is a symbol of Satanism, the Goat of Lust. This reminds Case of his dreams. He recalls going to Hell and meeting the devil. He remembers he has the face of a goat. He explains all this to Tiffany. She furrows her brow. She's all like, "You mean... in a dream?" And, Case is like, "No, I'm telling you! It really happened." Tiffany rolls her eyes and walks away.

The pizza boy from the other night shows up. Before Tiffany can stop him, Case pays

him. He hands the pizza to Adam and Gabrielle. Tiffany gets very upset. She doesn't say anything. She just stomps into her office and slams the door. Case feels bad. He was just kidding around. He didn't see that coming. Anyway, he sits down and has some pizza with the kids. That's when Gabrielle mentions talking to Regina earlier. It catches Case off guard. He repeats the name, "Regina?" Gabrielle slugs him in the shoulder. "You didn't know your fiancée's full name?" she asks. Case is stunned. "Regina Gracie Keller," he mumbles. "R.G.K." He tells the kids to tell Tiffany he's sorry. Then, he goes to Gina's old apartment. She's still moving out.

You think it's almost over, right? We've got a way to go, my friend. Are you ready to read the damn thing, yet? Hmm? You're killing me. So, Case breaks into Gina's apartment. He finds a stack of drawings on the kitchen counter. They're drawings of the Rube Goldberg machines Gina's used on the victims. Everything makes sense, except the motive. Case still doesn't get the motive. He knows the inverted pentagram from Betsy's mouth is a clue. But, Gina's motive eludes him. Case turns around and gets knocked out. He goes to Hell again. This time, Satan tortures him. It's excruciating. Satan brings out Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle. He tortures them as well. Case is tied in place and forced to watch.

Case gets free. The four of them drop through a hole in the floor and escape. They wander to the end of a long tunnel. There, Satan makes one last appearance. Case awakens on a dining room table. He's tied to the top, facing the ceiling. Gina holds a drawing in front of his eyes. It's another Rube Goldberg machine. This one drops a bunch of bricks on a person tied to the top of a table. Gina takes the drawing away. She reveals a net filled with bricks. It's nailed to the ceiling. Case looks at Gina. She's wearing a robe. It reminds him of Tiffany's. However, Gina's is black. And, there is an inverted pentagram dangling from her neck. Case

asks Gina why she's doing all this. She tells him to keep quiet. Then, she attempts to kill him. The machine doesn't work. They never do the first time. Gina tinkers with it and tries again. It screws up a second time.

Case finds out what Gina's up to. Gina tells him she's sacrificing people to Satan. She claims it's a trade for magical powers. Tiffany appears at the door. She picks up a stapler off the floor. She hurls it at Gina. Tiffany and Gina get into a scuffle. Case gets loose and recovers his revolver. It's lying on the floor. He instructs Tiffany to step aside. Then, he turns the gun on his fiancée. Gina snags a couple of knuckle dusters from a shelf behind her. They're strange looking. They consist of a bar held in the hand. A thin sheet of metal is attached to the end. It curls across the knuckles. Wavy dagger blades stick out of the sheet of metal. Tiffany warns Case about them. "I don't know what her intentions are with those," she tells him. Gina crosses her arms like she's in a coffin. Tiffany clutches her stomach and falls to her knees. She begins to vomit straight pins. Gina charges her fiancé. Case fires at her. He's sure he's hit her. However, she charges past him and out the door.

Case is dumbfounded. He drops next to Tiffany, unsure what to do. Tiffany tells him not to worry. He needs to stop his fiancée. Reluctantly, Detective Case leaves Tiffany behind. Tiffany snags Gina's cell phone and calls for an ambulance. Case chases Gina. Gina grins at him. Then, she starts killing people. She kills a bunch of hookers, some couples at an outdoor diner, a jogger on a bridge, and anyone else that gets in her way. Case empties his revolver at her. He even bums a second pistol from someone at the outdoor diner. He looks like a hitman. Case chases Gina down a bridge, through a bar, and onto a rooftop. Gina continues to slash people to pieces with her knuckle dusters.

She hides in a shadow at the edge of the roof. Case empties a clip at her. He can hear

Gina laughing. But, he can't find her. Gina soars from the shadows and lands on top of him. Case tries to subdue her. Gina gets away and jumps to the street. Case and his fiancée are several stories up. Yet, Gina lands on her feet and looks up at him. She gets away, and Case is left to explain things. While running from Case, Gina kills twenty-two people. Captain Ford is furious. Case blows him off. He walks back to Gina's old apartment. Paloni and Gary walk with him. Case explains about firing two pistols at Gina. He also explains her motive. Paloni and Gary are puzzled. Case tells them he's quit drinking. When Case, Paloni, and Gary get to Gina's apartment, they find no bullet holes in the walls. So, Case must have hit Gina when he fired at her. Paloni and Gary are confused. However, they try to understand everything Case has told them.

Sergeant Paloni tells Detective Case that Tiffany is at a hospital. Case drives to the hospital to check on her. There, he finds out a little more about incantations. Tiffany tells him about the pins. She explains that Gina cast some kind of spell. This materialized the pins in her stomach. She's okay, though. The hospital is keeping her overnight for observation. Tiffany sniffs Detective Case's jacket. Then, she kisses him. Case is confused. Tiffany tells him, "You quit smoking." Case tells her he quit smoking because of her. She kisses him again. She says, "You quit smoking because of *me*? I think I love you." Case is good with that. He kisses her back. Then, he says he's leaving for Richie's. He explains he's figured out about the mysterious woman he keeps seeing there. Tiffany instructs him to drop by the magic shop and check on the kids, afterwards. She says to ask Gabrielle about a particular tree. It's in a yard behind the shop. She says to draw Gina's picture on it. Then, she says to draw an "X" over her heart and drive a nail into it. She says Gina will feel it if she's hexing Case. The idea is to draw her out. Case takes Gina's cell phone from a shelf next to the door. Then, he leaves.



Detective Case goes to Richie's. He explains to Richie that he's quit drinking. Richie is not pleased. But, he gets over it. Case asks him to serve him a tonic with orange juice. Then, he waits for the woman to show up. Case acts like he's wasted. He kicks his stool out from under him and falls to the floor. The woman kneels and tries to help him. Case drags her to the floor. Her teeth smash against the tiles. She screams, "Do something!" Captain Ford enters the bar. He's all, "Jesus, Case! You drunk bastard!" And, Case is all like, "No, fat-ass! *You're* drunk... with power." He tells the captain he's quit drinking. He shows him his hands. They're all shaky. Captain Ford helps his spy off the floor and pays her off. Then, she slips out the door. Richie asks Captain Ford if he's going to buy anything. Ford refuses. So, Richie tells him to hit the road.

Case decides to shoot a little pool with his buddy, Richie. A couple of games in, Adam and Gabrielle call Case on Gina's cell. Case has forgotten all about them. Case says good night to Richie. Then, he drives to the magic shop. Gabrielle throws her arms around him as soon as she sees him. He looks terrible. His body is undergoing alcohol withdrawal. Adam and Gabrielle take him to the tree Tiffany described. Gabrielle hands Case a marker. She helps him draw a figure of Gina. They put an "X" over her heart. Adam hands Case a hammer and a nail. Case knocks the nail into the "X" a little. Then, he bends over and throws up. Gabrielle and Adam help him to the grass.

Gabrielle tells Case about her father. She's worried. She says he'll be coming by soon to pick her up. She says he abuses her. Case is skeptical. So, she shows him a knife wound in her side. She claims he put it there. Case asks why. She says he did it "because he could." Case recovers and heads into the shop. Adam and Gabrielle tell him there's a bedroom inside. It's opposite the office. Case goes to the bedroom. He finds a bed, a wall filled with books, and a

bathroom with a shower. Case borrows Tiffany's facilities. He crashes on a sofa across from the bed. He awakens the next morning to the sound of Gabrielle's voice. It's humming through the wall. Case slithers out of the bedroom. Then, he sneaks up behind Gabrielle. She's on the phone. Case can tell it's her father. He's coming by to pick her up.

Case snags the phone from Gabrielle and has a chat with her father. Case acts like a hard-ass. He pretends he's sick of Gabrielle always coming by the shop and bothering him. Gabrielle is confused. But, she plays along. Her father shows up. Case and Gabrielle greet him at the door. Adam hides behind the counter. Gabrielle's father reaches for her arm. But, Gabrielle pulls away. She tells him she's not going home with him. Case looks her father in the eyes. He asks him if he's going to do anything about that. Gabrielle's father knocks her to the floor. So, Case kicks his ass. About the time Gabrielle's father is picking up his teeth, Tiffany shows up. Adam and Gabrielle are watching behind the counter. Tiffany pulls Case away and tells him to stop. Case goes outside and sits on a parking pylon. Gabrielle's father collapses on the floor. Tiffany has Adam call an ambulance. He does so. Then, he and Gabrielle join Case on the parking pylon.

The ambulance shows up. Next, Case takes everyone to breakfast. There, Tiffany tells Case that she plans to adopt Gabrielle. Adam is having problems at home as well. His mother is a drunk. She'd rather be partying than taking care of him. Adam asks if Tiffany will do the same for him. Tiffany plops her forehead on the table. Case tells Adam he'll talk to his mother, later. He'll try to straighten her out. Tiffany begins to disclose some of her abuse. It's worse than Case could have imagined. She tells Case and the kids about a time when her father caught her smoking. He burned all her hair off. Later, Case and Tiffany are alone at the magic shop. Tiffany discloses that the magic shop is actually her home. Case has surmised this already.

Tiffany tells Case more about her childhood. Her father not only abused her. He molested her as well. She tells him he used to rape her. She says sometimes he would bring his friends. Case is appalled. He's not sure if he can handle all that. Who would be?

Tiffany shows Case more scars. There's one that looks like a slice of Swiss cheese on her belly. Tiffany tells him it's from an iron. She shows him one that looks like a hook. It's from a coat hanger. Her father heated it and pressed it against her flesh. There are others. Gabrielle interrupts them. Tiffany seals her lips. By now, it's dinner time. Gabrielle is up for pizza. How unusual. Tiffany tells Gabrielle and Adam to order a pizza. Then, she takes Case outside to look at his drawing. They check it out for a bit. Then, Case spots a silhouette on a fence surrounding the property. It's Gina. There's a shorter silhouette standing next to her. It turns out to be Gabrielle. Gina drops to the ground and approaches Case and Tiffany. She drags Gabrielle along. She demands that Case trade himself for Gabrielle. Adam comes out with a Berend. A Berend is one of those white dolls from earlier, in case you've forgotten.

Adam douses the doll in lighter fluid. Then, he lights it on fire. Gina turns to black ash and blows away in the wind. The next thing you know, the entire police department is in Tiffany's parking lot. Captain Ford approaches Detective Case. He hands Case his badge. Case hands it back. Then, he, Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle head for Case's car. The pizza boy bumps into them along the way. They snag their pizza and leave. They go to Case's apartment and get some of his things. Then, Case and Tiffany have sex, of course. Case awakens the next morning in Tiffany's bed, holding her in his arms. Case hops in the shower. He emerges from the bedroom. Gabrielle and Adam are at the counter. Gabrielle is rubbing her stomach. Case takes them to get donuts. Then, they return. They find Tiffany dancing around in a robe and slippers. For once, she's in a good mood. As they're eating breakfast, Gina's cell phone rings.

Case answers it. It's Sergeant Paloni. He rattles off something in Case's ear. Case tells him he'll be right there and hangs up. He turns to Adam. Adam asks, "What?" Case tells him, "It's your mother. She's dead."

So that's it, more or less. That's the "condensed" version of *R.G.K.* I suppose I might mention something about Adam and Gabrielle sneaking a smoke when Tiffany's not around. In fact, they had Case buy them a pack of cigarettes when they got donuts. Also, Adam claims to be a skeptic when it comes to the occult. Of course, then he kills Case's fiancée with a bit of thaumaturgy. He quickly explains that away, though. He claims it must have been spontaneous human combustion. Tiffany tells him when they're at breakfast that she's going to put a curse on him. Then, he'll believe. Right before Paloni calls Case to tell him Adam's mother is dead, Tiffany tells Adam she's just put a curse on him. Adam rolls his eyes. Then, the phone call comes in. Alright, then. Can I tell my next story now? Jesus Christ.

## Chapter 1: “A Fight”

It was raining. The patchy field where the football team practiced was a muddy mess. The Willow Tree Frogs didn't have much in the way of grounds people. Then again, they *were* a junior high team. They had the worst record in their district, too. Funding was pretty slim. Gabrielle Griffin didn't care about the football field or the Tree Frogs. She was furious. She'd had enough. She was going to kill the bitch. “*Brittany...*” she grumbled. She stomped across the muddy field. Tiny, tan droplets dotted her black, canvas shoes. Modest tears of muck splattered her dark blue jeans. Gabrielle balled her little hands into fists. Her eyebrows fell in the middle. Her sapphire irises glided from side to side. There were no witnesses. Gabrielle's long, brown hair was drenched. It swayed at the sides of her face in bursts of wandering wind. A row of bangs was stuck to her forehead. A black hoodie and a tie dye blouse clung to her squishy, wet flesh.

Gabrielle caught a glimpse of Brittany through misty suds of grey. Rain was falling in sheets. But, she could see her just the same. Gabrielle could *detect* her presence. It was like a sixth sense. In the jagged air, there was a sudden eruption. It was as if the boundaries of space and time began to crack. “*Brittany...*” Gabrielle mumbled. It was the sound of her hideous cackling. Brittany threw a hand on her hip, flipped her head back, and bellowed with ferocious laughter. Brittany was also sporting a pair of dark blue jeans. Hers were vibrant and fresh. Gabrielle's were dingy and faded. They had huge holes in both knees. Brittany had on a thick, wool jacket. It was decorated with brown and black plaid. Her hair was cherry red. It hung in coils around her grinning face. A pair of white gloves covered her hands. A pair of tan boots covered her feet. She held a black umbrella above her head. The umbrella's wooden hook curled around her fleecy knuckles.

Brittany's boyfriend, Ted stood next to her. He was a foot taller. He also held an umbrella. His was decorated with alternating bands of red and white. Ted wore a black, wool trench coat, a red shirt with black stripes, and a pair of black jeans. He wore a black beanie on his head. Curls of brown hair dangled from the bottom. His sneakers didn't match. One was red. One was black. Gabrielle glared at them. She threw her hood over her head. Ted raised his palm.

"What are you, retarded?" he asked. "You just barely noticed it was raining?" Brittany giggled. It was like nails on a chalkboard. Gabrielle scrunched up her face and wrinkled her nose.

"Shove it!"

Brittany grinned and narrowed her eyes. "You're such a freak, Gabrielle. Why don't you hop in the tub and slash your wrists, you fucking geek?" Ted chuckled. His laughter consisted of a series of high pitched squeals. It was highly irritating. Gabrielle was not amused. She pointed at Brittany.

"I'm going to *kill* you, you slut!" Brittany looked at Ted. She let out a shaky sigh.

*"I guess she really wants some,"* she whispered. Ted closed his eyes and shrugged. Brittany faced Gabrielle. She tossed her umbrella aside. "Bring it, ho!" She threw up a pair of shaky fists. "I'll beat your little scrawny ass!" Gabrielle picked up the pace. Her eyes filled with fury. She stomped through the mud. She gritted her teeth. Her zeal got the better of her. A few steps away, her feet slid to the sides. She lost her footing and fell on her butt. Mud splashed all over her clothes. Brittany and Ted howled with laughter. Ted bent over and hugged his belly. Gabrielle looked up at them. Her eyes became big and sad. Her bottom lip quivered.

"How could you do that to me?" Gabrielle demanded. Hot tears dribbled down her

cheeks. “How could you *kiss* him like that? In front of the whole class...” Gabrielle narrowed her eyes. She cupped her hand over her mouth.

“Oh, Gabby,” Brittany replied. “He doesn’t even like you.”

Gabrielle dropped her hands at her sides. “He’s my boyfriend, you idiot!”

Ted grinned and shook his head. “That’s not what he told me.”

Gabrielle scoffed. “And, she’s with *you*! You two are ass-holes!”

Brittany smirked. “Well, I didn’t kiss him. He kissed *me*.” Gabrielle looked up and narrowed her eyes. She smashed her fists into the muck and shot to her feet. She snagged Brittany around the waist and took her to the ground. Brittany shrieked. They landed in an ice cold pool of sandy soup. Brittany fell on her back. Gabrielle landed on top of her. She straddled her midsection and glared at her. Brittany’s eyes were like saucers. She had irises like emeralds. Her face was filled with terror. Gabrielle snagged a fistful of her curly, crimson locks.

“You sure about that?” She twisted Brittany’s head from side to side. Then, she got in her face. “Huh?!” Ted got Gabrielle in a chokehold. He dragged her off his girlfriend.

“Oh you wanna fight, huh?” Ted squeezed Gabrielle’s throat between his bicep and forearm. “Well it’s two against one, bitch.” Gabrielle gritted her teeth. She slid her fingers through Ted’s arm and pulled with all her might. It didn’t budge. What’s worse, Brittany had hopped to her feet. She slung mud from the tips of her white gloves and approached. A sadistic grin twisted across her face. Blue and orange lightning swirled across the sky behind her.

“I’ve been waiting for this for a long time.” Gabrielle squeezed out a sharp whimper. She gripped Ted’s arm and tensed up. She knew what was coming. She’d felt it many times. Brittany smashed her fist into Gabrielle’s stomach. Gabrielle went limp. She fought to catch her

breath. Brittany reeled back. She sank another knuckle sandwich into Gabrielle's soft belly. She wound up and socked her again. Gabrielle shrieked. She felt Ted's arm go slack. Brittany grabbed a hold of Gabrielle's chin and lifted her head. She glared into her glassy, blue eyes. "Bet you wish you'd stayed inside, huh?"

"Beat her ass," Ted told her. "Knock some teeth out." Gabrielle slid to the side. She flipped back her foot and caught Ted in the balls. Ted's arm flew away from Gabrielle's throat. He bent over and clenched his nuts with both hands. "Aye!" he squealed. Gabrielle whirled around and punched Ted in the nose. Then, she kicked his legs out from under him. Ted fell to the ground and crumpled into a ball. Gabrielle faced Brittany. Brittany's emerald eyes were tentative and frightened.

"Oh, crap!" Brittany barked. She threw her hands in front of her, palms out. Gabrielle threw up her dukes.

"You want Adam, Brittany? You're gonna have to fight me for him." She stalked towards her. With each step, there was a splash of cold mud.

"Whoa, wait a minute!" Brittany begged. She backed away. "Um... stop!" Gabrielle lunged towards her. She landed on top of her. They landed in the middle of a giant mud splash. Gabrielle began slinging fists across Brittany's squishy, little face. Brittany cried out in agony. She threw her hands in front of her face. Gabrielle smacked them away and continued to strike. She laid twenty-five blows against her teeth, her cheeks, and her eyes. Then, she twisted her fingers through Brittany's cherry red coils. Gabrielle tightened her little fingers and began smashing Brittany's head into the ground. Blood was gushing from Brittany's mouth, nose, and eye sockets. It began slinging around in the rain. "Like that, Brittany?!" Gabrielle shouted. "Was it worth it?"



Ted snagged a hold of Gabrielle's hoodie. He jerked her off his girlfriend and whirled her around. Then, he slung a brass knuckle duster across Gabrielle's left eye. Gabrielle cowered to the side and clutched her eye. She looked up just in time to catch Ted's wrist. He had already taken another swing. Gabrielle jerked Ted's fist in the direction it was headed. Then, she opposed Ted's momentum by slinging his arm the other direction. She'd seen Case do that once before... to her father. Gabrielle tossed Ted across the muddy field. He landed on top of his girlfriend. It was perfect timing. She had just sat up and dropped her face in her palms. Ted landed on her arms. So, his fall jabbed her fingers into her eyes. Brittany shrieked. Ted and Brittany landed in a heap. They were surrounded by a splash of cold mud.

Gabrielle winced. She cupped her hand over her eye. Her eye socket was already swollen. Warm blood leaked down her face. It began seeping through her cold fingers. She moaned.

"Gyad!" Ted screamed. He clutched the back of his skull and looked up at Gabrielle. He pointed at her. "I'm gonna get you, you little shit-head!" Gabrielle slid her fingers away from her eye. She held out her hand and let the rain wash her blood away. A crimson waterfall drizzled from her fingertips.

"Go ahead, *Ted*," Gabrielle replied. "I'll kick your ass, too." She slid her fingers across her lips. Then, she held up her fists. Ted hopped to his feet and approached her. Blood gushed out of his nostrils and dribbled down his chin. He showed her his palms.

"Gabrielle, I'm gonna beat the crap out of you!" Gabrielle lurched at him. He backed away. "Ah!" he shrieked. He pointed at her. "Stop it!" Gabrielle lurched at him again. Ted backed away, again. He dashed towards her and snagged her around the waist. Gabrielle reached up the loose sleeves of his trench coat. She clawed at his arms. Ted screamed with fury.

He snagged a fistful of Gabrielle's long, brown hair. It was squishy and wet. He smashed Gabrielle's head into the ground. Gabrielle rolled onto her back. She pinched her eyes shut and clutched her temple. It was pounding. Gabrielle felt a shadow upon her. She opened her eyes and looked up. Ted dropped to his knees. He slid a pair of ice cold fingers around Gabrielle's throat and squeezed. Gabrielle tried to scream. But, nothing came out. Brittany popped up next to her boyfriend. Her face was puffy, bloody, and flush.

"Move, Ted," she instructed. Ted looked up. He let go of Gabrielle's throat and hopped out of the way. Gabrielle rolled onto her side and clutched her neck. She began to cough. Brittany began kicking her in the ribs. Gabrielle rolled away. She whimpered after each kick. She stopped rolling, curled into a ball, and caught her breath. Then, she snagged a hold of Brittany's ankle and jerked her to the sloppy ground. She slid on top of her and glared into her face.

"Oh, you want some more, huh?" Gabrielle smacked at Brittany's rosy cheeks. Ted ran up. He clocked Gabrielle in the back of the head with his knuckle duster. Gabrielle fell forward and clutched her aching skull. She hopped up and whirled around. Ted took another swing. Gabrielle snagged a hold of his wrist and jerked him to the ground. As he fell, Gabrielle stuck out her leg. Ted's belly landed on her shin. It knocked the wind out of him. His knuckle duster fell to the ground. Ted landed on his butt. A cold splash of mud surrounded him. Brittany rolled onto her stomach. She spotted her boyfriend's knuckle duster. She grabbed it and pushed herself to her feet. She whirled around and faced Gabrielle. Gabrielle threw up her dukes. Brittany slid the brass knuckles down her gloved fingers.

"Come on, Brittany!" Gabrielle yelled. "Let's see what you got." Brittany dashed towards her. She faked Gabrielle out with a left. Gabrielle dodged to Brittany's right. Brittany

caught her in the eye with the brass knuckles. Gabrielle ducked away and clutched her eye. It was the same place Ted clocked her. Gabrielle looked up. She held up her fists. The left side of her face pounded with her heartbeat. Brittany took another swing with the duster. Gabrielle backed away. Brittany took another swing. Gabrielle tackled her. They fell to the cold, sloppy soil. They landed on their sides, facing each other. Gabrielle grabbed fistfuls of Brittany's hair. Brittany snagged a hold of Gabrielle's hoodie. Gabrielle began slamming Brittany's head into the ground. Brittany thrashed Gabrielle about.

She buried the knuckle duster in Gabrielle's ribs. They still hurt from being kicked. Gabrielle groaned. She let go of Brittany's hair, lay on her back, and clutched her aching side. Brittany climbed on top of her. She straddled her stomach and laughed. Gabrielle looked into her emerald eyes. A jagged bolt of violet raced across the sky behind her. Brittany's face was covered with an evil smirk. She reeled back and smashed the knuckle duster into Gabrielle's ribs. Gabrielle squashed her arms against her sides. She held her hands out and tried to predict the next attack. Brittany giggled. She popped Gabrielle in her left breast. Gabrielle shrieked. She held her forearm over her breast and waited. Brittany faked her out with a swing at her face. Gabrielle covered her face, immediately. Brittany jabbed her in the ribs three more times.

Gabrielle clutched her side and wheezed. She breathed heavily. Her eyebrows fell at the sides. Brittany stared into her big, blue irises. Sadistic images filled her thoughts. She reeled back for another strike. But, there was a sound in the distance. Brittany stopped and looked up. Gabrielle flipped her head back and looked. Willow Junior High's security staff was stomping towards them. There were four officers, total. They wore blue uniforms with badges. Principal Callaway followed. He was a large, balding man. Tufts of black hair rested at the sides of his head. He wore a white shirt with long sleeves. A pair of brown suspenders dangled down the

sides of his chest. They supported an enormous pair of black slacks. It was funny watching the five of them walk through torrents of ice cold rain. Their nice, neat clothes were getting soaked.

“Awe, crap,” Brittany mumbled. She shoved herself to her feet and backed away. Ted had recovered. He was sitting in the mud, staring at the approaching cavalry. Gabrielle tried to sit up. She felt blood leaking down her face. It felt hot in the cold rain. Gabrielle’s ribs ached. Her eye thumped with each heartbeat. She couldn’t even get her head off the ground. She went limp and closed her eyes. The river falling from the sky soothed her battered body. Gabrielle relaxed and let the feeling come. The officers stopped. Principle Callaway wandered in front of them and stopped. He threw his hands on his hips. He pointed out the two officers on his right.

“Take them to the office.” He motioned towards Ted and Brittany. The officers Callaway’s right sprang to life. They approached Ted and Brittany. Ted smashed his fists into the mud. Then, he dragged himself to his feet.

“Man, this sucks,” he grumbled.

“Watch it!” Callaway warned. He pointed at him. Ted bobbed his head at him.

“Bite me, Callaway.”

“How’d you like to go to the detention center?” Principal Callaway asked. Ted grinned. A row of pearly teeth appeared from behind his lips. The two officers on Callaway’s right escorted Ted and Brittany away. Principal Callaway turned his attention to Gabrielle. She lay in a heap on the muddy football field. Callaway knelt beside her and nudged her shoulder. Gabrielle tensed up and tightened her face. “Gabrielle?”

Gabrielle peeled her eyes open. “Um... yes?” She blinked her big, blue eyes. “Y-Yes, Principal Callaway?”

Callaway shook his head. “What did I tell you, Ms. Griffin?”

Gabrielle looked away. “Awe, please don’t suspend me, Mr. Callaway.” She looked into his eyes. They were dark and wise. “Tiffany will kill me.” One of the officers snickered. Callaway turned around and looked at him. The officer cleared his throat. Callaway returned his attention to Gabrielle. Her eyelids fluttered closed.

“Get the nurse,” Principal Callaway instructed. The officer who’d snickered snagged a walkie talkie. It was attached to a black belt around his waist. He held the walkie to his lips and pressed a button. There was a single beep.

“Get Nurse Brown out here, please.” There was a snowy response.

*“She’s on her way.”* The officer returned the walkie talkie to his belt. Principal Callaway slid a fat palm around Gabrielle’s little fingers. They were freezing.

“Stay with me, Gabrielle,” he remarked. He rested his other palm against the side of her face. His hand felt warm and snuggly. Gabrielle groaned.

Adam scribbled furiously on a piece of notebook paper. The pencil in his fingers could hardly keep up. His brain felt like it might explode. His eyes pored across a drawing. Its graphite lines were dark and distinct. The end of Adam’s pencil was down to a stump. Soon, it would stop coloring. Then, Adam would have to get up and sharpen his pencil. He knew it was coming. It pissed him off. Sure enough, the end of his pencil stopped writing. It began sliding across the page with an unsatisfying squeal. Adam lifted his head and slapped his pencil on his desk. He stared at his drawing. It was a likeness of Gabrielle. The page was nearly filled with black. Adam had pressed down hard and consistently throughout the picture. It was all smeary and dotted with black fingerprints. Adam had drawn his girlfriend on the lower half of the page. He had filled the upper half with dark clouds and pouring rain.

He looked to his right. He was angry about what Brittany had done. It filled him with

fury. She hurt his feelings. But, Adam didn't care about that. It hurt Gabrielle's feelings as well. It tore her apart. Adam could tell. He turned his head a little further. Hanna was sitting next to him. She had the previous class with Adam and Gabrielle. She had seen the whole thing. She finished writing. Then, she looked at Adam and smiled. Adam bobbed his head at her and faced forward. They were in their math class. Everyone was sitting quietly, working out problems. Adam was too. It's just that his were not math related.

He narrowed his eyes. Something didn't... feel right. The air felt thick. Adam's skin felt clammy. He looked down. He was wearing his leather jacket. Adam shrugged. He slid the jacket off and whirled it around the back of his seat. A rush of cool air washed across his arms and chest. He still didn't feel right, though. Something was... off. He held up his hands. They were all shaky. He knew something was wrong. He looked at his drawing. He focused on the eyes. Gabrielle's bright, blue eyes flashed through his mind. He closed his eyes and pictured them. They were like sparkling gems. Adam's head jerked to the left. He stared out a window. Mostly, he could just see grey. But, he was able to make something else out. It was something on the football field. It was... a gathering. Adam leaned towards a row of windows on the wall and squinted. He counted out two guards, Principal Callaway, and Nurse Brown. They were gathered around someone on the ground. Adam felt his stomach churn.

*"Gabrielle?"* he whispered.

"Mr. Rhodes?" Ms. Phillips inquired. Adam whirled around and faced her. She was sitting at the front of the room behind her desk. She lowered a pair of spectacles and stared at Adam above the rims. "Don't you have something you need to be doing?"

Adam bobbed his head at her. "Sorry, Ms. Phillips." She narrowed her eyes. Then, she slid her glasses off her face. She had big, blue eyes just like Gabrielle. Only, Ms. Phillips' were

darker. She pointed at Adam with her spectacles. They were shiny and clean with thick, black frames.

“What are you...?” She looked around. A couple of kids were staring at her. She glared at them. They locked their eyes on their math and began writing. Ms. Phillips looked at Adam. He grinned, showing his teeth. Ms. Phillips slid away from her desk and approached him. Adam’s smile faded. He stared at the drawing on his desk. Ms. Phillips arrived beside him and looked down. Adam looked up. Ms. Phillips looked into his eyes. Her gaze wandered to his drawing. She picked it up and looked it over. She looked at Adam. Adam looked away and rubbed the back of his neck. Ms. Phillips bent over. Adam faced her. “*Is this Gabrielle?*” Ms. Phillips whispered. Adam nodded. Ms. Phillips looked at his drawing. Then, she returned it to his desk. “*It’s good. I like it.*” She narrowed her eyes. She pointed at a gathering of black tears. They ran down Gabrielle’s face in long, black streaks. They were gushing out of her left eye. Adam had drawn them around her left eye only.

“*Is she crying?*” Ms. Phillips asked.

Adam looked his picture over. “Um, I don’t know.”

## Chapter 2: “Gina’s Cellular”

Principal Callaway’s office was rather sloppy. Callaway sat at his desk. The majority of the wall behind him was a giant window. Tan mini blinds split it into tiny rows. It was raining cats and dogs outside. Water poured down the window. It was difficult to make out anything beyond that. There was just grey dribbling from the sky. Once in a while, a flash of white lightning filled the spaces between the blinds. The walls of the office were covered with vertical strips of veneer. The wall stuck out a foot from the window. Principal Callaway had books piled on the window sill. At one point in time, they were probably stacked in a neat row. The carpet was a pale shade of blue. Four filing cabinets sat in the corner to the right of the window. They were arranged in a row down the wall. Each one was turned slightly. They were painted grey. The paint was chipped and the sides were dented.

Callaway’s desk was made of polished oak. At the front, left corner stood a wooden nameplate. “Herbert Callaway” was spelled across the nameplate in white letters. A desk lamp with a long, fluorescent bulb stood at the front, right corner. Two wire mesh baskets sat at the edge of the desk. They stood next to each other between the nameplate and the lamp. There was a black rotary telephone next to those. There was also a stapler and a cup filled with pencils and pens. Papers, folders, two three ring binders, three spiral notebooks, two pencils, and different colored paper clips were scattered across the top of the desk. Among the clutter was a keyboard, a mouse with no mouse pad, and a huge CRT monitor. There were also two wadded up paper sacks. They were takeout bags from Gabrielle’s favorite fast food restaurant, Burger Land.

Principal Callaway sat in a rolling chair. It was old and worn out. It was made of thick, heavy metal. Two red, faded, squishy cushions rested against the seat and the back. Bits of yellow foam poked out in places. The chair creaked every time Callaway moved. It sounded



like an old telephone ringing. Gabrielle sat across from Callaway. She sat in the only other chair in the room. It was a wooden chair with four legs. It had a black cushion on the seat. Like Callaway's, yellow foam was poking out in places. Gabrielle's black hoodie was strewn across the back. She sat with her knees together, hugging herself. Gabrielle had warmed up, considerably. But, she was still shivering.

Her left eye was swollen halfway closed. It was surrounded by a black circle. Two cuts resided at the edge. Gabrielle stared at a trash can. It was on the floor at the left side of Callaway's desk. It was made of wire mesh like the bins on his desk. More wadded takeout bags were stacked up in the trash can. They were all from Burger Land. Gabrielle counted twelve paper cups from Burger Land as well. They were all the large size. Principal Callaway sat with his elbows on his desk. He held a folder in front of his face. He was reading through Gabrielle's file. It was quite extensive. Mostly, it consisted of so-so grades, a few incidents of missed classes, and pictures of bruises. Callaway had examined Gabrielle's file several times. One picture in particular always caught his eye. It was a picture of a knife wound in Gabrielle's side. It had been taken when it was fresh. Gabrielle still hadn't told the school how it got there.

There were also counts of misconduct. These included talking back to teachers, difficulty getting along with other students, and now, three fights. There were many more. Callaway dropped Gabrielle's file on his desk. He folded his arms on top.

"So Gabrielle, you gonna tell me who put this big gash in your side, here?" Gabrielle dragged the trash can towards her. She laid her right foot on her left knee. She flicked her laces loose. Her black canvas shoes were caked with mud. Gabrielle slipped off her shoe and set it on the edge of Callaway's desk. Callaway narrowed his eyes. "Uh... Gabrielle?" Gabrielle rolled off her sock. She wrung it out over the trash can. A bucket full of muddy water dribbled down

the wadded takeout bags. Gabrielle curled her toes. Then, she wrestled her soggy sock back into place.

“What do you care?” Gabrielle asked. She looked at Principal Callaway and switched feet. She looked down and flicked her other laces loose.

“I care about *all* my students,” Callaway told her.

“Really?” Gabrielle inquired. She slipped off her left shoe. She dropped it on top of the other. “Every single one?” Gabrielle rolled off her sock, held it over the trash can, and wrung it out. Callaway sighed.

“I, uh... I try to.” Gabrielle slid her finger across her toenails. They were painted pink like her fingernails. The polish was chipped from the fight. Gabrielle looked up.

“Thank you.” She wrestled her sock back into place. She leaned back and dropped her hands over her eyes. She slid her fingers down her face. She was covered with mud. It was splattered across her tie dye shirt. It swirled across her dark blue jeans. Streaks of it lay along strands of her long, brown hair. It was dried on her flesh. Gabrielle dropped her left foot next to the other. She dropped her hands in her lap. “I need a shower.”

“You need a spanking,” Callaway told her.

Gabrielle looked into his dark, brown eyes. “Great. Can I have three of those, instead?”

Principal Callaway held up his first and second fingers. “Two days.”

Gabrielle plopped her forehead in her palms. “Tiffany’s going to kill me.”

“Who’s that?” Callaway asked. He held up the folder. He pointed at the picture of Gabrielle’s gash. “Is she the one that did this to you?” Gabrielle looked up and shook her head. Principal Callaway dropped the folder on his desk and looked it over. He looked up. “So, you want to tell me what happened with Brittany and Ted?”

Gabrielle took a breath. “Not really.” She rubbed her left eye. She turned away and scrunched up her face. She sucked air through her teeth. Callaway pointed at her.

“You want some ice for that?” Gabrielle picked up a bag of ice and pressed it against her eye. It was sitting next to her leg.

“Stupid slut,” Gabrielle mumbled.

“Gabrielle...”

“And, that... ass-hole, Ted.”

“Gabrielle!” Principal Callaway shouted. Gabrielle looked up. She only had one big, blue eye to offer. Callaway threw his hands out at his sides. “Language?” Gabrielle looked away and showed him her palm. Callaway folded his arms on top of her file. “We need to call someone to come pick you up.” Gabrielle nodded. A tear dribbled out of her right eye. Principal Callaway took the telephone receiver off its cradle. He held it to his ear and retrieved the unit. “Who do you want to call?” Gabrielle pinched her eyes shut and sobbed.

Case stood five foot, ten. He had a pair of wise, blue eyes and a head of thick, brown hair. It was parted to the right and slicked to the side. Case wore a wool jacket with red and white plaid, a black t-shirt with grey stripes, and a pair of dark blue jeans. He had on a pair of red canvas shoes. Case was distracted. He was supposed to be listening to his client, Linda Nelms. She was telling Case about her husband, Jerry. Jerry had been missing for the past two months. Linda wanted to hire Case to find him. Case stood across from Mrs. Nelms. He nodded from time to time as she spoke. He had the appearance of concern and ambition. In actuality, his eyes were wandering across Linda’s kitchen.

Case was parading as a private detective. But, he was growing tired of it. It bored him to tears. Plus, he wasn’t in high demand. Work was growing scarce. It tore him apart. Case was a

natural detective. He lived for puzzles and mysteries. Everywhere he looked, he saw one. Sometimes, it was like an obsession. Case's thoughts constantly wandered. At the moment, he was admiring Mrs. Nelms' beauty. He wasn't thinking about making sweet love to her. He wasn't picturing her naked. He was wondering if anyone *else* had made sweet love to her or pictured her naked before Jerry disappeared. Case wondered if anyone was knocking boots with her, now. Case smiled. In his mind, he shook his head. Mrs. Nelms was an absolute sweetheart. She would never cheat on her husband.

That was Case's suspicion. He wondered if he could confirm it. He assured her panicked dialog with another wise nod. Then, he looked her over. She wore a pair of high heels with peep toes. Case found peep toed shoes silly. Why bother? *"It's about APPEARING normal,"* he thought. *"In actuality, the appearance of normalcy is an illusion. It allows the wearer to obtain a certain look. That's the point of peep toes. The intention of protecting a person's tootsies has been abandoned."* It was kind of cute. It was ignorant, though. Tiffany didn't wear stuff like that. Case figured she looked at it the way he did. That made sense. His eyes rose. Mrs. Nelms wore no hose, just bare legs. She wore a wrap dress. It was white with black checks. The waist band was red. It matched her peep toed shoes. Her hair was golden brown. It was puffy but not too puffy. Her eyes were bright blue. They were filled with passion and innocence. Jerry was likely the only lover Linda ever had.

Case looked away and nodded. It made him kind of sad. He hoped Jerry was okay. He had no idea, though. He narrowed his eyes. He was staring at a grey grain of sand. It sat atop the Nelms' dining table. It bugged him, immediately. Why was it grey? Where had he seen grey sand before? Case merely glanced at it. Then, he returned his attention to Mrs. Nelms. He acknowledged her continued speech with a pair of concerned eyes. He was thinking about the

pale grain of sand on her table, though. It reminded him of... something. Case noticed a spot of light on the white, tile floor. It was coming from a window behind him. Rain was pouring from the sky. So, the spot of light was dim. But, it was there just the same. Case wondered if rain had filled the streets and pooled to the sidewalk. Case bobbed his head and smirked. That was it. The pale grain of sand reminded him of sidewalk.

Linda stopped talking. Her eyebrows fell to the sides, and she looked away. Case wasn't completely zoning out. He was listening to most of what Mrs. Nelms was saying. She had just said something about the last time she saw Jerry. He'd gone to work and never come back.

"You're husband works in construction, yeah?" Case asked. Mrs. Nelms looked up and sniffled. "Oh, hey... Are you okay?" Case dropped his hand on her shoulder. "Do you... wanna sit down?" Linda pinched her eyes shut and looked at the floor. Case snagged a chair from the dining table and slid it around. "Here," he told her. "Let's sit down and relax." Linda nodded without looking up. She sat in the chair. Case pulled up a chair, sat down, and faced her. "I'm so sorry, Mrs. Nelms." Linda laid her hand on the table. It was trembling. Case slid his fingers on top of hers. "Don't worry. We're going to find him, okay?" She looked up. Tears rolled down her cheeks. Case looked at the grain of sand and narrowed his eyes. "So... he works in construction, right?"

Linda wiped tears from her eyes. "Yeah..." she moaned. She cleared her throat. "Um, didn't I mention that?" Case looked at her and shook his head. Linda looked at her lap and nodded. She slid her hand away. Then, she buried her eyes in her palms. Case had a feeling he knew where Jerry was, now. Unfortunately, it wasn't a place his wife was going to like. Case hoped he was wrong. A piece of classical music began to play. It was Case's ring tone. He slipped his hand inside his jacket. He revealed a black cell phone. He stared at the front. Below

a tiny window was a pink heart with black letters. The letters spelled “Gina.” Case studied the window. It read “Willow Junior High.” Below that was a phone number. Mrs. Nelms looked up and sniffled. “What is it?”

Case pointed at her. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Nelms. It’s the school. I have to take this.”

Mrs. Nelms narrowed her eyes. “You have kids?”

Case scrunched up his face. “Mm... Kind of.” He flipped open Gina’s old phone, held it to his ear, and stood up. “Hello?” he inquired. He left the kitchen and rested his back against a wall.

“*Louis...*” Gabrielle moaned. Case pushed his mouth to the side of his face. “*I, uh... I got suspended.*” Case took the phone away from his ear and looked at the screen. There was a clock at the top. It read “10:23.” Case put the phone to his ear.

“Fighting again?”

Gabrielle let out a shaky sigh. “*I’m so sorry, man. I, uh... I need you to come get me.*”

Case pinched the bridge of his nose. “Tiffany’s going to kill you.” Case flipped his phone closed and returned to the kitchen. Linda looked over her shoulder. Case pressed his lips together.

“I have to go, Mrs. Nelms. It’s... kind of an emergency.”

She nodded. “I, uh...” She cleared her throat and wiped her eyes. “I assume you want an advance?”

Case gritted his teeth. “Preferably.” Linda wrote him a check, and Case skedaddled. He dropped by his bank and deposited the check, immediately. He’d heard horror stories from private detectives before. It wasn’t unusual for clients to put stop payments on checks after a case was finished. After he deposited the check, Case drove to Willow Junior High. Luckily,

both places were only a few blocks away.

There was a knock at Principal Callaway's door. Callaway looked at the door from his desk.

"Come on in." The door opened a crack and Case's head popped in. Gabrielle collapsed in her chair and exhaled. Case pointed at her.

"You are in *big* trouble, young lady."

"Shut-up," Gabrielle replied. Case smirked. He entered the office, rested his back against the door, and eased the door shut. He twirled a black umbrella around his finger by the hook.

"Mr. Callaway," he remarked.

"Case," he replied. Detective Case was a familiar face. Gabrielle practically lived in the office. Callaway pointed at Gabrielle. "I'm suspending her."

"How long?" Case inquired.

"Two days." Case nodded. He placed the tip of his umbrella against the carpet. He folded his hands on top. He glared at Gabrielle and narrowed his eyes. Gabrielle shrugged up her shoulders and stared at the floor. "I'm sorry, Case," Callaway continued. "We have to do something. This type of behavior will not be tolerated."

"I know," Case replied. "I remember what you said last time." Case lifted the umbrella with his right hand. He poked Gabrielle's shoulder with the tip. She slowly looked up. Her left eye was black. Her eyebrows fell to the sides. Her lower lip was quivering. Case pressed his lips together. He hung his umbrella on Callaway's doorknob. Then, he approached Gabrielle and crouched beside her. Gabrielle shrugged up her shoulders and looked away. Case slid his fingers below her chin. He turned her head and made her face him. She bobbled her eyes

around and looked up. “*You okay?*” Case whispered. Gabrielle shook her head. Case eased his fingers away from her chin. He slid them around her black eye. “*Who were you fighting with?*”

Gabrielle sniffled. “*Ted and Brittany,*” she whispered back.

“Really?” Case looked at Principal Callaway. “Both of them?” Callaway shrugged.

Case turned to Gabrielle. He bobbed his head. “Who won?”

“Uh, Case?” Callaway interrupted.

Case grinned at him. “Sorry.” Case stood up and offered his hand. “Come on, sweetheart. I’ll take you home.” Gabrielle dropped her hand in Case’s. Case helped her to her feet. He narrowed his eyes. He patted her back. “You’re sopping wet. And, you’re all muddy.” He looked at Callaway.

“They were fighting on the football field.”

“Ah...” Case replied. He slipped out of his jacket and wrapped it around Gabrielle’s shoulders. He gave her arms a rub. He recovered her black hoodie from the back of her chair. He draped Gabrielle’s jacket over his arm and turned to Callaway. “Do I need to sign anything?”

Principal Callaway shook his head. “Nope. You just need to take her home. She can’t be on campus again until Monday.” Case nodded. He took Gabrielle’s hand and headed for the door. He snagged his umbrella on the way out. They passed a few desks and entered a long hallway. Gabrielle looked up at Case.

“I-I’m sorry, Louis.”

Case smirked. “No, you’re not.” Gabrielle looked at the floor. Case looked down at her. “What did they do this time?”

Gabrielle looked at him. “Brittany... kissed Adam.”

“Oh...” Case moaned. He looked ahead. “Tongue?” Gabrielle looked away and sighed.



She tugged Case's jacket around her shoulders and shivered. Case looked at her. "So, yeah?" Gabrielle looked up. Her eyes were big and sad. She nodded. They pushed through a set of double doors. They led into another hallway. There was another pair of doors at the end of the hallway. They led to the parking lot. "Then, what happened?" Case asked.

"Adam shoved her across the room," Gabrielle replied. "She fell on the floor, laughing."

Case nodded. "Then, you have nothing to worry about."

Gabrielle smacked her lips. "The whole class saw them."

"They were in front of the class?"

"Yes." Gabrielle sighed. "Mr. Saffron put us in groups of three to do an assignment in front of the class. He put Adam with Ted and Brittany. And, he put me with two other douche bags." Gabrielle looked up. Her eyebrows fell in the middle. "It pisses me off. *She* pisses me off."

"So, I gather," Case replied. They walked through the doors at the end of the hall. Case popped open his umbrella and held it above their heads. He slid his fingers through Gabrielle's long, brown hair. It was wet and stringy. It hung down her face in wavy clusters. Case slid Gabrielle's hair behind her ears and patted her head. "So, who won?" Gabrielle snickered. She threw her arms around Case's waist. Case slid his hand across her back. He noticed her tense up. Case figured she'd injured her ribs were during the fight. "Tiffany's going to be mad."

"I know," Gabrielle replied. She looked up. "Which is why..." Case narrowed his eyes. He awaited the end of Gabrielle's sentence. "Um, don't tell her."

Case pushed his mouth to the side of his face. "Uh..." Gabrielle let go of Case and backed away. She held his hand in both of hers and looked into his eyes.

"Please, Louis?" Case stared into her big, blue eyes. The left one was black.

“Hmm...” He took his hand from Gabrielle and stroked his chin. “I don’t know. What are you offering?”

Gabrielle scoffed. “I’m not giving you *anything!*”

Case smirked. “Huh. No deal, then.”

Gabrielle threw her hands out at her sides. “Louis!” Case snickered. “You can’t tell her, okay?”

Case narrowed his eyes and tilted his head. “Mm... Actually, I can.” Gabrielle threw her hands on her hips. She looked away.

“I can’t believe you’d do me like that.” Case’s jacket was slipping off Gabrielle’s shoulders. Case snagged a hold of it before it fell.

“Here, hold this,” he instructed. He handed Gabrielle the umbrella. He joined the collar of his jacket in front of Gabrielle’s neck. He buttoned the top button. “There you go.” He patted her shoulder. “There you are.” Gabrielle glared at him. Case smiled back. He took his umbrella and stood up. Gabrielle crossed her arms over her chest.

“I’ll... do whatever you want.”

Case draped his palm over his heart. “Really?” He looked away, narrowed his eyes, and stroked his chin. “Anything?” Gabrielle’s arms went slack. She tilted her head back and sighed.

“You’re such an ass!”

Case looked down at her and smirked. “Okay. For how long?”

Gabrielle folded her fingers in front of her mouth. “I guess... until Monday? It’s only fair.” Case nodded. He held out his hand.

“Alright. It’s a deal.” Gabrielle glared at him. She reluctantly shook his hand. Case’s eyebrows fell in the middle. He belched a hideous laugh. “Mwuh, huh, ha, ha, ha!”

### Chapter 3: “John Doe”

Case sat on the corner of Tiffany’s bed. Well, it was his *and* Tiffany’s bed. Whoever’s bed it was, he was sitting on the corner. It was covered with red bedding. The frame was made of oak. The walls and floor were covered with wood paneling. A circle was laid into the floor in a different shade. It surrounded the bed. A pentagram was laid in the middle of the circle. It was the same shade as the circle. Bookshelves were built into the walls. They ran around the room. They were almost full. Tiffany had a lot of fiction by writers like Edgar Allen Poe and H.P. Lovecraft. She had books about magic and the occult. There were also books on mathematics, physics, and quantum mechanics. Tiffany was enrolled in college to become a math teacher. It was the most interesting room Case had ever been in. He *still* found it interesting, even after living with Tiffany and the kids for over two months. There was something about it, something magical.

Case had picked out a fresh jacket for Gabrielle. It was a long, grey, wool coat. Actually, it was the only other jacket Gabrielle had. She’d lost a mountain of clothes when Tiffany adopted her. Gabrielle’s father burned them. He was lucky Case didn’t beat his ass again. Case bought Gabrielle the wool coat a couple weeks after moving in. It was folded across his lap. Case sighed and looked at a clock. It sat atop a table between the bed and the wall. A row of slanted, green numbers read “10:52.” Gabrielle had been in the shower for fifteen minutes. She was a really slow shower taker. Some mornings, she spent as long as forty minutes in the shower. Case knew that for a fact. He’d timed her. He smirked. He laid Gabrielle’s coat on the bed and hopped to his feet. He pounded on the bathroom door with his fist.

“Good lord!” he shouted. “You’re gonna use up all the water!”

*“Lou-is!”* Gabrielle yelled back. *“Leave me alone!”* Case turned away and snickered. *“I’m all muddy and shit!”*

“Well, hurry the hell up!”

*“Bite me!”* Case walked away, grinning and shaking his head. He sat on the corner of the bed. He retrieved Gabrielle’s coat and laid it across his lap. The plan was to go to the police station. There, they would look through John Does from the past two months. Case pushed his mouth to the side of his face. He smirked and shook his head. *Gabrielle* would look through the John Does from the past two months. Case would be hanging out in the break room with Sergeant Paloni or something. They could have a soda or two and talk about old times. Yep, that was even better. Case nodded in approval. Gabrielle had agreed to do whatever he wanted until Monday. It was perfect. Case could take Gabrielle to lunch after that. Then, they could take the clothes Gabrielle wore that morning to the laundry mat. Gabrielle could change back into them before Tiffany saw her. That way, Tiffany wouldn’t notice the change of clothes. Case just had to explain the black eye. He wasn’t sure how he was going to do that, yet.

Gabrielle stared at her toes. Water fell from a bronze faucet near the ceiling and smothered her. Gabrielle had the hot water wide open. The cold water was off. Steam hung in the air. In front of Gabrielle were two intersecting sheets of blurry, green glass. Behind her were two intersecting walls of white tiles. The floor of the shower was covered with smaller tiles. Most of them were white. However, there were black tiles as well. They were arranged in the shape of a pentagram. A black circle bordered that. Gabrielle looked at her breasts. The left one was bruised. Brittany had punched it with Ted’s brass knuckles. Gabrielle sighed. She slid her fingers across the bruise. It was puffy and tender. Gabrielle examined her stomach. It was covered with purple blotches. Brittany had smashed her tummy with the knuckle duster as well.

*“Slut,”* Gabrielle mumbled.

She snagged a bottle of shampoo. It rested on a porcelain shelf sticking out of the corner behind her. She dropped a squirt of shampoo into her hand and returned the bottle to the shelf. She slid the shampoo through her long, brown locks. Chunks of mud came tumbling out. Gabrielle leaned back and rinsed shampoo suds out of her hair. *“Ah...”* she moaned. She snagged a bar of soap. It rested on a shelf below the one with the shampoo. Gabrielle worked up a mountain of suds and slid it across her arms. Her flesh was sandy and unsatisfying. It took a good bit of work to wash everything off. The Tree Frogs needed a better field. Or, perhaps a better maintenance crew was in order. Gabrielle rinsed her arms. They felt slick and refreshed. Gabrielle worked up another mountain of suds and scrubbed her face. Now, she felt much better. She gave everything else a scour. Then, she flicked off the water and slid back the blurry, green door.

Cool air rushed in. It scattered a cloud of steam. Gabrielle closed her eyes and gave them a rub. She stared at the backs of her eyelids. She saw a group of purple flashes. She stared them down until they went away. Case pounded on the door. Gabrielle dropped her hands, opened her eyes, and let her head fall to the side. *“Lou-is!”* she groaned. *“Will you please leave me alone?”*

*“You’re not resting your eyes, are you?”* he inquired. *“We don’t have time for that!”*

Gabrielle grinned and stomped across the floor. *“Shut-up!”* She heard Case laughing. She wandered towards a toilet. It sat against a white, tile wall next to the shower. A black towel was hanging from a rod above the toilet. Gabrielle snagged the towel and buried her face in it. The towel was cool and squishy.

*“You’d better not be standing there with your face buried in a towel!”* Case called.

Gabrielle glared at the bathroom door. “Do you have a camera in here?” She heard Case laughing. Then, she heard him leave Tiffany’s bedroom and shut the door. Gabrielle squashed the towel on her head and swabbed her hair. “Stupid Louis,” she mumbled. She swabbed her arms. “Better leave me the hell alone.” She pressed the towel against her breasts. She tensed up and pulled it away. “*Bah!*” she groaned. She slid her fingers across her left breast. It was quite tender. Gabrielle pinched her eyes shut and sucked air through her teeth. There was a light knock at the door.

“*Gabrielle?*” Case inquired. Gabrielle whirled around and faced the door. “*You okay in there?*”

“Lou-is!” she shrieked. “I thought you left the bedroom!”

“*I was just messing with you,*” he replied. Gabrielle dropped her forehead in her palm. “*I was going to scare you when you came out.*” Gabrielle smirked. She pinched the bridge of her nose. “*Seriously, though. You okay?*”

Gabrielle sighed. “I’m hurting, man.” She patted her stomach with the towel. “Those two really beat the crap out of me.” Gabrielle threw the towel around her shoulders. She slid it across her back.

“*You want me to kick their asses for you?*” Case offered. Gabrielle giggled. She patted her legs dry. She returned the towel to the rod above the potty. “*I will, if you want me to.*”

Gabrielle looked over her shoulder. “Oh, I made them work for it.” Gabrielle had stacked some clothes on the toilet seat before turning the shower on. She rummaged through them. She threw on a pair of pink panties.

“*Yeah?*” Case inquired. “*You give ‘em the old snatch a fist, toss them to the floor routine?*”

Gabrielle looked over her shoulder. “Louis, I thought we didn’t have time to mess around.” She threw on a red bra and hooked it into place.

“*Oh,*” Case replied. “*Right.*” Gabrielle threw on a different pair of jeans. They were lighter than the others. A burst of thunder rolled across the ceiling. Gabrielle stared at the roof. Her eyes were big and bright. The left one was black and puffy. It was still raining like crazy. Buckets of water battered the roof and tumbled to the sides. It was like standing under a tent below a waterfall. Gabrielle threw on a long sleeved shirt. It was decorated with horizontal rows of white, black, violet, and magenta bands. It was a little big on her. The ends of the sleeves draped across her little knuckles. Gabrielle looked at herself in a large mirror. It stood above a porcelain sink, opposite the door. Gabrielle shook the ends of her sleeves back and slid her fingers through her hair. There was a knock at the door. Gabrielle closed her eyes and sighed.

“Yes, Louis?”

“*You about ready?*” Gabrielle threw her hands out at her sides. She stomped across the floor and unlocked the door. She threw it open and poked her head out. She found Case sitting on the edge of Tiffany’s bed. Well, *his* and Tiffany’s bed. Whoever’s bed it was, Case was sitting on the edge. He looked up and grinned. Gabrielle pointed at him.

“As soon as I finish getting ready, I’m kicking your ass, next.” Case narrowed his eyes and opened his mouth. He smiled and stood up.

“I heard you groaning. Are you okay?” He walked towards her and stopped. “You need me to take a look?” Gabrielle looked into his eyes and exhaled through her nose. She looked down and lifted her shirt. Case knelt and looked at her stomach. It was littered with violet welts. He reached up and touched one. Gabrielle gasped and backed away. Case looked into her eyes.

He reached up and touched the black one. “I’ll get you some ice, okay?”

She nodded. “Thank you.” Case stood and headed for the fridge. It was a small one. It was tucked away in a corner of the bedroom. Gabrielle headed for the mirror above the sink. “And, thank you for not telling Tiffany.” Case looked over his shoulder. He was kneeling next to the refrigerator.

“Oh, you’re going to *pay* for that,” he assured her. “Believe you me.” There was a box of sandwich bags on top of the refrigerator. Case snagged one and opened the refrigerator. There was a tiny freezer at the upper, left corner. Gabrielle stood in front of the mirror. She plugged in a hair dryer.

“Whatever,” she replied.

Case dropped a handful of ice cubes into the sandwich bag. “Hey, you promised.”

Gabrielle began drying her hair. “Oh, come on!” she called out. The hair dryer was rather noisy. “You’re not *seriously* going to hold me to that, are you?” Case closed the refrigerator and zipped the sandwich bag. He turned around and draped his arm over his knee.

“Nothing in this world is free, Gabrielle!” he shouted over the hair dryer. “You have to earn it!”

“What?!” Gabrielle shouted back. Case pushed his mouth to the side of his face. He hopped up and wandered into the bathroom. Gabrielle saw him coming in the mirror. She watched until he was standing beside her. She turned and looked up at him. She continued to dry her hair.

“You’ve got to earn it!” Case shouted. Gabrielle grinned. She flicked off the hair dryer and set it on the counter. The porcelain sink resided inside a counter of black tiles. Giant, white tiles on the walls matched tiny, white tiles across the floor of the shower. A countertop full of



black tiles matched the pentagram tiles on the shower floor. Gabrielle unplugged the hair dryer, wrapped the cord around the handle, and opened a drawer below the counter. The counter was shaped like a trapezoid. Three drawers stuck out of the sides facing away from the wall. Gabrielle dropped the hair dryer in the middle drawer and snagged a stick of deodorant. She rolled it under her arms, returned the stick to the drawer, and slid the drawer closed. She looked into Case's eyes.

"You're not going to make this easy on me, are you?" Case smirked. He pressed the bag of ice against Gabrielle's eye. She sighed. Gabrielle curled her little fingers around the frosty, plastic container. Case let go and patted her shoulder.

"You could always tell her." Gabrielle slowly shook her head. Case shrugged. "We'd better get going, then." He turned around and walked away. Gabrielle threw her free arm out at her side.

"Go where? Where are we going?" Case recovered Gabrielle's wool coat from the bed. He returned to the bathroom. Gabrielle sat on the toilet and slipped on a couple of socks. They were pink with little hearts. The left one had a hole in the bottom. Case stared at Gabrielle's exposed sole. He narrowed his eyes.

"We gotta get you some socks, girl."

Gabrielle smiled, showing her teeth. "I *like* these." She slid a shoe onto her right foot. It was one of the ones from earlier. It still had mud on it. Case dropped his forehead in his palm. Gabrielle squinted. "What?"

Case threw his hands out at his sides. "You don't have any other shoes?"

Gabrielle shrugged. "I think I *did*." She looked towards the door. "Somewhere..."

Case nodded. "Didn't you have... some boots?"

“Brittany stole them,” Gabrielle replied. She slid her other shoe on and tied it. One of the loops broke when she pulled the strings tight. “Hmph.” Case sighed. He knelt in front of her, gripped both halves of the loop, and tied them in a knot. He looked up at her. She grinned.

“We should go shopping,” Case told her.

She nodded. “Okay.”

Case stood up. “Tomorrow.” He held her coat open. “We’ve already got enough stuff to do today.” Gabrielle looked at him, timidly. She sighed. She stood, turned around, and slipped her arms into the sleeves of her jacket.

“Okay, so what all do I gotta do?” Gabrielle began buttoning her coat. Case patted her shoulders.

“Well Gabrielle, have you ever wanted to be a detective?” She looked at him over her shoulder. She scrunched up her nose.

Case took the freeway and drove to the police station. There was a tiny parking lot in front of the building for civilians. That’s where Case parked. It pissed him off. He screeched up an entrance ramp, slid across two rows, and skidded to a stop in a handicapped spot. It was directly in front of the door. Case parked his back tires against a blue pylon. His windshield faced the street. He snagged a handicapped parking permit from his glove box and dangled it from the rearview mirror. Gabrielle looked at it with a pair of wide eyes. “Um, where did you get *that*?”

Case looked at her. “Nunya.” It was still raining. It hadn’t let up a bit. It was flooding the streets. Case drove a brown, eighties model car. The driver’s door had a tendency to get stuck. It had needed bushings for some time. Case couldn’t remember a time that it hadn’t. He jerked the handle towards him and kicked the door open. He stuck his black umbrella out, held it

above the roof, and popped it open. Then, he hopped out and kicked the door closed. It swung closed with a rusty squeal. Naturally, it didn't close all the way. Case turned around and bumped it with his butt. It took three smacks. Case looked at the parking lot. The water was an inch deep. Case hurried to the other side of the car, held the umbrella above the roof, and opened Gabrielle's door. She slid out and dropped to the pavement with a splash. Case shoved her door closed, and they headed for the building.

It was a red, brick building. At the front, two sets of double doors stood side by side. They were in the middle of the wall. They were wooden doors with square windows at the top. Rather than knobs, they opened with flat, steel handles. Windows littered the rest of the front. There were four in a row on either side of the doors. The police station was four stories. So, three rows of windows dotted the wall above that. Each of those had ten windows. A thick barrier of swirling, black clouds was reflected by each pane of glass. It was surreal, breathtaking, and frightening all at once. Gabrielle tugged on Case's plaid coat. He stopped and looked down at her. She looked up and smiled. Case narrowed his eyes.

"I need to smoke a cigarette," Gabrielle remarked. Case looked towards the door and sighed.

"Man, we're in front of a police station." He looked down at her. "And, you're fourteen."

Gabrielle shrugged. "But, I'm with *you*." Case pushed his mouth to the side of his face. "Please, Louis? You won't let me smoke in the car. And, Tiffany would kill me if I smoked in the shop." Case nodded. He pointed towards the side of the building.

"You'd better suck it down, honey."

Gabrielle threw her arms around his waist. "Thank you." Case slid his fingers down her

hair. He shook his head. Gabrielle let go, and they wandered to the side of the building. Once there, Gabrielle fished out a pack of smokes and a tiny, yellow, plastic lighter. She got them from the front, right pocket of her jeans. The cigarettes were in a cardboard box, not a soft pack. She flipped back the top and tossed a cigarette in her mouth. She looked at Case. She held up the box and shook it from side to side. "You want?"

"No, thanks," Case replied. "I'm going to go drink a big bucket of tar when we get back to the magic shop. That should do." Gabrielle narrowed her eyes and shook her head. She turned, cupped her little fingers around her lighter, and flicked it to life. She left an opening where her index finger curled around. She bowed her head, slid the cigarette through the opening, and balanced the tip of the cigarette above the flame. She returned the cigarettes and the lighter to her pocket. She snagged the cigarette between her first and second fingers, opened her mouth, and inhaled through her nose. Murky white smoke drifted from her lips to her nostrils. Case looked down at her. "You done smoking that thing, yet?"

Gabrielle smacked her lips. "You're such a dick." She looked up at him. "You and Tiffany man, I swear." She faced forward and took a drag. This time, she puffed out a series of smoke rings. Case faked a cough. "Shut-up!" Gabrielle squealed. She nudged Case in the ribs. She looked up and grinned. "That's so unfair. *You* used to smoke these things, too."

Case narrowed his eyes. "Did I?" He stroked his chin. "I don't recall." Gabrielle's eyebrows fell in the middle. She faced forward and shook her head. Case patted her shoulder. "Hurry up. We don't have all day."

"Bite me." A window opened above them. It was on the second story. Case and Gabrielle stepped away from the building, turned around, and looked up. Sergeant Paloni looked down at them from the open window. He crossed his arms on the window sill and shook his

head.

“Case, please tell me you and Gabrielle aren’t down there smoking.”

Case scoffed. “Of course not!” He draped his hand over his heart. “I quit, remember?”

Paloni bobbed his head. “Ah...”

Gabrielle dangled the cigarette between her teeth and waved. “Hi, Sergeant Paloni!”

He waved back. “Hi, Gabrielle.” He rested his elbow on the window sill and dropped his chin in his palm. “You’re not here to get your badge back, are you?”

“Piss on my badge,” Case replied. Paloni smiled and shook his head. “I need to read through all the John Does from the past couple of months.” He narrowed his eyes. “Actually, *Gabrielle* needs to read through them.” Gabrielle’s eyebrows fell in the middle. She dropped her jaw, looked up, and stomped her foot. Her foot made a loud splash thanks to the torrent rolling across the parking lot. Case looked down at her, smugly. “You owe me.” Paloni nodded. He grabbed the bottom of the window.

“I think there were five during the past couple of months. I’ll get them laid out for you guys. Just meet me up here.” He slid the window down and walked away. Case and Gabrielle turned around and backed against the side of the building.

“Man...” Gabrielle moaned. “That’s why you brought me here?”

Case smiled. “I also think you’re cute.” Gabrielle rolled her eyes. “I like having you around. You’re like my little sidekick.”

Gabrielle pushed her mouth to the side of her face. “John Does, huh?” She looked up. “Those are like... guys that died, and no one knows who they are?” Case nodded. Gabrielle took a drag of her cigarette. “Are they real long?” She exhaled smoke. “The files, I mean.”

“I don’t know,” Case replied. “Sometimes they are. Sometimes they aren’t.” Gabrielle

finished her cigarette, and they went inside. Case had to sign in at a booth before going to the second floor. Once there, they found Paloni in the records room. He dropped a giant stack of papers on a table and looked at them. Gabrielle stared at it. She scrunched up her nose and looked at Paloni.

“You’re kidding me, right?” Paloni grinned. Case patted her shoulder.

“Good luck, kiddo.” Paloni wandered around the table. He and Case headed for the door. Gabrielle glared at them over her shoulder.

“Guys?! You need me to read through all of these? Seriously?”

Case stopped and smiled at her. “All of it.” Paloni stood in the doorway. He crossed his arms over his chest. Gabrielle flipped through the top few pages. She looked at Case and Paloni.

“Surely, I don’t need to read *all* of this.”

Case shrugged. “You never know which details might be important, Gabrielle.” Gabrielle looked at Paloni. He concurred with an ambitious nod.

“It’s true. You just never know.”

Gabrielle stared hopelessly at the stack of typed pages. “There’s gotta be over a hundred pages here.” Paloni looked at the floor and laughed. Gabrielle looked at Case. “What am I even looking for?”

Case held up his index finger. “It’s better that you don’t know, actually. That way, you don’t go skimming over any of the details.” Gabrielle narrowed her eyes. Her head slumped to the side.

“Yep,” Paloni added. “That’s how *I* made detective. I used to read through these all the time.”

Case grinned, showing his teeth. “We’ll come back by in about an hour to see how things are coming along, okay?” He looked at Paloni and pointed at him. “Didn’t you guys just confiscate a pool table from somebody?”

Paloni smiled and drew in a breath. “Yes, we did!” They turned and headed down the hall. “It looks brand new, too. Let’s go try it out.” Gabrielle’s arms dangled at her sides. Her head went limp and fell back. Paloni led Case to his office. Paloni sat at his desk. Case sat in a chair, across from him. He looked Sergeant Paloni over. He wore a pale yellow, button up shirt with long sleeves. A pair of brown suspenders with an empty gun holster was draped over that. They held a pair of brown slacks at his trim waist. A pair of shiny, brown dress shoes poked out of the bottoms of his slacks. He had jet black hair and dark brown eyes. He swiveled in his chair and snagged a pot of coffee. It sat in a coffee maker on a cruddy, wooden shelf behind the desk. He turned and filled a mug on his desk. He held up the carafe so Case could see it.

“Coffee?” he asked.

Case smacked his lips. “Man, you know I don’t drink that crap.”

Paloni smiled and nodded. “Yes, I remember.” He returned the carafe to the coffee maker. The shelf around the coffee pot was covered with books, papers, pencils, and pens. Paloni’s desk was a giant pile of the same. Among all that was an L.C.D. computer monitor. It lay on its face atop a keyboard. A discolored, white mouse lay on top of the monitor. It was missing one of the buttons. Paloni turned around and folded his arms on his desk. He looked at Case and narrowed his eyes. “Case, you’ve never read an entire John Doe file in your life.”

Case shrugged. “*She* doesn’t know that.”

Paloni snickered and patted the top of his desk. “What the hell, man? Why are you making her do that?”

“Because she won’t tell Tiffany she got suspended for fighting.” Paloni rested his elbow on his desk. He dropped his chin in his palm.

“I see. So, you’re like... punishing her.”

“I believe the proper term is ‘blackmailing’.”

Paloni smiled and shook his head. “But, why the John Doe files? You know, missing persons’ files are usually much thicker.”

Case held up his palms. “Well actually, I *am* working a case. A lady asked me to look into her husband’s disappearance.”

“I see,” Paloni replied. “He disappeared a couple of months ago, yeah?”

“Right.”

Paloni nodded. “So, you’re going to let Gabrielle read through about a hundred pages worth of John Doe autopsies and personal effects. Then, you’re going to show her a picture of the husband? See if she can match him to any of the files?”

Case reached into his coat pocket. “Got a picture of him right here.” He dropped a photograph on Paloni’s desk. Paloni looked at it and nodded. He looked at Case.

“You think Gabrielle will learn?” He pointed at his eye and smiled. “You’d think that shiner would’ve taught her. My God, man! It looks like she felt *that* one.”

Case shrugged. “I just wish she wouldn’t try to hide stuff from Tiffany. You know?” Paloni nodded. “She should feel comfortable telling her that. Tiffany’s cool.”

“She’ll probably get pissed.”

“Yeah, well...” Case looked to the left. He was looking out the window Paloni had opened earlier. “She should be.” Case looked at Paloni. “She just got in trouble a week ago for fighting in the hallway.” He threw his hands out at his sides. “It was the same two kids.”



Paloni smiled. "So, what are you going to do to her after this?"

Case smiled. "Well... I'm pretty sure she won't find anything in the John Does."

"Of course not," Paloni replied. He showed Case the photograph. "We just got done checking the John Does for this guy." He handed the picture back to Case. "What was the wife's name?" Case returned the photograph to his pocket. "Mrs. Nelms?" Case looked up and nodded. Paloni shrugged. "It's a dead end. He's disappeared." Case rested his elbows on his knees. He folded his fingers in front of his face.

"Anyway, I think I'll take her to lunch after this." He looked into Paloni's dark brown eyes. "That way she won't be *totally* pissed at me."

Paloni snickered and pointed at him. "Yeah. Yeah, that's a good idea. Then, you should make her do all the laundry."

"That's exactly what *I* was thinking." Paloni laughed. He took a sip of coffee and pounded his desk with his fist. "You see, Gabrielle was fighting with these two kids in the rain. So, her clothes are all muddy."

Paloni leaned back and cackled. "Wait, so now she's wearing different clothes than she was this morning."

"That's right," Case replied. "So, now we have to go wash those, anyway. We might as well just do *all* the laundry at the same time."

Paloni threw his arms out at his sides. "You might as well!" He took another sip of his coffee. "No, wait..." Case and Paloni pointed at one another. "*She* might as well!" they said, simultaneously. They sat back and had a chuckle. Case sighed.

"The only thing is... I have to explain that big, fat, black eye."

Paloni flicked his wrist. "Just tell Tiffany she got hit in the eye with a baseball or some

shit.”

Case stroked his chin. “No... It’s raining like crazy. She couldn’t have been outside playing baseball.”

“Hmm...” Paloni mused. “Hockey puck?”

“Yes,” Case replied. He slapped his hands together in front of his face. “That’s perfect.”

Paloni nodded. “So, where are you two going for lunch?” he inquired.

“I’ll have to take her to Burger Land, I guess.” Case looked at him. “That’s her favorite.”

“Yeah, you should do that,” Paloni agreed. “Get her all buttered up.” He took a sip of his coffee. “Then, you can get her to do all the laundry after that.”

Case snickered. “It sucks, though. I wanted to surprise Tiffany for lunch, today.”

“Hmm... That *does* suck, man.” He narrowed his eyes and pointed at Case. “You should like... make Gabrielle feel all guilty for that, too.”

Case chuckled. “Yeah, I guess I’ll have to, huh?” Paloni snickered and shook his head. “That’s a bummer. I wonder what Tiffany’s doing for lunch.” Paloni looked away and shrugged.

Tiffany looked like shit. She hadn’t slept in about a week. She had off and on. But, sometimes she suffered from horrifying nightmares. She’d begun having some Sunday. It was Wednesday. Between night terrors and stacks of homework, she’d gotten a total of five hours of sleep during that period. She stood in a hallway at the college. The air was hot and humid. Tiffany’s shiny, black hair was all messy. It dangled from her head in stringy clusters. It drooped to her chin in the front. It was cut to half that length in the back. Her eyes were dark brown, almost black. Underneath, they were puffy and dark from lack of sleep. Her hair

dangled in her face. It had been bugging her all day. She reached up and slid it aside. It fell right back into place. Tiffany closed her eyes and sighed.

She was standing in front of a vending machine. It stood against a vacant wall of grey bricks. Tiffany was five foot, two. She wore a red coat, a pair of dark blue jeans with bell bottoms, and a pair of brown boots with pointed toes. Her coat was buttoned over a tank top with tiny, white and brown stripes. A silver necklace with a shiny emblem hung from her neck. The emblem was a black star with a silver border. Case bought it for her a month earlier. A black backpack dangled from her shoulders. She was hot. She felt like tearing off her coat and dropping it in the nearest trash can. She shuttered at the thought. Tiffany never showed her arms. They were littered with scars. Her right shoulder looked like it had been raked by a bear's claw three or four times. Some of the scars reached from the tip of her shoulder to her elbow. The name "Andre" was carved onto her inner forearm. The letters were jagged and sketchy. Andre was her father's name. Her left arm was normal looking on the outside. The inside was covered with cigarette burns. They spanned her flesh from wrist to armpit. There were slashes on both of her wrists. They started at the wrist and reached halfway up her forearm.

Yes, Tiffany rarely showed her arms. Then again, she was starting to sweat. She looked at a clock. It was sticking out of a wall at the end of the hall. A row of red digits read "11:31." Tiffany had just taken an exam. So, she'd gotten out of class early. She dug through her pockets. She came up with two quarters and a dime. She scanned the vending machine. She was in luck. There was one bag of chili cheese Cornitos left. It was the only bag of chips in the vending machine that sold for sixty cents. Tiffany stared at them. She wondered if Case might come by and pick her up. "*Probably not,*" she whispered. She needed a cell phone. She slid the three coins into a slot. Then, she punched in "E-6." She knelt down to watch. She bent her

knees and rested her elbows on top. A long metal coil began to spin. The bag of chips resided at the front.

Tiffany narrowed her eyes. The gap between the chips and the end of the coil was rather large. Tiffany's jaw dropped. The chips weren't going to make it. "*Oh, no...*" she whispered. The coil made a single rotation and stopped. The chips rested right at the end. It would take another sixty cents to get them out. "You fucker!" Tiffany shouted. Like most vending machines, this one had a clear sheet of plastic in front of its contents. Tiffany glared at the bag of Cornitos. She hammered the plastic barrier with her fist. She stood up and sighed. Wavy chunks of her hair bobbed around and stuck to her lips. She leaned her head back and slid her hair out of her face. It was hot. Tiffany exhaled through her nose. She dropped her backpack on the floor. Then, she undid five large buttons at the front of her coat. She yanked it off and dropped it on top of her backpack. A rush of cool air wafted across her jagged, sweaty flesh.

Her chest showed a little, too. It was decorated with a row of circular scars. They were old cigarette burns. Tiffany plopped her palms over her mouth and stared at the bag of Cornitos. She was starving. But now, she had no money. She had Case's debit card in her pocket. But, it was raining like crazy. She didn't feel like going anywhere. She thought about going to the office. She could borrow a phone and call him. He could swing by and take her to lunch. "*I'm sure he's busy,*" she whispered. She hated to bother him. She threw her hands out at her sides. Then, she turned around and plopped down in front of the vending machine. She sat with her knees folded in front of her face. She folded her arms on top and rested her forehead against them. There was a pair of golden doors at the end of the hall. The one on the left swung open. Tiffany looked up. Cindy, Sandy, and Danielle wandered through.

"*Oh, great,*" Tiffany whispered. She knew Cindy, Sandy, and Danielle from her

Psychology class. They had been Francine's friends before she was killed. Tiffany caught Francine and her ex-boyfriend doing it in one of the restrooms. The girls didn't like Tiffany, and Tiffany didn't like them. She thought they were a bunch of stuck up bitches. Tiffany stared straight ahead. She hoped they would walk on by and leave her alone. They didn't.

"Look who it is," Cindy remarked. They stopped. Tiffany glared at them. Cindy was a blonde. Danielle was a brunette. Sandy had short, black hair. Sandy narrowed her eyes. She looked up and down Tiffany's arms. Tiffany draped her fingers over her right shoulder.

"My God, Tiff," Sandy remarked. She knelt beside her. "What does that say?" She reached for Tiffany's right arm. Tiffany jerked it away.

"DON'T touch me." She let out a shaky sigh.

"Whoa, Tiff," Danielle replied. "Calm down."

Tiffany pointed at her. "Don't call me that!" She shot to her feet. Sandy fell on her butt and scrambled away. Tiffany got in Danielle's face. "Don't call me that, you piece of shit."

"Jeez, Tiffany," Cindy remarked. Tiffany glared at her. "Relax. We just wanted to say 'Hi'."

"No, I know *exactly* what YOU three wanted," Tiffany told her. Sandy stood and dusted herself off. "You wanted to talk shit or call me names or something." Tiffany looked at Danielle. "You think you're better than me, bitch? Well, come on!" She put up her dukes. "Bring it. I'll take all three of you mother fuckers, right now!" Tiffany backed away and looked at each of them. Cindy bowed her head and chuckled.

"Tiffany, piece of advice?" Tiffany exhaled through her nose. Cindy pointed at her red coat. "Wear your jacket. Never take it off."

Sandy pointed at Tiffany. "Have you ever been laid?" They bellowed with laughter.

Tiffany punched the side of the vending machine. It left a dent in the shape of her knuckles.

“Come on, Sandy. You can have the first swing.” Tiffany lurched at her. Sandy widened her eyes and backed away. “You’re gonna be picking up your teeth off the floor!” She glared at Danielle. “Come on!”

Cindy looked at her friends. “Guys, I’m leaving. I just had my nails done.” Sandy cupped her hand over her mouth and laughed. They began to leave. Danielle lurched at Tiffany as she passed.

“Psycho,” she remarked. They walked to the end of the hall and exited through an alternate set of golden doors. Tiffany exhaled and let her arms go slack. She was shaking all over. She turned around and looked at her coat. She wandered over and reached for it. The door Cindy, Sandy, and Danielle came through opened again. This time, it was a blonde guy. He wore a pair of dark shades, even though he was indoors. A pair of bad boy sideburns crept down the sides of his face. He wore a leather jacket, a striped shirt, khaki pants, and a pair of black boots. He moved with a swagger like he was God’s gift to women. It was Tiffany’s ex-boyfriend, Chad Harris. Tiffany looked at him. She turned and picked up her coat. Chad stopped in his tracks. He wrinkled his nose. His eyebrows fell in the middle.

“God damn, Tiffany!” he shrieked. Tiffany rolled her eyes and sighed. “Put on a jacket or something.”

Tiffany threw her coat over her shoulders. “Chad, leave me alone.”

“You look like a freak.”

Tiffany glared at him. “You look like an ass-hole, talk like an ass-hole, and smell like an ass-hole.” Chad walked up to her and narrowed his eyes. He snagged a hold of her wrist and looked it over. Tiffany tensed up. She started to shake. Chad looked into her eyes. Tiffany

could see her eyes in the lenses of Chad's sunglasses. Chad shook his head.

"Next time, just hang yourself." He let go of Tiffany's wrist and walked away. He headed for the same doors as the girls. Tiffany pinched her eyes shut and sobbed. She fell to her knees. She curled her fingers around her wrist and slid her thumb across the scar.

*"I... didn't do it,"* she gasped.

Chad stopped and looked over his shoulder. "What?" Tiffany buried her face in her hands. Chad shook his head. He shoved the door on the right out of the way. Then, he headed to the left.

## Chapter 4: “Expansion”

As Case suspected, none of the John Does matched Linda’s missing husband. It took Gabrielle an hour and a half to read through twenty-seven pages. Case finally snatched the files from her with a chuckle. It took him five minutes of skimming to rule everyone out. Two of the John Does were the wrong race, two were too short, and the fifth had blonde hair. Jerry Nelms had brown hair. Gabrielle studied the picture of Jerry Nelms. She looked at Case with a long, hopeless face.

“You couldn’t have just given me this from the start?” Case and Paloni escorted her from the police station, roaring with laughter. Paloni bid them farewell. Then, Case took Gabrielle to Burger Land. After that, they returned to the magic shop and gathered all the laundry. There were eight loads. To top it off, the laundry mat was buzzing. Gabrielle had to do all eight loads with one washing machine and one dryer. Case sat on a wooden bench, flipping through a paperback.

He looked up at the sound of a dryer closing. Gabrielle had tossed in the last load. Case snagged his cell phone and flipped it open. It was 4:32. By the time that load was dry, it would be time to pick up Adam and Tiffany. Gabrielle picked up a basket filled with clothes and turned around. She staggered towards Case, dropped the basket on the floor, and plopped down next to him. Her arms lay slack at her sides. Her eyes were narrow and hazy. Case continued to read. He looked away and chuckled at something he had read. He shook his head and returned his eyes to the paperback. Gabrielle looked Case over. Her little eyes fluttered closed. She collapsed against Case’s shoulder. Case looked up. He narrowed his eyes and looked beside him. Four giant baskets filled with fresh clothes laid on the floor. Case looked at Gabrielle.

“You know, you didn’t fold any of these. They’re going to get wrinkled.”



*“Oh, shut-up,”* Gabrielle moaned. Case chuckled. He slid his arm around Gabrielle’s shoulders. Gabrielle snuggled up next to him and yawned. “What are you reading?”

“I don’t know. It’s some... freak.” He let the book close around his thumb and looked at the cover. “Tiffany had it on her shelf.” He read the author’s name. “Michael Atkins.”

“Who the hell is that?” Gabrielle asked. Case shrugged. He opened the book and picked up where he’d left off. Gabrielle’s eyes opened a crack. She looked around. Aside from a wall lined with two rows of dryers, the laundry mat was surrounded by windows. The rain had stopped. But, the sky was filled with black clouds. It could resume at any moment. Gabrielle counted the equipment, earlier. There were fifty dryers and twenty-five washing machines. Every one of them was in use. And, there were people waiting. Gabrielle looked around. A huge, black lady sat on a wooden bench in front of one of the windows. She was surrounded by six children. There were two boys and four girls. They were bored out of their minds. The boys sat on the floor, playing with toy cars. They didn’t do much with them. They just kept crashing them into each another. Every time they collided, the boys made crashing sounds. They crashed them over and over. They never stopped.

Two of the girls stomped around the bench. One would go to the end and hide from the other. Then, she’d peek around the side and scare her. The one being scared was very young. She didn’t appear to have been walking long. Every time her sister’s head popped out, she shrieked in amazement. It was like a brand new trick every single time. The other two girls were older. They sat on either side of their mother. The one on the left had long, thin braids. They dangled past her shoulders. She sat, twirling her braids in her fingers. That’s all she did. The one on the right appeared to be the oldest of the children. She was just a little younger than Gabrielle. She sat with a dull look on her face. Her arms were crossed over her chest. Gabrielle

wondered what she was doing there. She figured she must have been suspended, too.

“You should go change,” Case remarked.

Gabrielle looked up. “Huh?” Case dragged a laundry basket around. He laid it at her feet.

“Find the clothes you were wearing earlier.” He pointed towards the restrooms. “Then, go in the restroom and change back into *those*.”

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

Case chuckled. “Man, Tiffany’s going to notice that you changed clothes. She’ll start asking questions.”

Gabrielle nodded. “Yeah, you’re right. I’d better do that.” She bent over and dug through the basket. “It is Tiffany, after all.”

Case went back to reading. “That’s right.”

Gabrielle looked up. “But, what about my eye, though?”

“Hockey puck.”

Gabrielle squinted. “Huh?”

Case looked at her. “You got hit by a hockey puck in P.E.” Case slid his fingers around her eye. “Got it?” Gabrielle nodded. She resumed digging for her clothes. Case went back to reading. Gabrielle jerked out her tie dye shirt and jeans from earlier. She dug around for her hooded sweatshirt.

“We need to tell Adam about it, too. We have P.E. together.”

“Yes,” Case agreed. “You need to get your stories straight.” Gabrielle sighed. She dropped her forehead in her palms. “Or, you could just tell her the truth.” Gabrielle glared at him.

Adam hadn't seen Gabrielle since Geology with Mr. Saffron. He missed her terribly. He hadn't seen Ted or Brittany, either. He hoped they'd died horrible deaths. Gabrielle was very upset after Brittany kissed her boyfriend. Adam hoped she was okay. Gabrielle handed him her denim backpack after class. She told him to keep an eye on it. Adam reluctantly took it from her shaking fingers.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm going to be," Gabrielle responded. Her reply was eerie and mysterious. Now, Adam had no idea where the hell she was. He figured she'd gotten in a fight with them and gotten suspended. That's what he hoped, anyway. Tiffany was going to kill her. Adam sat on a curb at the edge of the school parking lot. A cigarette dangled from his lips. A black backpack and a leather jacket dangled from his shoulders. A pair of sideburns framed his face. His hair was black and shaggy. His eyes were hazel and cryptic. He wore a maroon shirt with two white stripes, a pair of blue jeans, and a pair of brown boots. The sidewalk was soaked. Water flowed down the gutter and splashed his boots. He didn't care. He missed his girlfriend. His mother died two months earlier. He missed her less than Gabrielle. Without her, he felt angry and despondent.

Adam thought about the picture he'd drawn in his Algebra class. He pressed his lips together. It didn't make much sense. It never did. But, Adam had this funny feeling that Case and Gabrielle were about to show up. What's more, he suspected Gabrielle's left eye would be black. He had no idea why. It just made sense. He snatched the cigarette from his lips and narrowed his eyes. He thought for a moment. He tried to remember Brittany writing. He closed his eyes. He grinned at a vague recollection from his Geology class. Brittany and Ted were both right handed. If they punched at Gabrielle's face, it stood to reason they'd strike her left eye.

Adam nodded and opened his eyes. He looked to his left. He had no idea why. He simply turned his head and stared. After thirty seconds, Case's brown car skidded around the corner. Adam hopped to his feet, took a final drag, and dropped his cigarette in the gutter.

Gabrielle was sitting in the front, passenger seat. Her left eye was puffy and violet. It made Adam sick. He shook his head. Gabrielle's door came to rest in front of Adam. It swung open before the car stopped rolling. Gabrielle flew out and threw her arms around her boyfriend. She buried her face in Adam's squeaky, leather jacket. Adam smiled and exhaled. He dropped Gabrielle's backpack at her feet. Then, he wrapped his arms around her. "What happened, Gabs?"

She turned her head and exhaled. "I got suspended." Adam dropped his hand on her head. He slid his fingers down her hair.

"Dead and Bitch-any?" he asked. Gabrielle closed her eyes and nodded. "Okay. Let me see." Gabrielle let out a shaky sigh. Her arms went slack, and she backed away. Adam exhaled through his nose. He slid his fingers around Gabrielle's left eye. She looked at the ground.

"There's more."

Adam nodded. "Tiffany's gonna be mad." Gabrielle looked at her boyfriend. Then, she looked over her shoulder. Case was standing on the other side of the car. His arms were folded on top. He smiled at waved.

"We're not going to tell her," Gabrielle explained. She faced Adam. "I got hit by a hockey puck in P.E. Got it?"

Adam made a circle with his index finger and thumb. "Hockey. Check." He looked over Gabrielle's shoulder. "Dick-head Case isn't going to say anything, is he?"

Gabrielle scrunched up her nose. "I'm paying him off."

Adam threw his hands out at his sides. “With what? You don’t have anything.”

“Slave labor.”

“Oh.”

Case patted the roof of the car. “Come on, guys. We gotta go pick up *my* woman.”

Gabrielle picked up her backpack and threw it over her shoulder. She turned and took Adam’s hand.

“Come on, let’s go.” They headed for the car. Adam turned his head and pursed his lips. Gabrielle turned and kissed him.

Lightning whirled above Tiffany’s head. It filled the sky with white light. The sky returned to black, and thunder filled the air. Tiffany sat on a bench in front of the college. It was a rectangular slab of concrete resting atop an arrangement of red bricks. Tiffany sat Indian style. Her elbows rested on her knees. Her chin rested in her palms. Her black backpack dangled from her shoulders. The bench resided where the parking lot ended and a walkway began. The walkway was a grid of sidewalk. It weaved through patches of green and yellow grass. Behind Tiffany was the main building. It was a red, brick building. White windows with black grids dotted the front, three stories high. There was a pair of wooden doors at the entrance. Tiffany stared at the parking lot. Most of the other students were leaving. Some stayed for night classes. But, the parking lot was mostly empty. It usually *was* when Case showed up.

“*I need a car,*” Tiffany groaned. She sighed. She slipped off her backpack and dropped it on the ground. She leaned back and rubbed her spine. She felt like cuddling up in her bed and taking a nap. Of course, she felt like scarfing down a double meat cheeseburger, first. She tilted her head back and closed her eyes. A raindrop landed on her forehead. Tiffany’s murky, brown eyes popped open. She stared at the sky. It was filled with black, swirling insanity. “Figures,”

she remarked. She leaned forward and rubbed her eyes. She folded her fingers together and stared at the parking lot. A jaw cracking yawn came out of nowhere. Tiffany pinched her eyes shut and sucked in cool, humid air. She finished up with a throaty exhale. “My goodness.” At last, Case’s brown Cutler peeled down the street and entered the parking lot. “*Thank God...*” Tiffany moaned.

She hopped up and threw her backpack over her shoulders. Case’s car squealed across the parking lot. It screeched to a stop in front of the red, brick bench. Tiffany slid her hair out of her face. It fell right back into place. Tiffany sighed and dragged herself towards the car. Case rested against the steering wheel. He watched Tiffany stumble along. He thought about hopping out, scooping her in his arms, and carrying her to the car. She looked like she’d been beat with a baseball bat.

“God, she looks terrible,” Adam remarked. Case looked at him. Adam shoved Case’s shoulder. “What the hell have you been *doing* to her?”

Case grinned. “She hasn’t been sleeping so well.” The kids were sitting in the back seat. Gabrielle was on the passenger’s side. She reached over the front, passenger seat and opened the door. Tiffany’s backpack flew in and crashed to the floor. Tiffany plopped down on her seat and jerked the door closed. A squishy, vinyl armrest stuck out of the door. Tiffany dropped her elbow on the armrest and rested her temple in her palm. She stared out the windshield in a daze. Case unbuckled his seatbelt and slid across the seat. “Rough day, I take it.” Tiffany nodded. Case dangled his arms over her shoulders. He undid the top button on Tiffany’s coat. She let out a shaky sigh.

“What are you doing?”

Case undid her next button. “I’m making you more comfortable.” Tiffany looked out

her window. Cindy, Sandy, and Danielle were walking by. Tiffany looked timidly at Case. Case narrowed his eyes and looked up. Cindy, Sandy, and Danielle stopped and stared at them. They were grinning like idiots. Case thought a moment. He looked into Tiffany's eyes. Tiffany smiled.

"Louis... What the hell?" Case placed his hand on the side of her face. Then, he kissed her. He pressed his lips against hers and played some good, old suck-face. Case and Tiffany rolled their tongues back and forth. It got pretty intense. Case could feel Tiffany's heart pounding against his palm. He figured that was good enough. He turned and cuddled Tiffany in his arms. He waved at Cindy, Sandy, and Danielle with a big, toothy grin. Tiffany smiled. She waved as well. Cindy and her friends had stopped smiling. Sandy's jaw dropped. They turned and walked away. Adam folded his arms across the backs of the front seats.

"What a bunch of stuck up bitches," he remarked.

"Piss on 'em," Case added. He undid Tiffany's last three buttons and held her coat open. Tiffany grinned and slipped out of her jacket. Case folded it neatly and handed it to Adam. Adam took Tiffany's coat and laid it across his lap. Case dropped his hands on Tiffany's shoulders. He squashed her flesh around in his fingers. Tiffany leaned back, closed her eyes, and exhaled. "That better?" Case asked.

Tiffany nodded. "Take me to dinner, Louis," she begged. "I haven't eaten all day." Case glared at Gabrielle. She scooted away and looked timidly at her lap. Case snagged a hold of Tiffany's seatbelt, slid it across her chest, and buckled it.

"There you go," he remarked. "There you are."

"Thank you," she replied. Case slid his fingers through her hair and pushed it away from her face. Then, he returned to his seat, buckled his seatbelt, and pulled down the shifter.

“So, where do you want to go, Tiffany?” Case asked.

“I don’t care,” she replied. “I’m *starving*.” Case looked at Gabrielle in the rearview mirror. Her eyebrows fell at the sides, and she shrugged. Case looked at Tiffany.

“I gave you my debit card, right?”

Tiffany shrugged. “It was raining.” She looked at him. “I didn’t know what to do.”

Case nodded. “I guess you could’ve called a cab.” Tiffany laughed. “You could’ve called *me*.”

Tiffany threw her hands out at her sides. “I... didn’t want to bug you.” Case looked at Gabrielle in the mirror. She crossed her arms over her chest and looked away. Case’s eyes returned to the road. He held out his hand. Tiffany dropped her hand in his.

“You can call me anytime you like. Okay?” Tiffany nodded. Case kissed her hand. “I guess we should get you a car, though.”

Tiffany pointed at him with her free hand. “And, a cell phone.” Case nodded. Adam rested his chin on the back of Case’s seat.

“When do *I* get a cell phone?”

“When you get a job,” Case replied. Adam grinned and settled into his seat. Tiffany looked at Gabrielle over her shoulder. She narrowed her eyes.

“Gabrielle, what the hell happened to your eye?!”

“Hockey puck!” Gabrielle shrieked.

Tiffany looked at Gabrielle. “Like, in P.E. or something?”

“Yes!” Gabrielle shouted.

Tiffany looked into Gabrielle’s eyes. “Um, okay.” She looked at Case then back. “Did you ice it down?” Gabrielle nodded. Tiffany let out a shaky sigh. She shook her head and



turned around. “Damn, that thing looks terrible.” Adam looked at Gabrielle. He made a circle with his index finger and thumb. Rain began to pour down the windows. Case flipped on the wipers. Tiffany looked at him. “Take us to... Burger Land, will you?” Gabrielle rolled her eyes. She dropped her face in her palms.

There were several Burger Lands in town. Case took the gang to a different one than he and Gabrielle went to for lunch. He wanted to avoid being recognized. That way, he wouldn’t tip off Tiffany. Case, Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle sat at a booth at the back of the restaurant. The benches were made of thick particle board. The seat surfaces were covered with slick, blue shells. The backs were dark brown. The tables were covered with shiny, pale veneer. Everyone had a large, paper cup. They were yellow with Burger Land’s colorful logo splattered across the side. In the middle of the table was a group of paper doilies. They had mustard and ketchup in them. The booth was next to a giant window. The window covered half the wall. Rain poured down the glass so hard, no one could see out. The sun had gone down. So, all they could see were blurry city lights. A chrome napkin dispenser, a white salt shaker, a black pepper shaker, and a glass jar filled with sugar rested in front of the window. Tiffany was wearing her red coat. She threw it back on before going inside. She slouched in her seat and clutched her stomach.

“God damn it. I’m hungry.” Case grinned and shook his head. He patted Tiffany’s shoulder.

“They’ll call our number in a minute.” He scooted her cup towards her. “Have some more water.” Tiffany pressed the rim of the cup to her lips and gulped down its contents. She slammed the cup on the table.

“This sucks,” she remarked. “I’m starving.” Case looked at her. He slid his hand across her back.

“You want me to take you to lunch, tomorrow?”

Tiffany smiled. “No. I’ve got a bunch of damn homework I gotta do.” She sighed. “I took three exams today.” Case narrowed his eyes. “It took everything I had.” She shook her head. “I’m telling you, man.”

“Okay,” Case remarked.

“Then, after each exam I took...” Tiffany held her cup in front of her lips. She opened her mouth and shook some ice into it. She crunched it between her teeth and looked at Case. “Every single one of my professors gave me homework.” Tiffany set down her cup. She threw her hands out at her sides. “I’ve got four homework assignments due Friday. I’ve gotta spend all day tomorrow doing *that* shit. I guess I might as well keep an eye on the old magic shop while I’m at it.” She shook her pointer finger at Case. “I’ve got a ten page paper due in English, Friday. It’s worth like... half of our grade.”

Case shook his head. “Gay, gay.”

Tiffany’s eyebrows fell in the middle. “It is, man.” She shook more chunks of ice into her mouth. “So, what did *you* do all day?”

“Well, *I* went and saw Mrs. Nelms, today.” Case pointed at Tiffany with his thumb. “The lady whose husband went missing. *I* told you.”

“Yeah?”

“Then, I went down to the police station and read through the John Does. He went missing a couple of months ago. So, I went back two months.”

Tiffany nodded. “Okay.”

“So, I spent...” He looked at Gabrielle. “... like, an hour reading through all that.” Gabrielle looked at Adam. Her eyebrows fell in the middle. She shook her head. “Then, I got

some lunch. After that, I did the laundry.” He grinned at Gabrielle. “All of it.” Gabrielle crossed her arms over her chest and looked through the blurry window. Her jaw dropped. Adam patted her back. Tiffany smiled.

“You did all the laundry?” Case nodded. Tiffany threw her arms around his shoulders and kissed him. While she was distracted, Case flipped Gabrielle off. Gabrielle puffed up her cheeks and glared at him. She smacked the table with her fist. Tiffany stopped kissing Case and looked at her.

“Relax, Gabrielle,” Case said. “They’ll call our number in a minute.” Gabrielle looked at Tiffany and nodded.

“Man, your eye,” Tiffany remarked. She picked up her cup and pressed it against Gabrielle’s eye. “That thing’s going to be black for a week.”

A girl’s voice spoke over a loudspeaker. “Ninety-seven.”

Tiffany hopped up and zipped towards the front counter. “Thank God.” Case looked at Gabrielle and grinned. She pointed at him.

“You are so dead.” Adam chuckled. Case slid to the end of his and Tiffany’s bench.

“Are you going to tell her?” Gabrielle dropped her hand on the table. She exhaled through her nose. Case shrugged. “Then, I’m not worried.” He snagged Tiffany’s cup and headed towards the fountain. He filled the cup with water and walked to the counter. There were two trays. Tiffany had a tray in one hand and was trying to grab the other. “Nope,” Case told her. He set Tiffany’s cup on the tray in her hand. “Just get one.” Tiffany smiled. She turned around and headed for the table. Case picked up the second tray and followed.

Chad Harris was standing in line. He was still wearing his shades. He turned to his left and noticed Tiffany and Case. He smirked.

“Next in line,” a girl said. Chad faced forward. The girl was standing behind a register. It rested atop a stainless steel counter. Chad thought the girl at the register was hot. Her hair was mahogany. Her eyes were turquoise. She wore magenta lipstick, smoky eyes, and mascara. She wore a Burger Land uniform. It consisted of a yellow hat and apron. They had vertical, orange stripes. There was also an orange shirt, orange shorts, and yellow socks. She wore a pair of saddle shoes like some girl from the forties. Across the front of her hat was the Burger Land logo. A nametag was pinned to her apron. It said, “Amber.” Chad grinned. He rested his elbow on the counter and tilted his head.

“Hi, there,” he remarked. Amber turned her head without looking away. She smiled and raised her eyebrows.

“Hello,” she replied. “You know, you can take those shades off, now.”

Chad pointed at her. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

Amber narrowed her eyes. “Actually, no.”

Chad pressed his lips together. “Let me get a number three combo.”

Tiffany set the tray she was carrying on the corner of their table. She had Adam’s meal, Gabrielle’s meal, and her water. Tiffany set down her water, handed the kids their meals, and picked up the tray. Case slipped in front of her and reclaimed his seat. He set his meal in front of him, dropped Tiffany’s next to it, and handed Tiffany his tray. Tiffany set the trays on an empty table behind them. She plopped down next to Case and unwrapped her burger. She’d gotten a double meat, double cheese. She shoved it in her mouth and took a bite. Case stared at Tiffany’s burger. She’d bitten off an eighth of it in one whack. Her lips were tight, and her cheeks were puffed up. She took ten quick chews and looked at Case.

“Wrah?” she demanded. Case snickered and shook his head. He turned and sank his

teeth into his burger. Tiffany chewed some more. She washed down her monstrous bite with water. “Bite me,” she told Case.

Case swallowed and picked up his drink. “I don’t think so.” He took a sip and set his drink down. “You might bite back.” Tiffany rested her elbows on the table. She held her double cheeseburger in front of her lips. Case studied her hands. Her fingernails were painted different colors. She wore three rings. There was a plain, silver one on her left, index finger. Her name was engraved across the outside. There was another silver one on her left, middle finger. A tiny, silver pentagram was woven across the top. There were different colored jewels in each of the five triangles. Each color represented the five elements of nature. There was white for divinity, yellow for wind, red for fire, blue for water, and green for earth. On her right hand, Tiffany wore a ring on her thumb. It was gold, dotted with tiny emeralds. The emerald was Tiffany’s birthstone. Her knuckles were dislocated and misshapen. Her fingers were littered with pale scars.

Case already knew those details. Mainly, he noticed that her hands were shaking. They quivered with violent tremors that shook the table. The table was flopping against the window. Tiffany had eaten half of her cheeseburger. She finished chewing and looked at Case. She blinked.

“You’re staring.” Case smiled. He reached across and took her left hand.

“Maybe we should go get you a drink after this.” Tiffany narrowed her eyes and smacked her lips. “You know, it’ll help you relax.”

Tiffany tilted her head. “I don’t know. Ever since I came into my bedroom and found you seizing on the floor from alcohol withdrawals...”

Case sucked air through his teeth. “Oh, yeah. Sorry about that.”

“Yeah,” Tiffany remarked. “I think I’ll stay away from that crap. Thank you.”

Chad interrupted them. “Hello, ladies.” Everyone looked to the right of Tiffany. Chad was standing next to her. He had a paper cup with a straw sticking out of the top. He put the straw to his lips and took a sip. He looked at Tiffany. “And, Tiffany.”

Case smirked. “Why, Chad. What a pleasant surprise.” Tiffany set her burger on the table and looked at her lap. Case stroked his chin. “So, what’s on your mind?”

“Oh, just thought I’d check in on my old pals.”

“Yeah?” Case inquired. “And, when are *they* gonna get here?”

Chad smiled. “I wanted to show you something.” Tiffany’s right hand rested on the corner of the table. It was trembling. Chad curled his fingers around hers.

“Chad,” Tiffany protested. Chad held up her hand and slid her sleeve back. Tiffany dropped her eyes in her left palm.

“You see that?” Chad asked.

Case narrowed his eyes. “You mean that scar on her wrist?” Tiffany sobbed. Chad nodded.

“You know, she never would tell me how she got that,” Chad told him.

Case picked up his cola. “Yes, I noticed, Chad. She has a hell of a lot more than that.” He took a sip of his cola and set it down. “Thank you for pointing that out, though.”

Chad threw his free hand out at his side. “That doesn’t bother you?”

“Actually, it doesn’t.” Case cocked his head. “*You* do, though.” Tiffany looked at him. Tears dribbled down her cheeks. She looked afraid.

“Louis...” she gasped. “Don’t.” Case looked into her eyes. Then, he looked up at Chad.

“Get your hand off my girlfriend, please.” Tiffany looked at her lap. She let out a shaky

gasp.

“Hmm...” Chad moaned. “I don’t know. What’s in it for me?”

Case grinned, showing his teeth. “I’ll not beat the living crap out of you in front of all these nice people. How’s that sound?” Chad was a lot of things. He wasn’t an idiot. He returned Tiffany’s wobbly hand to the corner of the table. He patted her arm. “Don’t touch her.” Case pointed at him. “Don’t touch her, you piece of shit. Leave Tiffany alone.”

Tiffany looked at Chad. “Yeah, go away, please.” She took a breath. Chad showed Case his palms.

“Hey, I’m just trying to warn you.”

“No,” Case told him. “You’re trying to be an ass-hole.” He took Tiffany’s hands and scooted towards her. “You’ve succeeded.” Chad tilted his head. Case slid his arm around Tiffany’s shoulders. She rested her head against his chest and looked at Chad. “You’re trying to hurt her. I’m trying to help her.” Tiffany pinched her eyes closed. “You understand? Does that make sense to you?”

“Number one-oh-one,” a girl’s voice said over the loudspeaker. Chad bobbed his head at him. Then, he headed for the front counter. Tiffany sighed. Case kissed the top of her head. He slid towards the window and picked up his burger. He looked Tiffany over. She wiped tears from her eyes and stared at the table. She poked her cheeseburger.

“Stop playing with your food,” Case told her. Tiffany snickered.

“What a freak,” Adam remarked.

Case chuckled. “I think *we’re* the freaks.”

“Oh,” Adam replied. He narrowed his eyes. “Yeah, I think you’re right.”

“How *did* you get those scars on your wrists?” Gabrielle asked.

“Gabrielle...” Case replied. “Leave her alone.”

Tiffany took a tiny bite of her burger. “M-My ex-boyfriend did that to me.” Everyone looked at her. Tiffany took a sip of water and looked up. She looked at Case. “In high school.” She looked at Gabrielle. “H-He committed suicide. He tried to take me with him.” She looked at Case. Case looked at Gabrielle. He shook his head. Gabrielle raised her hand and bowed her head.

“Sorry.”

Tiffany sighed. “Oh... that’s okay.” She rolled her eyes. She dipped a couple of fries in some ketchup and dropped them in her mouth. Gabrielle had two chicken nuggets left. She dipped one in a tub of barbecue sauce and bit off the top.

“I just... I always figured you did that to yourself,” Gabrielle remarked. She looked at Tiffany.

“Sorry to disappoint you,” Tiffany replied. Gabrielle smiled and exhaled through her nose. “Of course, now I *feel* like killing myself.” She looked at Case. Case scrunched up his nose. “I’m going to go slice my wrists and bleed to death, now. Wanna watch?” Case looked into her eyes. Then, he faced the kids.

“Well actually, people who slice their wrists rarely bleed to death.”

Adam bobbed his head. “Really?”

Case looked at Tiffany. “You have a really nice, fat jugular, though.” Case pressed his fingers against Tiffany’s neck. Gabrielle snickered through her nostrils. “You might try the throat. I’ll bet that’d get her done.”

Tiffany smiled. “Ah, the throat.” She reached for her neck and took Case’s hand. “Okay, then. I’ll remember that.”



Case narrowed his eyes and smirked. “Razor blade’s your best bet.”

“Yes. Thank you, Louis. That’s wonderful advice.”

The magic shop was on Raulin Street. It was just off the freeway. It was a little, yellow brick building with a flat roof. There was a tiny parking lot out front. Behind the shop, there was a red, brick fence. It concealed a large yard with thirteen trees. Six floodlights illuminated the perimeter at night. There were three across the front of the roof and three across the back. The shop had one bedroom. It was the one Tiffany and Case had been staying in. Gabrielle and Adam had been crashing in an office across the shop. It was a cool place to live for one or two people, maybe. But for Case, Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle, it was pretty cramped. The magic shop’s purpose was to serve as a store, not a home. The gang needed a house. Also, people rarely came by and bought anything. People rarely came by. If they did, the place was usually closed. Tiffany was in class most of the time. It was a mess.

It was pouring rain. It was after nine. Gabrielle and Adam were watching a movie in the office. They watched it on Tiffany’s old, decrepit computer. The video card had just enough juice to play movies. And, sometimes it was choppy. But, it kept the kids entertained. Case and Tiffany sat around the front counter on barstools. Tiffany was working out a chain rule problem for Calculus I. The problem seemed easy enough. But, Tiffany always factored wrong. So, she kept coming up with the wrong answer. She’d already erased half a page worth of stuff four times. She stopped writing. This time, her answer was worse than ever. It wasn’t even close.

“What?” she inquired. She slammed her pencil on the counter. She jerked off her coat and tossed it aside. She folded her arms on the counter and plopped her forehead on top. Case was reading through Tiffany’s Calculus book. He was trying to understand what she was doing wrong. She was working with a fifth degree polynomial. Tiffany snatched up her paper, wadded

it into a ball, and tossed it across the shop. She laid her head on top of her arms again. Case closed Tiffany's book and looked at her.

"So, how's everything going?"

"Fine," she grumbled.

Case smiled. "Need me to take a look?"

She looked up. "No." Case had worked through a little math in his day. Tiffany had no idea how much. All she knew was Case could glance at a problem and solve it. It pissed her off. Plus, she didn't understand how he came up with the answer half the time. He'd try to explain. That would confuse her even more. Case hopped up and strolled across the shop. He snatched her paper ball off the floor.

"Let me just take a peek."

"No!" Tiffany shouted. She dashed across the shop. Case uncrumpled the piece of paper. "Louis, leave me alone!" She wrapped her arms around Case's waist and reached for her homework. Case held it just out of her reach. Tiffany looked up the side of his arm. "Man, don't do that... thing you do."

Case looked into her eyes. "Come on, Tiffany. Let me help you." He glanced at her work. "I'm sure you just got mixed up when you were factoring."

"Shut-up," Tiffany begged. She reached for the crinkled notebook paper. She stretched her little fingers as far as they would go. Case curled his fingers around hers. He lowered his head and kissed her knuckles. "Lou-is!" she shouted. She started hopping. "Stop it!"

Case pointed at something she had written. "Here, you see? You just forgot to split this up." He held the paper up so she could see. "You should have made two quotients out of this." Tiffany dropped her arms, tilted her head back, and sighed. Case turned around and smiled. He

kissed her forehead and slid his arms around her. She laid her temple against his chest and closed her eyes. “You ever think about getting a house?”

Tiffany opened her eyes halfway. “What?”

“You know, a bigger place.” Case narrowed his eyes. “You’d mentioned it before when you were adopting Gabrielle.”

Tiffany backed away and looked into his eyes. “Um...” She cleared her throat. “You mean like... you and me? Together?”

Case puffed up his lips and looked away. “Well, I guess you and *Chad* could get a place if you’d prefer.”

“Oh, fuck him!” Tiffany shrieked. She threw her hands on her hips and stared at the floor. “Gyad!”

Case chuckled. “Yes, you and me.” He motioned towards the office. “And, Adam and Gabrielle.” Tiffany looked up. She let out a breathy sigh. “It... We don’t *have* to.” Case dropped his hand on Tiffany’s shoulder. “I’m just asking. You know, maybe we could have a place with more than one bedroom at least.” Tiffany folded her fingers in front of her lips. She spun around and headed for the counter. She hobbled onto a barstool and faced him.

“Jeez, you’re...” She looked at the floor and let out an exhausted breath.

“What?” Case asked. He crossed his arms over his chest. “It’s okay. Just tell me.”

Tiffany looked up. “I don’t know. I...” She slid her palms across her jeans. “Do you think we’re ready for that?”

Case pointed at the office with his thumb. “Tiffany, the kids are sleeping on the floor. Look, I love your little shop. But, we need something... bigger.” Tiffany folded her fingers together and dropped her forehead on top. Case exhaled through his nose. He walked to the

counter and sat next to her. Tiffany tapped her fingers against her forehead and looked at him. Case pushed his mouth to the side of his face. He took Tiffany's hand and looked into her eyes. "Okay, let me ask you this." He dropped his free hand over his heart. "And, you don't have to answer me right now. Just think about it, if you want." Tiffany nodded. "Do you love me?" Tiffany looked away. She slid her palm across her jeans. Case patted her back. "It's okay. You don't have to answer right now. Just think about that." Tiffany pinched her eyes shut. Case stood and let his hand go slack. Tiffany squeezed it. Case stopped and looked at her. Tiffany looked up. Her eyes were wide. Her brows were at the sides. She bit her bottom lip.

"Um, do you... love *me*?" she asked.

Case smiled. "Well, yes. I do." He sat back down. "Very much." Tiffany sighed. She looked away. Case slid his fingers across her back. He patted the counter. "Do you feel like you can..." He licked his lips. "Do you feel like you can come home at the end of the day and share anything with me?" Tiffany looked into Case's eyes. She slowly nodded. Case shrugged. "See, I feel the same way." Case let go of Tiffany's hand. He patted his chest. "That means we're soul mates. We're in love." He laid his hands in his lap and tilted his head. Tiffany pressed her lips together and nodded.

"Okay, yeah. I feel that way."

Case smiled. "Do you love me?"

Tiffany closed her eyes. "Yes." She opened them. "I love you, Louis."

Case held his hands out at his sides. "Then, let's get a house, man." Tiffany snickered. "It'll be great." He held out his hands to demonstrate. "Some big place out in the country, with a big, long porch." He looked at Tiffany. "I'm gonna check out some construction sights, tomorrow. Maybe I'll look at some places while I'm out."

Tiffany narrowed her eyes. “Construction sights, huh?”

Case nodded. “Yeah, I’m going to go look for Mr. Nelms.” He threw his hands out at his sides. “Well, his body.” Tiffany scrunched up her nose. “You see, I figure he’s in a block of concrete, somewhere.”

Tiffany pushed her mouth to the side of her face. “Yeah, that makes *perfect* sense.”

Case narrowed his eyes and smiled. “What’s that supposed the mean? Dare you doubt Detective Case?”

Tiffany shrugged. “Um, no. Of course not.” She smiled. “Sure, that’s... possible.” She looked into his eyes. “Whatever you think, sweetheart.” Case turned his head without looking away. He shook his pointer finger.

“You’ll see. I’ll show you.”

Tiffany took Case’s hand and dropped it in his lap. “Okay, then. Yes. I like that idea. You should do that.” She dropped her palms on her thighs and looked away. Case patted her head.

“You look so sleepy.” Tiffany looked at him. “Let’s go have sex.” Tiffany pinched her eyes shut. She dropped her face in her hands. “Then, you can get some sleep.” Tiffany looked up. Case squinted. He dropped his hand on her shoulder. “Or, maybe you should just get some sleep.”

“Oh, forget *that!*” Tiffany replied. She took Case’s hand and dragged him to his feet. “The kids are watching a movie. Come on.” Case glanced at Adam and Gabrielle. They had their movie turned up really loud. They probably hadn’t heard a thing he and Tiffany were saying. Case looked into Tiffany’s eyes. She smiled. “Let’s go... make love.”

Case bent over and kissed her. “Alright.” He took Tiffany to her bedroom and closed the

door.

## Chapter 5: “Tiff”

When Tiffany Haynes was thirteen, no one called her by her name. Her father, Andre called her “Tiff.” Her teachers and principal called her “Terrible Tiff.” Her classmates called her “Tits,” “Titty,” “Bitch,” “Piss,” or “Pussy Lips.” It depended who you asked. There was a basis for each of them. Tiffany’s father said he called her “Tiff” because she wasn’t worth calling by her full name. Her teachers called her “Terrible Tiff” because she was always getting into trouble. She was caught fighting, stealing, cutting class, and swearing on several occasions. Also, she never seemed to get her homework done. When she was twelve, Tiffany was reading in front of her English class. She was wearing a faded, blue blouse. It had a tiny tear in the middle of the collar. The teacher was distracted by something outside. She was staring through one of the windows. There was this terrible bully in Tiffany’s class named David Sweeny. He terrorized Tiffany through high school.

David was sitting on the front row. He had been staring at the little rip in Tiffany’s blouse since she’d stood to read. It was calling his name. He couldn’t take it. While their teacher wasn’t looking, David dashed around his desk. He ran up and slid his finger down Tiffany’s blouse. His finger glided through like a hot knife through butter. He scurried away and plopped down in his seat. Tiffany’s blouse lay wide open. The whole class got to see her tater tots. Tiffany’s eyes popped open. Her jaw dropped. She pressed the book she was reading against her chest and ran out of the room. Their teacher, Ms. Turner never figured out who did it. No one turned David Sweeny in. Nobody dared. That’s how Tiffany got the name “Tits.” “Titty” sounded a lot like Tiffany. Tiffany never thought so. But, all the other kids sure did. So, they called her that as well. They called her that long before David Sweeny ripped her blouse open.

“Bitch” is pretty obvious. Tiffany was always plagued by overpowering emotions. No matter where she went or what she was doing, she inevitably ended up in an argument with someone. A person who met Tiffany five minutes prior might call her “Bitch.” It’s as if the five letter declaration was a universal nickname for her. Once, between classes, Tiffany spilled a drink on herself. It was a bottle of cola she’d purchased from a vending machine. She was carrying it around without a lid. She was also shuffling through her backpack. Out of nowhere, someone bumped into her from behind. Tiffany never did figure out whom. At any rate, she ended up with twenty ounces of cola all over her. It leaked down her yellow sweater. It spread across her red, corduroy slacks. She looked around. Everyone in the hallway was laughing at her. There wasn’t a single kid in the school who didn’t hear about it. Since she was wearing a yellow sweater, the cola looked a lot like urine. That’s how Tiffany got the name “Piss.”

“Pussy Lips” was also started by David Sweeny. Tiffany was walking home from school one day. She wore a purple t-shirt with a pocket and an old pair of white shorts. The shorts stopped three inches above her knees. David and four of his buddies greeted her at the edge of an alley. His buddies were Tyler, Ryan, Troy, and Aaron. David was wearing a denim jacket and khaki slacks. Tyler wore a black jacket and jeans with holes in the knees. Ryan wore a red hoodie and black shorts. Troy was known for his black beanie. It had an insignia on the front. It was a skull and crossbones. He and Aaron wore plaid jackets and baggy jeans. David and his friends were hanging out, waiting for her. Tiffany had a couple of books tucked under her arms. She stopped and faced them, timidly. She wanted to run away. But, she was afraid they would chase her down. “Hey, Piss,” David remarked. Tiffany looked down and exhaled through her nose. She looked at one of the other boys. It was Troy. He was approaching. He had a glass bottle in his hand. Tiffany looked at David.



“W-What do you guys want?” Troy laughed.

“We were wondering if you would play spin the bottle with us,” David told her.

“Yeah,” Ryan remarked. “What do you think there, Tits? You wanna kiss one of us?”

Tiffany let out a shaky sigh.

“You see, we had this bet going that you were lesbian,” Aaron added.

“Yeah,” Troy said. Tiffany didn’t even know what a lesbian was. “You see, I say ‘no way’.” Tiffany looked at David.

“And, I’m right sure of it,” he told her. “So, what do you say, Tiffany? Wanna play?”

Tiffany looked at all of them. “You... guys wanna kiss me?”

“Oh, yeah,” Aaron remarked with a nod.

“Absolutely,” Ryan added. Tiffany didn’t feel like arguing. She decided to let them play their little trick on her, whatever it was. She felt a huge knot in her throat. She swallowed hard.

“Um, okay,” she told them. “I-I guess.” Troy placed the bottle at Tiffany’s feet. She wore a pair of floppy, worn out sneakers. She also wore a pair of white socks with red bands around the tops. They reached halfway up her calves. The necks were wore out and drooping. Troy backed away. He crossed his arms over his chest and grinned.

“Now, you know how this works, right Tiffany?” David asked.

“Um, not really.”

Troy pointed at the bottle. “Well, you just spin that bottle right there,” he explained.

“And, whoever it’s pointing at, they have to kiss you.”

Ryan pointed down his throat. “Bleh!”

“Man, I hope that shit don’t land on me, yo,” Aaron remarked. Tiffany knelt and placed her books on the sidewalk. She sighed and reached for the bottle. She held it still and closed her

eyes.

“Man, hurry up and spin that shit, already,” Ryan told her. Tiffany shook her head. She took either end of the bottle and whirled it around. It made it around twelve times and stopped on Tyler.

“Awe damn, fool!” Tyler protested. He threw his palms over his eyes and stepped forward. The others laughed at him. Tiffany stood and stared at the sidewalk. Her cheeks felt flush.

“Go on and kiss that freak!” Troy shouted. Tyler flipped him off. He stopped in front of Tiffany. She looked up and caught a glimpse of his eyes. He had hazy, blue eyes. Tiffany quickly looked at the ground.

“Um, I’m sorry, Tyler,” she said. “Y-You don’t have to, if you don’t want to.”

“Oh, Titty,” he replied. The boys laughed. “Of course I do.” He put his hand on her shoulder. She shuddered. “I tell you what. Why don’t you close your eyes, okay?” Tiffany looked up at him. She let out a shaky sigh. Troy cupped his hands around his lips.

“Do it!” he shouted.

“Do it!” Aaron added. Tiffany closed her eyes. She hesitated. Then, she pursed her lips. She heard shuffling feet and laughter. Next, she felt something pressed against her lips. It certainly didn’t feel like Tyler’s lips. It felt round and squishy. Tiffany opened her eyes. David had replaced Tyler. He was pressing the tip of a dildo against Tiffany’s lips. His eyebrows fell in the middle. He shrieked with laughter. Tiffany tried to back away. David shoved the dildo into her mouth and slid it back and forth. Tiffany pinched her eyes closed and turned her head.

“Oh!” Ryan shouted.

“Damn, yo!” Aaron yelled. David slid the dildo to the back of Tiffany’s tongue. She

gagged. She shoved him away and fell to her knees. She plopped her hands over her mouth and looked around. David stood in front of his buddies cackling. He pointed at Tiffany.

“What I tell you, huh?!” he shouted. “Pussy Lips!” David’s buddies roared with laughter. Troy fell to the ground and rolled around, howling. From that moment on, Tiffany became known as “Pussy Lips.” Tiffany had it worst when she went by “Tiff.” That’s what her father called her. She hated it. She never understood why he couldn’t just call her “Tiffany.” That was her name. Andre was huge. He stood six foot, six. He tipped the scales with two hundred fifty pounds of rock hard muscle. He spent a lot of time in prison when he was younger. So, building himself up was like an old habit. Andre was bald. His eyes were dark and murky like Tiffany’s. There was an “X” shaped scar above his right eye. A long, curly handlebar mustache stuck out at the sides of his face. He had a propensity to wear sleeveless undershirts. They showed off his jagged, muscular arms. He had arms like tree trunks. They were covered with scars and prison tattoos.

He beat the living shit out of Tiffany at least twice a week. He had done so since she was little. Most of the time, she had no idea why. She would come home some nights, and he’d just be there, waiting. As Tiffany got older, Andre made her more uncomfortable. He would stare at her. Like, Tiffany would be sitting alone for a while. Then, she’d look over her shoulder. She’d find Andre standing there, staring. She first noticed it when she was eleven. She was in her bedroom. She lay on her stomach doing homework. She lay there for an hour scratching away at math problems. She had this odd feeling the entire time. She kept shaking it off. Eventually, she got up to use the restroom. She turned around to find her father. He was standing in the doorway, leaning against the frame. He glared into her eyes. Then, he turned around and headed down the hall. It was unsettling. Tiffany froze. She stood there and stared for another hour.

Finally, she got up the nerve to leave her room. She dashed down the hall and into the bathroom. She did her business as quickly as she could. Then, she raced back to her room and closed the door.

In those days, Tiffany hardly knew anything about sex. She most certainly didn't know anything about perverts. She was about to learn. When Tiffany was thirteen, she was walking home. She lived on Bernard Street. Like most city blocks, Tiffany's was dotted with telephone poles. Three of them were broken in half. They threatened to fall at any moment. There was no sidewalk. Where the street ended, lawns began. Tiffany was a rough looking little girl. A mop of black hair dangled to her chin. She had huge, murky, brown eyes. A person could get lost in them. She wore an old, ragged t-shirt her father loaned her. She didn't have any others that were clean. Her father hadn't taken her to do laundry in three weeks. Tiffany wore a faded pair of blue jeans. They were two sizes too small. They slid up her calves when she sat down. The necks of her socks were stretched out. So, they fell into her shoes, constantly. Her sneakers were filthy. They were grey and white when they were new. Now, they were covered with streaks of brown, yellow, and green. It was mostly from mowing. The soles were floppy and falling off.

Tiffany hobbled down the street. She carried a couple of school books under her arms. That was a common occurrence. Her father hadn't bought her a backpack since she was in second grade. Tiffany was two blocks from home. The sun was setting. Her neighborhood was in shambles. Half the houses were unoccupied. The first house Tiffany passed was an old, brick house. It was dotted with shattered windows. Where glass was broken, wavy mini blinds poked out. There was no door. The whole house looked slanted. It looked like it was caving in. Half the shingles were missing from the roof. The ones that were there were falling off and faded. As

Tiffany passed, she caught wind of something. It wafted across the street from the open door. Tiffany smelled it from time to time when she passed. She didn't know what it was. When she was older, she learned it was the smell of crack cocaine.

The house two lots down had wooden siding and a tin roof. The siding was lime green. There was no driveway. There was only a yard. It was filled with waist high grass and weeds. The roof hung four feet from the front. It became the roof of a deep porch. A dilapidated deck rested below. It was made of faded two by fours. They were warped and pulling apart. There were boards missing in places. The door was open. But, a screen door covered the entrance. Next to the door sat an ancient, old man. Tiffany figured he was in his seventies. He sat in a wooden rocking chair. The chair looked like the deck. It looked like it had been nailed together from scraps of pallets. The rocking chair rocked slowly. The old man wore an oversized pair of spectacles, a faded, plaid shirt, a pair of khaki trousers, and a tall, red cap with a long bill. A set of black suspenders stretched over his shoulders from his waist. He raised a shaky hand and waved as Tiffany passed. He always did. Tiffany smiled. She slid her books under her right arm and waved back.

At the end of the block was another abandoned house. This one was two stories. The roof sloped towards the front and back. Near the front, a dormer with a window stuck out. It had a little roof of its own. It slanted opposite the main roof. The house was made of warped, wooden siding. It wasn't painted. It was just faded and grey. All the windows were boarded up. The lawn was half dirt. Wild, knee high grass poked out everywhere else. An old, rusty, fifties model car was parked in the middle of the lawn. From what Tiffany remembered, it had always been there. There wasn't a single window in the car. It hardly had any paint on it. Mostly, it was covered with primer and rust. It had been beat to death by the sun. The car had a set of

rusty rims. They were caving in. There were no tires. Rather, chunks of bristly rubber stuck out of the rims. The hood had been missing for some time. And, the body was covered with dents.

Andre and his daughter lived in a tiny, little house. Like most of the houses on the block, the outside was paneled with wooden siding. Andre and Tiffany's was painted light blue. It was pale and fading. The roof was covered with light grey shingles. It sloped to the front and back of the house. There was a decrepit, faded, wooden door on the front. It resided on the left. There was a window on the left side of the door. There were two on the right. The windows had bare, wooden borders. The windows were the kind that had a top and bottom pane. The bottom slid up and down. The glass itself had aluminum borders. In front of the door was a floppy storm door with a sagging screen. The frame matched the wooden borders of the windows. The screen was grey and faded. The door had a top and a bottom. A long, narrow turnbuckle stretched from the top right corner to the lower left on the top section. A hideous fence surrounded the backyard. It was made of four different sizes of pickets. Some were new and shiny. Some were old and grey. Some were turned this way and that. In some places, Andre had replaced missing pickets with tree limbs.

The front door opened to a living room. There was a wall on the right side of the living room. There were two bedrooms to the right of that. There was a hallway between the bedrooms and the back wall of the house. A bathroom resided at the right corner of the hallway. A tiny kitchen resided at the left. The front and back lawns were always mowed. Andre was quite particular about that. He made Tiffany mow them twice a week. However, it still looked like shit. It was patchy and filled with weeds. Mowing didn't help much. Usually, the only thing Tiffany got out of it was a mouthful of dirt. Andre drove a cruddy, old van. It was white in some places. The driver's door and a sliding door on the side were primer grey. The paint

was scratched and peeling off. The body was littered with dents. Half the grill was missing. It was usually parked on the front lawn. On this particular evening, it was not.

Tiffany squinted. She stared at her vacant front lawn. She looked at the ground and breathed a sigh of relief. “*THAT’S awesome,*” she whispered. She looked across the street. It was to her left. A bunch of gangsters were gathered around a pair of low riders. They were parked on another lawn. The radio in one of the low riders was playing rap music. It was really loud. Piercing thumps and profanity filled the air. Tiffany counted nine gangsters in all. They stared her down. The lawn was a giant, fleshy knot of tattoos, dew rags, and gold. One of the gangsters went by the name “G.B.” It stood for “Gangsta Benny.” He was basically the leader of the sect in Tiffany’s neighborhood. He’d known Tiffany since she was little. Sometimes, Tiffany’s father would go out drinking. He might be gone for several days. G.B. would come by and play cards with Tiffany. It kept her company. Plus, she usually didn’t have anything to eat. G.B. would take her to eat or bring some Mexican food by.

Tiffany bobbed her head at him. G.B. bobbed his back. A huge, Mexican guy stood next to him. He wore a black, sleeveless shirt and a gold chain. His arms were covered with tattoos. He turned to G.B. with a pair of narrow eyes. G.B. patted his shoulder and leaned towards him. He pointed Tiffany out and explained something. The man crossed his arms over his chest and stared at Tiffany. He wandered towards one of the low riders. He reached through the driver’s window and turned the knob on the radio. The volume of the rap music turned down. It was like turning down the wind. Tiffany’s bowels had been tied in a knot since she’d heard the first note. Now, she felt nice and relaxed. The big guy’s head appeared above the roof of the low rider. He looked at Tiffany. Tiffany smiled. She mouthed the words “Thank you.” He raised his hand. Then, he returned to his spot beside G.B.

Tiffany passed two more houses. Her house was the one after those. She wandered across the lawn and pulled back the screen door. She tried the knob on the door behind it. It was unlocked. That wasn't unusual. She and Andre didn't have anything worth stealing, anyway. Tiffany wandered inside and closed the door. She pinched her eyes shut and wrinkled her nose. The house smelled like a sewer. It usually did. The living room floor was covered with tiles. Well, it was mostly covered with tiles. Some of the tiles were broken. Concrete showed in those places. The tiles were white with faded, pink diamonds. They were decorated with smears of black, brown, and nicotine yellow. A giant television with a wooden frame sat in the corner. It was by the window to the left of the front door. The television had knobs rather than buttons. Two smaller televisions sat side by side atop the large one. They were newer. They had black, plastic frames and buttons. The top, left one was the only one that worked.

Tiffany wandered across the living room and headed for her bedroom. It was the second door on the right. What Tiffany didn't know is that Andre's van *was* there. It was parked in the backyard. A pair of old, willow trees kept it hidden from prying eyes. Andre was hiding in his bedroom, waiting for his daughter to come home. He had been there for the past two hours. The door to his bedroom was open. He was sitting behind it, listening to Tiffany's little footsteps. He breathed quietly through his nostrils. He didn't want Tiffany to notice him just yet. Tiffany glided by his door and entered her bedroom. Andre's pulse doubled. He felt his heart beating in his ears. Tiffany set her books on the floor next to the door. There wasn't a stick of furniture in her bedroom. There wasn't even a light. It was dimly lit by sunlight pouring through the window.

All Tiffany had was a closet and a jagged, worn out mattress. The mattress was slumped in the corner below the window. What few clothes she had were dirty. They had needed to be



washed for some time. They lay in a pile on the floor of Tiffany's closet. The bedroom floor was covered with jagged strips of wood. Most of them were warped and faded. The walls were dotted with holes. Some of them were the size of Andre's fists. Sometimes, he got a little tipsy. Then, he kept his kid up all night punching holes in her bedroom walls. That's what he did when he was being nice. Sometimes, he punched Tiffany instead. Sometimes, he used her head to make holes in the walls. Tiffany kicked off her sneakers and sat on the floor. She faced the window. She crossed her ankles and hugged her knees. Her jeans were way too small. The ends slid above her socks.

Tiffany stared at one of the holes in the wall. It was the size of her head. It resided below the window. Thin streams of dried blood appeared at the bottom. They ran down the wall and pooled on the jagged, faded floor. Something caught Tiffany's eye. Her head jerked to the left. She looked at the wall next to her mattress. A little, white mouse scampered out. He darted eight inches and stood on his hind legs. He held a tiny pair of pink hands to his mouth. Then, he slid them through the hair on his head. He wiped his hair with vigor. He put his hands to his mouth again. This time, he pinched his eyes shut and gave them an energetic rub. He stopped and stared. He lifted his head and sniffed the air. He turned his head about and inhaled. His little nose twitched. Tiny whiskers twitched with it.

Tiffany's eyes popped open. She hadn't eaten in two days. And, she wasn't above scarfing down a cute, little, white mouse. She'd done it many times. He was a pudgy little bastard, too. He was a meal all by himself. Tiffany's tongue slid across her lips. She moved slowly. She eased forward and rested her chest on her knees. The mouse put his tiny pink hands to his mouth. Then, he stopped. Tiffany froze. The mouse stood for a moment. He pinched his eyes shut. He began raking his foot across his ear. He just had an itch. Now, his eyes were

closed. It was Tiffany's chance. She reached forward, leapt towards the wall, and fell on her face. She trapped the mouse between her fingers and the corner between the wall and floor. The little mouse shrieked and squirmed. He bit the tips of Tiffany's fingers. Tiffany squeezed his furry body. She began smashing her fingers against the jagged, wooden floor. She smashed them until the mouse stopped squirming.

She sat Indian style and uncurled her fingers. The little mouse fell to the floor. His white fur was soaked with blood. His mouth and nose still twitched. Tiffany figured she had snapped his neck. She looked at her hands. Her knuckles were peeled and bleeding. Little, white chunks of flesh dangled from her fingers. She slung her blood aside. She held the mouse's body in her right hand. She curled her left fingers around his little face. Then, she twisted his head off. She dropped the mouse's head in the pool of blood where his body had been. Tiffany dug her fingers into the mouse's neck. She tightened her arms and pulled them apart. The mouse's coat began to tear. Tiffany dangled the tiny body in front of her face. She reached up and peeled off the mouse's furry skin. It came off in three, sticky pieces. Blood dribbled to the floor.

Tiffany held the body in her right hand. She dug into its neck with her left fingers. She burrowed into its flesh and slid her fingers down. She ripped out the mouse's entrails and tossed them aside. She ripped the mouse's flesh from its bones. It came off in large chunks. She dropped the mouse's bones on top of its entrails. She sank her teeth into its flesh. It was squishy, supple, and warm. Blood squirted from her teeth with each bite. It splattered her lips and fingers. It dribbled down her chin. The little, white mouse was a chunky fellow. But, he didn't last long. Tiffany chewed up the last little bits of his flesh and swallowed. She stared at her shaking fingers. They were covered with blood. She sucked every drop of blood from her fingers as well. She slid her palms across her chin and looked at them. She'd recovered a little

blood from there as well. She licked her palms clean. She folded her arms across her lap and closed her eyes. She tilted her head back, inhaled through her nose, and exhaled through her lips.

Tiffany faced the ceiling and opened her big, brown eyes. Andre was staring down at her. Tiffany's eyes widened. She planted her palms behind her and wheezed. She cowered and shook with fear. She'd never been so terrified in her life. She panted like a dog. "Uh... H-Hi, Dad," she gasped. She nervously sat up and dropped her hands in her lap. "Um, h-how was *your* day?" Andre smirked. His eyebrows fell in the middle. He knelt until his face was six inches from Tiffany's. He snagged one of his mustache curls between his thumb and forefinger and twisted it. He glared into Tiffany's eyes. She shrugged up her shoulders and quivered.

"Hello, Tiff," Andre replied. "I've been waiting for you." He twisted his fingers through Tiffany's hair and dragged her across the floor. Tiffany curled her fingers around her father's wrist and shrieked. Andre dragged her through her bedroom doorway, down the hall, and through the back door. There was a one and a half foot drop from the back threshold to the ground. Tiffany fell that distance and landed on her butt. She pinched her eyes closed and groaned. Andre dragged her through the weedy backyard. It was filled with stickers. Tiffany had already gathered thirty or so. They burrowed into her flesh. She flattened her arms against her body and crossed her wrists over her stomach. She looked over her shoulder. Andre was dragging her towards a pair of trees at the back corner of the yard. His cruddy, white van was hiding behind them. Tiffany's eyebrows fell at the sides. She let out a breathy sigh. She looked up at her father. He glared back with a sadistic grin.

*"Dad, what are you doing?"* Tiffany gasped. She could barely speak.

"Something I should have done a long time ago." His answer was cryptic and disturbing.

Tiffany had no idea what was going on. But, she knew she was in for a long night. Andre made it to the van. There was a pair of double doors at the back. He threw them out of the way and tossed Tiffany inside. She rolled to a stop on the hard, jagged floor. Andre followed her in, turned, and closed the doors. Tiffany looked around. She was surrounded by junk. It wasn't the usual junk, either. She was confused. There was a pile of rope. There were rolls of duct tape. There were handcuffs and lengths of thin chain. Tiffany noticed something familiar. It lay next to the rope. It was one of those floppy things David shoved in her mouth a while back. There were also girls' clothes. There were little dresses, pairs of panty hose, and a stack of Halloween costumes. There were several costumes. Tiffany saw a princess costume, a fairy costume, one that looked like a bumblebee, and some others. She looked into Andre's eyes. She understood. He'd bought them for her to wear. He wanted to see what she looked like in them. He was fulfilling some kind of sick fantasy. He'd done a lot of things to her. But, none of them were sexual. Andre stole Tiffany's childhood that day. He did things to his daughter that no little girl should ever have to experience. And, it was only the beginning.

Tiffany awoke hanging off the side of her bed. Her shoulder blades rested against the hard, cold floor. The back of her head rested against the wall. Her neck was twisted and aching. Her butt lay on the corner of the mattress. Her arms were twisted up in her red blanket. The blanket was wrapped around her chest. She panted like a dog. She was in her pajamas. They consisted of a white tank top and a pair of blue, flannel pants with white stripes. Tiffany was soaked with sweat. Her heart pounded in her ears. She pinched her eyes shut and whimpered. She jerked her left arm out of her comforter and laid it across her eyes. She began to cry. Case awoke on his right side. He lay on the bed like a normal person. He wore a black t-shirt and a pair of plaid, flannel pants. His frosty, blue eyes popped open. He was staring at the bottom of

Tiffany's foot. It was dimly lit by glowing, green numbers on the alarm clock. The clock rested on a table between the wall and the bed.

"Uh..." Case mumbled. He reached up and tickled Tiffany's foot. Tiffany jerked it away. Case heard her crying. He exhaled through his nostrils. He sat up and flicked on a lamp. It sat on the table next to the alarm clock. Case grabbed a hold of Tiffany's ankle and dragged her onto the mattress. He threw her legs over his lap and looked into her eyes. She took a shaky breath and sighed. "Hi, there," Case remarked. Tiffany tilted her head back and sighed.

"*I, uh... I'm sorry, Louis,*" she gasped. She cleared her throat and looked at him. "I'm sorry, did I wake you up?" Case took her hand and spun her. Now, she was lying next to him.

"You okay?" he asked. He brushed her hair out of her face. Tiffany started to shake. She backed away.

"N-No," she protested. She hopped up and flattened against her bookshelf. She showed Case her palms. "No, I-leave me alone." She dropped her hands, walked around the bed, and headed for the bathroom. Case sat Indian style. He turned and watched as Tiffany passed. Tiffany dashed into the restroom and closed the door. Case stared at the door. After half a minute, he heard Tiffany vomit. Case looked at his lap. He pounded his fists into the mattress, hopped up, and reached for the bathroom door. He stared at his hand in front of the knob. He wasn't sure if he should bother her. He closed his eyes and shrugged. He turned the knob and walked in. Tiffany was sitting in front of the pot. She looked at him over her shoulder. Tears were pouring down her cheeks. She faced forward, tilted her head back, and sighed. Case walked up and sat beside her. Tiffany faced the toilet.

"I'm sorry," she told him.

Case held out his hand. "Come here," he told her. Tiffany stared at Case's hand. She

sighed and dropped hers in his. Case slid her towards him and set her on his lap. He slid his arms around her waist and kissed the side of her head. “What happened?” he asked. Tiffany pinched her eyes shut. “Did you have another dream?” Tiffany buried her eyes in her palms. Case slid her hair behind her ears. “You wanna talk about it?” Tiffany exhaled. She lifted her head, wiped her eyes, and faced him. She pressed her palms together and slid them between her thighs.

“Um, I don’t know,” she replied. Her voice was shaky. Case slid his thumbs across her bottom eyelids. She looked away.

“You’ll *feel* better.” Case touched her left cheek. There were two tiny scars below her eye. Each was shaped like a backwards “S.” They were hardly visible. Case slid his knuckles along the two grooves. Tiffany looked into Case’s wise, blue eyes. Case stared into her murky, brown eyes. He smiled. “Whatever it is, it can’t be *that* bad.”

Tiffany pressed her lips together and licked them. “You ever eat a mouse?” Case narrowed his eyes. Tiffany raised her eyebrows. “Ever been sodomized?” Case looked away. He exhaled through his nostrils. Tiffany laid her palm against his cheek. She turned his head, so he was facing her. “You know what a shit-fist is?”

Case pressed his lips together. “Okay, maybe it *is* that bad.” Tiffany nodded. Case pointed at the commode.

“I’m going to flush this, okay?”

“Okay,” Tiffany replied. She slithered aside. Case hopped up and flushed the pot. He turned around and looked at his girlfriend. She looked up at him. He swept across the floor, snagged her around the waist, and tossed her over his shoulder. “Lou-is!” she shrieked. She smiled a little. “What are you doing?”

“I’m putting you back to bed,” he told her. He flicked off the bathroom light and closed the door. He laid Tiffany on the mattress and yanked off the comforter. He threw it across the bed and evened it out. Tiffany sat up.

“Maybe I should just get up.”

Case pointed at her. “No. Lay back down.” He glanced at the clock. “It’s twelve thirty.”

Tiffany shook her head. “I could get some homework done.”

“Tiffany, I’m not going to *tell* you again.” Tiffany pressed her lips together. She sighed and lay down. “That’s better.” Case smoothed out the covers. Then, he lay next to her. He reached for the lamp next to the clock. Tiffany snatched his wrist.

“*No!*” she gasped. Case looked down. Tiffany’s face was filled with terror. Case slowly nodded. He lay on his back. He slid one arm around Tiffany’s waist and one around her shoulders. Tiffany snuggled up next to him. She rested her head below Case’s chin. “So, you wanna hear about it or not?” Case smiled. He kissed Tiffany’s forehead.

“Yeah, man. Go ahead.”

## Chapter 6: "The Search"

It was raining again. Adam and Gabrielle were in Tiffany's office. It was across the shop from the bedroom. The walls and the ceiling were white. The floor was covered with shiny, black tiles. The black was decorated with stone colored swirls. A grid of white grout lay between the tiles. A long window lay across the far wall. A heavy, wooden door stood to the right of that. It led to a yard out back. On both sides of the door, there was a tall, skinny window. In front of the long window, there was a dark, shiny, oak desk. It was pretty old. So, there were notches, dents, and scuffs in places. A heavy, leather chair sat in front of the desk. It had wooden armrests with padded leather on top. The chair stood on a metallic base with five wheels. A computer tower sat to the right of the desk. It was very outdated. A giant CRT monitor sat on the desk. An old, clacker keyboard and a mouse lay in front. There was a leather couch across from the desk. It rested along the wall, next to another heavy, wooden door. The door led to the shop.

The window behind the desk had a top and bottom. The bottom was up one quarter of the way. Gabrielle and Adam were sitting on the desk. They sat on either side of the monitor. They were passing a cigarette back and forth. Gabrielle had the cigarette at the moment. She took a tiny puff and passed it to Adam. She turned and exhaled through the open window. Gabrielle was wearing the clothes she'd worn the day before. She was wearing them when her others were dirty. She had on a long sleeved shirt with horizontal rows of white, black, violet, and magenta. The sleeves were a little long. They draped across her knuckles. She wore a pair of light blue jeans and a pair of black, canvas shoes. The left one had a broken loop. Case knotted it the day before. Gabrielle's grey, wool coat lay across her lap. Her eye was still black. But, it was less swollen.



Gabrielle rested her feet on the desk and hugged her knees. A pair of pink socks with little hearts appeared below the cuffs of her jeans. Adam wore a black, button up shirt with flames across the bottom. He had on a pair of faded blue jeans and a pair of red, canvas shoes. His leather jacket lay across his lap. Gabrielle looked at Adam and narrowed her eyes.

“This rain, man...” Adam exhaled smoke through the window. He handed Gabrielle the cigarette.

“Yeah, it sucks.” He looked at his girlfriend. She placed the cigarette between her lips. “It’s supposed to do this all week.” Gabrielle smiled. She took a drag and took the cigarette from her lips. She turned and exhaled through the window. She flicked ash through the opening. Then, she placed the cigarette between Adam’s lips. She narrowed her eyes.

“Are you okay?”

Adam touched Gabrielle’s left eye. “That’s a funny question, coming from a girl with a big, fat, black eye.”

“You’ve been kind of quiet.” Adam nodded. He took a drag, exhaled through the window, and handed the cigarette to Gabrielle. “It happened again, didn’t it?”

Adam smacked his lips. “Man, shut-up.”

“Was it a drawing, this time?” Adam looked away. Gabrielle threw her hands out at her sides. “How come every time I get in a fight, you draw a picture of it?”

Adam sighed. “There’s no picture, Gabrielle. Forget it.” Gabrielle pointed at Adam’s backpack. It rested against the wall across the room. It lay on the floor next to a couch.

“Is it in your backpack?” Gabrielle asked. She took a drag, exhaled through the window, and handed the cigarette to Adam. She hopped up and straightened her shirt. She laid her coat on the desk. “Let me see.” Gabrielle dashed across the room. Adam sighed.

“Gabrielle, stop.” He finished the cigarette, tossed it through the window, and closed the window. He stood and slid his hands into his pockets. He laid his leather jacket on the desk. Gabrielle sat across the room with her back against the wall. She had Adam’s backpack in her lap. She removed a three ring binder, found the picture Adam drew, and held the picture in front of her face. She smiled and shook her head. She looked up.

“You’re psychic.”

“Actually, I’m not,” Adam assured her. “You know how I know?” Gabrielle shrugged. Adam narrowed his eyes. “Because there’s no such thing, Gabrielle.” Gabrielle frowned. She waved Adam’s picture through the air.

“Well then, how do you explain this?”

Adam turned and shrugged. “Coincidence.”

Gabrielle scoffed. “You’re psychic, Adam. Just admit it.” Adam looked at her. “I swear. It’s like sometimes... you know exactly what I’m thinking.” She shook her hands. “Like, exactly!”

“I’m a good guesser,” Adam told her.

Gabrielle pointed at him. “What about that thing? You know, that thing you did to Gina?”

Adam shrugged. “Spontaneous Human Combustion?”

Gabrielle shook her head. “You killed her, Adam. You lit that doll on fire, and Gina turned into ash.” Adam smiled. He looked down and exhaled through his nose. “You know I’m right.” Gabrielle grinned. “You *know* it!” Adam flicked his wrist and turned away. “And, Tiffany said later that you could not have done that. She said there’s no *way* that could have worked. You didn’t use any incantations.”

Adam looked up. “Gabrielle, stop. Come on.”

Gabrielle pointed at Adam with his drawing. “You *know* it’s true. You knew exactly what you were doing, Adam.” Adam looked at the floor. Gabrielle threw her hands out at her sides. “Would you just admit it?”

Adam looked up. “I think Tiffany had another rough night.”

Gabrielle dropped her arms. “You see? How do you know that?”

Adam shrugged. “I don’t.”

“Bullshit.” Gabrielle pointed towards the door. “I bet you we go out there and wait. And, when Tiffany comes out, she looks even shittier than she did yesterday.”

Adam raised his palms. “There’s no way I could possibly know that.”

Gabrielle smiled and nodded. “And yet, she’ll come out looking like crap again.” She shook her pointer finger. “Even though her and Case went to bed at like nine thirty last night, she’ll still look like crap. And, you already knew about it.” Gabrielle raised her palms at the sides of her face. “That’s amazing.” She dropped her hands in her lap. “Why don’t you see that?”

Adam pressed his lips together. “Doesn’t help her, any.”

Tiffany looked like shit again. She stumbled out of the bathroom with a towel tied under her arms. Her hair was messy and wet. It hung in her face in wavy clusters. Case had taken a shower and dressed. He wore a black t-shirt. It was littered with thick, grey stripes from top to bottom. He wore a pair of black jeans and a pair of black, canvas shoes. He was ready to greet the day. The night before, he’d laid awake long enough to hear about Tiffany’s dream. Then, he went back to sleep. He looked at Tiffany. Her bottom eyelids were violet and puffy. Case exhaled through his nose. He figured she laid in his arms all night, crying.

“You didn’t ever get back to sleep, did you?” Case asked. Tiffany stopped and looked at him. Her eyes were open halfway. She looked at the floor and plopped on the edge of the bed. She pointed towards the restroom.

“Did the kids take a shower, yet?”

Case sat next to Tiffany. “The shower was wet when I got in.” He cupped his fingers below her chin. He turned her head, so she was facing him. “If I told you to go back to bed, you’d just smile and shake your head, wouldn’t you?” Tiffany smiled. She looked away and shook her head. Case patted her shoulder. “Bless your heart. Are you going to be okay?” Tiffany pressed her palms together. She rested them between her thighs.

“I just need to wake up.” She looked up. “You need to get the kids to school.”

Case nodded and stood up. “You want me to come back? Hang out?”

Tiffany rubbed her eyes. “Don’t you have to go look for Mr. Nelms?”

Case shrugged. “He’s dead. He can wait.”

“What if he’s not?”

“Then, he’s hiding out. He can still wait.” Tiffany laughed. Case smiled. “No, you’re right. I should get to work.” He waved his pointer finger. “I can look for us a place while I’m out.”

Tiffany pointed at him. “To rent. Don’t you go out and buy a damn house, today.” Case laughed. “I know how you are.”

Case threw his hands out at his sides. “To rent. Of course.” He dropped his hands. “You want me to take you to lunch, later?” Tiffany’s eyebrows fell at the sides. She buried her eyes in her palms. “Tiffany...” Case moaned. “You’re always crying.” Case sat next to her. “Come here, honey.” He wrapped his arms around Tiffany’s shoulders. Tiffany rested her head

against Case's chest. "You gotta finish your homework, huh?" Tiffany nodded. Case kissed her forehead. "Okay." Tiffany folded her arms across her lap and stared at the floor. "I'll take the kids to school. And, I won't come back until I pick them up." Tiffany looked up. "Then, I'll take you and the kids to dinner. Surely you'll be finished by then." Tiffany sighed. Case kissed her lips. He stood and faced her. Tiffany looked into his eyes.

"One of these days, I'm going to pay you back."

Case pressed his lips together. "You know how you can pay me back?" Tiffany shrugged. "You can go back to bed and get some sleep." Tiffany showed Case her palms.

"I have to do some homework." She patted her thighs. "*I have to.*"

"Actually, you don't," Case replied. He nodded. "But, you're going to anyway." Tiffany looked away and smiled. Case rested his palm at the side of her face. He turned her head and kissed her again. "I'll catch you later." Tiffany looked at her lap and nodded. There was a brown, leather couch across from the bed. It rested along the wall, next to the door. Case's wool coat lay over the right arm. The coat was decorated with red and white plaid. Case snagged a hold of his jacket and left the bedroom. Adam and Gabrielle were sitting at the counter. Gabrielle's elbow rested on the counter. Her chin rested in her palm. Adam's arms were folded on the counter. His forehead rested on top. Case closed the door to Tiffany's room. He threw his coat around his shoulders. "You guys ready?" he asked.

Gabrielle hopped to her feet. "Yeah, man. Let's get outta here."

Case looked at Adam. "Adam?"

"Bite me," he groaned. He looked up. Gabrielle weaved her hands through Adam's arm and dragged him to his feet.

"Come on," she told him. "Let's go."

Adam looked at his girlfriend. “Easy for *you* to say.” Gabrielle frowned. Her eyebrows fell in the middle. She put her finger to her lips. Adam smiled and showed her his palms. Case snagged his umbrella. It was lying on the counter. Case held the umbrella by the hook and pointed towards the door with the tip.

“Let’s go, guys.” Case, Adam, and Gabrielle headed for the door. It was a glass door with a steel handle. Adam pulled the handle. A little bell dinged. The sound of rain came pouring in. It was raining just as bad as the day before. Gabrielle, Adam, and Case walked through the door and stopped. The door closed by itself. A sloped row of fabric hung across the front of the shop. It was folded at the front. Little curves of fabric dangled from the fold. The fabric was tan with an amber border. Rainwater poured from the amber curves of fabric. So, Case, Adam, and Gabrielle were surrounded by a waterfall. Case flipped open his umbrella and held it above their heads. He offered it to Adam. “Here,” he remarked. “Hold this while you’re not doing anything.” Adam looked up and narrowed his eyes. He slid his fingers around the hook of the umbrella and held it up. “Thank you,” Case told him. He reached back with both hands. He smacked Adam and Gabrielle over the backs of their heads.

“Ow!” Gabrielle snarled. She leaned forward and dropped her palm on the back of her skull. Adam rubbed the back of his head. He glared at Case. Case took his umbrella back.

“That’s for smoking in the office,” he told them.

Adam faced the rain waterfall. “Oh.” Gabrielle dropped her arm and looked up. She scrunched up her nose.

“Sorry.” Case snagged his keys and walked through the waterfall. Adam and Gabrielle stayed close. Adam threw his hands out at his sides.

“It’s raining, Louis. What were we supposed to do?”

Case stuck a key into the rear, passenger door of his brown car. “Quit.” He held the umbrella above the door and opened it. Gabrielle hopped in and scooted over. Adam followed her in. He looked up at Case.

“Don’t think so.”

Case motioned towards the front of the shop. “Smoke out here, next time.” Adam pressed his lips together and nodded. Case shut the kids’ door and headed for the driver’s door. Gabrielle unlocked it. Case closed the umbrella and hopped in. He adjusted his rearview mirror. He turned around and looked at the kids. He slid his fingers across his chest. “You guys seen those scars on Tiffany’s chest?”

“Yeah,” Gabrielle replied. She held up her left palm. She slid her right fingers across her forearm. “She has them on her arm, too.”

Case nodded. “Her father used to put out cigarettes on her.”

Adam narrowed his eyes. “I know.”

Case threw his hands out at his sides. “And, you still wanna smoke those damn cigarettes?”

Adam shrugged. “They’re so tasty.” Case smirked and rolled his eyes. He turned around, buckled his safety belt, and fired up the engine.

“They taste like burning tires.” Case drove to a bakery on Desmond Road. It was a few blocks away. He got himself, Adam, and Gabrielle some donuts. Then, he drove Adam to the edge of the school parking lot. It was early. So, there weren’t many cars. Case threw the car into park. Rain was pouring down the windows. It was hard to see out. “You want me to walk you to the door?” Case offered.

“Nah,” Adam replied. He unbuckled his seatbelt. “I’ll just swim for it.” Case laughed.

He jerked his door handle and shoved at the door. It wouldn't budge. Case pushed his mouth to the side of his face. He held the handle back and kicked the door. It swung open and creaked on its hinges. The whole car shook. Adam grabbed his black backpack. It was lying on the floor. Adam threw it over his shoulders and looked at Gabrielle. She threw her arms around him. Adam hugged her back. "This is bullshit," he told her. Gabrielle laughed. "Don't laugh!" Adam pulled away and glared into his girlfriend's eyes. She returned his gaze with a big, toothy smile. Adam shook his head. "I think *I'm* going to get suspended."

Gabrielle pointed at him. "Yeah, man. That'd be awesome." Adam smacked his lips. Case opened his door. He held the umbrella above the top of the car.

"Come on, Adam." Case looked at Gabrielle. "You gonna hop up front?" Gabrielle nodded. She rolled over the backs of the front seats and plopped down on the passenger's side. Adam looked at Case. He shook his head. Case smiled.

"It's not fair, is it?"

"Hell no, it's not." Gabrielle tilted her head back and laughed. Adam hopped out. There was a giant splash when he hit the parking lot. He turned and closed the door. He and Case headed for the front of the school.

"Don't worry," Case told him. "She's going to pay for it, today."

Adam looked up and smiled. "Good. That makes me feel better." He faced forward. "What are you going to make her do?"

"I don't know, yet," Case replied. "Me and her are going to go looking for a body." He looked at Adam. "I know *that*."

"Really?" Adam asked. He looked up. "You working a case?"

"Yeah, Jerry Nelms," Case told him. "His wife hired me. He's been missing for a couple



of months.” They faced forward.

“That sucks, man.”

“Yeah,” Case replied. “We’re gonna go house hunting, too.”

Adam looked up. “What?”

Case looked down. “I’m going to find us a bigger place. Me and Tiffany were talking about it last night.”

Adam shoved Case’s arm. “Nuh-uh!”

“Yeah, man.” They faced forward.

“Alright,” Adam remarked. He drew in his fist. “Find some place cool. Not some piece of crap. Okay?”

Case nodded. “I’ll try my best. Before we do anything though, I’ve got to take that girl shopping.” He threw his free hand out at his side. “She doesn’t have any clothes.”

Adam shrugged. “She could just go naked. It’s cool.” Case laughed. They arrived at the entrance. Adam opened the door on the right. Case dropped his hand on Adam’s shoulder. Adam looked up. Case lifted his hand and pointed at him. “Don’t get into trouble, alright?”

Adam flicked his wrist. “Oh don’t worry about it, man.” He pointed at his chest. “I don’t get caught.”

“I’m serious,” Case warned. “I can’t have two of you lying to Tiffany. One’s bad enough.”

“I would just tell her.”

Case nodded. “Well, good for you. I wish your little girlfriend would do the same.”

Adam nodded. “I’ll talk to her, okay?”

“You do that.” Case held out his hand. Adam gave him five. “Later, man.”

“Later,” Adam replied. “Thanks.” He walked inside. The door closed behind him. Case returned to the car and plopped down on the driver’s seat. He closed his umbrella and tossed it in the back seat. Gabrielle looked at him.

“So, what’re we doing today, boss?”

Case looked at her. “Let’s go shopping.” Gabrielle squealed. She bounced in her seat and clapped her hands. “You like that, I take it.”

Gabrielle threw her arms around Case’s waist. “That is such a good idea.” She let go and returned to her seat. “So, where all do you wanna go?” Case produced Gina’s cell phone from an inner coat pocket. He looked at the tiny window on the outside. It read “7:47.”

“Well, it’s almost eight,” he reported. “And, Tiffany’s given us a day pass.”

“Oh. Are you going to take her to lunch, today?”

“No,” Case replied. Gabrielle looked at her lap and nodded. “I guess we can pretty much shop all morning.” Gabrielle looked up and grinned. Case smiled back. “Then, we can go to lunch.”

“And, after that?” Gabrielle asked.

“After that, we’ve got to look for Mr. Nelms.”

Gabrielle scrunched up her nose. “You mean the John Doe guy?” Case nodded. He fired up the engine. He and Gabrielle threw on their seatbelts. “Well, where do you think he is?”

“Dead,” Case replied. Gabrielle faced forward. Her eyes popped open. Case pulled away from the curb with a snicker. “We’re going house hunting, too.”

Gabrielle faced him. “Really?”

“Yes. So, we’re going to try to find some places that have had recent construction.” He

looked at Gabrielle. “Fresh concrete, okay?”

Gabrielle threw her hands out at her sides. “Huh?”

Case shrugged. “Kind of a two for one.”

Gabrielle dropped her forehead in her palm. “I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

“Good,” Case replied. He patted her shoulder. “Keep your head up.” Gabrielle lifted her head and glanced around. “Be looking for fresh concrete.” Gabrielle nodded. She looked at Case.

“So, we’re... getting a place?” Case looked into her eyes. He smiled. Gabrielle faced forward. “Cool.”

It was after eleven. Tiffany was asleep in her office. Her arms were folded on her desk. Her forehead lay on top. All she intended to do was rest for a minute. It was a mistake. Tiffany lay there, peacefully. The only sound in the room was the drumming of raindrops against the window. Tiffany waited for Case and the kids to leave. Afterwards, she threw on a white turtleneck, a pair of faded blue jeans with holes in the knees, and a pair of rainbow colored socks. She wore the necklace Case bought her and all her rings. Tiffany awoke with a shudder. Her big, brown eyes popped open. She stared at her computer screen. It was sitting in front of her. A screen saver was going. It was a 3-D animation. It simulated traveling through a 3-D tunnel. The tunnel had peaks and valleys. It curved to the right, dipped, and curved to the left. The screen flashed, and a new sequence started. The new sequence applied a different texture to the tunnel walls. A slightly different animation began. Tiffany exhaled. She patted the right arrow on her keyboard. The screen saver went away. Tiffany glanced at the clock. She’d only been asleep for a few minutes. She eased back and relaxed.

Tiffany was writing a ten page paper for her English class. She'd read an article about sexual discrimination. Now, she had to argue for or against it. It didn't interest her in the least. Tiffany rested her elbows on the desk and rubbed her eyes. She sighed and looked at the bottom, right corner of the screen. She was on page eight. She was exhausted. It was so boring. Tiffany thought about calling Case. He could pick her up for lunch. Tiffany shook her head. "*No...*" she groaned. Even though he'd offered to take her, she didn't want to bother him. She felt like things were going pretty well with him. She didn't want to screw it up. "Am I too needy?" Tiffany asked the open air. Silence was the answer she got. Actually, Tiffany didn't hear silence. She heard fuzzy ringing. She'd gone without sleep for days at a stretch before. That's one thing she noticed. Whenever it was quiet, she heard a faint ring. Apparently, that was part of it. Tiffany also noticed shadows in the corners of her vision. She would turn her head suddenly. But, the shadows would disappear.

"*Waking dreams,*" Tiffany mumbled. She tilted her head back and yawned. It made her dizzy. She pinched her eyes shut and dropped her forehead in her palms. She rubbed her eyebrows and looked up. She tried reading the last sentence she'd typed. She couldn't focus on the letters. She narrowed her eyes and concentrated. She stared at a gap between two letters in the last word. She couldn't figure out what to do from there. She closed her eyes and sighed. She tilted her head to the side and smacked her cheek a couple of times. The side of her face tingled. Tiffany opened her eyes and blinked. She glared at the first word of the sentence. The letters looked out of order. Tiffany focused. It was the word "their." She was trying to read it as "her." It finally clicked. Tiffany's head was killing her. She pressed her fingertips against her temples and pushed them back. Her stomach growled. She narrowed her eyes and looked towards the other end of the shop. She realized her mistake. She didn't have anything to eat.

She dropped her palms on the desk and stared at her fingernails. Each was painted a different color.

Case sat in a department store. He was sitting on a short, leather bench in front of a wall of mirrors. Each mirror was a door to a dressing room. All but one was open. Gabrielle was behind the closed one. Case sat Indian style. His palms were against the seat. His wrists were facing out. His head was tilted to the side. The mirror door directly in front of him was the closed one. He stared at his reflection. He was thinking about Tiffany. *"She really looked like shit, this morning,"* he whispered. He looked to his right. It was as though he was looking at someone. *"I'll be glad when this week's over."* Case had a wild imagination. He not only talked to himself. He went to the trouble of imagining the person he was talking to. Since he'd stopped drinking, he started naming them. He had five imaginary friends in all.

He was talking to Brandy. Case envisioned Brandy as being kind of nerdy. He imagined her with strawberry, chin length hair, big blue eyes, glasses with thick, oval lenses, a white sweater, a pair of khaki slacks that were a little short, and a pair of brown, leather dress shoes. Since she was sitting, a pair of white socks appeared above the tops of her leather clodhoppers. Why she should look that way, Case had no idea. She wasn't a fantasy or anything like that. She was just someone intellectual to talk to when none of his real friends were around. She helped him reason things out. Case thought about Brandy's response to what he'd whispered. He imagined her shyly looking away and nodding. Case narrowed his eyes. He looked up and searched the ceiling. He imagined Brandy doing the same. There was a tiny glass dome at the end of the wall of mirror doors. Case knew the glass dome hid a camera. That bothered him. Anyone could be watching him in a hidden room in the back of the store. But given the camera's location, Case just needed to turn his head to the right when he moved his lips. Then, no one

would see him talking to himself.

“*You think she finished her homework, yet?*” Brandy whispered. Case looked to his right. He pressed his lips together and shrugged.

“*You wanna call her?*” Brandy scrunched up her nose. Case faced forward. “*Yeah, me neither,*” he mumbled. “*I don’t want to bother her.*” The mirror in front of Case swung forward. Gabrielle’s head popped out. She looked at Case with a pair of big, blue eyes.

“Is anyone looking?” she asked.

Case smiled. “Are you dressed?” Gabrielle tilted her head back and sighed. Case hopped up and walked towards her. “Come on out, man. Let me see.” He stopped on the other side of the door. He turned his back to the door and crossed his arms over his chest. He looked towards the edge of the door and waited for Gabrielle to come out. She sighed again. Case chuckled. “It can’t be *that* bad.” Gabrielle hobbled around the mirror door. Her arms lay slack. Her head was tilted to the side. She wore a turquoise turtleneck and a pair of black jeans. Case threw his hands out at his sides. “You look cute,” Case told her. Gabrielle smacked her lips. “Come here.” Case took her arm and turned her. He closed the door so she could see herself. He stood behind her and dropped his hands on her shoulders.

“I look like a dork,” Gabrielle remarked.

Case narrowed his eyes. “No, you don’t.” He looked at the top of her head. “Who told you that?” Gabrielle shrugged. Case patted her shoulder. “I think you look very pretty.” He faced the mirror. “You’re wearing what you always wear.”

Gabrielle scrunched up her nose. “Don’t say that!”

Case looked away and snickered. “I thought you *wanted* to go shopping.” He met Gabrielle’s eyes in the mirror. She smiled and looked up.

“I really just wanted to hang out with you.”

Case smirked. “We’re getting these.” Gabrielle looked at the floor and nodded. Case cracked the door and pointed inside. “Now, go try something else on.”

Gabrielle looked at Case’s reflection. “Okay.” She returned to the dressing room and closed the door. Case reclaimed his seat. He imagined Brandy sitting next to him. She was smiling.

*“She looks pretty in that.”*

Case turned to his right and smiled. *“She’s so cute, and she doesn’t even know it.”*

*“That Adam...”*

Case narrowed his eyes and nodded. *“He’s a cool cat, man. They’re like peanut butter and jelly.”* Case imagined Brandy giggling. *“Adam’s a good kid... for the most part. He’ll take good care of her.”* Brandy nodded. Case looked at the mirror in front of him. He sighed. *“I wish I could get those two to quit smoking. It sucks. They won’t listen to me.”*

Brandy narrowed her eyes. *“How long did you smoke?”* Case tilted his head back and narrowed his eyes. He looked to his right.

*“Ten years, I think.”*

Brandy nodded. *“And, you quit because of Tiffany?”*

Case shrugged. *“Wasn’t that nice of me?”* Case pointed at Brandy. He did it discreetly. He didn’t want anyone to think he was nuts. *“You think I can get Adam to quit for Gabrielle?”* Brandy looked at her lap. Case sat Indian style. He rested his elbow on his knee. He leaned forward and stroked his chin. He narrowed his eyes. *“How could I...”* He looked to his right. *“How would that work?”* Brandy looked up. Case imagined her eyes were narrowed as well.

*“I don’t know. I got nothing.”*

Case faced forward and stroked his chin. “*There has to be something...*” Case pondered that for a good, long while. He narrowed his eyes. He stared at a corner where the carpet and wall of mirrors met. Eventually, Gabrielle was standing in front of him. Case snapped out of it and looked up. He lifted his head and looked Gabrielle over. She wore a pair of white, knee high socks with horizontal black bands. She also wore a denim skirt and a long sleeved shirt. Like the socks, the shirt was white with black, horizontal bands. Case looked into Gabrielle’s eyes and smiled. “I like it.”

Gabrielle scrunched up her nose. “This is the last thing I’m trying on.”

Case nodded. “How many things is that?”

Gabrielle motioned towards herself. “If I buy *this*?” She listed things on her fingers. “That’s three pairs of jeans, two shirts, one sweater, one blouse, one skirt, one pair of boots...” She pointed towards the dressing room. “One pair of shoes...”

Case pointed at her feet. “And, one pair of socks.”

Gabrielle looked down and smiled. “I like these. I thought I’d try them on.”

Case shrugged. “Okay. That’s better than the nothing you had before.” He pointed towards the dressing room. “Go change back, and we’ll go buy all this. Then, we can go get some lunch.” Gabrielle nodded. She hurried into the dressing room and closed the door. Case thought about Tiffany every time he said “lunch.” He shook his head. He looked to his right. “*I’m calling her.*” He imagined Brandy shrugging. He looked at his lap and sighed. “*I’m calling her.*” He reached into his jacket, took out Gina’s cell phone, and stared at the cover. He looked at the little heart with Gina’s name on it. It always gave him a funny feeling. After all, Gina had turned out to be a complete psycho. Also, Adam killed her.

“*Just do it!*” Brandy shrieked. Case looked to his right. He imagined Brandy with an



impatient glare. She threw her arms out at her sides. Case pressed his lips together and exhaled through his nose. He returned Gina's cell phone to his jacket.

*"Gabrielle's with me,"* he whispered. *"I promised I wouldn't tell."*

Brandy shrugged. *"Leave her with Paloni."* Case looked away. He cupped his hand over his lips and snickered. *"He'll take care of her."* Case held his belly. He leaned back and chuckled, quietly. He patted his thigh. Then, he looked to his right.

*"That would serve her right, too."*

*"Damn skippy,"* Brandy replied.

Case smiled. *"I'm not going to do that to her."*

Brandy looked at Case from the tops of her eyes. *"Are you protecting her or Paloni?"*

Case stroked his chin. *"Hmm..."* Finally, Gabrielle came out. It took her forever. Case took her to a register, and they cashed out. Afterwards, Case took Gabrielle to Burger Land. He parked in front of the entrance and killed the engine. Gabrielle looked up at him. She pleaded with her eyes.

*"Seriously?"* she asked.

Case looked at her and shrugged. *"I thought it was your favorite."*

Gabrielle stared at the entrance. *"Not anymore."*

Case nodded. *"We could always go get Tiffany."* Gabrielle's head whirled around. Her eyes popped open. *"Then, we could go wherever you want."* Gabrielle's arms went limp. She faced forward, tilted her head back, and sighed.

*"Let's go..."* She reached for the door handle. She narrowed her eyes and looked out the window. *"It's pouring down rain, still."* She looked at Case. Her eyebrows fell at the sides.

*"This sucks, man. I'm so unhappy."*

Case looked into her big, blue eyes. “Tell her, Gabrielle.” Gabrielle smacked her lips. She crossed her arms over her chest and looked at the floor. Case patted her shoulder. “You’ll feel better.” Gabrielle looked up. She squinted.

“I’m going to punch you in the nose.”

Case squinted and made an “o” with his lips. “Is that so?” He snaked his arms around Gabrielle’s waist. Then, he dug his fingers into her ribs. Gabrielle squirmed away with a shriek.

“Don’t you *dare* tickle me, you bastard!” Case scooted towards her. Gabrielle slid through his arms, rolled over the back of her seat, and dropped to the floor. Her head popped up. She was grinning from ear to ear. Case smiled back. He rested his arm on the back of his seat. Gabrielle jumped away. She plopped down on the back seat and pointed. “You leave me alone!”

“Oh, no,” Case told her. “Come on.” He motioned towards his chest. “Come here and punch me in the nose.”

Gabrielle shook her pointer finger. “I’m not going anywhere *near* you!”

“Yeah?” Case sprang to life. He reached over the backs of the front seats and snagged a hold of Gabrielle’s wrists.

“No!” she screamed. She squirmed and tried to pull away. Case flipped her around and held her against his chest. He dragged her over the backs of the seats and set her down. He snaked his arms around her waist and held her. Gabrielle looked around. “Somebody! Please!” Case cackled. He wrapped his arms around Gabrielle’s shoulders. Gabrielle let out a breathy sigh and relaxed. Case looked into her eyes. Gabrielle looked back. She shuddered. She fought away a smile. “Louis, leave me alone.”

Case patted her head. “Hey, we’ll go wherever you want. Okay?” Gabrielle faced

forward. Then, she looked back.

“I’ll go anywhere but here.”

Case nodded. “Let’s go get a big, fat steak.”

Gabrielle’s eyes lit up. “Okay.” Case loosened his arms. Gabrielle slid away, returned to her seat, and buckled her safety belt. Case shook his pointer finger.

“I really want to go get Tiffany.” He faced forward and fired up the engine. Gabrielle raised her palms.

“Will you stop? I’m sorry!” Case chuckled. Gabrielle dropped her hands in her lap and looked at him. Her eyebrows fell to the sides. Her mouth was open a little. Case peeled away.

He drove to Slow Frank’s. It was a little steakhouse five blocks away. There was a life size, concrete cow out front. It stood next to the entrance of the parking lot. It was painted white with brown spots. The Slow Frank’s logo was painted on the side facing the road. The parking lot was small. There were twenty places to park along two rows. Slow Frank’s was an old, red, brick building. The front was long. The sides were narrow. A pair of black doors resided in the middle of the front wall. There were small round windows near the tops of the doors. On the inner edges, shiny plates of steel hovered near the middle. There were five windows on both sides of the doors. A table rested next to each. There were ten windows with ten other tables across from those. There was enough space between the two rows to drive a truck through.

The floor was covered with blue tiles and a grid of black grout. The tables were made of dark, rustic wood. They were old and rough looking. Four chairs were scattered around each table. They matched the tables. The kitchen resided at one end of the restaurant. The restroom resided at the other. Case and Gabrielle sat near the middle. They sat across from one another. Their window was opposite the parking lot. The view behind Slow Frank’s was much more

interesting than the parking lot out front. A giant air conditioner unit sat on the other side of the window. The ground was covered with concrete squares. They were five foot by five foot. There were five rows of squares. Across the second and fourth rows, there was a hole in every third square. An elm tree was planted in each hole. They'd been there for some time. It was late fall. So, most of the trees' leaves were on the ground. They were curly and brown. They swirled around a pool of rainwater.

Case set his fork on his plate. He laid it next to a knife. The plate was empty. Case had just finished off a ten ounce sirloin, a fully loaded baked potato, and two giant rolls. He slouched in his seat and reached for his drink. It was a glass of iced tea, half full. Case took a sip and sighed. He smiled at Gabrielle. Gabrielle held her fork in front of her face. The last bite of her steak was on the end. She smiled at Case. She dropped the last bite between her teeth and set her fork on her plate. She left the peel of her potato behind. Otherwise, her plate was also clean. Case pointed at her.

"Cheesecake?" Gabrielle nodded. Case narrowed his eyes. "Strawberries?" Gabrielle nodded harder. She finished chewing. She washed the last of her sirloin down with a sip of tea. Case spotted their waitress. He bobbed his head. Their waitress finished taking another party's order. Then, she walked to Case and Gabrielle's table.

"You guys ready for dessert?"

Case held up his first and second fingers. "Two slices of cheesecake," he replied. "With strawberries." Their waitress wrote something on a notepad. She looked up and smiled.

"Okay. Let me take your plates."

"Thank you," Case replied. He and Gabrielle handed her their plates. Their waitress stacked them on her arm and walked away. Case looked at Gabrielle.

“I have to use the restroom.”

Gabrielle took a sip of tea and set down her glass. “Thanks for sharing.” Case smiled. He hopped up and wandered to the other end of the restaurant. The walls were covered with large, rectangular tiles. They were arranged like bricks. There was a wall at the end of the restaurant. A pair of double doors like the ones out front led to the restrooms. Case pushed through the doors. He entered a narrow hallway. The walls were covered with the same tiles as outside. There was a men’s restroom on Case’s left and a women’s restroom on his right. He pushed through the door on the left. It eased shut behind him. A sink, a urinal, and a stall were arranged along the right hand wall. Case stood in front of the urinal and undid his britches. He looked around while he peed. The restroom walls were also covered with rectangular tiles arranged like bricks. They were yellow. The ones outside were red-orange.

Case finished, buttoned his jeans, and zipped his fly. He reached for a chrome handle at the top of the urinal. His hand stopped halfway. Case looked at the floor and narrowed his eyes. He tapped the floor with his foot. He was standing on fresh concrete. It had fully cured within the past month. He could tell. Case flushed the urinal and turned around. He studied the floor. There wasn’t a single crack, anywhere. Case washed his hands and left the restroom area. He returned to his table and sat down. He faced the front of the restaurant. Gabrielle studied his expression. He looked troubled.

“Louis?” Gabrielle asked. “Are you okay?”

Case looked at her. “Where’s our waitress?”

## Chapter 7: “Recent Construction”

Case and Paloni stood in the doorway of the men’s restroom at Slow Frank’s. The door lay against the wall behind them. Case and Paloni each held a pair of ear muffs. They wore safety glasses. They looked at each other. Then, they dropped the ear muffs over their ears. The bathroom floor was a disaster. The concrete was now a pile of rubble. Case nodded, and two men fired up jack hammers. They had dug to the foundations. According to Slow Frank, the floor was not the only thing that had been freshly poured. The foundations were redone as well. Paloni and Case crossed their arms over their chests. Case narrowed his eyes. Paloni scrunched up his nose. Gabrielle walked up from behind. She squeezed between them. Case and Paloni stepped aside. Gabrielle was covered with cement dust. It was all over her clothes and her face. Her hair was a mess. Like Paloni and Case, Gabrielle wore safety glasses and ear muffs. She looked exhausted.

She threw a pair of suede gloves over her hands and looked over her shoulder. Her arms went slack. She exhaled heavily. Case pointed at a spot in the adjacent corner. Gabrielle studied it. It was untouched. Gabrielle looked at Case. Her eyebrows fell at the sides. She pleaded with her eyes. Case pushed his mouth to the side of his face. He reached for his phone. Gabrielle bowed her head and showed him her palms. She searched the floor, bent over, and recovered a pickaxe. Then, she headed for the corner where Case pointed. Case dropped his hand and smiled. Paloni looked at Case. He motioned towards the eating area with his head. Case nodded. He and Paloni walked down the restroom hallway, wandered through the eating area, and emerged on the parking lot. It was raining cats and dogs. There was an overhang above the entrance. A waterfall surrounded Paloni and Case. The doors closed behind them.

Case and Paloni removed their ear muffs. Paloni rested his around his neck. Case held

his at his side. Paloni looked into Case's eyes.

"You'd better not be jerking me around."

"Look in the foundations," Case replied. "I'm telling you. He's in there."

Paloni faced forward. "Do you know how much this is costing the city?" Case faced forward. He narrowed his eyes.

"No. How much is a body worth, these days?" Paloni smiled and shook his head. He wore a white shirt with rolled up sleeves, brown suspenders with a gun holster, a pair of black slacks, and shiny, black shoes. The gun was missing from Paloni's holster. He also wore a black tie. It was loose and dangling from his neck. Paloni threw his hands behind his head and closed his eyes. He twisted his upper body from side to side. He looked at Case.

"Captain Ford's coming by."

Case faced him. "Good. He could use the exercise."

"Case, he's gonna bite off a chunk of your ass."

Case nodded. "I'll bet." He faced forward. "Fat bastard."

Paloni dropped his arms. "I'm serious, Case."

"Yeah? Well, I don't work for him anymore." Paloni pushed his mouth to the side of his face and nodded. "I don't have to hold my tongue."

"You do if you want our help in the future."

Case looked at the ground. "Hmm." Captain Ford's car appeared in the distance. It was an eighties model. It looked similar to Case's. But, Ford's was a different make. It was light blue. Case looked up. "Oh, joy. There's the prick, now." Paloni smirked. He produced a pack of cigarettes from the front pocket of his slacks. He opened it and offered one to Case. Case narrowed his eyes and stared at Paloni's cigarette pack. He looked into Paloni's eyes. Paloni

shrugged. He snagged himself a cigarette, placed it between his lips, and returned the pack of cigarettes to his pocket. Case glared at Ford's car. It rolled down the street, coasted across the parking lot, and stopped in front of him. Ford's wipers were on high. They sloshed buckets of rain aside. Case looked at Paloni. "I hope he's got an umbrella."

Paloni had a lighter in his hand. He cupped his hand over the lighter and flicked it to life. There was an opening where his index curled around. He poked the cigarette through the opening. When he pulled his face away, the cigarette was lit. Ford's door eased open. Ford slid to the edge of his seat and grabbed the door frame. The whole car rocked. Ford gritted his teeth and pushed himself out. He landed on the parking lot with a splash. He held a newspaper above his head with one hand and shut the door with the other. The outside of Ford's head was covered with white hair. The middle was smooth and shiny. He wore a tan trench coat, a blue shirt, a black tie, brown trousers, and brown, leather shoes. His shoes were old and scuffed up. His chest and belly poked past the opening in his coat. He hobbled towards Case and Paloni as quickly as he could. It took him half a minute to get underneath the overhang. Case greeted him with a smirk and a single nod.

"Bill," he remarked. Captain Ford's first name was William. Ford pointed at him.

"Ford will do," he grumbled. He slung water off his newspaper and held it at his side. He looked at Paloni. "So, do we have Mr. Nelms, or what?"

Paloni closed his eyes and shrugged. "Nothing." When Paloni smoked, he had a habit of letting his cigarette rest between his lips. It flopped up and down when he spoke. Ford looked at Case and shook his head. Case turned his head without looking away. He widened his eyes and smirked.

"Something on your mind?"



Ford's eyebrows fell in the middle. "I'll tell you what's on my mind, smart-ass." Case narrowed his eyes and pressed his lips together. He held his elbow in one hand and his chin in the other. "You're using *my* excavation team to dig up a body. And..." Ford held his hands out at his sides. "There's no body." He narrowed his eyes. "I don't see a body. Do *you*?"

Case nodded. "Maybe you should get a better excavation team." Paloni smiled. He looked away and shook his head. Ford pointed at Case with his newspaper.

"No. I think you need to get your *own* excavation team!" The double doors opened. Gabrielle came stumbling out. She dragged the pickaxe at her side. Ford looked at her over Case's shoulder. Case and Paloni turned around. Gabrielle looked up and sighed. Her eyes were narrow and hazy. Her hair was tousled. She was dotted with concrete dust and sweat. She'd tossed her coat aside, earlier. She wiped her forehead with the sleeve of her striped shirt. Case looked at Ford.

"My excavation team," he remarked. Paloni faced forward and snickered. Gabrielle rested the pickaxe against the wall. She took off her ear muffs and her safety glasses. She dropped them next to the pickaxe. She folded her fingers above her head and stretched her arms. Ford looked puzzled.

"Why is her eye black?" Gabrielle staggered forward. She threw her arms around Case's waist and rested her head against his arm.

"*Louis,*" she moaned. "*Can I PLEASE take a break?*"

Case looked down. "Did you finish up that last corner?" Gabrielle looked up. She slowly nodded. Case slid her hair out of her face. "And, you didn't find anything?" Gabrielle rolled her eyes. Case smiled. He looked at Ford.

"So, you all finished?" the captain demanded.

Case narrowed his eyes. “Do you need your guys for something?”

Ford scrunched up his nose. “Well, not at the moment.”

Case stroked his chin. “And, they’re on retainer, right?”

“Yeah.”

Case shrugged. “Well, you might as well be using them.” Paloni laughed.

“Case, I’m taking my guys back to the station,” Ford replied.

“Let’s dig up the foundations,” Paloni suggested. Ford looked at him. “We might as well. We’ve come this far.” Ford glared at Case. Case raised his eyebrows and smiled.

“You’ve got one hour,” Ford told him. Case nodded. He looked down and patted Gabrielle’s back.

“Come on, Gabs. Let’s go sit down.” Gabrielle let her arms fall. She and Case headed towards the wall. They turned and sat next to the pickaxe. Ford pointed at Paloni.

“You’d better find something.”

Paloni looked at Case over his shoulder. “I’m not holding my breath.” Smoke trickled from his nostrils as he spoke. Gabrielle ripped off her gloves and dropped them in her lap. She tilted her head back and yawned.

“Having a rough time, huh?” Case remarked. Gabrielle glared at him. “You ready to tell Tiffany, yet?”

“Shove it,” Gabrielle replied. She faced forward and crossed her arms over her chest. Her eyebrows fell in the middle. Case snickered. He looked down and patted Gabrielle’s shoulder.

“You thirsty?” Case pointed behind him with his thumb. “You wanna get a soda?”

Gabrielle threw her hands out at her sides. “Why are you doing this?”

Case shrugged. "I thought you might be thirsty."

Gabrielle dropped her arms and looked up. "You... said you wouldn't tell her."

Case nodded. "And, I haven't." He smiled. "But, we had a deal about that. Remember?" Gabrielle turned towards him. She sat with her knee off the ground. She rested her elbow against her knee. She rested her cheek against her knuckles and sighed.

"Yes..." Case raised his eyebrows and smiled. Gabrielle sighed again. She snatched up her gloves. They were sitting in her lap. She shot to her feet. "Okay. Let's get a damn soda."

"There, that a girl," Case replied. He pressed his palms against the sidewalk and pushed himself to his feet. "Come on." He took Gabrielle's gloves. He laid those and his ear muffs next to the pickaxe. Case rested his palm against Gabrielle's back and nudged her towards the door. She reached out to push it. Captain Ford peered over Paloni's shoulder.

"Where the hell are *you* two going?" he demanded. Gabrielle and Case stopped and faced him.

"Soda break," Case replied.

Captain Ford narrowed his eyes. "So, you want the city to dig up a restroom while you sit on your ass and drink a soda?" Gabrielle smiled. She flashed her big, blue eyes.

"Pretty much."

Captain Ford nodded. "Don't ask us for any more favors, Case. Dig up your *own* shit, next time." Case grinned. He patted Gabrielle's back. Gabrielle continued through the door. Case followed. They sat at their table from earlier. They sat across from each other. They looked around for a waitress. The restaurant was completely empty. The air was filled with pulses from two jack hammers in the bathroom. Case pressed his lips together and scrunched up his nose. He felt bad. He'd chased away all of Slow Frank's customers. Case and Gabrielle's

waitress from earlier came out of the kitchen. She stopped when she saw them. She wore a light blue dress with vertical, white stripes, a white apron, and black flats. Her hair was dark brown. It was in a bun. She flattened her eyebrows, dropped her hand on her hip, and tilted her head to the side. The jack hammers stopped for a second.

“Not *you* two,” the waitress groaned.

Case pointed at her. “Shelly, right?”

Shelly approached them. “You know, you didn’t leave a tip a while ago.” The jack hammers started up again.

“I forgot all about that!” Case shouted. Shelly stopped next to their table. She planted her palms on the table and leaned towards Case.

“Also, I might be out of a job! Thanks a lot!” Case stared at her hands. Her nails were cherry red. He looked into her eyes. They were light brown. They were bright and fiery.

“Sorry!” Case shouted. The jack hammers ceased. Shelly stood and reached into a pocket on the front of her apron. She took out her little notepad and a pencil.

“What do you guys want?”

Case held up his first and second fingers. “Two colas, please.” Shelly scratched something on her notepad. She looked up.

“That it?” Case nodded. He reached into the pocket of his jeans and retrieved his billfold. He took out a ten and offered it to her.

“Keep it, okay?” Shelly smiled. She slipped the ten out of Case’s fingers. She slid it, her notepad, and her pencil into her apron pocket.

“Thank you,” she told him. “I’ll be right back with your sodas.” Case looked away and showed her his palm. Shelly headed towards the kitchen. The jack hammers started up again.

Gabrielle rested her arms on the table. She leaned towards Case.

“Yeah, this was a *great* idea!” she shouted.

Case leaned forward. “What?!”

Gabrielle made a fist and held up her thumb. “Great idea!” she repeated. Case held up his pointer finger. He hopped up, dashed across the restaurant, and dashed through the double doors at the front. He returned with his and Gabrielle’s ear muffs. He dropped Gabrielle’s on the table and reclaimed his seat. They threw their ear muffs on and smiled. Gabrielle made circles with her thumbs and forefingers. “Nice!” she shouted. “Stylin’!”

“Oh, yeah!” Case replied. He made a gun with his hand, pointed it at her, and winked. Shelly returned with their drinks. Case thanked her, and she returned to the kitchen. Case and Gabrielle sat and sipped their sodas for a while. It was noisy the entire time. So, they didn’t talk much. Rather, they left their ear muffs on, smiled, and shook their heads from time to time. About the time Case was finishing off his drink, Captain Ford poked his head in. Case looked up and bobbed his head. Captain Ford leaned his head back. He made a slashing motion across his throat with his fingers. Case pressed his lips together and nodded. His hour was up. He looked at Gabrielle and sighed. He hopped up and headed towards the restroom. Gabrielle watched him leave over her shoulder. Then, she stared at the double doors that led to the restrooms. After thirty seconds, the jack hammers ceased.

Gabrielle looked towards the entrance. Captain Ford was still there. His head was poking between the doors. Gabrielle smiled and waved. Ford exhaled through his nostrils and disappeared. Gabrielle faced forward. She took off her ear muffs and set them on the table. She finished off the last of her soda with a couple of sips. Case reclaimed his seat. Gabrielle looked up. Case jerked off his ear muffs and tossed them on the table. They rolled to a stop near the

wall. Case looked at the table. He raised his fingers at the sides of his face. Then, he crossed his arms over his chest. “You okay?” Gabrielle asked.

Case looked up. “I just *knew* we’d find him in there.” Paloni wandered through the entrance. Case and Gabrielle faced him. He disappeared through the double doors that led to the restrooms. Gabrielle faced forward. She folded her arms on the table.

“Well, now what?” Case shrugged. He slouched in his seat and looked out the window. There was a flash of lightning. It was followed by a roar of thunder. It rattled the walls. Gabrielle narrowed her eyes.

“Yikes.” Case looked at her and snickered. He sat up and folded his arms on the table.

“Just hang tight, kiddo. We’ll get out of here in a sec.”

Gabrielle nodded. “Okay.” Case took out his cell phone and looked at the window. It was 2:47. He returned the phone to a pocket inside his jacket. Paloni came out after a couple of minutes. He walked up and stopped next to Case and Gabrielle’s table. Case threw his arms out at his sides.

“Nothing?” Paloni shook his head. “Huh,” Case remarked. He pressed his palms against the table and hopped to his feet. Gabrielle stood as well. Gabrielle’s coat was draped over Paloni’s arm. He handed it to her.

“Don’t forget this.”

“Thank you,” Gabrielle replied. She took her coat and threw it over her shoulders. Case looked into Paloni’s eyes.

“Later.” Paloni nodded. Case passed him and left the restaurant. Gabrielle followed. Case snagged his umbrella on the way out. It was resting next to the double doors at the front. Case paused. He looked through the waterfall falling from the awning. Ford’s car was gone.

Case pressed his lips together. He opened his umbrella and threw it over his head. Gabrielle appeared beside him. She looked up. Case noticed something across the street. It appeared above a department store. Case squinted. He was looking at a house, a really nice house. It was on the other side of the freeway. Case remembered passing it from time to time when he was a kid. It had always been there. It was neat. And, it was off the beaten path. It was perfect. It called his name.

“Louis?” Gabrielle inquired. She looked where he was looking. She stood on her tip toes and narrowed her eyes. Case looked down and smiled.

“Come on. We gotta go check something out.”

The house was beautiful. It was hopeful and cheery. Case had to cross the freeway and traverse a maze of lonely roads to get to it. It was a north facing house. So from its location, it faced the freeway. The last road Case came to curved towards the house and became the driveway. The house stood in the middle of four acres of thick bladed grass. The grass was dotted with huge, twisting oak trees. They looked hundreds of years old. Like the trees at Slow Frank’s, most of their leaves had turned brown and fallen to the ground. The four acres became a hill in the middle. The house stood at the very top. The edges of the property were surrounded by woods. Except for the front, every side was isolated from the world by miles of trees. A fence of square shaped, iron bars surrounded the property. There was a large gate at the front. It was open. A for sale sign stood outside the gate.

Gabrielle looked at Case. “You can’t be serious.” Case smiled at her. He faced forward.

“You’d need a serious riding mower if you wanted to live here.” Gabrielle stared at the house. She narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest.

“I figured you were going to rent a place.” She looked at Case. “That sign said it was for

sale.”

Case shrugged. “I’m just... shopping around.” Gabrielle bowed her head and pinched the bridge of her nose. “How much do you think a place like this goes for?”

Gabrielle looked up. “I’ll bet it’s a million dollar house.”

Case flicked his wrist. “Bah. It’s probably half that.” The house was two stories. The walls were covered with crimson bricks. At the front, a shiny, wooden door stood in the middle. There were nine windows across the front. They had wooden frames, painted tan. Strips of wood lay across each window in the shape of a plus sign. On the lower story, there were two windows on either side of the door. On the upper story, there was a window directly above each of those. A fifth hovered above the door. There was a semicircle of blue, tinted glass above the door. It was sectioned into four pieces. It looked like half a pie. The lower story of the house was surrounded by a porch. It ran around all four sides. It consisted of a wooden deck, rows of shiny, wooden posts atop a railing, and an overhang. The overhang sloped from the bricks to the end of the deck. The posts resided at the end of the deck. They rested atop a flat, wooden railing. The railing ran across the tops of smaller wooden posts. There was an opening in the railing in front of the front and back doors.

From the front, the roof of the house sloped to the sides. A wall of stained glass lay below the peak of the roof. It was tinted blue like the arch of glass above the front door. It consisted of three, vertical sections. Each section had a top and a bottom. Each top and bottom consisted of square panes arranged two by two. The bottoms slid up. The back of the house looked identical to the front. The sides looked similar. However, there was a tenth window in place of the door in the middle. The roof was covered with a layer of shiny, black shingles. So was the roof of the porch. A chimney of crimson bricks arose from the west side of the roof.



That was the right side from the front.

At the west side of the house, there was a two car garage. It was a separate building, attached to the side. It was also made of crimson bricks. The roof sloped to the sides from the front. It was also covered with shiny, black shingles. At the front, two metallic, roll up doors stood side by side. They were painted tan to match the window trim. The road Case was on came to an end at the garage doors. It was a curvy road of smooth, white stones. The road of stones extended across the front from there. They formed a circular drive. Case stopped in front of the garage door on the left. A light blue convertible was parked in front of the door on the right. It was a high end, European car. It had no back seat. Rain was still pouring from the sky. It slid down the edges of the porch roof in sheets. The house sat atop a hill. So, rainwater hadn't pooled on the grass or the road.

Case opened his door, opened his umbrella, and hopped out. He closed the door and wandered to the other side of the car. Gabrielle slipped out and stood under the umbrella. She and Case looked up. Case had seen houses like this one. His folks lived in a decent house. Gabrielle had never seen anything like it. To her, it was like a mansion. She stared at the blue glass across the front, near the roof. The sky was filled with puffy, black clouds. Gabrielle could see their reflection in the glass. Case looked down. Gabrielle's big, blue eyes were wide open. They glittered like sapphires. Case smiled.

"Wow..." Gabrielle remarked. She looked at Case.

"Come on," Case told her. "Let's go check it out." He held out his elbow. Gabrielle grinned. She slipped her arm through his, and they wandered across the circle drive. There were four steps in the middle of the porch. They resided in the opening in the railing. They led from the white, rocky road to the door. Case and Gabrielle ascended the steps and stood in front of the

door. Case closed his umbrella and rested it next to the door. Gabrielle tugged the end of his jacket. Case looked down. Gabrielle fluttered her first and second fingers in front of her lips. Case sighed. “Seriously? You want a smoke, *now*?”

Gabrielle tilted her head to the side. “Come on, man. I haven’t had one since this morning.”

Case nodded. “Well, that’s good. Maybe you can make it the rest of the day, yeah?” Gabrielle pressed her lips together and narrowed her eyes. Case exhaled through his nose. He patted her shoulder. “I’ll tell you what. Let’s check this place out, first. Then, we’ll make a little... pit-stop somewhere, okay? You can smoke *two* cigarettes if you want.” Case pointed around. “Not here, though. You’re going to get us into trouble.” Gabrielle looked down and nodded. Case knocked on the door. A lady answered. She was a realtor. She was in her mid-thirties. She was short and plump. She wore a crisp white shirt, a red blazer, a pair of brown slacks, and black heels. Her hair was black and wavy. It draped to her chin in thin, curly clusters. Her eyes were like two giant emeralds. She greeted Case and Gabrielle with a bright smile. Her grin lit up the porch. She offered her hand. Case smiled and shook it. “Hi, there,” he remarked.

“Hello,” the lady answered. She let go of Case’s hand. She turned to Gabrielle and squinted. “What happened to your eye?”

“Hockey puck!” Gabrielle shouted.

The realtor nodded. “Uh-huh...” She looked at Case. “I’m Ruth. I can show you around the house, if you’d like.”

Case nodded. “That sounds great.” Ruth turned and led the way. Case and Gabrielle followed. Ruth left a faint scent of perfume in her wake. It made Case smile. Ruth was on the

heavy side. But, she was very cute. Of course, Case didn't think she was as cute as Tiffany. In his eyes, no one was. Case looked to his right. He imagined Brandy walking beside him. She jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow. Case cupped his hand over his mouth and snickered. He almost missed the beautiful home he walked into. He stopped and looked around. The house was very pretty. Case stood at the foot of a long staircase, facing the front door. The stairs were the first thing to see on the way in. They were twenty steps from the door. The stairs were wide at the bottom and narrow at the top. A pair of wooden rails ran down the sides. They curved away at the bottom. A row of red carpet ran down the center of the stairs.

Case looked at the wall around the front door. The first things he noticed were the windows. There were nine of them. There were two in a row on either side of the door, and a row of five above that. The lower ones were shaded by the porch. The upper ones were a little dim because of the clouds. On a sunny day, light would be pouring in. It was very cool. Case turned to his right. He was facing the living room. It was huge. There was no furniture in the house. But, Case had a wild imagination. Ruth was showing Gabrielle around the room. Case wasn't sure if he could fill it with enough furniture. He looked at the floor. It was covered with shiny veneer. It matched the steps on the staircase. He slid his hands in his pockets and wandered to the other side of the house. The area opposite the living room was a den. The wood on the floor extended across it and the living room.

The chimney on the roof led to a fireplace in the den. Case stood in front of the fireplace and looked it over. It was bricked with the same bricks as the outside of the house. They reached from the floor to the ceiling, two stories up. The wall to the right of the fireplace had wooden bookcases built in. There was a door to the left of the fireplace. It led to the garage. The door and the bookcases matched the floor. Case looked the bookcases over and stroked his

chin. He figured Tiffany could fit all her books plus that many more, probably. Case joined Gabrielle and Ruth in the kitchen. It was at the back of the house, behind the stairs. It was separated from the living area and the den by a long bar with a green, marble top. The floor turned into white and black, checkered tiles beyond the bar. The kitchen was enormous. It had marble countertops, wooden cabinets that matched the floor in the front, a stainless steel sink, and stainless appliances. Case narrowed his eyes and pointed out the appliances. There was a side by side refrigerator, a stove, a microwave, and a dishwasher.

Ruth looked at him and smiled. “The appliances come with the house.” Case tilted his head, narrowed his eyes, and stretched his chin. There was a wall at the back of the kitchen. It was covered with tiny, green tiles where there weren’t cabinets. The green matched the marble countertops. On either side of the back wall, there was an open doorway.

“Now, what’s back here?” Case inquired.

“The laundry room,” Ruth replied.

Case looked at Gabrielle. “Did you hear that, Gabrielle? It has a laundry room.” Gabrielle crossed her arms over her chest and smiled. Case wandered across the kitchen and entered the laundry room. The floor was covered with checkered tiles in there as well. The room came with a washer and a dryer, too. The laundry room was quite large. It had wooden cabinets that matched the ones in the kitchen. Case looked at the floor. He smiled and rubbed the back of his neck. Ruth’s head poked in from the other side.

“Would you like to see the upstairs?” she asked.

Case looked up. “I’d love to.” Case and Gabrielle followed Ruth up the stairs. Case looked around. The top floor split from the top of the stairs. It swept left and right along the south wall then shot down the east and west walls. The floors down the east and west walls

extended halfway to the front of the house. The railing down the sides of the stairs followed the floor all the way there. The chimney went up the west wall. Where the upper floor ended on *that* wall, the chimney slid past. Upstairs, there were two bedrooms along the east wall. There was an office followed by a bathroom on the south wall. The west wall was all master bedroom. The first place Case went was the bathroom. He flicked on the lights and looked around. All the rooms were huge. The bathroom at the top of the stairs made the one at the magic shop feel like a closet. The floor was covered with large, white tiles. The walls were covered with black ones. Both tiles were the similar. They were coated with a tan design that mimicked marble. The difference was the background color.

There was one window along the back wall. In front of that, there was a claw foot bathtub. It was huge. Two people could fit in it. A brass faucet hovered above the tub on the wall. It resided in the middle of the tub rather than at one of the ends. A long, brass lever rested above that. There was a brass shower faucet above that. It resided near the ceiling. It was a giant, sunflower shaped faucet. Case grinned. He looked down at Gabrielle. She stood next to Case in the doorway. Gabrielle looked up and smiled. She slipped by and checked out the sink. It stuck out of the wall adjacent to the tub. The sink had brass fixtures as well. There was a giant mirror on the wall above the sink. Gabrielle pulled it back. A medicine cabinet was hiding behind the mirror. It was built into the wall. A toilet stood next to the sink. The toilet was... just a toilet. It had a brass flusher, though. There was a cabinet on the opposite wall. It was made of the same wood as the cabinets downstairs.

Gabrielle closed the mirror. She turned towards Case and folded her fingers in front of her. Ruth's head appeared beside Case's shoulder. "More?" she asked. Gabrielle nodded. Ruth, Case, and Gabrielle checked out the room to the left of the bathroom. It was an office or

an extra bedroom. There were two windows along the back wall. There was a third along the east wall. A closet resided along the west wall. Aside from the bathroom, the floor in all the upstairs rooms was the same as the floor downstairs. Gabrielle looked at a spot on the ceiling. It was near the door. There was a hatch that led to the attic. The hatch was covered by a rectangle of sheetrock. It was painted white like the rest of the ceiling. A length of white rope with a white, plastic ball dangled from the west end of the hatch. Gabrielle tugged on the rope. The hatch door flopped open. The sound of rain came pouring out. A wooden ladder was folded on top of the hatch door.

“Cool,” Case remarked. He unfolded the ladder and rested the bottom against the floor. “Let’s check out the attic.” Case darted up the wooden stairs. Ruth and Gabrielle followed. The attic was enormous. It was bigger than some houses. Case stood next to the hole in the ceiling of the office. He plopped his fists on his hips. Everyone was in the attic. So, the ceiling sloped to either side. There were blue tinted windows at the front and rear. The entire space was alive with an eerie, blue glow. On a sunnier day, it would have been bright blue. It would be like standing in the sky. A flash of lightning blasted through the blue glass. Thunder cracked the air in two. Gabrielle shrieked. She threw her hands over her lips. Case looked over his shoulder and grinned. “This is all-right,” he remarked.

“Do you have a lot of stuff?” Ruth asked.

Case looked around. “Nope. But, I *could*.”

Gabrielle dropped her hands at her sides. “That scared the *crap* out of me!” There was another flash.

“Here comes another,” Case remarked. Thunder rolled across the ceiling. It increased in volume until the walls shook.

“Ah!” Gabrielle screamed. “Okay, I’m getting out of here!” She dropped down the hole and returned to the office.

“Yeah,” Case added. “Let’s check out the bedrooms.” Ruth climbed down. She was followed by Case. Case folded the ladder and returned the hatch door to its rightful place. He turned around. Gabrielle was backed against a wall. Her arms were crossed over her chest. She was shaking. Case smiled and narrowed his eyes. “Gabrielle? You okay?” Gabrielle looked up. She just... stared. “Hmm,” Case remarked. He approached her. “Seriously? Because of the thunder?” He stood beside her. She was shivering. “Come here.” Case rested his palm on Gabrielle’s shoulder and tugged. Gabrielle rested against his chest. Case slid his arms around her. Her shudders made Case’s teeth chatter. “That’s weird,” Case said. “Yesterday, you were...” Gabrielle looked into Case’s eyes. Case looked at Ruth. “I mean, you were... out in the rain yesterday.” Case looked at Gabrielle. She buried her face in his shirt. “You know. You had that thing... to do.” Case looked at Ruth and smiled. He didn’t want to tell Ruth about the fight. He didn’t want to tell anyone, just in case.

“You guys want to see the bedrooms?” Ruth asked.

Case nodded. “Yeah.” Case relaxed his arms, and Gabrielle backed away. They headed towards the bedrooms. Gabrielle felt uneasy. It was weird. Ordinarily, Gabrielle didn’t get *too* upset by lightning strikes. She felt the hair on the back of her neck standing. She’d stopped shaking in Case’s arms. Now, she started to shake again. She snatched a hold of Case’s hand. Case looked down at her. He smiled and faced forward. The bedrooms were quite large. There were two along the east wall. They each had one window. Case, Gabrielle, and Ruth entered the bedroom next to the office. On the north wall in the front corner, there was a closet with two sliding doors. It looked like the one in the office. The doors were painted white. So were the

walls. The bedroom next door looked pretty much the same. But, the closet was on the south wall.

The walls in the master bedroom were a pale shade of blue. The trim was white. The room was the length of the southeast bedroom. However, it stood to the north of a second bathroom. It was tucked into the southwest corner of the upstairs. Case wandered in and flicked on the light. The walls and floor were tiled like the ones in the hall bathroom. There was a standing shower. The shower had a glass door with a metal frame. Circular shapes were woven into the glass. A smooth, steel handle was sticking out of the door. Case yanked it. The shower had brass fixtures like the ones in the hall bathroom. The floor of the shower was covered with small, white tiles. The black tiles along the walls continued through the shower. Case closed the shower and looked around. The sink looked like the one in the hall bathroom. There was a large mirror above it. It looked familiar as well. A cabinet was built into the wall behind the mirror. A hot tub was built into the floor in front of the east wall. Case folded his fingers in front of his lips and looked it over. He liked *that*.

Case flicked off the light and returned to the bedroom. There was a closet on the north wall. It looked like the others in the house. However, the doors were covered with mirrors.

“Seen enough?” Ruth asked. Case looked up. “You wanna check out the yard?” She smiled. Case smiled and looked out the window closest to him. Rain poured down the glass.

“No, I’m good,” he replied.

Ruth narrowed her eyes. “I figured.”

Case looked at her. “So, how much?”

Ruth pressed her lips together and puffed her cheeks. “It’s... five thousand.” Gabrielle narrowed her eyes. She looked up at Case. Case scrunched up his nose.



“Jeez,” he remarked. “Five thousand a month, huh? I can’t get no better deal than that?”

Ruth closed her eyes and shook her head. “No. Total.”

Case stared at her, blankly. “Huh?”

Ruth sighed. “The owners are asking five thousand for the house. That’s the asking price.” Gabrielle’s jaw dropped. Case narrowed his eyes and smiled. He looked around and rubbed the back of his head.

“What’s wrong with it?”

Ruth threw her hands out at her sides. “Nothing.” Case looked at her. “Seriously. That’s what they’re asking.” Case looked down at Gabrielle. She looked up at him. She pushed her mouth to the side of her face. Case looked at Ruth and pointed.

“Am I on one of those hidden camera shows?”

Ruth laughed. “No! I’m serious. That’s what the homeowners are asking, five thousand.”

Case squinted. “Why aren’t *you* buying it?”

Ruth shrugged. “I already *have* three places.”

Case motioned around the room. “Why isn’t this place... crawling with bidders?” He smiled and shook his head. Ruth shrugged.

“It’s five thousand. Really.”

Case looked at Gabrielle. “You should call Tiffany,” she told him.

Case pointed at her and nodded. “That’s a good idea.” He removed his phone from inside his coat. He looked at Ruth. “That’s a damn good idea.” Ruth looked at the floor and crossed her arms over her chest. Case opened his cell phone and looked at the screen. It was black. The battery was dead. “Hmm...” Case looked at Ruth. “You got a cellular?”

She shrugged. "Mine's dead." Gabrielle tugged on Case's sleeve. Case bent over. Gabrielle cupped her hand around his ear.

*"Something weird's going on,"* Gabrielle whispered

Case faced her. *"I noticed."* Case flipped his phone closed and shoved it inside his jacket. *"I don't have my charger, though. So, what should we do?"* Gabrielle looked at Ruth. Ruth looked up and smiled. Gabrielle faced Case.

*"I think you should go for it,"* she whispered.

Case threw his hands out at his sides. *"Without talking to Tiffany?"* Gabrielle shrugged. Case tilted his head to the side. *"It's only five thousand bucks. It's kind of hard to lose at THAT price."* Gabrielle smiled. Case gritted his teeth. *"Tiffany's going to kill me. I was supposed to RENT a place."*

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes and shook her head. *"It's beautiful! Tiffany's going to love it."* Case sighed. He looked at Ruth.

*"We'll... take it."*

Case and Gabrielle stood in front of an abandoned grocery store. The building was made of vomit colored concrete. Around the base, there was a hollow area with sidewalk. Giant, square shaped pillars of concrete stood at the edges. Case and Gabrielle stood next to the entrance. At one point in time, the entrance consisted of a pair of glass doors. They slid back and forth when a person approached. Now, all the glass was gone. Rather, the entrance was covered with strips of particle board. They were nailed to a wooden frame that bordered the entrance. The walls were littered with graffiti. It was pretty elaborate. There was a giant tag behind Gabrielle that read "Murmur." Every letter was twisting and unique. They were spray-painted to look three dimensional. From left to right, the letters faded from black to blue. A grid

of thin, white lines wove across the letters. It made the letters look like they were made of bricks. The three dimensional parts were painted red. A black line bordered that. There were other tags as well.

Case looked down at Gabrielle. She was smoking a cigarette. She took a drag and puffed out a handful of smoke rings. Case took out his cell phone to check the time. The little window on the outside was black. Case looked up and slid the phone inside his coat. He raised his palms.

“I could’ve sworn I charged this damn thing.”

Gabrielle looked up. “Don’t worry about it, man. Tiffany’ll think it’s cool.”

Case looked at her. “Are we talking about the same Tiffany?”

Gabrielle smacked her lips. “Louis, she’s not gonna get mad at *you*.” Gabrielle faced forward. “She *never* gets mad at you. You couldn’t make her mad if you wanted to.” Gabrielle put the cigarette to her lips. The end glowed bright orange. Case looked at the ground and rubbed the back of his head.

“I feel bad. You know?” He looked at Gabrielle. “I should’ve called her.”

Gabrielle pointed at him. “You see? I don’t know how you do that shit.”

Case narrowed his eyes. “Do what?”

Gabrielle grinned. “That thing!” She raised her palms. “That damn... thing you do.” She flicked ash off the end of her stogie. “It’s like you know exactly how to work her. You know?”

Case nodded. “You think so?”

Gabrielle threw her arms out at her sides. “You’ve got her wrapped around your little finger.” She looked at Case and smiled. “It pisses me off!” She nudged him in the shoulder.

“*You* know what I’m talking about.”

Case faced forward and scrunched up his nose. “Nah, I don’t know how to do that.” He looked down and sighed. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Gabrielle faced forward. She smiled and shook her head.

“You are so full of crap, Louis.” Case snickered. “I swear.” Gabrielle took a drag of her cigarette. She exhaled smoke and looked up. “Hey, I promise not to tell her. You know, if you’ll promise not to tell her about me getting suspended.”

Case shook his head. “Nah, I’m just gonna tell her.” Gabrielle smacked her lips and faced forward. “I’m not a chicken shit like you are.” Gabrielle scoffed. She glared at Case.

“I can’t *believe* you just said that to me!” She smiled. Case shrugged.

“Hey, I calls ‘em as I sees ‘em.” Gabrielle narrowed her eyes. Case faced her and squinted. Gabrielle pointed at him.

“I’m gonna kick your ass, too.” Case looked down and chuckled. He smacked his hands together. “You piece of shit!” Gabrielle shouted. “I’m going to finish this cigarette. And then, I’m gonna beat your ass all over this parking lot.” She pointed towards a huge, vacant lot in front of them. Case smiled at her. He tilted his head to the side.

“Awe, you wouldn’t do that. Would you?” He motioned towards his chest. “Not to good, old Case.”

Gabrielle shoved Case’s arm. “Make me dig up Slow Frank’s bathroom!”

“Hey,” Case replied. “We had a deal.”

Gabrielle shoved Case’s arm again. “Make me do all the... damn laundry.” Case looked at the sidewalk. He pushed his mouth to the side of his face. He raised his eyebrows.

“Man, stop pushing me around.”

“And, then...” Gabrielle shoved Case’s arm again. She grinned and pointed in his face. “You took all the credit for it!” Gabrielle tossed her cigarette into the parking lot and threw her arms out at her sides. “That is so messed up!”

Case looked up. “Awe, that’s it.” He snatched Gabrielle around the waist and tossed her over his shoulder. Gabrielle shrieked.

“Louis! No!”

“You wanna push people around, huh?” Case requisitioned. He flipped Gabrielle upside down. He held her by her ankles.

“Ah!” Gabrielle shouted. She looked up at Case. Her eyes were like saucers. She pointed at him. “Don’t you do it!” Case let go with one hand and jabbed his fingers into her belly. Gabrielle shrieked with giggles. She squirmed and smacked his hand away.

“You think I’m gonna let you get away with that shit?” Case asked. He was grinning from ear to ear. “Nobody... pushes *me* around.”

Gabrielle pointed at him. “Leave me alone!”

Case shook his head. “Oh, it’s on.” He laid Gabrielle on the sidewalk and jabbed his fingers into her ribs. Gabrielle shook with laughter. She squirmed and slid away. “Enh!” Case shrieked. He snagged a hold of Gabrielle’s ankle and dragged her towards him. “Get back here, you little shit-head.” He played her ribs like a xylophone. Gabrielle squashed her arms against her sides. Case switched to her belly. The hollow area around the store echoed with Gabrielle’s giggles.

“*Louis!*” she gasped. “Louis! I’m sorry!” She looked at him. Tears were pouring out of her eyes. “Please... Please stop!” Case stopped. He was sitting beside her. He smiled and reached for Gabrielle’s arm. She shrugged up her shoulders and slid away. She pointed at him.

“Don’t. Don’t you dare!” She was smiling so hard, it hurt. Case wiped her eyes. Then, he patted her shoulders. Gabrielle backed away. “Louis!”

Case snickered. “We have to go get Adam.” Gabrielle nodded. She leaned her head back and swatted her eyes. She inhaled through her nose and let out a shaky sigh. Case reached down to help her up. Gabrielle squirmed.

“Louis!” Case laughed. He wrapped his arms around Gabrielle’s shoulders and dragged her to her feet. He squashed her shoulders around in his fingers and patted her back. He recovered his umbrella. It was resting against the wall next to the entrance. Case opened the umbrella above their heads.

“Now, get your ass in the car.”

Gabrielle looked down and showed him her palm. “Yes, sir.”

Adam stood beside a pair of doors. He resided next to the door on his right. From outside, it was the door on the left. It was a glass door. It was one of two standing side by side at the front of Willow Junior high. They were glass doors with steel frames. Adam stood with his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket. His backpack dangled from his shoulders. It was a red backpack with black trim. Sheets of rain danced across the glass. Adam watched it dribble to the sidewalk. It had been pouring rain all day. It was depressing. Adam sighed. He stared at the parking lot. He knew Case and Gabrielle were on their way. He suspected they were running a little behind, though. He had no idea why. Adam closed his eyes and exhaled through his nose. He missed his girlfriend. He was in a very dark place without her. It dragged him to the ground.

“Hey, Adam,” a fellow student’s voice cut in. Adam knew that voice. It was Ted’s friend, Cole. Adam hated him. He was a real dick. Adam’s wild, hazel eyes popped open. He

looked at Cole over his shoulder. His eyebrows fell in the middle.

“What?”

“Nice going with Brittany yesterday, man. I hear you two really hit it off!”

Adam smacked his lips. “Shut-up, ass-Cole!” That was Adam’s little nickname for Cole. He always called him that. Cole smiled like an idiot.

“What? You gonna get your little girlfriend to come kick my ass, too?”

Adam rolled his eyes. “If you don’t shut the fuck up, I’m gonna rip your head off, dribble it to the basketball court, and dunk it.” Adam smirked. His eyes remained angry. “What do you think about *that*, ass-Cole?” Cole’s smile faded. He showed Adam his palms.

“Hey, man. I’m just kidding.” Adam frowned. He faced forward and shook his head. He heard Cole walk away. He didn’t care. He knew Case and Gabrielle were about to show up. He had no idea why. He smiled. It reminded him of the conversation he and Gabrielle had that morning.

“*There’s no such thing...*” Adam whispered. He didn’t believe in anything supernatural. He most certainly didn’t believe in psychics. To him, it was stupid. Adam believed psychics were thieves who preyed on the desperate and hopeless. Adam wasn’t a thief. He hated thieves. They were always stealing his shit. Adam looked towards the street. It was a stone’s throw from the front door. Adam didn’t look at anything in particular. He just... stared. After half a minute, Case’s brown car skidded around the corner and parked by the curb. Adam looked at the floor and let out a heavy breath. He couldn’t wait to see Gabrielle. He’d been thinking about her all day. He hoped she would walk to the door with Case. Adam looked up. Case was standing beside the passenger door with his umbrella above his head. The door opened, and Gabrielle hopped out. She joined Case beneath the umbrella. She shut the door. Then, she and Case

approached the building.

Gabrielle looked up and waved. Adam smiled and waved back. He cupped his hands over his mouth and backed away. He shut his eyes. Suddenly, he didn't feel right. Something was wrong. He had no idea what. He cleared his thoughts and focused. His eyes popped open. He dropped his hands and shook his head. He watched Case and Gabrielle all the way to the door. He jerked the door open once they'd arrived and threw his arms around his girlfriend. She hugged him back. Gabrielle giggled.

"Hi, Adam."

"Hey, Gabs," he replied. He loosened his arms, closed his eyes, and kissed her. Case smiled. Adam looked Gabrielle over. Gabrielle's big, blue eyes were staring back. But, something wasn't right. Adam could see something. It was something in her eyes. Something had been added. Or, something had been taken away. Adam wasn't sure. He saw... something.

"*Fear...*" Adam mumbled under his breath.

Gabrielle tilted her head to the side. "Huh?"

Adam shook his head. "Nothing. Let's get the hell out of here." He looked up at Case. "I'm starving."

Case nodded. "Let's go pick up Tiffany and get some grub, man." They headed towards the car.

"Nah," Adam replied. "Let's... pick up a pizza, yeah?"

Gabrielle's eyes lit up. "Yeah!" She looked up at Case. "Let's do *that!* Tiffany would love that."

Case looked at them and grinned. "I like it." Case and the kids hopped in the car and headed for Jack Colby's. That's where they always got their pizza. Case sat in the front. Adam



and Gabrielle sat in the back. Adam leaned across the front, passenger seat.

“Call it in,” he told Case.

“Huh?” Case inquired.

“Pepperoni,” Adam replied. “You know what I like.”

“Can’t,” Case told him. “Phone’s dead.”

Adam smacked his lips. “Awe, shit.” He plopped down in his seat. “Gay, gay.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “That means we’re gonna have to wait for it.” Adam looked at Gabrielle. “What happened to the phone?”

“Battery,” Gabrielle replied. She grinned. “We got a new place.” Adam looked at Case.

“Yeah? You didn’t get some piece of crap, did you?”

Gabrielle grabbed Adam’s hands. “No. It’s awesome!”

Adam looked at her then at Case. “Cool. How much?” Case chuckled. Adam narrowed his eyes. “What?”

“Five thousand bucks,” Gabrielle told him. Adam looked at her. Then, he looked at Case.

“My God, Louis. Five thousand a month? You didn’t have to go *crazy* or anything.” Case laughed. “I just meant I didn’t want to live in a trailer park. That’s all.” Case smiled. He leaned forward and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“It’s not some trailer park,” Gabrielle replied. “It’s cool as Hell. It’s huge!” She held her palms above her head and spread her arms.

“Total, Adam,” Case remarked. “Five thousand bucks, total.” Adam narrowed his eyes. He threw his arms out at his sides.

Case opened the door to the magic store. The howl of languid, metal music came roaring

out. Case smiled. He nodded his head to the rhythm. It was a band called Pentari. They were Tiffany's favorite. She played them sometimes when she did homework. Case looked towards the counter. Tiffany was crashed out on top. She sat on a stool on the opposite side. Her arms were folded on the counter. Her head rested on top. The kids followed Case in. Gabrielle slipped in behind Case. Adam came in last with a pizza box from Jack Colby's. He grinned and nodded his head to the music. The door closed behind him. A little bell dinged when the door shut. Tiffany popped up with a gasp. Her eyes were like saucers. Case showed her his palms.

"Wh-" Tiffany grumbled. She raked her fingers across her eyes. She draped her fingers across her lips. "What happened? What time is it?" She looked at the counter and began shuffling through papers. The counter was covered with math problems she'd been working out. Case stopped beside her and patted her shoulder.

"You okay?"

She looked up at him. "I-I don't know." She snatched up a couple of sheets of notebook paper and held them up. They shook furiously in her hands. They were covered with messy scratch work. Tiffany tilted her head back and sighed. "Yeah, there's only two problems left." She stacked the papers neatly and set them on the edge of the counter. "I've just got to finish these last two problems. And then, I'm done." Case dropped his hand on hers. Tiffany looked up at him. "I must've dozed off for a second."

"You haven't eaten all day, have you?" Case asked. Tiffany smiled and looked away. Case smacked his lips. "Here, have some pizza." Adam stood in front of the counter. He held up the pizza box for Tiffany to see.

"Ha!" Tiffany remarked. She smacked a radio sitting on the counter. The music stopped. "I, uh... I'm sorry guys." Tiffany began shuffling papers together and stacking them. "Here, let

me clear off a spot.” Case smiled. He looked at Adam and shook his head. Adam set the pizza on the first spot Tiffany cleared. Then, he headed for the office. He went inside and shut the door. He dropped his backpack on the floor and looked around. He ripped his backpack open. The clothes Gabrielle and Case had purchased earlier were inside. They were in white, plastic sacks. Adam nodded with a smirk. He zipped up his backpack and slid it towards the end of the couch.

Adam emerged from the office. Case was coming out of his and Tiffany’s bedroom. He had a drink for everyone. Gabrielle was stuffing her face. Tiffany was still straightening up the counter. Case set four glass bottles of cola next to Gabrielle. He looked at Tiffany and exhaled through his nostrils. He snatched a stack of papers out of her hands and dropped it on the edge of the counter.

“Leave it,” he instructed. “It’s fine.” Tiffany sighed. Case snagged a slice of pizza from the Jack Colby’s box. He dropped it in Tiffany’s hands. “Here. Play with that.” Tiffany looked at the slice of pizza. It was a big, floppy piece. Case snagged a hold of her calves. He dragged them to the counter and crossed her ankles on top. Tiffany grinned.

“Louis, what’re you doing?”

“Oh, you’re wearing your rainbow socks, today,” Case remarked. He patted Tiffany’s knees. Then, he reached across and got himself a slice of pizza. Gabrielle sat across from them. Adam sat next to her. He also got a slice of pizza. “So, you say you’ve only got two problems left?” Case inquired. Tiffany looked at him and nodded. Case reached for the stack of papers at the end of the counter. “Need any help?” Tiffany smacked his arms away.

“Nope. Stop it.”

Case sat back and grinned. “I got us a place, today.”

Tiffany swallowed. “Yeah?” Case nodded. “How much?” Case smiled. He looked at the kids. Tiffany widened her eyes. She stared at Adam and Gabrielle. They were snickering. Tiffany looked at Case. “What?”

## Chapter 8: "The Basement"

Tiffany grew up in a little town called Lincoln. It was an hour and a half drive from her magic store. It was a longtime goal of Tiffany's to get the hell away from there. She hated it. Lincoln was terrible. The streets were filthy. The neighborhoods were overrun with gangs and crime. The service industry was terrible. A typical outing at a fast food restaurant in Lincoln was like eating out of a dumpster. Lincoln had only one Burger Land. The floor was usually covered with trash. The door swept it aside when a person walked through. It looked like a windshield wiper wiping rain away. Food fights were common. When Tiffany was eleven, she was sitting at one of the tables. She'd been waiting for an order for nearly an hour. Suddenly, this group of gangsters barged in. There were fifteen of them. They wore dark sunglasses over their eyes. Red dew rags dangled from their noses. They filled the air with hoots, hollers, and laughter.

They scattered about the restaurant. They stole people's food right out of their hands. They began tossing it through the air. One moment, everything was normal. Then, Tiffany looked up. Swarms of fries, onion rings, pickles, and condiments were flying through the air. Tiffany's eyes widened. A giant paper cup tumbled through the air. It landed right in the middle of her table. It was a chocolate milkshake. Tiffany threw her arms over her face. Two cups of chocolate soft serve and milk splattered through the air. Most of it landed in Tiffany's hair. It dribbled across the sleeves of her canary yellow sweater. Tiffany dropped her arms and looked herself over. She shook away slathers of ice cream. Then, she dropped below the table. Three cheeseburgers took her place.

Tiffany slid her chocolate covered arms around a cylindrical post holding up the table. She looked to her right. The back of her seat was covered with mustard, mayonnaise, and

ketchup. Stacks of vegetables and buns lay in the seat. Three patties were piled on top of a gooey mountain of cheese. They resided right where Tiffany's little butt had been. Tiffany slid her fingers through her hair. It was icy and wet. Tiffany slopped handfuls of ice cold milkshake away and looked around. Gangsters were running around everywhere. Tiffany was surrounded. What's worse, the gangsters were assaulting customers and employees. Tiffany was a sitting duck. She looked at the floor. She was wearing a red, plaid skirt that reached past her knees. It lay in pools of goo on the floor. The Lincoln Burger Land customers referred to it as "mystery goo." It was probably just a cola someone had spilled... probably.

Tiffany slid the edges of her skirt towards her and checked out her shoes. She wore a pair of black saddle shoes and white socks. Like most of her clothes, they were all worn out and shredded. Her shoes had mustard and ketchup all over them from walking through the restaurant. She lifted her left foot and shook some aside. She looked up and saw an opening. The door was directly in front of her. There were two rows of tables between her and the door. The rows lay side by side. A waist high wall ran between. Tiffany figured she could hop across the tops of the tables between her and the door, dash through the entrance, and run for her life. She looked at the floor and sighed. She closed her eyes and nodded. She opened her eyes. A two pound rat scampered across the floor. It disappeared below one of the tables.

Tiffany looked up and took a breath. She dashed across the floor, hopped onto the first table, and jumped to the second. It was a mistake. The second table was a piece of crap. It crumbled to the floor along with Tiffany. Tiffany's head bounced off the cold, filthy, tile floor. Tiffany skidded to a stop a few feet away. She sat up and clutched her aching skull. Blood trickled down her fingers and dripped to floor. Tiffany's eyes were pinched shut. She winced and looked up. She was surrounded by three gangsters. It was a terrifying sight. Tiffany slid

her arms behind her, planted her palms on the floor, and widened her eyes. Two gangsters were in front of her. One was behind her.

“Man, did y’all see this crazy ass white girl?” the one behind her asked. Tiffany cringed. She hugged her knees and looked up at him. He glared back through a pair of triangular, mirrored lenses. A red bandana was draped across the lower part of his face. A flat circle of gold curled out of his left ear.

“Damn, girl,” one of the ones out front said. Tiffany faced forward. It was the one on her left. “You crazy as hell.” He wore a pair of shades with shiny, black lenses and a white undershirt. A red bandana dangled from his nose. There was also a red bandana wrapped around his head.

“You wanna fly, white girl?” the third gangster asked. Tiffany looked up at him. Her eyes were big, brown, and sad. The third gangster wore a pair of shades with tiny, oval lenses. They barely covered his eyes. His eyebrows were thick and dark. His skin looked like shiny charcoal. His bandana glowed against his flesh. “We can make you fly.” The other two laughed. Tiffany opened her mouth. Nothing came out but a pathetic whimper. Tiffany looked around, waiting for one of the gangsters to make a move. Suddenly, all three of them bent over. The gangster behind her snagged her around the waist. The ones in front each grabbed an ankle. They yanked Tiffany off the floor. She shrieked. They swung Tiffany towards the front door. It was a pane of glass with a border of steel.

“No!” Tiffany howled. She began to squirm. The three gangsters laughed and rocked her back. They swung her forward a second time. “Ah!” Tiffany squealed. The trio chuckled and eased her back a second time. They swung her forward again. “Please!” Tiffany begged. “Please, stop!”

“Nah,” the one behind her replied. “This is it, right here, girl.”

“Let’s do dat shit!” the one on her left yelled.

The one on Tiffany’s right nodded. “Do it.” They rocked her back and tossed her towards the door. Tiffany screamed. She tumbled through the air. She landed in a pair of thick, shiny arms covered with tattoos. Tiffany looked up. It was G.B. A blue bandana dangled from his nose. His eyes were hidden behind a pair of shades with blue lenses. He looked down at Tiffany. Tiffany looked up at him.

“What’s up, Tiff?” Tiffany let out a shaky sigh. She looked over G.B.’s shoulders. He was surrounded by thirteen of *his* guys. They all wore blue bandanas across the lower halves of their faces and shades over their eyes. Tiffany stared into G.B.’s shades. G.B. set her gently on her feet. He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. “Get out of here, chiquita. We’ll take care of this.” Tiffany replied with a timid nod. She dashed through the exit, snaked past G.B.’s boys, and scurried down the sidewalk. She didn’t look back. She just ran. She ran until her legs were wobbly and her lungs were burning. She had to stop. A street sign was coming up. Tiffany wrapped her arms around the sign post, kicked her feet through the air, and swirled to the ground. She landed on her butt and looked up. She was on Bernard Street. She’d run thirteen blocks. She clutched the signpost, leaned back, and gasped for air.

When she’d caught her breath, Tiffany dragged herself to her feet and dusted herself off. She was filthy. There were long streaks of chocolate milkshake, bits of vegetables, and puddles of mustard and ketchup all over her. She could smell it. It burned her nostrils. Tiffany looked down Bernard Street and sighed. She had fifteen blocks to go. A duo of lightning bolts tore across the sky. The air filled with thunder. Tiffany looked up. The sky was filled with puffy, indigo clouds. They lay in long, dreary rows. Tiffany tilted her head to the side. Her arms went



slack. It was going to be a long walk. It began to rain halfway down the first block. It didn't start off slow, either. There wasn't a drop of rain one minute. The next, a river was falling from the sky. It dropped in buckets. It beat Tiffany's flesh like sacks of hammers.

Tiffany hurried home. That wasn't like her. She usually dreaded going home. She especially dreaded it on this particular evening. She knew her father would be there. And, she knew he would be blindingly drunk. It was Saturday night. That's usually the way he spent his Saturday nights. That is, unless he went missing for a few days. Tiffany had no idea where he was, then. What's worse, Tiffany had left early that morning before her father awoke. She hadn't seen him all day. He hadn't seen her. He was likely to be pissed. Rather, Tiffany opted to take a trip to the Lincoln library and study up on some things. The occult was among them. Plus, her friend Valerie visited Lincoln on the weekends. Valerie's mother was stuck in a nursing home there. So, on Saturday and Sunday evenings she ran a small business in Lincoln as a fortune teller. While in Lincoln, she stayed at her mother's old place. She spent the week an hour and a half away. During that time, she ran the magic shop Tiffany would later own.

Tiffany spent the majority of the afternoon at Valerie's. Valerie gave her five bucks for dinner. That didn't turn out so well. Anyway, Tiffany couldn't stay gone all day. So now, she was trudging home in the rain. It sucked. The water was freezing. Tiffany hugged herself and shivered. She was soaked. She was two blocks away. She passed the brick house with the broken windows. The stench of crack cocaine wafted through the rain and crept up her nostrils. The house with the old man was two lots down. It had lime green, wooden siding, a tin roof, a dilapidated porch, and waist high grass out front. The old man sat in his rocking chair, staring through sheets of rain. He held up a shaking hand and waved as Tiffany passed. Tiffany looked to her right. She uncrossed her arms and waved back. The old man smiled a little. He threw his

arms out at his sides. Tiffany smiled and did the same.

She hugged herself and hobbled on. Tiffany always gave the house at the end of the block a good, long stare. It was abandoned. It was a two story house made of warped, wooden siding. A dormer stuck out of the front of the roof. A rusty, old car lay on the lawn. It was a fifties model. Tiffany stared at chunks of rubber that used to be the car's tires. Tiffany glanced at G.B.'s house on her way down the next block. There wasn't a car in sight. Tiffany pressed her lips together and nodded. She hoped G.B. and his friends were okay. Things likely got ugly after *they* showed up. "*You gotta defend your turf, chiquita.*" That's what G.B. always said. Apparently, Burger Land was part of G.B.'s "turf." Tiffany stopped in front of her house. Andre's hideous van was parked on the front lawn. It was mostly white. Half the grill was missing.

Tiffany's arms fell at her sides. She leaned her head back and sighed. She looked the lawn over. What little grass was there stood over two inches. Andre was likely to be mad about that. Tiffany figured he would drill her about it as soon as she walked through the door. For a moment, she thought about hiding beneath his van. She'd done that a few times. She lay on her stomach and watched the window to the left of the front door. When the dim flicker of the television disappeared, she counted to a thousand. By then, she knew her father had gone to his bedroom and passed out. Then, she snuck in and crawled into bed. Andre wasn't too bad first thing in the morning. It was late at night after he'd been drinking when he was so bad. He was particularly ghastly on Saturday evenings. Then, he was scary.

Tiffany looked around and shook her head. Rain was pouring from the sky. She was shivering. She worried she may freeze to death before the night was over. The undercarriage of the van provided a little shelter. But, it wasn't much. Tiffany crossed her arms over her chest.

She looked at the grass and exhaled through her nose. Her clothes were soaked. Her father was going to be mad just about that. He'd look up and gawk when she walked in. He'd scrunch up his long, fat nose. *"Good God, Tiff,"* Tiffany imagined him saying. *"Don't come tracking all that damn SHIT in here! What the hell is wrong with you?"* From there, things would likely get ugly. Tiffany's upper lip arose on the left side. She looked around and rolled her eyes. She *really* didn't want to go home. Lightning rolled across the sky. Thunder followed. A shiver crept up Tiffany's little spine. She had to do it. She had to go in.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She bowed her head and let out a shaky sigh. She looked up and faced the floppy storm door. The screen was sagging. Tiffany inched across the yard and stopped in front of the door. There was a tiny, steel handle on the left side. Tiffany slid her little fingers around the handle and eased it back. She stared at a decrepit, faded, wooden door behind it. It made her want to vomit. Tiffany's eyes burned around the edges. Her sinus cavities tingled. Hot, soggy tears dribbled out of the inside corners of her eyes. They mixed with ice cold raindrops dotting her face. She let out a shaky whimper and reached for the doorknob. Her hand was trembling. She snatched at the knob and missed. Tiffany tilted her head back and sighed. She swung the screen away and held it against the wall. She stared at the sky. It was roaring and black. Tens of thousands of raindrops were on their way down. It made Tiffany want to scream.

She gritted her teeth. She snagged a hold of the doorknob, slid it to the side, and shoved the front door out of her way. She looked timidly towards the right corner of the living room. That's where Andre's recliner resided. It was mostly covered with faded, tan fabric. There were rows of duct tape in some places. Yellow stuffing poked out in others. Aside from vivid flickers coming from a television in the opposite corner, the entire house was dark. Tiffany caught

glimpses of her father when flashes came from the television. He was slouched in his seat. A glass bottle of beer stuck out of his lap. The first things Tiffany noticed were his eyes. He was staring straight at her. It was as though he *knew* she was on the other side of the door the entire time. A knotted, twisting grin rested below his cold, dark eyes.

Tiffany's father was huge. He stood six foot, six. He weighed two hundred fifty pounds. He was fiercely built. An "X" shaped scar hovered above his right eye. A long, handlebar mustache stuck out of the sides of his face. As long as Tiffany had known her father, he'd always had a handlebar mustache. He wore a sweaty, sleeveless undershirt. His arms were covered with scars and prison tattoos. He didn't move. He just sat there, grinning. Once Tiffany laid eyes on him, she froze and stared back. She was too terrified to move. The two of them sat there, staring at one another. Tiffany lost track of the time. Minutes ticked by. Half an hour passed. No one moved. Tiffany stood, holding the door. Her mouth was open a little. Her eyes were wide. She fought for every breath. Andre sat in his chair. His eyes were murky and penetrating. His eyebrows were lowered in the middle. He was grinning from ear to ear. The television was turned up really loud. It was distracting.

Tiffany spoke first. She finally closed her eyes, tilted her head back, and took a breath. Then, she faced her father.

"H-Hello, D-Dad." Andre shot out of his seat. The beer bottle between his legs toppled to the floor. He bowed forward, still facing her. His face was covered with a hideous grin.

"It speaks!" he shouted. "And, good morning to you too, ass-hole!" Andre dashed towards Tiffany. He bent over more and got right in her little face. "Where the hell have *you* been all day?" Tiffany shook all over. She tried to back away. But, her wobbly legs wouldn't budge. Andre's eyes popped open. His eyebrows dropped further down the middle. His grin

intensified. “Answer me!” His breath was hot and humid. It soaked Tiffany’s soft, squishy face. It wreaked of watered down beer and cheap cigarettes. Tiffany pried her lips apart. Her teeth were chattering. Her jaws were wiggling.

“Uh... Th-Th-The library.” She looked at the floor and exhaled a shaky breath. Water dripped from the ends of her hair. It pattered the floor tiles. Andre snagged a hold of her shiny, soggy hair and tilted her head back. Tiffany looked up. She stared into Andre’s dim, frosty eyes. Her eyebrows fell at the sides. She pleaded with a timid stare. Andre glared into his daughter’s feeble precipice. He felt like smashing her to pieces.

“You’ve been at the lie-berry all day?” he demanded. “That’s where you’ve been? When you could’ve been *here*...” Andre whirled Tiffany around by her hair. He tilted her head forward, so she was staring at the ground. “Look at that.” Tiffany pressed her lips together. She scrunched up her nose and stared at the ground. Andre felt her shaking below his thick fingers. He shoved her to her knees and held her face above the grass. “*Look* at it!” Tiffany whimpered. Tears poured out of her eyes. “It’s taller than the roof! You didn’t think to *mow* that shit!” Andre twisted his daughter’s head around. She looked up and gave him her utmost attention. “I’m gonna break your fucking neck!”

Andre and Tiffany’s basement looked like a medieval torture chamber. Andre only took his daughter to the basement when he was *really* angry. Apparently, it was one of those times. He dragged Tiffany through the house by her hair. She whimpered and tore at his fingers. Andre tossed the back door aside and dragged Tiffany by. Tiffany pinched her eyes shut and braced for impact. Her butt bounced off the rocky ground. Piercing pulses of agony shot up her spine. Andre dragged Tiffany around. He stopped next to a set of double doors. They lay on the ground, next to the back wall of the house. Andre dropped Tiffany on the ground and reached

for a pair of handles. They resided near the middle of the doors. Tiffany watched her father jerk the handles back. Her eyes popped open. She shook and skidded away.

“No...” she gasped. “Dad... *Not the basement...*” Tiffany slid towards the back door. She smashed her fists into the ground. She tried to force herself to her feet. Andre lurched towards her and grabbed a hold of her ankles. “NO!” she shrieked. Andre dragged her down a row of wooden steps. Tiffany’s head bounced off the first five. Then, she whirled around and clawed at them. “Dad!” she shouted. “Stop!” It was pitch black. Tiffany heard her father giggling behind her. His laughter was hideous and sadistic. He darted up the stairs and pulled the doors shut. Tiffany filled the cold, musty room with sobs. She heard her father sliding a chain around. A pair of thick, iron handles was stabbed into the inside of the doors. Andre slid a chain through the handles and pulled it tight. He clamped it into place with a giant padlock. Tiffany heard a light switch chain being pulled above her. An old light bulb flickered on above Andre’s head. It painted the room with an eerie, dim light.

Andre was grinning from ear to ear. Tiffany stared at him upside down from the steps. Her chest was heaving. Andre knelt and glared into her eyes. Tiffany’s eyes popped open.

“*I’ve been waiting all day for this,*” Andre growled. He snagged a hold of Tiffany’s wrists and lifted her into the air. He rested her wrists in a pair of manacles and clamped them shut. Then, he shot down the stairs. Tiffany filled the room with a series of panicked shouts. She tried not to move. She knew better from past experience. If she moved, she would swing. The more she swung, the worse her wrists would hurt. She tried to calm down and hold still. She felt herself swooping just the same. She couldn’t help it. She was trembling all over. She looked around. Andre had all sorts of nasty little devices stashed in the basement. He had fashioned them himself from medieval texts and his own, twisted thoughts.

There was an iron maiden in the corner. It was a metallic coffin with a tiny window. The inside was lined with nails. Once, Tiffany spent two days in there. There was a metallic cage in the opposite corner. It was shaped like a person. There was an iron hoop at the top. Sometimes, Andre put Tiffany inside. Then, he hung the cage from a hook sticking out of the ceiling. From there, he did as he pleased. Once, Tiffany hung in the cage all night while Andre battered her with a leather whip. It was the worst night of Tiffany's life. Tiffany shook all over. She looked at the ceiling and fought to catch her breath. Her face was soaked. She didn't know if it was rain or sweat.

A wooden trunk rested against the wall between the cage and the iron maiden. It was made of thick, heavy duty wood. The top was round. It hinged open. There were three thick, heavy duty latches along the front and one on either side. Andre drilled five holes in the lid of the trunk. Sometimes, he threw Tiffany in the trunk. Then, he latched it with big, fat padlocks. He started things off by dropping a few firecrackers into the holes. Afterwards, he tossed in lit cigarettes, broken glass, or thumb tacks. Next, he rolled the trunk down the stairs. Sometimes, he did that ten times or more. Tiffany usually came out a bloody mess. Once, after rolling Tiffany around in the trunk a bit, Andre dropped a box of hungry mice in with her. He starved them for five days, first. He slipped the little mice down the holes, one by one. In the end, the entire box of thirty was in the box with Tiffany. After that, the trunk rolled on its own for a couple of hours.

There was a thick, wooden picnic table in the center of the room. There were five leather straps nailed to the top. There was one for Tiffany's neck, two for her wrists, and two for her ankles. Usually, something like that involved a person lying on their back and being tied down. The picnic table was used to tie Tiffany *up*. Andre had her stand on the table. He strapped her

ankles into place. Then, he bent her over and strapped her wrists and neck. That way, Tiffany's little butt was sticking straight up. Andre kept a long, wooden paddle strapped to the bottom of the picnic table. Once Tiffany was strapped in, he beat her ass with the paddle until it was raw, bruised, and about to fall off. Then, he paddled the rest of her body.

There was also what Andre called "the fan." It was a motorized wheel with five wooden blades. There were two for Tiffany's legs, two for her arms, and one for her head. The blades stood upright. From time to time, Andre strapped Tiffany to the fan, flipped a switch, and took her for a spin. It spun pretty fast, too. Andre installed a slider on the side. It allowed him to adjust the speed. Sometimes, he spun it on high until Tiffany got dizzy and threw up. He left it running until she ran out of vomit or passed out. Sometimes, he spun it slow. Then, he stood back and threw things at her. He tried darts, light bulbs, and baseballs to name a few. Andre really liked to shoot at Tiffany with his BB gun while she spun around. He found it highly entertaining.

There was a knock at the door. Tiffany gasped. She looked over her shoulder. Her father slithered up the stairs. He punched Tiffany in the stomach as he passed. She let out a heavy breath and lowered her head. Andre answered the door.

"Hey, there you are," he remarked. Tiffany looked up and gritted her teeth. She looked over her shoulder. It was Andre's buddy, Jack and his two boys, Henry and Hank. Henry was the older brother. They each had a rifle. Tiffany began to pant like a dog. Jack, Henry, and Hank wore plaid shirts, blue jeans, hiking boots, and tall caps. They looked like they had been hunting. The three of them entered. Andre shut the door behind them. Henry looked at Tiffany and narrowed his eyes.

"What are *you* looking at, freak?" Hank, Jack, and Andre laughed. Tiffany stared at



them over her shoulder, gasping for breath. Henry smirked. He shouldered his rifle and aimed it at Tiffany's face. Tiffany whimpered. She looked at the floor and pinched her eyes shut. "I'm gonna blow your fuckin' head off, you little bitch!" Henry shouted. Hank kicked Henry's legs out from under him. Henry went tumbling down the stairs. He rolled all the way to the bottom. His rifle landed on the back of his head. Hank held his belly and roared with laughter. Henry looked at him from the bottom of the stairs. "Hank, you dick!" he shouted. Jack slapped Hank over the back of the head. Hank bent over and dropped his hand on the back of his head.

"Ow!" he whined.

"Knock it of, you two dipshits," Jack told them. He kicked Hank in the butt. Hank started down the stairs. Jack and Andre followed. Hank smacked Tiffany's butt as he passed. Tiffany looked up and shuttered. Jack stopped and glared into Tiffany's face. Tiffany looked at him, timidly. She could smell beer on his breath. "What've *you* been doing, Tiff?" he asked.

Tiffany let out a shaky breath. "Hanging around." Jack smiled. His eyes got all crinkly.

"Yeah?" he replied. He snagged a fistful of Tiffany's hair and lifted her. Tiffany felt her wrists relax. At the same time, a tight, tingling twinge dashed across her scalp. Tiffany's eyebrows fell at the sides. She whimpered. "You been being a good girl, like I told you?" Tiffany began to shake. A pair of tears dribbled down her cheeks.

"Pl-Please leave me alone, Mr. Holiday," she begged. "C-Come on. I-I didn't do nothing." Jack dropped Tiffany's hair. She fell half a foot and dangled from her wrists. Jack turned around and held out his hand. He motioned towards Henry with his fingers.

"Let me have your rifle, son." Henry glared at Tiffany. He handed his rifle to his dad. Jack turned around and looked into Tiffany's dark, brown eyes. He cocked Henry's rifle. It was a lever action. Tiffany trembled. The chains her wrists dangled from began to rattle. Jack

shouldered the rifle and aimed it at Tiffany's face. He stuck the end of the barrel right between her eyes. Tiffany began to wheeze. "Open your mouth," Jack instructed. Tiffany whimpered. She folded in her lips and looked away. Jack buried the tip of the barrel in Tiffany's belly. She responded with a series of panicked shouts. "Tiff, I'm gonna blow your guts out all over the steps." Tiffany pinched her eyes shut and lowered her head. She looked up. Jack stuck the barrel of Henry's rifle in her face. "Open it."

Tiffany exhaled through her nose. She slowly parted her lips and waited. Jack slid the barrel of the rifle between Tiffany's teeth. She bit down and pleaded with her eyes. "Now, you're gonna die, sweetie," Jack told her. His boys laughed. "You ready?" Tiffany closed her eyes. Jack pulled the trigger. The hammer fell. It clicked. Tiffany winced. She opened her eyes. Jack was grinning. "Bang!" he shouted. "You're dead!" His boys rolled around on the floor, laughing. Jack jerked Henry's rifle away and turned around. Tiffany scrunched up her nose and whimpered. The sight on Henry's rifle chipped her tooth as it slid by. Tiffany slid her tongue across the bottom of her tooth to assess the damage. Jack started down the stairs. "God damn, Andre!" Jack shouted. "You sure that girl ain't adopted?" He held the butt of the rifle in front of Andre's face.

"She takes after her mother," Andre replied. He snatched the rifle out of Jack's hands and stomped up the stairs. The air was filled with Hank and Henry's laughter. Tiffany stared at the stairs. She felt empty. She noticed her father approaching. She looked up and shuttered. Andre stomped up to her. He smashed the butt of the rifle into her stomach. Tiffany shrieked. She swung back and forth by her wrists. The manacles dug into her flesh. Her bowels filled her body with sharp pain. Her belly felt like it had been ripped open. Andre snagged a hold of Tiffany's canary sweater and ripped it off. Tiffany looked at the stairs and whimpered. Andre

tore her little saddle shoes and her socks off. Then, he ripped off her plaid skirt and a pair of white panties. He tossed all her clothes down a gap beside the stairs. He undid the manacles. Tiffany crumbled to the stairs with a groan. She crossed her wrists and laid them across her chest. She curled her legs towards her belly. Andre kicked her down the stairs.

“Move your ass,” he grumbled. Tiffany crashed to the floor. She landed in front of Henry and Hank. The floor was made of concrete. It felt ice cold against her bare flesh. Henry and Hank pointed at Tiffany and roared with laughter.

“Man, look at her skin, fool!” Henry shouted. “You ugly, scarred up freak!” Tiffany stared at the ceiling. She tried to imagine she was somewhere else. She heard Andre dragging the cage out of the corner. She closed her eyes and buried her face in her hands. Andre dropped the cage in the middle of the floor. He glared at his daughter.

“Tiff, don’t make me come over there and get you!” he shouted. Tiffany dropped her hands and looked at him. He looked really angry. He was big and scary enough without looking angry. Andre opened the cage. The front half hinged to the side. Andre pointed inside. His eyebrows fell in the middle. “Get in there!” Tiffany looked at the floor and sighed. She noticed her wrists. They were bloody, bruised, and swollen. Her blood was pooling on the floor. Andre turned towards Tiffany and threw his hands on his hips. “NOW!” Tiffany looked up. She pressed her fingertips into her blood and forced herself to her feet. She bowed her head and hobbled towards her father. She pressed her biceps against her ribs and crossed her forearms over her chest. She stopped a couple of feet from Andre and looked up.

“Dad...” she squealed. Andre snagged a hold of her arm and shoved her inside the cage. Tiffany shrieked. Andre slammed the front of the cage in her face and latched it. The cage was made to fit her. It had separate spaces for Tiffany’s arms, legs, and head. It was quite cramped

and very uncomfortable. Jack, Henry, and Hank joined Andre. They stood in front of the cage, grinning. Andre crossed his huge, tattooed arms over his chest and narrowed his eyes. Tiffany looked around. She pleaded with her eyes. Andre looked down at Henry and Hank. He snapped his fingers and pointed towards the ceiling. “Hang it, boys.”

Henry and Hank sprang to life. They snagged a hold of the cage, lifted it, and hung it from a hoist hook. The hoist hook dangled from an I-beam that ran across the ceiling. Tiffany whimpered and cried. Henry and Hank backed away, laughing. Andre handed them a box. Tiffany looked it over. It was filled with empty beer bottles. “Try those out,” Andre told them. He and Jack wandered towards the back wall. They sat in a pair of lawn chairs along the wall. An old ice chest rested on the floor between them. Andre flipped open the lid and snagged a couple of bottles of beer. He opened one and handed the other to Jack. Henry laid the box at his feet. He bent over and got out one of the bottles. He looked up at Tiffany and grinned. Tiffany shrugged up her shoulders and took a breath.

Henry chucked the bottle at her. It bounced off the side of Tiffany’s skull and crashed to the floor. Tiffany groaned.

“Hoo...” Andre groaned.

“At a boy,” Jack added. Tiffany couldn’t raise her arms. She felt blood leaking from her scalp. It ran down the side of her face and dripped from her chin. Her eyes filled with tears. Hank got out a bottle and chucked it at her. It crashed into the cage and shattered. It struck right in front of Tiffany’s face. Most of the shards flew into her eyes. The rest of them sliced up her face.

“Gah!” Tiffany shouted. Bloody tears dribbled from her eyes. Her eyelids nailed themselves shut. Tiffany fought to free her arms. Her mind was screaming at her to rake her

fingers across her eyes. She began to wheeze.

“Keep it up, boys!” Jack shouted. “Then, you can come over here and have a beer with Dad.” Henry and Hank filled the air with bottles. They took them out in armfuls. They chucked them one by one until they were gone. Brown, shattered glass and Tiffany’s blood rained from the base of the cage. Tiffany’s shrieks echoed along the empty, stone walls of the basement. Finally, the kids ran out of bottles. Tiffany blinked out enough glass shards to pry her eyelids apart. She shook with pain and fear. She swallowed hard and looked down. Her flesh was painted with blood. It trickled from the base of the cage and splattered the concrete. Jack looked at his boys. He threw his hands out at his sides. “Is that it?” They nodded over their shoulders.

Andre hopped up and grabbed another box. It was sitting next to his chair. Tiffany had a look. The second box was filled with billiard balls. Tiffany collapsed against the back of the cage and cringed. Andre picked out an eight ball and looked up. Tiffany shivered. She stared down through a pair of hazy, bloody eyes. Andre smirked. He reeled back and tossed the eight ball. It struck Tiffany right between the eyes. She shouted and squirmed. The cage shook from side to side. Andre cackled. He handed the box to the boys, stood back, and sipped his beer. He dropped his free hand in his pocket. Henry and Hank filled the air with billiard balls. They battered every inch of Tiffany’s bare, squishy, wet flesh. Tiffany cried for mercy.

“Henry!” she shouted. “Hank! Please!” Henry and Hank giggled and tossed more billiard balls. Once they’d emptied the box, they ran around and gathered up the balls. Then, they threw them again... and again... and again.

Finally, the billiard balls stopped battering Tiffany’s body. She was dazed and shaking with pain. Her ears were ringing. She could barely hear. She managed to make out bouts of hideous laughter. She peeled her glassy eyes open and glanced around. Andre, Hank, Henry,

and Jack were gathered around the cage. All four of them had beers in their hands. Tiffany looked at Henry. He pointed at a spot below the cage. He backed away, smacking his leg and laughing. Tiffany looked down. More than blood was dripping from the base of the cage, now. She had also pissed herself. Andre handed everyone pool cues, next. They stood around the cage, poking and prodding Tiffany with those. It was humiliating and insidious. After that, Jack took his boys home. When they left, Andre locked Tiffany in the iron maiden. He left her there for two days.

Tiffany awoke with a shriek. She was soaked with sweat. Her heart was drumming in her ears. She fought to catch her breath. She felt like she was falling down a pit. She sat up and gasped for air. She looked down at Case. He lay on his back. His arms were folded behind his head. His eyelids popped open, and he looked up. Tiffany shook with terror. She slid a cluster of trembling fingers through her shiny, black hair. She looked down. She wore a grey tank top and a pair of pink, flannel pants. They were all sweaty. Case slipped his fingers through Tiffany's and squeezed.

"You okay?" Tiffany's head whirled around. She gritted her teeth and sucked in a couple of sharp breaths.

"Do I *look* okay?"

Case looked away and shrugged. "No. That's why I asked." Tiffany's eyebrows fell at the sides. She slid her fingers away from Case's. She laid her hands in front of her mouth.

"*Oh, God,*" she gasped. "*I'm sorry...*" She looked away and swallowed. "I'm sorry, Louis. I'm sorry."

"Awe..." Case moaned. He sat up and scooted towards her. "Come here, sweetheart." He slid his arms around her waist. Tiffany relaxed. She rested her head against Case's chest.

Case reached up and swept her hair aside. “You’re all sweaty.” Tiffany exhaled a hybrid of laughter and sighs. Tears came dribbling out of her eyes. Case kissed the top of her head. “Tiffany, this has to stop.” Tiffany groaned. Her lips quivered. She lifted her head and wiped her eyes. She looked into Case’s eyes.

“*I know*,” she gasped. She cleared her throat. “I know. I’m sorry, Louis.” Case looked away and sighed. He shook his head. Tiffany grabbed his shoulders. “I’m sorry.”

Case looked down at her. “Stop saying you’re sorry.” Tiffany pinched her eyes shut and buried her face against Case’s chest. Case slid his fingers through her hair. “I didn’t mean...” He exhaled through his nose. “There’s nothing for you to be sorry about. I didn’t mean it like that.” Tiffany turned her head. She laid her cheek against Case’s chest and wiped her eyes. Case laid his free hand on top of her fingers. She slowly looked up. “I meant... You can’t go on like this.” Tiffany sighed. She slowly nodded. Case looked away. “I think I’m going to call my dad, tomorrow.” Tiffany narrowed her eyes. Case looked at her. “He’s a psychiatrist. *I* told you.” Tiffany nodded. “Maybe he can help.”

Tiffany sniffled. “Man, I am *not* taking those stupid SSRIs. I told you that.”

Case held up his palm. “I know. I remember.” He patted her shoulder. “You don’t have to take anything. But, maybe he can come up with... something. You know, something more than what we’re doing, here.” Case faced forward. “This isn’t working.” He looked at Tiffany. “This is going to kill you.” Tiffany folded in her lips and closed her eyes. She opened her eyes and looked down.

“He’s going to tell you to give me Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors.” Tiffany looked up. “That’s what he’s going to tell you.” Case looked away and shook his head. Tiffany threw her hands out at her sides. “That’s what every psychiatrist I’ve ever been to has told me to

take.” She slid her arms around Case’s waist. Case looked into her eyes. “But, I can’t take those damn things. They make me sleepy and cranky...” She looked away. “I can’t eat, I can’t focus, I can’t do my homework...” She looked up at Case. “I can’t... get aroused.”

Case sucked air through his teeth. “Yeah... That’s a problem.” Tiffany snickered and patted his arm. Case dropped his hands on hers. “There has to be something. And if there is, my dad will know about it. He’s the best in the business.” Case dragged one of Tiffany’s hands to his lips and kissed it. Tiffany smiled. She looked away and shook her head.

“Whatever.”

Case looked away then back. “Come on. Lay back down. I gotta get some sleep. I’m going to start moving our stuff into the new house, tomorrow.” Tiffany nodded. She pulled away, and Case laid back. Tiffany lay in his arms. She rested her head against his chest.

“Man, I can’t believe you bought that place.”

Case chuckled. “Yeah, something’s up with that.” He shrugged. “But, five thousand bucks... You know?”

Tiffany smacked Case’s arm. “And, you didn’t even *call* me.”

Case looked at her and smiled. “I know. I’m sorry, honey.” Tiffany looked up and smiled back. “The phone went dead.”

Tiffany nodded. “A likely story...” Case looked away. He threw his hands out at his sides.

“It went dead.” Tiffany snickered. She lay down.

“Did you put it on the charger?”

“I did.” Case kissed the top of Tiffany’s head. “Are you going to be alright?”

Tiffany pressed her lips together. “Nope.”



Case exhaled through his nose. “You want to tell me about it?”

Tiffany looked up. “My dream?” Case nodded. Tiffany rested against his chest and sighed. “Yes.” Case patted her shoulder. “Yeah, I think so.”

Case nodded. “Okay. I’m listening.”

## Chapter 9: “The Attic”

At 6:17, Case awoke. He turned his head. He looked above Tiffany’s head. She was lying in Case’s arms atop his chest. A row of green numbers hovered above a table between the bed and the wall. Case noted the time. He pressed his lips together and looked down. Tiffany was sound asleep. She looked so peaceful and relaxed. Case didn’t want to wake her, not on *this* day. She needed to rest. And, Case needed to move their stuff into the new house. Case looked at the alarm clock and nodded. He eased away from Tiffany. He moved carefully but efficiently. He inched his chest away from her face. Now, her head rested gently on his shoulder. Case lifted Tiffany’s head like a breeze. He laid her head gently on her pillow. Then, he reached across and laid his fingers on the alarm clock. He found the slider and slid it to the left. Now, the alarm was off.

Case sat up slowly and looked Tiffany over. She was out cold. Case nodded and slid off the edge of the bed. He snagged some clothes from a chest of drawers. It rested along the wall next to the tiny refrigerator across from the bed. Case crept into the restroom. He slid the knob to the right, eased the door open, eased by, eased it shut, and unrolled the knob. He took a quick shower and got dressed. He threw on a red shirt with thick, black bands, a dark pair of blue jeans, his red canvas shoes, and a black hoodie. He emerged from the bathroom and checked on Tiffany. She hadn’t moved. Case exhaled silently. He crept out of the bedroom and eased the door shut. He turned around and looked at the counter. Tiffany’s homework was stacked on top. Case thumbed through it and nodded. He’d looked it over with her the night prior. It was all there, ready to turn in. Someone just needed to turn it in.

Case pushed his mouth to the side of his face. He looked up. Tiffany’s binder lay next to her homework. Case flipped it open. Tiffany had her binder organized by class. The classes

were separated by neon dividers. The syllabus for each class was the first thing behind each divider. Case gathered them all, closed the binder, and stacked them on top. He flipped through them. As it turned out, all of Tiffany's professors kept office hours between seven and eight. Tiffany didn't have her first class until eight. Case could turn Tiffany's homework in and gather her homework for the weekend. That is, if he was up to the challenge. He looked out one of the front windows. There were four across the front, two on either side of the door. It wasn't raining. That was a plus. Case tilted his head to the side and puffed up his lips. He closed his eyes and nodded.

He laid Tiffany's syllabi on the counter. Then, he wandered across the magic shop to check on Adam and Gabrielle. He slid open the door to the office. Adam and Gabrielle were also sleeping peacefully. Gabrielle slept on the couch. Adam was on the floor. He was curled up beneath a plaid blanket. Case knelt beside him and nudged his shoulder. Adam blinked his eyes open and looked up.

*"Hey, buddy,"* Case whispered. Adam closed his eyes and exhaled through his nose. He looked up.

*"Hey, Louis. What's up, man?"* Case smiled and shook his head. He turned and patted Gabrielle's hand. It lay on top of her belly. A soft, brown blanket lay between her palm and her stomach. It was draped across her body. Gabrielle's head whirled to the side. Her big, blue eyes popped open.

*"What?"* she gasped. *"What is it?"* Case snickered. He rubbed Gabrielle's shoulder and looked at Adam.

*"I'm going to call you in sick, today. Okay?"*

Adam nodded. *"Uh... I'm good with that."*

Case looked at Gabrielle. *“Both of you, if Tiffany asks.”*

Gabrielle laid back and sighed. *“Okay.”*

*“Why?”* Adam asked.

Case turned to him. *“Because you’re gonna help me move all our shit into the new house.”*

Adam smiled and nodded. *“Oh... Okay.”*

*“I guess we’ll have to get my old beds out of storage and put them together, too.”* He looked at Gabrielle. *“It’ll be a job.”*

Gabrielle nodded. *“Beats sleeping on the couch.”*

*“Couch beats the floor,”* Adam remarked.

Case looked at Adam. *“Anyway, I’m going to see about giving Tiffany the day off as well.”* He looked at Gabrielle. *“I’m going to try to turn her homework in for her.”*

Adam raised his palm. *“Sounds great.”*

*“Yeah,”* Gabrielle agreed. *“Do that! She’ll love that.”*

*“She’ll probably get mad,”* Adam said.

Case gritted his teeth. *“She might. That’s what I’m going to find out. Right now.”* He stood and approached the door. He looked over his shoulder. *“I’m going to get some donuts on the way back.”* The kids smiled and nodded. *“If Tiffany wakes up...”* Case looked at the floor.

*“Don’t worry,”* Gabrielle whispered. *“I’ll stall her.”*

Adam pointed towards the bedroom. *“You want me to sneak in there and turn back the clock?”* Case snickered.

*“Ooh! Did you remember to turn it off?”* Gabrielle asked. Case looked at her and nodded. Adam tilted his head to the side.

*“Well, you should be good, then.”* He sighed. *“Hurry up, too. I’m starving.”*

Case smacked his lips. *“Shut-up.”* Adam and Gabrielle chuckled. Case hurried to the counter, snagged Tiffany’s syllabi and homework, and dashed towards the door. He opened and closed it slowly. That way, the bell didn’t ring. Case hurried to his car and headed towards the freeway. He looked at the sky. It was overcast. It looked like it could rain at any moment. Case nodded and focused on the road. He arrived at the college a little after seven. He parked near the front and approached the main building. It was a red, brick building. Tiffany waited on a concrete bench near the parking lot every day after her classes ended. It sat in front of the main building. Three stories of white windows with black grids dotted the walls.

Case wandered to a pair of wooden doors. He pulled the one on the right out of his way and stepped inside. He was in a long, wide hallway. The opposite walls were all glass. A wooden, spiral staircase stood in front of those. Case met up with a few of Fran’s friends under there a while back. He chatted with Cindy, Sandy, and Danielle on the other side of the wall of glass. Case smiled and sighed. He took to the stairs. He knew from the room numbers that all of Tiffany’s professors had offices on the third floor. The room numbers began with the number three. Tiffany told Case a while back that the first number referred to the floor the room was on. The numbers were similar in size. So, Case knew the rooms were close together. The floor at the top of the stairs was covered with large, white tiles. They were decorated with tiny, grey dots. A grid of thin, metallic lines lay between the tiles. The school was empty. Case’s footsteps echoed along the walls.

He made a right and headed down a curvy hallway. The first door he arrived at was 3109. That was Dr. Swan’s office. She was Tiffany’s psychology professor. She had also been... Gina’s psychology professor. Case met her only once. She was a short, large lady with

rosy cheeks, curly brown hair, and a bright smile. Her door was open a crack. Case knocked, gently.

“Dr. Swan?” he inquired.

“*It’s open,*” she replied. Case shoved the door aside and grinned. Dr. Swan sat behind a shiny, wooden desk, grading papers. She wore a red blazer and a crisp, white shirt. She looked at Case and narrowed her eyes.

“Oh, not *you* again!” she remarked. She smiled. “Hi, Detective Case.”

“Hello,” he replied. He wandered to her desk. He shuffled through Tiffany’s homework as he went. He arrived at the edge of Dr. Swan’s desk and held out an essay. Dr. Swan snatched the essay out of Case’s hand and looked it over. She looked up, suspiciously.

“Are you auditing my course?”

Case smiled. “It’s for Tiffany.”

Dr. Swan furrowed her brow. “Who?”

Case smacked his lips. “Tiffany Haynes.” He raised his hand below his shoulder.

“She’s... kinda short.” He slid his fingers across his jaw. “Short, black hair.”

Dr. Swan opened her mouth and bobbed her head. “Ah... The quiet one.” She narrowed her eyes and pointed. “Is *that* who you ended up with? I mean, after Gina?”

Case turned his head without looking away. “What are you trying to say?” Dr. Swan showed him her palms. Her big, blue eyes popped open.

“Nothing! I’m not saying anything.” She smiled. “Honest.”

Case looked at the floor and nodded. “That’s the essay you’re taking up, today.” He looked up. “I’m turning it in for her. And, she’s not coming in, today.” He slid his hair aside. Dr. Swan nodded.

“That’s fine. I was going to take these up and give everyone the day off.”

Case nodded. “Good. That’s good.” He sighed. “She could use a break.”

Dr. Swan pressed her lips together. “We *all* could. Believe me.”

Case pointed towards the hallway. “Okay. Well, I’m going to go try and turn in the rest of this.” He held up the stack of homework he was turning in for Tiffany. Dr. Swan scrunched up her nose.

“My, God! She *does* need a break.”

Case laughed. “Yeah. You have no idea.” He headed towards the door. “I’ll see you, Dr. Swan.”

She smiled. “Good-bye, Detective Case.” Case marched down the hall. He was searching for room 3114. That was Dr. Matthews’ office. She was Tiffany’s English professor. Tiffany wrote a ten page paper about sexual discrimination for her. Dr. Matthews kept her door open. She was short and thin. She had short, curly, brown hair, dark eyes, and thin lips. A pair of rectangular spectacles with plastic frames lay across the bridge of her nose. She wore a dark blue blazer and a white turtleneck. That’s all Case could see. Dr. Matthews sat at her desk, reading a paperback. The book lay on her desk. Her arms were folded on top. Case stood in front of her office doorway. He crossed his arms over his chest and observed. Dr. Matthews’ scanned each line on the page in front of her. Her eyes slid from side to side.

“Dr. Matthews?” Case inquired. Dr. Matthews didn’t look up. She showed Case her pointer finger and continued reading. She finished the page she was on, dropped her palm on top, and looked up. With her free hand, she tore the spectacles from her face.

“Yes? Can I help you?” Case smiled. He waved Tiffany’s essay and entered the room.

“I’m turning in Tiffany’s essay for her.” He dropped it on Dr. Matthews’ desk. The

surface of the desk was smooth and shiny. It was almost empty. There was a stack of papers she was grading, the book she was reading, a brass nameplate, and a golden lamp with a long, green shade. Now, Tiffany's essay joined the party. Dr. Matthews looked at Tiffany's essay and narrowed her eyes. She flipped her book over, dropped her glasses over her eyes, and snatched up Tiffany's paper.

"Ah..." she remarked. She lowered the essay and looked at Case over the rims of her spectacles. "Tiffany Haynes. The dark haired one."

Case nodded. "Yeah." He held his elbow in his hand and stroked his chin. "The really *pretty* dark haired one." Dr. Matthews smiled and looked away. She placed Tiffany's essay on the stack of papers she was grading. She looked up.

"I didn't mean..." Case smiled and waved her off. Dr. Matthews focused on the stack of papers. She straightened Tiffany's and looked at Case. "She's not coming in, today?" Dr. Matthews slouched in her chair, slid off her spectacles, and folded them. Case narrowed his eyes.

"She needs a day off." Dr. Matthews looked away and pressed her lips together. She smacked her lips and pointed at Case with her glasses.

"That's unfortunate." She looked up. "I'm introducing a very important literary figure during today's lecture."

Case crossed his hands behind his back. "And, who might that be?"

Dr. Matthews smiled. "Mr. William Shakespeare."

Case pressed his lips together and nodded. "Isn't that what *all* the college English classes are about?" Dr. Matthews smiled and scoffed. Case smiled. "Which play?"

Dr. Matthews shook her spectacles at him. "You are just a little too smart for your own



good.” Case scrunched up his nose. “Mister...”

“Case.” He offered his hand. “I’m Louis Case.” Dr. Matthews shook it. She sat back and looked into Case’s eyes.

“I really was just going to talk about him. Have the students take notes.” She shook her spectacles. “Tiffany is a big note taker.” Case nodded. “But, I think she’ll be alright if she misses out. Just this one time.” Case looked at the floor and snickered. He looked up.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Dr. Matthews slid her glasses over her eyes. “I’ll talk a little more about Mr. Shakespeare on Monday. Then, I’ll have the students read one of his plays.”

Case nodded. “Okay.” Dr. Matthews picked up her book. She pointed at Case with it.

“You take care of her, Mr. Case. You hear me?”

Case looked at the floor then back up. “I’ll try my best.”

“Don’t hurt her.” Dr. Matthews laid the cover of her book on her desk and dropped her palm on top. She looked at Case. “That last guy she was with, Chad.” Case nodded. “He really did a number on her.”

Case looked down and rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah, I know.” He looked up. “Thank you, Dr. Matthews.”

“Welcome,” she replied. She looked down and resumed reading. Case wandered down the hall to room 3119. That was Dr. Isaacs’ office. He was Tiffany’s physics professor. Dr. Isaacs’ door was open a crack. Case eased it open. He found Dr. Isaacs slumped in his chair. He lay with his head to the side, his arms dangling, and his eyes closed. A science fiction magazine lay across his chest. He had short, grey hair. A pair of oval shaped glasses lay over his eyes. Dr. Isaacs had a glass desk with a thin, metal frame. So, Case could see his entire

profile. He wore a maroon, polo shirt, a pair of khakis, and a pair of white sneakers. His britches were too short. They slid up his calves.

*"I'm not sleeping..."* he mumbled. *"I'm just resting my eyes."*

Case smiled and shook his head. "Dr. Isaacs?" he inquired.

*"Hmm...?"* he groaned.

"My name is Louis Case. I'm turning in Tiffany's homework for her." One of Dr. Isaacs' eyes popped open. It was sky blue.

"Yeah?" he inquired. "You think so, huh?"

Case shook his pointer finger at him. "You are a strange cat, Dr. Isaacs. I'll give you that." Dr. Isaacs closed his eyes and smiled. He stretched his arms above his head and groaned. He snatched up his magazine and dropped it on his desk. He planted his palms against the top and pushed himself to his feet.

"No, Louis." He slid his fingers beneath the lenses of his glasses and raked at his eyes. He looked up and inhaled through his nostrils. "I'm beat." He sighed and approached him. "I feel like I just got run over by a truck." He held out his hand. "You're turning this in for Tiffany Haynes?" Case nodded. He handed him a stack of Tiffany's chicken scratch. Dr. Isaacs thumbed through it and looked up. "She taking the day off?"

"Yeah, man," Case replied. "She's a little beat, too." Dr. Isaacs chuckled. He returned to his desk, dropped Tiffany's homework on top, and had a seat. He rested his arms on the glass and looked at Case.

"Okay. I was going to give out a little homework, but..." He stopped, threw his fist in front of his lips, and yawned. "Ho... Excuse me." He shook his head and rubbed his eyes. Case rubbed the back of his neck.

“I see your point.”

Dr. Isaacs dropped his palm on Tiffany’s homework. “Thank you, Louis. I’ll get this back to her by next class.” He pushed his lips to the side of his face and nodded. “And, you might tell her to just... look through the next chapter in our book. I’m going to go over it a little, today. But, there’s no way I’m giving out any more homework before the weekend.”

Case nodded. “Good. Thank you.” Dr. Isaacs pointed at him then looked at his desk. He dropped his hand on the glass surface. He sorted through some of the papers that were on his desk. Case wandered down the hall. His last stop was room 3123. That was Dr. Vincent’s office. He was Tiffany’s Calculus I professor. He was a scatter brained freak. Case could tell right away. Dr. Vincent’s door was wide open. An old, cruddy desk sat in the middle of the room. Five different chairs were scattered around the room. Papers and books were slathered across the desk. Dr. Vincent stood at a chalkboard on wheels. It stood in front of the wall adjacent to the door. The chalkboard was blanketed with scratch work. It lay across the gritty, green surface. The chalkboard was covered from one end to the other. A few papers and books were lying on the floor around it.

Dr. Vincent wore a white, button up shirt with a black collar, a pair of white slacks, and a pair of white, canvas shoes. He had short, black hair. A thick beard covered the lower half of his face. A circular pair of glasses with thick, plastic lenses covered the upper half. Dr. Vincent glanced at the door and turned back to his scratch work.

“I’ll be with you in a minute,” he mumbled. He was finishing up a proof. A Greek letter that looked like an E appeared all over the board. It was the letter sigma. Case had seen it before in math. It meant Dr. Vincent was working with a summation series. Case had no idea which. But, he knew better than to ask. The symbol for infinity appeared above every single

sigma. That meant whatever Dr. Vincent was working out was extremely complicated. Case thought about saying something like, "Take your time." But, he didn't want to interrupt. Dr. Vincent stopped writing and dropped his arm at his side. He studied the last thing he'd written. He drew a small square next to it and colored it in. Then, he laid his chalk stick on a metallic railing. The railing slid across the bottom of the chalkboard. Dr. Vincent dusted his palms and faced Case. A smile shot across his bearded face.

"Okay. What can I do for you?" He clapped his hands one time. He looked like a quarterback waiting for his center to hike the ball. Case smirked.

"I'm just turning in Tiffany's homework for her." He handed it to Dr. Vincent. Dr. Vincent took it from him, anxiously. He narrowed his eyes and looked it over. He slid his pointer finger across the first bit of Tiffany's work and muttered to himself. He smiled and shook his head. He moved to the next problem and looked it over. He looked up and nodded.

"And, here I didn't think I was going to have anything to do today." He turned and headed towards his desk. He shook Tiffany's homework as he walked. "Only student in my class with an A." He dropped Tiffany's papers on top of a book. It was a book about group theory. It lay open, pages down. Dr. Vincent looked at Case and smiled. Case nodded.

"She tries really hard."

Dr. Vincent pointed at him. "Yep, she does. I like that." He tore off his glasses and wiped the lenses with the bottom of his shirt. He held them to the light and looked them over. "I like the ones that try." He rolled a heavy, leather chair towards his desk and plopped down. He began stacking papers together. He looked up. "I should clean up once in while."

Case smiled. "Awe, don't worry about it. It'll chase away the jerks." Dr. Vincent looked up and chuckled. "Are you going to give out any homework today, Dr. Vincent?"

Dr. Vincent stacked three books and shook his head. “Nope. Not today.” He laid Tiffany’s homework on the center of his desk and picked up a pen. He looked it over.

“Okay,” Case replied. “Well, Tiffany’s not coming in, today.”

Dr. Vincent looked up. “Oh, man. It’s going to be lonely without her.” He smiled and went back to scanning.

“Is she like a big deal around here?” Case inquired.

Dr. Vincent looked up. “Well, I’ve got...” He narrowed his eyes and looked to the right. “Six students in my Calculus I class.” He poked the middle of his glasses and scooted them back. “And, that’s a pretty big class for *me*.”

“Six?” Case asked. “Not a lot of math majors out there, huh?”

Dr. Vincent was poring over Tiffany’s homework. “We started out the semester with forty-one.” He tapped something at the bottom of the second page. He flipped the page and scanned the other side.

“Anyway,” Case muttered. “Is there anything she should look through over the weekend?” Dr. Vincent looked up. He looked away, nodding.

“Well...” He flipped through the three books he’d stacked earlier. He grabbed the bottom one and flipped through it. He slid it around and tapped one of the pages. “We’ve been working on chain rule problems?” Case looked up and nodded. “Now, we’re going to start looking more at the lower end.” He looked into Case’s eyes. Case pushed his lips to the side of his face. Dr. Vincent smiled. “Just tell her to read through this chapter.” Case noted the chapter number. “Chapter twenty-one.” Case nodded and backed away. Dr. Vincent went back to scanning Tiffany’s homework.

“Okay,” Case remarked. “I’ll tell her that. I appreciate it, Dr. Vincent.”

Dr. Vincent looked up. “Hang on. Let me finish this up for you. There’s just a couple of problems left.” Case raised his eyebrows. He walked towards the desk and folded his arms over his chest. Dr. Vincent went back to scanning. “I can go ahead and get her grade logged in. That’ll save me a little time, later.” Case nodded and watched. Dr. Vincent finished combing through Tiffany’s chicken scratch. He rolled the last page over, whirled the stack of papers around, and slapped it down in front of Case. He looked up with a grin. “Yeah, that looks good.” He snagged a three ring binder from the side of his desk. It was organized with manila dividers. He flipped to a section labeled “Calculus I.” He flipped to a white sheet. It had a grid with labels at the top and left side. The top labels were dates. The left hand labels were the names of forty-one students. Dr. Vincent found Tiffany Haynes and the date. He wrote “110” in the rectangle and flipped the folder closed. He looked up at Case. “Done deal.”

Case offered his hand. “Thanks, Dr. Vincent.”

Dr. Vincent shook it, ambiguously. “No problem.” He hopped up and returned to the chalkboard. He picked up his chalk stick and looked over his shoulder. “I don’t mind grading *hers*.” Case smiled. He turned and entered the hallway. He retrieved his cell phone from a pocket on the front of his hoodie. It was fully charged. The little window on the outside said it was 7:37.

“Time for donuts,” he remarked. He looked to his right. He imagined Brandy walking beside him. It made him smile. “*You think Tiffany’s up?*” he thought. Brandy shrugged. Case faced forward. “*Let’s go find out...*” He dropped by the bakery on Desmond Road. He picked up three chocolate donuts, three vanilla, three cherry, and three glazed. Then, he returned to the magic shop. He found Adam and Gabrielle sitting at the counter. They sat on their usual barstools in the middle. Adam sat on Case’s left. Gabrielle sat on his right. They spun around

as Case entered. Case eased the door closed so the bell wouldn't ring. Adam wore a black t-shirt. It read "X-Team" in tall, white letters. X-Team was a punk band Adam and Gabrielle were into. Adam also wore a pair of dark blue jeans with holes in the knees, a pair of red, canvas shoes, and his black, leather jacket. Gabrielle wore some of the clothes Case bought her the day before. She wore the turquoise turtleneck and pair of blue jeans. She wore the black, canvas shoes she'd worn when she was fighting Brittany and Ted. She'd gotten a new pair of shoes as well. But, she didn't want to break them in, moving.

Case pointed towards the bedroom and narrowed his eyes. "*Is she awake?*" he whispered. Adam and Gabrielle shook their heads. Case nodded. He marched to the counter and dropped the donuts on top. They were in a shiny, white box. Gabrielle and Adam spun around and flipped the box open. Case smiled and wandered into the bedroom. Tiffany hadn't moved. She lay beneath her red covers, quiet as a mouse. Case stood with the door open halfway. A sudden burst of Gabrielle's laughter whooshed in. Tiffany awoke with a gasp. She sat up and looked at Case. Her eyes were like saucers. Case smacked his lips and turned around. He glared at Gabrielle through the opening in the door. Gabrielle pointed at Adam and shook her head.

"He tickled me!" Case narrowed his eyes. He shut the door and faced Tiffany. Tiffany sighed. She slid her hair aside and turned around. The alarm clock read "7:52." Tiffany whirled around and looked at Case.

"Oh, my God!" she shrieked. She threw the covers aside and scooted towards the edge of the bed. "I'm gonna be late!" She looked at Case. "What... Why didn't you wake me up?"

Case showed her his palms. "Tiffany, relax." Tiffany planted her palms at her sides and exhaled. Case pressed his lips together. "I... turned in all your homework."

Tiffany narrowed her eyes. “Wh-Why?” She shook her head. “What do you mean?”

Case smiled and approached her.

“I took all your homework and turned it in.” He sat beside her. Tiffany looked him over.

“And then, I told all your professors you were taking the day off.”

Tiffany leaned away and took a breath. “Really?”

Case gritted his teeth. “Look, I don’t know if that pisses you off or not...” Tiffany relaxed. She dropped her hands in her lap, looked down and sighed. Case patted her shoulder. She looked up and smiled. “But, you need a day off.” Case pointed towards his chest. “And, I need your help.”

Tiffany squinted. “Um, okay. Doing what?”

“Moving all our stuff.” Case smiled. “Into the new house.”

Tiffany faced forward. “Ah.” She folded her fingers in front of her lips. She looked at Case. “You... talked to all my professors?”

Case nodded. “Yeah, man. They’re not giving out any homework for the weekend. So...” Tiffany threw her arms around Case’s neck. She kissed him on the cheek. Case chuckled. “I, uh... I’m going to call the kids in sick, too.” He looked towards the shop. “I guess I’d better do that.”

Tiffany squeezed his neck. “That is such a good idea!” Case slid his arms around Tiffany’s waist. She backed away and looked into his eyes. “Um, let me go get ready, okay?”

Case nodded. “You don’t want to sleep some more?”

Tiffany shook her head. “I feel fine. I feel *much* better.”

Case slid his fingers through her hair. “Okay.” He kissed her lips. “You want a donut?”

Tiffany looked away and snickered. “Here...” Case stood up. “What kind do you want?”



Tiffany looked at the floor and tapped her teeth. She looked up.

“Did you get any cherry ones?”

Case nodded. “I’ll be right back.” He turned and left the bedroom. Tiffany folded her arms over her lap. She looked at the floor and sighed. She rested her elbows on her knees and rubbed her eyes. Case returned with a cherry donut and a vanilla. He handed the cherry one to Tiffany. He snagged two bottles of milk from the little refrigerator and left. He returned empty handed and closed the door. He knelt beside the refrigerator. He handed Tiffany a bottle of water. He got himself a bottle of milk and sat next to her. He held the vanilla donut and the milk in the same hand. He opened the milk and dropped the cap next to him. He took a bite of his donut. He rubbed Tiffany’s back with his empty hand and looked her over. “You okay, Tiffany?” Tiffany sat with her palms on her thighs. She held her cherry donut in one hand and her bottle of water in the other. The donut had a tiny bite taken out of it. Tiffany looked at Case.

“I’m still half asleep.”

Case rubbed her shoulder. “So, go back to bed for a little while.”

Tiffany took a deep breath and sighed. “I-I can’t.”

Case narrowed his eyes. “Sure, you can.” He took a bite of his donut. “Sleep all day if you want. You don’t even have to help.” Tiffany smiled and looked at her lap. “I just wanted you to have a day off.” Tiffany looked up. “It’s been a rough week.”

Tiffany closed her eyes and shook her head. “No. You don’t...” Tiffany leaned back and sighed. “I-I *can’t*. I can’t go back to sleep.” She looked at Case. “I’ll start dreaming again.”

Case opened his mouth and nodded. “Take some of your sleepy potion.”

Tiffany pressed her lips together and looked away. “I seem to be developing a

tolerance.” She looked back. “It’s not enough anymore.”

Case folded in his lips. “Were you having another dream? A second ago, when Gabrielle woke you up?” Tiffany nodded. Case slid his fingers through Tiffany’s hair. He rested his hand on the back of her head. She looked down. Her eyebrows fell in the middle.

“Louis, I don’t even know why you like me.” She looked up. “What is it? You just feel sorry for me? Is that it?” Case smiled.

“I *do* feel sorry for you. But, that’s not it.”

Tiffany nodded. “Well, what then? Why *do* you stick around? Why do you keep coming back?” Case looked at her from the tops of his eyes. “That night in the hospital, when I kissed you... Why didn’t you punch me in the nose?” Case looked away and shook his head. Tiffany let out an impatient sigh. “What?”

“I could never punch you, Tiffany.” Case looked into Tiffany’s dark, brown eyes. “Never.”

Tiffany raised her palms. “But, why?”

“Look, *I* think you’re a sweetheart.”

Tiffany’s arms fell at her sides. “I don’t know very many people that would agree with you.”

Case pressed his lips together. “Well, piss on them. You’re the kindest, sweetest person I know.” Tiffany smiled. “Anyone who can’t see that is a jerk.” Case slid his palm to the top of her head. “Besides, *you* have friends. What about that Diana chick? I remember, me and Gina dropped you off at her apartment that one time.”

Tiffany smacked her lips. “Yeah. Turns out, she was just using me to get her homework finished. I was basically doing it for her.” Case dropped his forehead in his palm. “I finally

stopped hanging around with her. She dropped out a week later.” Case looked up. “That’s how people treat me, Louis. Why don’t *you*?”

Case pointed at his chest. “*I* don’t treat people that way.” Tiffany looked down. Case sighed. “What about Valerie?” He motioned towards the door. “You know, the lady who left you the magic shop. What about *her*?”

Tiffany narrowed her eyes. “Yeah. She was cool.” Tiffany nodded. “She was a lot like you.” Case took a bite of his donut. Tiffany took a bite of hers. Case patted her head. She turned away. She took a sip from her water bottle and looked up. “She always knew exactly what to say.” Case nodded. “No matter what.” Tiffany took a bite of her donut. “No matter what was going on, she could always make me feel better.”

Case took a sip of milk. “That’s nice.”

Tiffany smiled. “*It was.*” She stuffed the last of her donut between her lips. Then, she sucked at her fingers. She washed everything down with a gulp of water. She pointed towards the bathroom with her thumb. “I’m going to take a shower.” Case took a bite of his donut and nodded. He looked at the floor. Tiffany knelt in front of the chest of drawers beside the refrigerator. She snagged some clothes and laid them over her arm. She looked over her shoulder. “Thank you.” Case looked at her. “I mean, thanks for doing all that for me.” She rolled her wrist. “Turning in my homework and all that.”

Case finished off his donut. “Welcome.” Tiffany took a sip from her water bottle. She set it on top of the fridge and stood up. She looked at Case and narrowed her eyes.

“No one gave me any homework for the weekend?”

Case shook his head. “Dr. Vincent said you might check out chapter twenty-one.”

Tiffany nodded. “I read through that, yesterday.” Case shrugged and looked away.

Tiffany smiled. She wrapped her fingers around Case's chin, turned his head, and kissed his lips. "You're a sweetheart." Case took her hand and kissed it. Tiffany laughed through her nostrils. She slid Case's hair around. Then, she slipped into the restroom and closed the door. Case faced forward and smiled. He slithered to his feet and wandered into the shop. He closed the door behind him. He sat across from Adam and Gabrielle. They looked up and grinned.

"What's on your mind, guys?" Case inquired. He took out his cell phone and flipped it open.

"Is she going with us?" Gabrielle asked. Case was staring at his phone. He found Willow Junior High in his list of contacts. He pressed the send button and put the phone to his ear. He looked at Gabrielle and smiled.

"Yeah, man. She's coming."

Adam pointed towards the bedroom. "Is she taking a shower?" Case nodded. Adam looked at Gabrielle. "Smoke break?"

Gabrielle's eyes popped open. "Yeah! Let's go." They hopped up and dashed outside. Case rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, hi. This is Louis Case." Case took a breath. "I'm calling about Adam Rhodes." He took a sip from his milk and set it on the counter. He snagged a chocolate donut. "Yeah, he's not coming in today. He's got some kind of stomach thing. He was up *all* night throwing up." Case took a bite of the donut. He nodded. "Thank you. I appreciate that." He flipped Gina's old phone closed and laid it on the counter. He leaned back, took another bite, and set the donut on the counter. He began chewing. Then, he stopped. He narrowed his eyes and pushed his mouth to the side of his face. He washed the bite of donut down with a swig of milk. He flipped open his phone and punched in his father's number. He put the phone to his ear, took

another drink of milk, and set the bottle down.

“*Gina!*” Case’s father said over the phone. Case smiled. He rolled his eyes and shook his head. “*You’re calling me from beyond the grave, again.*”

“Dad, you *know* it’s me.”

“*Me, who?*” his father asked. Case dropped his forehead in his palm. He looked up.

“Nah, it’s Gina.” He pressed his lips together and nodded. “I just climbed from the depths of the nether realm. Thought I’d call and say ‘hi’.”

His father chuckled. “*Louis, when are you going to get a different phone? Or, at least change Gina’s name to your own?*”

“Yes, I’ll get right on that.” His father laughed. “Also, I’m needing some advice.”

“*A life lesson, eh? Son, did I ever tell you the story about the cricket and the caterpillar?*”

Case narrowed his eyes. “I thought it was an ant and a grasshopper.”

“*Hmm. Maybe I mixed a couple together or something.*”

Case smiled. “Dad, it’s about Tiffany. I need your help.”

His father smacked his lips. “*You mean you’ve been seeing her for two months, and you still haven’t gotten her in the sack?*”

“Dad!” Case shouted. “Will you focus?”

His father chuckled. “*Is it about her abuse? Is that why you’re calling?*”

“Yeah, man. She’s having some problems.” Case looked out one of the windows across the front wall. Gabrielle and Adam were passing a stogie back and forth.

“*So, she needs counseling?*”

Case pressed his lips together. “She’s having trouble sleeping, Dad. Yeah.”

*"I see."* There was a pause. *"Well, I charge one twenty-five an hour."*

Case smacked his lips. "Man, bite me, you old fart."

*"Well, I can't give this shit away for free, Louis. I've gotta pay the bills, somehow."*

Case pushed his lips to the side of his face. "Dad, I'm gonna come down there and kick your ass."

His father chuckled. *"She doesn't need advice, Louis. She needs SSRIs."*

Case sighed. "She *told* me you'd say that." He shook his head. "She can't take SSRIs. Too many side effects."

*"No?"* his father inquired. *"Well, that's tough shit, then."*

Case smacked his lips. "Dad."

His father sighed. *"Alright, Louis. Alright. There might be another way."*

"Yeah? What's that?"

His father took a breath. *"Well, let me ask you this. When was the last time she saw her father?"*

Case raised his eyebrows. "Um, I don't know. I take it it's been a while. Yeah."

*"Well, it may help."*

Case nodded. "You think she should go to Lincoln and see her father?"

*"Ooooo..."* his father groaned. *"He's in Lincoln, huh?"*

Case rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah, man. That's where Tiffany's from."

*"Well, that sucks, Louis."* Case sighed. *"You have any idea what Lincoln's like?"*

Case shrugged. "I just know what Tiffany's told me about it."

*"Yeah? What does SHE say it's like?"*

"Not good," Case replied. His father chuckled. "Not so good, Dad."

His father sighed. *“Well, that may help. It might help her to go down to Lincoln and see her father.”* Case nodded. *“You should go down there with her, you know? Then, she could be there with you? It might change the way she remembers him a little. You see?”*

Case narrowed his eyes. “Uh... Yeah, that kind of makes sense.”

*“Maybe you could bring... those two kids. What are their names?”*

“Adam and Gabrielle,” Case replied.

*“Right,”* his father continued. *“You should ALL go down there with her. Maybe she could show you her old neighborhood, too. Her old place.”* Case gritted his teeth. *“You know, if the two of you went there together, it would give her something more pleasant to remember. Then, the next time she thinks about her old place in Lincoln, she’ll associate it with you and the kids, instead of her father.”*

Case nodded. “That’s actually a really good idea.”

*“Yes, it is,”* his father replied. *“That’ll be one hundred twenty-five dollars.”*

Case rolled his eyes. “Yeah, sure. I’ll send you a check, okay?”

His father chuckled. *“Really, you should take her down there. It would make her feel a lot better, I’m sure. You could be there with her, hold her little hand...”*

Case smiled and exhaled through his nose. “Thanks, Dad.”

*“Sure, Louis. Hope that helps. Just be careful, okay? Lincoln is... pretty rough. I had no idea she was from there.”*

“Yeah, okay.” Case looked up. Adam and Gabrielle were staring at him. Gabrielle flipped him off. “I gotta go, alright?”

*“Okay. Come by and see us, when you get a chance.”*

“I will.” Case flipped his phone closed. He dropped it in the right pocket of his hoodie.

He stuffed the last of his donut into his mouth and finished off his milk. Then, he hopped up and dashed through the front door. He pointed at Gabrielle. "I'm gonna *kill* you."

Gabrielle giggled. "Oh, yeah? Come get me, old man." Case's eyes widened. He started towards her.

"Uh, I believe we settled this yesterday, little girl."

Gabrielle's eyes lit up. "Ah!" she shrieked. She darted behind Adam. She planted her palms against his back and peeked around his shoulder. "You leave me alone!" Adam looked over his shoulder. A lit cigarette dangled from his lips.

"He's gonna get you, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle looked into Adam's hazel eyes. "No, Adam! You're supposed to protect me!" Adam looked at Case. He showed him his palms and stepped aside. Gabrielle's jaw dropped. She shook her head and backed away. "No, Louis! Leave me alone!"

Case pointed at her. "You'd better start running." Gabrielle whirled around and dashed towards the end of the parking lot. Case ran after her. The pavement was still wet from all the rain. Every step made a splash. Gabrielle made it to the street before Case snagged her around the waist. She shrieked. Case tossed her over his shoulder and headed towards the shop. Gabrielle wriggled and squirmed.

"Adam!" she cried. "Help me, you bastard!" Adam took a puff of his smoke. He grinned and shook his head. Case tickled the backs of Gabrielle's knees. She kicked her feet and giggled. "Stop it!" Adam was sitting on a row of concrete. It lay across the front of the shop. He stood and motioned towards the concrete.

"Here," he told Case. "This is perfect."

"Adam!" Gabrielle shrieked. "I'm breaking up with you!"



Adam narrowed his eyes and grinned. “Stop being so dramatic.” Case laid Gabrielle on the sidewalk and dug his fingers into her belly. She cried with laughter. She squashed her arms against her sides and crossed her wrists above her stomach.

“Stop it, Louis! No!” She was grinning so hard, it hurt. Case tickled her arms. She threw them out of the way. So, Case tickled her belly some more. Gabrielle curled away and giggled. She scooted towards the front of the building. She looked at Adam. Her eyebrows fell at the sides. “Adam, help me!” Adam nodded. He tossed his cigarette aside and approached her.

“Okay.” He snagged a hold of Gabrielle’s ankle. He untied her shoe and yanked it off. She was wearing the striped socks Case bought her the day before. “But, I’m a lousy tickler.” Adam tickled her foot. She tried to jerk it away. But, Adam had a hold of her ankle. He looked up at Case and continued. “You think we can make her pee her pants?”

Case nodded. “We can try.” He dug his fingers into Gabrielle’s armpits. She didn’t know which fingers to swat at. She squirmed and rolled around. She finally curled into a ball and submitted. She was laughing so hard, nothing came out. Case snickered. He looked at Adam and slid his fingers across his throat. Adam nodded. He let go of Gabrielle’s foot and scooted away. Gabrielle whirled around and rested her back against the shop. She grinned and gasped for breath. Tears dribbled down her cheeks. She pointed at Case.

“Please... leave me alone.” Adam folded his legs like a pretzel. Gabrielle’s head whirled around. “Adam!” she shrieked. Adam snickered. Case picked up Gabrielle’s shoe and approached her. Gabrielle hopped up and ran to the other end of the concrete. Adam laughed and smacked his thigh. Case smiled at Gabrielle. He smacked his lips and walked towards her. Her eyes popped open. She pointed at him. “Louis, no!” She pointed towards Adam. “Get

back over there!” Case chuckled. He held out his arm.

“Come here, Gabrielle. I won’t tickle you anymore.” Case was getting close. Gabrielle flattened against the wall and hugged herself. She thought about running through the parking lot. But, Case had her shoe. She folded in her lips and whimpered. She began to shake. Case threw his arms around her.

“Ah!” she cried. Case chuckled. He slid his hand across Gabrielle’s back and backed away. He held up her shoe.

“Here, put this back on.” Gabrielle sighed. She reached for her shoe, timidly. But, she couldn’t reach it. She couldn’t pry her arms away from her sides. Case handed her the shoe. Gabrielle held her shoe and looked up. She waited for Case to leave. Case smacked his lips. He snatched her shoe from her. Gabrielle shrieked and backed away. Case snickered. He snagged a hold of Gabrielle’s wrist and dragged her towards him.

“Louis!” Gabrielle shrieked.

“Here, I’ll do it,” he told her. He knelt beside her, stuffed her foot into her shoe, and tied it. He narrowed his eyes and studied the laces. They were the ones he’d knotted the other day. He stood and nudged her towards the front door. She squashed her arms against her sides and started walking. “Why are you still wearing *those*?” Case inquired.

She looked up. “I didn’t want to wear the new ones, yet. Not while we’re moving. They’ll get messed up.” Case nodded. He dropped his hand on her shoulder. She tensed up and whirled around. She grinned and pointed at him. “Stop it!”

Case pointed back. “Stop flipping me off.” Tiffany’s head popped out. She looked at Adam. Then, she looked at Case and Gabrielle. She narrowed her eyes.

“What’s going on out here?” Case looked her over. She wore a sweater with bands of

olive, strawberry, cornflower, plum, and white. The sweater was olive colored around the collar. It buttoned halfway down the front. Tiffany wore indigo bell bottoms and black boots with square tips. She also wore the star necklace Case bought her and her usual rings. Case looked at Adam.

“*She’s* ticklish, too.” Adam raised his eyebrows. He looked at Tiffany.

“Oh, really?”

Tiffany crossed her arms over her chest. “Am not.”

Case pointed at her. “No, I noticed it the other night. I touched your foot and you jerked it away.” He looked at Adam. He motioned towards Tiffany with his head. “Let’s get her, Adam.”

Tiffany pointed at Case. “Louis, don’t you *dare* tickle me.”

Adam rubbed his hands together. “Oh, I’m good with that.”

Tiffany glared at Adam. “Adam!”

Case looked at Gabrielle. He pointed at Tiffany.

“Gabs? You wanna get down on this?” Gabrielle looked at Tiffany. She narrowed her eyes and grinned.

“Oh, yeah. *She’s* got it coming.”

Tiffany pointed at Gabrielle. “No, Gabrielle!” She looked at Case and grinned. “Louis, don’t!”

Case smiled. “Come on, Tiffany. You could use a good laugh.” He started towards her. Adam and Gabrielle followed. Tiffany whirled around and darted across the shop.

“Get her!” Adam cried. Case, Gabrielle, and Adam ran after her. Tiffany dashed through the office and jerked at the back door. It was locked. It only unlocked with a key. Tiffany

whirled around and gasped. She dropped her arms at her sides and gritted her teeth. Case and the kids dashed inside. There was a smaller door adjacent to the back door. It was painted white. It concealed a tiny closet. That's where Adam and Gabrielle were keeping their clothes. Tiffany reached for the knob, spun it to the right, and dashed inside.

"Nuh-uh!" Case shouted. He darted across the office and snagged a hold of the doorknob. Tiffany didn't get the door shut. Case held it inches from the door jam. Tiffany held her side of the knob with both hands.

"*Louis!*" she shrieked. Case inched the door away from the wall. Tiffany's boots slid across the black, tile floor. "No! No! No!" she shouted. She peeked around the door.

Case smiled and nodded. "Oh, yeah. You're long overdue."

Tiffany pressed her lips together and fought back a grin. "I am gonna *kill* you!" Case snagged a hold of Tiffany's wrist and dragged her out. He threw her over his shoulder, carried her across the office, and laid her on the couch. Adam poked her knees. Gabrielle poked her belly. Case poked her ribs. Tiffany shrieked with giggles. Her laughter filled the room. It echoed along the walls. "*Stop! Stop! Stop!*" Tiffany wheezed. "Guys!" Case looked away, snickering. He waved his hands at Adam and Gabrielle. They stopped prodding and backed away. Tiffany scooted towards the wall. She grinned and pointed at Case. "Leave me alone, you bastard!" Case smiled. He offered his hand.

"Come on, honey. We'll leave you alone." Tiffany turned her head without looking away. She timidly took his hand. Case dragged her to her feet. He wrapped his arms around her waist. She squirmed.

"Louis!" Case chuckled. He kissed the top of her head.

"I'm sorry, Tiffany. I *had* to bust your balls." Tiffany tensed and looked up. Then, she

melted in Case's arms. Case looked at the kids. "Come on, guys. Let's go move all our shit." Adam and Gabrielle headed for the door.

"Cool, man," Adam remarked. "I haven't even *seen* this place, yet." Tiffany gasped for breath. She looked up at Case.

"I *knew* you were ticklish," he told her.

She grinned and pointed. "Louis, I am gonna kick your ass." Case poked her in the ribs. Tiffany jumped out of Case's arms and whirled around. Case snickered. He motioned towards the door with his head.

"Come on, man. Let's go."

Case and the gang rented a moving van. Then, they returned to the magic shop to load some stuff. They didn't take much. Tiffany decided to leave the office the way it was. They took Adam and Gabrielle's clothes from the closet. But, they left everything else. Tiffany spent her days off from school at the magic shop. It was the only time she had to run it. It's also when she did her homework. It made sense to leave her computer there. They left the couch across from the desk as well. Rather, they decided to put a different computer in the office in the new house. Case had a computer and a desk in storage. They were left over from his and Gina's split. They took all the books, the bed, the chest of drawers, and Tiffany's tiny refrigerator from the bedroom opposite the office. Case and Tiffany put everything but the books in their new master bedroom. They put Tiffany's books in the bookshelf in the den. Case was right. They took up half the shelf space.

Case and Gabrielle stood at the bottom of the stairs before unloading anything else. Case had something important to discuss. Gabrielle looked up at him and narrowed her eyes.

"Louis, what is it?" she asked.

Case rubbed the back of his neck. “You okay with this? You and Adam having separate rooms?” He looked down at her. “It’s kind of screwed up. This situation, I mean.”

Gabrielle sighed. “What do you mean?”

“You two aren’t...” Case mashed his hands together and shook them. Gabrielle exhaled through her nose. She slowly shook her head. Case nodded and looked towards the top of the stairs. Adam got Case and Gina’s old bed. Case had it in storage as well. It was a queen sized oak bed with a large headboard. It had a memory foam mattress. Adam wasn’t complaining about that. He’d slept on the floor of Tiffany’s office for the past two months. That’s why Gabrielle figured *he* should have it rather than her. Case had a spare bed in storage as well. He, Tiffany, and the kids set it up in Gabrielle’s bedroom. It was also a queen. It had a simple, metallic frame that bolted together.

The desk they put in the office was made of metal. It was ancient. It was from the 1920s. Case took it from the police station when he was a detective. Captain Ford was going to throw it away. The chair Case had for it was the chair that came with it. It was also made of metal. It was upholstered with leather. It was funky. When someone sitting in it moved, it made a noise like an old telephone ringing. The chair was really heavy. It took Case, Tiffany, Gabrielle, and Adam just to get it up the stairs. Case’s computer was an antique. It looked a lot like Tiffany’s. It had an old CRT monitor and a keyboard that shook the walls when the keys were tapped. Case had an old laser printer he’d swiped from the police station as well. They put Case and Gina’s old living room in the new living room. There was a squishy, blue sofa and a matching loveseat. Case also had a giant, outdated television. It didn’t need a stand. It stood atop a base of two speakers. Case gave everyone two guesses as to where he’d gotten it.

Case gave Gabrielle his and Gina’s old chest of drawers. He put his and Gina’s old

dining table below the stairs. It rested between the stairs and the bar. Case also had some plates, bowls, cookware, and silverware in storage. He, Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle stocked the kitchen cabinets with those. And, that was it. It made Case happy. He was able to get rid of his storage building. He'd emptied it out. Tiffany and Adam were blown away by the new house. Tiffany's eyes were like saucers from the time Case drove onto the property to the moment she was standing in front of the stairs. She looked at Case in disbelief.

"There *has* to be something wrong with it," she remarked.

Case shrugged. "*Has* to be." Gabrielle tried her best to act impressed. After all, she was not supposed to have seen it, yet. She should have been in school when Case was buying it. Little did Tiffany know, she was not. Tiffany brought a few small things from the magic shop. She put them in the attic. There was a table that belonged to her friend, Valerie. It was a giant Ouija board. The table was made of polished oak. The pointer was glass. It was ancient. Tiffany had no idea where Valerie got it. Case and Tiffany took the table to the attic, first. Adam and Gabrielle followed with a couple of boxes. Gabrielle dashed up the ladder with her box. Adam stopped dead in his tracks. A cold chill climbed his vertebrae. The hair on the back of his neck stood up. He looked towards the top of the ladder and gasped. Gabrielle set her box next to the Ouija table. She returned to the ladder and looked down at Adam. She narrowed her eyes.

"Come on, Adam." Adam set the box beside his feet. He looked at Gabrielle and narrowed his eyes. He opened his mouth to speak. But, he just stood there. "Adam?" Adam motioned for Gabrielle to come down. He looked terrified. "What?" Gabrielle asked. "What's the matter?"

"Come... back down here," Adam managed to get out. Gabrielle blinked. She hobbled

down the ladder and turned around. Adam looked pale. Gabrielle took his hands and looked into his eyes.

“Adam, what *is* it?” Adam took a breath. The air was chilly. It froze his lungs. He adjusted his shirt collar and cleared his throat.

“Just stay out of there, okay?” He looked towards the top of the ladder. “There’s something... very strange about this attic.” He looked into Gabrielle’s big, blue eyes. “I don’t like it.”



## Chapter 10: “Andre”

Sometimes, Andre played a game. He called it “Pick a Cup.” He played it when he was in a particularly delightful mood. Well, *he* never played. Rather, he made Tiffany play. Andre enforced the rules. He laid five cups on the kitchen table. It was actually an old card table Andre found in the dumpster. But, he always referred to it as “the kitchen table.” He laid the cups upside down. It was usually five different cups. Two might be coffee mugs. One might be a squashed paper cup from Burger Land. One might be a chewed up, blue, plastic cup. It depended on what was available in Andre and Tiffany’s cupboard. Sometimes, Andre had to do a couple of dishes just to set it up. He placed an object beneath each cup. There was a pink elephant, a pair of dice, a yellow ball, a match, and a marble.

The pink elephant was an old, cruddy, plastic toy. Tiffany got it in a kid’s meal when she was eight. If she picked the cup with the pink elephant, she had to drink until she passed out. The dice didn’t match. One was white with black dots. Some of the dots were faded. The other was red and transparent. If Tiffany chose the dice, she had to roll them. The number she rolled was the number of times Andre punched her. He usually continued to hit her afterwards. If Tiffany picked the yellow ball, Andre peed on her. He took her out back and made her lie in the dirt. Then, he pissed all over her face. He usually downed a few bottles of beer, first. That way, it was a good, full load of putrid piss. If Tiffany picked the match, Andre gave her a burn scar. She had a handful across her belly. One was shaped like a slice of Swiss cheese. It was from an iron. One was hook shaped. It was from a coat hanger, roasted over the stove. One was from a fire poker. One was from a scorching hot light bulb. There were others.

If Tiffany picked the marble, Andre raped her. Sometimes, he invited friends. Jack was a frequent visitor. When they were older, so were his sons, Henry and Hank. There were others.

The first time, Tiffany tried to fight them off. She did that with the first two. She learned after that to lay there and take it. It was easier that way. It was also quicker. After a while, she began to wonder if she enjoyed it. She wondered if she was making a career decision. She worried it was all she was good for. She was afraid she'd end up on the streets, selling her body to anyone who'd pay for it. It was a dreadful fear of hers. It troubled her well into college. Little did she know, an eccentric screwball named Louis Case would come along one day and change all that.

Tiffany turned out to be a non-smoking, non-drinker. She was caught smoking several times when she was younger. But, she was never very serious about it. When Andre was put away, Tiffany swore off smoking for good. She couldn't stand to be around it, anymore. It reminded her of *him*. As for drinking, Tiffany had her reasons for swearing that off as well. It was all about the cups. During her times playing, Tiffany drew the pink elephant seven times. They were the only seven times she ever had alcohol. Those occasions were the seven worst nights of her life. When Andre instructed Tiffany to drink until she passed out, he meant exactly that. One time, he gave her an entire bottle of vodka to drink. It was 750 ml, or about three-quarters of a quart. Tiffany got half of it down before she began to vomit. It's a good thing, too. Any more could have killed her. What she drank could have killed her.

Tiffany felt like she got off easy that night. The first time was the worst. It was the first time she played Pick a Cup. It began on a Friday evening. Tiffany was fourteen. Her shiny, black hair was cut even with her chin. She wore a neon green shirt. It was way too big for her. She also wore a pair of red, jogging shorts and two different sneakers. The sneakers were sloppy and worn out. One was black. One was white with blue trim. A pair of white socks with yellow bands stuck out of the top of Tiffany's sneakers. They were long, crew socks. They didn't stretch up her skinny calves, though. The necks were so worn out, they dangled in heaps around

Tiffany's ankles.

Tiffany was walking home from school. She was eleven blocks away. She was walking across a parking lot. It belonged to a department store called "Jackie's." Jackie's was a long, cinderblock building. The cinderblocks were painted pink. The paint was faded and peeling. It was getting late. So, the sign was lit. It consisted of white letters on large, black, plastic squares. They were arranged across the front of the store. Only five of the eight characters lit. The "e" was missing. It was just a busted light bulb in front of a white backing. There was a row of tall, skinny windows below the letters. There were once fifteen. But, six of them were boarded up.

Tiffany walked by Jackie's every day. On this particular day, David Sweeny, Tyler, Ryan, Troy, and Aaron were there. They were hanging out behind the store. There was a tower of cruddy pallets. Two rusty dumpsters were lined up beside that. One was brown. One was lime green. The boys sat between the dumpsters and the pallets. They sat in a circle. Tiffany watched them out of the corner of her eye. They were passing something around. It looked like a paper sack. Tiffany had no idea what they were up to. She didn't *want* to know. She hurried along. She hoped they wouldn't notice her.

"Hey, Tits!" David shouted. Tiffany stopped in her tracks. Three textbooks dropped from her arms. They crumbled to the pavement. Tiffany looked up and rolled her eyes. Her head fell to the side. Her arms went limp.

"Yo, Pussy Lips!" Tyler shrieked. Tiffany looked over her shoulder. "Just drop them damn books, why don't you!" Tiffany sighed. She bent over and scraped her books off the ground. One of them was her book for Geology. Half the pages got bent when it fell. Tiffany stacked the books together, stood, and turned around. David was sitting, facing the wall. He wore a red, plaid jacket and a pair of dark blue jeans. He motioned for Tiffany to come on over.

Tiffany hugged her books. She pressed her lips together and looked at the pavement.

“Come on, Titty!” Aaron screamed. “Don’t be a bitch like that!” Tiffany looked up. Aaron wore a black, long sleeved shirt and faded jeans with holes in the knees. Tyler wore a grey, plaid shirt and a pair of black jeans. The plaid shirt was open. A black t-shirt showed from beneath. It had the logo for some band he was into. Troy wore his black beanie with the Skull and Crossbones, a black, long sleeved shirt with flames on the sleeves, and faded jeans. Ryan wore a black hoodie and a pair of brown corduroys. Tiffany took a long breath. She looked down and slowly approached them. Ryan turned to his friends.

“I knew she’d do it,” he remarked. Everyone laughed. Tiffany wandered up to them and stopped. She stared at the pavement and exhaled through her nose.

“Tiffany, you’re an idiot,” Aaron said. His friends laughed. Tiffany looked up. Aaron threw his arms out at his sides. He narrowed his eyes. “You’re wearing shorts.” He looked around. “And, it’s like... thirty out here!” Aaron dropped his hands in his lap. He stared at Tiffany and shook his head. “Are you that dumb? Seriously?” Tiffany looked herself over. She *was* cold. Unfortunately, the clothes she was wearing were the cleanest ones she had. All her others were starting to stink. Her father hadn’t taken her to the laundry mat in over a month. She planned to wash her clothes in the tub when she got home. That is, if there was any soap. Tiffany looked up.

“S-So, what’s up?” The boys grinned and looked at each other. Tiffany looked at the ground. “W-Why did you call me over here?”

Troy looked at David. “David wants you to smell his sack.” Everyone laughed. Tiffany looked at David from the tops of her eyes. She let out a shaky sigh. David held up a paper sack and grinned. He shook it from side to side.

“What did you *think* he meant, Piss?” David asked. Tiffany swallowed hard. David lowered the sack. Ryan sat next to him. He revealed a can of pink spray paint. He shook it. A steel ball bounced inside the can. Ryan laid the nozzle at the end of the bag. He filled the bag with a handful of paint. David offered it to Tiffany. “Here you go, Tits.” The boys laughed. “Take a whiff.” Tiffany squeezed her books. She shook her head and backed away.

“No, way.” She showed them a nervous pointer finger. “There’s no way I’m sniffing that.”

Ryan narrowed his eyes. “Come on, Tits. Just do one hit.”

Tiffany looked at him. “No.”

David glared at her. “Tiffany, do it. Or, I’m gonna put my foot in your shitty ass.” Ryan giggled. Troy looked over his shoulder.

“What? You think you’re better than us?” Tiffany looked at him and tilted her head. She pointed towards her house.

“Guys, j-j... just let me go home, please.” She looked at David. Her eyebrows fell at the sides. “Please, David.” Her heel caught the end of a parking pylon. She stumbled and fell on her butt. Her books toppled to the pavement. The boys laughed.

“Damn, Tits,” Aaron remarked. “Watch where you’re going. Not where you’ve been.” Tiffany sat up. Her knees were bent above the pylon. Her elbows burned. She looked them over. They were ripped open. Blood dribbled from her jagged elbows to the pale pavement. She felt tears in her eyes. David hopped to his feet. His friends did the same. They approached her. Tiffany began to wheeze. She gathered her books and stumbled to her feet. Her butt was throbbing. She’d landed on the bony part. She continued backing away. She looked behind her. She was almost to the street. David held up the paper sack.

“Just one sniff, Tiff.”

Tiffany looked at him. “No, David!” she sobbed.

Tyler threw his arms out at his sides. “Come on, Titty! Be cool just once in your life!”

Tiffany panted like a dog. She decided to run. She whirled around and darted across the pavement. She made it to the end of the parking lot and turned right. Within half a block, David hopped on her back. They crumbled to the ground. Tiffany’s books scattered. Her knees skidded across pale, jagged rocks. Before she could utter a sound, David had her in a headlock. He held up her head and squashed the bag over her lips. Tiffany held her breath. David’s friends gathered around. They glared at her and grinned. Tiffany closed her eyes and lowered her head. She pulled at David’s arm. It didn’t budge.

“*Breathe,*” David groaned. He tightened his arm. “Do it.” Tiffany looked up. Tears dribbled down her cheeks. She had no choice. She took a breath. It was the worst breath she ever took. It was putrid, metallic, and foul. It burned her nostrils and tongue. It made her dizzy and nauseous. Her head began to throb. The pavement was white. It was made of tiny rocks. The rocks were pointed and flat. The points were mighty sharp. They were rough and unforgiving. Yet, they supported her weight. The space between was filled with grime. It was packed into every pore. It was filthy and slimy. It was filled with germs. The germs were microscopic. They danced in little germ nightclubs. They went on dates, had sex, and multiplied. Little baby germs bounced and hopped around. They tumbled down little germ slides. They crashed into the jagged street.

Tiffany awoke in a puddle of puke. Her head thumped with her pulse. Her eyes felt like they were going to burst. The flesh around her lips was burning. She rested her palms against the pavement. She slid her head to the side, twirled it around, and looked up. She studied her

surroundings. She was alone. The sky was a little darker, but not much. Tiffany hadn't been there long. She groaned. She could smell and taste pink spray paint. It was stuffed up her nostrils. It coated her gums, teeth, and tongue. Tiffany hacked up a loogie and spit it out. It was pink and gooey. Tiffany pressed her thumb against her left nostril. She exhaled through her right. Pink spray paint spattered the pavement. Tiffany did the same with the other. Then, she scrunched up her nose and inhaled. It burned. So did the flesh around her mouth. She slid her fingers across her lips and examined them. They were slathered with slimy, pink flakes.

Tiffany rolled onto her butt. She crossed her legs like a pretzel. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath through her nose. She exhaled through her lips. She swirled her fingers across her lips. She wanted to make sure she'd gotten all the paint off. Her knees and her elbows were burning. She looked them over. Flesh was hanging off her elbows and knees. Blood was gushing out. Tiffany sighed. She looked at her lap. She ripped off a chunk of her highlighter colored shirt. She wadded it against her left elbow to stop the bleeding. She took care of the other wounds and hobbled to her feet. Her head was throbbing. Everything was spinning. Tiffany poked her eyelids and swirled them around. She scrunched up her nose. She looked at the pavement. Her books were scattered about. Little drops of blood were all over them.

Tiffany bent over and scraped up her books. She swabbed them with her shirt. Then, she tucked them under her arms and headed home. She stuffed the chunk of fabric she'd ripped off her shirt into the left pocket of her shorts. She traversed the next nine blocks without incident. She turned right on Bernard Street. She passed the old, brick house. It was dotted with shattered windows. Mini blinds were poking out in places. Two lots down, Tiffany looked to her right. She was walking by the house with the lime green, wooden siding and the tin roof. The yard was

filled with waist high grass as usual. The old man sat on the porch in his wooden rocking chair. He sat next to the screen door. He wore his usual getup, gigantic, square shaped glasses, plaid shirt, brown trousers, black suspenders, and a tall, red cap with a long bill. He waved as Tiffany passed. His hand was tired and wobbly. Tiffany smiled and waved back.

At the end of the block, Tiffany passed the two story house with the dormer. The old, fifties model car rested on the middle of the lawn as usual. Tiffany wandered down the block. She looked at G.B.'s house. His low rider was parked on the front lawn. He was probably inside. Tiffany thought about stopping by. She looked at *her* house. Her father's van was parked out front. She pressed her lips together and exhaled through her nostrils. She could still feel chunks of spray paint inside. She decided to go home. She was already running behind. She'd been delayed after all. Also, the lawn needed to be mowed. What dry, prickly grass there was almost reached above the toes of Tiffany's shoes. She'd noticed it on the way to school. Her father would likely be upset.

Tiffany stomped across the crunchy, front lawn and reached for the storm door. She stopped in hesitation. The front door was open. Tiffany heard some game show through the screen. She looked at the ground, took a breath, and exhaled a shaky sigh. She eased the storm door aside and wandered in. The living room reeked of cigarettes. A smoky haze hung in the air. It was like a kick in the chest. Tiffany looked towards the end of the wall on her right. Andre's head poked around the corner. Tiffany gasped. She stopped in her tracks and looked at the floor.

"Well, there's Tiff," Andre remarked. He stomped around the corner, leaned against the wall, and crossed his arms over his chest. He wore his usual clothes, an old, ratty undershirt, a pair of cruddy jeans, and a pair of sloppy sneakers. Tiffany looked up, timidly.



“H-Hi, Dad. I was just about to mow.” Andre folded his fingers. He lowered his hands and cracked his knuckles.

“No, you weren’t.” Tiffany looked at the floor and exhaled through her nose. “You were just about to play a game.”

Tiffany looked up. “A game, huh?”

Andre narrowed his eyes and nodded. “Yeah.”

Tiffany let out a nervous breath. “Um, sounds great.” She cleared her throat. “What kind of game?” She faced the tower of televisions. She decided to set her books on the large, wooden one. She lifted them.

“Don’t set your books on the T.V., Tiff!” Andre shouted. Tiffany whirled around and faced him. Andre’s eyebrows fell in the middle. He crossed his arms over his chest. “How many times am I going to have to tell you that before you finally *get* it?!” Tiffany looked at the floor and nodded. “What are you, retarded or something?”

Tiffany looked up. “I-I guess so.”

Andre dropped his arms at his sides. “You fucking retard.” Tiffany pressed her lips together. Andre pointed towards the kitchen. “Come in here, and see if you can get *this*, retard.” He turned and wandered into the kitchen. Tiffany hugged her books. She hobbled after him. Andre stopped next to the kitchen table. Tiffany stopped behind him. She looked at the table. There were five cups on top. They lay upside down. There was one black coffee mug, one white coffee mug, one red, plastic cup, one paper cup from Burger Land, and one tin can. Andre made Tiffany use the tin can as her cup. Tiffany hated it. It always cut her lips. Andre turned around. He looked at Tiffany’s books and narrowed his eyes. “God damn, you’re dumb as Hell.” Andre snapped his fingers and pointed towards her room. “Go put your books up, dipshit.” Tiffany

looked at the floor. She whirled around and dashed down the hallway. She stacked her books inside her bedroom door and hurried back.

“Now,” Andre continued. He pointed at the table. “Pick a cup.”

Tiffany looked at the cups and looked up. “W-Why?”

Andre crossed his arms over his chest. “Tiffany, don’t make me put my foot in your ass.”

Tiffany looked away and sighed. She looked up and threw her arms out at her sides.

“What did I *do*?”

Andre narrowed his eyes. “You know damn well what you did.” Tiffany looked at the floor. She exhaled, impatiently.

“You’re right. I’m just asking because I like hearing you talk, so much.” Andre snagged a fistful of his daughter’s hair and lifted her off her feet. Then, he bounced her head off the floor. The floor in the kitchen was made of rock. Tiffany rolled onto her side and clutched the back of her skull. The dizziness she’d shaken on the way home returned. Andre bent over.

“What’d I tell you about that smart mouth of yours, you little bitch?” He stood and kicked Tiffany in the chest. He kicked her right between the breasts. Tiffany rolled onto her back and clutched her sternum. She pinched her eyes shut and wheezed. Andre looked towards the ceiling. He held out his hands and shook his head. “Why couldn’t I have had a son?” He looked at Tiffany. “Instead, I get stuck with *this* useless cunt.” Tiffany puffed up her cheeks and exhaled. She opened her eyes and looked up. Andre threw his arms out at his sides. “Stand up.” Tiffany gasped for air. She plopped her palms against the floor and shoved herself to her feet. Andre sighed. “Finally. I finally got your ass to do something, today.” He smacked Tiffany’s cheek with the back of his hand. Her head whirled to the side. She pinched her eyes shut. Andre pointed at the table. “Now, pick a cup.” Tiffany stared at the row of cups. She let out a

shaky sigh. She looked into her father's cold, dark eyes.

"Dad..."

Andre threw his fists on his hips. "Tiff!" Tiffany shrugged up her shoulders and looked at the floor. She closed her eyes. A pair of tears slithered down her cheeks. She opened her eyes and studied the row of cups. There was no rhyme or reason to them. They were just cups. Well, they were four cups and a tin can. Tiffany raised a nervous, shaky hand. The tin can was *her* cup. So, she chose it. She extended her pointer finger and poked it. The can wobbled on its jagged rim and clattered to a stop. Andre twisted the left side of his mustache between his thumb and forefinger. "Let's see what we got." Tiffany didn't even want to know what was underneath. She turned away and crossed her arms over her chest. Andre picked up the tin can. The pink elephant was underneath. Andre grinned at his daughter. His eyebrows fell in the middle. He began to cackle. Tiffany let out a shaky sigh. She slowly turned around. "Drinkey, drinkey..." Andre remarked. He handed Tiffany the elephant toy. Tiffany held it in her palm and studied it. She looked up.

"Okay? So, what does *that* mean?" Andre's hideous grin relaxed. He snagged a hold of Tiffany's hair and dragged her down the hall. Tiffany began to whimper. She slid her fingers through Andre's and tried to keep up. Andre took her into the bathroom and tossed her into the tub. He left the lights off. Tiffany's hips and shoulder blades collided with the porcelain canoe. She flattened her arms against her sides, shrugged up her shoulders, and sucked air through her teeth. Andre snapped his fingers.

"Clothes," he muttered.

Tiffany exhaled through her nose. "Why?" Andre whirled to the side. There was a plunger beside the commode. It stood with the handle sticking up. Andre grabbed a hold of the

handle, near the rubber head. He held the plunger in front of Tiffany's face. Tiffany's eyes popped open.

"Tiff, I'm gonna stick this up your fucking ass... if you don't do what the *fuck* I tell you!" Tiffany shook all over. She sat up, scrambled out of her shirt, tossed her shoes and socks aside, and yanked off her shorts. She wore a white bra and panties. She hooked her thumbs beneath the back of her bra. She looked at her lap and exhaled. Andre crossed his arms over his chest. He still held the plunger. "All of them." Tiffany looked up. She unhooked her bra and tossed it aside. Then, she slid off her panties and added them to the pile. Andre nodded. He set the plunger beside the potty. He removed the top from the toilet tank. Tiffany watched. Her eyes widened. Andre took out a baggie. There was a pair of handcuffs inside. He kept them there for just such an occasion.

He took out the cuffs, laid the empty bag on the toilet seat, and returned the top to the tank. He snagged a hold of Tiffany's skinny wrists and held them above the faucet. A thick, metallic ring was sticking out of the wall. Tiffany folded her knees against her chest and looked away. She began to cry. Andre slid the handcuffs through the ring. Then, he cuffed Tiffany's wrists. Tiffany looked up. Andre backed away and looked down. He smiled and nodded.

"Alright, then. I'll be right back." He turned and stomped down the hallway. Tiffany melted against the back of the tub. She stared at her wrists and panted. Tears poured down her cheeks.

"Dad!" she cried. "Dad, please!" Tiffany heard the front door slam. She plopped her forehead against her knees and sobbed. Andre returned thirty minutes later. To Tiffany, it was an eternity. She heard the van pull up and shut off. At least, she *hoped* it was her father's van. It could have been a burglar. The front door opened and shut. Tiffany heard her father's

footsteps and clanking beer bottles. She looked up. Her eyelids were puffy and swollen from crying. The corners of her lips curled towards her chin. She sniffled. Andre wandered into the bathroom. It was getting dark. So, he flicked on the lights. It didn't make much difference. The bulb was a twenty watt. Andre liked his light bulbs dim.

He had four cases of beer tucked under his arms. He set them in front of the tub and left. Tiffany looked away and whimpered. She closed her eyes and shook her head. Andre returned with a cruddy, foldout chair. It was one of three he had scraped up for the "kitchen table." He unfolded it, set it in front of the tub, and sat down. He'd thrown on a plaid jacket before stepping out. He tore it off and tossed it aside.

"Okay then, Tiff," he belched. He slid out a case of beer, so Tiffany could see it. Tiffany looked it over. "You are going to drink this entire case of beer." Each case was a six pack of glass bottles. Andre slid one bottle from its cardboard sarcophagus. He took a bottle opener out of his pocket and popped the cap. He looked into his daughter's eyes. "And, if you finish this case..." He set the bottle on the rim of the tub. Then, he slid out a second case. "You're going to drink *this* case." He looked up and grinned. Tiffany let out a shaky sigh. "And, if you finish *that* one..." He slid out the third and fourth cases. He looked up. "There's more." He nodded. "That's what the pink elephant means." Tiffany looked at the bottle resting on the edge of the tub. She narrowed her eyes. She looked at her father and shook her head.

"No, Dad. Please." She looked at the bottle. "Come on."

Andre pointed towards the commode with his thumb. "Tiff, I *will* stick that plunger handle up your ass." Tiffany gritted her teeth and looked away. "You *know* I will." He narrowed his eyes. "And, you *know* how it feels, don't you?" Tiffany whimpered. She slowly turned her head and looked into her father's eyes. His face was painted with a twisted, cold

expression. It was a look of pure evil. Tiffany sighed. She closed her eyes and swallowed. She opened her eyes and sat up. Andre pointed at the floor of the tub. "On your knees." Tiffany looked away and rolled her eyes. She sniffled. She used her wrists to lift herself. She slid onto her knees and leaned forward. She looked at her father below the tops of her eye sockets.

Andre picked up the bottle. Tiffany pressed her lips together. She closed her eyes. Andre pressed the tip of the bottle against her lips. Tiffany got a tiny taste. The rim of the bottle was dotted with beer. It was putrid and rotten. It tasted like piss with bread soaked in it. Tiffany gagged. She turned her head and shuttered.

"No!" she gasped. She looked into her father's eyes. "*No, please. I can't do this!*" She took a breath. "Dad, come on."

Andre hopped up. "I'm getting the plunger."

"No!" Tiffany shrieked. "Please, Dad! Not that! No!" Andre looked down at her. He narrowed his eyes and sat down. Tiffany panted like a dog. Andre picked up the bottle and offered it to her.

"Do it." Tiffany tilted her head back. She gasped and cleared her throat. She pinched her eyes shut. Then, she leaned forward. Andre pressed the tip of the bottle against her lips. He tilted it. Handfuls of carbonated piss poured into Tiffany's mouth. Tiffany scrunched up her nose and swallowed. It was awful. She felt like vomiting. She knew better than to do that, though. She gulped it down. Beer dribbled down her chin. She opened her eyes and looked up. She puckered her lips to stop the flow. "Keep going," Andre instructed. Tiffany cringed. She relaxed her lips and closed her eyes. Beer filled her mouth. She choked it down as best she could. She moaned and puckered her lips. "Drink it," Andre ordered. Tiffany opened her eyes and looked up. "Tiff..." Tiffany exhaled through her nose. She loosened her lips. Andre

poured the remainder of the bottle down her throat. He patted the bottom.

“Ah...” he sighed. “That’s one.” He set the empty bottle beside the tub. Tiffany sat back and coughed. It tasted like beer. It was disgusting. She looked at the floor of the tub and gagged. Andre looked up. “Enh! Don’t you do it!” Tiffany looked up. She took a couple of quick breaths and swallowed. Andre looked down. He popped the top off the next bottle and set it on the edge of the tub. Tiffany sighed. She leaned forward and closed her eyes. After two more bottles, Tiffany felt dizzy. She felt light headed and foggy. She didn’t care so much anymore. It reminded her of how she felt when David made her huff spray paint. Only, it was subtle. After beer number five, things got sloppy. The disgusting suds poured down Tiffany’s chin and dribbled down her breasts. She didn’t care. She didn’t care what her father did, anymore. She didn’t care about anything.

She drifted in and out of consciousness. She caught glimpses of beer bottles being poured down her throat. She lost count after seven. She still didn’t care. Andre began battering her with empty bottles. It roused her a time or two. But, she just lay there and took it. She didn’t feel like getting upset. She didn’t feel like being angry. She didn’t care. Tiffany awoke atop a pile of brown, shattered glass. The light was off in the bathroom. But, it was morning. The sun was shining through the windows. Tiffany was still handcuffed to the wall. She bobbed her head around and blinked. Her head was throbbing. It felt like her eyes were filled with thumb tacks. Tiffany smelled blood. She looked down. Her body was covered with dried blood and lacerations. She wiggled her arms. Her right arm pounded with pain. Tiffany winced. The wincing made her head hurt. She twisted her head around and looked up. Her father had carved his name in her right forearm. It was hideous. The letters were jagged and misshapen. Blood leaked down Tiffany’s flesh. It pooled on her shoulder and breasts.

Tiffany awoke on the wrong side of the bed. She wore a grey tank top and a pair of blue, flannel pants with white stripes. She lay on top of the covers, staring at the ceiling. Rivers of tears flowed down the sides of her face. She was covered with sweat. She felt uncomfortable. She looked around. She and Case put her old bed in the center of the new master bedroom. It faced the door to the hallway. Tiffany looked at the wall. She was facing two windows. The table with the alarm clock lay next to the bed. It was below the window on Tiffany's left. A large, maroon rug lay across the floor below the bed. A pentagram was stitched into the rug. Tiffany was adamant about it being there. Case awoke on the other side of the bed. He was beneath the covers. He wore a tan t-shirt and a pair of red, flannel pants. The name of an old, psychedelic rock band lay across the top of Case's t-shirt. It was written in white letters. The shirt was decorated with a white triangle. A white line passed through the triangle and became a rainbow. Case looked next to him and noticed Tiffany's foot. He slid his fingers around it. Tiffany jumped. Case smiled. He swirled his thumb around the ball of Tiffany's foot.

"You okay, sweetheart?"

Tiffany sighed. "Yeah, I'm great." She looked at Case. "You?" Case smacked his lips. Tiffany dragged her foot away. She sat up and threw her hands over her eyes. "Gah..." she moaned. "I'm sorry, Louis." Case slid across the bed. He folded his legs and sat in front of her. He slid his fingers across her shoulders.

"It's okay, honey." He smiled. "You wanna tell me what you were dreaming about?"

Tiffany looked up. "I huffed spray paint, one time."

Case nodded. "Let me guess. David Sweeny." Tiffany half-smiled. "Remind me to kill that cocksucker, some day." Tiffany laughed through her nose. She slid her fingers across her right forearm. Andre's carving was still there. It was still jagged and hideous. Case took



Tiffany's right hand. "Let me see." Tiffany moved her fingers. Case's fingers replaced them.

Tiffany narrowed her eyes. "Did I ever tell you how I got that?"

Case looked up. "You said you didn't remember." Tiffany nodded. Case exhaled through his nose. He held up Tiffany's arm and kissed her long, hideous scar. He squinted. He remembered his conversation with his father. It had been such a long day, he'd forgotten all about it. He looked into Tiffany's eyes. She blinked.

"What?"

"I talked to my dad this morning." Case looked at the clock. "Yesterday morning. Whatever."

Tiffany nodded. "SSRIs?"

Case smiled and shook his head. "He thinks..." He pressed his lips together and looked away. Tiffany rubbed his shoulder.

"Louis, what? What does he think?"

Case looked into her eyes. "He thinks you should visit your father."

Tiffany sighed. "You mean... in Lincoln."

Case nodded. "He thinks me, Adam, and Gabrielle should go with you." Tiffany looked at her lap. Case dropped his palm on the top of her head. "How would you feel about that? We could go see your old place? It would be different, though. You know? We'd be right there, with you."

Tiffany looked up. "Have you ever been to Lincoln?"

Case dropped his arm. "No." Tiffany nodded. She narrowed her eyes.

"Consider yourself lucky. No one should ever have to go to that shit-hole." Case tilted his head and sighed. "And, no one should *ever* have to go back."

Case nodded. “My dad seems to think it will help.”

Tiffany shook her head. “No, Louis. You don’t want to go to Lincoln. You don’t want to see my old place. And, you most certainly don’t want to meet my father.” She planted her palm on her chest and sighed.

“I think I do,” Case replied.

Tiffany threw her arms out at her sides. “But, why?”

“Look, my father explained it to me. He says it will give you something different to associate with when you think about Lincoln.” Tiffany narrowed her eyes. “Maybe next time, you can remember the time you went down to Lincoln with me and the kids. That’s much better than the time your father broke your nose.” Tiffany looked down. She laughed through her nostrils. “It makes sense, when you think about it.” Tiffany looked up. She dropped her hands in her lap, leaned back, and stretched her arms.

“Um, when could we go?”

Case shrugged. “Let’s go tomorrow.”

Tiffany nodded. “I don’t know about the sanatorium. I don’t think you can just get in over there whenever you want. It’s kind of like a prison. You have to make special arrangements.”

Case nodded. “I’ll bet Paloni can get us in. He’s good at that.” Tiffany pressed her lips together. She looked into Case’s eyes. She stared blankly for half a minute. Then, she took a breath and looked at her lap.

“Do it.” Case leaned forward. He laid his palm on the side of Tiffany’s face and kissed her forehead.

“Okay. That’s what we’ll do.” He looked towards the hallway. “I hope the kids are up

to it.”

Gabrielle wound up with the bedroom north of the office. Adam got the bedroom north of that. The head of Gabrielle’s bed rested below a window. The window resided on the eastern wall of the house. Case scraped up some linens and a blanket for her. Gabrielle lay atop a white sheet with blue stripes. She had two pillows. One had a brown pillowcase with yellow flowers. The other had a red pillowcase with white polka dots. Gabrielle lay on her right side in the middle of the bed. The red pillow lay beneath her head. The brown pillow was stuffed between her knees. Case had an old quilt his grandmother made. She’d stitched it from a hundred squares of fabric. Each square was unique. Case hung onto it for many years just in case. Now, Gabrielle was using it. It lay over her and her new bed. It was all snugly and warm.

Gabrielle was sleeping peacefully. She’d slept on Tiffany’s couch for the last two months. So, she was out like a light. Her left hand rested beside her face. The top edge of Case’s old quilt lay below Gabrielle’s shoulder. There was a chill in the air. It made Gabrielle shiver. Half a minute passed. Then, five tiny dents appeared in the quilt. They manifested near Gabrielle’s elbow. They were spread like the tips of five tiny fingers. The dents slid across the quilt and disappeared above the top edge. Where they disappeared, the quilt became wadded. It looked as though it were held by a tiny fist. The quilt stretched where the wadding occurred. The edge of the blanket was tugged towards the head of the bed. The entire quilt began to slide. The wadded part of the quilt slid above Gabrielle’s shoulder. Then, it relaxed. The top edge of the quilt floated to the bed. And, Gabrielle was all tucked in.

Gabrielle stopped shivering. All was quiet for a few minutes. Then, there was a short creak in one of the floorboards. It was at the foot of Gabrielle’s bed. It groaned for half a second then stopped. It was just enough to wake Gabrielle up. Her big, blue eyes blinked open.

She inhaled through her nose and exhaled through her mouth. She licked her lips. She was thirsty. She slipped from beneath the quilt and sat on the edge of the bed. She wore a grey tank top and a pair of red, flannel pants. She plopped her little feet on the floor and wandered into the hallway. Gabrielle moseyed down the hallway and entered the bathroom. The house was dark. But, dim light poured through the windows. The sky was filled with clouds. They reflected lights from the city.

Gabrielle flicked on the bathroom light and found a cup. It was sitting on the edge of the sink. It was a paper cup Gabrielle got from Burger Land. Case took everyone to eat there after moving in. Gabrielle held the cup under the faucet and filled it halfway. She gulped it down and licked her lips. She looked at herself in the mirror. Her black eye was almost gone. She pushed her mouth to the side of her face and looked around. She was surrounded by tiles. They were everywhere. Gabrielle exhaled through her nose. She set the cup down, flicked off the lights, and entered the hallway. She wandered towards her new bedroom. As she passed the office, she heard a thump. She stopped in front of the doorway and looked. She narrowed her eyes. She wasn't sure what she'd heard. It was just a thump.

Gabrielle didn't move for a couple of minutes. She stood in the dark, staring. The office was the darkest place in the house. It had three windows. Yet, somehow it was darker than Gabrielle's room. Her room had only one. Gabrielle shrugged. She faced forward and lifted her foot. There was another thump. Gabrielle felt like she'd been punched in the chest. She stopped with her foot in the air and looked into the office. Something weird was going on. Gabrielle decided to investigate. She crept into the office and stopped. She looked around. The windows were lit from reflected light. The rest of the room was covered in shadow. Everything looked black. It seemed odd. Even in a dark room, Gabrielle figured a few things should be visible.

She crossed her arms over her chest and looked at the floor. She couldn't even see her feet.

She looked at the ceiling. The ceiling was painted white. It was the only visible thing in the room. The first thing Gabrielle noticed was the hatch leading to the attic. A piece of string with a little, plastic ball dangled from the middle of the door. Gabrielle stared at the hatch door. It looked weird in the dark. Light coming from the windows made it appear blue. It was visible but just barely. Gabrielle stared at it. She traced imperfections in the paint with her eyes. The hatch door shuffled. Gabrielle gasped. She hopped away and flattened against the wall. Her big, blue eyes popped open. Her heart thumped in her ears. Her breathing became shaky. The edge of the hatch door had bounced. It hadn't moved much. It just flopped a little. It looked like someone in the attic patted it.

Gabrielle laid her fingers over her mouth and nose. She didn't know what to think. She wondered if a window was open in the attic. She figured she'd better check. She lowered her hands and approached the string. She stared at the little ball. It was wobbling. Gabrielle let out a breath. She reached for the ball. Adam popped up beside her.

*"What the hell are you doing?"* he whispered. Gabrielle gasped and backed away. She flattened against the wall and looked to her left. Adam was standing in the doorway. Gabrielle hugged her belly. She bent over and sighed. She looked at Adam.

*"My, God!"* she whispered. She stood and shook her hands. *"You scared the crap out of me!"* Adam stomped into the office. He wore a faded Pentari t-shirt and a pair of black, flannel pants. He pointed at the plastic ball and looked at his girlfriend.

*"Gabrielle, what did I tell you?"* Gabrielle crossed her arms over her chest and sighed. Adam threw his hands out at his sides. *"Gabrielle!"*

She motioned towards the hatch. *"What? I heard a noise!"*

Adam narrowed his eyes. *“What do you mean you heard a noise?”* There was another noise. Adam and Gabrielle looked towards the attic. The noise was faint. It sounded like a long chain being dragged across the floor. It lasted a long time. It started at one end of the attic. Then, it slowly slid across the ceiling. Gabrielle dashed across the room. She threw her arms around Adam’s chest and rested her cheek against his shoulder. She looked towards the ceiling. Her eyebrows fell at the sides.

*“Adam?”* she whispered. *“What IS that?”* Adam looked down at her. He slid his fingers across her shoulder blades. He looked at the ceiling and squinted.

*“I don’t...”* He faced forward and exhaled through his nostrils. Gabrielle looked at him. She began to shiver.

*“What?”* she demanded. Adam looked at the floor. He rubbed Gabrielle’s shoulder. Then, he took one of her hands and turned around. Gabrielle loosened her arms.

*“Come on, Gabs,”* Adam whispered. *“I don’t hear anything.”*

Gabrielle exhaled an annoyed sigh and rolled her eyes. *“You’re such a dick.”* Adam led Gabrielle to his bedroom. Gabrielle stopped at the doorway and let go of his hand. Adam turned around. *“Adam, where are we going?”*

Adam motioned towards his bedroom with his head. *“Come sleep in here.”*

Gabrielle scrunched up her nose. *“I can’t. I mean... I’m not supposed to.”* She looked at the floor and rubbed the back of her head. *“I mean...”* She looked up. *“I don’t know.”*

Adam smirked. *“Gabrielle, I told you. It’s okay.”* He shrugged. *“I’ll wait until you’re ready.”* Gabrielle sighed. *“I just meant you should come in HERE and sleep.”* Adam looked towards the office. *“I’ll protect you, okay?”* Gabrielle slid her mouth to the side of her face. She looked towards the master bedroom. She looked back.

*“Louis and Tiffany... They might get mad. I-I don’t know. You know?”* Adam looked at Gabrielle. He pointed towards Gabrielle’s bedroom.

*“You want me to come sleep in THERE?”* Gabrielle looked at the floor. She pinched the bridge of her nose.

*“God... I don’t know, man!”* Adam snickered. He dropped his palm on Gabrielle’s shoulder. She looked up.

*“Gabs, I don’t care that we don’t have sex, alright?”* Gabrielle grinned and looked away. *“It just means I spend five extra minutes in the shower every morning.”* Gabrielle snickered. She cupped her hand over her mouth and looked at the floor. Adam rested his palm on the side of her face. *“But, you’re my girlfriend. And, you’re sleeping with ME, tonight.”* Gabrielle looked into his eyes. *“I won’t try anything. I promise.”* Adam pointed towards the office. *“After what I just heard in there...”* Gabrielle nodded. She took Adam’s hand from the side of her face and looked into his eyes. She motioned towards his bedroom with her head.

*“Um, okay. Let’s go.”* Adam nodded. He led Gabrielle to the side of his bed. His plaid blanket from Tiffany’s office lay across the top. Adam slid it aside, and Gabrielle lay down. Adam tucked her in. Then, he wandered to the other side of the bed and slid beneath the covers. Lightning splashed through the windows. It was followed by a burst of thunder. It made the glass rattle. Gabrielle shrieked. She slid towards Adam and shrugged up her shoulders. Adam laughed through his nose. He slid his arms around Gabrielle’s waist. Gabrielle turned and hugged him back. She was shaking. Adam slid his hand across her back.

*“It’s okay, Gabs. Don’t be scared.”*

## Chapter 11: “Rest Stop”

It was after seven. Case came out of the bathroom and checked the clock. He wore an olive shirt with thin, white stripes, a pair of dark blue jeans, and his red, canvas shoes. He looked at the bed. Tiffany was crashed out. She lay on Case’s side of the mattress. She was rolled up in the covers. She looked like a crimson burrito. Case smiled. Then, he frowned. He realized Tiffany was probably in the middle of some terrifying nightmare. He hated to wake her. But, it was an hour and a half drive to Lincoln. Case wanted to get the ball rolling. He wandered to his side of the bed. He knelt beside Tiffany and nudged her shoulder. Tiffany’s eyes popped open. She lifted her head and scooted away.

“*No! No! No!*” she gasped. She was all tangled up in her blanket. So, she didn’t get far. She lay in the middle of the bed, panting. Case sighed and sat next to her. He took her trembling hand. It lay on her forehead. Case kissed Tiffany’s knuckles and looked into her eyes. Tiffany took a couple of deep breaths and cleared her throat.

“*Hey...*” Case whispered. “*It’s okay. Relax.*”

Tiffany forced a smile. “Sorry.” She looked down. Her arm was wrapped in her blanket. She tried to jerk it loose. But, it was wrapped up pretty tight. Tiffany began to squirm. Case smiled and shook his head. Tiffany looked up. Her eyes were big and sad. “Louis... Help me.” Tiffany was sitting on the edge of the blanket. Case stood up, snagged a hold of the edge, and pulled it towards him. Tiffany rolled the opposite direction and came unwound. She lay on her back. She supported herself with her elbows. She looked at Case. “What the hell did you do to me?”

Case motioned towards his chest. “Hey, *I* didn’t do anything. When I went into the bathroom, you were fine. And, when I came back, you were like this.” Case laid the blanket on



the bed and sat down. “I hated to wake you up. But, we should get going, yeah?”

Tiffany nodded. “Sure. I’ll get my ass up. Just hold on.” She shoved herself to her feet and wandered across the room. The chest of drawers from the magic shop was on the wall opposite the bed. Tiffany opened the top drawer and rifled through her socks. Case pointed towards the hallway.

“I’m gonna go make sure the kids are up.”

Tiffany looked over her shoulder. “Okay.” Case headed towards the door. He stopped beside Tiffany and dropped his hand on her shoulder. She looked up.

“You sure about this?”

Tiffany exhaled through her nose. “Nope.” Case looked away and nodded. He wandered down the hall. The hall bathroom was empty. So, Adam and Gabrielle had already taken a shower, or they were still asleep. Case peeked into Gabrielle’s bedroom. Her bed was empty. Case wandered to Adam’s bedroom. He found Gabrielle asleep in Adam’s arms. He looked at the floor and cupped his hand over his mouth. He didn’t know what to think. He imagined Brandy standing next to him.

*“I’d better have a talk with them,”* Case whispered. He looked to his right. He imagined Brandy nodding.

*“Yes, that’s probably a good idea.”* Case looked at Adam and Gabrielle. He clapped his hands, twice. The kids eyes popped open. Case threw his hands out at his sides.

“You two had sex!” he shouted. Gabrielle dropped her forehead in her palm. Adam sat up. He showed Case his palms. He swished them back and forth.

“No, fool. Nuh-uh.” Case smacked his lips. He narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Man, you two can’t be coming around here with no babies.” Gabrielle looked up. Her eyes popped open.

“Louis, we didn’t! I swear!”

Case nodded, slowly. “Uh-huh.” He looked towards the office then back. “So, what the hell?” Adam and Gabrielle looked at each other. Gabrielle looked at Case.

“Um, the attic’s haunted.”

Case raised his eyebrows. “Uh…”

Adam smacked his lips. “No, it’s not.” Gabrielle scrunched up her nose and looked at him. She raised her palms.

“Then, what the hell *was* that last night, genius?”

Adam sighed. “Gabrielle, there’s no such thing as ghosts. I told you.”

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. “Shut-up, Adam. You heard that shit last night.” She looked at Case. “Louis, we heard something in the attic last night.”

Adam looked at Case and shook his head. “*I* didn’t hear anything.” Gabrielle pounded her little fists against the mattress. Her eyebrows fell in the middle. She puffed up her cheeks and growled.

“You’re such an ass!” She glared at her boyfriend. She pointed at him. “You even told me to stay out of there, yesterday. Remember?” Adam pressed his lips together.

“Guys! Guys!” Case shouted. Adam and Gabrielle looked at him. Case sighed. “What does she mean, Adam? Why did you tell her to stay out of the attic?” Adam crossed his arms over his chest. He looked at the floor and shook his head.

“I don’t recall that conversation.”

Gabrielle glared at him. “Show him your pictures, Adam!” Adam looked at her and

smacked his lips.

“What do you mean?” Case inquired. “What pictures?”

Gabrielle sat up. “Adam’s psychic.”

Adam leaned forward and grinned. “Shut-up!”

Gabrielle looked at him and nodded. “He *is*!” She looked at Case. “Ask Tiffany. *She’ll* tell you.” Adam shook his head. He pointed at his girlfriend.

“Man, I think maybe you should take *her* off to the loony bin.”

Case blinked. “Huh?”

Adam narrowed his eyes. “You know. The old Lincoln Sanatorium.” He threw his hands out at his sides. “That’s where we’re going, right?” Gabrielle looked at Adam. Her eyes were like saucers. Adam flattened his lips. “Oh. You didn’t tell us that, yet. Did you?” Gabrielle threw her hands over her mouth. She looked at Case. She threw her hands out at her sides.

“See?” Case smiled and exhaled. He looked at the floor and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Huh.” He looked up. “Um... Yes, Adam. That *is* what I was about to tell you.” He narrowed his eyes. “How did you know that?”

Adam looked annoyed. “I’m *not* psychic.” He motioned towards the master bedroom. “I probably heard you and Tiffany talking about it or something.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m not psychic. There’s no such thing.”

Case pointed towards the office. “What about the attic?”

“It’s haunted,” Gabrielle replied. She shook her hands. “We heard thumping and chains dragging...”

Adam looked at the wall. “Chains. How cliché.”

Gabrielle looked at him. “Shut-up.” She looked at Case. “Something’s wrong. We have to tell Tiffany.” Gabrielle nodded. “*She’ll* know what to do. *She* can fix it.”

Case looked towards the master bedroom. “Uh, no.” He looked at the kids. “Guys, not just yet. We’re going to go to...” He looked at Adam and smiled. “We’re going to Lincoln, first. Which you already *know*.” Adam tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. “Because you’re psychic.”

Adam smiled. “Shut-up, Louis!” Gabrielle looked at Adam and smiled. She patted his back. Case nodded.

“Yeah, let’s worry about Lincoln, first. Okay?” He looked towards the master bedroom. “Um... Then, we can worry about the funky house I bought for five thousand bucks.” Case looked towards the office. He narrowed his eyes. “You heard chains?” He looked at the kids. Gabrielle nodded. Adam looked at his lap. Case smiled. “You know, you killed my fiancée with a Voodoo doll.”

“Berend,” Gabrielle corrected.

Adam looked up. “Spontaneous Human Combustion.” He shook his pointer finger. “I’m telling you, she was in a fit of rage...” He pointed at his first finger. “She’d been out in the rain...” He pointed at his second finger. “She had chemically treated hair...” Gabrielle looked at Adam. She narrowed her eyes.

“Oh, Adam! Will you just admit that you’re freaking psychic?” She rubbed his shoulder. “Huh?”

Case smiled. “I witnessed it, Adam. You killed Gina with a doll.” He leaned against the door frame. He crossed his arms over his chest. “It was... amazing!” Adam looked into Case’s eyes. He looked at his lap and nodded.

“I’m sorry.”

Case shook his head. “Don’t be.” He looked down the hallway. “She had it coming.” He looked at the kids. “Would you guys get up and... go to Lincoln with us?” He gritted his teeth. “You don’t have to, if you don’t want to. But, it would mean a lot to Tiffany.”

Gabrielle nodded. “She’s going to go visit her father?”

“Yeah,” Case replied. “And then, we’re going to go check out her old neighborhood.”

Adam puffed up his cheeks and exhaled. “Man, that’s a gang neighborhood. Isn’t it?”

Case narrowed his eyes and shrugged. “You guys don’t have to go. I’m not going to make you.” Adam looked at Gabrielle. He pointed at her.

“She’d do it for us. I’m going.” Adam hopped out of bed. He headed for the chest of drawers Case gave him. It was along the north wall. Gabrielle smiled at Case. Case smiled back. Gabrielle stretched her arms in front of her.

“Yeah, okay,” she told him. “I’ll go.”

Case nodded. “I’m gonna go talk to Paloni.” He pointed at the kids. “You guys get ready.”

“Okay,” they replied. Case slid down the railing of the stairs. It was a long way down. The stairs were long and short. Case slid to the bottom. He landed on his feet in the den. He dropped his elbow in his palm and stroked his chin. He looked to his right. He imagined Brandy standing next to him.

“*We need chairs,*” Case whispered. He wandered behind the stairs. He snagged one of the chairs from his and Gina’s old dining table. He carried it to the den, set it across from the fireplace, and sat down. He patted his pockets. He found his phone, flipped it open, and dialed Paloni’s number. “*He’ll probably be at work,*” Case whispered. He looked to his left. Brandy

sat in a ghost chair. It was an imaginary duplicate of Case's. Brandy folded her arms across her lap and nodded.

*"If not, you'll wake his ass up anyway."* Case smiled. *"It'll be good for him."*

Case faced forward. "Sergeant Porn Star!" he remarked.

*"What the hell do you want, Case?"* Paloni demanded. *"I still haven't heard the end of your LAST request."*

Case smacked his lips. "Man, I just *knew* he'd be in there." He smiled. "Captain Ford didn't like that too much, I take it."

*"He's pissed."*

"Good. Piss on him."

Paloni sighed. *"Alright. What do you need THIS time?"*

Case looked towards the top of the stairs. "I need you to get Tiffany in to see her father." There was a pause.

*"Really?"*

Case faced forward. "Would you do that for me? It would really mean a lot to her."

Paloni sat at his desk. It was covered with stuff as always. He sat in his chair with his cell phone to his ear. He looked towards the window. "Well, yeah..." He scooted towards the window. He lifted the bottom and poked his head out. The sky was filled with ominous clouds. "I wouldn't think that would be a big deal." He scooted across the floor and snagged his coffee mug. It was dangling from the corner of his desk. "Where's he being held?" Paloni took a sip of coffee.

*"Lincoln Sanatorium,"* Case replied.

Paloni spit out his coffee. "Lincoln Sanatorium?"

“*Yes, Paloni.*” Paloni took another sip of coffee.

“You mean like... in Lincoln?”

Case narrowed his eyes. “Last I checked.”

Paloni shook his head. “Well, uh... Well, damn.” He set the coffee mug on the corner of his desk. “*You’re* not going down there. Are you?”

Case looked at Brandy. “Yes, Paloni.”

Paloni threw his arms out at his sides. “Seriously?”

Case held the phone in front of his face. “Yes, numb nuts!” He held the phone to his ear. “Can you get me in or not?”

Paloni slouched in his chair. He scratched the back of his head. “Well, yeah. I don’t see why not.” He dropped his hand. “I can’t guarantee you’ll get back *out.*”

Case looked at Brandy. “Do it.”

Paloni nodded. “Okay. You want me to come with you?”

Case smiled. “Do you really want to?”

“Hell, no.”

Case nodded. “Don’t worry, man. I can take care of myself.”

Paloni wiped his mouth. “Okay.” He pointed at the phone. “And, Case...”

Case hopped up and cracked his neck. “Yeah?”

“Take your gun.”

Case pressed his lips together. “You’re right. I will.”

Paloni smacked the bottom of his phone against his cheek. The top folded shut. Paloni dropped his phone on his desk. He shuffled through piles of paperwork. “He’s gonna get shot up by a bunch of gangsters.”

“*Paloni!*” Captain Ford called from the hallway. Paloni looked up. His eyebrows fell in the middle.

“God damn it!”

Case closed his phone and sat down. He sat there for ten minutes. Then, he heard someone clunking down the stairs. He stood and turned around. Tiffany was at the bottom of the stairs. She wore a rainbow striped sweater, peacock corduroys, and pointed, cherry red, leather boots. Case’s hoodie was draped over her arm. Case smiled.

“Hi, sweetheart.”

Tiffany smiled back. “Hi.” She looked around. She felt tiny in the huge house Case purchased. Case approached her. He stood in front of her and took his coat. He threw it on and stared at Tiffany’s chest. He narrowed his eyes.

“You’re not wearing your little star.” Tiffany looked down. She patted her chest.

“Oh.” She looked at her fingers. “Oh, right!” She looked up. “I must’ve forgot.” She whirled around and headed up the stairs. Case joined her.

“Yeah, you’re always wearing that, lately,” he remarked. “You look weird without it.”

Tiffany smiled. “Yeah, I know.” She and Case made it to the master bedroom. Tiffany wandered into the bathroom. Case followed. It was still humid from Case and Tiffany showering. Tiffany wandered to the sink and opened the mirror. She’d put all her jewelry inside. She slid on her rings and snagged her necklace. She closed the mirror and held it in front of her chest. She smiled at her reflection. “I like this necklace.”

Case took the necklace from her. “Why do you like *this* one so much?” He tugged it around Tiffany’s neck and clasped it. “It’s nothing special.”

Tiffany looked at Case’s reflection. “Because *you* bought it for me.”



“Oh.” Case smiled. He slid the black star to the center of Tiffany’s chest. “Yes, I did.” Tiffany laid her fingers on the star. She looked over her shoulder.

“I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Well, you don’t have to,” Case told her. He dropped his palm on her shoulder. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.” Tiffany smiled. She looked at the floor and exhaled through her nose. She turned around and looked up. She was crying.

“I’m so sorry, Louis.”

“Oh, Tiffany...” Case swatted tears from his girlfriend’s eyes. “For what?” Tiffany looked down. She laid her fingers and thumb over her eyes. She whimpered. Case exhaled through his nose. He slid his fingers down the back of Tiffany’s head. “Jeez. I forgive you. Whatever it is, I forgive you.” Tiffany looked up. Tears were pouring down her cheeks. Case pressed his lips together. “You’re messing up your makeup, honey.” Tiffany sighed. She looked at the ceiling and fanned herself.

“*I meant...*” she gasped. She cleared her throat and faced him. “I meant because...” She shook her hands. “Because what I said to you last night.” She sniffled. She wiped her cheeks, vigorously. She sat in front of the sink and folded her legs like a pretzel. Case sat next to her. He took her hand.

“What do you mean?”

Tiffany looked at him. “You know. What I said.”

Case pressed his lips together. “Refresh my memory.”

Tiffany narrowed her eyes. “You mean you’re not mad?”

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

Tiffany sighed. “You know. When I woke up.” She slid her hair aside. Case looked at

the floor.

“I asked you...” He looked up. “I asked if you were okay.” Tiffany nodded. “And, you said, ‘Yeah, I’m great. You’?”

Tiffany patted his shoulder. “Yes.” She laid her cheek against his arm. “I’m sorry.”

Case nodded. “Uh-huh.” He shrugged. “That’s not an unreasonable reaction. It was a dumb question.”

Tiffany looked at him. “Really? You think so?”

Case smiled. “Yeah, man.” He squeezed her hand. “It’s okay. I forgive you.” He faced forward and shrugged. “I’m... sorry I asked such a dumb question.” Tiffany chuckled. Case faced her and smirked. “You were obviously upset.” Tiffany looked at her lap and sighed. She slid her fingers across her cheeks and looked up.

“I’m gonna fuck this up.”

Case licked his lips. “Here, come here.” He slid his arms around Tiffany’s shoulders. Tiffany snuggled up next to him. “You need to relax, Tiffany.” Case slid his fingers across Tiffany’s arm. “That’s all you need to do. Then, you’ll be fine.” Tiffany looked across the bathroom. She spotted the hot tub. She looked up.

“Man, we got a hot tub?”

Case nodded. “We do.”

Tiffany smiled. “I-I didn’t even notice.”

Case smiled. “Yeah? You wanna try it out, tonight?”

Tiffany nodded. “Sure.”

“Okay.” Case rubbed her shoulders. He stood up, faced her, and offered his hands. He helped Tiffany to her feet. They wandered down the hallway and stomped down the stairs.

Adam was waiting at the bottom. He was duded up and ready to greet the day. He wore a maroon shirt with olive stripes, black jeans, red, canvas shoes, and his black, leather jacket. He stood at the end of the railing. His arms were folded across his chest. He looked like he'd been expecting Tiffany and Case to come stomping down the stairs for some time. Case smirked. He looked at Tiffany. "Hey, man. Why didn't you tell me Adam was psychic?" Adam smacked his lips. He looked away and shook his head. Tiffany and Case joined him at the bottom of the stairs. Tiffany smiled at Adam. She folded her fingers.

"Adam doesn't think he *is*."

Adam rolled his eyes. "Of course, I'm not." Case shook his head. He looked at Tiffany.

"You got something to write on?"

Tiffany pointed towards the den. "My backpack's in the den." Case looked. Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle's backpacks were in the northwest corner of the den. Case wandered over, picked up Tiffany's backpack, and ripped it open. He found a stack of index cards and a felt pen. He rejoined Adam and Tiffany at the bottom of the stairs. He held the index cards in front of his face and looked at Adam. Adam narrowed his eyes. Case looked at Tiffany.

"We've used psychics a time or two at the department."

Adam nodded. "That's retarded."

Case smiled and shook his head. "There was a test we always used." He drew a long, horizontal line across the top index card. "That way, we could tell if our guy was the real deal." He drew a triangle at the end. It pointed to the right. Tiffany narrowed her eyes. She leaned over and tried to see what Case was drawing. Case looked at her. He cupped the index card against his chest. "No peeking." Tiffany stood straight and faced forward. Case looked at Adam. He held the index card in front of his eyes and stared at it. "Now, Adam. Can you tell

me what's on the card?"

Adam crossed his hands behind his back. "I can tell you that you're a dick." Tiffany chuckled. She cupped her hands over her lips.

Case smiled. "So, no?"

Adam shrugged. "Um, no." He scratched the back of his head. "No. I get nothing." Case nodded. He looked at Tiffany. Tiffany squinted.

"So, what does that mean? He's *not* psychic?"

Case shrugged. "That's what we call a positive result." He looked at Adam. "It means you're not figuring out what's on the card by watching me write." Case narrowed his eyes. "Do you understand?"

Adam nodded. "I... wasn't cheating."

Case pointed at him. "Right." He looked at Tiffany. "That's correct. None of the *real* psychics could ever deduce what was on the card when just one person saw it." He looked at Adam. "But..." He raised his pointer finger. "If I *share* my idea..." Case showed the card to Tiffany. He did it discreetly, so Adam couldn't see. "Preferably with someone connected to the medium..." Tiffany cupped her hand around the side of the index card. She peeked at Case's drawing. She and Case looked at Adam. Case turned his head without looking away. "Now?" He smiled. "Do you know what's on the card, Adam?" Adam narrowed his eyes. He looked at the floor.

"This is dumb."

Tiffany smacked her lips. "Adam..." Case grinned. He pointed at Adam.

"You *know*. Don't you?" Adam looked up. He looked annoyed. "You know *exactly* what's on the card." He threw his hands out at his sides. Adam shrugged. "What is it, Adam?"

What do you see?”

Tiffany narrowed her eyes. “Adam?” Adam looked away. He exhaled through his nostrils.

“*It sun are...*” he grumbled.

“Huh?” Case inquired. He cupped his hand around his ear. “Could you... repeat that, please?” Adam glared at him. His eyebrows fell in the middle.

“It’s an arrow!” he shouted. Tiffany laid her fingers across her lips. Case was hysterical. He bent over and smacked his thigh with the stack of index cards. He looked up and pointed.

“That’s amazing!” He looked at Tiffany. “That’s amazing.” Tiffany looked at Case. She dropped her hands. “Some of the best we ever had...” Case looked at Adam. “We had to show the card to three or more people before they’d finally get it.” He showed Adam the card. “With *you*, I only had to show it once.”

Tiffany nodded. “What’s that mean?”

Case looked at her. “It... probably means that you and Adam have a strong psychic connection.” Adam smacked his lips and rolled his eyes. Case looked at him. “You probably do with all of us. Me, Gabrielle, and Tiffany. *You* understand.”

Adam pressed his lips together. “Oh, come on. I probably just... saw a reflection or something. In a mirror...”

“There’s no mirrors down here, Adam.” Case looked around. “None.” He looked at Adam. Adam shrugged.

“Maybe I saw the arrow in Tiffany’s eyes...”

“Did you *see* an arrow?” Case asked. Adam sighed. Case looked around. “Tell me. Where did you see it?” Case folded his arms across his chest. Adam scratched the back of his

head.

“I saw... the word ‘arrow’.” Adam rested his arms at his sides. He narrowed his eyes.

“I saw it like... written.”

Case motioned towards him. “In your mind’s eye, right?”

Adam looked away and shook his head. “I don’t know what you *call* it.” He looked at Case. “Whatever.” Tiffany snatched the index cards and the pen from Case. She wrote the word “arrow” and showed it to Adam. It was strange. Tiffany’s rs were both capitalized. The other letters were lowercase. Apparently that’s how she wrote.

“Was this what you saw?” Tiffany asked. Adam studied Tiffany’s chicken scratch. He looked at her and nodded.

“Well, yeah.” He pointed at the two rs. “With the two capital rs and everything. That’s pretty much it.”

Tiffany looked at Case and smiled. “He saw what I *thought*.” Case nodded. “Like, I looked at your picture, and I thought the word ‘arrow’.”

Case looked at Tiffany and pointed at her card. “And, you imagined it like that?” Case pointed at his temple. “In your mind’s eye?” Tiffany shrugged. Case looked at Adam and nodded. He grinned. He shook his pointer finger at the index cards. “Do that again.” Tiffany offered Case the cards. Case looked at her. “No. *You* write something, this time.” Tiffany thought for a minute. “Or, draw something,” Case suggested. “Whatever.” He faced Adam. So did Tiffany. She smiled and held up the index cards. Case looked away. He made a wall at the side of his eye with his palm. Tiffany’s tongue dangled out of the side of her mouth. She drew a circle. She drew two tiny circles inside. She drew them across from one another, near the top. Near the bottom, she drew an arc. She looked her drawing over and nodded. Then, she looked

at Adam.

“Okay. You got it?” Adam narrowed his eyes. He studied Tiffany’s face, carefully. He crossed his arms over his chest and looked at the floor.

“This is stupid.” Case chuckled. He wandered over and snatched the card from Tiffany. He examined it and looked up.

“Anything?” Adam looked up and sighed. He let his arms relax at his sides. He patted his fist with his palm.

“It’s a... little happy face. Isn’t it?”

Case nodded. “Yeah, man.” He flipped the card around. “That’s exactly what it is.” Adam showed Tiffany and Case his palms. He turned and faced the den. He crossed his arms over his chest. Then, he leaned against the wall beside the door.

“I’m a freak, huh?” Tiffany skidded across the floor. She rested her palm on Adam’s shoulder.

“You’re not a freak, Adam.” He looked up. “That’s not... It’s cool, man!” Tiffany backed away. She raised her palms. “Why can’t you see that?”

Adam looked at Case. “You’re rigging it, somehow.”

Case looked at the ceiling. “Gah!”

Tiffany smiled. “My God!” she shrieked.

Case threw his hands out at his sides. “You’re the most skeptical cocksucker I’ve ever *met!*”

Adam faced the den. “I don’t believe in any of this crap.”

“Ah!” Case shouted. He flipped to the next card in the stack. “Here, then. We’ll do it again.”

Adam looked over his shoulder. “No, Louis! Stop!”

Case wrote something and looked up. “We’re going to keep doing this until you admit that you’re psychic.” He pointed at Adam with the index cards. “So, you’d better start believing, buddy boy.” Adam smacked his lips. He flicked his wrist and stomped into the den. Case showed the card to Tiffany. She looked it over and looked up. Adam stopped in his tracks. He balled his fists at his sides. He whirled around and stomped his foot.

“Damn it!” he shouted. Case showed him the card. It read “Damn it!” Adam’s eyebrows fell in the middle. He shrugged up his shoulders and pointed at them. “You guys are pissing me off!” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Stop it!” Case and Tiffany looked at each other and cackled.

“That is so cool!” Tiffany shouted.

“Shut-up!” Adam yelled. “Stop laughing! It’s not funny.”

Case pointed at him. “Admit it, Adam. You’re psychic.” Adam glared at him. Case grinned. “Just admit it! And, we’ll stop messing with you.”

Adam threw his hands out at his sides. “Alright!” he shouted. “I’m psychic. Okay?” He threw his hands in his coat pockets. “I’m fucking psychic!” He whirled his hands around, inside his jacket. “Every time I go anywhere with more than ten people, I have to listen to somebody’s thoughts.” He took out his right hand, looked away, and tapped his forehead with his fingers. “Or, when we’re driving down the road, and someone in the car next to us is talking on their cell phone...” He looked up. “I might have to listen in on *that* conversation!” Case nodded. Adam stuffed his right hand in his pocket. He leaned forward, widened his eyes, and stared at Tiffany and Case. “Do you have any idea how I feel walking through a cemetery? Or, when I’m at the park, and some damn pedophile walks by?” He narrowed his eyes. “Every day...” he gasped.



“Every *day* Louis, when you come to pick me up, I *know* when you’re about to come zipping around the corner.” Adam stood straight and sighed. “I *know* it.”

Case looked at Tiffany. “I didn’t know all that, Adam.” He looked back. “I didn’t *know* all that stuff.”

Tiffany narrowed her eyes. “You know I haven’t been sleeping so well.”

Adam looked into her eyes. “Yes, I know.” Tiffany exhaled through her nose. “I’ve also seen some of the things you dream about.” Tiffany looked at the floor. Adam sighed. He approached her. “My God, Tiffany... What that bastard did to you...”

Tiffany looked up and nodded. “I know, Adam.” A pair of tears dribbled out of her eyes. “I know.” Tiffany looked down and sobbed. Adam walked up to her. He pressed his lips together. He took Tiffany’s hand and looked towards her eyes. Tiffany sniffled and looked back.

“No one should have to go through the things you went through.” Adam swatted tears from Tiffany’s cheeks. “No one...” Tiffany fell to her knees. Her lips quivered. She wiped her eyes and looked up.

“*I know...*” She took her hand from Adam. She rested it at the side of his face. She cleared her throat. “I didn’t know you could see all that stuff, honey. Why didn’t you ever tell me?” Adam patted her shoulder. Case stroked his chin.

“It’s probably just the stuff you tell *me*.”

Adam nodded. “I think he’s right.” Adam looked at Case. “Not that she shouldn’t tell you those things.” Tiffany sobbed. Adam sat beside her. He threw his arms around her shoulders. He looked at Case. “I think you should know all about it, too.” Case nodded. He walked up and sat behind them.

“I think you’re right, buddy.” Case threw his arms around them. Tiffany and Adam relaxed in his arms.

“Oh, you guys...” Gabrielle moaned from the stairs. Everyone looked up. Gabrielle was ready to go. She wore her new, long sleeved shirt. It was white with black, horizontal bands. She also wore a pair of dark blue bell bottoms and a pair of blue, canvas shoes. They were new as well. There were tears in Gabrielle’s big, blue eyes. She scampered down the stairs, slid next to Case and Adam, and threw her arms around them. Case and Adam hugged her back. Tiffany kissed Gabrielle’s forehead and joined in. Adam poked his head out. He sighed.

“I’m not psychic, though. Alright?”

“Bah!” Case shouted.

“Jeez!” Gabrielle groaned. She swatted her eyes and looked at her boyfriend.

“You’re a dick,” Tiffany remarked. She shoved the back of Adam’s head. Adam smacked his lips.

“Just don’t call me ‘psychic.’ Alright? That’s all I ask.” Case eased back and sighed. He held up his keys.

“Guys, go wait in the car.” Tiffany wiped her eyes and snatched the keys from him. “I’ll be right there, okay?”

Tiffany sniffled. “Okay.” Everyone stood up. They wandered through the den, filed through the door to the garage, and closed it. Case took the stairs to the master bedroom. He reached behind the dresser. He patted around and pulled his arm out. His revolver was in his hand. He slid open the cylinder and looked inside. It was loaded. Case dropped his revolver in the right pocket of his jeans. He reached behind the dresser again. He patted around and retrieved his arm. This time, he had a small bag. It was decorated like the packaging for King

Leer. King Leer was a brand of scotch Case used to buy when he drank. The bag was royal purple. It was made of suede. There was a pull tie at the top. The pull tie and the King Leer logo were gold. Case loosened the pull tie and looked inside. The bag contained twenty-four rounds. Those and the six in the cylinder yielded five cylinders worth of ammunition.

Case's car horn honked. Case looked towards the hallway. He stuffed the bag in his pocket, wandered down the hall, and slid down the stair railing. He walked through the den, entered the garage, and locked the door. He laid a pair of narrow eyes on the occupants of his car. Tiffany's head was down. Her eyes were focused on the glove box. She was staring into space. Adam sat behind her. He sat, slouching. His arms were folded across his chest. Gabrielle sat behind the driver's seat. She looked at Case and grinned. Case pointed at her. He wandered to the driver's door, ripped it open, and looked over the back of his seat. He glared at Gabrielle.

"Don't touch... the horn," he warned. Gabrielle continued to grin. She smacked her lips and threw her hands out at her sides. Case slid into the driver's seat and closed the door. Ruth gave him two garage door openers. Case had one attached to his visor. The other was in the glove box. Case tapped the button on the one hanging from his visor. The garage door rolled out of the way. Case backed out and closed the door. He weaved down the driveway and parked outside the gate. He grinned. He looked at Gabrielle in his rearview mirror. She narrowed her eyes.

"What?" Case motioned towards the gate with his head. Gabrielle smacked her lips. Case dug around in his pocket. He came up with a set of keys. He reached over the back of his seat and dangled them in front of Gabrielle's face. She glared at him. She looked at Tiffany. Tiffany wasn't paying attention. She was looking at the sky. It was filled with clouds again.

Gabrielle snatched the keys out of Case's hand. She stomped around the car and pulled the gates closed. There were two of them. They were both open. They were heavy. There was a lock on the right gate. Gabrielle looked at the keys Case gave her. There were three. Each had a piece of clear tape over it. One key's tape had the word "gate" written on it. The other two keys' tape said "door." Gabrielle used the key labeled "gate" to lock the right gate. She hurried back to the car, handed Case the keys, and plopped down in her seat. Case made a right. Gabrielle sat with her arms folded across her chest. Her little face was all wrinkled and angry. Tiffany glanced at her over her shoulder. She looked at Case.

"Why does *Gabrielle* have to lock the gate?" She looked at Gabrielle. Adam smirked.

"Yeah, Louis." He looked at Gabrielle. "Why does *Gabrielle* have to lock the gate?" Gabrielle glared at him. Case looked at Gabrielle in his mirror. He smiled.

"Gabrielle? Would you like to take that?" Gabrielle looked at the floor. She sighed and looked into Tiffany's eyes.

"B-Because of the horn." She looked at Case. Her eyebrows fell in the middle. She clenched her teeth. "Right?"

Case shrugged. "Of course." Tiffany looked at Case. She smiled and looked over her shoulder. She looked at Gabrielle then Adam.

"Um, what's going on?" Tiffany turned to Case. Case looked at her.

"Why, whatever do you mean?" Adam cupped his hand over his mouth and chuckled. Gabrielle nudged him in the ribs. Tiffany looked over her shoulder. Her eyebrows fell in the middle. She pointed at the kids.

"Hey! You two be nice." Adam bowed his head and showed Tiffany his palm. Gabrielle puffed up her cheeks and smiled. She looked at the floor and nodded. Case patted

Tiffany's shoulder.

"Relax, honey." He looked her over. "And, put on your seatbelt." He faced forward. "I hate it when you don't wear your seatbelt." Tiffany smiled. She slid her seatbelt across her chest and buckled it. Case looked in his rearview mirror. "You guys got your seatbelts on?"

"Yes, Louis," Adam groaned. Gabrielle hooked her thumb beneath her seatbelt's shoulder harness. She tugged it away from her chest and showed it to Case. Case looked at the road.

"Good." Tiffany's eyes lit up. She turned to Case with a grin.

"Can we stop and get breakfast?"

Case smiled back. "Of course." He took her hand and faced forward. "That's where I was going."

Adam leaned forward. "Yeah? Where are you going?" Case looked at Gabrielle in the mirror. He smirked.

"Burger Land." Gabrielle rolled her eyes.

Tiffany looked at the floor. "Cool," she remarked.

Gabrielle looked at Adam. "*I'm never eating there, again.*" she whispered. "*I hate that place.*" Adam grinned and shook his head. Case stopped at a gas station and filled up. Then, he went through the Burger Land drive thru and got everyone breakfast. Gabrielle was not pleased. Everything from Burger Land was beginning to taste the same, even the breakfast. Burger Land's breakfast used to be Gabrielle's favorite thing in the whole world. Case smiled at her in the rearview from time to time while she ate. She'd take a bite. Then, she'd glare at him and chew it, slowly. It was miserable. Case drove for fifty minutes. It wasn't so bad. It was the most interesting thing he'd done in a while. Tiffany played Pentari the entire time.

Case looked Tiffany over. She was rocking out. She'd taken off her cherry red boots and arranged them in front of her seat. She sat with her ankles crossed. Her feet rested on the dashboard. She wore a pair of white socks with teal stripes. *Graveyard Tombs* was playing. It was Tiffany's favorite song by Pentari. Case stared at her tootsies. They rocked to the music. Case smiled. He reached across and poked Tiffany's foot. Tiffany jumped. She pointed at Case.

"Stop it." She shooed Case's hand away. "No." Case grinned. He reached across and tugged at Tiffany's sock. Tiffany smiled. "Louis!" she shouted. "What the hell are you doing?" Case yanked her sock off. Then, he tickled her foot. Tiffany squirmed away. "You bastard! Don't you *dare* tickle me!" She reached for her sock. "Nuh-uh!" Adam reached over the back of Tiffany's seat. He poked her ribs. She whirled around and pointed at him. "Adam! I'm gonna kick your ass!" Case chuckled. He pounded the steering wheel with his fist. Tiffany looked at him. She tried to look angry. But, she couldn't stop smiling. "I'm gonna *kill* you for telling them that." Case handed Tiffany her sock. Tiffany snatched it from him and slid it over her foot. Gabrielle rested her chin on the back of Case's seat.

"Louis..." she groaned. "I have to pee."

Case patted her head. "Awe..." he moaned. "Well, that's tough shit." Adam tilted his head back and cackled. Gabrielle smacked her lips. She plopped down in her seat and crossed her arms over her chest. Case offered Gabrielle his cup from Burger Land. "Here you go, Gabs. Use that."

Gabrielle grinned. "Shut-up!" Case laughed. He set his cup down.

"I'll stop. Just hang on." Case stopped at the next exit. There was a rest area. It had two picnic tables, an awning, and restrooms. A row of sidewalk separated the rest area from the

road. The floor of the rest area was covered with concrete. The picnic table and benches were also concrete. The restrooms were two separate buildings. The girl's room was on the left. The boy's room was on the right. They were red, brick buildings. The roofs were covered with tan shingles. A pickup was already parked when Case arrived. Case parked behind it. It was an older pickup. It had a two tone paint job. It consisted of maroon and cream. Gabrielle and Adam hopped out.

"I have to go *so* bad!" Gabrielle shouted. She wandered around the car. Adam stood beside the car. He rested his back against the door and folded his arms over his chest. He looked up as Gabrielle dashed by. He grabbed her arm. "*Geh-buh...*" Gabrielle gasped. She whirled around and glared at her boyfriend. She narrowed her eyes. "What, God damn it? I'm going to piss my pants!" Adam showed her his palms. He looked around.

"I... don't know." Case wandered to Tiffany's door. He bent over and peered through the window. Tiffany was lacing her right boot. She stopped and looked up.

"Stop staring, Louis." She grinned. "I hate it when you do that." Case opened the door. He tied Tiffany's left boot, and Tiffany finished the right. Then, Case helped Tiffany to her feet. He closed the door. Tiffany looked Gabrielle over. She squinted. "Where did you get that shirt, Gabrielle?" Gabrielle pressed her lips together. Tiffany looked at her britches. "And, those jeans..." Tiffany crossed her arms over her chest. "And, those shoes..." She looked into Gabrielle's eyes. "I don't remember seeing *any* of that stuff before." Gabrielle's heart thumped in her ears. Case stood behind Tiffany. He looked Gabrielle over and grinned. He turned and headed for the restroom. Adam took a breath. He grabbed a hold of Case's arm. Case whirled around. He threw Adam's arm over his head, flipped Adam around, and twisted his arm behind his back.

“Shit... Louis!” Adam shrieked. “What the hell?”

Case patted Adam’s shoulder. “Don’t do that.” He let go of his arm. Adam turned around. Case peered into his hazel eyes. He tilted his head. “What is it? What happened?” Case looked around. Adam squeezed a breath through his teeth.

“I-I’m not sure.”

Case looked at him. “What is it, Adam?” He narrowed his eyes. “What did you see?” Adam looked towards the restrooms. He scratched his head.

“It’s nothing visual, this time.” Gabrielle walked up to them. He rubbed Adam’s arm. Adam faced her.

“Adam?” Gabrielle inquired. “What?” Tiffany joined them. She stared at Adam and folded her arms across her chest. Adam faced the restrooms. He squinted and shook his head.

“I don’t know. Something...” He looked at Case. “Something doesn’t *feel* right. You know what I mean?”

Gabrielle sighed. “Well, figure it out.” Adam looked at her. She bounced on the balls of her feet. “I have to pee, man!” The door to the boy’s room opened. Three men wandered out. One was in his late forties. The other two were Case and Tiffany’s age. They looked like they’d been hunting. They wore tall caps, flannel shirts, and hiking boots. The youngest wore camouflage pants. The men were chatting amongst themselves. Their manner of chatter was unsettling. They had twisted grins on their faces. And, they laughed a lot. Their laughter was sadistic and insidious. The one with the camouflage pants looked towards Tiffany. He stopped and patted the other young man. He stopped and patted the oldest. The oldest stopped. They all glared at Tiffany. Tiffany stood behind Case. She began to breathe heavily. She curled her fingers around Case’s. Case looked over his shoulder.



“What?”

Tiffany began to shiver. “*It-It-It...*” Case squinted. He turned around and looked the men over. The oldest one smirked. The one in the middle crossed his arms over his chest. The one with the camouflage pants bobbed his head. Case reached into his pocket. He curled his fingers around his revolver. The oldest man looked at Case’s hand. His eyes widened. He turned to the younger ones and motioned towards the pickup with his head.

“Let’s go, boys,” he remarked. They wandered across the rest area and gathered around the pickup. Case, Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle watched them as they passed. The oldest took out his keys, unlocked his door, and hopped inside. He leaned across the seat and unlocked the passenger door. There was only one. The young man with the camouflage pants looked at Tiffany. He smirked and hopped in. The other young one looked over his shoulder. His eyebrows fell in the middle. He smirked. Tiffany let out a shaky sigh. She cowered behind Case and rested her palms against his back. She peeked around Case’s shoulder. The last guy hopped in the pickup and closed the door. The truck started and peeled away. Tiffany faced the ground and closed her eyes. She let out a shaky sigh.

“What the hell was *that* all about?” Gabrielle asked. Tiffany looked at her. “I almost peed my pants!” Case turned around. He laid his hand on Tiffany’s back. Tiffany gasped. She jumped up and backed away. Case showed her his palms.

“Tiffany, what happened?” he demanded. “Who *were* those guys?” Tiffany laid her palm over her heat. She looked away and sighed. It was a sigh of relief. She looked up.

“It...” Tiffany folded her fingers in front of her forehead. She inhaled through her nose and exhaled through her mouth. She dropped her arms and looked at Case. “It was the Holidays.” She swallowed. “Jack, and his boys. Um, Henry and Hank.” Tiffany laid her

fingers over her lips. Case looked towards the highway. He looked back.

“*Those bastards?*” Tiffany looked down. She closed her eyes and nodded. Case faced the highway.

“We should try to catch them.” He faced Tiffany. Tiffany’s eyes popped open. She showed Case her fingertips.

“Louis, no!” She shook her head and approached him. “No! No! No! No! No!” Tiffany walked up to Case and threw her arms around his waist. She peered into his bright, blue eyes. “Don’t, Louis. Please.” She looked terrified. She shook all over. Case pressed his lips together and exhaled through his nose. He slid his fingers across Tiffany’s back.

“O-Okay,” he told her. Tiffany laid her eyes against Case’s chest and sobbed. Case slid his fingers through her hair. “Tiffany, relax.” He looked towards the highway. “They’re gone, now. We’re okay.” He turned around and kissed the top of Tiffany’s head. Gabrielle threw her arms out at her sides.

“Can someone please tell me what’s going on?”

Adam looked at her. “I’ll tell you later, Gabs.” Gabrielle looked at her boyfriend. She narrowed her eyes. She looked at Tiffany and Case. “Well, how come *he* gets to know, and I don’t?”

Case showed her his palm. “Gabrielle, just...” He pointed towards the restrooms. “Just go pee. Would you?” Tiffany looked up at Case.

“*No...*” she gasped. She looked at Gabrielle. Her eyes were like saucers. “No, Gabrielle. No. No. No! No! No!”

Case rubbed Tiffany’s shoulders. “Tiffany, chill out.” Tiffany looked into Case’s eyes. Case slid tears away from her cheeks. He looked at Adam. “Is the feeling gone?” Adam shoved

his hands into his coat pockets. He looked at the ground and let out a breath. He looked at Case and nodded.

“It... feels fine, now. Yeah.” He shrugged. “I think it’s safe.”

Gabrielle darted towards the girl’s room. “Well, I’m peeing, then. My eyeballs are floating!” Tiffany pulled away from Case. She hopped up and down.

“Louis, stop her!” She grabbed Case’s hands. “Something’s gonna happen. I *know* it!” Case sighed. He looked at Gabrielle.

“Gabrielle, wait.” Gabrielle stopped in her tracks. She dropped her arms at her sides and looked at the sky. She turned around with an impatient sigh. Case turned to Tiffany. “I’ll check it out, first. Okay?” Tiffany exhaled a shaky breath. She hugged Case’s arm and looked into his eyes.

“I’m going with you.” She pointed at him. “Don’t you leave me here.” Case closed his eyes and smiled. He opened his eyes and patted Tiffany’s head.

“Tiffany, it’s okay. Will you *please* relax?” She sighed and faced forward. Case sighed. “Okay.” He looked at Tiffany. “Let go of my arm for a second.” Tiffany looked up. She squeezed his arm, tighter. Case tilted his head. “Tiffany...”

Adam offered his hand. “Here, hold my hand, Tiffany.” Tiffany stared at Adam’s hand. She pressed her lips together and loosened her arms. She walked towards Adam and took his hand. She looked at Case.

“Hurry up,” she demanded.

Adam grinned. “Your hands are all shaky.” Case stuffed his hand into his pocket. Gabrielle hopped up and down.

“Guys, I *really, really* have to go.” Case looked at her. He took out his revolver and

thumbed back the hammer. Gabrielle's eyes widened. Case switched the revolver to the other hand. He looked at Tiffany. He motioned towards the girl's room with his head.

"Okay. Let's go." Tiffany stared at the revolver in Case's hand. She looked into his eyes.

"Um, okay." She let go of Adam's hand and weaved her arms through Case's arm. She looked at Gabrielle. She motioned behind her with her head. "Gabrielle, come stand behind us, honey." Gabrielle rolled her eyes and sighed. She stomped across the rest area and stood behind Tiffany. Case rested the revolver against his chest. He did that when he carried pistols. It used to drive Paloni crazy. Case dragged Tiffany towards the restroom. Adam and Gabrielle followed. Tiffany panted like a dog. She was shivering so badly, it made Case shiver. Adam rubbed her shoulder.

"Shh, Tiffany. It's okay, man." Gabrielle exhaled through her nose. She slid her fingers across Tiffany's back.

"Don't worry, Tiffany. Louis'll get 'em." Tiffany squeezed out a laugh. The bathroom doors pushed open. Case rested his shoulder against the door. He looked over his other shoulder.

"You guys ready?" he asked. Everyone nodded. Case shoved the door out of the way and waved his gun back and forth. The restroom was empty. It was dimly lit by a row of fluorescent bulbs. They ran down the middle of the ceiling. There were five stalls along the wall. The opposite wall was lined with three sinks. Case just needed to check each stall. He eased his arm away from Tiffany's arms. Tiffany squeezed his arm.

"Louis! Don't you *dare* leave me behind!" Case grinned and shook his head. He dragged Tiffany along. Adam and Gabrielle followed. Case rested his shoulder against the wall

of the first stall. He shot around the wall and aimed his gun into the stall. It was empty. He did the same with the second. It was also empty. So was the third. So was the fourth. Case stopped beside the fifth stall. He looked at Tiffany. "I'm gonna feel really dumb if there's nobody in there," Tiffany told him.

"I *already* feel dumb," Adam remarked.

"I'm gonna pee my pants," Gabrielle said. Case shot around the last stall. He aimed his gun at the wall. There was nobody there. He looked at Tiffany and sighed.

"Shocker. It's all clear." Tiffany let go of Case's arm. She looked away, plopped her hand over her heart, and sighed. Gabrielle threw up her hands.

"*I'm* peeing." She shot into the nearest stall, slammed the door, and locked it. Adam motioned towards the boy's room with his head.

"Come on, Louis. It's okay, now. I'm sure of it." Case nodded. He looked at Tiffany.

"Can I go pee pee, now? Please?"

Gabrielle banged on her stall door. "Will all the men please get the hell out of here, now?" Case snickered. He looked at Tiffany. Then, he turned to leave. Tiffany grabbed his arm.

"Uh, wait." Case and Adam stopped. Case faced her.

"Seriously?" Case asked. "What, now?" Case pointed towards the boy's restroom with his thumb. "Would you like to check the men's room, too?" Tiffany sighed. Case looked at his revolver. He flipped up the hammer and offered it to Tiffany. "Here. Why don't you hang on to this?" Tiffany stared at Case's pistol. She looked into his eyes.

"I'm going to kill myself with that thing." Case smacked his lips. He pried Tiffany's fingers away from his arm. He opened her hand and dropped the revolver in her shaky palm. He

pointed at the hammer.

“All you have to do is pull back the hammer.” He demonstrated for her. “And, you’re good to go.” Case relaxed the hammer. He patted Tiffany’s shoulder. Then, he and Adam headed for the door. Tiffany cradled Case’s revolver against her chest. She looked up.

“Um, thank you, Louis.”

“Bye!” Gabrielle shouted. “Don’t let the door hit you on the way out!”

## Chapter 12: “Lincoln Sanatorium”

Case, Tiffany, Gabrielle, and Adam were five minutes from Lincoln. It was sprinkling. The sky was filled with black. Lightning tore across the clouds. Pentari was playing. Adam lay slouching in his seat. His head was tilted back. His eyes were closed. He wasn't asleep. But, he wasn't awake. Gabrielle lay across Adam's lap. Her legs were curled up. Her hands were stuffed between her thighs. Her long, brown hair dangled down Adam's shins. Gabrielle was out like a light. She'd been napping since she left the rest stop. Adam's eyelids peeled back. They rested lazily above his pupils. Adam stared at the roof. It was lined with tan fabric. It was torn and dangling in places. Adam's right palm rested on Gabrielle's shoulder. His left palm rested against the top of her head. Adam slid his fingers down Gabrielle's sleeve. It was cool and squishy. Adam smiled. He closed his eyes.

Tiffany was lacing her boots. She'd taken them off after leaving the rest stop. She sat with her left foot on the seat. She tied the laces in a bow. She leaned forward and looked at the sky. A pair of lightning bolts ripped through the clouds. One was orange. One was blue. The coils of lightning twisted through each other in a helix. Low pitched thunder filled the air. Tiffany rested her foot on the floor. She looked at Case.

“We picked a hell of a day to do this.”

Case shrugged. “I have an umbrella.” He looked at Tiffany and smiled. Tiffany smiled back. She grabbed her other boot. She stuffed her foot inside and rested it on the seat. She weaved the laces around a pair of studs and looked out the window. Case's car was approaching a tiny cemetery. It was surrounded by a waist high fence. The fence was made of rusty, square shaped bars. There was a gate at the front. It was open. Tiffany looked at Case.

“Louis, stop.”

Case faced her. “Huh?”

Tiffany pointed at the rusty fence. “Stop right here.” Case narrowed his eyes. He pulled off the highway and stopped next to the fence. The highway had no shoulder. And, there wasn’t any pavement around the cemetery. It was surrounded by knee high grass. The grass inside the fence was a third that height. The horizon was lined with old, twisting oak trees. Case threw the shifter into park and turned back the key. Tiffany tied her laces and unbuckled her seatbelt. She hopped out and hurried through the gate. Case threw his arms out at his sides. He turned around and smiled. Adam and Gabrielle were crashed out. Case reached over the back of his seat. He snagged his umbrella. It was on the floor in front of Adam’s feet. Case got out and eased the door shut. He opened the umbrella above his head and hurried after Tiffany.

Tiffany wandered around, looking at tombstones. She stood in front of one that lay flat. She fell to her knees. Case walked up and stood beside her. He held the umbrella above their heads. Tiffany slid her fingers across a name engraved in the tombstone. Case looked it over. It read “Julia Haynes.” Her death date was eight years after Tiffany was born. Her birth date made her twenty-four when she died. Case closed his eyes and nodded. He knelt next to Tiffany and patted her back. Tiffany was crying. She folded her fingers and pressed them against her lips. Case turned to her.

“You never told me about your mother before.” Tiffany exhaled through her nose. She closed her eyes and nodded. Case dropped his hand on hers. “How did she die?” Tiffany opened her eyes. She slid her fingers through Case’s. Then, she lifted his hand and rested it against her cheek. She laid her free arm across her thighs. Case nuzzled up next to her.

“*Yeah,*” Tiffany gasped. She cleared her throat and looked at Case. “My father strangled her.”



Case faced forward. “Oh.”

Tiffany looked at her mother’s gravestone. “Apparently, she was into that.” Case looked at Tiffany. He narrowed his eyes. Tiffany looked up. She half-smiled. “One night, Dad got a little too rough.”

Case looked down. “Mm...”

Adam’s eyes popped open. He looked to his right. He noticed Case’s umbrella. He made out Case and Tiffany below. Adam felt uneasy. He traced a fence of rusty, square bars with his eyes. He looked at the ground around Tiffany and Case. He noticed the tombstones. He tilted his head back and sighed. He looked at his lap. Gabrielle was lying on top. Adam cradled her in his arms. Gabrielle turned and opened her big, blue eyes. She smiled.

“Hi, Adam.”

Adam smiled back. “Hey, Gabs.” He rested his palm against Gabrielle’s cheek. Gabrielle looked towards the front of the car. She looked back.

“Where’s Louis and Tiffany?” Adam looked towards the cemetery. He bobbed his head. Gabrielle sat up. Adam rested his palms on her shoulders. Gabrielle looked over her shoulder. “Tiffany’s mom.” Adam nodded. Gabrielle looked towards the cemetery. She patted Adam’s knuckles. “Come on.” She slid across the seat, opened the door, and hopped out. Adam followed. Little raindrops danced across Adam and Gabrielle’s heads. Gabrielle held out her palms. She smacked her lips. “It’s always raining.” The kids wandered up to Tiffany and Case. Gabrielle stood behind Tiffany. She watched a pair of tears fall from Tiffany’s eyes. They splashed on her mother’s gravestone. Gabrielle’s eyebrows fell at the sides. “*Awe, Tiffany...*” she moaned. Tiffany and Case looked over their shoulders. Gabrielle fell to her knees next to Tiffany. She threw her arms around Tiffany’s waist. Tiffany took her hand from Case. She

dropped her palms on Gabrielle's shoulders. Gabrielle looked up.

"Are you okay?" she asked. Tiffany smiled. She pressed her lips together and nodded.

"Yeah." She looked at Case. "Yeah, I think I'm okay." She looked at Adam. Adam looked nervous. Tiffany narrowed her eyes. "Adam? What's the matter?"

Adam forced a smile. "I'm fine." Case looked at him. He looked around.

"What is it, Adam?" He faced Adam. Adam showed him his palms.

"I'm... good, man." He looked behind him. They were on the side of a two lane highway. The other side had knee high grass. A bunch of creepy, ancient oaks were scattered about. Adam faced Case and Tiffany. "I'll be over there, guys." He looked at Gabrielle. Then, he skedaddled. The other side of the highway seemed more comforting. The further Adam got from the cemetery, the better he felt. Gabrielle watched him until he was to the car. Then, she hurried after him. Tiffany and Case looked at each other. Case laughed through his nose. He reached up and wiped Tiffany's eyes. Case motioned towards the kids with his head.

"Let them hang out for a second. I'm sure they're going stir crazy." Tiffany nodded. She looked at her mother's tombstone.

"I'm sure they're going *cigarette* crazy." She looked up. Case shrugged.

"That, too."

Adam stood beneath a giant oak tree. Its branches were wild and twisting. Its leaves were golden and falling off. The grass was littered with them. Adam turned around. Case's car stood between him and Tiffany and Case. Adam held out his palms. The tree was catching the rain. Not a drop fell below. Adam stuffed his hand into the pocket of his jeans. He pulled out his smokes. He tossed a cigarette in his mouth and looked up. Gabrielle was approaching. Adam grinned. He returned his smokes to his pocket, found his lighter, and sparked up.

Gabrielle dashed across the highway. She raised her eyebrows, lowered her jaw, and pointed.

“Om...” she moaned. “I’m telling...”

Adam flipped her off. “Bite me, one eye.”

Gabrielle scoffed. “It looks better!”

Adam smiled and nodded. “Nah, it looks good.” He motioned for her. “Come on, man.”

Gabrielle hurried across the grass. She joined Adam beneath the tree. Adam handed her his stogie. Gabrielle took a puff and faced the car. She looked at Adam.

“They can’t even *see* us.” She handed Adam the cigarette. Adam scrunched up his face.

“Nah.” He took a drag. He flicked ash from the end of the cigarette.

“Do they know what we’re doing?” Adam looked at his girlfriend. He shrugged.

“How would *I* know?”

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes. “Because you’re psychic.” Adam narrowed *his* eyes. He held up the cigarette.

“They know.” Gabrielle laughed through her nostrils. She took the cigarette from Adam. She faced the car and took a drag.

“Really?” She looked up. Adam closed his eyes. He slowly nodded.

“Yeah...” Adam faced the car. “They *always* know.” He looked back. Gabrielle handed him the cigarette.

“Well then, why don’t they come over here and stop us?”

Adam shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Gabrielle shook her head. “Yes, you do.”

“Oh, so now *you’re* psychic?” Adam took a drag. Gabrielle smacked her lips. She took Adam’s hand.

“Adam, would you just tell me? I think it’s cool.” Gabrielle looked towards the car then back. “Why don’t you want to talk about it?” Adam handed her the stogie. He exhaled smoke through his nostrils. He faced the car.

“It... bothers Tiffany when people smoke. Because, it reminds her of her father.” He faced Gabrielle. Gabrielle narrowed her eyes.

“I know *that*.” She took a puff. Adam shrugged.

“And yet, she doesn’t come over here and stop us.” He faced the car. “She’d have a problem if we went over *there* and fired one up.”

Gabrielle faced the car. “So, we’re okay? As long as we do this... discreetly?”

Adam tilted his head. “Until she gets in one of her moods.” Gabrielle smacked her lips. She held up the cigarette. Adam snatched it from her fingers.

“And, Louis?” Gabrielle inquired. Adam narrowed his eyes and shook his head. He looked at Gabrielle.

“This isn’t going to become a regular thing, is it?” Gabrielle looked at him. “You asking me this crap... Me having to answer...” Adam took a drag. Gabrielle shrugged.

“Nah.”

Adam nodded. “So, you’re... lying to me.”

Gabrielle smacked her lips. “Of course, I’m lying.” Adam sighed. He handed the cigarette to Gabrielle and faced the car.

“Louis is... complicated.” Gabrielle faced forward. “He wants us to stop smoking just like *he* did.”

Gabrielle rested the cigarette between her lips. “So, why doesn’t he come over here and stop us?” Adam laughed. He scratched the back of his head.

“He, uh...” Adam faced Gabrielle. Gabrielle faced him. “He also wants you to tell Tiffany you got suspended.” Adam narrowed his eyes. “Do you realize that?”

Gabrielle threw her hands out at her sides. “Well... Well, why doesn’t he just tell her?”

Adam pressed his lips together. “Because, he loves you.”

Gabrielle shrugged up her shoulders and narrowed her eyes. “What? What the hell are you talking about?” Adam grinned. He dropped his forehead in his palm and shook his head. Gabrielle dropped her palm on her chest. “You mean, he *loves* me, loves me?”

Adam showed her his palms. “No, Gabrielle. No. No. No. Not like *that*.”

Gabrielle nodded. “Well, I don’t understand.” She handed Adam the cigarette. Adam took the last drag. He dropped the cigarette in the grass and stomped it flat.

“This is why I don’t tell people this stuff.” Adam looked up. Gabrielle pressed her lips together. “He... loves you, Gabrielle.” Adam dropped his palm over his heart. “He loves me, too. And Tiffany, if you can believe *that*.” Gabrielle laughed. Adam pressed his lips together. “He wants *you* to tell her.”

Gabrielle sighed. “I... still don’t understand. Why doesn’t *he* just tell her?”

Adam threw his hands out at his sides. “Because, you *asked* him not to!”

Gabrielle looked towards the car. “You mean...” She looked at Adam. Adam crossed his arms over his chest. “You mean, he’s doing all *this*...” Gabrielle held up her pointer finger. “He’s been... tormenting me since Wednesday, because he wants me to tell Tiffany I got suspended?”

Adam narrowed his eyes. “Was any of the stuff he made you do *really* that bad?”

Gabrielle pointed towards the car. “And, he won’t tell Tiffany, just... because I asked him not to?”

Adam nodded. "Louis would part the Red Sea for you." Gabrielle dropped her eyes in her palms. Adam dropped his arms at his sides. "Awe, Jeez." He threw his arms around Gabrielle's shoulders. "You see? This is why I don't tell people this stuff." Gabrielle whimpered. She hugged Adam's waist. Adam slid his fingers through her hair. He kissed the side of her head. "You should tell her, Gabs. She deserves to know." Gabrielle backed away. She wiped her eyes and looked up.

*"I don't know if I can,"* she gasped.

Adam shrugged. "Well, you'll have to. Or, Louis will drive you crazy." Gabrielle laughed. She hugged herself and faced the car. She looked at Adam.

"The deal was until Monday."

"Hmm..." Adam moaned. "Well, I'm *sure* he'll stop after that." Gabrielle let out an uneasy sigh. She looked at the ground.

"We should go." Adam nodded. He took Gabrielle's hand, and they left. They crossed the highway and returned to the cemetery. The further they walked, the more uneasy Adam became. The rain hadn't picked up. It was just a drizzle. Tiffany and Case were sitting on Julia's tombstone. They faced the gate. They spotted Adam and Gabrielle as soon as they came around the car.

"You guys ready?" Tiffany asked. Adam and Gabrielle stopped in front of the gate. Adam nodded.

"Yeah, man. Let's roll." Case hopped up. He turned and offered Tiffany his hand. Tiffany smiled. She took his hand, and Case helped her to her feet. Adam looked at Gabrielle. He motioned towards Tiffany with his head. Gabrielle pressed her lips together. She looked at Adam and shook her head. Adam shrugged. He opened the rear, right door and slid across the

seat. Gabrielle grabbed the edge of the door and stopped. She watched Tiffany get in. Case shut the door for her. He looked at Gabrielle and smiled. Gabrielle ran up to him and threw her arms around his waist. Case narrowed his eyes. He patted Gabrielle's head.

"Gabrielle... What the hell?" Gabrielle looked up. Case pressed his lips together. He slid his fingers under Gabrielle's arms, lifted her off her feet, and held her against his chest. Gabrielle giggled. She hugged Case's neck. Case kissed the side of her head. "*You okay, Gabs?*" he whispered. "*You look like you've been crying.*" Gabrielle eased back. She looked into Case's eyes.

"Um, I'm okay, I think." Case looked at Tiffany. She smiled. She threw her hands out at her sides. Case looked at Gabrielle.

"You ready to go get shot up by a bunch of gangsters?"

Gabrielle gritted her teeth. "You'll protect me, right?"

Case nodded. "I'll do my best." Gabrielle exhaled through her nose. She smiled.

"I love you, Louis." Case's lips parted. He closed his mouth and looked at Adam. Adam sat behind the driver's seat. His arms were crossed over his chest. He was staring into space. Case smiled at Gabrielle. He slid his fingers through her long, brown hair.

"I love you too, Gabrielle." Gabrielle threw her arms around Case's neck. Case patted her back. "I'm glad Adam told you that." Gabrielle laughed through her nose. "I've wanted to tell you that for a long time." Case set Gabrielle on the ground. He motioned towards the car with his head. "Now, get your ass in the car. Let's do this."

Gabrielle nodded. "Okay." She hopped in and closed the door. Case hurried to the driver's side and climbed in. He fumbled through his keys. Tiffany looked at him.

"What was *that* all about?" Case looked up. He pointed towards the back seat.

“Gabrielle loves me.” Gabrielle threw her fingers over her lips and snickered. Tiffany narrowed her eyes. Case shrugged. “And, I love her back.” Tiffany smiled. She looked at Gabrielle then Adam. She turned to Case.

“What the hell is going on around here?” Case laughed. Tiffany looked at Adam and Gabrielle. “You guys are keeping something from me.” Adam showed her his palms. Gabrielle looked at her lap. Tiffany faced Case. “What is it? What aren’t you telling me?” Case turned the ignition over. He looked at Tiffany. Then, he looked at Gabrielle. Gabrielle looked up. She shook her head. Case looked at Tiffany. Tiffany took a deep breath and sighed. Case tilted his head.

“I... took Gabrielle shopping.” He faced forward and threw on his seatbelt. Tiffany narrowed her eyes.

“What? When?”

Case threw the car into overdrive and drove onto the highway. “Thursday, at lunch.” He looked at Tiffany. Tiffany nodded.

“Okay. So... why are you keeping that from me?”

Case tilted his head. “Awe, you know. I felt bad.” He looked at Tiffany. “I should’ve come by and picked you up and taken you to lunch. But, I took her to the mall, instead.” He shrugged and faced forward. “Then, I got to thinking about it, later.” He looked at Tiffany. “I remembered there wasn’t a *thing* to eat in the magic shop. Right?” Tiffany narrowed her eyes. She nodded. Case faced forward. “Um... I should’ve come and picked *you* up, instead.” He looked at Gabrielle in his mirror. “But, Gabrielle was needing some clothes.” He looked at Tiffany. “You know.”

Tiffany faced forward. “Yeah, she really did.”



Case faced the road. “Anyway... So, that’s why we showed up Thursday night with a pizza.” He looked at Tiffany. “My little way of saying, ‘I’m sorry’.” Tiffany looked at him. She smiled. Case smiled back. He faced forward. “I’ll make it up to you. Let’s... go to lunch Monday. Yeah?”

Tiffany patted his shoulder. “Yeah, man.” She leaned across the seat and kissed the side of his head. “Let’s *do*. That sounds great.” Gabrielle looked at Adam. Adam shook his head. Tiffany returned to her seat. Case looked her over. He smacked his lips.

“Tiffany, put your seatbelt on.”

Tiffany whirled around and snagged her safety belt. “Sorry! I forgot.” She buckled her seatbelt and sighed. “You know, I wanted to call you.” She looked at Case. “But, I was afraid you might be busy. So, I didn’t want to interrupt you.” Tiffany faced forward. “I’m kind of glad I didn’t, now.” Adam threw his hands out at his sides. He dropped his forehead in his palms. Gabrielle slouched in her seat. She folded her arms across her chest.

“Monday,” Case replied. He took Tiffany’s hand. Tiffany looked at him and smiled.

“Monday.”

The two lane highway turned into a tiny, brick road in Lincoln. The first intersection had a traffic light. It stood on a post at the northeast corner. It was painted yellow. Case looked at the top of the light post. There were two long, green signs on top. They were perpendicular. The top one faced east and west. It was facing Case. It read “Avenue A.” The bottom sign faced north and south. It read “Main Street.” Main Street ran down the middle of Lincoln’s tiny downtown area. It was barely big enough for two opposing cars. The rest of the downtown roads were mainly one lane, one ways. If a person was lucky, they ended up on a two lane road the same width as Main Street. All the downtown streets were made of jagged, decrepit bricks.

They'd needed to be re-laid for many years. It made the roads wobbly. It was like driving over a row of speed bumps.

The light at Avenue A and Main Street was red. Case crept up and stopped. He looked towards the top, right corner of the intersection. That was the northwest corner. The Lincoln courthouse was the first building on Main Street. It took up half a block. It was a red, brick building. The peak of the roof was parallel to Avenue A. The side facing Main Street was the entrance. The roof extended from the building. At the front, it was supported by four white pillars. There was a single, white door behind the pillars. A tall, skinny window hovered at either side of the door. The Lincoln Police Department took up the other half of the block. It was also a red, brick building. It was two stories. The peak of the roof was parallel to the peak of the courthouse. All four walls were the same size. There were four tall, skinny windows on each wall. There were a pair of old, wooden doors at the front. An arch of bricks was built around them.

Case looked at Tiffany. She was shaking. Case curled his fingers around hers.

"Just relax," he told her.

She looked at him. "Easy for *you* to say."

Case looked in his rearview mirror. An old, seventies model pickup was approaching. It came roaring up the highway. Case looked it over. The paint was mismatched. The hood, cab, and driver's door were yellow. The front and rear, driver's fenders were covered with rust. The front, passenger fender was covered with grey primer. The passenger's door was red. The rear, passenger fender was a faded shade of blue. There was no tailgate. The pickup screeched to a stop. It stopped inches short of Case's bumper. The driver laid on his horn. Gabrielle and Adam gasped. They looked over their shoulders. Tiffany looked at Case. Case turned the music

down.

“The light is red, dipshit.”

Adam faced forward. “What the hell’s that guy’s problem?”

Case looked at Tiffany. “You want me to run it?” Tiffany looked at the floor. She pressed her lips together and shook her head. Case looked in his mirror. The driver threw the pickup into reverse. He peeled out, backwards. Then, he smoked the tires and roared around them. Case flipped him the bird as he passed. “Yeah, shove it up your ass, pal.”

Tiffany looked at her lap. “Home, sweet home.” Case looked Tiffany over. Tiffany closed her eyes and shuddered. Case let go of her hand. He slid his knuckles across her cheek. “You look like you’re scared to death.” Tiffany’s eyes opened. She took Case’s hand and kissed it. She looked into his eyes.

“*I am.*”

Case nodded. “Well, we’re right here, with you. Okay?” Tiffany faced forward. She rested her hands in her lap. Case patted her shoulder. “So, where are we going?”

Tiffany pointed towards the road. “Make a right on Avenue D. The sanatorium is two blocks down.” She looked at him. “You can’t miss it.”

“Okay.” Case faced forward. The light turned green, and Case drove onto the bricks. He kept his speed below twenty. He was worried any faster might tear his car up. The next intersection was at Avenue B. Avenue B was a one lane, one way. It headed north. When Case got to it, the light was red. All the traffic lights in the downtown area looked like the light post at Main Street and Avenue A. Case stopped. He looked to his left. Half the southern block was occupied by a six story building. It was made of brown bricks. Except at the front, there were six rows of five windows on each side. There were four windows on the bottom story at the

front. In the middle, there was a pair of glass doors. Case looked towards the top. There was a logo for Star Banking. The other half of the block was a bank building. It was also owned by Star Banking. It had two drive thru lanes. The outer lane had a tube for passing paperwork back and forth. The inner lane was next to the building.

Case faced forward. The light changed. Case crept across the bumpy bricks. He eased towards the next intersection. It was at Avenue C. Avenue C was a one lane, one way. It headed south. The light was red. Case stopped and sighed. He looked at Tiffany.

“No wonder that guy ran it.” Tiffany looked at the south side of the street. She smiled.

“Me and Valerie used to eat there.” Case looked. The southern block between Avenue B and C had two buildings. The west building was a restaurant called “Sally’s Kitchen.” “It’s the only place around here that’s any good.” Case looked at Tiffany. “Everywhere else is like eating at the landfill.” Case nodded. He looked the building over.

“You wanna go there before we leave?” he asked.

“Unless you want to starve to death.” Case smiled. Sally’s Kitchen had a red curtain. It ran around the roof. The restaurant name was written on the front of the curtain. It was written in tall, white letters. Sally’s was a red, brick building. The entrance consisted of a pair of green doors with tall, steel handles. There was a circular window at the top of each door. Two long, black, rectangular windows surrounded the doors. “I can probably catch a couple of rats,” Tiffany offered. Case pinched his eyes shut and gritted his teeth. He turned to Tiffany and shook his head.

“No, thank you. I’m trying to quit.” Tiffany smiled. Gabrielle’s head appeared above the back of Tiffany’s seat. Her face was all scrunched up.

“You would eat a rat?” she asked.

Tiffany looked over her shoulder. “Nah. Never.”

Case faced Gabrielle. “She’s done it.”

Gabrielle shook her head. “That’s gross.” She looked at her hands. They rested on the back of Tiffany’s seat. She looked up. “What’s the worst thing you’ve ever eaten?” Tiffany looked down. She slid her lips to the side of her face. She looked up.

“I ate my neighbor’s cat, one time.”

Gabrielle scrunched up her nose. “Tiffany!”

Case looked at Tiffany. “Awe, Tiffany. You never told me that.”

Tiffany nodded. “*That* was pretty disgusting.” She narrowed her eyes. “I cooked it, first.” She shrugged. “You have to with larger animals. It smelled *so* bad.”

Gabrielle threw her hands out at her sides. “Why would you *do* that, Tiffany?”

“I was starving.” Tiffany looked into Gabrielle’s eyes. “It was him or me.” The light turned green. Case carried on. Adam leaned forward.

“What did it taste like?”

Tiffany tilted her head. “It’s been my experience... things usually taste like what they eat.”

Adam narrowed his eyes. “So, it tasted like cat food?” Tiffany narrowed her eyes. She nodded, slowly.

“Pretty much.”

“No!” Gabrielle shrieked.

Tiffany looked at her. “Pretty much, man.”

Gabrielle eased back. “God, that’s gross.”

“That’s kind of how it smelled, too.” Case arrived at the next light. It was red.

“God damn it,” Case remarked. He pushed the brake pedal to the floor. He stopped behind two other cars. He punched the steering wheel. Tiffany smacked her lips.

“Louis, don’t punch the steering wheel.” She took his hand. She slid her fingers across his knuckles. “You’re gonna hurt yourself.” Case looked at Tiffany’s hand. He slid his fingers through hers. He looked into her eyes and smiled.

“I’ve seen *you* do that.” He pointed at her. “I’ve seen you punch the register, plenty of times.”

Tiffany pressed her lips together. “I know. You don’t wanna be like *me*, do you?”

“How was the texture?” Adam asked. Tiffany looked over her shoulder. She narrowed her eyes. Adam threw his hands out at the sides of his face. “Of the cat, I mean.”

Gabrielle smacked her lips. “Adam...”

Tiffany tilted her head. “It was... thin. Very thin.” Adam nodded. “And, chewy. It was like chewing a balloon.” Case looked away and smiled. He shook his head.

“Yuck,” Gabrielle remarked. Tiffany smiled at her. She twisted around and laid her arms on the back of her seat.

“And, it was... really greasy. I remember that more than anything.” Gabrielle scrunched up her nose and looked away. “Like, there was a pool of it on my plate when I finished eating.”

Gabrielle shook her hands in front of her chest. “That’s disgusting, Tiffany!” Tiffany giggled. Gabrielle looked into Tiffany’s eyes. Her eyebrows fell at the sides. “That was somebody’s kitty cat.” Case cackled. Gabrielle looked at him. “It’s not funny, Louis. Stop laughing!” Case turned around. He patted Gabrielle’s shoulder.

“It’s okay, honey. I’m sure they just thought... it ran away.” Adam snickered. “Then, they probably got a *new* kitty.” Gabrielle looked at her lap. Her eyebrows fell in the middle.

She pushed her mouth to the side of her face. She looked into Tiffany's eyes. Tiffany shrugged.

"I hadn't eaten in four days, Gabrielle. I *had* to eat something."

Gabrielle crossed her arms over her chest. "Eat that poor kitty cat!" Everyone but Gabrielle laughed. Case turned around to watch the light. Gabrielle pointed at Tiffany. "You're going straight to Hell."

Tiffany threw her hands out at her sides. "Should I go get them a new cat, Gabrielle? Would that make you feel better?"

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes. "No."

Tiffany pressed her lips together. "Would *you* like a kitty? Would that make up for it?"

Gabrielle motioned towards Tiffany. "No. *You* would probably eat him!" Case and Adam cackled. Tiffany looked at the floor. She slithered around and faced forward. Case patted her shoulder.

"You never told me that story, before." Tiffany scrunched up her nose. She looked at her boyfriend.

"Is it that bad?"

Case sighed. "Kind of." Adam cupped his hand over his mouth and cackled. "That's... pretty gnarly," Case continued. Tiffany looked at her lap.

"Sorry."

Case looked at her. "You had to do what you had to do."

"Yep." Tiffany smiled at Case. Case smiled back. He narrowed his eyes.

"Greasy, huh?"

Gabrielle pointed down her throat. "Bleh!" The light turned green. Case waited for the people in front of him to take off. They weren't in any hurry, either. The car out front was a

light blue compact. It was motionless for fifteen seconds after the light changed. Case narrowed his eyes and slid his mouth to the side of his face. He hammered his horn. The car remained still for another five seconds. Then, it took off. Case figured the driver was fiddling with his radio. The light turned yellow when the compact was halfway through. The car in front of Case was an old, red Station Cruiser. The paint was faded and rusty. The driver was a lady in her forties. She had long, dark, curly hair. She wore a pair of sunglasses. They had white, plastic frames and giant, black lenses. She looked at the light. She slammed on her brakes. Case tilted his head back. He eased his brake pedal to the floor. He threw his hands out at his sides.

“*Damn, lady...*” Tiffany moaned. “We could’ve *both* made that.” She looked at Case. “What a dumb bitch.” Case chuckled. He looked at his girlfriend.

“You know, I’ve never seen you drive.” Case pointed at the steering wheel. “Here, why don’t *you* drive us?”

Tiffany scrunched up her face. “Oh, no...” She looked away and waved Case off. “Nah. Uh-uh.”

Gabrielle rested her chin on the back of Tiffany’s seat. “No, Louis. Don’t! She’ll kill us!” Tiffany’s eyebrows fell in the middle. She looked over her shoulder.

“Hey!”

Gabrielle pointed at her. “I rode with you *one* time.” Gabrielle held up her hand, laid it flat, and slid it through the air. “And, I’m *never* doing that again!”

Tiffany smacked her lips. “It wasn’t that bad.”

Gabrielle raised her eyebrows. “Wanna bet?” She looked at Case. “She drove on the *sidewalk*, Louis!” Case looked at Tiffany. He narrowed his eyes.

“Nuh-uh!” he shouted. Tiffany looked at Case. She fought back a smile and pointed at



him.

“Shut-up, Louis!” Case laughed. Adam nodded.

“Yeah, that *was* pretty rough, Tiffany.” He looked up and flattened his lips. “I remember that.”

Tiffany looked at Adam. “Bite me.”

Case smiled at Tiffany. “Awe...” He patted her shoulder. She faced him. “It’s okay, Tiffany. We’ll go driving, some time. Just you and me.” Tiffany smacked her lips. She faced forward and fought back a smile.

“I don’t drive *that* bad.”

“Actually, you do,” Gabrielle assured her.

Tiffany pointed over the back of her seat. “Shut-up.” Gabrielle giggled. Case watched the light like a hawk. As soon as he saw green, he tooted his horn. The lady in front of him flipped him off. Case raised his eyebrows.

“Oh, you got a problem with that, huh? Well, maybe you shouldn’t have stopped a while ago.” He laid his palm over his heart. “*I* got a problem with *that*.” The lady crept across the intersection. Case rode on her ass. He looked towards the next intersection. It was Avenue D. The light was green. Case shook his head. He narrowed his eyes. Tiffany sighed.

“Hurry, lady.”

Case glanced at her. “I’m gonna run her ass over, if she stops at *this* one.” They bounced down Main Street. They were within two car lengths. The light turned yellow. Case pressed his lips together. “Don’t *do* it.” The lady in the Station Cruiser stomped on her brakes. She skidded to a stop inches from the intersection. Case stomped *his* brake pedal to the floor. He nearly hit the lady in front of him.

“Gyad!” Gabrielle moaned. She dropped her forehead in her palms. Tiffany scrunched up her nose. She slouched in her seat and folded her arms over her chest.

“You fuckin’ cunt!” she screamed. She punched Case’s dash. The glove box popped open. Tiffany looked down. She stared at the little door. She laid her fingers over her lips and looked at Case. Case looked at the glove box. He looked at Tiffany and smirked. He motioned towards the glove box.

“You see?” He reached across and smacked the door closed. Tiffany rested her palms on her thighs.

“Sorry.” Case rubbed her shoulder. He looked at the Station Cruiser. He turned to Tiffany with a smirk.

“Let’s ram her.”

Tiffany gasped. “Louis, no!”

Adam patted Case’s seat. “Do it, Louis. Push her out of the way.” Tiffany’s eyes popped open. She grinned and shook her head.

“Louis, do *not* hit her!” Case narrowed his eyes. He eased into his seat. He threw the shifter into reverse and looked behind him. It was clear. Case pressed the gas pedal. “Louis!” Tiffany shrieked. Case cackled. He looked over his shoulder.

“You ready, guys?” Adam grinned. He rubbed his hands together. Gabrielle crossed her arms over her chest. She narrowed her eyes.

“Get her, Louis.” Case gritted his teeth. He looked at Tiffany. She smiled.

“Man, you can’t be serious.” Case pressed his lips together and squinted. He threw the shifter into drive and cut the wheel. He jumped the curb. Tiffany and the kids laughed. Case crept down the sidewalk. He stopped next to the Station Cruiser and turned on his right blinker.

He stared at the driver. She pretended not to notice. Case flipped her off. Then, he peeled around the corner. Tiffany looked over her shoulder.

“See? I’m not the *only* one that ever did that.” Case drove down Avenue D. It too was an old, worn out, brick road. Case kept it under twenty. His car hobbled across jagged, red stones. Case came to another light at the next intersection. It was at the intersection of Avenue D and Einstein Road. The green bulb was not lit. The yellow bulb was not lit. Case shook his head. He stopped behind an old, fifties style pickup. It was white. The vehicle’s make lay across the tailgate in large, red letters. Case looked at Tiffany. He threw his hands out at his sides.

“Seriously?” Tiffany looked at Case. She half-smiled.

“Lincoln sucks. I told you.” A piece of classical music began to play. It was Case’s cell phone. Case stuffed his hand into his jeans pocket. He tugged out his phone and looked at the window. It was Paloni. Case flipped the phone open and put it to his ear.

“What’s up, man?”

*“The way I got it figured,”* Paloni replied, *“you’re about two blocks from the sanatorium.”* Case laughed, silently. He smacked his thigh.

“You’re such a smart-ass, Paloni.” Case shrugged. “Yeah, pretty much, man.”

*“Okay, then,”* Paloni continued. *“You’re going to go inside the sanatorium. There’s going to be a front desk with a bunch of nurses. They’ll be checking in patients and signing in visitors.”*

Case nodded. “With you, so far.”

*“Andre Haynes is in ward seven. It’s a special ward for criminally insane patients.”*

Case nodded. *“Tiffany needs to tell one of the attending nurses who she is. They’ll be expecting*

her.”

“Okay,” Case remarked.

*“The Lincoln Sanatorium is three stories. Ward seven is on the third. That’s where they’re going to take Tiffany. I’ve arranged for you and the kids to go as well.”*

“Good,” Case replied. “That sounds great.”

*“However, you can’t be in the room when Tiffany meets her father.”* Case narrowed his eyes. He looked at Tiffany. *“They’ll be in a small, conference room. It’s set up like an interrogation room. There’s a two way mirror. You and the kids can sit outside and watch. But, no one except Tiffany is allowed to be in the same room as Andre. The sanatorium is very serious about that.”*

“Hmm,” Case mumbled.

*“He’s what they call a ‘high priority’ patient. I had to beg them just to get Tiffany in to see him. Normally, they only allow officers to visit him. But, I convinced them that letting him talk to his daughter might help with his treatment. Due to his history with Tiffany and his declining condition, they agreed.”*

Case nodded. “You did good, Paloni. Thanks, buddy. I knew I could count on you.”

*“Yeah, well... You owe me one.”* Case smirked. *“Actually, you owe me a hell of a lot more than that, Case.”*

Case pushed his mouth to the side of his face. “I will talk to you, later.” Case closed his phone and stuffed it into his pocket. Tiffany took a breath.

“Is everything okay?”

Case looked at her. “Yeah, man.” He narrowed his eyes. He looked down the street.

“Everything’s...” Tiffany looked where Case was looking. He was staring at a crack dealer. He

was a black man. His head was shiny and bald. He was tall and stocky. He wore a black shirt, black jeans, red sneakers, and a red, plaid jacket. He was dealing to a kid who looked Adam and Gabrielle's age. He was also black. He wore a sloppy, red wind breaker, black corduroys, a red hat with a flat bill, and sloppy sneakers. The dealer handed the young man a tiny baggie. The young man handed him a wad of wrinkly bills. Then, he split. The dealer looked around. He casually dropped the money in his pocket. He froze when he spotted Case. He narrowed his eyes.

The light turned green. The white truck's left turn signal was blinking. It turned left. Case crept through the intersection. He stared at the crack dealer as he approached. Tiffany looked at her lap. She looked at Case out of the corner of her eye.

"*Louis!*" she whispered. "*Chill out.*" Case glanced at her. He returned his eyes to the drug dealer. The dealer folded his arms over his chest. His eyebrows fell in the middle. His eyes widened. When Case was a foot away, the crack dealer dropped his arms at his sides.

"The fuck you looking at?!" he demanded. Case narrowed his eyes. He stomped on the gas pedal, cut the wheel, and jumped the curb. The drug dealer was standing in front of an old, brick wall. He flattened against the wall. His eyes popped open. He gritted his teeth. Case stomped on his brakes. His bumper rested against the crack dealer's shin. Case glared into the dealer's eyes. He shoved his hand into his pocket. The drug dealer winced. Tiffany snagged a hold of Case's wrist.

"Louis, stop!" Case stared at the drug dealer's terrified face. He turned to Tiffany. She was gasping for breath. "Don't... Please..." Case glared at her. He pressed his lips together. He looked at the crack dealer. The crack dealer threw his hands over his head. Case smirked. He took out his hand. It was empty. He pretended to aim a gun at him. He curled his index

finger, like it was curled around a trigger. He pulled the invisible trigger, twice.

“Clack! Clack!” Case shouted. He threw the shifter into reverse and skidded to the road. He didn’t look away. The drug dealer dropped his arms. He pointed at Case.

“You dead, motha fucker!” Case rolled his eyes and skidded away. “You hear me!” Tiffany looked over her shoulder. She was panting like a dog. She watched to make sure the dealer didn’t do anything. She looked at Gabrielle and Adam. Gabrielle was looking at her lap. Her eyes were like saucers. Adam was slouched in his seat. His arms were folded across his chest. He was half asleep. Tiffany whirled around and looked at Case.

“Damn it, Louis! What the hell?”

Case pressed his lips together. “Sorry.” He sighed. “I have a bit of a temper.” He looked into Tiffany’s eyes. “As you know.”

Tiffany let out a shaky breath. “*God...*” she gasped. She faced forward and dropped her palm on her chest. “You’re going to get us killed.” Case patted Tiffany’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Tiffany. I shouldn’t have done that.” Adam sat up. He narrowed his eyes.

“Huh? What happened?”

Case, Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle were beside the Lincoln Sanatorium. It spanned half a block on Avenue D. It took up the entire block on Luther Drive. Luther Drive was an intersecting street. The Lincoln Sanatorium was an old, brick building. The bricks were crimson. Like Paloni said, the sanatorium was three stories tall. There was a single row of parking out front. Each story had a row of tall windows. There was a pair of rusty steel doors at the entrance. They had flat, folded, steel handles on the outside. A white sign hovered next to the doors. It had a picture of a gun on it. There was a red circle around the gun. There was a diagonal slash across the middle. There was a row of metallic letters at the top, right corner of

the building. They read “Lincoln Sanatorium.” Case parked near the doors. He took out his revolver and his King Leer pouch. He put them in the glove box. He looked at Tiffany and nodded. Everyone hopped out. It was barely sprinkling. So, Case didn’t bother with his umbrella. He wandered around the car and stood beside Tiffany. He looked at her hands. They were shaking. He curled his fingers around hers.

“You okay, Tiffany?”

She looked up. “I can’t believe you did that.”

Case narrowed his eyes. “He’s lucky I didn’t run his ass over.” Tiffany smiled. She looked away and shook her head. “Next time, I might.” Tiffany looked at him. Case exhaled through his nostrils. He kissed Tiffany’s forehead. “I’m sorry. He... pissed me off. What can I say?” Tiffany laughed through her nostrils. Case looked at the kids. “I’m sorry guys.” Gabrielle smiled. She shrugged. Adam pushed his mouth to the side of his face.

“For what?” Case looked at Tiffany. He pointed at her.

“Stop wasting time. *I* see what you’re doing.” Tiffany looked at the pavement and sighed. Case rubbed her shoulders. “Come on. You can do this.”

Tiffany looked up. “They’re not going to let you guys in, are they?”

Case shook his head. “They’re going to let us watch.” Tiffany rolled her eyes. “But, we can’t be in the room with you. No.”

Tiffany nodded. “I figured.”

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes. “That’s stupid.” Adam looked away. He stretched his chin and raised his eyebrows.

“I’m kind of glad, actually.” He looked at Tiffany. “Your old man’s a freak.” Tiffany pressed her lips together. Case nodded. He pointed towards the doors.

“Let’s go, guys.” Case, Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle wandered inside. They were in a reception room. There were five nurses. They were surrounded by a chest high wall. There was a wooden, writing surface along the top of the wall. The outer surface of the wall was covered with old, scarred up veneer. There were two computer monitors along the writing surface. They resided on the side facing the entrance. There was a long, white table in the middle of the area that was walled in. The five nurses sat around the table, chatting. They looked up when Case, Tiffany, and the kids walked in. One of the nurses sat at the middle of the table. She faced the entrance. She was Asian. She had long, dark hair and dark eyes. She and the other nurses wore white blouses, white skirts, white stockings, white sneakers, and little, white hats. Their hats had red plus signs. Their blouses had red plus signs on the left breast. The nurse in the middle stood and headed towards the front of the walled area. She stood between the computer monitors and folded her arms on the writing surface. She narrowed her eyes. The other nurses resumed chatting.

“Are you guys visiting?” the nurse at the counter inquired. Case and Tiffany made it to the counter. Adam and Gabrielle surrounded them. Adam stood on Case’s left. Gabrielle stood on Tiffany’s right. Gabrielle could barely see over the counter. Case turned to Tiffany for an explanation. She looked at Case. Then, she faced the nurse. The nurse wore a nametag. It read “Joline.”

“I-I’m Tiffany Haynes. I’m here to see my father.” The nurses at the table stopped talking. They looked at Tiffany. Tiffany looked them over. She swallowed, nervously.

“Tiffany, huh?” Joline remarked. “Yes, a Sergeant... Paloni called. We’ve been expecting you.” She looked into Tiffany’s eyes. “So, *you’re* Andre’s daughter?” Tiffany shuddered. She looked at the floor and crossed her arms over her chest. She exhaled a shaky



breath. Case patted Tiffany's shoulder.

"Yes, Joline," Case replied. "This is Tiffany Haynes." Tiffany looked up. Joline turned to Case. "Can she go up and see her father, please?" Joline looked at Tiffany. She narrowed her eyes.

"You're shorter than I thought." Tiffany half-smiled. She exhaled through her nose. Joline picked up a clipboard. It was sitting on a shelf below the counter. She handed it to Case. "I need you all to sign this." Case looked at the clipboard. There was a stack of papers clipped to it. Case flipped to the last page. There was a large, white space for everyone's signatures. He looked at Joline.

"What is this?"

"It's a waiver," Joline replied. "In the event that something happens to you..." She shrugged. "We can't be held liable."

Case looked at Tiffany. "Oh, my God." Tiffany snatched the clipboard from Case. She looked at Joline and held out her hand.

"You got a pen?" Joline handed Tiffany a pen. Tiffany pressed a chrome button at the end. She scratched her name at the bottom of the last page. She handed the pen and clipboard to Case. Case signed his name and handed the clipboard to Adam. Adam wrote his name. He wandered behind Case and Tiffany. He handed the clipboard and pen to Gabrielle. Gabrielle looked at Case and Tiffany.

"I don't know about this, guys."

Case smiled. "Just sign it, Gabrielle. It's okay." Her eyebrows fell in the middle. She reluctantly signed her name. Adam handed the clipboard to Joline. Joline removed the stack of papers from the clipboard. There was a row of plastic inboxes on the inside of the wall. Joline

dropped the waver in one of those. She stuck another sheet on the clipboard and handed it to Case. It had a grid for names and dates. Joline pointed at the next empty slot with the pen.

“And, I need you guys to sign in.” Case took the pen. He signed his name and wrote the date. He handed the clipboard to Tiffany. She, Gabrielle, and Adam signed in. Joline picked up a walkie talkie. She put it to her lips. “Haynes’ daughter is here.”

A man’s voice answered. “*Ten-four.*” Joline led everyone to an elevator. It was around the edge of the left wall. Tiffany, Adam, Gabrielle, and Joline gathered around the doors. Joline pressed the up button. Tiffany looked beside her. Case wasn’t there. Tiffany looked over her shoulder. Case stood with his back against the opposite wall. He stared at the elevator doors. Tiffany narrowed her eyes.

“Louis?” she inquired. “Are you okay?” Case looked at her. He turned to Joline.

“Can we take the stairs?” Joline narrowed her eyes and shrugged. Case motioned towards a door. It stood next to the elevator. It led to the stairs. “It’s only three floors. Let’s take the stairs.” Case looked at Adam and Gabrielle. “Come on, guys. We’ve been cooped in the car all morning. Wouldn’t you rather take the stairs?”

Adam crossed his arms over his chest. “Hell no.” Case slid his lips to the side of his face. He looked at Tiffany. He motioned towards the stairs with his head. He scrunched up his nose.

“Tiffany?” Tiffany smiled. She crossed her arms over her chest.

“I’m... kind of tired from moving, yesterday.” She squinted. “What the hell’s wrong with you?” Case looked at the elevator doors. They were made of shiny steel. It was all scratched up. Case could see everyone’s reflections. They were blurry and warped. It was like looking into a funhouse mirror. Case looked at Tiffany.

“I’m taking the stairs.” He headed towards the door. He pushed it open and looked back. “I’ll see you guys up there.” The door closed behind him. Tiffany turned to Joline. Joline shook her head.

“They won’t let him up there without a nurse.” Tiffany looked at the door to the stairs. She turned to Adam and Gabrielle. She motioned towards the door with her head. Everyone followed her through. Tiffany raced up the stairs and caught up with Case. He was close to the second floor. He turned around and stopped. Tiffany hurried up the steps and stood next to him. She looked into his eyes and grinned.

“You’re... afraid of elevators?” Case looked down the stairs. Gabrielle, Adam, and Joline were on their way up.

“*Shut-up...*” Case grumbled. Tiffany threw her arms around Case’s waist. She stood on her tip-toes and kissed his neck.

“*I’m sorry!*” she whispered. “*I didn’t know that!*” Case wrapped his arm around Tiffany’s shoulders. He looked down at her.

“*Now, you know my secret shame,*” he whispered. Tiffany looked up and smiled. Adam, Gabrielle, and Joline made it up the stairs. Joline smiled. She motioned towards the third floor.

“Are we going, or what?”

Case nodded. “Let’s roll.” They climbed to the third story. There was a guard on the other side. He was black. He had grey hair. He wore a tan shirt with police emblems and black slacks. There was a badge above the left pocket of his shirt. A nightstick hung from his belt. There was a nametag above his badge. It read “Simms.” He looked at Joline. He threw his arms out at his sides.

“Is the elevator broken?”

Simms allowed Joline through. She led Case, Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle down a hallway. There were patient rooms on both sides. Each room had a heavy, steel door with a knob and a deadbolt. Each door had a window at the top. Rather than glass, the windows were covered with steel mesh. The doors and the walls were white. The floor was covered with slick, white tiles. The hallway was dim. Case looked at the ceiling. A row of fluorescent lights ran down the middle. Some of them were flickering. Two were burnt out. There was a sudden roar. Everyone stopped and looked to the right. They were next to one of the doors. The roar was a man shouting. He roared continuously with a high pitched squeal. He came charging towards the door. The walls rattled with the sounds of his footsteps. He crashed into the door. The door rattled on its hinges, and there was a thud. After that, the noise ceased. Case, Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle looked at Joline. She smiled. She motioned towards the end of the hallway with her head.

“It’s this way.” Everyone continued down the hall. Two male attendants came around the end of the hall. One had blonde hair. The other had brown hair. They wore white shirts, white slacks, and white sneakers. They were dragging a lady down the hall. She was in her thirties. She had long, blonde hair. It was a static charged mess. She was in a white tank and white slacks. The attendants dragged her by her arms. She faced the opposite direction. She slid across the tiles on her butt. Tears were pouring down her cheeks. She kept grumbling something indistinct. The brown haired attendant turned to Joline as he passed.

“Andre’s on his way,” he remarked. Joline turned to him with a nod. The blonde lady looked up as she slid past.

“S-Somebody... HELP ME!” she cried. “I’m being held against my will! I’m being held against my will!”

The blonde attendant looked down at her. “Ms. Kline, please calm down. We’re going to take you back to your room.” Adam looked over his shoulder. Ms. Kline pleaded with her eyes. Adam squinted.

“*Help me...*” she squealed. Adam sighed. He turned around and shook his head. “Ah!” Ms. Kline screamed. “Help me, you little bastard! You’re cowards! All of you!” Joline led Tiffany, Case, Gabrielle, and Adam around the corner. There was a door made of bars. There was also a doctor and another guard. The doctor wore a white lab coat, a lavender shirt, a blue tie, tan slacks, and shiny, black shoes. He was short and fat. He was bald on top. The rest of his head was surrounded by curly, brown hair. He wore a pair of round glasses with red, plastic frames. The lenses were really thick. They made the doctor’s eyes look like they were sunken. He wore a nametag that read “Valkyrie.” The guard was dressed like Simms. His nametag read “Hughes.” He had grey hair. He was six, three. Case figured he weighed around 220 pounds. The guard stood next to the barred door with his arms folded across his chest. Joline stopped and looked over her shoulder. Everyone else stopped. Dr. Valkyrie smiled at Tiffany. He had a creepy smile. It was overly enthusiastic. Also, his teeth were jagged and yellow. He held out his hand.

“Hi, you must be Tiffany.” Tiffany pressed her lips together. She tried to shake Dr. Valkyrie’s hand. She hesitated.

“Um, hi,” she managed to get out. She exhaled through her nostrils. She slid her shaky, sweaty fingers around Dr. Valkyrie’s. Dr. Valkyrie shook her hand eagerly.

“We’re very pleased to have you, Ms. Haynes,” Valkyrie continued. “I am looking forward to this very much.” Tiffany took a deep breath. Her eyes widened. She turned to Case. Case smiled. He nodded towards their hands. Tiffany slid her fingers away. She wiped her

palm on her corduroy pants. Dr. Valkyrie looked at Case. He motioned towards the bars with his head. “Shall we get to it?”

Case raised his eyebrows. “Let’s.” Valkyrie turned to the guard.

“Hughes...” Hughes took out a set of keys. He unlocked the barred door and pulled it aside. Valkyrie stretched his hand towards the doorway. Case looked down at Tiffany. She looked up at him. She looked terrified. “Joline,” Dr. Valkyrie remarked. “You can return to the front, now. We’ll let you know when Tiffany’s ready to leave.” Joline turned to Tiffany and Case. She smiled and disappeared around the corner. Tiffany squeezed Case’s hand. She clenched so hard, it hurt. Case scrunched up his nose. He dragged Tiffany through the door. Adam and Gabrielle followed. Dr. Valkyrie came in last. Hughes shut the door and locked it. They were in a short hallway. It was surrounded by grey bricks. There was a long, large window along the left wall. There was a thick, steel door next to the window. It had a knob with a lock. There was a row of plastic, blue seats along the opposite wall. The room the window overlooked was pitch black. Case figured it was the conference room.

Case and Tiffany faced Dr. Valkyrie. He wandered in front of the window. He unlocked the door next to the window, stepped inside, and flicked on the lights. The conference room was surrounded by the same grey bricks as the hall. There was a foldout table in the middle of the room. It was surrounded by foldout, steel chairs. Dr. Valkyrie stood in front of the door and faced Tiffany. He motioned towards the doorway. Tiffany pinched her eyes shut and sighed. She squeezed Case’s hand, harder. Her nails dug into his flesh.

“*Tiffany...*” Case groaned. Tiffany opened her eyes and faced him. Case narrowed his eyes. “You’re gonna break my hand.” Tiffany gritted her teeth. Case began prying her fingers loose. Tiffany pressed her lips together and whimpered. Case clawed her hand away and looked

into her eyes. He dropped his palms on her shoulders. Tiffany scrunched up her nose and looked at the floor. "It's okay," Case told her. "We'll be right outside." Tiffany sniffled. Case slid his fingers through her hair. "Are you going to be able to do this?" Tiffany draped her fingers across her lips and looked up. Tears were dribbling down her cheeks. Case exhaled through his nose. He wiped her eyes. Then, he slid her hair aside. "*Look,*" Case whispered, "*you don't have to do this, if you don't want to.*" Tiffany looked away. Case laid his palm against her cheek. "*We can leave right now, if you want.*" Tiffany closed her eyes. She dropped her face in her palms.

Case looked at Dr. Valkyrie. He was grinning. His teeth were hideous. Gabrielle wandered up. She threw her arms around Tiffany's waist. Tiffany whimpered. Adam sighed. He wandered around and hugged Tiffany from the other side. Tiffany lowered her hands. She wiped her eyes and sniffled. She looked up and sighed. She motioned for Case.

"*Come here...*" she groaned. Case threw his arms around her. Tiffany melted against his chest and hugged him back. Hughes turned towards the door. He tapped on the bars with his nightstick.

"Dr. Valkyrie," he remarked. "They're bringing him."

"Splendid," Dr. Valkyrie replied. Tiffany relaxed her arms. Case did the same and backed away. Adam let go and stepped back. Tiffany looked down at Gabrielle. Gabrielle was still hugging her. Tiffany smiled. She slid her fingers through Gabrielle's long, brown hair.

"Gabrielle, I have to go now." Gabrielle groaned. She tightened her arms around Tiffany's waist. Tiffany pressed her lips together. She looked at Case. "Why can't you guys just go in there with me?" She and Case looked at Dr. Valkyrie. He shook his head, adamantly.

"Oh no, Ms. Haynes. That's far too dangerous." He motioned towards Tiffany. "He

knows *you*. You're his daughter." Valkyrie pointed out Case, Adam, and Gabrielle. "But, he doesn't know any of them." He shook his head some more. "No, I'm afraid that's much too risky. I'm not sure how he'll react. He's very moody. Very unpredictable."

Case looked at Tiffany. "Hmm. That reminds me of... someone." Tiffany looked at Case. She narrowed her eyes. Hughes unlocked the barred door and pulled it back. Case snagged a hold of Gabrielle's arm. "Gabrielle, come on." Gabrielle looked up. "Stop, playin'. We need to go sit down, now." Gabrielle sighed. She looked at Tiffany. Tiffany knelt in front of her. She laid her hands on Gabrielle's shoulders and kissed her forehead. Gabrielle laid her palm on the side of Tiffany's face.

"You gonna be okay?" Tiffany laid her hand on top of Gabrielle's.

"I hope so." She looked over Gabrielle's shoulder. She spotted her father. He looked terrible. All his hair was grey. It draped to his shoulders from the sides of his head. He was bald down the middle. He didn't have his usual handlebar mustache going. Rather, long, jagged twists of grey hair hung from his lips and chin. His eyes were dull and murky. He looked like a zombie. He was in a straight jacket, white slacks, and a pair of white slippers. His slippers slid across the floor, lazily. His legs didn't seem like they wanted to move. As badly as he'd treated Tiffany growing up, Tiffany actually felt kind of sorry for him. *Andre was* her father, after all. Tiffany looked at Gabrielle. She motioned towards the row of chairs with her head.

"Go sit down, honey." Gabrielle nodded. She turned and headed towards the wall. Tiffany stood and faced her father. He stopped. The two attendants from earlier surrounded him. They did their best to hold him up. They were pretty big guys. But, Andre was enormous. Just moving him around was a painstaking process. Tiffany glared into her father's hazy eyes. She squinted. Her eyebrows fell in the middle. She whirled around and stomped into the



conference room. The attendants looked at Andre.

“Let’s go, Mr. Haynes,” the brown haired one remarked. They dragged Andre in front of the window and entered the room. Hughes followed them in. Tiffany pulled up a chair and sat at the table. She sat, facing the window. The attendants sat Andre across from her. Then, they wandered away. They didn’t go far. They remained at Andre’s sides, rested their backs against adjacent walls, and folded their arms over their chests. Hughes stood by the door. He looked at Dr. Valkyrie and nodded. Valkyrie rubbed his palms together. He reached inside the door next to the window. He flipped on a microphone. There was a speaker outside the window. That way, everyone outside the room could hear. Valkyrie closed the door and locked it. He stuffed the key in his coat pocket. Case, Adam, and Gabrielle sat along the wall, facing the window. Dr. Valkyrie sat next to them. Gabrielle was unfortunate enough to get to sit next to him. She waited for him to get situated. Then, she casually slid her chair away. She took Adam’s hand. Adam smiled.

Tiffany stared at her father. The window was behind him. It was a two way mirror. So, on Tiffany’s side, it was a mirror. She couldn’t see out. She glared into her father’s eyes. He sat perfectly still. He looked like a rag doll. He was slumped over. His eyes were narrow and hazy. He looked drugged. Tiffany looked at the mirror.

“Um, is he on something?” Dr. Valkyrie hopped up. He wandered to the speaker and pressed a button.

“No, Tiffany. He’s not sedated.” Tiffany looked at Andre. She narrowed her eyes. “Well, what the hell’s wrong with him? He looks like a vegetable.”

Valkyrie pressed the button. “He’s just depressed, Tiffany. That’s why we wanted you to talk to him.” Tiffany pushed her mouth to the side of her face. “*He has a flat affect. He’s*

*been that way for over a month. I have a feeling he'll snap out of it, if you just talk to him. Open up to him. Talk to him about something that only HE would know about."* Tiffany looked at the table. She nodded. Dr. Valkyrie reclaimed his seat. He looked beside him. Gabrielle and Adam had scooted several feet away. They looked at Dr. Valkyrie and grinned. Tiffany laid her palm on the table. She drummed her fingers, nervously. She stuffed her hand into her pocket. She took out a can of hair dressing. She showed it to Andre.

"Um, hey Dad. I... brought you something." Case leaned forward. He folded his arms across his lap and watched, intently. Andre didn't move. He looked dead. Tiffany sighed. She laid the can of dressing on the table. She popped the top and laid it aside. "I figured they weren't letting you style your mustache in here." Tiffany dug her fingers into the hair dressing. She scooped out a glob and slid it around in her fingers. She stood and leaned across the table. She slid the dressing through Andre's shaggy mustache and twisted it. Case grinned. He exhaled through his nose. Tiffany shaped her father's mustache into a pair of handlebars. She looked them over and grinned. "Man, those are pretty long, Dad." She snickered. "You're gonna be... beating the girls off with a stick." Andre didn't budge. Silence filled the air. Tiffany frowned. She scooted the hair dressing and the lid towards her father. Then, she sat down. She folded her arms on the table and sighed.

"I'm sorry I haven't come to visit you." Tiffany looked at her reflection in the mirror. She pressed her lips together and faced her father. "I thought about it. But..." Tiffany got choked up. She looked away and sniffled. She slid her fingers across her eyes. Her fingers were all slimy. Tiffany laughed. She looked at her fingers. "Damn it!" Case laughed. He leaned back and smacked his knee. Tiffany slid her fingers across her peacock corduroys. She smacked her lips. "Man, now I've got this damn shit all over me!" She slid her sleeves across her eyes.

Then, she looked at her father. The corners of Andre's mouth were twitching. Tiffany smiled. "You, uh... You feeling okay, Dad? C-Can you hear me in there?" Andre half-smiled. Then, he frowned. His eyes popped open. They were dark and intense. Tiffany stopped smiling. She looked frightened. "Um, Dad?"

Andre looked to his right. He noticed the brown haired attendant against the wall. He noticed Hughes by the door. He looked to his left. The blonde haired attendant stood against the adjacent wall.

"*My, God...*" Dr. Valkyrie whispered. "*That's the most I've seen him move in a month.*" Andre faced his daughter. He sat up and smiled. His eyes relaxed.

"Hi, Tiff," he remarked. Tiffany smiled. She relaxed and sighed. She crossed her arms over her chest.

"H-Hi, Dad."

Her father narrowed his eyes. "You... changed your hair. It's long in the front and short in the back." Tiffany nodded. "I like it. It's pretty. That's the way your mother used to cut *hers.*"

Tiffany pressed her lips together. "Yeah." She wiped a tear from her cheek with the sleeve of her rainbow sweater. "I know." Andre looked Tiffany over. It made Tiffany nervous. It always made her uncomfortable when he did that. She felt like he was "checking her out." Andre nodded.

"*You* look good." Tiffany sighed. She faked a smile. "You seeing anybody?"

Tiffany dragged her teeth across her bottom lip. "Yes."

Andre smiled. "Not that punk I saw out there in the hallway?" Tiffany looked away. She fluttered her eyelids and looked back.

“Yeah, Dad. That’s him.” Case narrowed his eyes. He slid his lips to the side of his face. Andre shook his head.

“Surely not.” He fidgeted in his straight jacket. “I mean, you can’t be *too* serious about that guy.” Tiffany frowned. She swallowed, nervously.

“I love him.” Andre narrowed his eyes. He smiled, sarcastically.

“Oh, right. Of course, you do.” His smile widened. “And, the kids? I know I haven’t been in here *that* long. They can’t be *yours*.”

Tiffany shook her head. “No, Dad.”

Andre shrugged. “So, who’s are they? What are you, babysitting? Is that what you’re doing, now?” Tiffany looked at the floor. She began to shiver. “I thought you told me you were going to go to college. And, you were gonna make a big success story out of yourself or some shit.”

Tiffany looked up. “Dad...” Andre looked away. He narrowed his eyes.

“What was it?” He nodded and faced Tiffany. “Yeah, you said you were going to be a math teacher, right?” He shrugged. “Useless profession. But, I suppose *some* useless cunt has to do it. Right?” Tiffany smashed her knuckles into the table.

“Dad!” Tiffany’s father tilted his head back and chuckled. Case looked at Dr. Valkyrie. He motioned towards the window with his head.

“Doc, let me in there.” He narrowed his eyes. “Please.” Dr. Valkyrie shook his head. Case faced forward and sighed. Tiffany pointed at her father. Blood trickled from her knuckles. It plopped to the surface of the table.

“Listen to me, you bastard!” Tiffany shrieked. “I can do whatever I want! You got that?” Andre filled the room with cackles. “I’ll see whoever I want. And, if I want to adopt

some poor, helpless kid that some..." She gritted her teeth. "*Psycho! Like you!*" Tiffany looked at the table. She gasped for breath. Andre continued to cackle. Case motioned towards the window. He looked at Dr. Valkyrie.

"Doc, please! Let me *in* there!"

Dr. Valkyrie shook his head. "No, way. Too dangerous." Case looked through the window. He stared helplessly at his poor girlfriend. She looked so fragile and weak. It pissed Case off. Tiffany couldn't defend herself. She needed somebody to stand up for her. Case hopped up and dashed across the room. He laid his finger on the button below the speaker.

"Who are you calling a punk, you ass-clown?" Andre looked over his shoulder. He was staring at his reflection. It was hideous. Dr. Valkyrie hopped up. He grabbed a hold of Case's arms.

"No! You can't do that. Stop!" Case let go of the button. He looked over his shoulder.

"Bitch, I'm gonna knock your... jagged, nasty, yellow teeth out of your mouth." Case looked Valkyrie up and down. "Back up!" Dr. Valkyrie threw raised his hands at the sides of his face. He backed away. Case faced Andre. Andre grinned. His eyebrows fell in the middle.

"*You know how many times I've made this little slut suck my dick?*" Case narrowed his eyes. He pressed the button.

"Nah, how many?"

Andre gritted his teeth. "Twice... for every little hair on top her hideous precipice." Case looked at Tiffany. Tiffany sat back. She folded her fingers in front of her lips. Case pressed the button.

"She likes sucking my dick more, though." Tiffany laughed. She leaned forward and rested her forehead against her hands. Adam and Gabrielle giggled. Andre frowned.

*“I think you better run along, little boy.”*

Case pressed the button. “I think you better kiss my ass, handlebar.” Andre smashed his forehead against the window. The attendants closed in.

“Andre...” the brown haired one warned. Tiffany folded her arms on the table. She was grinning so hard, it hurt.

*“Oh, my God...”* she gasped.

Case’s voice came over the speaker. *“What? You let the guys hold on to your handlebars when they’re riding your ass? Is THAT it?”* Tiffany laid her forehead on her arms. She roared with laughter. Case smiled. He let go of the button and backed away. The attendants were wrestling Andre into his seat. He’d almost fallen to the floor. He looked furious.

“Alright!” Andre roared. “Let go! Get off me!” The attendants backed away. Andre situated himself. He glared at his daughter. Tiffany looked up and grinned. Andre bobbed his head.

“What the hell are *you* smiling about, dipshit?”

Tiffany shrugged. “Now, I know why you always had your buddies over.” She laughed. “So, they could hold on to your handlebars and stick it up your ass!” Case sat next to Adam and Gabrielle. They slouched in their seats and cackled. Dr. Valkyrie pushed his mouth to the side of his face. He looked through the window. Tiffany laughed through her nostrils. She licked her lips and cleared her throat. Andre stared at her. His eyes were cold and dark. It made Tiffany uncomfortable. She looked at the table. “I’m sorry, Dad.” She looked up. She narrowed her eyes. “But, you know what? You kind of deserve it.” Andre smirked. He looked at the lid off the can of hair dressing. He leaned forward and slid his teeth around it.

“Hey...” the brown haired attendant warned. He and the other attendant closed in.

Andre looked up. He spit out the lid, hopped up, and smashed into him. The attendant's head bounced off the two way mirror. Blood splattered across the glass. Gabrielle and Adam gasped.

"Oh, shit..." Case remarked.

"Ah!" Hughes screamed. He reached for his nightstick. Andre dashed across the room and smashed Hughes into the wall. Hughes fell to the floor. Andre growled. He dropped on Hughes' head. It knocked Hughes unconscious. Case looked at Dr. Valkyrie. He pointed towards the door.

"Valkyrie, let me in there!" Valkyrie's eyes were hidden behind his thick lenses. They looked like tiny saucers. Valkyrie stared at the door. He looked at Case and shook his head. "Valkyrie!" Case shouted. "Give me the key!" The blonde haired attendant dashed across the room. He drop-kicked Andre. Andre rolled away. The attendant snatched Hughes' walkie talkie off the floor. He pressed the button and put the walkie to his lips.

"Security!" he screamed. *"I need security to the conference room, now! Hurry!"* Andre wrapped his legs around the attendant's throat. He squeezed his neck until he stopped moving.

"Gah!" Tiffany shrieked. She hopped up and stood in the corner. She looked towards the mirror. *"Louis, help! Help me!"*

Case pointed at Valkyrie. "Doc, *give* me the key!" Dr. Valkyrie backed away.

"No!" he shouted. He pointed towards the room. "That door is the *only* thing containing him, right now." He looked into Case's eyes. "If he gets out here, he can get loose! William called for security. Just wait for them." He shook his head. "But, I cannot risk him getting loose. I can't! I won't!" Case shook his hands in front of him. He looked at Adam and Gabrielle. Gabrielle showed Case her palms.

"Don't look at *me!*"

Adam pointed at Dr. Valkyrie. "I say we take the key from him, Louis. Let's *do* it!"

Case looked through the window. Andre was on his feet. He wandered to the table and sat down. Tiffany stood in the corner and whimpered. She sounded like a scared puppy. Andre dropped his chin on the table. He got the lid in his teeth again. He lifted his head. Then, he smashed his chin into the table. Case narrowed his eyes. The lid broke. A piece of it remained in Andre's teeth. It was tin. So, it was a sharp, jagged piece. Case's eyes popped open. He raced to the door and jerked at the knob. He looked at Dr. Valkyrie.

"Valkyrie!" He pointed at the door. "Open this door!" Andre lowered his head. He slid the shard of tin across the sleeve of his straight jacket. It ripped open. Case backed away. He threw his arms across his chest and shook his head. He reached up and laid his finger on the button. "Tiffany, you can *beat* him! Use a... chair or something." Tiffany threw her arms out at her sides. Her eyebrows fell in the middle.

"*Louis! Just open the damn door!*" Andre grinned. He ripped his arm out of his jacket. He tore the jacket open, yanked it off, and tossed it aside. He stalked towards his daughter. Tiffany stuffed her hand into her pocket. She jerked out her fist, swung it towards Andre, and spread her fingers. Andre was sprinkled with a handful of sparks. He fluttered his arms and backed away.

"Ah!" he screamed. "Fuckin' witch!" Valkyrie threw his arms out at his sides. He looked at Case.

"What the hell was *that*?"

Case shrugged. "I have no idea."

Andre pointed at Tiffany. "Don't you try any of your witchy tricks on *me*, Tiff!"

Tiffany flattened her palms against the walls. "*Oh, my God... Louis! Help me, you fuck!*"



*Get me outta here!*” Case turned to Dr. Valkyrie. Dr. Valkyrie narrowed his eyes and shook his head.

“They’ll be here any second!” Valkyrie shouted. “Just wait for them!” Case marched up to the door. It was a heavy, steel door. It would take everything he had to break it down. Case lifted his leg and turned to the side. He extended his knee and flattened his foot below the doorknob. Adam held up his palms.

“You can’t be serious!” Case roared. He jerked his leg back and smashed it through the door. It felt like he’d fallen three stories and landed on his right leg. The door flew out of the way. It smashed into the wall. Case kicked it so hard, it chipped two bricks. Andre was stalking towards his daughter. He whirled around and narrowed his eyes. Case bobbed his head.

“Hi, Andre.” He turned and grabbed one of the steel, foldout chairs. He folded it, hopped onto the table, and flew across the room. He dropped the edge of the chair across the bridge of Andre’s nose.

“Awe, *Gyad!*” Andre snarled. He fell to the floor and clutched his nose. Blood gushed through his fingers. Case rolled across the floor and stood beside him. He smashed the chair into Andre’s ribs.

“Yeah, baby!” Case shrieked. “You like that? Have some more!” He reeled back and smashed the chair over Andre’s head. Andre rolled away and groaned. He lay between Case and Tiffany and the door. Case was hesitant to make a break for it. Andre looked up. Case gritted his teeth. He smashed the chair into Andre’s knee. Andre pinched his eyes shut. He faced the ceiling and filled the room with shouts.

“Louis, stop!” Tiffany shrieked. Case looked over his shoulder. Tiffany laid her fingers across her lips. Her eyebrows fell at the sides. She showed Case her palms. “Please...” Case

looked at Andre. Andre rolled onto his stomach. He pressed his palms against the floor. Case flattened his lips. He shoved Tiffany into the corner and stood in front of her. Tiffany rested her palms against Case's back. Case looked at the chair. It was all twisted up and dented. It looked like it had been run over by an eighteen wheeler. Case patted his pocket. He looked over his shoulder.

"I should've brought my gun, huh?"

Tiffany whimpered. "Don't let him get me, Louis. Please!"

Case shrugged. "It would be a lot easier if you'd let me smash him over the head with this chair." Tiffany rubbed Case's back. Andre shoved himself to his feet. He sniffed blood up his nostrils and shuddered. He pointed at Case.

"I'm going to stick *her* head up *your* ass." Case narrowed his eyes. He pointed at Andre with the chair.

"If you even *touch* her, I'll rip your face off and flush it down the toilet." Andre gritted his teeth. He looked over Case's shoulder.

"Hey Tiff, tell him about the time I sodomized you with a baseball bat." He grinned. Blood poured down his chin. "Tell him about *that*."

Tiffany's head popped up beside Case's. "I already did, you piece of shit." Case looked towards the door. Five guards came running in. One of them was Simms. Case faced Andre.

"Well, I guess that's it for today's session." He narrowed his eyes and nodded. "Same time next week?" Andre roared. He dashed towards them. Case smashed the edge of the chair across Andre's throat. Andre fell on his butt. He clutched his neck and coughed. Case chucked the chair at his face. He bobbed his head at the guards. They gathered around Andre, flipped him over, and cuffed him. Case sighed. He turned around and took Tiffany's hands. "You

okay?” Tiffany’s bottom lip quivered. She nodded. Case kissed her. He didn’t mess around, either. He didn’t stop until she was gasping for air. Case eased back. He laid his palms against the sides of Tiffany’s face. “Man, I thought I’d lost you.” Tiffany smiled. Tears dribbled down her cheeks. She slid her hair back and looked at the floor. She looked at Case.

“I have to sit down,” she remarked. Case took Tiffany’s hand and helped her to the floor.

“Take it easy, Tiffany,” Case told her. “Try to relax.” He sat beside her. They watched the guards drag Andre away. Hughes was sitting with his back to the wall. He looked at Case and smirked.

“Boy... You ever want a job, you got one *waiting* for you, here.” Case bobbed his head. Hughes drew his nightstick. “I’ve gotta get the hang of that.” Case looked at the adjacent wall. William and the other attendant were sitting below the mirror. Joline sat next to the brown haired one. She was stitching the back of his scalp. Andre started screaming from the hall.

“Ah!” he shouted. “*I’ll murder you all! I’ll murder you all! You’re all gonna die! You’re all gonna die!*” Case turned to Tiffany. Tiffany was panting like a dog. She laid her palm against her chest and tilted her head back. Case patted her arm.

“Look at me, Tiffany.” Tiffany faced him. Case raised his palms. He made circles with his index fingers and thumbs. “Go like this.” Tiffany studied his hands. She held up her palms and made circles with her fingers. “Now, close your eyes,” Case instructed.

“*But, Louis...*” Tiffany gasped.

“Close them,” Case repeated. “And, tilt your head back.” Tiffany sighed. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back. Case nodded. “Now, breathe slowly. Breathe in through your nose...” Case joined her. He closed his eyes and tilted his head back. They took slow, deep breaths through their nostrils. “Now, out through your mouth...” Case instructed. He and

Tiffany exhaled slowly through their lips. “Again...” He and Tiffany inhaled through their noses. This time, they went slower and took longer. “Now, out...” Case and Tiffany exhaled through their lips. “One more time...” Case told her. They breathed in slowly and exhaled. “Okay,” Case remarked. “Now, open your eyes.” He and Tiffany opened their eyes. Adam and Gabrielle were standing in front of them. They were grinning.

“Guys!” Case shouted. He threw out his arms. Gabrielle threw her arms around Case’s neck and dropped in his lap. Case hugged her back. He looked up at Adam. He held out his arm. “Come here, Adam.”

Adam bobbed his head. “Nah, I’m good.”

Case nodded. “Yeah, yeah. It’s cool.” He held up his fist. Adam bumped knuckles with him. Case looked at Tiffany. He held out his hand. Tiffany slid her fingers through his. “You feel better?”

She nodded. “Yes. Thank you, Louis.” Case dragged her towards him and threw his arm around her shoulders. He kissed the side of her head. Case narrowed his eyes. He showed his hand to Tiffany. Tiffany looked at Case’s fingers. They were covered with her blood. Case slung it aside. Tiffany sighed. She looked at her bloody knuckles. She turned to Case.

“Forgot about that.” Simms wandered up to them. He stopped and folded his arms over his chest. Adam turned around. Case, Tiffany, and Gabrielle looked up. Case narrowed his eyes.

“Well, you owe us a door,” Simms remarked.

Case motioned towards the door with his head. “Sorry about that.” He looked at Dr. Valkyrie. Valkyrie stood next to the attendants. “I told him to give me the key,” Case remarked. Simms smirked. He looked at Tiffany.

“Well, *that* was interesting.” He sighed. “If you want, we can escort you guys to the parking lot.” Tiffany looked at Case. She threw her arms around his chest and looked up.

“That’s okay. I’ve got all the security I need, right here.” Case smiled. He looked at Tiffany.

“You ready to get out of here?” Tiffany turned and nodded. Case patted Gabrielle’s shoulder. She hopped out of the way. Case stood and offered Tiffany his hand. She reached up with her right hand. Case smacked his lips. “The non-bloody hand, please.”

Tiffany looked at her knuckles. “Oh.” She reached up with her left hand. Case took it and helped her to her feet. Then, they wandered out of the conference room. They wandered to the barred door. Joline was standing there, waiting for them.

“I have to escort you guys to the elevator,” she told them.

Case nodded. “I’ll take the stairs. Thank you.”

Joline rolled her eyes. “Right. Of course.” She led Case, Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle around the corner and down the hall. They took the stairs to the first floor and left the sanatorium. Rain was still trickling from the sky. A bolt of lightning dashed across the sky. Case stopped and looked across the street. He tilted his head. Gabrielle looked up at him.

“You okay, Louis?” Case pointed across Luther Drive. He was pointing at a row of concrete pillars. The foundations for a building were laid behind them. Gabrielle looked where Case was pointing. She narrowed her eyes. Case dashed across the parking lot. He looked both ways down Luther Drive then crossed. He wandered across a row of ancient, jagged sidewalk and stopped. He threw his hands on his hips. Tiffany, Gabrielle, and Adam joined him. Gabrielle looked up. “Don’t tell me...” Case spotted a pickaxe. It was lying behind a pillar. Case wandered around the pillar and picked it up. Gabrielle’s arms fell at her sides. She tilted

her head and sighed. Case came around. He spotted another pickaxe. It was leaning against a different pillar. Case pointed at it.

“Grab that pickaxe, Gabrielle.”

### Chapter 13: “Recent Construction?”

Tiffany looked at her knuckles. The damn things had finally stopped bleeding. Tiffany was sitting next to a dumpster. She looked to her left. There were two pillars still standing. The rest had been demolished. The construction crew that put them up was taking them down. Case called Paloni. Paloni authorized it. Tiffany had no idea how Case managed to pull *that* off. None of that concerned Tiffany so much. What concerned her was Gabrielle. She’d been picking away at pillars since Case found them. It seemed odd. Gabrielle was outworking everyone there. She was surrounded by hardhats and jackhammers. Yet there she was, picking away.

Tiffany looked at Adam. He was hiding behind a stack of lumber. He was smoking a cigarette of course. He kept looking around for Tiffany, nervously. Tiffany smiled and shook her head. She looked towards the sanatorium parking lot. Case was standing beside his car. He was on his cell phone, talking to Paloni. Even *he* had stopped digging for Jerry. Tiffany looked at Gabrielle. She was still going at it. Something was going on. Tiffany was sure of it. Gabrielle, Adam, and Case were keeping something from her. Tiffany shoved herself to her feet. She dusted herself off and wandered towards the pillar. It was time to find out what the hell was going on.

Gabrielle was working with two other guys. They were all swinging pickaxes. They wore hardhats, safety glasses, earmuffs, and suede gloves. The construction workers wore navy blue shirts, faded jeans, and brown, leather boots. Gabrielle held the end of her pickaxe handle in her left hand. Her right hand was near the head. She lifted the pickaxe over her head. She dug into the pillar. She took out a chunk the size of her head. The ground around the site was still dirt. The chunk of concrete fell to the ground and shattered. Gabrielle lifted the pickaxe

again. She tore off another chunk with an angry grunt. She lifted the pickaxe a third time.

“Gabrielle?” Tiffany inquired. Gabrielle shrieked. She smashed the pickaxe into the pillar. A piece the size of a bowling ball fell to the ground. The two guys Gabrielle was working with grinned and shook their heads. Gabrielle exhaled a heavy breath. She jerked off her hardhat and earmuffs. She tossed them aside. She tore off her safety glasses and ripped off her gloves. She slid her sleeve across her forehead and looked at Tiffany.

“What?!” she growled.

Tiffany smiled. “Gabrielle, is there something you want to tell me?”

Gabrielle pushed her mouth to the side of her face. “What do you mean?”

“Well...” Tiffany motioned towards Adam. “Adam’s hiding out, smoking a damn cigarette...” She motioned towards Case. “Case is on the phone...” Tiffany motioned towards the dumpster. “And, I’ve been sitting on my ass for the past half hour.” Tiffany threw her hands on her hips. “So, what the hell are *you* doing?” Gabrielle sighed. She lifted the pickaxe, gloves, and safety glasses over her head.

“You know what?” she inquired. “God damn it!” Gabrielle dropped her gear to the dirt. A giant cloud of dust surrounded her. “There *is*.” She looked into Tiffany’s eyes. Tiffany pressed her lips together. Gabrielle snagged a hold of her hand. “Come on.” She dragged Tiffany towards the dumpster. “I’ve had enough of this.” Gabrielle and Tiffany arrived at the dumpster. Gabrielle let go of Tiffany’s hand and faced her. Tiffany crossed her arms over her chest.

“Okay. So, what’s going on?” Tiffany smiled. Her eyebrows fell at the sides. “You and Louis... *didn’t* go shopping, Thursday? Is that it?” Gabrielle’s arms lay slack at her sides. She tilted her head. “Well what, then? What *did* you guys do?” Tiffany narrowed her eyes and



shook her head. "I don't understand."

Gabrielle showed Tiffany her palms. "No, Tiffany. Just... chill out. Okay?" Tiffany sighed. "Let me explain." Gabrielle dropped her hands. "Yes. We *did* go shopping, Thursday. But, don't you think that's a little weird?"

Tiffany shrugged. "Um, Louis said he picked you up at lunch."

Gabrielle shook her head. "No. He lied."

"He lied?" Tiffany asked. Gabrielle shrugged. Tiffany looked towards the sanatorium. "I'll kill him."

Gabrielle dropped her forehead in her palms. "*No, Tiffany...*" Gabrielle groaned. She looked up. Tiffany faced her. "He lied... to protect me."

Tiffany squinted. "Well, why would he do *that*?"

Gabrielle grabbed Tiffany's arm. "Because I asked him to." She sighed. She let go of Tiffany's arm. She played with her fingers, nervously. "The truth is, I haven't been to school since Wednesday morning." Tiffany raised her eyebrows. "I got suspended."

Tiffany looked away. "Awe, Gabrielle." She looked into her eyes. "For what?"

Gabrielle pressed her lips together. "For fighting, again."

Tiffany looked at the sky. "Oh, God..." She looked at Gabrielle. Her eyebrows fell in the middle. "Let me guess... Ted. Or, was it Brittany, again?"

Gabrielle scrunched up her nose. "It was both, this time." Tiffany exhaled an angry breath. She looked at the ground and shook her head. She threw her hands on her hips. Gabrielle threw her hands out at her sides. "Well, Brittany kissed Adam in front of the whole class!" Tiffany looked up. She was furious.

"Damn it, Gabrielle!" She reached back and smacked Gabrielle's butt.

Gabrielle hopped forward. “Ow!”

Tiffany pointed at her. “I thought we talked about this! We agreed. No... more... fighting!” Gabrielle looked up at Tiffany. She rubbed her little cheeks. They were burning. Tiffany exhaled through her nose. “I’m sorry.”

Gabrielle’s eyebrows fell in the middle. “Used to it.”

Tiffany held out her arms. “Come here...” Gabrielle slid her arms around Tiffany’s waist. Tiffany slid her arms around Gabrielle’s shoulders. She rested her chin on top of Gabrielle’s head. She eased back. “Wait... So, Louis knew about this the whole time?” Gabrielle looked up. She nodded. Tiffany looked at Case. “And, he didn’t say anything to me?”

Gabrielle shrugged. “I *asked* him not to.” She looked towards the pillars. Tiffany looked over Gabrielle’s shoulder. “I agreed to do whatever he wanted until Monday.” Tiffany faced Gabrielle. She smirked. Gabrielle raised her palms at the sides of her face. “But, I’m not doing this, anymore!” She dropped her arms and looked towards the sanatorium. “I’m... sick of this shit.”

Tiffany stared at her boyfriend. “He... wanted you to tell me?”

“I guess,” Gabrielle replied. “Whatever.” Tiffany grinned. She looked down.

“What all did he make you do?” Gabrielle looked up. Her eyebrows fell in the middle.

“He made me do all the damn laundry.” Tiffany chuckled. Gabrielle threw her arms out at her sides. “It’s not funny, Tiffany! It’s totally immature!” Tiffany looked away. She cupped her hand over her mouth. She faced Gabrielle and pointed.

“But then, *he* took credit for it!”

Gabrielle stomped her foot. “Yes!” She looked at Case. She folded her arms over her chest. “He’s an ass-hole.” She looked at Tiffany. “He made me dig up a bathroom Thursday,

too!”

Tiffany pointed over her shoulder with her thumb. “You mean, just like this?”

“Yes!” Gabrielle shouted. “At Slow Frank’s. It was terrible!” Tiffany hugged her belly. She leaned over and cackled. Gabrielle looked away. She slid her lips to the side of her face and shook her head. “It’s not funny, man. Not at all.” Tiffany threw her arms around Gabrielle’s shoulders. Gabrielle lay limp in her arms. “Shit ain’t funny.”

Tiffany kissed the top of Gabrielle’s head. “He was trying to get you to do the right thing, Gabrielle.” Gabrielle looked up. Tiffany eased away. She slid Gabrielle’s long brown hair aside. “And, you did. Thank you... for telling me.”

Gabrielle crossed her arms over her chest. “This is bullshit.” Tiffany snickered. Gabrielle motioned towards Case. “He is such a piece of crap.”

Tiffany shrugged. “Well, that’ll teach you. Maybe next time, you’ll just tell me.”

Gabrielle raised her eyebrows. “You know what? Maybe I will!”

Tiffany patted Gabrielle’s shoulder. “There’s not going to be a next time.”

Gabrielle nodded. “I hope not.”

Tiffany turned towards the sanatorium. “Nope, there won’t be.” She walked to the end of the sidewalk and looked both ways. She glanced over her shoulder. “Because, you’re grounded for ten years.” Gabrielle dropped her forehead in her palms. Tiffany smiled. She pointed at her. “Wait here a minute. Okay?” Gabrielle looked up. She folded her arms over her chest and nodded. Tiffany wandered across Luther Drive. She moseyed across the sanatorium parking lot and headed towards Case. Case was still chatting with Paloni. His front, passenger door was open. Case was bent over, rummaging through the glove box. It was a mess. He organized some things, his insurance, his registration, an old puzzle cube toy, and a tire gauge.

The list went on. Case snagged his revolver. He looked it over.

“What do you mean ‘have I found anything yet’?” he asked Paloni. “Of course, we found some stuff.”

“*Did you find a body?*” Paloni demanded. Case sighed. He got his King Leer pouch and closed the glove box. He stood and closed his passenger’s door. He dropped the revolver and the pouch filled with ammo in his pocket.

“You’re such a pessimist.”

“*Case!*” Paloni screamed. “*Ford’s breathing down my neck! Have you found Jerry, or not?*” Case turned around. He spotted Tiffany. She stood at the other end of the car. Her arms were folded across her chest. She was grinning from ear to ear. Case smiled back.

“We’ve still got...” Case looked the construction sight over. “One and a half pillars to go. I’m not stopping short, this time.” He exhaled through his nostrils. “I’ll call you back when we’re finished. Okay?”

“*Case...*” Case flipped his phone closed and dropped it in his pocket. Tiffany was standing in front of him. She was still grinning. Case raised his eyebrows.

“Tiffany... What the hell?” Tiffany threw her arms around Case’s waist. She backed him against the car. “Uh...” Tiffany pressed her lips against Case’s. Case leaned back and closed his eyes. He tried to keep up. He kissed her back. He slid his arms around Tiffany’s back and relaxed. Tiffany finished kissing Case and lifted her head. She gazed into his eyes. Case stared back. Tiffany’s big, brown eyes were murky and mysterious. They were like labyrinths. Case fought to catch his breath. “*What was THAT all about?*” he whispered.

Tiffany bit her bottom lip. “*She told me.*” Case pressed his lips together and nodded. His eyebrows fell at the sides.

*“And, I lied to you.”* Case laid his palm on the back of Tiffany’s head. *“I’m so sorry, honey.”*

Tiffany laughed through her nose. *“No, I’m not mad!”* she whispered. She eased back and laid her palm on her chest. *“I, uh... I like what you did.”* She nodded. *“I like it. I think it’s cool.”*

Case tilted his head. “Well, good.” He eased Tiffany back and stood up. “Good. Yeah, I wanted her to tell you. You know?” Tiffany’s eyebrows fell at the sides. She nodded her head. “Gabrielle was scared to tell you she got suspended.” Case shrugged. “So, I promised I wouldn’t tell.” He scrunched up his nose. “I mean, I couldn’t. Right?”

Tiffany took Case’s hands and looked into his eyes. “You couldn’t betray her.”

Case nodded. “I want her to trust me.” He looked across the street. He spotted Gabrielle. She was wandering around, looking for Adam. “Of course, now she knows better.” Tiffany laughed. She shoved Case’s chest, lightly. She pointed at him.

“You’re nuts!” Case faced her. “You’re nuts, for doing all that. That must have been driving you crazy.”

Case nodded. “That’s why I was able to take her to the mall, Thursday.” He shrugged. “And, that’s why I didn’t come pick you up for lunch Wednesday and Thursday.”

Tiffany narrowed her eyes. “You were going to do that?” Case dropped his arms at his sides and looked at the sky. He gritted his teeth.

“Man, I wanted to come pick you up so bad.” He looked at Tiffany. “It was *killing* me!” Tiffany smiled. “But, I couldn’t.” Case rubbed the back of his neck. “And then, that Wednesday... when I picked you up after school...” Tiffany nodded. Case sighed. “And, you told me you hadn’t eaten all day...” Case pressed his lips together. He turned and pointed at

Gabrielle. Tiffany turned and looked. “It’s all *her* fault.” Tiffany and Case faced each other. Case rested his palms on Tiffany’s shoulders. “Man, I swear. From this day forward, I’m gonna come by and take you to lunch *every* day.” Tiffany looked away and cackled. Case threw his arms around her. “I will, too. I promise.” Tiffany exhaled through her nose. She slid her hands across Case’s back.

“You don’t have to do that, Louis. I’m happy you did what you did.”

Case smiled. “Really?”

Tiffany nodded. “Yes.” She and Case backed away. Tiffany tapped Case’s chest. “But, I *would* like you to come and pick me up from school on Monday and take me to lunch. That sounds like *so* much fun.” Case smiled. He held the back of Tiffany’s head. He rested his forehead against hers.

“I’ll be there. I promise.” Tiffany pressed her lips together. She eased back and crossed her arms over her chest.

“I should’ve just called you. That was dumb.” Case shrugged. “What would you have done, then?”

Case gritted his teeth. “I guess I would’ve left Gabrielle with Paloni.” Tiffany cackled. Case looked at Gabrielle. She and Adam were sharing a cigarette. “That would teach her.”

Tiffany nodded. “That would. Paloni’s a freak, man.”

Case looked at her. “He *is*!” Tiffany cupped her hands over her mouth and snickered. “He’s the strangest cat I know.” Case crossed his arms over his chest. “And, I’ve been around some weird dudes.” Case studied Tiffany’s knuckles. He narrowed his eyes. “Speaking of weird dudes, there’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you.” Tiffany dropped her hands and licked her lips. Case pointed towards the sanatorium. “A while ago...” He looked into

Tiffany's eyes. "When you were being attacked..." Tiffany sighed. She nodded. "You did... some kind of weird shit with your fingers." Case held his hand in front of Tiffany's face. He spread his fingers. "Just like that. And, Andre was covered with like... little sparks or something." Tiffany smiled. She stuffed her hand into her pocket and pulled it out. She held out her hand. It was filled with tiny, white bags. They were made of paper. Each one had a little twist at the top. Case recognized them, immediately. He grinned.

"Dragon Poppers." Case snatched one out of Tiffany's hand. He dropped it on the pavement. It popped and made a tiny spark. He looked at Tiffany. "That is so cool, man. What a good idea." Tiffany took another Dragon Popper. She dropped it next to Case's. It popped and made a tiny spark. Tiffany dropped the rest in her pocket.

"I always tell Adam and Gabrielle... Witchcraft is ninety percent deception and ten percent magic." She turned her head and winked. A man's voice popped up beside Case and Tiffany.

"You must be the dick-head that dug up four days worth of work for nothing." Case and Tiffany looked beside them. It was one of the construction workers. He was dressed like the others. Tiffany's eyes widened. She slipped behind Case. Case looked over his shoulder. He furrowed his brow. He looked at the construction worker's nametag. It read "Sweeny." Case smirked.

"You must be the sadistic ass-hole that tormented my poor girlfriend throughout her childhood." The construction worker grinned. He pointed at Tiffany.

"Not Tits, over here. Tell me you're joking."

Tiffany looked over Case's shoulder. "Leave me alone, David."

David looked at Case. "Man, this slut's the best you could do? Seriously?" He

wandered towards them. “Watch, I’ll show you how to handle some dumb bitch like *this*.” Case rested his palm against David’s chest.

“Whoa, Sweeny.” Case narrowed his eyes. “If you go *near* that girl, you’ll be scraping your teeth off the parking lot.” David blew a breath through his lips. He reached for Tiffany’s arm. Tiffany jumped back.

“Louis!” Case snagged a hold of David’s wrist and jerked it towards the ground. David grunted. Case laid a knee on the ground and left one in the air. David’s teeth landed on the one in the air. When he connected with Case’s knee, David went flying. He landed on his back and shrieked. Actually, it was more of a gurgle. Case stood and took Tiffany’s hand. It was trembling. David lay next to Case’s car. He rolled over and spit. A mouthful of blood and teeth tumbled to the pavement.

“Awe, God!” David screamed. He looked over his shoulder. “You knocked my teeth out!”

Case shrugged. “Told ya.” Tiffany wandered around her boyfriend. She stood next to David and threw her hands on her hips. She looked at Case.

“We should leave his ass here.”

Case tilted his head. “We should.” David choked on blood. It was trickling down his throat. He turned his head and filled the air with coughs. Tiffany sighed. She knelt beside David and rolled him over. She helped him sit up. She rested her palms at the sides of his head. “Here,” she instructed. “Tilt your head back.” She rested David’s head against Case’s front, passenger door. Case smiled. He exhaled through his nose.

“I’ll call an ambulance.” Case took out his phone and flipped it open. It had an emergency button. Case pressed it and put the phone to his ear. Tiffany brushed David’s hair



out of his face.

“*Your boy toy’s a psycho...*” David snarled.

Tiffany narrowed her eyes. “He warned you, David.” She hopped to her feet. “Now, keep your mouth shut. Or, I *will* leave you here.” David closed his eyes. He slowly nodded. Tiffany looked around for Case. He was standing at the end of the parking lot. He was talking to a 9-1-1 dispatcher. He was facing the construction site. Tiffany looked where *he* was looking. Everyone was staring at them. Even Adam and Gabrielle were checking them out. Tiffany wandered to the end of the parking lot and stood next to Case. Case turned to her. He nodded.

“Okay. Thank you.” He closed his phone and dropped it in his pocket. “The hospital’s just around the corner.” Case pointed it out. It was two blocks down. It was on the north side of the road. Tiffany nodded.

“I know. I’ve been.”

Case pressed his lips together. “The ambulance will be here any second.”

“Okay.” Tiffany crossed her arms over her chest. “What time is it?”

Case stuffed his hand into his pocket. “You hungry?”

Tiffany snagged his arm. “I’m *starving!*” she growled. Case smiled. He took out his phone. He held it up so they could see the little window. It was 11:17. A siren began in the distance. Case dropped his phone in his pocket. He smiled at Tiffany.

“You wanna go to Sally’s after this?”

Tiffany shrugged. “I’m telling you. There’s nowhere else to eat around here. It’s either Sally’s Kitchen. Or, I catch us a rat.” Case cackled. An ambulance came roaring around a corner. It was at Avenue B and Luther Drive. Tiffany patted Case’s arm. She pointed to the west. “Let’s move on down and let these guys through.” Case and Tiffany walked a few paces

down. They looked at David. He was passed out next to Case's car. Case rested his palm on Tiffany's shoulder. The ambulance was getting close. So, he had to yell.

"You should've kicked him in the nuts!"

Tiffany looked over her shoulder. "What?!" Case lowered his head. He spoke into her ear.

"You should've kicked him while he was down!" The ambulance swerved onto the parking lot and stopped. The driver left the lights on. But, he turned off the siren. Tiffany turned around. She crossed her arms over her chest and smiled.

"I... can't."

Case shrugged. "Why not?"

Tiffany shook her head. "I-I don't know." She looked towards the construction site. She spotted Adam and Gabrielle. She motioned for them. They hopped up and headed towards Tiffany and Case. Tiffany looked into Case's eyes. "I just can't. I... couldn't do that to somebody." She sighed. "I mean, I *have*. I-I've been in fights before. But..." She bowed her head and slid her fingers through her hair. "But-But..." She looked up. She exhaled through her nose. Case squinted.

"All the times you got in a fight, were you just defending yourself?" Tiffany shrugged. "Is *that* it? You can defend yourself, but you can't just beat the crap out of somebody?"

Tiffany shook her hands in front of her. "I-I don't know." She looked over her shoulder. The ambulance EMT guys laid a stretcher next to David. One was checking David's pupils. Tiffany looked at Case. "Sometimes, it just doesn't *feel* right. You know?"

Case motioned towards David. "After all the crap that guy did to you growing up... Don't you just wanna go over there...?" Case held his hands in front of him. He closed his

fingers. “And, twist his head off like a chicken?” Tiffany’s eyebrows fell at the sides. She smiled and tilted her head.

“Um, I can’t. No.” Gabrielle and Adam joined them. Adam folded his arms over his chest.

“Damn, Louis. You kicked that guy’s ass!” He held up his palm. Case smacked it. “Alright!” Tiffany threw her hands on her hips. She looked at the pavement. Adam pointed at David. The EMTs were wheeling him away. “That’s that Sweeny guy?” Adam asked. Tiffany nodded.

“Sweeny?” Gabrielle inquired. She looked at the pavement. “Sweeny, who?”

Adam patted her back. “I’ll tell you later.” Gabrielle looked at Tiffany. She narrowed her eyes.

“You okay, Tiffany?” Tiffany closed her eyes and folded her fingers in front of her lips. Case looked at Gabrielle.

“She feels bad.” Gabrielle bobbed her head. Adam pointed towards David with his thumb. The EMTs closed the ambulance doors and fired up the engine.

“About *that* jerk? You can’t be serious.” The ambulance siren started up. Gabrielle plugged her ears. The ambulance backed off the parking lot and drove away. Tiffany looked into Adam’s eyes. She looked like she might cry. Adam shook his head. “Man, don’t feel bad for that creep. He deserves what he gets.” Tiffany rolled her eyes. She looked away and shook her head. Case smiled.

“Tiffany has a heart three sizes too big, Adam.” Tiffany tried not to smile. But, she couldn’t help it. Adam smirked. He waved Case off.

“Whatever.” One of the guys from the construction site popped up behind Adam. He

was dressed like the other workers. He also wore a hardhat and safety glasses. He had a goatee with lots of grey hair. Case figured he was the boss. It was something about his appearance. He couldn't put his finger on it. Case looked at his nametag. It said "Smith." Smith narrowed his eyes.

"You Detective Case?"

Case shrugged. "In some circles." Smith held out his hand. Case shook it.

"Hi, yeah." He pointed towards the construction site. "That's my crew, over there. We all saw what happened." Case nodded. "Yeah, that Sweeny... He can be a real jerk, sometimes." Case smiled. Tiffany laughed. "Anyway, uh... No hard feelings, yeah?"

"Nah," Case replied. "Not at all."

"But, we're on your side," Smith continued. "He started it. We saw everything."

Case sighed. "Good. Thank you." He looked towards the construction site. The pillars were now piles of rubble. Case smiled. He rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm... sorry we demolished your little project, over there." Smith waved him off. "You guys didn't find anything, huh?"

Smith shook his head. "No, I'm afraid not."

Case pushed his mouth to the side of his face. "Huh." He pressed his lips together. "Well, I gave you Sergeant Paloni's number." Case laid his palm on his chest. "Our police department will reimburse you for labor and material."

Smith motioned towards the construction site. "Yes. Now, that's a thousand dollars worth of concrete per pillar, Detective Case." Case crossed his arms over his chest. He looked at the pavement.

"Wow, that much, huh?"

“Yes, sir. And, our labor rate is two hundred an hour. Now, that’s spread across four days, mind you. So, we’re talking about a pretty good chunk of change, here.” Case nodded. He headed towards the car. Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle followed suit.

“Okay. Well, just write us up a bill. And then, call Sergeant Paloni.” Case looked over his shoulder. Smith was still standing where he’d left him. “He’ll take care of it.” All the car doors were unlocked. Everyone climbed in. Case fired up the engine and split. Smith watched him leave. He folded his arms over his chest.

“Yeah, sure. Whatever.”

Sally’s was half full. It had just the right amount of people to stay in business. Yet, it wasn’t crowded and noisy. Best of all, it wasn’t a filthy mess. It was unlike any other restaurant in Lincoln. That’s what Tiffany liked about it. They could’ve served fried, rat burgers. As long as Tiffany had that one place in town to eat growing up, it wouldn’t have made any difference. Actually, Tiffany dined on a little rat from time to time. So, it was all good. The floor was covered with checkered tiles. They were a mix of black spotted, white tiles and white spotted, black tiles. The walls were trimmed with bright, shiny veneer. The ceiling was paneled with similar wood. It was lined with ceiling fans. Since it was a little chilly, none of the fans were running. Sally’s was a north facing building. There were six booths along the north wall and six along the south. Two rows of five tables were arranged across the middle of the restaurant. Each table had four, wooden chairs.

Each table and booth had a shiny, chrome napkin dispenser, salt and pepper shakers, a glass jar of sugar, and a glass bottle of ketchup. At Sally’s Kitchen, the shakers, sugar jars, and ketchup bottles were always full. They never felt greasy or dirty. The pepper always came out when the shaker was turned upside down. The napkin dispensers were always stuffed full of

crisp, white napkins. The chrome was always shiny. It wasn't even scratched. The floor was slick and clean. It was swept and mopped, daily. It was a wonderful place to dine. Everywhere else in Lincoln was a piece of crap. That's how Tiffany felt. She, Case, Gabrielle, and Adam sat at a booth. Like the other booths, a window hovered above the table along the wall. Tiffany and Adam sat across from each other. They sat next to the wall. Case and Gabrielle sat next to the aisle. Tiffany stared at her plate, chewing. She chewed slowly and quietly. She didn't look up. She didn't say anything. She just chewed. When she finished, she swallowed. She eased her fork into her chicken fried steak. She cut off another bite and stuffed it between her teeth. Then, she had a sip of water. That's what she drank, plain, old water.

Adam stared at Tiffany with narrow eyes. He'd already finished a cheeseburger and fries. He was ready for a chocolate shake. He slid his glass towards him. It was half filled with cola. A straw was sticking out of the glass. It was a white straw. A thick, red stripe coiled around it. Adam wrapped his lips around the straw and took a sip. He gulped it down and exhaled through his nose.

"You okay, Tiffany?" he asked. "You haven't said anything since we left the construction site." Tiffany didn't look up. She just chewed, slowly. A couple of times, she blinked. She swallowed her bite. Then, she eased her fork into her chicken fried steak.

"I'm fine," she replied. She sliced off another bite and held it in front of her lips.

"You don't *look* fine," Adam told her. "You look sad." Tiffany closed her eyes. She shrugged, lightly. She opened her eyes. She stuffed the next bite of chicken fried steak in her mouth. Case looked Tiffany over. He rubbed her arm and stared at Adam.

"Leave her alone, Adam." Case also ordered a chicken fried steak. The chicken fries at Sally's were enormous. They took up an entire plate. The sides came on a second plate. Case

forked his last bite of chicken fried steak. He swirled it through a pool of cream gravy. It was left over from the steak. Case held the bite in front of his mouth and slid it between his teeth. He swapped his chicken fried steak plate and his sides. He hadn't touched the sides, yet. Case had two. There was a mountain of mashed potatoes with cream gravy. There was also a tower of fried okra. Case sank his fork into the mashed potatoes. Gabrielle nibbled at an ear of corn. It was on a wooden skewer. Gabrielle held the skewer with the fingers of her right hand. She held the tip of the corn cob with the fingers of her left hand. The corn cob was ten inches long. It was slathered with butter. Some of the kernels were scorched. The others were shiny and golden. Gabrielle lowered the ear of corn and chewed what she nibbled off. There was a corn kernel stuck to her chin. She looked at Adam.

“You gonna get a milkshake?”

Adam turned his head. “I think so, man.” He smiled. He pointed at his chin. “You got a...” Gabrielle raised her eyebrows. She flicked out her tongue, snagged the corn kernel, and reeled it into her mouth. She looked at Tiffany.

“Do they have cheesecake?” Tiffany was staring at her plate. She slid her next bite of chicken fry through a pool of cream gravy. She nodded without looking up. Gabrielle laid the corn cob on her plate. She sucked the tips of her left thumb and index finger. “Do they have... strawberry to go on top?” Tiffany added a couple of nods. She slid the next bite between her teeth. Case finished off his mashed potatoes. He found their waitress. Like the others, she wore a tan dress with a white band around the waist and black heels. Case motioned for their waitress. She saw him and wandered towards them. Case looked at Tiffany.

“You want any dessert?” Tiffany finished chewing and looked up. She pushed her mouth to the side of her face.

“Yeah. I want a slice of apple pie.”

“Ooh...” Case moaned. “Do they put ice cream on top?”

Tiffany squinted and smirked. “Of course.” Case smiled and nodded. Their waitress arrived and took out a tiny notepad. Her name was Kathy. She was in her forties. She had shoulder length, blonde hair, blue eyes, long eyelashes, and ruby red lips. She rested the tip of a plastic, blue pen against her notepad and looked into Case’s eyes.

“You guys ready for dessert?”

“Yeah, man,” Case replied. He pointed at himself and Tiffany. “We want the apple pie.” He pointed at Adam. “He wants a chocolate milkshake.” He pointed at Gabrielle. “And, *she* wants the cheesecake, with strawberries.” Kathy nodded and wrote. She looked up and smiled.

“Coming right up.” She pointed at their plates. “Are you guys done with these?”

“Yes,” Case replied. Everyone but Tiffany gathered their plates and handed them to Kathy. Kathy stacked the plates along her arms. She turned around and looked over her shoulder.

“I’ll be right back.”

Case nodded. “Thank you.” Kathy wandered towards the kitchen. Case looked at Tiffany. Tiffany patted her lips with a napkin. She laid her fork on her plate and dropped her hands in her lap. She stared at the table. Case smiled. He slid his arms around Tiffany’s waist. “*Come here, Tiffany,*” he whispered. Tiffany looked into his eyes and smiled. She slid towards Case and rested her head against his shoulder. Case kissed the top of her head. “*You’re not still thinking about Sweeny, are you?*”

Tiffany closed her eyes. “*No,*” she whispered. “*It’s not that.*” She lifted her eyelids a little. She looked around. “*I just HATE it, here.*” Case slid his fingers through Tiffany’s slick,



black hair. He looked around.

“Yeah. I can’t imagine what it was like, growing up here.” He snagged his glass. It was half filled with iced tea. “*This* place isn’t so bad.” Case sipped his tea and set it down.

Gabrielle nodded.

“It’s cool, man. I like it.” Case’s pocket began playing a piece of classical music. Case slid his hand into his pocket, jerked out his phone, flipped it open, and put it to his ear.

“What?” he growled.

“*Case?*” Paloni snarled. “*What the hell are you DOING?*”

Case narrowed his eyes. “Slamming the ham. It’s after twelve. What do you *think* I’m doing?”

“*Are you eating lunch?*” Paloni inquired. “*Please, tell me you’re not sitting on your ass eating lunch.*”

“I’m not sitting on my ass eating lunch,” Case replied. Paloni sighed. “I’m sitting next to Tiffany, holding her in my arms, waiting for dessert.” Gabrielle and Adam cackled. “I already *ate* lunch, you douchebag.” Case grinned. He picked up his glass and took a sip.

“*Damn it, Case,*” Paloni groaned. “*You were supposed to call me back. You were supposed to tell me what you found.*”

Case nodded. “Did you talk to Smith? The guy in charge over there?”

“*Yeah,*” Paloni replied.

Case shrugged. “Then, you already *know* what we found.”

“*Case!*” Paloni screamed. There was shouting in the background. It was Captain Ford. Case grinned.

“*Case?!*” Ford snarled. “*Is that Detective Case on the phone?!*”

Case narrowed his eyes. “*Former Detective Case,*” he told Paloni. “I don’t work for you butt-lickers, anymore.”

“*Case, you’re killing me!*” Paloni groaned. “*Captain Ford’s gonna sit on me. I swear! He actually said that!*” Case looked at his shoulder. Tiffany’s eyebrows were lowered at the outer edges. The corners of her lips were sagging. Case exhaled through his nose.

“Look... I can’t do this right now, Paloni.” Case rested his palm against the back of Tiffany’s head. Tiffany raised her arm and folded her fingers against Case’s chest. She closed her eyes. A pair of tears trickled out. “Call me back, later.”

“*When, Case?*” Paloni demanded. “*When should I call you back?*”

Case narrowed his eyes. “Later, Paloni. I just said that.” Case closed his phone against his cheek. He dropped the phone next to his tea. He laid his hand on top of Tiffany’s. Tiffany sniffled and looked up. Case forced a smile. “Tiffany, are you sure you’re okay?” She let out a shaky sigh. “Do you want to go home?”

“*No...*” she gasped. She cleared her throat. Case let go of her hand. He slid her hair out of her face and looked into her eyes.

“It’ll be okay, sweetheart,” Case assured her. Tiffany laughed through her nostrils. “I promise.” Case slid his fingers along Tiffany’s cheek. Tiffany gazed into his eyes. “We’re going to get through this. Together.” Gabrielle laid her hand on the table, palm up. Tiffany turned her head and looked. She sighed. She started to lay her hand on top. She hesitated. Gabrielle fluttered her fingers.

“Give me your hand, Tiffany. Damn.” Tiffany chuckled. She laid her palm over Gabrielle’s. Adam laid his on top. Tiffany smiled at the kids.

“Thanks, guys.” She looked at Case. “Thank you for coming down here with me.”

Case smiled, sadly. “Sure, man. Anytime.”

Adam narrowed his eyes. “It hasn’t been *that* bad.”

Tiffany looked into his eyes. “Just wait. It will be.” Kathy returned with dessert. She handed Adam his milkshake. It was in a tall, spiraling glass. It had whipped cream, chocolate sprinkles, and a cherry on top.

“Here’s your milkshake,” Kathy remarked with a smile. She laid Gabrielle’s slice of cheesecake in front of her. It was a long, hearty slice. It had a thick, graham cracker crust. It was slathered with chunks of strawberries and thick, crimson syrup. Kathy handed Gabrielle a fork. “Your cheesecake,” she hummed. She looked at Tiffany. Tiffany eased away from Case. She swatted tears from her cheeks. Kathy’s eyebrows fell at the sides. “What happened?” she asked. “What’s wrong?” She motioned for Tiffany’s plate. Case laid it on her arm and smiled.

“What makes you think something’s wrong?” Case laid his hand on Tiffany’s shoulder. He swirled his fingers around. Kathy smiled. She held up Tiffany and Case’s apple pie.

“Your apple pie,” she remarked. The apples and syrup were smoking hot. They lay in a pool on the plate. A golden crust floated on top. It was sprinkled with cinnamon sugar. A scoop of ice cream lay on top of that. It was melting. It drizzled across the flaky crust. Kathy laid a slice in front of Tiffany and one in front of Case. She handed them forks. Case bobbed his head.

“We’ll take the check, too.”

Kathy nodded. “Okay.” She looked at Tiffany. Her eyebrows lowered at the outer corners. She forced a smile and tilted her head. “Feel better, honey. Okay?” Tiffany laughed through her nose. She nodded.

“I’ll try. Thank you.”

## Chapter 14: “Bernard”

The Lincoln Library was north of the police department. It was on the corner of Avenue B and Einstein Road. It took up half the block. It was an old, brick building. The bricks were crimson. The library had a roof that sloped towards the front and rear. It was covered with grey shingles. A pair of tall, wooden doors covered the entrance. They had tall, golden handles in the middle. There were ten tall, skinny windows along the front. There were five on each side of the doors. Others lay along the walls around the sides and back of the building. There was a tiny parking lot out front. It had eight spaces. Two spaces were taken. One was occupied by an old pickup. It was a sixties model with cerulean paint. The tailgate was missing. The bed was covered with old, rotten planks of wood. The paint was old and faded. Case’s brown car was parked next to it.

The truck belonged to the librarian. Her name was Hilda Schneider. She’d been the librarian since Tiffany was little. She was in her fifties when Tiffany left Lincoln. She had long, white hair. It was rolled in a bun. She had pale, wrinkled skin. Her eyes were dark and inviting. She greeted visitors with a warm smile. And, the library didn’t get many visitors. A pair of rectangular glasses dangled from Hilda’s neck. They had black, plastic frames. They lay over the middle of her chest from a tiny, silver chain. On this particular afternoon, Hilda wore a denim blouse with long, puff sleeves. She wore a long, black skirt that reached her ankles and a pair of black, suede boots. She sat behind an ancient, oak desk next to the front doors. It was the checkout desk. Hilda sat in a chair behind the desk, flipping through a mystery novel. A card catalogue sat on the other side of the doors.

There was a long, brick walkway down the center of the library. On either side of the walkway, there were ten rows of shelves. A large, round table sat in the middle of the walkway.

Ten chairs were scattered around the table. The chairs and the table were made of ancient oak like the front desk. They were scarred and dented. Hilda kept them polished. She had plenty of time for that. There were two, long tables at the back of the library. They were at the end of the walkway. There were four chairs along each side of the tables. They matched the other furniture. Adam and Gabrielle were wandering around the shelves. Case and Tiffany sat around the large, round table in the middle of the walkway. A five thousand piece jigsaw puzzle was scattered across the table. That was typical. Hilda usually had a puzzle going on at least one of the tables. There were others along the back wall. They had been completed previously. The pieces were glued together. The puzzles were framed and tacked on the wall.

Case and Tiffany were assembling the puzzle on the round table. Case was outpacing his girlfriend. When Case and Tiffany sat down, the puzzle was barely started. Only two lines were solved. Now, it was nearly half assembled. Every time Tiffany tried a piece somewhere, Case laid three in her way. It was pissing Tiffany off. She looked at Case's hands. He had eight pieces stuck together. He laid the ninth and tenth at the top and bottom of his assembly. He pored over the array of pieces and nodded. Tiffany narrowed her eyes. She was familiar with a piece that Case was missing. It went in the center. She'd seen it several times. She rested her elbows on the table and folded her fingers in front of her lips. She pored over the loose pieces. Before she could locate it, Case found the familiar piece, dropped it in the middle, and added another to the top, right corner. He looked at the other assembled puzzle pieces. He narrowed his eyes. He picked up his small assembly and attached it to the rest. Tiffany smacked her lips.

*"Damn it, Louis!"* she whispered. Case looked up. *"You don't have to finish the whole thing!"*

Case shrugged. *"It's what I do."* He stared at the table. He narrowed his eyes. He

gathered four pieces that were near each other, stuck them together, and attached them below his small assembly from earlier. Tiffany shoved Case's shoulder, lightly.

*"You're a bastard,"* she whispered. She looked into his eyes and smiled. *"You're cheating!"*

Case nodded. *"Yeah, you got me."* He exhaled through his nose. *"I've been buying puzzles in my spare time over the past couple of weeks. I've been putting them together and memorizing them. You know, just in case we ended up in Lincoln, solving one together."*

Tiffany's eyebrows fell in the middle. *"I hate you."* Hilda stood in front of the table. She laid her glasses over her eyes and studied the puzzle. She folded her arms over her chest. Case and Tiffany looked up.

*"Oh, dear,"* Hilda whispered. *"Those puzzles usually last several months."* Case shrugged. He pointed at Tiffany with his thumb.

*"She's a freak of nature."* Tiffany threw her hands out at her sides. *"What can I say?"*

Tiffany rolled her eyes. *"HE did it!"* she whispered. *"He overdoes EVERYTHING!"* Tiffany looked at Case. Case grinned. *"He has to solve every little mystery... every puzzle..."* She looked up. *"Everything."*

Hilda narrowed her eyes. *"Now, what will the children do all day?"* Case pressed his lips together. Hilda smiled. *"I don't get very many."* She motioned towards Tiffany. *"Tiffany was a frequent visitor when she was little."* Tiffany smiled. *"But, the few that do come by..."* Hilda shook her head. *"Oh, they're not much for reading. That's for sure."*

Case nodded. *"I can... break it back apart, if you'd like."* Hilda chuckled. Tiffany folded her fingers on the table.

*"I'm sorry, Ms. Schneider. We'll buy you a new puzzle and bring it by. How does that*

sound?” Hilda snickered. She laid her palm on her chest.

*“Oh, I think I’ll manage, dear.”* She smiled. *“You know, you can call me ‘Hilda’.”*

Tiffany pressed her lips together and nodded. Hilda looked at Case. *“I always told her that when she was younger.”* Hilda shrugged. *“She always called me ‘Ms. Schneider’.”* She looked at Tiffany and squinted. *“Maybe you should try it, dear.”* Tiffany smiled and sighed. *“You’re an adult, now.”* Hilda tapped her lips. *“You are... twenty-five, now. That is, if I’m remembering correctly.”*

Tiffany nodded. *“Yes, ma’am.”* Hilda looked at Tiffany’s hands. She squinted.

*“Oh, my,”* she whispered. She slid her fingers around Tiffany’s left wrist. She flipped Tiffany’s arm over and slid back her rainbow colored sleeve. *“I never noticed THIS.”* She slid her fingers across the scar on Tiffany’s wrist. *“Or, these...”* She pointed out a handful of cigarette burns. Hilda pulled up a chair. She sat across from Case and Tiffany. She rested her elbow on the table and her chin in her palm. *“What happened to you, dear? Surely you didn’t do this to yourself.”*

*“She was abused,”* Case explained. Hilda looked into Tiffany’s eyes. Tiffany swallowed, nervously.

*“‘Abused’ doesn’t begin to describe it.”* She looked at Case then back. *“I was tortured, molested, tormented, de-humanized...”*

Case looked at her. *“Tiffany...”*

Tiffany exhaled through her nostrils. *“Pissed on, shit on...”*

Case patted Tiffany’s shoulder. *“That’s good! I think she understands.”*

Hilda sighed. *“By whom? Who did that to you?”*

Case looked at Hilda. *“Her father. Also, everyone ELSE she came into contact with.”*

Hilda looked at Tiffany. Tiffany slid her sleeve down. Hilda sighed. She patted Tiffany's knuckles.

*"I'm so sorry, honey. I had no idea."* Tiffany looked into Hilda's warm eyes. She forced a smile.

*"It's not your fault. It, uh..."* Tiffany laid her fingers over her lips. Her eyebrows fell at the sides. She moved her fingers. *"It's me. It's MY fault."* Case sighed. He threw his arms around Tiffany's shoulders and kissed the side of her head. Tiffany closed her eyes. She relaxed against Case's chest. Hilda shook her head.

*"No, Tiffany... It's not your fault. It's NOT."* Tiffany's eyes opened a little. She faked a smile.

*"Thank you for saying that, Ms. Schneider."*

Case slid his fingers across Tiffany's shoulders. *"It's true. It's not your fault."*

Hilda smiled. *"I see you have someone to take care of you, now."* Tiffany laughed through her nostrils. Case looked up.

*"I'm trying."*

Adam picked up a book. It had a hard cover. It was green with a mesh texture. The title was in black text. It read "Ghosts, Phantoms, and Everything in Between." The book was thick and heavy. Adam flipped to the end and looked at the page number. It was page 598. Adam looked up. Gabrielle was standing next to him. She was staring at him, grinning. Adam sighed. He returned the book to the shelf.

*"What, Gabrielle?"* he whispered. Gabrielle slid her fingers around Adam's forearm. Adam pressed his lips together.

*"Can we do some more psychic stuff?"* Gabrielle whispered.



“Awe, Gabs...” Adam groaned. He looked into Gabrielle’s big, blue eyes. He smiled. “*I don’t even know what you’re talking about.*” Gabrielle stared at the ceiling and sighed. She shook Adam’s arm.

“*Adam, you bastard! Do it, some more.*” She bounced her knees. “*Please?*”

Adam narrowed his eyes. “*What? For free?*” Gabrielle smacked her lips. Adam exhaled through his nose. “*Alright. Jeez.*” He turned towards her. “*But, this is it. Okay?*” Gabrielle nodded. “*No more of this crap for the rest of the day. Got it?*”

Gabrielle sighed. “*Okay.*”

Adam looked Gabrielle over. “*So, what do you want to know THIS time?*” Gabrielle folded her fingers in front of her lips. She looked around and tapped her teeth. She showed Adam her palms.

“*Oh, I’ve got it!*” she whispered. Adam turned his head without looking away. “*Tell me what I’m thinking!*”

Adam nodded. “*That’s kind of pointless. You already know what you’re thinking.*”

Gabrielle smacked her lips. “*Adam! You said you would!*”

Adam shrugged. “*Why do you want me to tell you what you’re thinking? Seems kind of silly. Doesn’t it?*”

Gabrielle shoved him, lightly. “*It’s cool! Just do it, okay?*” Adam sighed. He stared into Gabrielle’s eyes and squinted. He slid his head from side to side. But, he never looked away. Gabrielle concentrated. She cleared her thoughts and focused. She thought of the word “love.” She held it in her mind and imagined it. She imagined what the letters looked like. She focused on each one. She stopped and looked into Adam’s eyes. Adam blinked. “*Well?*” Gabrielle whispered.

Adam shrugged. *“Nothing, so far.”* He narrowed his eyes. *“Try harder. Close your eyes... and really focus on it. Okay?”*

Gabrielle nodded. *“Okay.”* She pinched her eyes shut and thought of the word love. She imagined each letter as a tall, pink balloon letter. She imagined them floating around in a black void. The letters bobbed around, side by side. Gabrielle focused on them. She thought about the definition of love. She thought about Adam and how he made her feel. It made her all warm and tingly inside. After a couple of minutes, she got tired of waiting. She opened her eyes and looked beside her. Adam was reading a book. Gabrielle scoffed. Her arms dangled at her sides. Adam looked up and snickered. Gabrielle pointed at him. *“You’re an ass!”* she whispered. Adam pushed his mouth to the side of his face. He closed the book and returned it to the shelf. He turned to Gabrielle and crossed his arms over his chest.

*“Look, I can’t tell what people are thinking. Okay?”* Gabrielle sighed. *“I mean, not always. It doesn’t work like that.”* Adam thought a minute. He stuffed his hand into his pocket. He took out a small piece of paper and a tiny pencil. He’d gotten them when he and the others came in. They were on top of the card catalogue. Adam handed the slip of paper and the pencil to Gabrielle. *“Seriously,”* he told her, *“write something on this, or draw a picture. And, don’t show it to me.”* Gabrielle nodded. Adam pointed towards Case and Tiffany. *“Then, go show it to one of them.”*

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes. *“Show it to THEM? Why?”*

Adam shrugged. *“You’re the one who’s so damned interested.”* Gabrielle’s eyebrows fell in the middle. Adam smiled. *“Look, I don’t know. Okay?”* He sighed. *“Louis showed it to me. He and Tiffany kept doing it to me this morning.”* He motioned towards his chest. *“It was driving me crazy!”* He crossed his arms over his chest. *“I just know that it works.”* Gabrielle

nodded, slowly. She picked up a book and laid the slip of paper on top. She rested the tip of the pencil against the paper. Her tongue dangled from the side of her mouth. Adam shook his head. “*No, Gabrielle,*” he whispered. Gabrielle looked up. Adam pointed towards the end of the aisle. “*Go stand at the end of the shelf and do it. You know. That way I can’t see.*” Gabrielle narrowed her eyes. She pointed at Adam with the pencil.

“*Wait. You’re just trying to get rid of me, again. Aren’t you?*”

Adam chuckled, quietly. “*No, Gabs. Not this time.*” He pointed towards the end of the aisle. “*Seriously. Go.*” Gabrielle nodded. She hurried to the end of the aisle. She laid the piece of paper against the end of the shelf. She rested the tip of the pencil against the paper and stuck her tongue out of the corner of her mouth. She drew a plus sign in the middle of the paper. She surrounded the plus sign with four rectangles. They stuck out of the ends of the plus sign. Gabrielle peeked around the corner. Adam was flipping through a book. Gabrielle’s eyebrows fell in the middle. She went back to drawing. She rounded the outer edges of the rectangles. Then, she drew arcs between them. She looked her drawing over and nodded.

Gabrielle wandered across the library and stood next to Tiffany. Tiffany and Hilda were reminiscing. Case sat back, listening. Tiffany finished what she was saying and looked down. Gabrielle showed her the drawing. Tiffany squinted. Gabrielle laid her index finger across her lips. “*Don’t say what it is. Okay?*” Tiffany looked towards Adam then back.

“*Oh...*” she whispered. She smiled and nodded. “*Gotcha.*” Gabrielle hurried back. Adam glared at her. His eyes were narrow and angry. Gabrielle threw her hands out at her sides.

“*What?*”

Adam pressed his lips together. “*It’s a windmill. Isn’t it?*”

Gabrielle’s eyes popped open. “*Oh, my God!*” she whispered. “*How did you KNOW*

*that?*” Adam sighed. He pointed at his girlfriend.

*“I hate this.”*

Case’s phone vibrated. He put it on silent mode on the way into the library. He slid his phone out of his pocket and looked at the tiny window. It was Paloni. Case turned to Tiffany and Hilda.

*“I’m sorry, ladies,”* he whispered. *“I have to take this.”* Case stood, walked across the library, and wandered outside. He flipped open his phone and put it to his ear.

*“Mm, yes?”* he inquired.

*“Is now LATER?”* Paloni asked.

Case narrowed his eyes. *“Now was later, earlier.”* He smiled. *“Now, now is now.”* He nodded. *“In fact, the time we’re now referring to was earlier.”* Paloni sighed. *“What’s up, man?”*

*“Oh, I got the bill from Smith,”* Paloni replied.

Case slid his hand into his pocket. *“Okay.”*

*“Now, that’s a labor rate of two hundred dollars per hour, Case.”* Case nodded. *“And, that’s six pillars you guys destroyed. Each one was worth... nearly a thousand dollars.”*

Case slid his mouth to the side of his face. *“How many hours did they charge?”*

*“It’s eight hours a day for four days. That’s nearly thirteen thousand dollars, Case.”*

Case nodded. *“Huh.”*

Paloni dropped his fist on his desk. *“Case, what the hell?”*

Case shrugged. *“You authorized it.”*

*“Case!”* Paloni shouted. *“It’s thirteen thousand dollars! What did you guys DO? This is... nuts!”*

Case sighed. "So, bill me."

"*My God...*" Paloni groaned. "*I can't BELIEVE I let you talk me into this.*" Case looked at the little window on his phone. It was 4:12. He put the phone to his ear.

"You wouldn't be saying all this if we'd found him."

"*But, you DIDN'T find him, Case. You didn't find him.*"

Case pointed at the receiver. "But, if we had..." He smirked. Paloni smacked his cheek a couple of times.

"*Case, don't call me for a while.*"

Case pressed his lips together. "Okay, man." He looked over his shoulder. Then, he faced the street. "If that's what you guys want."

Paloni sighed. "*How's Tiffany?*"

Case smiled. "She's losing it." Paloni fought back a laugh. "If she hasn't *already* lost it." The door to the library opened a crack. Tiffany poked her head out. "Sometimes, she seems fine. You know?" Case shrugged. "Then sometimes, she's like a scared little girl." Case walked to the end of the sidewalk. He sat on the curb. Tiffany froze. She stood behind the door, listening. "I think she's okay. She just..." Case shook his head. "She's got problems, man."

"*Yeah?*"

Case nodded. "Yeah, man. You know..." Case shook his hand. "It pisses me off. It's like, she won't stand up for herself." Tiffany rolled her eyes. She looked away. "And so, everyone just walks all over her." Case sighed. "So, she's been through a lot. But then, on top of that, she's been through a lot *more*." Case dropped his palm on his knee.

"Yes, I know," Paloni replied. He sat at his desk. The usual barrel of crap was piled on top. Tiffany's file lay on top of that. Paloni was thumbing through it. He stopped when he got

to a photograph. It was a picture of Tiffany's chest. It was taken in a hospital. "Did you know she has an 'X' carved over her right nipple?"

Case threw his free hand out at his side. "You're sitting there, looking at naked pictures of my girlfriend?" Tiffany squinted.

Paloni nodded. "Yeah, man. It's pretty wicked stuff." He flipped to another photograph. It was a picture of Tiffany's abdomen. "She has burn scars all over her stomach."

Case nodded. "Yes, I know. She has a hell of a lot more than *that*." Case looked at the pavement. "Do you have any pictures of her back? It's covered with whiplashes." Case drew squiggles in front of his face with his pointer finger. "She has knife wounds across her shoulder blades."

Paloni flipped to another photograph. It was a picture of Tiffany's butt. "She has a burn mark on her right butt cheek," Paloni remarked.

Case nodded. "It's a cattle brand," he explained. "It's the letter 'A'." Tiffany pressed her lips together. She looked at the sidewalk.

"*A for Andre*," Paloni guessed.

Case sighed. "Yeah, man. A for Andre." He laid his arm across his lap. "Anything else?"

Paloni shook his head. "Case, what the hell?"

Case smirked. "What?"

Paloni threw his free hand out at his side. "Man! What are you... *into* this? Does this turn you on?"

Case flicked his wrist. "Leave me alone, Paloni. That's between me and her."

Paloni closed Tiffany's file. "You're a freak, Case."

Case pressed his lips together. “I love her, Paloni.” Tiffany smiled. “I wouldn’t trade her for all the swimsuit models in the world.”

Paloni smiled. He exhaled through his nose. “Really?”

Case nodded. “Yeah, man. Really.” He exhaled through his nostrils. “I’d do anything for her.”

Paloni closed his eyes. “If you guys run into any trouble down there...”

“I know, man,” Case replied. “I’ll call you.” Paloni hung up. Case closed his phone against his cheek. He slid it into his pocket and let out a shaky sigh. A tear trickled down his cheek. He swatted it away.

“Did you mean that?” Tiffany asked. Case whirled around. Tiffany was standing in front of the door. Her arms were folded over her chest. “You, uh... You don’t think I can stand up for myself?”

Case exhaled through his nose. “I don’t know. I wish you *would*, sometimes.” He smiled. “I also understand why you don’t.” Tiffany looked away. Tears dribbled down her cheeks.

“*Yeah...*” she gasped. She wiped her eyes. “Oh, yeah. Everybody *always* thinks I should.” She looked at Case. “You think I’m a wuss. Don’t you?”

Case showed her his palms. “No, Tiffany. I didn’t say that.” Tiffany buried her eyes in her palms. Case sighed. He slithered to his feet. “That jerk... That Sweeny guy, earlier...” Tiffany whimpered. Case wandered towards her. “I mean, you and I could’ve beat the shit out of him. You know?” Tiffany sighed. She looked up and slid her fingers across her cheeks. Case shook his head. “But, that’s not what happened.” Case forced a smile. “I knocked him on his ass. And then, you...” Case crossed his arms over his chest. He looked at the pavement.

“You sat beside him and helped him feel more comfortable.” He looked up. “You didn’t do that because you were afraid. You did it because you’re very brave.” Tiffany laid her fingers over her lips. “You’re just... the kindest, sweetest person I’ve ever met.” Case narrowed his eyes. “I think I like that about you more than anything else.” Tiffany exhaled a shaky breath. Case shrugged.

“So, yeah. I wish you’d stick up for yourself, sometimes.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Maybe that would make *you* feel better. But, I don’t think you can.” Tiffany dropped her eyes in her hands. Case folded his fingers in front of his lips. “And, I most certainly don’t think you’re a wuss.” Tiffany looked up and sniffled. She threw her arms around Case’s waist. She rested her eyes against his chest. Case slid his fingers across her back. “Sometimes, I wish I could be more like you.” Case laid his cheek on top of Tiffany’s head. “But the truth is, I don’t have it in me. No one does.” Case felt Tiffany shivering. He lifted his head and slid his fingers through her hair. He eased back and smiled. He tugged Tiffany’s face away from his chest and looked into her eyes. He laughed through his nose. “Look at you. You’re a mess, again.” Tiffany sobbed. Case turned and took her hand.

“Come on,” he told her. “Sit down with me.” Case led Tiffany to the edge of the sidewalk. He helped her sit down. Then, he sat beside her. He slid his arm around her shoulders. Tiffany snuggled up next to him. She rested her head against Case’s shoulder and cleared her throat. She looked into Case’s eyes.

“You, know sometimes *I* wish I could stand up for myself, more.” Her eyebrows fell at the sides. “But, I can’t. I just can’t.” Case nodded. He slid his fingers across Tiffany’s soggy cheeks.

“Well, you know what?” Case inquired. “You don’t have to anymore. You have *me*



now.”

Tiffany smiled. “Thank you.” She looked over her shoulder. “Um, we should go get the kids.” She looked into Case’s eyes. “And, then we can... go see my old house.” Case nodded. He stood and offered his hand.

“Come on.” Tiffany took his hand, and Case helped her to her feet. He looked into her eyes and smiled. “Hang on...” He cupped his sleeves around his palms. He patted Tiffany’s cheeks with the ends of his sleeves. Then, he took her hand. “Okay. Let’s go.” They wandered inside and found Adam and Gabrielle. They bid Hilda farewell and left.

Bernard was on the south side of town. The south side was the roughest area in Lincoln. Tiffany led Case down Main Street. She had him take a left at Washington Drive. Washington Drive was a paved road. Case breathed a sigh of relief. He made the left and stomped on the gas. Two blocks down, they passed a Burger Land. It was the only Burger Land in town. Tiffany stared at Burger Land as they passed. So did Gabrielle. She was *sick* of Burger Land. She narrowed her eyes and shook her head. Two blocks south, they became surrounded by neighborhoods. They were pretty rough looking. Some of the houses were questionable. Some lawns were unkempt. Some lawns had cars parked on them. But, it wasn’t so bad.

Four blocks south of that, the sidewalk disappeared. So did the stripe down the center of the road. Case was driving down blank pavement with grass on both sides. He looked around. The surrounding houses were decrepit and old. Some were abandoned. Most had old, wooden siding with faded, peeling paint. The houses fortunate enough to have bricks needed new roofs. Or, they had lawns filled with waist high weeds. There were no driveways. Everyone parked on their lawn or on the side of the road. There were a lot of residents out. Some were rough looking. Some looked scary. Some looked like gangsters. All the ones that looked like

gangsters wore blue. Some residents turned and went inside as Case, Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle passed. Most of them stood and stared. Their heads turned as Case's brown car crept by. Gabrielle sat behind Case. She rested her chin on the back of his seat.

"This place is scary," she remarked.

Tiffany looked over her shoulder. "Don't worry, Gabrielle. If I know G.B., he's still hanging around. He'll make sure no one messes with us."

Case turned to her. "G.B.?"

Tiffany smiled. "I told you about Gangster Benny." Case bobbed his head. He looked in his rearview mirror. There was a low rider behind him. It was right on his ass. It was shiny and black. It bobbed along, inches from Case's bumper. Case narrowed his eyes. There were four occupants. They were all black. They were covered with red clothes. They wore red dew rags around the tops of their heads and dark shades over their eyes. Case turned to Tiffany. Tiffany looked at him out of the corner of her eye.

*"I see them,"* she whispered.

Case nodded. *"You think that crack dealer sicked the dogs on us?"* Tiffany let out a nervous sigh. She faced forward.

*"Just get to Bernard. They won't follow us down Bernard."* Case faced forward. He didn't speed up. He slowed down. The low rider stayed right behind him. After four blocks, Case came to a stop sign. He stopped. The low rider screeched to a halt. The driver looked frantic. He turned to his buddies and shook his head. Case squinted and watched. The front, passenger turned to the driver. He waved his arms and shouted. He shook the whole car as he spoke. The driver pointed at him. He said something and faced forward. Case crossed his arms over his chest. The driver threw his shifter into reverse and squealed the tires. He drove

backwards and jerked the steering wheel to the left. The car peeled around and faced the other direction. The driver lowered the shifter and stomped the gas pedal to the floor. The low rider peeled out and sped away. Gabrielle and Adam were turned around. They looked at Tiffany and Case.

“What the hell was *that* all about?” Gabrielle asked. Tiffany looked over her shoulder. She shook her head. She looked at Case.

“Three more blocks,” she told him. “Then, turn right.” Case took a breath through his nostrils. He exhaled through his lips. He faced forward, let off the brake, and eased the gas pedal towards the floor. He looked around. He was surrounded by hideous houses. Some were like shacks. One house was covered with different colored sheets of tin. It was a tiny, little place. It was no bigger than an average bedroom. The owner sat out front. He sat on a lawn chair, held together by duct tape. The owner’s elbow rested on his knee. His chin rested in his palm. His eyes were closed. He was draped in ratty, old, plaid and striped clothes. His eyes fluttered open as Case’s car passed. He watched it drive by. Some houses were missing doors. Some were missing window glass. Some were missing both. Some were in pieces and covered with graffiti. The artwork was intricate, detailed, and flashy.

Case’s car came to a stop sign three blocks away. Two long, green signs rested at the top. One faced north and south. The other faced east and west. Case read the one that faced north and south. It read “Bernard Street.” Case stopped. He stared at the signs and sighed. He looked at Tiffany. She motioned to the right with her head. Case cut the wheel and pressed the accelerator.

“Gabrielle’s right,” Case remarked. “This place *is* scary.”

Tiffany looked at her lap. “It gets worse.” Case bent forward and looked at the sky. It

was filled with black. White bolts of lightning scattered across the ominous canvas. They filled the neighborhood with bright flashes. Thunder followed close behind. Gabrielle rested her chin on the back of Case's seat.

"How much further is it?"

"Fifteen blocks," Tiffany replied. She looked over her shoulder and pointed. "You're not gonna wuss out on me, are you?" Gabrielle showed Tiffany her palms. She looked at her lap and shook her head.

"Hey, I'm just asking."

Tiffany pointed at Adam. "Adam?"

He pressed his lips together. "I might." Tiffany narrowed her eyes. Adam smiled. He patted her shoulder. "I'm kidding! I got your back, man."

Tiffany looked at Case. "Louis?"

"I got my gun," Case replied. Tiffany chuckled. "I think I'll manage." The next thirteen blocks were dreadful. Most of the houses were abandoned, falling apart, and in shambles. Telephone poles were broken. One was lying in the road. There were old, cruddy cars parked on the lawns. Some had been sitting long enough to rust. There weren't many people out and about. Most of the ones that *were* out were gangsters. When Case, Tiffany, Gabrielle, and Adam were two blocks from Tiffany's old place, they spotted a Hispanic man. He was standing at the end of the block. He stood with his arms folded over his chest, facing them. His face was covered with a grin. Tiffany looked at Case.

"It's G.B.," she told him. "Pull over." Case nodded. He eased to the side of the road and stopped next to G.B. He looked him over. G.B. wore a dark blue hoodie, a pair of baggy, black jeans, and a pair of high dollar sneakers. His jeans were dark at the top and the bottom. They

faded around the knees. G.B.'s clothing looked new and neatly pressed. His face was littered with long, thin scars. His hair was mostly black, but it was grey in places. It was slicked back with a generous wad of styling gel. Tiffany rolled down her window. "S'up, cuz?" she asked. G.B. bobbed his head. He swaggered to the side of Case's car, bent over, and folded his arms on Tiffany's door. He pointed at her, casually.

"You know, when I heard there was some crazy ass blancos strolling through the hood, I thought to myself, 'Could that be Tiffany Haynes'?" Tiffany smiled. G.B. looked around. He uncrossed his arms and raised his palms. "So? You gonna introduce me to your posse, or what?"

Tiffany pointed over her shoulder with her thumb. "This is Louis." She pointed towards the back seat. "And, this is Adam and Gabrielle."

G.B. waved at everyone. "S'up, fellas?" He looked at Tiffany. "You going to see the old crib?" Tiffany nodded. "Well, it's still hanging on." G.B. looked at Case. "No one's living there. There's no electricity or water. But, you guys can go check it out, if you want. I still have the key..." He reached into his jeans pocket. He took out a key and handed it to Tiffany. He smiled. "You gave it to me when you left. Remember?" Tiffany nodded. She looked at the back seat.

"You guys wanna walk?" She turned to Case. Case shrugged. G.B. pointed at him.

"You packing?"

"You kidding?" Case asked.

G.B. nodded. "Well, I'll watch your ride if you want." He smirked. "Uh, if you trust some crazy ass gangster with your shit." Case grinned. He looked at Tiffany.

"Why do you wanna walk?"

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Old habit?” Tiffany unbuckled her seatbelt. Everyone hopped out and locked their doors. Case grabbed his umbrella. It wasn’t raining. But, Case snagged it just in case. The house on the corner looked the same. It was a two story, brick house with broken windows. There used to be mini blinds hanging out of the empty windows. But, they’d all disappeared. A familiar stench wafted through the air. Tiffany caught a whiff. She pressed her lips together and looked at Case. Case stared back. He narrowed his eyes and shook his head. Gabrielle and Adam walked behind them. Gabrielle looked up.

“What *is* that?”

“Nothing,” Tiffany replied. “Keep going.” Case looked at the sky. It was ominous and fierce. Case expected pouring rain any moment. He twirled his umbrella around his finger by the hook. The old man’s house was two lots down. It had wooden, lime green siding and a tin roof. The yard was overgrown and wild. Tiffany looked at the porch. The old man’s rocking chair was sitting on the porch. It was empty. Tiffany looked around. The front door and the screen were missing. There was a window on either side of the door frame. They were broken. Hideous, nicotine stained drapes wafted through the holes. Tiffany exhaled through her nostrils. She faced forward. Some things never change. The two story house at the end of the block was still abandoned. The old, fifties model car still rested peacefully on the front lawn. It was surrounded by wild grass. Tiffany looked at Case. Case was looking the car over. He looked at Tiffany.

“Alright, man. We found you a car.”

Tiffany smacked her lips. “Oh, Louis...” She took Case’s hand and looked at the car. “But, the paint’s the wrong color.” Case chuckled. He switched hands and patted Tiffany’s shoulder.

“Which one’s *yours*?” Gabrielle asked. Tiffany faced forward and searched. She looked at Gabrielle over her shoulder. She motioned towards her old house with her head. Gabrielle looked where Tiffany was pointing. Her eyes widened. Andre’s cruddy, old van was parked out front. All the tires were missing. The van rested on cinderblocks. The lawn was mostly dirt. The patches that *weren’t* dirt were overgrown with weeds. The weeds swayed in a gentle breeze blowing by. The house was paneled with light blue, wooden siding. It was very faded. It was flaking and falling off. The roof was covered with dilapidated shingles. They’d begun to peel away. Some flapped in the wind. The screen door was missing. The main door was faded and crumbling. Strips were peeling away at the bottom. There was one window to the left of the door and two to the right. The window borders were unpainted. They looked a lot like the front door. Gabrielle looked towards the backyard. It was surrounded by a hideous fence. It was made of mismatched pickets and chunks of tree limbs. Gabrielle looked up. Tiffany looked over her shoulder and smiled. Gabrielle shook her head.

“I’m not going in there.”

Tiffany narrowed her eyes. “Gabrielle, you said you would go with me.” Gabrielle stopped in her tracks. Everyone stopped and looked at her.

“I just changed my mind.” She pointed at Tiffany’s old house. “That’s the creepiest looking house I ever saw in my life! There’s no *way* I’m going in there!” Tiffany’s eyebrows fell at the sides. She looked at Case. Case took out his revolver. He held it up and thumbed back the hammer.

“Don’t worry, Gabs. I got us covered.” Gabrielle looked away and smiled. She shook her head. Tiffany knelt in front of her. She took Gabrielle’s hand and looked into her eyes.

“Gabrielle, you have to.” Tiffany looked over her shoulder then back. “Come on. I *need*

you.” She laid her hand over her heart. “I need you to do this with me.” Adam laid his palm on Gabrielle’s shoulder. Gabrielle turned to him.

“It’ll be okay, Gabs.” He smirked and nodded. “I won’t let anything happen to you. I promise.”

Gabrielle looked towards the house. “What if there’s some creep in there?” She looked at Adam. “He might come out a *get* us! Tie us up and torture us... for days.” Adam narrowed his eyes. He looked the house over and nodded.

“It’s empty. There’s no one in there.” Adam looked at Gabrielle. Everyone stared at him. “I mean, uh...” Adam looked away and rubbed the back of his neck. “I mean, it *looks* empty.” He threw his hands out at his sides and looked up. “You know. Because there’s no way I could possibly know that.” Case smirked. He dropped his revolver in his pocket and took Tiffany’s hand. He motioned towards the house with his head.

“Come on, guys. Let’s go.” The sky flashed white. Thunder rolled across the landscape. Case, Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle wandered to the front door of Tiffany’s old house. Tiffany slid her key into a deadbolt. It hovered above the doorknob. Tiffany turned the key to the right. She closed her eyes and exhaled through her nose. Case stood behind her. He patted her shoulder. “It’s okay, honey. Go ahead.” Tiffany stuck her key in the knob. She twisted it to the left and slid the door aside. It creaked all the way to the wall. A putrid stench flowed out. It hit everyone like a kick in the chest. Tiffany pinched her eyes shut. She turned her head and lowered it. She looked like she might vomit. Case took Tiffany’s hand and wandered across the threshold. Tiffany looked up and followed. Adam and Gabrielle stepped inside. Adam closed the door.

Case, Adam, and Gabrielle stood, staring at the living room. The whole house was eerie



and dim. There wasn't much to look at. Yet, they couldn't look away. Andre's old, crummy chair rested in the northeast corner. It was covered with faded, tan fabric and strands of duct tape. Yellow stuffing was sticking out in places. Beer bottles lay across the floor. There were hundreds of them. Most were standing up, arranged in a row. Some lay on their sides atop puddles of dried beer. The beer bottles led from the recliner to the southwest corner. That's where the televisions resided. An old, wooden television stood on the floor in the corner. It faced the recliner. It was big and stout. It looked old. Unlike modern televisions, it had knobs instead of buttons. Two newer televisions sat on top. They were skinned with black plastic.

The walls were stained with nicotine. From top to bottom, they faded from white to yellow. Here and there, the walls were dotted with fist sized holes. The floor was covered with cheap tiles. They were white with faded, pink diamonds. Some were shattered. Concrete showed in those places. Case looked over his shoulder. Tiffany stood behind him. She stared at the floor in a daze. Her fingers were folded in front of her.

"Tiffany," Case remarked. Tiffany didn't move. She just stood there, staring. Case turned around. "Tiffany!" he shouted.

Tiffany gasped and looked up. "What? What is it?"

Case forced a smile. "Let's see the kitchen." Tiffany tilted her head. She sighed. Case wandered into the kitchen. It wasn't separated from the living room. It just had a different floor. It was covered with jagged stones. A cruddy, foldout, card table sat in the middle of the floor. It was surrounded by three different chairs. Tiffany pressed her lips together. She followed Case, timidly. Case stood in front of the refrigerator. He looked over his shoulder. Tiffany stopped behind him. "I don't suppose you cleaned out the refrigerator before you left." Tiffany crossed her arms over her chest. Case opened the door. The rotten smell intensified. Adam and

Gabrielle stared at the fridge from the living room. Gabrielle threw her hands over her nose and mouth. Adam scrunched up his nose. Case narrowed his eyes and exhaled through his lips. He closed the door and turned around. Tiffany sighed.

“Sorry. I didn’t think I’d ever come back.” Case nodded. He looked next to the refrigerator. There was a short counter with a steel sink. A window hovered above the sink. Against the western wall, there was a pantry. Case looked at Tiffany.

“What about the trash? Did you take the trash?” Tiffany pressed her lips together. She shook her head. Case wandered to the pantry and opened the door. It smelled worse than the refrigerator. Case looked at Tiffany. He shook his head. He sucked his tongue away from his teeth three times. Tiffany smiled. She threw her hands out at her sides.

“I’m sorry!” she shouted. Case looked the pantry over. He spotted a box of trash liners. He picked it up and slipped one out. He tossed the box to Gabrielle. He motioned towards the refrigerator with his head.

“Gabrielle, clean that out. Would you?” Her jaw dropped. Her eyebrows fell at the sides.

“Uh-uh!” she shrieked. “No way.” She pointed at Tiffany. “I done already *told* her I got suspended.” Case tilted his head back and chuckled. “*You* do it.” Gabrielle looked at Tiffany. Tiffany snapped her fingers. She pointed towards the refrigerator with her thumb.

“Clean it,” she instructed. Gabrielle’s arms fell at her sides. She tilted her head and sighed. Adam grinned. He took the box of liners from his girlfriend.

“Come on, Gabs. I’ll help.” Adam and Gabrielle wandered towards the refrigerator. Gabrielle narrowed her eyes. She glared at Tiffany as she passed. Tiffany patted her little butt. Gabrielle whirled around.

“Tiffany!” she shouted.

Tiffany smiled. “That’s what you *get*.” She folded her arms over her chest. “Try to hide that from me.” Gabrielle shook her head. Adam opened the refrigerator. He sat down and pulled out a trash bag. Gabrielle knelt beside him. She laid her fingers over her nose and mouth.

“Bleh!” she remarked. Tiffany looked at Case. Case slid a tall, skinny trash can out of the pantry. He tugged out an old trash liner. It was rotten and falling apart. Case looked at Tiffany. He tossed her the new trash bag he’d gotten from the box. Tiffany spread the top, popped it open, and hurried across the kitchen. She held the new liner open. Case dropped the old one inside and tied it. He looked towards the kids.

“Hey, toss me another liner, Adam.” Adam tugged a fresh liner out of the box and tossed it to Case. Case popped it open and dropped it in the trash can. He slid the trash can into the pantry. He studied the shelves. He spotted a bottle of air freshener. He picked it up and pulled the trigger. It sputtered. Tiny sprinkles of lavender drizzled out. The can was almost empty. Case looked at Tiffany.

“We may have a problem.” Tiffany smiled. She motioned towards the refrigerator with her head.

*“We should help,”* she whispered.

“They can do it,” Case replied. He bent over and rolled the can of air freshener across the floor. It rolled into Adam’s butt. Adam turned around, looked at the floor, and spotted the air freshener. He picked it up and gave the refrigerator a spritz. Case pointed towards the hallway. “Let’s check out the bedrooms.” He lowered his arm and wandered past. Tiffany whirled around and caught up. She snagged a hold of Case’s arm.

“W-Wait,” Tiffany remarked. Case reached the first room in the hallway. It was on the

north side of the hall. The door was closed. Case stopped and looked at Tiffany.

“What’s the matter?”

Tiffany shook her head. “D-Don’t go in there. That’s Dad’s room.” Case pressed his lips together. He wrapped his fingers around the knob and slid the door aside.

“Your father’s in the mental institution,” Case remarked. He wandered in and faced her. He raised his palms at his sides. “This is *your* room, now.” Tiffany sighed. She wandered in, timidly. She folded her arms over her chest and looked around. Case stood next to her. Andre’s old bed rested against the western wall. It hovered above the floor on a quartet of rotten, wooden legs. An old, sloppy mattress with thin, blue stripes lay on top. A ragged, plaid blanket lay crumpled on the corner. A forty inch by thirty inch rubbing was nailed above the bed. It was white, stained with cigarette smoke. The material was like a flag. The rubbing was a portrait of Adolf Hitler. Case looked at the floor. It was covered with crunchy strips of warped wood. The floor looked like it might cave in. Case looked at Tiffany. Tiffany tilted her head and took a breath. Case looked below Andre’s bed. There was an old shoebox underneath. Case knelt beside the bed and dragged it out.

“Whoa!” Tiffany shrieked. Case looked over his shoulder. “No! No! No! No! No!” Tiffany dropped to her knees beside her boyfriend. She dropped her palms on top of the shoebox. Case looked into Tiffany’s eyes. She was shaking. “L-Louis, d-don’t look in there. Please.” Case sighed. Tiffany gasped for breath. “Please.”

Case laid his fingers across Tiffany’s trembling hands. “Tiffany, this is why we came here. Remember?” Tiffany exhaled. She looked around.

“Look, check out anything else around here you want.” She looked into Case’s eyes. “But I’m begging you, don’t look inside this box.”

Case nodded. “And, I’m begging *you*. Let me see what’s in it.” Tiffany’s eyebrows fell at the sides. She shook her head.

“*Don’t...*” she gasped. “*Louis...*”

Case looked at the box. “I have a feeling I know what’s in here.” He looked up. “Photographs, right?” Tiffany buried her face in her hands. Case dropped his hand on her shoulder. He looked at the box. “Look, I won’t open this, if you don’t want me to.” Tiffany sobbed. “But, I really think we should.” He looked up. “Together.” Tiffany sniffled. She slid her hands away and looked at the floor. She crossed her arms over her chest. Tears dribbled down her cheeks. Case slid his fingers below Tiffany’s chin. He lifted her head and looked into her eyes. Tiffany’s lower lip quivered. Case grabbed the box and held it in front of her. “Come on, Tiffany. Show me.” Tiffany pinched her eyes shut. “Show me what that piece of shit did to you.” Tiffany opened her eyes. She slid her fingers across her cheeks and reached for the box. Case laid it in her quivering hands.

“*Okay...*” Tiffany groaned. She motioned towards the bed with her head. “Sit down.” She and Case sat on Andre’s old bed. Tiffany laid the shoebox in her lap. She looked into Case’s eyes. “If you tell anyone about this, I’ll kill you.”

Case smirked. “No, you won’t.”

Tiffany scrunched up her nose and looked at her lap. “Yeah, you’re probably right.” Tiffany laid her hand on the box. “I figured G.B. would find this... and burn it.”

Case nodded. “I think he was trying to keep everything the way you left it. You know, in case you came back.” Tiffany nodded. Case looked around the room. “I know he’s had the place sprayed for bugs.”

Tiffany looked around. “Yeah, you’re right.” She looked at Case. “Otherwise, there’d

be spiders and shit all over the place.” Case nodded. Tiffany flipped the top of the box back. She pinched her eyes shut and exhaled through her nostrils. Case faced forward. He laid his hands in his lap. Tiffany opened her eyes and faced him. “Are you sure you want to see this?”

Case smiled. “I’ve been a detective for a good while, Tiffany. I’m sure I’ve seen worse.” Tiffany pressed her lips together. She reached inside the box and took out a photograph. She handed it to Case. Case looked it over. It was a picture of Tiffany when she was fourteen. It was taken from behind. She wore her birthday suit. She was on her knees, looking over her shoulder. There was a pool cue sticking out of her ass. Her face was all twisted up and terrified. She was gritting her teeth. Case faced forward. “I stand corrected.” Tiffany snatched the photograph from Case’s fingers. She laid another in its place. Case exhaled through his nostrils. He looked down. It was a picture of Tiffany giving her father head.

“I was fifteen in that one,” Tiffany remarked. Case looked away. He handed Tiffany the photograph. Tiffany took it and handed him another. Case looked at the wall. He pressed his lips together.

“Tiffany...”

“*Look* at it!” Tiffany demanded. Case faced her. Tiffany’s eyes were fiery and intense. She motioned towards Case’s hand with her head. “Look...” Case closed his eyes. He faced the photograph and opened them. In this one, Tiffany was sprawled, naked on the floor. She lay with her head tilted back, screaming. Andre’s entire fist was shoved into her vagina. Case pinched his eyes shut. He held the photograph in the air and shook his head. Tiffany slid her fingers around Case’s hand. She rested her chin on his shoulder. “*Thirteen...*” she whispered. She snatched the picture out of Case’s hand. Case looked at her and sighed.

“Tiffany, I can’t do this. I’m sorry.”

She nodded. “Some things can’t be unseen.” She dropped the photograph in the box and closed it. Case looked at the box.

“We should burn those.”

Tiffany looked into Case’s eyes. “We should burn this whole *place* down.” Case smiled. Tiffany slid the shoebox underneath the bed. “Leave them here.” She sat back and sighed. She slid her hair out of her face. “Maybe some *other* pervert will find them.” She looked at Case. “Then, maybe some *other* little girl won’t have to go through some of the things I did.” She took Case’s hand. “Are you okay?” Case had a lump in his throat. He swallowed, nervously.

“No. I’m *not* okay.” He shook his head and looked at his lap. “I’m not.” Tiffany slid across the mattress and sat beside him. She switched hands. She slid her fingers across Case’s back.

“I told you, man.”

Case looked up. “I should’ve listened.” Tiffany raised her eyebrows and nodded. She looked at the mattress.

“You know, he made me sleep with him, sometimes.” Case looked at her. “You know. In *bed* with him.” She looked up. “He’d hold me in his arms.” She shuddered. “It was disgusting.”

Case squinted. “Pretty much.” Tiffany licked her lips. She looked over her shoulder.

“We better make sure those two aren’t killing each other out there.” She faced Case. “Come on.” Case nodded. He hopped up and offered Tiffany his hands. Tiffany smiled. She took Case’s hands, and Case helped her to her feet. They wandered into the hall.

“*Gross, Adam!*” Gabrielle called from the refrigerator. “*Stop touching that!*” Adam giggled. Case looked at Tiffany. He tilted his head. Tiffany crossed her arms over her chest.

Gabrielle chuckled. *“Adam! Just throw it away!”* Case wandered down the hall. He arrived at the refrigerator and sat next to the kids.

*“Move over, Adam,”* he remarked. *“You’re fired.”*

Adam smacked his lips. *“Fool! Bite me!”* Tiffany looked at the floor and shook her head. She turned and crept down the hallway. She slithered into her old bedroom and looked around. The walls were decorated with holes. Some were the size of fists. Others were the size of Tiffany’s head. There was a window along the southern wall. Tiffany looked towards the southeast corner. Her old, squishy mattress was still crumpled in the corner. She looked around the floor. It was covered with faded, warped planks of wood. Some were broken. Others were missing. Tiffany looked above the window. A message was painted in red. It read *“Kill Tiffany, slowly.”* The letters dripped when they were smeared along the wall. The drips slid down the wall and pooled on the window sill.

Tiffany crept across the jagged floor and sat near the window. She sat with her ankles crossed and hugged her knees. She stared at a hole below the window. It was the size of her head. Tiffany squinted. The sheetrock was caved in and cracked. Some of Tiffany’s blood was still in the cracks. Adam appeared in the doorway. The first thing that caught his attention was the message above the window. It made him sick. He looked at all the holes in the wall. Some had Tiffany’s blood on them. Adam closed his eyes and shook his head. He wandered in and stood behind Tiffany. He looked her over. She was shaking. She sat with her ankles crossed, hugging her knees. She looked like a little girl. Adam felt like crying. He laid his palm on Tiffany’s shoulder. Tiffany gasped and hopped away. She slid across the jagged floor and plopped down on her mattress. Adam showed her his palms.

*“Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”* Tiffany exhaled a heavy sigh. She laid her palm on



her chest and tilted her head back. Adam fought back a smile. He wandered across the floor and sat beside Tiffany. He felt the mattress shivering. Adam curled his fingers around Tiffany's. Tiffany sat up and cleared her throat. "We finished cleaning out the refrigerator," Adam told her.

Tiffany turned to him and smiled. "Thank you." Gabrielle and Case appeared in the doorway. Case slid his hands into his pockets and looked around. Gabrielle scrunched up her nose. She looked at Tiffany.

"Man, this place sucks!" Tiffany chuckled. Gabrielle wandered across the room. She sat next to Tiffany and looked around. "What happened? Did somebody come by and mess it up after you left?" Tiffany exhaled through her nose. She laid her hand on Gabrielle's shoulder.

"No. This is how it always looked." Gabrielle looked into her eyes. "This is... my old bedroom, Gabrielle." Tiffany turned to Adam. She forced a smile. "This is where I grew up." Adam nodded. He looked away. Tiffany turned to Gabrielle. Gabrielle crinkled her eyes. She motioned towards the mattress with her head.

"Is this where you slept?"

Tiffany nodded. "Yeah." She looked at Case. He stood across the room. He rested his back against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest. "Most of the time," Tiffany added. Case nodded. Gabrielle shook her head.

"I don't like this place." Tiffany looked into her eyes. "It's scary." Tiffany snickered. "And, it's stinky. Can we get out of here, now?" Everyone looked at Case. He shrugged.

"That's up to Tiffany."

Tiffany pressed her lips together. "Let's take the trash to the dumpster." Case nodded. He pointed at Adam and Gabrielle.

“You guys stay here a minute.” Adam nodded. Gabrielle squinted.

“Okay,” she replied. Tiffany hopped up. She and Case wandered into the kitchen. There were six trash bags piled on the floor. Most of them were filled with expired cases of beer. Case picked up two of the lighter trash sacks and handed them to Tiffany. He picked up the other four. Tiffany pointed over her shoulder with her thumb.

“*Why are you making them wait in THERE?*” she whispered. She opened the back door. It was next to the refrigerator.

“*I don’t want them going into the alley,*” Case replied. “*That’s where you got stabbed, right?*”

Tiffany bobbed her head. “*Yep. That’s right.*” Tiffany and Case were referring to seven knife wounds in Tiffany’s back. Six were around her shoulder blades. One was near her left side. The backyard was filled with knee high weeds and stickers. There was a one and a half foot drop from the back door to the ground. Tiffany eased to the ground and looked up. She pointed at the ground. “Watch your step, here.”

Case smiled. “Yeah, I know.” He dropped to the ground and looked around. He spotted a pair of doors. They lay on the ground, next to the back wall of the house. Case narrowed his eyes. He looked at Tiffany. “You got a flashlight?” Tiffany shut the door. She pointed towards the kitchen with one of her trash liners.

“There’s a lantern on top of the fridge.” Case nodded. He motioned towards the fence with his head.

“Lead the way.” Tiffany nodded. She wandered through the backyard. She looked over her shoulder.

“What do you need a flashlight for? It’s not that dark out here.”

Case nodded. “I know.” Tiffany pressed her lips together. She pointed around.

“Watch for stickers. They’re everywhere.”

Case scanned the weeds. “Okay.” He and Tiffany made it to the gate. It was pitiful. It was mostly tree limbs. There were two hinges on the left side. They were covered with rust. They attached to the tree limbs with long, pointed plates. The top hinge was wobbly and barely hanging on. The bottom hinge was broken. The gate didn’t have a latch. It was tied with a piece of rope. The tree limb on the right was tied to the next picket in the fence. Andre punched a hole in the picket for the rope to feed through. Tiffany carefully untied the rope. She held the gate and eased it towards the outside of the fence. That way, the top hinge didn’t bend and break off. Tiffany and Case wandered across the alley. They arrived at a dumpster. Tiffany snagged a hold of the lid. It was a metallic lid with a flat handle. Tiffany flipped the lid back. It squealed on its hinges.

Tiffany tossed her trash liners into the dumpster. She stepped aside. Case heaved the two trash liners in his left hand over the rim of the dumpster. They crashed to the floor. The sound of shattering glass echoed across the alley. Case cackled. He whirled the second pair of trash bags through the air. He deposited them on top of the others. He reached across the dumpster, snagged a hold of the lid, and jerked it shut. It squealed and smashed into the rim. Case looked to his right. Tiffany was standing next to him. She stood with her arms crossed over her chest. She was staring at the ground next to the dumpster. Case wandered around and looked. He took Tiffany’s hand.

“Is that where it happened?” Tiffany nodded. She pointed at the ground.

“He came up from right there.” She looked at Case. “He came up behind me. And, he just started stabbing.” Case slid his fingers across Tiffany’s shoulder blades. He could feel the

scars beneath her rainbow colored sweater.

“What did you do?” Case asked. Tiffany looked at the ground in front of the dumpster. She folded her fingers in front of her lips.

“Fell on my side. Curled up in a ball.” She looked at Case. “He just started laughing.”

Case narrowed his eyes. “You didn’t get a good look at him?”

Tiffany dragged her fingertips down her face. “Nah, he was wearing panty hose over his face.” Tiffany looked at the ground and shook her head. “It was just some freak. He giggled like a maniac. And then, he ran away.”

Case pointed at her. “It wasn’t that Sweeny guy. Was it?”

Tiffany smiled and exhaled through her nose. “No. It wasn’t David.” Case nodded. He pointed towards the gate.

“Let’s go back in before he comes back.”

“Okay.” Case made it to the refrigerator. He looked on top. He spotted an old lantern like Tiffany described. He picked it up and showed it to her. Tiffany stood in the doorway.

“You got some matches?” Case asked.

Tiffany stared at the lantern. “Um...” She pointed towards a column of drawers next to the refrigerator. “Top drawer, I think.” Case opened the top drawer. He found a giant box of strike anywhere matches. He snagged one and slid it across the refrigerator. It fired up. Tiffany extended her index finger. “Uh, Louis...” she remarked. Case stuffed the lantern under his arm. He tried turning the knob to the right. It was closed.

“Yes, Tiffany?” Case inquired. He held the match to the lantern’s mantles. He eased the knob to the left. Tiffany dropped her hand and sighed.

“What’re you doing?”

“I’m lighting this lantern,” Case replied. The mantles ignited. Case held the match to his lips and blew it out. He dropped it in the sink. He held the lantern in front of his face. He opened the valve until the lantern was nice and bright. Tiffany sighed.

“You’re not going where I *think* you’re going,” Tiffany remarked. “Are you?”

Case looked at her. “Where *do* you think I’m going?” He wandered past his girlfriend and dropped to the backyard. Tiffany watched. Case was headed towards the basement.

“Louis!” she called. “Wait! Don’t go down there!” Case yanked back the doors. He looked at Tiffany.

“I have to see it,” he replied. Tiffany groaned. She teetered towards the edge of the threshold. She forgot she was a foot and a half above the backyard. She lost her balance and dropped to the rocky ground. She gasped. She hit the backyard with a shriek. Case’s arms drooped at his sides. He tilted his head and stared at his girlfriend. Sometimes, he forgot what a klutz she was. “*Damn!*” Case barked. He wandered across the yard and knelt beside Tiffany. Tiffany lay on her side. She pinched her eyes shut and clutched the back of her skull. Case set the lantern down. He looked Tiffany over. She lay in a giant pile of stickers. Case took Tiffany’s hand and lifted her off the ground. He looked at her from the other side. Her left sleeve and half her sweater was covered with prickly barbs. Case sighed.

“*D-Don’t go in there...*” Tiffany moaned. Case laid Tiffany across his lap. He laid her on her stomach.

“I’m going to check it out,” Case replied. He patted Tiffany’s peacock colored britches. They were covered with dirt. Case winced. He looked at his palm. There were three stickers poking out. “*God!*” Case squeezed through his teeth. He yanked the little barbs out of his hand and tossed them aside. He slid his fingers through Tiffany’s hair. “You’re such a mess.”

Tiffany's eyebrows fell at the sides. "I know, Louis." She looked over her shoulder. "I'm sorry." Case exhaled through his nose. Tiffany looked at the ground. Case lifted the bottom of her sweater. There were ten stickers in her corduroys. Case plucked them loose and tossed them aside.

"I'm gonna pull all these God damn things out of your clothes," Case told Tiffany. He lowered her sweater. "And then, I'm going downstairs to look at the basement." He fluttered the bottom of Tiffany's sweater. Half the stickers tumbled to the ground. Case slid his fingers across Tiffany's back. "Alright?" Tiffany pressed her lips together. She nodded, slowly. Case patted her head. "Okay, then." He began plucking stickers out of Tiffany's sweater. He dropped them diligently in his hand. When he collected a handful, he reached across the yard and tossed them aside. Then, he continued. Tiffany sighed.

"I wish..." she began. Case dropped a handful of stickers on the ground. He lifted Tiffany's arm and looked her over. Her torso was clean.

"What?" Case inquired. He lowered Tiffany's arm. He began picking stickers out of her rainbow colored sleeve. Tiffany looked over her shoulder.

"I wish I had met you a long time ago." She forced a smile. "You know, when I still lived down here."

Case nodded. "I wouldn't be the same person, if I'd grown up here." He tossed a handful of barbs aside. He looked into Tiffany's eyes and smiled. Tiffany licked her lips. She faced the dirt.

"Yeah, I guess that's true." Case fluttered Tiffany's sleeve. Most of the remaining stickers popped loose.

"I'm here, now," Case remarked. He plucked the last of the stickers out of Tiffany's

sleeve and hurled them away. “And, I’m not going anywhere.” He rolled Tiffany onto her back. He rested his palm at the side of her face. “Except, to the basement.” Case snagged Tiffany around the waist and stood up. He dropped Tiffany on her feet. He recovered the lantern and headed for the basement.

“Louis, wait!” Tiffany called. She hurried after him. “Wait! Wait! Wait! Wait!” Case wandered into the basement. He made it to the fifth step. He stopped and looked over his shoulder. Tiffany stood at the entrance. She looked down the stairs and folded her arms over her chest. Case motioned towards the bottom of the steps with his head.

“Come on. This is why we came out here. Remember?” Tiffany sighed through her nose. Case turned around and offered his hand. “Look. *I’m* here. You don’t have to be afraid anymore.” Case wobbled his arm and smiled. Tiffany looked at the ground. She took Case’s hand and stumbled down the stairs. She looked up. A set of manacles dangled from the ceiling. Case lifted the lantern. He looked at Tiffany. “He used to hang you from those?”

Tiffany looked at Case. “Oh, yeah. All the time.” Case nodded. He continued down the stairs. Tiffany squeezed Case’s hand like a vise. She stayed right beside him. The first thing Case spotted was an iron maiden. It rested in a corner, in front of the stairs. In the opposite corner, there was a cage. It was shaped a lot like Tiffany. Case and Tiffany made it to the bottom of the steps. Case looked along the wall. He spotted a wooden box with a round lid. There were five holes drilled in the top.

“Ah, the trunk,” Case surmised. He wandered over and dragged it out.

“Wait, Louis...” Tiffany began. Case flipped the lid back. The trunk was filled with sex toys. There were dildos, leather whips, ball gags, leather masks, and ass-hooks. Case closed his eyes and exhaled through his nose. He looked at Tiffany. Tiffany looked away and slid her hair

out of her face.

“Sorry,” Case remarked. He closed the trunk and slid it against the wall. He looked around. He spotted a picnic table in the center of the room. He wandered across the room and looked it over. There were five leather straps on top. There was one for Tiffany’s neck, two for her wrists, and two for her ankles. They were close together. That way, Tiffany would be standing with her butt in the air when Andre tied her down. Case knelt and looked below the table. There was a long, wooden paddle strapped to the bottom.

“Seen enough?” Tiffany asked. Case stood and lifted the lantern.

“Have *you?*” Tiffany sighed. She wandered across the room and stood next to Case. She looked the table over. She slid her fingers across the straps. Case smirked. “You want me to tie you up?” Tiffany snickered. She turned to Case and shook her head.

“No. I’m good.” Case patted Tiffany’s shoulder. He looked around.

“What else is down here?” Tiffany pointed across the room. Case looked where she was pointing. He spotted the fan. It was a motorized wheel that stood upright. It had five wooden blades. There was one for Tiffany’s head, two for her arms, and two for her legs. Case wandered across the room. He spotted a slider on the side of the fan. Andre installed it to adjust the speed. Case looked at Tiffany. He motioned for her with his head. Tiffany wandered towards him, timidly. She stood beside Case. She looked at the floor and threw her hands on her hips.

“It’s different being down here with you.”

“It’s supposed to be.” Case spotted a plug. It was sticking out of the fan, near the slider. Case picked it up and looked for a socket. Tiffany pointed at him.

“Don’t!” She began to pant. “D-Don’t do it.” She looked into Case’s eyes. “Please.”



Case nodded. “Okay.” He dropped the plug on the floor. He spotted a couple of lawn chairs. He pulled one up and sat down. He set the lantern on the floor. He slid the second chair next to him and looked at Tiffany. He patted the seat. Tiffany laid her palm on her chest. She fought to catch her breath. “Come here, Tiffany,” Case told her. “Come sit down.” Tiffany looked at the empty seat. She played with her fingers, nervously. Case motioned for her with his head. Tiffany sighed and wandered across the room. She stood in front of the empty chair and stared at it. She took a breath.

“I-I can’t.” Case snagged a hold of Tiffany’s wrist. He dragged her to the seat. Tiffany fell on her butt with a gasp. She looked at Case. She was panting like a dog. Case raised his palms. He pressed his index fingers and thumbs together.

“Here, do this,” Case instructed.

Tiffany melted in her seat. “*Louis...*” she groaned.

“Do it.” Tiffany exhaled through her nostrils. She held up her palms and made circles with her index fingers and thumbs. “Now, close your eyes,” Case continued. Tiffany stared at him. She faced forward and closed her eyes. “Now, breathe slowly.”

“I know,” Tiffany replied.

“In through your nose...” Tiffany and Case inhaled through their nostrils. “And, out through your mouth...” Case and Tiffany exhaled through their lips. “In...” Case instructed. They inhaled. “And, out...” They exhaled. They repeated the process three times. “Now, open your eyes.” Case and Tiffany opened their eyes and looked at each other. Case snagged a hold of Tiffany’s hand. He laid his first and second fingers across her wrist and felt her pulse. He looked at her and nodded. A pair of shadows appeared at the top of the stairs. Case and Tiffany looked up.

“What’re you guys doing down *there*?” Gabrielle asked.

Tiffany smiled. “Nothing.” She turned to Case. “Can we please... get the hell out of here, now?” Case pressed his lips together. He rested his palm against the side of Tiffany’s face.

“Are you sure?” He looked around. “You don’t wanna look around some more?”

Tiffany exhaled through her nose. She laid her hand on top of Case’s.

“No. Let’s go home.”

It was sprinkling. Case, Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle returned to the car beneath Case’s umbrella. G.B. stood beside Case’s car. He’d thrown his hood over his head.

“You guys taking off?” G.B. inquired. “So soon?” Tiffany smirked. She stood in front of G.B. and held up the key. G.B. showed Tiffany his palm. “Keep it. I made a spare.”

Tiffany took a breath. “I don’t want it.”

“Keep it, chiquita,” G.B. insisted. “It’s *your* house.” Tiffany pressed her lips together. She slid the key into her pocket.

“I figured you’d sell it,” she remarked.

G.B. narrowed his eyes. “*That* piece of chit? I couldn’t sell that for five thousand dollars.” Case uttered a single laugh. He unlocked his door and stuck his foot inside. He looked at G.B.

“You’d be surprised what you can sell for five thousand bucks.” Case sat down and unlocked the other doors. Tiffany looked at G.B. G.B. motioned towards Case’s car with his head.

“You got yourself a good guy there, Tiffany. Don’t screw it up.”

Tiffany nodded. “I always do.” She slid her arms around G.B.’s waist. G.B. hugged her

back. Tiffany turned, wandered to the car, and hopped inside. Case did a U-turn and headed east. After thirteen blocks, he made a left. He was on Washington Drive, headed north. After two blocks, Case looked in his rearview mirror. He spotted a familiar sight. It was a shiny, black low rider. It peeled around a corner and shot after Case. Case punched the accelerator to the floor. Tiffany's eyes popped open. She looked at Case. "What the hell?" Case motioned towards the mirror with his head. Tiffany's head whirled around. She laid eyes on the low rider.

"*Oh, crap!*" she whispered. She looked at Adam and Gabrielle. She held up her hand and flattened it. She lowered it. "Get down, guys." Gabrielle's eyes widened. Adam pushed his mouth to the side of his face. He and Gabrielle ducked below the back of the seat. Tiffany hid behind *hers*. She brought in her knees and curled into a ball. She pointed at Case. "This is all *your* fault."

Case watched the low rider in his rearview mirror. "Yes, dear. I know." Case spotted the remnants of a telephone pole. It was three blocks down. It was a narrow stump, sticking out of the grass. There wasn't a single car parked on the side of the road for the next few blocks. Case cut the steering wheel to the right. He drove half on the grass and half off. He glanced over his shoulder. The low rider moved over as well. It was right on their butts. Case got a look at the front, passenger. He shoved a banana clip into an assault rifle. Case's car bounced across the grass. Case faced forward. Tiffany grabbed his hand.

"Louis, what're you doing?" She faced forward. "There's a telephone pole!"

"I noticed," Case told her. He squeezed Tiffany's hand. He looked at his speedometer. The needle was close to sixty. Case watched the telephone pole stump. It was within half a block. Case tightened his fingers around the steering wheel. Tiffany looked away and shut her eyes.

*“Louis...”* she whimpered. Case’s brown car was inches from the telephone pole stump. Case jerked the steering wheel to the left. Then, he eased it to the right. There was a heavy, metallic crunch. Case watched the low rider in his rearview mirror. It rolled through the air like a rogue torpedo. The engine growled. The low rider tumbled to the road and landed on its top. It rolled across the street and smashed into another telephone pole. The second telephone pole was more than a stump. The lights on the west side of the street went out. Case looked at Tiffany. She was sprawled across her seat, shivering. Her eyes were like saucers. She looked at Case. Case shrugged.

“Oops.”

Adam smacked the back of Case’s seat. “That was awesome!”

## Chapter 15: “Adam”

Rain poured from the sky. It battered cars. It filled the streets. It slithered down the sidewalk. Tiffany, Case, Gabrielle, and Adam were at Sally’s again. They sat at the same booth as before. They sat in the same places, too. Adam and Tiffany sat by the window. Gabrielle and Case sat on the outside. Everyone decided to have breakfast for dinner. Tiffany and Case ordered pancakes. The flapjacks at Sally’s were the size of a plate. They were served in stacks of three. They came with a scoop of butter on top. They included a side of breakfast meat. Tiffany chose four sausage patties. They were juicy and delicious. Case opted for bacon strips. They were long, succulent, and crispy. There were eight in all. The pancakes came with small, glass pitchers of hot, maple syrup.

Case’s flapjacks were widdled down to three bites. One strip of bacon floated atop a pool of syrup on Case’s plate. Case picked up the bacon strip and nibbled on it. Tiffany had half a sausage patty left. She took a tiny bite and stared out the window. Case had been on his phone for the past couple of minutes. He was dining at Sally’s and chatting with Paloni. He was pretty good at it, too. He crunched bits of bacon between his teeth. Then, he took a sip from his glass. It was half filled with water. Case shrugged.

“They were gangsters, man,” he remarked. “The guy up front had an assault rifle.” He pointed at the receiver. “And, you remember what you said. You said if we had any problems to call *you*.”

Paloni sighed. “*Yes, I DID say that. Didn’t I?*”

Case nibbled at his bacon strip. “At least no one was killed.”

“*Nope,*” Paloni replied. “*And just as soon as the hospital releases them, all four of those guys are going into custody.*”

Case nodded. “That sounds good, Paloni. I appreciate you taking care of that for me.” He sipped his water. “*I certainly wasn’t going to do it. Those fools would’ve probably shot us.*”

“*You did good, Case,*” Paloni assured him. “*Are you guys about to leave?*”

“Yeah, man,” Case replied. “We’re going to finish eating. Then, we’ve gotta stop and get gas. And then, we’re getting the hell out of here.” Tiffany dropped the remainder of her sausage patty in her mouth. She turned and threw her arms around Case’s waist. She rested her head against his chest. Case laid his palm on Tiffany’s back.

“*Alright,*” Paloni remarked. “*Well, don’t piss off any more drug dealers on your way out. You think you can handle that?*”

Case nodded. “Ten-four, Sarge.” He closed his phone against his cheek and dropped it on the table. Adam ordered French toast. At Sally’s, the French toast was an inch thick. Adam’s order came with four slices of French toast and four bacon strips. Adam slid his fork into the last bite French toast. He slid it through a puddle of syrup, held it in front of his lips, and snagged it with his teeth. Gabrielle was most of the way through an omelet. It was huge. It was stuffed full of sausage, ham, cheddar cheese, and bell peppers. Gabrielle dropped a bite on her tongue and chomped away. She stared out the window. Rain poured down the glass. Gabrielle couldn’t even see out. She looked at Case.

“So... you didn’t kill those guys?”

Case showed Gabrielle his palms. “Hey, *I* didn’t do anything.”

Tiffany looked up. “You shot at a drug dealer with a...” Tiffany made quotation marks with her fingers. “‘Handgun’.” Case looked down. He narrowed his eyes. He looked at Gabrielle.

“Well, I didn’t do a *thing* to those jerks that were chasing us.” Case took a sip of water.

“All I did was move to the left a little.” He looked at Tiffany. They smiled at each other. Case looked up. “And, no. No one died.”

“Are they going to jail?” Adam asked. He held a glass in his hand. He swirled it around. A little cola and a few chunks of ice spun around the base of the glass.

“Yeah,” Case replied. “The hospital’s going to patch them up. Then, the Lincoln police are taking them into custody.” Adam nodded. He put the rim of his glass to his lips and tilted his head back. Cola dribbled into his mouth. The ice chunks gathered around his lips and nose. Some of them tumbled down his cheeks. Gabrielle was watching. She laid her fork on her plate, cupped her hand over her mouth, and snickered. Adam tilted his head forward. The ice around his mouth returned to the glass. Adam set the glass on the table and looked himself over. He scooped three chunks of ice off his lap and dropped them on his plate. He stared at the table and nudged Gabrielle with his elbow.

“Shut-up, punk.” Gabrielle scoffed. Adam faced her and smiled. Kathy stood beside their table. She looked around and grinned. She pointed at everyone’s plates.

“You guys want me to take these?”

Case looked at Gabrielle and Adam. “You guys ready to get out of here?”

Gabrielle looked at the table. “Yes.”

Adam handed Kathy his plate. “You could say that.” Gabrielle, Tiffany, and Case handed Kathy their plates. Case looked into Kathy’s eyes.

“Can I get the check, please?”

Kathy stacked everyone’s plates along her arms. “Sure. I’ll bring it right out.”

“Thank you,” Case replied. He looked at Tiffany. Tiffany rested against the back of her seat and sighed. Case rubbed her shoulder. “You ready to leave?” Tiffany faced him and

exhaled through her nose. She slowly nodded. Case squinted. “You sure?”

Tiffany tilted her head. “*Louis, I’m sure,*” she whispered. “*Let’s get OUT of here. You know, before something else happens.*” Case nodded. He looked to his left. Kathy wandered up and handed him the check. Case took out his billfold. He handed Kathy his debit card and a twenty. Kathy looked the twenty over and gasped. She threw her hands out at her sides.

“For being the nicest person in the whole town,” Case explained. Kathy smiled. She pointed towards the kitchen.

“I’ll ring this up.” She looked at Tiffany. “You feeling better, honey?” Tiffany forced a smile. She looked at her lap and nodded. Case slid his fingers through Tiffany’s.

“She’ll be fine,” Case told Kathy. “I promise.” Tiffany squeezed Case’s hand. She laid her head on his shoulder. Kathy smiled and nodded. She headed for the kitchen. Case looked down. Tiffany looked into Case’s eyes. “Where should we go for gas?” Case asked.

Tiffany sighed. “Somewhere outside of town.” She snagged a hold of Case’s jacket. “Please.” Case nodded. Kathy returned with Case’s debit card, and they left.

Case wobbled down Main Street and returned to the highway. He drove for five minutes and passed the cemetery. A few minutes from there, the tiny, two lane road became an industrious, four lane highway. Case took the first exit he came to. There was one gas station on the service road. It was called “Valerie’s Quick Stop.” Case parked beside a gas pump, popped the hood, and got out. He looked around. He, Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle were the only customers there. There was one other car. It was parked in front of the store. Case assumed it belonged to an employee. Case could barely make it out. The gas pumps were below an awning. Rainwater poured from the edges of the awning. Case was surrounded by waterfalls.

He opened the fuel door. It was on his side of the car. He unscrewed the gas cap and laid



it on top of the car. Tiffany hopped out. She wandered to a trash can beside the gas pumps. There was a paper towel dispenser on the side. Tiffany snagged a couple of paper towels and walked in front of the car. There was a keypad on the gas pump. It had a slot for credit cards. Case slid his debit card into the slot and yanked it out. He looked at Tiffany and smiled.

“Thanks, buddy.” Tiffany smiled and exhaled through her nostrils. She lifted the hood and looked around. There was a metallic ring near the top, left corner of the engine compartment. It was sticking out of a long, narrow tube. Tiffany slid her index finger through the loop and pulled. A dipstick came out. Tiffany slid the end of the dipstick through the paper towels and returned it to the tube. She pulled it out and looked at the end. It was dotted with engine oil. It was shiny and golden. It reached the full line on the dipstick. Tiffany swiped the end of the dipstick with the paper towels. Then, she returned the dipstick to the tiny tube. Tiffany glanced at a plastic reservoir. It resided at the left side of the firewall. It was half filled with coolant. The coolant was olive green.

Case typed his billing zip code into the keypad on the gas pump. A readout read “Wait for card to be authorized...” After ten seconds, it read “Choose fuel type.” Case looked at the fuel dispenser handles. There were four. Each was a different color. There was a green one, a red one, a white one, and a blue one. Except for the white one, each handle had a word written above it in white letters. The white handle had a word written in blue letters. The green handle was marked “Diesel.” The red handle was marked “Premium.” The white handle was marked “Super.” The blue handle was marked “Unleaded.” Case grabbed the blue handle and removed it from the machine. A steel tube was sticking out of the end of the handle. Case slid the tube into his gas tank and looked at the machine. There was a second readout at the top. It had two lines. The top line was the price. The bottom line was the number of gallons dispensed. They

were blank. After five seconds, the top line read “0.00.” The bottom line read “0.000.”

Tiffany checked the transmission fluid, the power steering fluid, and the brake fluid. They all looked fine. She dropped the hood and tossed her paper towels into the trash can. She wandered to the side of the car and opened the front, passenger door. Case’s umbrella was on the floor. Tiffany snagged it by the hook and looked towards the back seat. Adam and Gabrielle looked up.

“You guys need to pee?” Tiffany asked. Adam shook his head. He went at Sally’s.

“Nah,” Gabrielle replied.

Tiffany pointed at them. “You sure? It’s your last chance before we get home.”

Adam shrugged. “Louis will stop. He’s cool.”

Tiffany narrowed her eyes. “We are not *stopping* until we get home. No way.”

Adam nodded. “I’m good, man.” Tiffany looked at Gabrielle. She nodded.

“You guys want something to drink?” Tiffany asked. Gabrielle parted her hands. She held her right hand in front of her lips. She held her left hand in front of her chest.

“Get me one of those iced tea... things,” Gabrielle replied. Tiffany smiled. She looked at Adam.

“Adam?”

Adam pressed his lips together. “Get me an ice cream.”

Tiffany scrunched up her nose. “Ew! You just ate that big, huge plate of French toast. Now, you want ice cream?”

Adam shrugged. “Sounds good.”

Tiffany pointed at Adam with Case’s umbrella. “You’re gross.” She shut the door and looked over the top of the car. She opened the umbrella above her head. Case looked up. “I’m

going inside. You want anything?" Case pressed his lips together. He showed Tiffany his palm.

"Hang tight, okay? Let me go with you."

Tiffany narrowed her eyes. "I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself."

Case smiled. "Well, okay. But, I also have to pee." He looked above Tiffany's head.

"And, *you* have my umbrella." Tiffany smiled. She turned the umbrella in her fingertips.

"I didn't mean..." She looked at the ground. Case nodded.

"I *do* want to go with you." Tiffany looked up. "There's some crazy people around these parts. I don't want you going in there all by yourself." Tiffany exhaled through her nose. Case rolled his eyes. "But also, my bladder's about to break."

Tiffany snickered. "Okay." There was a thump. Case removed the gas nozzle from his car and returned it to the machine. He watched the readout on the keypad. It read "Printing receipt..." There was a tiny printer below the keypad. It made a whining sound. Nothing came out. The readout above the keypad read "Clerk has receipt." Case rolled his eyes. He snagged the gas cap from the top of the car. He returned it to the opening of the tank and closed the little door. Case and Tiffany met at the front of the car. Case stood below the umbrella, and they walked through the rain. The store portion of Valerie's Quick Stop was surrounded by old, crimson bricks. There was a pair of doors along the front of the store. They were made of glass. A steel frame bordered that. There was a row of bars in front of the glass. A small window hovered at either side of the doors. They were also covered with rows of bars. Two steel handles hovered near the middle of the doors.

Case took his umbrella from Tiffany. He grabbed the handle on the right door and pulled it. Tiffany wandered inside. Case closed his umbrella and followed her in. Inside, the walls were white. The floor was covered with small, tan tiles. The tiles were separated by thick, black

grout. There were wooden shelves to the left and a counter to the right. The walls of the counter were crimson. There was a shiny black surface on top. There was a register on the counter near the door. Two guys around Tiffany and Case's age sat behind the counter. They sat next to each other, flipping through a magazine. They wore Valerie's Quick Stop uniforms. That consisted of a maroon, button up shirt with short sleeves, khakis, and a nametag. The one on the left had curly, brown hair. The one on the right had shaggy, black hair and pale skin. Neither employee looked up. They continued to flip through their magazine. The one with the brown hair pointed at something and snickered.

Case stood, staring at them. He narrowed his eyes. He spotted the bathroom. It was to the left of the counter. Case turned to Tiffany.

"Get me a fountain drink. Would you?" Tiffany nodded. Case wandered towards the restroom. Tiffany wandered down the first aisle. There was a waist high freezer at the end of the aisle. It was decorated with colorful plastic. The top was covered with two sliding, glass doors. Tiffany spotted a pint of Gabby's ice cream. It was the Cookies and Cream flavor. It was Adam's favorite. Tiffany snagged a tub of that. She wandered towards the wall. The wall at the end of the aisles was lined with refrigerators. They were covered with glass doors. Tiffany spotted a bottle of Nevada Iced Tea. It came in tall, quart sized cans. The cans were tan with green, wobbly letters. That's what Gabrielle asked for. Tiffany snagged a can of that. She headed for the soda fountain.

The soda fountain was along the back wall. Near the center of the back wall, there was a machine that dispensed nacho cheese and chili. There was a stainless steel cabinet to the left of that. A wire rack rested on top. Plastic tubs of corn chips were stacked on the rack. That's what the nacho cheese and chili were for. There were square shaped holes in the top of the cabinet.

There were little, white, plastic bins in the holes. There were condiments in those. There were onions, sliced jalapeños, relish, diced tomatoes, and sour cream. There was a pair of tongs for gathering condiments. There was also a bin with sporks. Tiffany grabbed a spork for Adam's ice cream and stuffed it in her pocket. The soda fountain was to the right of the chili and cheese machine. There was a stainless steel dispenser next to the machine. It contained stacks of polystyrene cups. There were three sizes of cups. One was twenty ounces; one was thirty-two ounces; and one was forty-four ounces.

Tiffany snagged two forty-four ounce cups, a couple of lids, and two straws. The lids were stacked on top of the cup dispenser. They were stacked in see through, plastic bins. The bins were arranged by size. The straws stuck out of a slot in the cup dispenser. It resided between the lids and the twenty ounce cups. The soda fountain had two ice dispensers. One was crushed. One was cubed. Tiffany set a cup below the crushed ice dispenser. There was a steel lever in front of the ice dispenser. Tiffany lowered it. She filled the first cup halfway. She did the same with the second. She filled the cups with cola and pressed the lids on top. The straws were covered with paper. Tiffany held a straw in each hand. She tapped the ends against the counter with chips and condiments. The tops of the straws poked out. Tiffany slid out the straws and stabbed one through each lid.

She grabbed a cup with each hand. She set the one in her right hand on top of Gabrielle's tea. She laid the one in her left hand atop Adam's ice cream. She carried the four items with two fingers a piece and approached the register. She arranged everything along the front counter and looked towards the restroom. Case was still inside. Tiffany looked at the guys behind the counter. They looked up. The one on the left had hazy, blue eyes. The one on the right slid a black beanie over his head. It had a skull and crossbones on it. It was Tyler and Troy. Tiffany

looked into Tyler's hazy eyes. She shuddered. The boys recognized Tiffany immediately. Tyler grinned. Troy scrunched up his nose and gritted his teeth.

"Hey, Tits!" Tyler screeched. Tiffany looked at Troy. He flipped her off. Tyler looked Tiffany over. He shook his head. "Well, I see *you* haven't changed, much. You still dress like a geek." Troy snickered. Tiffany looked at the floor. She fluttered her eyelids. Case appeared beside her. Troy pointed at him.

"Who's *this*?" Tiffany looked at Case. Case narrowed his eyes. He looked at Troy's beanie. Then, he looked into Tyler's eyes. They were blue and hazy. Case grinned. He pointed at Troy and Tyler with his umbrella.

"Tyler and Troy, right?" Case slid his fingers through Tiffany's. Tiffany exhaled a shaky breath. She faced Tyler and Troy. Tyler tilted his head. He grinned.

"We were talking about Titty just the other day," he recalled. "Like, that time we were playing spin the bottle." He looked at Troy. "*You* remember. And, old Sweeny shoved that dildo down her throat!"

Troy turned to Tyler and grinned. "Oh, yeah. I remember that!" Tyler cackled. Troy looked at Case. "Have you heard this story?"

Case smiled, showing his teeth. "Yes, I heard about that." He looked at Tiffany. "You guys talk to David, lately?" Case faced Tyler and Troy. Tiffany pressed her lips together. She was fighting back a smile. Tyler smiled. He narrowed his eyes.

"Yeah, he's still around. What *about* him?"

Case raised his eyebrows. "Oh, maybe you haven't heard." Troy narrowed his eyes. "He's in the hospital." Tyler raised his eyebrows. Case slid his fingers across his teeth. "Apparently, some nutcase knocked out all his teeth." Tiffany turned her head and snickered.

Troy pressed his lips together. He puffed up his cheeks. Tyler looked at Tiffany. He sighed.

“What the hell are *you* laughing at, Tits?” Tiffany looked up. Case pointed at Tyler with his umbrella.

“Don’t call her that.” Tyler smirked. He threw his hands out at his sides.

“Hey, it’s just a nickname.”

“So is ‘Dipshit’,” Case replied. He looked at Troy. “So is ‘Punk Ass Bitch’.” Troy narrowed his eyes. Case narrowed *his*. He looked at Tyler. “I can share some *others* with you, if you’d like.”

Tyler showed Case his palms. “Hey, man. We’re just working, here. Uh...” He scratched his head.

“How lovely,” Case replied. He smiled, sarcastically. “So, you wouldn’t mind ringing all this up for us. Yeah?” Tyler looked at the items Tiffany laid on the counter. He pressed his lips together and stood up. He picked up a scanning gun. He scanned barcodes on the drinks and ice cream. He typed something on the register and pressed enter. He looked up.

“It’s eight seventy-seven.” Case nodded. He let go of Tiffany’s hand and took out his billfold. He stuffed his umbrella underneath his arm. He snagged a ten and handed it to Tyler. Tyler laid it in a plastic organizer inside the register. He gathered a one dollar bill, two dimes and three pennies. He closed the register. He dropped the change in Case’s hand. Case stared at Tyler’s hand. It was shaking. Tyler looked into Case’s eyes. “There you go.” Case nodded. He pointed towards his car with his thumb.

“Can I get a receipt? For the gas?” Tyler puffed up his cheeks. He turned and typed something into the register. “Yeah,” Case continued. He looked at Troy. Troy crossed his arms over his chest. “Apparently *someone* didn’t refill the dispenser.” Tyler tore off a receipt. He

handed it to Case. Case snatched it out of his hand. He looked into Tyler's hazy, blue eyes.

"That really *pisses* me off. You know?" Tiffany laid her hand on Case's shoulder. Case faced her. He handed her his umbrella. Tyler nodded. He looked into Tiffany's eyes.

"See ya. Tiff." Tiffany sighed. She reached for her cola. Case grabbed her wrist.

"It's Tiffany," he corrected. Tyler looked at him. He pressed his lips together.

"Right. Sorry." Tiffany swallowed. She looked at Case. Case glanced at her. Then, he looked back.

"Say it."

Tyler exhaled a shaky breath. "T-Tiffany." Tiffany smiled at Tyler.

"Thank you," Case replied. He picked up Adam's ice cream, Gabrielle's tea, and his cola. He followed Tiffany to the door. Tiffany backed through the door and opened the umbrella. She and Case stood underneath and left. Case exhaled a satisfied sigh. He looked at Tiffany. She was smiling at him. Case slid his arm around her shoulders. He kissed the side of her head and held up his soda.

"Hey, thanks for getting me a drink, man." He took a sip. Tiffany hugged her soda with the arm carrying the umbrella. She patted Case's shoulder.

"You're welcome." Case looked at her. He put Gabrielle's tea below the base of his drink. He held his drink with his upper fingers and the tea with his lower fingers. He hugged Adam's ice cream with the same arm. Then, he reached for Tiffany's hand. Tiffany slid her fingers through his. Case looked around.

"You wanna drive us home?" Tiffany snickered. She looked into Case's eyes.

"The kids are right. I'll probably kill us." Case laughed. Tiffany looked at him from the tops of her eyes. "In *this* weather?" She faced forward and shook her head. Case nodded.



“Well, maybe you can drive us up the driveway or something. Yeah?”

Tiffany smiled at him. “Sure. Okay.” Adam and Gabrielle got out. They opened the front doors for Tiffany and Case. Gabrielle got her tea from Case. Adam got his ice cream. Tiffany handed him the spork. Adam looked it over, suspiciously. Tiffany shrugged. “It’s all they *had!*” Adam smiled. He took his ice cream and hopped in. Case drove home without stopping. He stopped at the gate and looked at Tiffany. Tiffany pushed her mouth to the side of her face. She looked at Case. “What are we doing?”

Case motioned towards the driveway with his head. “You said you’d drive us.” Adam sat behind Case. He rested his chin on the back of Case’s seat.

“No!” he cried.

Gabrielle rested her chin on the back of Tiffany’s seat. “Uh-uh! No way!”

Case looked over his shoulder. “Hey! You two keep your mouths shut.” Adam narrowed his eyes. Case focused on Gabrielle. He motioned towards the gate with his head. Gabrielle tilted her head. Her arms dangled at her sides.

“Seriously?” Case took a set of keys out of his pocket. He handed the keys to Gabrielle. Gabrielle looked into Case’s eyes. She blinked her big, blue eyes. Case smiled. He snatched the keys from Gabrielle and grabbed his umbrella. He looked at Tiffany.

“I’ll be right back.” He motioned towards his seat with his head. “Sit here.”

Tiffany smiled at Case. “Why do you want *me* to drive us?”

“Because, I’ve never *seen* you drive,” Case replied. He unbuckled Tiffany’s seatbelt and took her hand. “Come on. Switch with me.” Case unbuckled *his* seatbelt. Tiffany sighed.

“Okay.” Case kicked his door out of the way and got out. He helped Tiffany into the driver’s seat. Tiffany plopped down and licked her lips. Case closed the door. He hurried to the

gate, unlocked the doors, and slid the doors out of the way. He returned to the car and sat in the front, passenger's seat. He closed his umbrella and laid it below Gabrielle's feet. He looked at Tiffany.

"Okay, then."

Tiffany stretched her legs. "Man, what the hell?" Tiffany looked below the steering wheel. She looked up. "I can't even reach the pedals." Case cackled. He reached between Tiffany's shins. There was a lever at the bottom of the seat. Case pulled the lever and tugged the seat. The seat slid forward. Tiffany patted the brake and the gas pedals with her foot. "Ah. There we go." Case sat back and buckled his safety belt. Tiffany did the same. Adam touched his forehead then his chest. He touched his left shoulder then his right. He looked at Gabrielle.

"Say your prayers," he remarked.

Case looked over his shoulder. "Shut... up."

"Yeah!" Tiffany cried. She looked at the rearview mirror. She pulled the mirror down and focused it on Adam. She smiled. "Leave me alone."

Case patted Tiffany's shoulder. "It's okay, Tiffany. Don't listen to them." Tiffany pushed the brake pedal. She threw the shifter into overdrive.

"Here we go," she remarked. She punched the gas pedal. Everyone's heads jerked back. "Oh, crap!" Tiffany growled. She stomped on the brake. The car skidded to a stop. Case's head almost hit the dash. He looked at Tiffany. Tiffany stared back. Her eyebrows fell at the sides. "Sorry!" she cried. Case sighed. Gabrielle smacked his seat.

"Told you."

Case looked over his shoulder. "Be quiet." He patted Tiffany's fingers. "Ease into it." Tiffany let off the brake. She pressed the gas pedal, timidly. The car was basically coasting.

Case dropped his forehead in his palm. Tiffany looked at him and smiled. Case looked up. He shook his head. Tiffany came to a minor curve in the driveway. She jerked the steering wheel to the right. She ended up on the grass.

“Damn it!” Tiffany shrieked. She stomped on the brakes. Everyone slumped forward. Tiffany slid her tongue out of the corner of her mouth. She stomped on the gas and swirled the steering wheel to the left. She ended up on the other side of the grass. She pushed the brake pedal to the floor. Case pressed his palm against the dash. He glared at Tiffany. Tiffany looked at him. She pressed her lips together. Case grabbed a hold of the shifter. He slung it to the top of the steering column. He motioned towards his seat with his thumb.

“Get back over here. You’re fired.”

Tiffany hugged the steering wheel. “No! Just let me drive us to the house. Please?”

Case threw his arms out at his sides. “You can’t drive!” He looked over his shoulder. “The kids were right.” Adam and Gabrielle shrugged.

“I *can*,” Tiffany replied. “I’m just not any good at it.”

Case narrowed his eyes. “Do you even have a license?” Tiffany scrunched up her nose. She played with her fingers, nervously.

“Um, well...”

Case gasped. “Oh, my God! You’ve gotta be *kidding* me!”

Tiffany shrugged. “Look, I’m sorry. I-I never had no one to teach me. Okay?” Case unbuckled his seatbelt. He reached across and unbuckled Tiffany’s. Tiffany looked into Case’s eyes. “You’re kicking me out. Aren’t you?”

“No,” Case told her. He slid across and sat next to her. There was a lever on the left side of the steering column. Case lifted it and raised the steering wheel as high as it would go. He

pushed the lever at the bottom of the seat to the right. He scooted the seat back. Then, he slid his arms around Tiffany's waist, lifted her, and set her in his lap. Adam smacked his lips.

"Man, can we get this show on the road, or what?"

Case looked over his shoulder. "You can walk, if you want." Adam looked out the window. Rain was pouring down the glass. Adam faced forward.

"Take your time, guys."

Gabrielle leaned forward. "Hey, will teach *me* how to drive, Louis?"

Case looked at her. "Of course I will, Gabs." He faced forward. "Not tonight, though." Gabrielle sat back and nodded. Case lowered the steering wheel. "Okay, Tiffany," he sighed. "I'll work the peddles, and you steer." Case rested his chin on Tiffany's shoulder and looked at her. "Okay?" Tiffany exhaled through her nose. She turned her head and nodded. Case patted her shoulder. He pressed the brake pedal and lowered the shifter. He eased the accelerator towards the floor. Tiffany jerked the steering wheel to the right. Case sighed. He eased the brake to the floor. He laid his fingers on Tiffany's. "*Not so hard*," he whispered. "*Okay?*" Tiffany nodded. Case let off the brake and accelerated. He left his hands on Tiffany's and guided her to the driveway. He remembered what she did at the gas station, earlier. Tiffany had done that in the past when she and Case gassed up the car, together. Case smirked.

"So, you know how to check the fluids. But, you don't have a driver's license?"

Tiffany pressed her lips together. "My dad used to make me." She looked over her shoulder. "Whenever he bought gas, he always made me check them." She faced forward. Case eased his hands away from Tiffany's. He slid his arms around her waist. Tiffany smiled. "I've driven a few times but never very far." Tiffany swerved to the right. The right tires were on the grass. Case smiled and exhaled through his nose. He grabbed a hold of the steering wheel and

eased it to the left. “Sorry!” Tiffany cried.

“You’re doing fine,” Case assured her. He slid his fingers across Tiffany’s arm. “Don’t worry, honey. I’ll teach you.” Adam stared at their new home. He narrowed his eyes. He began to get a really bad feeling. It was a gnawing, nagging feeling. Adam felt like he was dreaming and someone was shaking him awake. Except, he never woke up. He squeezed Gabrielle’s hand. Gabrielle looked at him. She smacked her lips.

“Adam!” she whispered. “*She’s not doing THAT bad!*” Adam didn’t move. He just stared. Gabrielle raised her eyebrows. She rubbed Adam’s shoulder with her free hand. “Adam? What’s wrong?” Adam faced her. He looked terrified.

“*I don’t know,*” he whispered back. Tiffany steered the car towards the garage door on the left. Case let off the accelerator and eased the brake to the floor. He pressed a button on the visor. The garage door rolled up. Case let off the brake and pushed the accelerator. Adam grabbed his shoulder.

“Wait!” he shrieked. Case stomped on the brake. He looked over his shoulder.

“Adam... What?” Adam sighed. He sat back and folded his arms over his chest.

“Um, maybe you *should* teach Tiffany how to drive. You know, we could find some vacant parking lot somewhere. And, she could drive around a little bit.”

“Ooh!” Gabrielle shouted. She leaned forward. “We could take her to that place where we were hanging out the other day. You know, with the graffiti everywhere.”

Case nodded. “Not tonight, guys. Okay? Maybe tomorrow.” Case pressed the gas pedal.

“Graffiti?” Tiffany inquired.

“Don’t ask,” Case replied. Adam grabbed Case’s arm.

“Stop!” he cried. Case stomped the brake pedal to the floor. He looked over his shoulder.

“What, Adam? Damn.”

“Don’t...” Adam shook his head. “Don’t go in there.” Tiffany narrowed her eyes. She looked over her shoulder.

“What’s going on?”

Adam sighed. “Nothing.” Case and Tiffany looked at each other. Case threw the shifter into park and turned back the key. He and Tiffany looked at Adam.

“Okay, Adam. What the hell?”

Gabrielle parted her lips. “It’s the house,” she replied. She looked at Adam. “That’s what it is. Huh?”

Tiffany looked at Case. “What *about* it?”

Case looked at Tiffany. “The kids think the house is haunted.”

“I didn’t say that!” Adam shrieked. He pointed at Gabrielle with his thumb.

“*Gabrielle’s* the one!” Gabrielle smiled. She shook her head.

“God, Adam! You’re such a dick!”

Tiffany looked at Case. “Great. You bought a haunted house. Didn’t you?” Case smiled. He shrugged.

“It would explain the five thousand dollar price tag.” Tiffany sighed. She nodded.

“Yes, it would.” She looked at the kids. “What did you guys see?”

Adam showed Tiffany his palms. “Man, I didn’t see *nothing!*”

Tiffany pointed at him. “Damn it, Adam! Don’t give me that shit. What happened?”

Adam sighed. He looked away and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Look, Gabrielle claims she heard some chains... or something.”

Gabrielle scoffed. “You heard it too, numb nuts!”

Tiffany nodded. “Was that all?”

Gabrielle smacked her lips. “No!” She pointed at Adam. “*He’s* been freaking out on me ever since we came here!”

Adam shrugged. “I have no idea what she’s talking about.”

Gabrielle growled. “Yes, huh!” She pointed at him. “You told me when we were moving in... remember?” Adam pushed his mouth to the side of his face. He looked out the window. Gabrielle looked at Tiffany and Case. “He warned me...” Gabrielle leaned forward. She pointed towards the row of blue glass at the top of the house. “He told me not to go in the attic.”

“*Man, whatever,*” Adam grumbled.

Gabrielle shoved Adam’s shoulder. “Yes, you *did!*” she shouted. Adam shook his head. He crossed his arms over his chest and looked away. Gabrielle looked at Tiffany and Case. She motioned towards the house. “I’m telling you. This house is haunted. Okay?”

Case looked at Tiffany. “Isn’t there something you can do?” Tiffany looked into Case’s eyes. She pressed her lips together and tilted her head.

“Um... well there’s a lot of things I can do.”

Gabrielle pounded her fists into her seat. “Then, *do* something! Will you?” She motioned towards her boyfriend. “Look! Adam’s scared to death!” Adam looked at her. He faced Tiffany and Case and exhaled through his nose.

“I am *not*.” Gabrielle folded her arms over her chest. She looked at the floor and shook her head. Case looked at Tiffany.

“Can’t you... use your Ouija board or something?”

Tiffany scrunched up her nose. “It’s after eight, right?” Case nodded. Tiffany looked around. The sky was filled with black. Rain poured down the windows. Tiffany shook her head. “No. I never the Ouija board after dark.” Case narrowed his eyes. He threw his hands out at his sides. “It’s dangerous.”

Case nodded. “Really?”

Tiffany slid her lips to the side of her face. “There’s one thing we *can* try, though.” She looked at the kids. “You guys took some boxes up to the attic, right?” Adam and Gabrielle nodded. Tiffany looked at Case. “I have some of those wooden blocks, you know? With the different colored letters?”

Case took a breath. “Oh. Like, for little kids, right?”

Tiffany nodded. “Yes.” She looked at Adam and Gabrielle. “We can leave *those* out.” She shrugged. “Maybe your little friend will leave us a message.” She looked at Case. “But, I’m not doing anything more than *that*. Not tonight. I’d like to know more about what we’re dealing with, first. You can’t just go opening doors in the middle of the night. You have to know what you’re up against.”

Case nodded. “Opening doors?”

Tiffany took a breath. “You see, a Ouija board is like an open door. If you use one for communication, you’re allowing something from the other side into your home.” She narrowed her eyes. “Does that make sense?”

“Tiffany’s worried it might be a demon,” Adam explained.

Tiffany motioned towards him. “Exactly.” Case nodded. Tiffany looked at him. “If this is a demonic presence, we can’t let it into our home.”



Case narrowed his eyes. “But, it’s already in there.” Tiffany smiled. She shook her head.

“Oh, no. It’s not.” She sighed. “Look, the kids are just seeing glimpses of something. It’s like a cat scratching at the front door. It’s kind of annoying. But, if you bang on the door, the cat will run away.”

Case nodded. “Okay.”

“If you let the cat in, though...” Tiffany shrugged. “Then, it might claw up all your furniture.” Case pressed his lips together. “That’s why I have the blocks. *They’re* not doors to the other side. They’re just blocks of wood.” Tiffany threw her hands out at her sides. “It’s like a cat leaving claw marks on your door. They might be hideous. But, you can paint over them.”

Case nodded. “Cool. Let’s do it.”

Tiffany nodded. “Okay.” Case eased the accelerator towards the floor. Tiffany steered Case’s car into the garage. Case pressed the button on the visor. The garage door closed. Case killed the car and threw the shifter into park. Adam opened his door and hopped out. Gabrielle followed and closed it. She and Adam wandered towards the door to the den. Adam tried it. It was locked. He and Gabrielle looked over their shoulders. Case and Tiffany smiled. Case rolled down his window. He tossed Adam his keys and pointed towards the attic.

“Get up there and find those letter blocks. Would you?”

Adam’s eyes popped open. “But...” Adam laid his fingers across his lips. “Um...”

Case raised his palms. “Problem?” Adam gritted his teeth. Case narrowed his eyes. “Go ahead, Adam.” He smirked. “Unless... you’re afraid of something.” Gabrielle smiled. She crossed her arms over her chest and looked at Adam. Adam glared at her.

“What the hell are *you* staring at?” he demanded. He looked at Case. “Man, I don’t even

*believe* in any of this crap. Why do *I* have to go up there?”

Case shrugged. “No reason. But, there’s no reason why you shouldn’t. Is there?” Adam squinted. Gabrielle snatched Case’s keys out of Adam’s hands. She unlocked the door, turned the knob, and shoved the door out of her way. She headed towards the stairs. Adam followed.

“Wait!” he shouted. “Wait, Gabrielle!” Adam shut the door behind him. Tiffany exhaled. She melted against Case’s chest. Case slid his arms around Tiffany’s waist and kissed the top of her head. Tiffany tilted her head back. She looked at Case from the tops of her eyes.

“Hey, Louis,” she said. “After this, can we...” She smiled. Case smiled back.

“You wanna try out the hot tub?” Tiffany’s eyes lit up. She took an eager breath.

“Yes! That is such a good idea!” Case nodded. He slid his fingers along Tiffany’s arms.

“I can’t wait.” Case looked at the door to the den. “You think there’s a ghost in there?”

Tiffany shrugged. “I’ve seen *stranger* things.”

Case patted Tiffany’s shoulder. “Well, I hope it doesn’t like hot tubs.” Case opened the driver’s side door. He and Tiffany got out. “I’m not into threesomes.” Tiffany chuckled.

Joline and another nurse escorted Andre towards his room. Andre’s hands were cuffed behind his back. His long, grey hair swished at the sides of his face. His eyes were hazy and cold. He looked like a zombie. The other nurse was a blonde. Her nametag read “Laura.” She had crimson lips and lazy, blue eyes. She held Andre’s right arm. Joline held his left. They arrived at Andre’s room. Like the others, Andre’s room was covered by a thick, steel door. There was a tiny window near the top. It was covered by steel mesh. There was a narrow slot near the middle. It was covered by a long, narrow cover. The cover hinged at the top. It was used for depositing breakfast trays and removing handcuffs. Joline held a set of keys. She unlocked the deadbolt on Andre’s door and opened it. Laura marched Andre inside. She left

Andre standing in front of the door. She joined Joline outside. Joline shut the door. Andre stood absolutely still. He stared into space. Joline sighed.

“Back up, Mr. Haynes. I need to take off your cuffs.” Andre stood motionless. He slowly backed towards the door. He slid his giant hands through the slot. The cover hinged back. Joline slid a key into the cuff on Andre’s left hand. She twisted it. Laura stood two doors down. She was laughing. Joline looked at her. “What is it?” Laura cupped her hand over her mouth. She pointed at one of the doors.

“Palmer!” Laura squeezed between giggles. “He’s walking around naked again!”

Joline smiled. “Mr. Palmer!” she shouted. “Put your clothes back on! Or, we’re going to get a set of body restraints.” Andre bent over. He slid his left hand through the slot. He slid it all the way to his elbow. Laura stared at Palmer, shaking her head.

“He looks good for an old man.” She looked at Joline. “I think we should...” She narrowed her eyes. Joline turned her head without looking away.

“What?” Andre snagged a hold of Joline’s hair. “Whoa!” Joline shrieked. She curled her fingers around Andre’s. Andre thrashed Joline’s head about. Laura dashed down the hallway. She reached behind Joline’s head and grabbed a hold of Andre’s hand.

“Haynes!” she shouted. “Let go of her!” Andre glared at Laura through the slot in his door. He gritted his teeth and snarled.

“Andre!” Joline yelled. “Do you need some time in the white room?” Andre narrowed his eyes. He eased his fingers away from Joline’s hair. He jerked his hand inside. Joline stood and sighed. She adjusted her hat and dusted her hair. She turned and slid her key into Andre’s other cuff. “I swear, Andre,” she remarked. “You’re either the easiest guy to get along with or the hardest.” Joline undid Andre’s shackle and handed the cuffs to Laura. She pointed at the

door. “Now, you behave yourself.” She narrowed her eyes. “You hear me?” Andre stood in silence. He didn’t move. Joline and Laura looked at each other. They turned and headed down the hallway. Andre stared into space. He waited until he could no longer hear the nurse’s footsteps. He held up his hand. Joline’s bobby pin was lying in his gigantic palm.

## Chapter 16: “Tiffany’s in the Well”

When Tiffany was ten, she played Hide and Seek with her friends. Actually, she didn’t have any friends. Rather, she played Hide and Seek with David, Tyler, Ryan, Troy, and Aaron. Tiffany didn’t have much choice. It was David Sweeny’s birthday. And, Tiffany wound up having to go. Naturally, her father hadn’t picked her up. Everyone else’s parents showed up two hours earlier. David’s buddies were staying the night. Apparently, Tiffany was too. David and his family lived in the country. They owned five acres of land. Most of it was filled with thick blades of green grass. There was a small section where the Sweeny’s grew rows of vegetables. The land was dotted with trees. Two of them had tree houses. There was a house at the center of the property. Two small, tin buildings resided elsewhere.

The property was surrounded by a wooden fence. It was made of round, wooden posts. They stuck out of the ground every six feet. Two rows of railing lay along the tops and middles of the posts. The house faced an opening along the north side of the fence. There was a water well at the northeast corner of the property. It was buried. It was marked by a pump sticking out of the ground. There was an old, abandoned well at the southwest corner. It was surrounded by a cylinder of white stones. The land was dotted with old, cruddy cars and tractors. Two new tractors were parked near the new well. There was an old, willow tree at the northwest corner of the property. That’s where David, Tyler, Ryan, Troy, Aaron, and Tiffany were. They stood in a circle below the tree. It was summer. It was nearly 8:30. There was an hour of daylight left. David was in charge of picking who was it. He held out his fist.

“Put in your dukes,” he told everyone. Tiffany looked around. She wore a pair of cutoff, blue jean shorts. They were faded and frayed. They reached halfway down her thighs. She wore a bright, yellow shirt with a giant, red question mark. She had on a pair of brown Mary

Janes and a pair of red socks. Tiffany's thick, black hair was jagged and messy. It reached two inches below her chin. It wafted in front of her face in the wind. All the boys wore jeans. David wore a red shirt with two white stripes across the chest. Tyler wore a white shirt with black letters. Troy wore his black beanie with the skull and crossbones. His clothes were all black. Ryan wore a collared shirt with thin bands of umber, tan, and white. Aaron wore a crisp shirt that buttoned up the front. It had vertical stripes. They were four different shades of blue.

Tiffany had no idea what "put in your dukes" meant. She waited to see what everyone else did. Tyler, Troy, Aaron, and Ryan held up their fists like David. Tiffany faced forward and held hers up. She didn't understand why David only had to put in one. Tiffany stood across from David. David narrowed his eyes and grinned.

"You ready, Tiff?"

Tiffany looked around. "Uh..." Ryan stood to David's left. Aaron stood to his. Tiffany stood to his. Tyler stood to hers. And, Troy stood to his.

"Here we go," David remarked. He patted his chin then everyone's fists in sequence. He uttered a series of words and made his way around the circle. Each word corresponded to a fist. "Rick the mouse peed on a house. How many drops did fall?" That made eleven movements. David counted "Rick" and "the" on his chin. He stopped on Troy's right fist. Everyone looked at Troy. Troy looked at the tops of his eyes and thought. He looked at David.

"Nine." David started on Troy's left fist and counted to nine.

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine." He stopped on Tiffany's left fist. Tiffany pressed her lips together and looked around. David squinted.

"Put your hand down, stupid." Tiffany's lips parted. She hid her left hand behind her back. David started on Tyler's right fist. He began a new series of words. "Steve the penguin

shit blocks of ice. How many blocks came out?” David stopped on Tiffany’s right fist. Tiffany looked around.

“Um, twelve?” David started on Tyler’s right fist and counted to twelve. He stopped on Tyler’s right fist. Tyler hid it behind his back. David started a new series on Tyler’s left fist.

“Bob the clown went to town. He turned around. His pants fell down. He did a dance in his underpants. He fell into a bed of ants. How many bites did he get?” He stopped on Troy’s left fist. Troy went with nine, again. That eliminated his right fist. David continued to eliminate fists. In the end, it was his chin versus Tiffany’s right fist. David grinned. He started on Tiffany’s hand. “Rob the dog shit a log. Then, he pissed into the bog. He fell inside. He skinned his hide. He swallowed muck. And then, he died. How many gallons did he drink?” David stopped on Tiffany’s right fist. The other boys grinned and gasped. David *never* screwed up counting. When it was between him and someone else, he always used the right mantra. That way, he could eliminate himself. Apparently, Tiffany messed with his mojo.

Tiffany looked around. She was so excited, she didn’t know what to do. She couldn’t decide between one and two. She knew one or the other was the right answer. But, she couldn’t decide which one. She gritted her teeth.

“One?” she blurted. The other boys shouted.

“Damn, Titty!” Tyler shrieked. “You had him beat!”

“Jeez!” Troy shouted. “Seriously?” Tiffany buried her face in her hands. David narrowed his eyes and grinned. He patted his chin and pointed. He stuck his index finger between Tiffany’s eyes. Tiffany looked up.

“You’re it!” David shouted. David’s friends laughed and smacked their hands together. Tiffany sighed. David made a swirl with his finger. “Turn around and count to a hundred,” he

instructed. “And, no peaking!” Tiffany faced the willow tree. She looked at the sky. A pack of hideous, angry clouds was rolling in. Tiffany shook her head. She crossed her arms over the trunk of the tree. She laid her eyelids across her forearms. David thumped her ear. Tiffany jumped. She looked over her shoulder. David and his friends held their bellies and roared with laughter. Tiffany narrowed her eyes. She turned around and rested her face on her arms. She heard everyone scurry away. Tiffany counted to one hundred. She did it in her head. As she cycled through, she imagined numbers flying by. Each one looked a different color. Each was a different shape. Tiffany opened her eyes and tilted her head back.

“One hundred!” she shouted. She looked around. The property looked deserted. The wind was picking up. Blades of grass fluttered towards the east. Leaves and branches gently swirled. Tiffany had no idea what to do. When she was little, she’d played Hide and Seek with her mom. It was only a few times. Her mother always hid in plain sight. And, she always waited until Tiffany found her. Tiffany usually found her mother under the kitchen table with her hands over her eyes. When Tiffany spotted her, her mother always looked so surprised. She dropped her hands, widened her eyes, and lowered her jaw. Tiffany smiled. If she actually *did* find one of the boys, she had no clue what she was going to do. Tiffany looked towards the northeast corner of the property. She spotted the new tractors. She figured someone was likely to be hiding there.

Tiffany wandered along the fence and looked around. She was looking for anything out of the ordinary. She passed three trees along the way. The ground around them was littered with pecans. Tiffany reached the northeast corner. She crept around the tractors and looked around. She didn’t find anyone. She looked towards the house and sighed. She figured the boys had gone inside. She pressed her lips together and exhaled through her nose. She felt dumb,



creeping around the property all by her lonesome. She spotted the pump for the Sweenys' water well. She wandered up and checked it out. She had no idea what it was. She looked over her shoulder. She spotted the old, abandoned well at the opposite corner of the property. She shrugged. She figured while she was stuck on the Sweenys' property, she might as well look around. It was better than standing around like an idiot.

Tiffany trudged across the grass. It was a long walk from one corner to the other. Tiffany looked around for David and his friends. But, she figured they were gone. She didn't care. She was used to it. Tiffany passed the two trees with tree houses. They were a pair of oak trees. They had thick, jagged trunks and old, swirling, black branches. Their leaves were olive green. The ground around them was covered with acorns. The tree houses were made of lumber. It was nailed together and painted. One was blue. One was red. They even had shingles. They were shiny and tan. Each tree house had a large opening on one side. Three little windows were scattered around the other sides. Tiffany wondered if David and his friends were in the tree houses. She stared at them as she wandered by. Then, she faced forward.

The old water well was surrounded by a waist high cylinder of white stones. The stones were warped and irregular. They were roughly the same size. The wall was six feet in diameter. Tiffany had never seen a water well. She crept up to the wall of stones and peaked over the top. She folded her arms on the wall. She slid her hair out of her face and looked around. The well was one hundred feet deep. It was lined with old stones all the way down. There was a tiny, shiny pool at the bottom. There were tree limbs poking out along the wall. There were sharp, jagged stones sticking out in places. The ones sticking out were red. They had grooves in the sides. They looked like they were carved by a desert. Tiffany heard a pair of feet hit the grass. She looked over her shoulder. David and his buddies were standing behind her. They *were*

hiding in the tree houses after all. Tiffany whirled around.

“Uh...” she stammered. She forced a smile. “Hi! I found you.” David stood out front. Tyler and Troy stood to his left. Ryan and Aaron stood to his right. David folded his arms over his chest and smirked. He glanced over his left shoulder.

“What do you think we should do to her, boys?” Tyler narrowed his eyes and grinned. Troy raised the left corner of his lip. Tiffany’s smile faded. She backed against the wall around the well. She laid her palms on top. David looked over his right shoulder.

“You think there’s still water down there?” he asked.

Aaron shrugged. “I don’t know. Let’s find out.” Ryan cackled. David looked at Tiffany. Tiffany exhaled a shaky breath. Her legs turned into rubber.

“Um, guys...” David, Ryan, Aaron, Troy, and Tyler started towards her. Tiffany began to pant like a dog. She clawed at the stones beneath her fingertips. David glared into Tiffany’s dark brown eyes. Tiffany shuddered. She shrugged up her shoulders and looked at the grass. David pointed at her.

“Going down?” he inquired. Tiffany whimpered. David snagged Tiffany around the waist. Tiffany tilted her head back and tried to scream. Nothing but breathless shouts came out. Tony and Tyler each took an arm. Ryan and Aaron took one leg apiece. The boys lifted Tiffany off the ground. They held her above their heads. Tiffany’s panting sped up. Her eyes popped open. She turned her head and looked down the well. It was a long way down. Tiffany looked at David and his friends. She pleaded with her eyes.

“Guys!” she squeaked. “*Please... Please, don’t.*” David looked around. He narrowed his eyes.

“On three!” he shouted. Tiffany looked at the sky. She gritted her teeth and fought for

air. The boys swung her towards the well. “One!” David cried. Tiffany groaned. They swung her again. “Two!”

“Ah!” Tiffany shrieked. David looked around. He grinned. The boys swung her a third time.

“Two and a half!” David cried. Tiffany growled. Troy looked over his shoulder. He faced David.

*“Fool, somebody’s gonna hear!”* he whispered. Everyone looked at Tiffany. Tiffany shivered in their hands. She looked at them, timidly.

*“Guys, stop...”* she gasped. She cleared her throat. “Please. I’ll do anything you want.”

David looked into Tiffany’s big, brown eyes. “Do it,” he ordered. David and the boys hurled Tiffany down the well. Tiffany filled the narrow space with terrified shrieks. One quarter of the way down, she smashed into the wall. She struck head first. It caused her to flip the other direction. Her limbs flopped through the air. Tiffany looked like a rag doll. After a few feet, she struck the opposite side. She slammed into an old, jagged tree branch. It was hard, crunchy, and filled with thorns. It ripped Tiffany’s right shoulder to shreds. The thorns and sharp branches slid all the way to her elbow. They tore through her little, yellow sleeve. They ripped through her flesh like a hot knife through butter. The limbs almost stopped her fall. But, they didn’t have the support. Tiffany crashed through and continued to fall.

She tumbled down the well. Three quarters of the way down, her spine smashed into a jagged rock. It was one of the red rocks sticking out of the wall. Five of Tiffany’s vertebrae slid across the rust colored, serrated surface. Tiffany arched her back and groaned. Further down, her shoulder blades smashed into the wall. Tiffany flopped the other direction and crashed to the bottom. It was filled with murky, scummy water. The bottom of the well smelled like a sewer.

The yucky water at the bottom was surrounded by a narrow bank of stones. Tiffany toppled into the water. She landed on her back. The water pierced her flesh like a thousand pins. Tiffany pinched her eyes shut and gritted her teeth. She forced her eyes open and flapped her arms. Her right arm felt like it was going to fall off. She felt chunks of flesh around her shoulder sloshing through the water.

Tiffany surfaced. She blew out a mouthful of dirty water. It tasted like shit. Tiffany raked her fingers across her eyelids and slung herself towards the bank. She rolled onto the narrow, stony, surface and fought to catch her breath. The air smelled terrible. It was thick, muggy, and foul. Tiffany felt her bowels cramping up. She moaned. She rolled over and vomited into the murky water. She spit and gasped for breath. She tasted the stench hanging in the air. It made her throw up a second time. Tiffany tilted her head back and whimpered. Tears poured down her cheeks. She caught her breath. She looked towards the top of the well. She could see David, Tyler, Troy, Ryan, and Aaron. Their faces were gathered around the opening. They were covered with grins.

Tiffany sighed. She curled her legs and sat up. Her feet didn't feel right. She looked them over. Her Mary Janes were gone. Her right sock was missing. Tiffany looked at David and his friends. Her eyebrows fell at the sides.

"Guys..." she squealed. She swallowed. It tasted like vomit and scummy water. "Please... help." David and his buddies looked at each other. Their heads disappeared one at a time. "Help me!" Tiffany shrieked. Her shouts echoed along the stony walls. "Get me outta here!" Tiffany rested her back against the wall. Her spine felt like it had nails in it. Tiffany arched her back. She folded her legs against her chest and hugged her knees. The flesh along her shoulder and arm felt like it was ripping. Tiffany gritted her teeth and squeezed her arm.

Blood trickled down her fingers. It felt like hot syrup.

Tiffany looked around. She noticed little, black bugs wafting through the air. They took long, slow strides. They were hard to see. It was dark at the bottom of the well. But, that's not what made the bugs difficult to spot. They *avoided* Tiffany's eyes. It's as though they could sense her staring at them. Tiffany focused on one. Then, it moved in just the right direction. And, she could no longer see it. Tiffany wasn't sure what kind of bugs they were. But, they were everywhere. Tiffany felt blood dribbling down her face. She felt her scalp. Her hair was wet from the scummy pond. It was warm from bloody lacerations along her skull. She began to shiver. It felt like the temperature dropped twenty degrees. Her eyelids fluttered shut. Tiffany collapsed on her side, curled into a ball, and drifted to sleep.

She awoke two hours later. Her lips were quivering. Her arms and legs were shuddering. Her fingers and toes were trembling. She felt really itchy. The first place she noticed it was her right arm. Tiffany dragged it towards her. Her fingers were cold and tingling. Her shirt was soaked and freezing. It felt like ice. Tiffany gritted her teeth. Her teeth chattered. She was sopping wet. She lay on her back and slid her hair aside. It was wet and squishy. Tiffany's arm was itching like crazy. She reached over her chest and raked her fingers across her flesh. Her nails slid across a row of pea sized bumps. Tiffany stopped. Her eyes popped open. Her arm was covered with mosquito bites. The sky was filled with indigo clouds. They came to life with a white flash. It was brighter than the sun. It filled the well with flickers of light. Tiffany sat up and looked herself over. She had been bitten hundreds of times. Her arms, legs, hands, and right foot were coated with tiny, red mounds. Her left foot was covered by a soaking wet, red sock.

Tiffany's eyebrows fell at the sides. She exhaled a frosty, trembling breath. The lights went out. The well filled with tremors of thunder. Tiffany breathed out a painful cry. She

pressed her palms against her ears and lowered her head. She waited until the thunder stopped. Then, she raked her fingernails across her flesh. Her whole body itched. It was the worst feeling she'd ever felt. She began to whimper. The more she tore at her skin, the worse it felt. It was welted and oily. It began to burn. There was another flash. Tiffany looked around. Rain was pouring from the top of the well. It was enough to flush the mosquitoes out. Unfortunately, it was too late. The fluttering, white light ceased. The well filled with thunder. Tiffany cried out. She flattened her hands against her ears. The sky was roaring with thunder. And, Tiffany was in an echo chamber. Her eardrums felt like they were going to burst.

The thunder stopped. Tiffany's right shoulder lit up with itches. She raked her fingers across her shoulder. She'd forgotten it was ripped to shreds. She felt her flesh tearing under her nails. It was puffy, jagged, and squishy. It felt like a raw steak. Burning, stabbing tingles shot across her arm. The fingers on her right hand rolled into a fist and clamped shut. Tiffany tilted her head back and shrieked. She exhaled one, long, agonizing wail. She didn't stop until she ran out of breath. She clamped her left fingers over her mouth and inhaled through her nose. She pinched her eyes shut. Now, *that* was the worst feeling she'd ever felt. What's worse, her shoulder continued to itch. Tiffany turned her head. She exhaled a gargling groan. Her arms, legs, hands, and foot ordered her to scratch. Tiffany scrunched up her nose and shook her head.

"*Stop it...*" she moaned. Lightning filled the well. Tiffany looked around. She gasped. She looked at the narrow bank. She was sitting in a pool of crimson. It was a mixture of ice cold rainwater and Tiffany's warm blood. Tiffany whimpered. The lightning stopped. A quiet crackle followed. Tiffany covered her ears and stuffed her head between her knees. She knew a big one was coming. Thunder pounded down the well. It was menacing and ferocious. It made the walls shake. "Stop it!" Tiffany cried. The thunder ceased. There was tiny pop. Something

was tumbling down the well. It danced around the walls as it fell.

Tiffany looked up. She spotted a tiny, white pebble. It tumbled down the well and crashed into the bank. It bounced around and stopped at Tiffany's feet. Tiffany reached between her knees and picked it up. It was tiny and cold. Tiffany held it in front of her eyes and squinted. It was a hailstone. The bottom of the well was really dim at night. Tiffany could just make it out. There were two more pops. Tiffany looked up. Two more hailstones were on their way down. "*Oh, crap!*" Tiffany whispered. She backed against the wall and hugged her knees. There were more pops. Then, hailstones began pouring down the well. They filled the air with crackles. Tiffany pressed her palms against her ears and gritted her teeth. Little chunks of ice began battering her. She squeezed her head and shoulders between her knees. She was itching like crazy. She fought off the urge to scratch.

The hailstones were getting heavier. Some of them really hurt. Tiffany had a look. Most of them were the size of golf balls. Some were as big as baseballs. The baseball sized hailstones had little, icy spikes sticking out of them. Tiffany folded her fingers over her lips. "*Oh, my God!*" she grumbled. She stuck her head between her knees. She folded her arms over the back of her head. The golf ball sized stones became more frequent. They battered Tiffany's knuckles, knees, and back. Minutes rolled by. The hail didn't let up. It was so loud at the bottom of the well, Tiffany couldn't hear herself think. She felt hailstones piling around her hips. She couldn't take it anymore. She slid her arms aside and had a peak. She was surrounded by little balls of ice. A baseball sized stone came out of nowhere. It smashed against the back of Tiffany's little skull and knocked her out.

When Tiffany awoke, she was on fire. She was soaked with sweat. She was starving and dying of thirst. She was surrounded by a foul smelling, scum filled pond. The stony bank was

an inch underwater. The night before, the water was a foot below the edge of the bank.

Tiffany's head and arms were tucked between her legs. She sat up and tilted her head back. Her spine was aching. She reached back and rubbed it. Her shoulder felt like it was falling apart. She was surrounded by burning hot sunlight. It glinted across the murky water. The white stones along the walls glowed bright yellow. Tiffany felt like she was in a pot of boiling water. It was muggy and miserable. Tiffany looked up. The sun was directly above the opening of the well. It was high noon.

Tiffany buried her eyes in her arms. She felt little bumps rubbing against her cheeks. She looked herself over. Every inch of her flesh was covered with mosquito bites. They were in every nook and cranny. They itched like crazy. Tiffany sighed. She tilted her head back and looked around. The well was six feet wide. It was a bit confining. It was absolutely terrifying. Tiffany smacked her lips. They were bone dry. Tiffany thought about taking a sip from the water she was sitting in. But, she knew better. It was a cesspool. Tiffany laid her palms at her sides and forced herself to her feet. Her body was battered and bruised. It ached for miles. Tiffany's head was throbbing. When she stood, it felt like the room was spinning. She felt the back of her scalp. There was a three inch knot on the back of her head. It was at the base of her skull.

Tiffany slid her fingers across the bump. She pressed her lips together. Her eyebrows fell at the sides. Tiffany held her fingers above her eyes. She looked towards the top of the well. It was a long way up. The opening was one hundred feet away. Tiffany exhaled through her lips. She looked at the walls. There were jagged, red stones sticking out in places. Tiffany noticed them the day before. They looked like little stepping stones. Tiffany wondered if she could use them to climb out. She looked towards the top of the well. She cupped her hands



around her mouth. “Hello?!” she called. Her shriek echoed along the walls and funneled out the top. Nobody answered. Tiffany’s eyebrows fell in the middle. She exhaled through her nostrils. “I’m not gonna die down here.”

She grabbed a hold of the nearest rock she could find. She used it to scramble up the wall. She stood on the rock and looked around. She laid her foot on a second rock and grabbed two others. She looked around for the next one. She snagged it with her left hand. She found another for her right. She pulled herself up and plopped her feet down in their places. She found two more rocks, higher up. She switched out, again. Tiffany made it fifteen feet. She couldn’t resist. She had to look down. Fifteen feet looked a lot higher than she figured. It made her legs and arms wobbly. Sweat was pouring down her face. It dripped into her eyes. It saturated her right shoulder and upper arm. Tiffany scrunched up her nose and exhaled through her nostrils. Her arm was stinging. Her head was throbbing. She itched all over. And, her back, knees, and knuckles were smashed to pieces.

She reached for another rock. The one beneath her right foot gave way. Tiffany plummeted to the stony bank. She filled the well with panicked shouts. She landed on the bony part of her butt. It hurt like Hell. Tiffany tumbled backwards and fell into the water. She sank like a stone. Her little butt was throbbing. She scrunched up her nose and scrambled to the surface. She gasped for breath and cried with agony. She wrestled onto the bank and lay on her stomach. She slid her fingers across her butt bone. It was excruciating. The pain was sharp and intense. Tiffany panted like a dog. Tears poured down her cheeks. After a minute, she caught her breath. Her butt eased up. She rolled over and looked towards the top of the well. It was hopeless. Tiffany was dying for something to drink. Her stomach started growling.

She hugged her belly and looked around. It felt like the walls were closing in. Tiffany

shut her eyes. She tried not to think about where she was. When she was little, her father locked her in the closet all the time. Tiffany wasn't new to small, cramped spaces. She just needed to get the hell out. She heard a voice in the distance. It was Tyler.

*"Did you guys hear that?!"* he called. Tiffany looked towards the top of the well. She heard shuffling feet and giggling. She sighed. Tyler and Troy's heads appeared at the opening. Tiffany whimpered. She backed against the wall and shrugged up her shoulders. Troy folded his arms on the wall around the opening.

"Hey, douchebag!" he shouted. "How's it going, down there?" Tiffany's lips trembled. She took a raspy breath.

*"G-Guys..."* she groaned. Her voice was low and scratchy. Tiffany looked beside her and cleared her throat. She looked into Troy's eyes. "Guys, please get me out of here."

Tyler waved his hand in front of his face. "Damn, fool!" He looked at Troy. "What the hell's that smell?" Tiffany sighed. Troy looked at his buddy.

"Titty really stunk it up, down there. Didn't she?" Tiffany folded her fingers and laid them in her lap. She looked at her hands. She felt tears in her eyes. Ryan and Aaron's heads appeared. Their faces were covered with grins.

"Hey there, Titty!" Aaron yelled. "How was the rain, last night?" The boys cackled. Tiffany looked at them from the tops of her eyes. She heard David's voice.

*"Move over, dipshits!"* he shouted. His head appeared between Tyler and Troy's. He laid one arm on the wall. He rested his elbow in his palm. He rested his chin in his other palm. He looked into Tiffany's eyes and smiled. "Hey, stinky." Everyone waved their hands in front of their faces.

"Whew!" Ryan remarked. "My God. Did you *shit* yourself?" The boys giggled.

“You know you’re not supposed to drink the water, right?” Tyler inquired. “It’ll give you the runs.”

Tiffany looked into Tyler’s eyes. “I’m not stupid, Tyler.” The boys laughed.

“Yes, you are,” Troy replied. “You haven’t climbed outta that thing, yet?” He pointed along the walls. “Man, there’s stepping stones all around the walls.” Tiffany looked at him out of the tops of her eyes. Her lips quivered.

“*Guys, I need...*” There was a tickle on the back of her throat. Tiffany looked away and started coughing. She curled her fingers in front of her lips. She looked up. “I need... water.” She looked around. “Please, guys. I’m gonna *die* down here.”

David grinned. “Oh, Titty...” Everyone laughed. “I wouldn’t let that happen to *you*.” He disappeared. After ten seconds, he was back. He dangled something from his fingers. It was red and shiny. “You want water?” Tiffany sighed. David retrieved whatever he had in his hand. “Here you go!” David tossed the red thing down the well. Tiffany watched it fall. The sun was right in her eyes. She could barely keep track. She held her fingers above her eyes. She tracked the shiny, red thing as best she could. It looked like a ball. But, it was oblong and floppy. It was falling towards Tiffany’s face. She moved her hand and laid her arms over her face. The shiny red thing landed on her neck. It was soft and squishy. It stung when it hit. It burst and covered Tiffany with ice cold water. The boys cackled. Tiffany dropped her arms. She looked around. It was a water balloon. She spotted the remains floating next to her.

Tiffany looked at her arms. They were clean where the balloon splashed her. Fresh, cold water was trickling down her arms. Tiffany lapped it up. David and his friends found it hilarious. Tiffany didn’t care. She licked every bit of it up. Then, she looked up. Everyone had balloons. Tiffany took a breath. The boys tossed their balloons at her. Tiffany watched. Tyler

and Troy dropped yellow and blue balloons. They smashed into the wall halfway down and burst. Aaron dropped an orange balloon. It snagged the jagged tree limbs that shredded Tiffany's shoulder. Ryan dropped a pink balloon. It headed towards the bank. Tiffany steadied herself. She scrambled towards the shiny, pink balloon. When it was a few feet from the bank, Tiffany leapt across the center of the well. She snatched the balloon out of the air and landed on the other side.

Tiffany looked around for David's balloon. It was headed towards the center of the well. It was a black balloon. It fell in the middle with a splash. Tiffany laid the pink balloon on the bank. She dove after the black one. The balloon was roughly the same weight as the water. So, it didn't go far. Tiffany snagged the balloon and resurfaced. She slid onto the bank and looked up. She sat Indian style and laid the balloons in her lap. She held the pink one to her lips. She bit a tiny hole in the side and tilted her head back. She sucked the balloon dry and tossed it aside. She looked at David and his friends. They looked disgusted. Troy looked at David.

"Damn it, David! *That* was a stupid idea!" Tiffany picked up the black balloon. She put it to her lips and bit down. She tilted her head back and let the ice cold water dribble down her throat. It was the best thing she'd ever tasted. She finished off the black balloon and tossed it aside. David flipped her off.

"Fuck you, Bitch!" The boys laughed. Tiffany looked at them. She stood and folded her fingers.

"Guys, get me out of here." David grinned. His head disappeared. Tiffany's arms slumped at her sides. "Please?!" David reappeared. He held something over the wall with both hands. It was moving. Tiffany's eyes popped open. She pointed. "What *is* that?!"

David shook his arms. "Here it comes, Titty!"

Tiffany balled her little fists at her sides. “Stop it!” Whatever it was, David tossed it in. Tiffany flattened against the wall. She watched the creature falling. It bounced off the walls on the way down. Tiffany heard it squealing. It was a giant rat. “*Oh, crap...*” Tiffany mumbled. She wandered around the narrow bank. David and his friends laughed. Tiffany couldn’t avoid the rat. No matter which direction she moved, the rat ended up right above her. It fell right on her head. Tiffany squealed. The rat was the size of a dog. It was the biggest one Tiffany had ever seen. It scrambled down her back. It bit her on the butt. Tiffany dusted her hair and slapped her back. The rat tumbled to the bank. Tiffany heard David and the boys cackling. She turned around. The rat scampered towards her.

Tiffany was starving. And, the rat appeared healthy. It wasn’t foaming at the mouth. All it had was a fresh wound from hitting a rock on the way down. Tiffany licked her lips. The rat snagged a hold of her ankle. Tiffany snagged a hold of its tail. It was three feet long. It was as big around as a piece of rope. Tiffany lifted the rat by its tail and smashed it into the wall. She slammed it until it stopped moving. David, Tyler, Troy, Ryan, and Aaron stopped laughing. Their smiles faded.

“Uh...” Ryan moaned. Tiffany laid the rat on the bank. She slid her fingers around its neck and twisted its head off. She tossed it aside. Blood began pooling in the water. Tiffany dug her fingers into the rat’s neck. She peeled back its flesh. Troy and Tyler scrunched up their noses. Tiffany tore a chunk of flesh from the rat’s ribs and dropped it on her tongue. She looked up. Blood dribbled down her chin from her lips.

“Sick...” Aaron groaned. Tiffany exhaled a shaky breath. She knelt next to the rat and peeled off a chunk of flesh the size of her hand. She ripped a chunk of fur off of that and stuffed it down the rat’s neck. She bit off the end of the chunk of flesh and chomped away. The boys

began to shout.

“Ew!” Tyler shouted.

“That’s gross!” Troy added. Tiffany scrunched up her nose. The meat was sour and gamey. It was rubbery and inconsistent. It wasn’t too bad, though. It was one of the better rats she’d eaten. Tiffany looked towards the top of the well. She felt all itchy. She clawed at her arms. She bit off another chunk of rat and chewed it up.

“Damn!” Ryan yelled. “That’s disgusting!” Tiffany looked at the stony bank. She sat next to the rat carcass and took another bite. She heard a voice. This time, it was David’s mother.

“*What are you boys doing?!*” she shouted. Tiffany looked up. David and his friends looked over their shoulders.

“*Shit!*” Troy whispered. He patted David’s shoulder. “*What do we do?*” David looked at him.

“*Are you going to answer me?!*” David’s mom called. Tiffany laid the rat flesh on top of its body. She backed away from the wall and cupped her fingers around her lips.

“Down here!” she called. “Help me!”

“*What was that?!*” David’s mom demanded. “*Is there somebody down there?!*” Tiffany closed her eyes, tilted her head back, and sighed. She looked towards the top of the well. David glared at her. Tiffany shuddered. David pointed at her.

“I’m gonna *kill* you, Tiff.”

Troy looked into Tiffany’s eyes. “Yeah, Titty. This isn’t over.”

“*Will somebody answer me?!*” David’s mother demanded. Her voice was getting closer. David looked over his shoulder.

“It’s Tiffany, Mom! I think she fell down the well!” David’s mother’s head appeared next to her son’s. She threw her hands over her mouth.

“Oh, my God!” she shouted. “You poor thing!”

Tiffany began to cry. “*Ms. Sweeny, please get me out of here,*” she whined. She slid her fingers across her cheeks. “*I-I-I’ve been stuck down here all night...*”

David’s mother sighed. “Don’t worry, honey. I’ll go get help. Okay?” Tiffany nodded. She turned around, rested her back against the wall, and sat on the bank. She looked towards the top of the well. David’s mother motioned towards the house with her head. “Go get the ladder, David.”

David glared into his mother’s eyes. “Mom...” he groaned. “Man, why do *I* have to go get it?” His mother’s eyebrows fell in the middle. She reached back and smacked his ass.

“David Sweeny! Get your butt over there and get that ladder!” She pointed towards one of the tin buildings. “Now!” Tiffany faced forward. Her shoulder began to throb. She leaned forward, grabbed it, and groaned. The pain intensified. It felt like her arm was being torn off.

Tiffany awoke next to Case. She gasped and looked around. She sat up and backed against the wall. Her pillow squashed between her and the sheetrock. Tiffany curled her fingers around the pillow, yanked it out, and tossed it across the room. Her shoulder was throbbing. It did that, sometimes. Tiffany groaned. She curled her fingers around her shoulder and leaned forward. She wore a white tank top and a pair of red, flannel pants. She slid her fingers across her bumpy, jagged flesh. It looked like it had been slashed by a grisly bear. Tiffany was caked with cold sweat. Her heart drummed in her ears. She felt like she’d run a marathon. She was dizzy and disoriented. She looked at Case. Case was lying on his stomach, looking at her. Tiffany sighed.

“You okay?” Case inquired. Tiffany fought back a smile. She laughed through her nostrils. Case showed Tiffany his palm. “Sorry. Don’t bite my head off. Okay?” Tiffany snickered. Case slid out of the covers and sat next to her. He wore a black shirt and black shorts. He slid his arm around Tiffany’s shoulders. He dropped his hand on hers. It was the one on her shoulder. “What happened, sweetheart?” Tiffany pressed her lips together. She looked into Case’s eyes.

“I... remember how I got this scar, now.”

Case narrowed his eyes. “Really? The one on your shoulder?” Tiffany closed her eyes and nodded. Case slipped his fingers below Tiffany’s. He slid his fingers along the grooves in her flesh. “I always wondered about that one. That’s a pretty nasty one, there.”

Tiffany sighed. “I know. I never could remember what happened to it.”

Case nodded. “So, what happened?”

Tiffany’s eyebrows fell in the middle. “Sweeny!” she growled. “That damn Sweeny!” Case narrowed his eyes. “He and all his buddies dropped me down a well.” Tiffany looked at her lap and shook her head. She curled her fingers around Case’s. “My shoulder snagged a tree branch on the way down.” She looked at Case. “I forgot all about that.”

Case shook his head. “Jeez, Tiffany.” He sighed. “We should’ve killed that fool.”

Tiffany tilted her head. “You *know* I could never do that.” Case smiled and exhaled through his nostrils. He kissed the side of Tiffany’s head.

“Yes, I know.” Tiffany snuggled up next to Case. She slid her arms around his waist. Case slid his fingers through her hair. He looked at the ceiling. A drop of blood appeared near the wall. It slid across the ceiling, leaving a trail. Case raised his eyebrows. He slid his mouth to the side of his face. “Um... Tiffany?” Tiffany looked at Case. She furrowed her brow. Case



pointed at the ceiling. “What the hell is *that*?” Tiffany looked up. A second drop of blood appeared where the first one did. It slid across the ceiling and stopped next to the first. Tiffany’s eyes widened.

“Oh, crap...” She snagged a hold of Case’s shirt. “Louis, move!” Tiffany dragged Case to the center of the bed. They turned and watched. More drops of blood slid towards the first two. Blood began to dribble to the bed. Case narrowed his eyes.

“What *is* it?”

Tiffany shook her head. “I don’t know.” She slid across the bed. She opened a drawer below the alarm clock and took out a box. It was an old, cruddy, wooden box. Case had seen Tiffany with it before. But, he had no idea what it was. Tiffany sat next to Case. She slid the top off the box and set it next to her. Case looked inside. It was filled with dirt. Case squinted. Tiffany snagged a pinch of dirt and scattered it across her palms. “*Sulk...*” she whispered. She held her palms in front of her lips and blew. She swirled her hands around. The dirt scattered across the bed. Case sat with his legs folded. He rested his elbows on his knees, folded his fingers in front of his lips, and watched. Tiffany scooted next to Case and took his hand. She slid the lid onto the box and handed it to him. “Hold this,” she instructed.

Case held the box in front of his eyes. “What *is* this?”

Tiffany looked at him. “Graveyard dirt.” Case narrowed his eyes. He and Tiffany watched the blood. It pooled above the bed. It rained on the sheets. Tiffany exhaled through her nose. She shook her head. “It’s not working.”

Case nodded. “So... what now?”

Tiffany smiled at him. “It’s okay. It’s *good* that it’s not working.” She looked at the pool of blood. “That means whatever this is, it’s human.” She pointed at the box. Case opened

it. Tiffany snagged another pinch of dirt. “*Nepo...*” she whispered. She tossed a little dirt over each shoulder. She did the same to Case. Case and Tiffany were still holding hands. Case threw his free hand out at his side. Tiffany closed the box and hopped up. She pointed at the pool of blood. “Watch that. Tell me what it does.” Case looked at her. He nodded. Tiffany pointed towards the hall. “I’m going to go check on the kids.”

“Okay,” Case replied. He looked at the ceiling and watched the blood. The pool continued to grow. Tiffany wandered into the hallway. Case sighed. “No wonder it was only five thousand bucks.” Tiffany made it to the stairs. She, Case, Gabrielle, and Adam scattered a bunch of wooden blocks near the top. They were children’s blocks. They had different colored letters on them. Tiffany stopped when she saw them. She looked towards the stairs. She laid her fingers over her lips. Someone left a message. Some of the blocks were arranged on the top three steps. Each step had a different word. The word “don’t” was spelled on the first step. The word “go” was spelled on the second. The word “upstairs” was spelled on the third. Tiffany looked towards the bedroom.

“Louis?!” she cried. “Are you fucking with me?!” Case wandered out of the bedroom. He headed towards Tiffany.

“What do you mean?” Tiffany pointed towards the stairs. Case stopped beside her and looked. He folded his fingers and laid his lips on top. He looked at Tiffany. “*I* didn’t do it.”

Tiffany pointed at him. “You promise me?”

Case threw his arms out at his sides. “I didn’t *do* it, Tiffany. I swear.” Case bent over. He reached towards the top step.

“Whoa!” Tiffany shouted. She snagged a hold of Case’s arm. Case looked up. Tiffany shook her head. “Don’t. It’s dangerous.”

Case narrowed his eyes. “Okay.” He looked towards Adam and Gabrielle’s bedrooms. “Did you check on the kids?” Tiffany’s eyebrows fell at the sides. She took Case’s hand.

“Um... Come with me.” She exhaled a shaky breath. “Will you?” Case smiled. He patted Tiffany’s shoulder.

“Sure.” He wandered towards the bedrooms. Tiffany let go of Case’s hand. She laid her fingertips on his back and followed. She peeked over his shoulder. Case wandered into Gabrielle’s room. His grandmother’s quilt was slumped on the corner of her bed. The bed was empty. Case looked over his shoulder. He shook his head and pointed towards Adam’s room. “*If she’s in there, again...*” he whispered. “*I swear...*” Case led Tiffany to Adam’s room. Adam was sound asleep. Gabrielle was nowhere to be found. Case exhaled through his nose. He wandered to the side of Adam’s bed. Tiffany stayed close behind. Case patted Adam’s shoulder. Adam’s hazel eyes fluttered open. He looked at Case. “*Hey, buddy,*” Case whispered.

Adam smacked his lips. “*Man, what the HELL, fool?*”

Case smiled and shook his head. “*Have you seen Gabrielle?*” Adam took a breath. He pressed his lips together and narrowed his eyes.

“*Did you look downstairs?*” he asked. “*Sometimes, she likes to get up in the middle of the night and have a snack.*” Case nodded. He looked over his shoulder. Tiffany offered Adam her hand.

“*Come with us,*” she whispered.

Adam plopped his head against his pillow and rolled his eyes. “*Awe, man! Come on, Tiffany. I’m comfortable, here.*”

Tiffany snapped her fingers and pointed at him. “Now!” she shouted. Adam sighed. He

rolled out of bed and stood up. He wore a pair of green, flannel pants and a grey shirt. Case, Tiffany, and Adam wandered towards the stairs. Adam spotted the message. He grinned. He pointed at Tiffany and Case.

“Are you two fucking with me?”

“Hey!” Tiffany warned. She smacked Adam’s hand.

“Ow...” Adam groaned. He held his wrist. Tiffany pointed over her shoulder.

“Watch your mouth.” Case, Tiffany, and Adam wandered past the blocks and descended the stairs. They found Gabrielle below the stairs. She was sitting at the dining table. She was eating a bowl of cereal. She wore a pair of white, flannel pants with crossing, blue stripes and a white shirt. She swirled a spoon around a bowl of Wheatie Puffs. She stared at the bowl, chewing. The cereal box and half a bottle of milk sat next to the bowl. Gabrielle finished crunching and looked up. She smiled.

“Hi.” She squinted and pointed towards the stairs. “What’s everybody yelling about?” Tiffany sighed. She crossed her arms over her chest.

“Oh... nothing.” Gabrielle looked at the bowl and nodded. She scooped up another bite. She slid it between her teeth and crunched away. “I want us all to sleep in the same bedroom, tonight,” Tiffany remarked. Adam looked at Tiffany and narrowed his eyes. Gabrielle looked up. She chewed, slowly. Case smiled. He wandered to the table and pointed.

“You done with the rest of this?” he asked. Gabrielle looked up and nodded. She slid another bite between her teeth. Case took the cereal and the remaining milk into the kitchen. He put the cereal in a cupboard. He put the milk in the refrigerator.

“Well, *I* don’t wanna sleep in your bedroom,” Adam remarked.

Tiffany glared at him. “Tough.” Adam looked at Case. Case stood next to Gabrielle.

He folded his arms over his chest.

“Louis, don’t make me sleep in there,” Adam begged. He looked at Tiffany. “On the floor.” He looked at Case. “Come on, man. I finally get a bed. And, now I have to sleep on the floor again?”

Case smiled. “I’m sorry, buddy. Tiffany wants us all together.” He looked at Tiffany. “Isn’t there some kind of thing where ghosts try to divide and conquer?” Tiffany nodded. She looked at Adam.

“Everyone needs to sleep in the same room until we get this straightened out.”

Adam shrugged. “Don’t tell me *you* guys heard something, now.”

“No,” Case replied. “We didn’t hear anything.”

Adam raised his eyebrows. “Well what, then?” Case looked at Tiffany. Tiffany nodded. Case looked at Adam.

“We watched a pool of blood materialize on the ceiling,” Case told him.

“What happened after I left?” Tiffany asked.

Case looked at her. “It pooled up for a while. Then, it vanished. So did the blood that dripped onto the bed.”

Tiffany shook her head. “Weird.”

Adam pushed his mouth to the side of his face. “Whatever.”

Gabrielle looked at Case. “In your bedroom?” Case looked at Gabrielle and nodded. Adam looked at Tiffany.

“So... you want us to sleep in there, now?” Adam inquired. Tiffany narrowed her eyes. Adam looked at the floor. He raised his eyebrows. “Yeah, that makes *perfect* sense.”

Tiffany pointed at him. “Adam...” Gabrielle lifted her bowl. She put it to her lips and

tilted her head back. She drank all the milk and pulled the bowl away. She licked her lips. Case smiled at her. Gabrielle set the bowl on the table. She spread her fingers in front of her mouth and yawned. Case patted her back.

“You ready to go back to sleep, Gabrielle?” Gabrielle stared at the table. She nodded, slowly. Case took her bowl into the kitchen. He rinsed it and laid it in the sink. He returned to the dining table. Gabrielle’s eyelids were sagging. Case snagged Gabrielle around the waist and threw her over his shoulder. Gabrielle slid her arms around Case’s neck. She laid her cheek on his shoulder. Case bobbed his head at Adam and Tiffany. Everyone wandered upstairs and made a left. They gathered Adam and Gabrielle’s blankets and pillows. Then, everyone crashed in the master bedroom.

## Chapter 17: “Ouija Board”

It was after nine. Joline and Laura toted a steel cart down the patient hallway. Joline was at the front, pulling. Laura was at the rear, pushing. The cart had four shelves. Each shelf was covered with breakfast trays. The breakfast trays were for high priority patients that were locked in their rooms. On this morning, the sanatorium was serving pancakes, scrambled eggs, and bacon strips. There was a little plastic cup on each tray with syrup. Each tray had a little, plastic fork. The nurses stopped next to the first door on their route. Joline lifted the deposit cover. Laura slid a tray inside. She and Joline looked through the window to check on the patient. They continued to the next door. They stopped and performed the same routine. Joline lifted the cover. Laura deposited a tray. Everything was going smoothly. It was business as usual. Joline and Laura were near the end of the hallway. They came to Andre’s room. Joline lifted Andre’s deposit door. Laura grabbed a tray. She looked through the slot. Her eyes widened. She stood and looked at Joline. Joline narrowed her eyes.

“What is it?” she demanded.

Laura exhaled a shaky breath. “It’s Andre,” she replied. “He’s gone.” Joline’s eyes popped open. She eased Laura aside, stood on her tip-toes, and looked through the mesh at the top of the door. The room appeared empty. Joline looked at Andre’s bed. It was still made from the night before. Joline scanned the walls. She didn’t see Andre anywhere. There was one blind spot. It was the wall beside the door. Joline took out her keys.

“Haynes?” she inquired. There was no answer. Joline pressed her lips together. She looked at Laura. “Call Simms.” Laura grabbed a walkie talkie. It was sitting on the cart. She held it to her lips and pressed a button on the side.

“Simms, we have a problem.”

*“Go ahead,”* Simms replied.

“One of the patients is missing from their room.”

There was a pause. *“Say again...”* Simms remarked.

“It’s Andre,” Laura told him. “Andre Haynes isn’t in his room.”

Simms stood next to the elevator. He tilted his head back and sighed. *“Oh, my God...”* he whispered. He punched the button on his walkie talkie. “Don’t move, you two. I’m coming down.”

*“Ten-four,”* Laura replied. Simms drew his nightstick. He swirled around the corner and jogged down the hall.

Joline tried Andre’s door. It was locked. She slid her key into the deadbolt. She looked at Laura. Laura shook her head.

“Don’t. Simms said not to move.” Joline narrowed her eyes. She slid her key to the right and opened the door. She looked along the wall next to the door. There was no one there. Joline let out an anxious sigh. She folded her fingers in front of her lips. Laura stepped inside, timidly. She looked around. “Oh, man. This is so bad.” She looked at Joline. “How the hell did he get out?” Joline shook her head. She raised her eyebrows. She slid her fingers through the back of her hair. She found the bobby pin she’d stuck there that morning. She was missing one the night before. She looked at Laura. “What?” Laura asked.

“He... stole my bobby pin.” Simms arrived. He stopped next to Andre’s room. His shoes squeaked.

“Damn it, Joline. I said to stay put.” Joline rolled her eyes. She looked away and showed Simms her palms. Simms sighed. He dashed inside and looked around. The room was empty. He knelt beside the bed and looked underneath. He sat up. He looked over his shoulder



and shook his head. Laura slung her hands around.

“*Jesus!*” she whispered. “*He could be anywhere!*” Simms stood up. He held his walkie talkie to his lips and pressed the button.

“We’re on lockdown,” he remarked. “No one goes in or out.”

There was a pause. “*Ten-four,*” a lady’s voice replied.

Case set a paper grocery sack on the bar. It was a long bar with a green, marble countertop. Case wore his plaid, wool coat, a white, collared shirt, a pair of light blue jeans, and a pair of white sneakers with black stripes down the sides. He took off his jacket. He laid it over the back of one of the chairs around the dining table. He returned to the paper sack. He took out a carton of eggs, a package of bacon, a bottle of honey, a carton of milk, and a carton of orange juice. He looked at the dining table. There was a salt and pepper shaker on top. They were Gina’s. Case pressed his lips together. He wandered towards the table and snagged the salt and pepper shakers. He took the groceries into the kitchen. He set them next to the refrigerator. He wadded the paper sack and wandered into the laundry room. There was a giant trash can next to the washing machine. Case got it from his storage building. It reminded him of Gina. Case narrowed his eyes. He tossed the paper sack into the trash can and returned to the kitchen.

He opened the refrigerator and looked around. He placed the carton of orange juice on a shelf inside the door and closed it. He got a frying pan from above the stove. He set it on the biggest burner on the stove. It was a gas stove. Like the other appliances, it was stainless steel. Case flipped on the burner and had a look. A flint clicked and the burner lit. Case nodded. He picked up the package of bacon. There was a perforation along the top. Case peeled it aside and opened the package. He placed eight strips of bacon on the pan. He looked them over and squinted. He smiled. He took out the rest of the bacon strips and placed them next to those.

There were sixteen in all. Case laid the empty package next to the stove. He snagged a spatula. It was a steel spatula he'd gotten from his storage building. It was in a drawer with the silverware next to the stove. It reminded Case of Gina.

Case looked at the ceiling and shook his head. He laid the spatula next to the stove. He opened a cupboard above the eggs, milk, spatula, and empty bacon package. He grabbed four glasses and laid them on the counter. They were also from his storage building. He and Gina used them on several occasions. Case got four plates and four forks. He set those and the glasses on the dining table for Tiffany, Gabrielle, Adam, and himself. He returned to the stove. The bacon was sizzling. Case got a large bowl from the cabinet above the stove. He cracked all the eggs into the bowl. He placed the shells in the carton and closed it. He added milk to the bowl. Then, he put the milk in the refrigerator. He salted and peppered the eggs. He got a whisk from the drawer next to the stove.

He whisked the eggs until they were smooth. He left the whisk in the bowl. He took the egg carton and the bacon wrapper into the laundry room. He deposited them in the trash can and returned to the stove. He laid the salt and pepper shakers on the dining table. He snagged the honey from the bar. He laid it next to the salt and pepper shakers. He finished cooking the bacon strips and laid them on a plate. He whisked the eggs in their place. He cooked them until they were fluffy. Then, he turned off the stove. He found a hot pad and an oven mit in a drawer below the silverware. He stuffed his hand into the oven mit. He grabbed the skillet and the hot pad and wandered towards the dining table. Tiffany dashed around the stairs. She inhaled through her nose and sighed with satisfaction. Case smiled.

“What the hell is that *smell?!?*” Tiffany shouted. She appeared next to the dining table. She wore an olive, argyle vest. The diamonds were tan. Red lines crisscrossed over those.

Underneath, Tiffany wore a white, long sleeved shirt with an open collar. She also wore black, bell bottoms and argyle socks. Her socks didn't match her vest. They didn't match each other. The one on Tiffany's left foot were black with red, and white diamonds and red lines. The one on her right foot was turquoise with yellow diamonds and white lines. Tiffany also wore her star necklace and all her rings. Case set the hot pad on the middle of the table. He laid the eggs on top. Tiffany looked into Case's eyes and grinned. "Is that what I *think* it is?"

"It *is*," Case replied. He pulled out the chair facing the kitchen. He motioned towards the seat. "Here you are, my dear." Tiffany plopped down in the chair. Case scooted it towards the table. Then, he headed towards the stove. Tiffany looked up as he passed.

"Thank you." Case returned with the bacon. He laid it next to the eggs.

"Welcome," he replied. He pointed at Tiffany's glass. "What would you like to drink?"

Tiffany looked into Case's eyes. "Did you go to the store?" Case nodded. "Did you... get some orange juice?"

"Of course," Case replied. He snagged Tiffany's glass and his own. He headed to the refrigerator. He filled Tiffany's glass with orange juice. He filled his with milk. He returned and handed Tiffany her glass. He sat next to her. Tiffany helped herself to some eggs and bacon. She picked up a strip of bacon and nibbled the end. She pointed at the honey and grinned.

"You like honey on your eggs?" The spatula was sticking out of the pan with the eggs. Case used it to scoop some eggs out. He laid them on his plate.

"You bet," he replied. "My dad used to put honey on everyone's eggs when I was little. My mom would get pissed." Case picked up the honey and squirted some on his eggs. "I always liked it." He offered the honey to Tiffany. "You want?" She nodded. She took the honey from

Case and poured some on her eggs.

“I used to eat them like this, too.” She looked up. “You know, when we had honey.” She set the honey down. “Or eggs.” Case snagged a couple of strips of bacon and set them on his plate. Gabrielle wandered in. She wore a sweater with black, white, and grey stripes. The stripes were different sizes. Gabrielle also wore a denim skirt that reached her knees and a pair of brown, leather boots. The boots zipped up the sides. They reached halfway up her calves. Her clothes were all new. She and Case bought them at the mall. Gabrielle looked at the dining table and gasped. She pointed at the eggs.

“Is that what I *think* it is?”

Case pulled out the chair next to him. “Have a seat.” Gabrielle plopped down, and Case scooted her in. He pointed at her glass. “What do you want to drink?” Gabrielle looked at Tiffany’s glass. She looked at Case and smiled.

“I want orange juice.”

Tiffany hopped up. “I’ll get it.” She grabbed Gabrielle’s glass and headed towards the refrigerator. Gabrielle scrunched up her nose. She tilted her head and rubbed her neck. Case scooped out some eggs and laid them on Gabrielle’s plate. He looked into her big, blue eyes.

“You okay, Gabs?” Case laid his fingers on Gabrielle’s shoulder and swirled them around. Gabrielle sighed.

“Oh, I’m fine.” She grabbed a strip of bacon and bit off the end. She looked at the table and chewed. “*Somebody* made me sleep on the floor last night.”

“Hey!” Tiffany called from the kitchen. Case patted Gabrielle’s shoulder. He laid his hand beside his plate. Tiffany returned with Gabrielle’s glass. She pretended to spit in it. Then, she set it in front of Gabrielle. Gabrielle grinned. She threw her hands out at her sides.

“Tiffany! That’s gross!” Tiffany returned to her seat, cackling. She pointed at Gabrielle.

“I was *trying* to protect you!” Tiffany looked at Case. “You see that? No appreciation.”

Gabrielle slid her fork through her eggs. She held a bite in front of her lips and looked at Tiffany.

“Next time, *you* two should sleep on the floor.” She put the fork in her mouth and slid her teeth across. Tiffany narrowed her eyes.

“Hey, I’ve done my share.” Gabrielle looked up. She thought of Tiffany’s old bedroom. She remembered her old, worn out mattress. It was slumped in a corner by the window. Gabrielle put her fingers to her lips.

“Oh... right.” She scooped up another bite. Tiffany showed Gabrielle her palm.

“Oh, no. I didn’t mean...” She pressed her lips together. “I wasn’t talking about...” She looked at her lap. Case took Tiffany’s hand. Gabrielle sighed.

“I’m sorry, Tiffany. You, um...” She picked up her glass. “You don’t *ever* have to sleep on the floor. Okay?” Tiffany looked up. Gabrielle took a drink and set her glass down. She looked at Case. “We should make *Louis* sleep on the floor.” Tiffany chuckled. Case nodded.

“Uh-huh. *I* see how it is.”

Gabrielle grinned. “You deserve it!” She took a bite of bacon. “Make me do all that shit for you!”

Case smacked his lips. “I can’t believe you’d do me that way.” Gabrielle scrunched up her nose. “Buy this nice house for you...” Case motioned towards Gabrielle’s plate with his head. “Feed you...” Gabrielle laughed through her nostrils. She patted Case’s arm.

“Thank you.”

Case patted Gabrielle's little fingers. "You're welcome, sweetheart." Adam walked in. He wore a red shirt with different sizes of white bands, white khakis, and his red, canvas shoes. He looked the table over. He turned and threw his arms around Tiffany's shoulders.

"I love you, man."

Tiffany pointed at Case. "Louis made it."

Adam let go and stood up. "Oh." He looked at Case. Case smiled. Adam held out his fist. "Hey, good lookin' out." Case reached across the table. He bumped knuckles with Adam. Then, he hopped up and threw his arms around him. "Ah!" Adam shouted. "You bastard!"

Case patted Adam's back. "I love you too, man." Tiffany and Gabrielle giggled. Case sat down. He exhaled a satisfied sigh. Adam narrowed his eyes. He sat down and pointed at Case.

"Fool, don't *ever* do that again."

Case took a bite of his eggs and nodded. "Don't worry, tough guy. You're still a big, bad man's man... and all that jazz." Tiffany laid her hand on Adam's. Adam jerked his hand away.

"Man, *get* your hand off me!" Tiffany tilted her head back and cackled. Adam stared at his plate and shook his head. "Not funny, guys. Not funny." Tiffany scooped some eggs out of the pan. She laid them on Adam's plate. She passed him the bacon and pointed at his glass.

"What do you want to drink?" Adam glared at her. His eyes moved to Tiffany's glass. He raised his eyebrows and slid his mouth to the side of his face.

"*I'll* take some orange juice." Tiffany smiled. She grabbed Adam's glass, hopped up, and headed for the refrigerator. Adam looked at Gabrielle. Gabrielle was staring at Adam, grinning. She laid her hand on his. Adam exhaled through his nostrils. He slid his thumb across

Gabrielle's fingers. Tiffany returned and set Adam's glass in front of him. She returned to her seat. Case looked at her.

"So, what the hell, Tiffany?" Tiffany sipped her orange juice. She licked her lips and looked up.

"What?"

Case narrowed his eyes. "'Sulk' and 'nepo'?" Tiffany took a breath and nodded. She set down her orange juice.

"Right. My circle commands."

Case pressed his lips together. "'Circle commands'?" Tiffany lifted her pointer fingers and held them side by side. She drew a circle in the air.

"That big pentagram rug we put under the bed?" Case nodded. "That counts as a circle in magic." Case rested his elbows on the table. He folded his fingers and laid his chin on top. Tiffany faced forward and exhaled through her nostrils. She sat back and shook her hair out of her face. She showed her palms to help gather her thoughts. "You see, sulk and nepo are my close and open commands." She looked at Case. Case looked at the tops of his eyes and shrugged. Tiffany sighed. "They close and open the circle around the star. You can close any circle that surrounds you." She rested her elbow on the table and laid her cheek in her palm. "Does that make sense?"

Case looked away and tilted his head. "Uh... for protection, right?"

Tiffany nodded. "Yes. I closed the circle to protect us." Case nodded. "But, it didn't keep that... pool of blood from getting in."

"Okay," Case replied. "So, when you close a circle, it makes like... a wall around you?" Tiffany closed her eyes and nodded. "I see. But, it only protects you from... what? Evil

spirits?”

Tiffany pointed at Case. “Yes. Exactly. The fact that the blood still got inside proves it was created by a human spirit.”

Case nodded. “So, what about the words you use? Do they mean something?”

Tiffany smiled. “Those are commands I wrote. ‘Sulk’ means to close. It’s the word ‘close’ in reverse.” She rolled her eyes. “Well, kind of. It’s hard to say ‘close’ backwards.” Case uttered a single laugh. “And, ‘nepo’ is ‘open,’ backwards.”

Case stretched his chin. “Hmm. I see. How cool.”

“*Whatever...*” Adam grumbled. Gabrielle smacked Adam’s hand. Adam looked at her. His eyebrows fell in the middle. His jaw dropped. Case fluttered his fingers through the air.

“And, the graveyard dirt?”

Tiffany motioned towards him. “It’s called ‘goofer dust’.” She flicked her hair out of her face. “Surely, you’ve heard of *that*.”

Case shrugged and shook his head. “No, never.” Tiffany forced a smile. She faced forward, scooped up some eggs, and stuffed them in her mouth. Case sipped his milk. “Are you sure it worked?”

“*Oh...*” Adam groaned.

“*Uh-oh...*” Gabrielle moaned. Case looked at the kids. He gritted his teeth. He faced Tiffany. Tiffany looked at him and narrowed her eyes.

“Um...” Case mused. “Red button?” Tiffany folded her arms on the table. She turned her head without looking away.

“Of *course* it worked.” She laid her hand over her heart. “*My* spells *never* fail.”

Case pressed his lips together and nodded. “My, my. How silly of me...” He looked at



Adam and Gabrielle. "...to even *suggest* such a thing." Tiffany's eyes lit up. Her jaw dropped.

"You...!" She smacked the table and pointed at Case. "You sound just like Adam!"

Case looked at her. He smiled and threw his arms out at his sides. Tiffany glared at him. Case pressed his lips together. He looked at the table.

"Sorry," he told her. "I mean, of *course* it worked." He looked up. "If you say so. I trust you." He shrugged. "So, we're definitely dealing with... a human spirit."

Tiffany nodded. "That pool of blood was created by a person." She squinted. "Or, it was created by the spirit of a person."

Case nodded. "So, what do we do about it?" Tiffany exhaled through her nose. She sat back and pointed at her plate.

"We finish breakfast. Then, we try the Ouija board."

Gabrielle drew in her fist. "Alright!" Adam folded his arms across his chest. He sat back and rolled his eyes. Tiffany pointed at him.

"Shut-up."

"But, that's upstairs," Case remarked. Tiffany looked at him. She smiled.

"Last I heard."

Case pointed towards the top of the stairs. "But, the message. Remember the ghost's message from last night?"

Tiffany nodded. "Mm-hmm. Yes." She pointed at Adam and Gabrielle. "Now, you guys didn't mess with the blocks, did you?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "No." Tiffany looked at Adam. He looked at Tiffany from the tops of his eyes.

"Seriously?"

Tiffany narrowed her eyes. “Adam?” Adam slouched in his seat and sighed. He shook his head. Tiffany pointed at Case. “Louis?”

Case held his hands out at his sides. “*I* didn’t mess with them.”

Tiffany nodded. “Good.” She nibbled the end of a strip of bacon. “We can use the blocks he moved.” Tiffany rolled her eyes. “Or *she*. Whatever.”

“*He*...” Adam mumbled. Tiffany looked at him. She pointed.

“What?” Adam looked up. He took a breath.

“Uh... nothing.”

Tiffany patted the table. “Damn it, Adam! You already *know* it’s a ‘he’!” She sighed. “Do you know his *name*?”

Adam tilted his head and scrunched up his nose. “Oh, come on. Tiffany...” Tiffany pointed between Adam’s eyes. She fought back a smile.

“Tell me, you bastard! I need to *know* these things.”

Gabrielle looked up. “It’s ‘Earl’.”

Tiffany looked at her. “Earl? You’re sure?” Gabrielle nodded. She pointed at Adam with her thumb.

“Adam told me this morning.” Adam smacked his lips. He sat back and folded his arms over his chest.

“I did *no* such thing!” He threw his arms out at his sides. “I don’t know where you guys *get* this stuff.” Tiffany bent over and giggled. She straightened up and smacked the table.

“You lying sack of *shit*!” Adam narrowed his eyes. He pressed his lips together and nodded.

“It’s Earl.” He looked at Case. “I’m sure.”

Case stroked his chin. “How did you *learn* his name, Adam?” Adam sighed. He looked at his lap and rubbed the back of his neck.

“I don’t know. I just kind of *know*.” He looked up. “You know what I mean?”

Case shrugged. “Kind of like... me and Jerry Nelms.”

Adam motioned towards him. “There. You see? You *do* know what I’m talking about.”

Tiffany pointed at Case. “Hey, what’s the deal with that, anyway? You can’t *know* that guy was murdered.”

Case looked at the table. “No. I can’t possibly know that.”

Tiffany laid her palms on the table. “Then, what the hell? How come every time you walk by fresh cement, you have to dig it up?” Case smiled. He looked into Tiffany’s eyes.

“Oh, you actually want to know what I *think*?” Tiffany’s lips parted. She narrowed her eyes. “You know, you’re the first person who’s asked me that?” Tiffany smiled. She folded her arms over her chest and exhaled through her nostrils.

“Really?”

Case nodded. “Yes.” He folded his fingers on the table. “Might I point out...” He looked at his lap then back up. “I *never* said Mr. Nelms was murdered.” Tiffany nodded. Adam and Gabrielle leaned in. Case held up his pointer finger. He looked around. “I can’t possibly prove that.” He slouched in his chair and looked at Tiffany.

“Um, okay,” Tiffany remarked. She shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

Case grinned. “Of course, you don’t.” He showed Tiffany his palms. “Look, here’s what I know.” He began listing facts on his fingers. “I know Jerry was in construction. I know he’s been missing for two months.” Case lifted the bottom of his shirt. He slid his hand into his pocket and took it out. He set a tiny pebble on the table. It was smaller than a pin head. Tiffany

looked at it. She leaned in and squinted. “And, I know one of *these* was on Linda’s table.”

Tiffany pushed her mouth to the side of her face. She looked into Case’s eyes.

“Look, I realize I’m not a detective. But, none of that proves *anything*.”

Adam threw his hands out at his sides. “Yeah! What the hell, man?” Case smiled. He held up his index finger and looked around.

“Ah... But, I haven’t told you guys about my assumptions.”

Gabrielle smiled. “Louis, you’re a weirdo.”

Case raised his palms and looked around. “You guys don’t wanna hear about my assumptions?” He sat back and shrugged. “Okay.” He picked up his glass and put it to his lips. Adam smacked his lips.

“Louis!” he shouted. “You’re killing me!”

Tiffany laid her palm on Case’s forearm. “Louis, tell us.” She motioned towards herself. “*I* want to hear about your assumptions.” Case looked at Tiffany. He set down his glass and continued.

“Here are my assumptions. Linda Nelms is not having an affair. She’s a good person with a kind heart.” He shrugged. “Jerry Nelms married her. Therefore, *he’s* not having an affair.” Case rolled his eyes. “Rather, he *wasn’t* having an affair. Whatever.” Adam gritted his teeth and rolled his wrist. Case looked into Tiffany’s eyes. He patted his forehead with the tips of his fingers. “I mean, why does somebody marry a beautiful, caring woman like that?” Tiffany smiled. Case folded his arms over his chest. “No, I believe the two of them are kind, caring people who love each other.” He looked at the tops of his eyes. “Were.”

Tiffany nodded. “So, why do you keep digging up concrete?”

Gabrielle threw her hands out at her sides. “Yeah?” She pounded the table with her fist.

“Tell us!”

Case shrugged. “Well, what do you mean?” Gabrielle melted. She collapsed on the table and folded her arms over the back of her head. Case snickered. He looked at Tiffany. “Look, go back to one of the most important facts. Jerry has been missing for two months.” He pointed at his index finger. “Now, throw in some assumptions. He’s not having an affair. And, he’s a straight guy.” Case motioned around the room. “He’s not tied up with the mob or something like that.”

Adam shrugged. “So?”

Case held up his palms. “So... where did he go?” Tiffany tapped her teeth and thought. Her jaw dropped. She looked at the tops of her eyes and gasped. She motioned towards Case.

“He fell in some wet concrete!”

Case crossed his arms over his chest. “It’s the only thing that makes sense. Don’t you *see* that?” Tiffany looked at the table. She smiled.

“It was just... an accident,” Tiffany remarked. Case nodded.

“I figure it went down like this.” He showed everyone his palms. Everyone leaned in. “Jerry’s working with one other guy, right? Like, they’re finishing up this big slab of concrete.” Tiffany nodded. “The other guy leaves for a second.” Case shrugged. “Maybe he had to take a leak. Who knows?” Case took a breath. “As the co-worker is leaving, Jerry tells him he’s going to finish smoothing out this one little section. Then, he’s gotta skedaddle. The co-worker nods and leaves the room.” Tiffany narrowed her eyes. “So, Jerry finishes his little thing. It takes about thirty seconds. He stands up and bonks his head.” Case shrugged. “Maybe he was sitting underneath something. I don’t know.”

“Maybe he had a heart attack,” Tiffany suggested.

Case pointed at her. “Hey, may-be.” He took a sip of milk. “Anyway, Jerry slides into the concrete. The co-worker has no idea. The co-worker returns and finds that Jerry is missing.” Case tapped his forehead with the tips of his fingers. “He remembers what Jerry just told him. He was about to leave.” Case smiled. “So, he sits down and finishes smoothing the concrete.”

Tiffany grinned. “Oh, my God!” She smacked the table. “That actually makes sense!”

Case held a bite of scrambled eggs in front of his lips. “Not only does it make sense. It’s the *only* thing that makes sense.” He looked away and tilted his head. “If you use my assumptions.” He stuffed the eggs between his lips. Adam squinted.

“But, how do you know it was concrete? I mean, what if he fell in some mud or something?”

“Yeah?” Gabrielle inquired.

Case pointed at the tiny rock on the table. “But, what about the pebble?”

Adam sighed. “Louis... it’s a pebble.” Case smiled. He held up his index finger.

“That’s right. It’s a pebble.” He nibbled on a strip of bacon. “If I’d found a chunk of mud on the Nelms’ table, I’d be looking around in the mud. But since it’s a pebble, there’s a much better chance that he’s in a block of concrete.” He looked at Tiffany. “I’ve built stronger cases with less. Believe me.” Tiffany smiled. She laid her fingers on Case’s.

“I believe you.” She looked at the kids. “I think I *actually* do believe him. That makes sense.”

Case shrugged. “What can I say? It’s what I do.” There was a sudden noise. It was the sound of a wooden croquet ball. It bounced down the steps. Everyone looked towards the stairs. The ball thumped to the bottom. It smashed into the front door and dribbled to a stop. Case and Tiffany looked at each other. “*What the hell was THAT?!*” Case whispered. A child’s laughter

came from upstairs. It was the giggling of a young boy. A pair of quick feet roared down the stairs. Everyone looked towards the front door. The footsteps brushed past them and stopped in front of the door. Then, it was quiet. Case looked around. *"Anybody other than me wondering what the hell's on the other side of those stairs?"* Tiffany looked into Case's eyes. She sighed. She looked at Adam and Gabrielle.

"Everybody finish their breakfast." She looked at Case. "Then, I'm breaking out the Ouija board." Everybody finished their breakfast. Then, Tiffany led them to the office. She pointed at the letter blocks as they passed. "Don't touch!" she warned. She pulled the string dangling from the attic door and lowered the stairs. She looked over her shoulder. "You guys stay here. I'm just going to get something. And then, I'm coming right back down." Case nodded.

"Okay," Gabrielle replied. Adam pressed his lips together. Tiffany laid her palms on an upper step. She stepped on the bottom step.

"Wait!" Adam shouted. Tiffany stopped and looked over her shoulder. Adam sighed. "Tiffany, please don't go up there."

Tiffany smiled. "Adam, I *have* to." She slid her hair aside. "I have to get some salt." Adam narrowed his eyes. "I'm going to recover the blocks. And then, we're *all* going up there." Adam folded his arms over his chest. He shook his head.

"I don't like this."

Tiffany shrugged. "Well, tough." She turned and hobbled up the stairs. She found the boxes the kids brought up. They were lying next to the Ouija table. Tiffany found three cans of salt in one of the boxes. They were covered with blue paper. They had a picture of a little girl in a yellow dress with an umbrella. Tiffany grabbed one can and looked around. The attic gave her

the creeps. Something about it didn't feel right. She shrugged the feeling away and returned to the office. She brushed past everyone and wandered down the hall. She got the wooden box from the table next to the bed. She took it and the salt to the stairs. Everyone else gathered around the blocks. Tiffany showed them her palms. "Okay. Be careful, guys," she warned. "There might be an open door here." Case looked at her and squinted.

Tiffany sat at the top of the stairs. Case sat across from her. Adam and Gabrielle flattened against the wall. Tiffany slid her thumbnail beneath a metal spout at the top of the can of salt. She pulled it back and looked at Case. She and Case sat Indian style. Case rested his elbows on his knees and folded his fingers in front of his face.

"Here we go," Tiffany remarked. She surrounded the words Earl left with salt. She laid an oval on each step around each word. She closed the spout and set the can aside. She slid her hair back and looked at Case. "Okay, then." She set the wooden box on the floor and slid back the top. She snagged a pinch of graveyard dirt and held it above the top steps. "Sulk..." she commanded. She opened her fingers and blew the dirt across the steps. It drifted across the letters. Case felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He slid his fingers below the collar of his shirt and adjusted it. Tiffany looked up and smiled.

"Did you feel that, too?"

Case raised his eyebrows. "Yes, I did. That was weird." He shrugged. "Now, what?" Tiffany pointed at the other blocks. They lay on the floor next to Tiffany and Case.

"I'm going to do the same thing with these," Tiffany replied. She picked up the can of salt and thumbed back the spout. "Just in case." Tiffany laid a circle of salt around the letter blocks at the top of the stairs. She snagged another pinch of goofer dust and held it in front of her. Case took her hand. Tiffany looked at him and smiled. "You ready?" Case smiled and



nodded. Tiffany faced the blocks. They said the command together. “Sulk...” Tiffany blew the dirt across the blocks. It wafted to the floor and doused them. Case heard hummingbirds in his ears. He shrugged up his shoulders and shuddered. Tiffany looked at him. “Yep. I’d say it’s safe, now.” She looked at Adam and Gabrielle. “Will you guys carry some of these blocks, please?”

Adam narrowed his eyes and exhaled through his nostrils. “Yeah, I guess.” He and Gabrielle knelt beside Tiffany and Case. “Let’s get this over with.” Tiffany glared at him. Case gathered the blocks from the stairs. Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle gathered the others. Everyone herded the blocks to the attic. Then, Tiffany returned for the can of salt and the graveyard dirt. She went alone. Everyone else stayed in the attic. Tiffany bent over and picked up the salt. She shivered. The air felt dry and frigid. Tiffany exhaled a shaky sigh and looked down the stairs. She wasn’t alone.

She spotted an apparition in front of the door. It looked like a little boy with a white sheet draped over his head. It had two black holes for eyes and a tiny black hole for its mouth. The apparition was slightly transparent. Tiffany could see the door through its face. Tiffany smiled a little. The apparition looked like a classic “boo” ghost. It was the most interesting thing Tiffany had ever laid eyes on. It was also the creepiest. The little ghost stood at the bottom of the stairs, staring. Then, it turned and ran around the corner. Tiffany sighed. She picked up the wooden box and returned to the attic. She closed the door behind her. Case, Adam, and Gabrielle were sitting on the other side of the Ouija table. The sky was filled with clouds. So, the attic was pretty dark. Case looked at Tiffany and tilted his head.

“Everything alright?”

Tiffany pressed her lips together. “I saw him.” Case narrowed his eyes.

“Really?” Gabrielle asked. “What did he look like?”

Tiffany shrugged. “Like a ghost.” She wandered across the attic and sat across from them. “He looked exactly like a ghost.” Tiffany slid her hair back and looked around. She set the salt and the dirt next to her. She shuffled through the box with the salt cans. She found a couple of red candles. They were in glass canisters. Tiffany set one on either side of the table. She looked at Adam. “Give me your lighter,” she demanded.

Adam narrowed his eyes. “Awe, man. *I* don’t have a lighter. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Tiffany held out her hand. “Adam, give me your damn lighter.” Adam sighed. He slid his hand into his pocket and fished around. He took out his Flippo lighter and handed it to Tiffany. Tiffany flipped back the lid and flicked the flint wheel. She held a candle above the flame until it lit. She returned the candle to the side of the table and lit the other. Then, she returned Adam’s lighter. Adam snatched it from Tiffany and shoved it into his pocket. Case switched sides and sat next to Tiffany. He looked the Ouija board over. It looked familiar. Case had seen Ouija boards before. Tiffany’s had the letters A through Z. They were carved into the shiny, oak surface. The letters were arranged in two, arching rows in the middle of the board. The top row was A through M. The bottom was N through Z. The word “yes” was carved in the upper, left corner. The word “no” was carved in the upper, right corner. The word “hello” was carved below “yes.” “Good-bye” was carved below “no.”

None of those things were unusual for a Ouija board. But, Tiffany’s board was special. It had other words below the letters. There were over a hundred of them. They were long, hard to spell words like “precious” and “hideous.” The board was designed to make things more efficient. Below the words, there was a row of numbers. Below that, there was a row of

symbols. There were symbols for math functions like a plus sign and a minus sign. There were also parenthesis, brackets, an ampersand, and an asterisk. There were others. Case looked at Tiffany.

“So, how do we start?” Tiffany pressed her lips together. She looked beside her. The blocks were scattered on the floor.

“Well, I never like to limit myself to one channel of communication.” Tiffany began organizing the blocks. She gathered all the A blocks and grouped them together. She did the same with the B blocks. Case sat across from Tiffany and helped. “We know Earl can move these blocks around. So, we’ll keep them handy.” Tiffany looked at Adam. She pointed at an empty spot between the table and the wall. “Adam, I need *you* to sit over there.”

Adam threw his hands out at his sides. “Why?”

Tiffany looked at the blocks. “Because, you’re a third channel of communication.” She looked over her shoulder. “You’re a psychic medium.” Adam’s eyebrows fell in the middle. He crossed his arms over his chest.

“You mean... you want the ghost to possess me?”

Tiffany smiled. “Of course, silly.” She pointed at the blank spot on the floor. “Now, sit over there. I don’t want you to hurt somebody, if Earl chooses *you*.” Adam sighed. He slid across the floor and sat in the empty spot. Gabrielle looked at Tiffany. Her eyebrows fell at the sides.

“But, Tiffany!” she cried. “What if something happens to him?” Tiffany looked into Gabrielle’s big, blue eyes. Adam glared at his girlfriend.

“Oh, come on, Gabrielle. Do you really think there’s a ghost in here? Seriously?” Gabrielle sighed.

“Yeah, Gabrielle...” Tiffany mused. “There’s no *way* this is going to work.” She tossed Adam the salt. She pointed at the floor. “Barricade yourself,” she instructed. Adam pressed his lips together. He opened the spout and surrounded himself with a circle of salt. Tiffany and Case finished arranging the blocks. Tiffany looked at Adam. She opened the little, wooden box, snagged a pinch of dirt, and held it in front of her. “Sulk...” she commanded. She blew the dirt towards Adam. Adam scrunched up his nose and waved his hand in front of his face. Gabrielle slid across the floor. She curled her arms around Adam’s arm. She rested her face against his shoulder. Tiffany returned to her spot. Case sat next to her. Tiffany laid her palms on her knees and sighed.

“Okay. I think we’re ready to begin.” She looked at Adam and Gabrielle. She snapped her fingers and pointed at them. “Enh!” she spat. She pointed at an empty spot across the table. “Get back over there, Gabrielle.”

Gabrielle went limp. “But, Tiffany!”

“Go!” Tiffany ordered.

Adam ruffled Gabrielle’s hair. “I’ll be okay, Gabs. Don’t worry.” Gabrielle moaned. She kissed Adam on the cheek. Then, she slithered away and sat across from Tiffany and Case. Tiffany motioned for the salt. Adam handed it to her. Tiffany handed it to Case. She pointed at the letters.

“Circle them.” Case laid a circle of salt around the letters. He handed the canister back. Tiffany began a circle around the table. She handed the can to Gabrielle. Gabrielle continued to the circle around her side. She handed the can to Case. Case completed the circle and handed the can to Tiffany. Tiffany closed the spout and set the can next to her. Case threw his hands out at his sides.

“Won’t that keep Earl from being able to use anything?”

Tiffany shook her head. “Earl can cross the salt.” She looked into Case’s eyes. “I proved that last night. I’m just putting up some extra protection. Just in case.”

Case narrowed his eyes. “Protection from *what?*”

Tiffany smirked. “You don’t want to know.”

Gabrielle motioned towards the Ouija table. “Earl might be talking to us from the other side,” she explained. Case looked at her. “Each time he says something, it might be like... an open door. If a door is open to the other side, other things can get through.”

Case scrunched up his nose. “Oh...” he groaned. He looked at Tiffany. “You’re right. I didn’t need to know that.” Tiffany nodded. She reached behind her and snagged a little goofer dust.

“It’ll be okay,” Tiffany assured him. “That hardly *ever* happens.” Tiffany held the dirt in front of her. “*Sulk...*” she whispered. She blew the graveyard dirt across the table and the blocks. Case turned his head and shuddered. The air felt thick and heavy. A yellow bolt of lightning twisted across the sky. It appeared in front of the southern window. It lit up the attic. Thunder rolled across the ceiling. Gabrielle shrugged up her shoulders and looked around. Her eyes popped open. Her eyebrows fell at the sides. Tiffany found the pointer for the Ouija board below the table. She laid it on top and sat back. She laid her palms behind her. Case joined her. He motioned towards the table with his head.

“Aren’t we supposed to put our fingers on that?”

Tiffany shook her head. “You never touch the pointer.” She looked at Case. “If it’s going to work, it will just work.” Case nodded. He and Tiffany stared at the table.

“So, how do we get the ball rolling, here?” Case inquired.

Tiffany looked at Adam. “Adam? Any suggestions?”

Adam rolled his eyes. “Why does everyone always ask *me* to do these things?”

Tiffany squinted. “You knew his name, Adam.” She pointed at him. “Don’t give me that shit. You’ve... talked to him or something.” Everyone looked at Adam. Adam looked at his lap and shook his head.

“This is so stupid, man.” He looked up. “Okay... Earl... the ghost.” Adam sighed. “Would you... please come out and play with our stupid Ouija board?” He looked at Tiffany. “Or something?” Tiffany glared at him. Adam looked at Case. “Louis? You wanna give it a whirl? You’re good at manipulating people.”

Case smacked his lips. “And, what is *that* supposed to mean?”

Adam pointed at Case and grinned. “*You* know what I’m talking about!” He crossed his arms over his chest. “You could charm the paint right off a car.” Tiffany looked at Case and smiled. She slid her fingers through his.

“You *are* very charming.”

Case looked into Tiffany’s eyes and smiled. “Oh, whatever.” He looked at Adam. “I don’t even know what you guys are talking about.” Gabrielle smiled. She leaned in.

“Come on, Louis. Say something charming.” Case looked at Adam. He exhaled through his nose.

“Do you know how *old* Earl is?” Adam pressed his lips together. He looked at his lap.

“Eight.” Case nodded. He looked at Tiffany.

“Earl?” Case called. “Come on out, buddy.” He looked around the room. “We’ve got some nice toys for you.”

“*No, we don’t,*” Adam grumbled. “*We’ve got some really crappy toys and a Ouija*

*board.*” Tiffany glared at Adam. She held up her fist and shook it. The glass pointer slid across the table. Case, Tiffany, and Gabrielle leaned in. Adam looked away and shook his head. The pointer rotated. It pointed at the word “hello.” Tiffany and Case looked at each other. Tiffany grinned. She rolled her wrist. Case looked at the board.

“Um... Hi, Earl.” He watched the pointer. “That *is* your name, right?” The pointer wobbled. It slid forward and pointed at the word “yes.” Adam smacked his lips.

“Man, whatever!”

Tiffany looked at Adam. “Be quiet, Adam!”

Adam motioned towards the table. “You’re moving it, somehow!” He folded his arms over his chest. “There’s no way I’m believing this shit.” Tiffany sighed. She faced the table and shook her head.

“Yeah, Adam,” Tiffany remarked. “I’ve got a guy downstairs with a magnet. He’s moving the pointer around.” Tiffany leaned in. “Earl, is there anyone else there?” The pointer slid to the word “no.” It moved with swift precision. Tiffany smiled. She was impressed. She sat back and crossed her arms over her chest. “You’re all alone? You haven’t seen any other spirits?” The pointer slid back and forth. It kept pointing to “no.” Tiffany nodded. She leaned forward and swiped the circle of salt around the table. “*Nepo...*” she whispered.

Case looked at her. “What the hell? You said it was dangerous.” Tiffany looked into Case’s eyes. She shook her head.

“He’s not in the spirit world. There are no open doors.” She pointed at the blocks. Case swiped the salt circle around the blocks. Adam swatted at his. The air thinned out. Case smiled and sighed.

“Earl, is there anything *specific* you’d like to tell us? You know, other than the message

you left on the stairs. I'd say we've already broken *that* rule." The temperature dropped.

Tiffany hugged herself and shivered. Case rubbed her arms. Everyone watched the table. The pointer slid to the word "yes." Case nodded. "Go ahead, Earl. It's okay." The pointer slid to the bottom of the table. It pointed at the word "get." Then, it moved to the word "out." Case smacked his lips. "Earl! That's not very nice." There was shuffling near the blocks. A "G" block and an "E" block floated onto the table. They looked as though they were being carried. A "T" block and an "O" block wobbled through the air and joined them. A "U" block and another "T" block drifted next to those. Case shook his head.

"I'm not leaving, Earl." He grabbed the pointer. He pointed at the word "kiss." "Kiss..." he remarked. He found the word "my." He pointed at it. "My..." he said. Case pointed at the letter "A." He felt a row of tiny, icy fingers curl around his hand. Case gasped. The pointer dropped from his fingers and landed on the table. Case jerked his hand away. The table flipped over. It landed in front of Adam. Adam backed away and flattened against the wall.

"Tiffany!" he cried. "Stop it!" Tiffany's eyebrows fell in the middle. She looked into Adam's hazel eyes.

"Adam, shut-up! *I'm* not doing this!" Tiffany took Case's hand and dragged him away. She pointed at Gabrielle. "Get back!" Gabrielle scooted back. Her big, blue eyes were wide open. Earl appeared. At first, there was a hollow spot in the air. It was in the shape of a young boy. Then, a white sheet appeared. It manifested above Earl's head and slid to his feet. Earl faced Tiffany and Case. Case stared into Earl's big, black eyes. They were hideous and dreary. It was like looking at a person who'd had their eyes torn out. The holes looked ancient and rotted. Earl's mouth looked about the same. It was below the eyes, in the middle. It was a little



smaller. Earl's mouth widened.

"*Get out!*" he shrieked. Everyone plopped their hands over their ears. Earl's hideous scream was piercing and incoherent. It sounded like a tea kettle. Case's eyebrows fell in the middle. He folded his arms over his lap and leaned forward.

"No! Leave us alone!"

Tiffany grabbed Case's arm. "*Louis!*" she whispered. Case looked at her. Earl shot across the room and got right in Case's face.

"*Get out of my HOUSE!*" Earl shouted. His mouth stretched to four times its size. Case narrowed his eyes. He stared into Earl's hideous, little face.

"Damn it, Earl! Stop being such a little bastard." Earl drifted away. He filled the attic with insidious growls. Then, he smashed into the floor and disappeared. Tiffany shoved Case's arm. Case looked at her.

"Louis, that was *dumb!*" Case sighed. He motioned towards the area where Earl disappeared.

"He needs to chill out. We're not hurting anything. We're just kickin' it." Gabrielle cupped her hand over her mouth and giggled. Tiffany stared at Case. She grinned and shook her head.

"*That's* all you have to say? After what you just saw?" Case took a breath. He pressed his lips together. He looked around.

"You guys think we should leave?"

"No!" Gabrielle shouted. She pointed at the floor. "Earl's being an ass-hole! I think *he* should leave!" Case and Tiffany looked at Adam. Adam looked up and shook his head.

"I don't even know what you guys are talking about. All I saw was hot air mixing with

cold air.”

Gabrielle pounded her fists into the floor. “God!” she yelled. She glared at her boyfriend. “*You’re* being an ass-hole, too!” She pointed at him. “I think Adam should leave, too.” Adam looked at his lap and exhaled through his nostrils. Tiffany sighed. She took Case’s hand and looked into his eyes.

“Well... I can always cleanse the house.”

Case nodded. “Figured.” Tiffany exhaled through her nose. She looked around.

“Is that what you guys want me to do?” Gabrielle nodded. Adam didn’t look up. He lightly shrugged. Tiffany looked at Case. “Louis?”

Case shrugged. “If he’s going to be an ass-hole.”

Tiffany laughed through her nostrils. “Then... take the kids to the magic shop. I need you get me some stuff.”

Case nodded. “What all do you need?”

Tiffany folded her fingers in her lap. “I need... my pentacle, some extra sage, and a Berend doll.” She grabbed the box they’d gotten the letter blocks from. She dug out some sage and showed it to Case. “I have enough to get started. But, I’ll need more.”

Case patted Tiffany’s shoulder. “Okay. You just want us to leave you *here*?”

Tiffany nodded. “Yes. I’d rather you guys left while I start cleansing the four corners of the property. I need everyone out of the house. But then, I’m really going to need those other items.” She looked at Adam. “Give me your lighter.” Adam glared at her. Tiffany glared back. She held out her hand. “Gimme.” Adam slid his hand into his pocket. He produced his lighter and dropped it in Tiffany’s hand. Tiffany looked into Case’s eyes. Case shrugged. He looked at Adam and Gabrielle. He motioned towards the front of the house with his head.

“Let’s roll.” Adam and Gabrielle hopped up and headed for the stairs. Case looked into Tiffany’s deep, dark eyes. He scrunched up his nose. “*I* wanna help. Let me stay.” Tiffany smiled. She pointed towards the front of the house.

“Go.” Case laid his palm on the side of Tiffany’s face. He kissed her lips. He stuffed his hand in his pocket and took out his phone. He handed it to her.

“Call me, if you need me.” Tiffany looked into Case’s icy, blue eyes and smiled. She nodded. Case turned and wandered down the stairs.

## Chapter 18: “Sage”

Tiffany stood at the northwest corner of the property. She held a bundle of sage. She always kept some on hand just in case. She had enough to cleanse the four corners of the property. But, she needed more. She needed to cleanse the house as well. The bundle was all she had. Case and the kids were collecting more from the magic shop. The back fence of the shop was covered with sage. Valerie planted it long ago. Tiffany flipped open Adam’s lighter. She flicked it to life and held the flame to the bottom of the bundle. It burned slow. Sage always did. Mainly, it smoked. Tiffany put Adam’s lighter in her pocket. She held the smoky bundle in front of her. She wiggled it and swirled it around. She slid her free fingers around the black star dangling from her neck. She didn’t have her pentacle. The necklace Case gave her would have to do. Tiffany hoped it had enough charm to protect her. That is, if she needed it.

She swirled her thumb around the shiny, black gem. It made her think of Case. She bowed her head and smiled. Tiffany’s pentacle was far more powerful. Valerie gave it to her. What made it so powerful was something organic. It had one of Valerie’s molars on it. It was a wisdom tooth. Valerie had her wisdom teeth removed. She kept all four of them. She drilled holes in them and put them on different necklaces. She gave one to Tiffany. Tiffany’s pentacle had a molar at the back, near the clasp. Tiffany was apprehensive about trying anything without it. But, Case charmed her star enough that she felt safe. It just needed something organic. Tiffany wandered along the north side of the fence. She waved the sage around. *“Maybe I should steal one of Louis’ teeth,”* she whispered. She smiled. *“I wonder if he had HIS wisdom teeth removed. Maybe he would give me one.”*

Case’s cell phone sat on the bar. Tiffany left it there, so she could focus. She didn’t want any distractions. She took a moment to look it over. She’d used it a time or two. But, she’d

never really looked at it. The body of the phone was made of black plastic. It was all scratched up and smashed. There were pieces missing. Tiffany had no idea Case's phone had a pink heart on it with Gina's name. Tiffany had seen the little sticker. But apparently, she never took the time to figure out what it was. Tiffany looked it over and laid her fingers across her lips. It made her sad. Case's cell phone sat all alone on the bar. It began to play a piece of classical music. The window on the front lit up. It read "Paloni."

It was a thirty minute commute from the house to the magic shop. The magic shop was on the freeway. The house wasn't far from it. Ordinarily, a drive like that would take five minutes. Unfortunately, there was a terrible accident that morning. Three tanker trucks had flipped and rolled. They lay across the eastbound lanes and the westbound ones. They resided a couple of miles between the house and the shop. Case and the kids were stuck in a wall of traffic. It was maddening. Case looked up and down the road. There were cars as far as he could see. He, Adam, and Gabrielle were somewhere in the middle. It was a joke. Even the next exit was filled with cars. They were backed up from people trying to get off the freeway. Case laid his elbow on the steering wheel. He leaned forward and pinched the bridge of his nose. Gabrielle sat next to Case. She reached across and patted his shoulder.

"It'll be okay, Louis. Don't worry." Case looked at Gabrielle and smiled. He patted her little hand. Adam sat in the back seat. He leaned across the backs of Gabrielle and Case's seat and tapped a knob on the stereo.

"Let's listen to some jams," Adam remarked. Pentari began to play. Adam grinned. He plopped down and bobbed his head to the beat. Gabrielle narrowed her eyes.

"Are you worried?" she asked Case.

Case shrugged. "I don't know. You think anything will happen while we're gone? What

if Earl comes after her?”

Gabrielle tilted her head. “Tiffany knows what she’s doing. She’ll be fine.” Case nodded. He faced forward. The car in front of him moved a little. Case rolled his eyes.

“Oh, boy,” he groaned. “I get to move six inches.” He looked over his shoulder. “We get to move six inches, Adam.”

Adam nodded. “Yeah, this sucks. I have to pee, too.”

“Hmm,” Case moaned. He looked around. “I think I might have my cup from yesterday.”

Gabrielle’s eyes popped open. “No way!” she shouted. She looked at Adam and shook her head. “Uh-uh!” She pointed at him. “That’s gross. I will *kill* you, if you pee in that thing!” Adam cackled. Case slid his fingers below his seat. He sat up and grinned. Gabrielle glared at him. Case held up his Burger Land cup from the day before. He held it above the back of his seat. Adam snatched the cup from his fingers. “Adam!” Gabrielle yelled. “Gross!”

Adam threw his hands out at his sides. “I have to go, man. What am I supposed to do?” Adam held the cup between his knees. He leaned forward and unzipped his fly. Case faced forward.

“At-a-boy,” he remarked. Gabrielle laid her head in her lap. She folded her arms over the back of her head.

“I can’t *believe* you two!” she shouted. “I’m telling Tiffany!”

Case scrunched up his nose. “Hey, man!” He patted Gabrielle’s back. “I thought we had an understanding.” Gabrielle looked up. She pointed at Case and grinned.

“Okay, I won’t tell. But, you have to do whatever I say for the next few days.”

Case flicked his wrist. “Nah. I’ll just tell her myself.”

Gabrielle smacked her lips. “You bastard.”

Adam tilted his head back. “Ah...” he sighed.

Tiffany wandered inside. She wore her brown boots. She bent over, untied them, and set them beside the door. She wandered into the den. The box she’d gotten the sage from was sitting on the floor. Tiffany knelt in front of the box and slid her hair back. She dug around. She took out five tuning forks. They had round, flat bases. So, they could stand on their own. Tiffany gathered the tuning forks and took them into the kitchen. She found a nice, clear spot on the checkered tiles in the kitchen. She arranged the tuning forks in the shape of a pentagram. She stood them on their bases, leaving a large area in the middle. She looked the tuning forks over and curled her fingers in front of her lips. She felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up. She looked over her shoulder. There was nobody there. Tiffany missed Case. She was scared. She needed a pair of big, strong arms around her. But, Case’s little, scrawny arms would do. Tiffany noticed Case’s cell phone on the bar.

“Maybe they’re at the magic shop,” she remarked. She wandered to the bar and picked up her boyfriend’s phone. The window read “1 missed call.” Tiffany narrowed her eyes. She flipped open Case’s phone and looked at the screen. There was a message from Paloni. Tiffany pressed a button to play it. She held the phone to her ear. Paloni sounded a little anxious.

*“Case! Pick up the phone!”* Tiffany’s eyes widened. *“Man, call me back! The sanatorium just called. Tiffany’s father escaped last night.”* Tiffany gasped. The phone dropped from her fingers. It clattered to the cold, tile floor. The screen splintered and went black. Tiffany threw her fingers over her lips. She pinched her eyes shut. Her arms quivered. Her knees felt wobbly. The room felt like it was spinning. Tiffany heard tires squalling. She looked towards the front of the house. She spotted an old pickup in the driveway. It had a two

tone paintjob. It was maroon and cream. Jack Holiday was in the passenger seat. He wore a camouflage jacket, dark blue jeans, and a pair of hiking boots. Andre was driving. He wore a blue, plaid jacket, a grey undershirt, a pair of faded blue jeans, and a pair of cruddy, brown, steel toed boots.

“*Oh, my God...*” Tiffany gasped. She dashed around the bar and ducked out of sight. She laid her palms on the floor. She patted the tiles, nervously. “*Surely, they won’t... break in,*” Tiffany whispered. There was a smash at the front door. Tiffany gritted her teeth. She buried her head between her knees and threw her arms over the back of her head. Tiffany heard another car arrive. There was a second smash at the front door. Tiffany heard her father, cackling. She sat up. She panted like a dog. She laid her palm on her chest and peeked around the side of the bar. She spotted Jack’s two boys, Hank and Henry. Henry wore a red and white, plaid jacket, black jeans, and brown, suede boots. Hank wore a denim jacket, khaki, cargo pants, and black steel toes. Tiffany also spotted David Sweeny. He wore a white hoodie with black skulls all over it. He also wore camouflage pants and brown boots. He, Henry, and Hank arrived in a second car. It was a shiny, black Cammy. It was an old, eighties model. Tiffany caught a glimpse of David’s face through the window on the west side of the door. He was grinning. And, he was toothless.

“*Oh, Titty!*” David teased. Tiffany ducked behind the bar. She fought to catch her breath. Beads of sweat dotted her forehead. Tiffany tilted her head back and brushed them away. She unbuttoned her sleeves and rolled them to her elbows. “*Are you IN there?*” David inquired. Hank and Henry cackled.

“*Oh, fuck!*” Tiffany whispered. She dashed across the kitchen. She opened the top drawer to the left of the stove. There was another smash. Tiffany ignored it. She dug through



the silverware and looked around. She pressed her lips together. She shoved the top drawer closed and opened the second drawer. It was lined with thick, sharp, butcher's knives. The biggest one had an old, faded, wooden handle. Tiffany slid her fingers around the handle, jerked out the knife, and whirled around. There was another smash. Tiffany heard her father giggling. She felt like vomiting. She looked at the floor. She noticed the tuning forks.

*"Oh..."* she whispered.

*"Tiff!"* Andre shouted. *"Get over here and open this fucking door, now! Tiff!"* Tiffany plopped down in the middle of the tuning forks. She sat Indian style, facing the door. There were three tuning forks out front and two behind her. She picked up the first tuning fork and tapped it against the tiles. It squealed a high pitched C. There was another smash. Tiffany heard the front door splinter. She returned the ringing tuning fork to its place. She picked up the next two. She smacked them against the tiles and returned them to their places. She did the same with the two behind her. She was surrounded by C tones. It was deafening. Tiffany pinched her eyes shut and concentrated. She heard the front door crash to the floor. She laid the knife across her lap and parted her lips.

*"Specter..."* she whispered. Tiffany vanished. Every few seconds, a flicker of her could be seen. Otherwise, she was invisible. Jack's boys wandered into the den. They filled it with maniacal cackling. Andre and Jack wandered through the living room. Andre's head was bald. His mustache was twisted into a pair of handlebars. He looked around and gritted his teeth.

"Oh, Tiff!" he grumbled. David stood in front of the bookcase. He folded his arms over his chest and looked around. He'd never seen books like the ones Tiffany had. Most of them were mathematical textbooks and books on the occult. David narrowed his eyes.

"Are you guys sure she's here?" David asked. There was a book on group theory two

rows away. It slid away from the shelf and hovered next to David. He didn't notice.

"Of course she's here!" Andre snarled. "Detective Dipshit and the kids took off a while ago. Tiff wasn't with them." David noticed a flicker out of the corner of his eye. It looked like Tiffany. He looked to his right. There was no one there. There was just a book floating in mid-air. It floated up and hovered in front of David's face. David's eyes popped open.

"Uh..." he managed to get out. He saw Tiffany holding the book. But, she was only visible for a fraction of a second. The book floated two feet away. Then, it smashed into David's nose. "Gah!" David shrieked. He bent over and pinched his nostrils. Blood leaked down his fingers. It dripped onto the shiny, wooden floor. Henry looked over his shoulder.

"What?"

David stood and tilted his head back. "Puh!" He let go of his nose and twitched it. "I doe know." He faced Henry. "One of the books jush attacked me!" Henry smiled and raised his eyebrows. He turned his head without looking away.

"Um... you sure about that, buddy?" He looked at Tiffany's books. He was staring at a book called "Granny Chants." "Books don't usually go around attacking people." "Granny Chants" jumped off the shelf. It smashed Henry between the eyes. Henry pinched the bridge of his nose and hopped away. "Whoa! What the hell?!" He and David saw Tiffany for a split second. She was grinning. All the books began toppling off the shelf. They battered the boys' noses, ribs, and eyes. David and Henry backed away. They stood with their backs against the railing of the stairs. Hank witnessed most of it. He stared at the floor with a pair of wide eyes. It was covered with books.

"What *is* this?" Hank demanded. Two thick, heavy textbooks slid off the shelf. They turned and stalked towards Hank. Hank gritted his teeth and dashed towards the kitchen. The

books flew through the air. They connected with the back of Hank's skull. "Aye!" Hank squealed. He tumbled to the floor. His back rested against the bar. He stared at the empty space in front of him. He caught a flash of Tiffany wandering towards him. Her argyle vest made an impression on him. Hank noticed that more than anything else. Hank looked to his right. Andre and Jack wandered past him and looked around. Jack narrowed his eyes. He heard a high pitched ring. He looked towards the kitchen.

"What *is* that?" he demanded. He stomped around the bar and looked around. He noticed the tuning forks on the floor. They were singing in the tune of C. Every few seconds, Jack saw a flash of Tiffany. Jack folded his arms over his chest and smirked. He looked at Andre. "Hey Andre, come check this out." Andre wandered around the bar and stood next to Jack. He threw his hands on his hips and stared at the tuning forks. He caught a glimpse of his daughter. He narrowed his eyes.

"She's in there," he remarked. He stomped across the kitchen and kicked one of the tuning forks aside. The other four clattered to the checkered floor. Tiffany appeared. She was sitting on the floor, staring at them.

"*Oh, crap!*" she whispered. She stuffed her hand in her pocket. Jack stalked towards her. His eyebrows drooped in the middle. He was grinning from ear to ear. Tiffany jerked her hand out of her pocket, swung her fist towards him, and opened her fingers. Jack was battered with crackling sparks. He shrieked and backed away. He dusted himself off and looked at Andre.

"She's a fucking witch, Andre! Jesus Christ!"

Andre shook his head. "There just Dragon Poppers. Don't worry." Tiffany gasped for breath. Hank, Henry, and David stood on the other side of the bar. They folded their arms on

the green, granite surface and stared at Tiffany. Andre stalked towards her. Tiffany pointed the butcher knife at her father and slid away.

“S-Stay back!” she shouted. She shoved herself to her feet and walked backwards. Andre narrowed his eyes and grinned. He slithered towards his daughter. Jack was right behind him. Hank, Henry, and David wandered around the counter and followed. “Dad!” Tiffany yelled. She shook the knife in Andre’s face. Her fingers were wobbly. “I’m warning you!”

Andre cackled through his teeth. “Tiff, we all know you’re not going to do anything.” Tiffany whimpered. She flattened against the west wall. It was the end of the road. She held the knife in front of her and looked around. She fought for every breath. Tears dribbled down her cheeks.

“Guys...” she gasped. She swallowed and cleared her throat. She pointed towards the door. “Louis is gonna be back any minute. If he comes back and finds you here, he’s gonna *kill* you!” Henry, Hank, and David hooted and hollered. Andre smiled.

“Have you seen the freeway, today?”

Tiffany let out a shaky sigh. “W-What do you mean?”

Andre shook his head. “He’s not coming, Tiff.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “There’s a bit of a... traffic jam.” Tiffany pressed her lips together. She shook the knife at her father and growled.

“You... lie! You’re lying!” Andre smacked the knife out of his daughter’s trembling fingers. It clattered to the floor and rested next to Andre’s steel toed boots. Tiffany stared at it and sobbed. “*Louis...*” she whined. Andre kicked the knife into the laundry room. Then, he kicked Tiffany in the stomach. His boot’s steel cap bounced off her ribs. All the breath flew out of Tiffany’s body. Tiffany crumbled to her knees and hugged her belly. She shook all over. She

felt like she'd been shot in the bowels. Her teeth began to chatter. She looked at Andre from the tops of her eyes. Andre grinned and stepped aside. Henry took his place. He pointed a pistol at Tiffany. Tiffany tilted her head back and closed her eyes. "*Oh, my God...*" she gasped. Henry thumbed back the hammer. He stuck the pistol between Tiffany's eyes.

"Open your mouth," he ordered. Tiffany gritted her teeth. She opened her eyes and glared at him.

"*Bite me!*" she whispered. Henry smacked Tiffany's temple with the pistol. Tiffany ducked and folded her arms over her head. Henry looked over his shoulder. Hank and David shook their heads. Henry snaked his hand through Tiffany's arms. He snagged a fistful of her hair and tugged. Tiffany growled. She dropped her arms and looked up. Henry pointed the pistol at her.

"Open it." Tiffany closed her eyes and let out a shaky breath. She parted her lips. She was so nervous, she could hardly get them apart. Henry slid the end of the pistol between Tiffany's teeth. Tiffany sobbed. She opened her eyes. She peered into Henry's eyes and lowered her eyebrows at the sides. She held up her hands.

"*Please...*" she begged. "*Please, don't...*" Henry smirked. He pulled the trigger. The hammer fell forward and clicked. Everyone but Tiffany roared with laughter. Henry jerked the pistol out of Tiffany's mouth and turned around. He held his hands out at his sides and shook his head.

"Every *time!*" he shouted. He wandered away and turned around. Tiffany stared at the floor. She tore through piles of thoughts. She didn't know what to do. She thought about Case. She thought about Gabrielle. She thought about... Adam. She blew out a breath and stopped shaking. She needed to get a message to Adam. All she had to do was write something down

and show it to someone. She looked up. Andre held out his hand. A long strand of rope dangled from his fingers. Tiffany let out a shaky breath. She looked towards the den. Everyone had backed away. It gave Tiffany an opportunity to make a break for the den. She could grab a pen from her backpack and write something down.

“Oh, Tiff...” Andre teased. Tiffany didn’t hesitate. She shoved herself to her feet and dashed towards the den.

“Oh, thit!” David squawked. He, Henry, and Hank tore after Tiffany. Tiffany fell on her backpack and rolled across the floor. She flattened against the wall and looked towards the kitchen. Henry, Hank, and David were closing in. Tiffany ripped open a panel on her backpack. She found a black, felt tipped pen and tossed her backpack aside. She jerked the cap off the pen and scrawled a message across her left forearm. It read “help me.”

“What the hell’s she doing?” Henry demanded. The boys stood on either side of Tiffany. Hank looked at his brother.

“I don’t know, Henry. But, I seen some freaky shit a while ago. We better tie her up before she does something *else*.” Henry and Hank hooked their arms under Tiffany’s. Hank smacked the pen out of her hand. Tiffany tilted her head back and gasped for breath. David loomed over her. He grinned. Blood from his nose dripped from his chin. Tiffany stared at his empty gums. She couldn’t help but smile.

“*Hey, Toothless...*” she gasped. David frowned. He pointed at Tiffany.

“Hi, Bitch.” He looked her up and down. “I’m gonna rip you apart.” Tiffany exhaled through her nostrils. She jerked her arm loose and held it up. She showed David her forearm. David narrowed his eyes. He faced Tiffany. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

Case, Adam, and Gabrielle were at the magic shop. Gabrielle was at the back of the

property, gathering sage. Adam had five Berends tucked under his arm. He wandered around the shop, looking for his girlfriend. Case was in the bedroom. It looked weird without furniture. There was a pentagram laid in the wooden floor. Case stood in the middle, staring at it. He knelt and slid his fingers along the wood. It was shiny and slick. Case looked towards the restroom. That's where Tiffany kept her pentacle. Case wandered in and flicked on the lights. He walked to the counter and opened the middle drawer. He slid a stick of deodorant and a bottle of perfume aside. He found Tiffany's pentacle underneath. He held it in front of his eyes by the clasp. He stared at Valerie's tooth. It made him smile. Case spotted Adam in the mirror. He looked over his shoulder.

"What's up, man?" Adam's hazel eyes were wide open. Case stared into Adam's eyes and gasped. Adam's gaze made the hair on the back of Case's neck stand up. Adam just stood there, staring. Case threw his hands out at his sides. "Adam, what?"

Adam pressed his lips together. "Oh... nothing," he replied with a shrug. Case pointed and shook his head.

"Bullshit." Case looked around. "What happened? Did you *see* something?" He looked into Adam's eyes. Adam parted his lips. He let out a shaky breath. "Adam, *tell* me," Case demanded. Adam knelt and set the Berends on the floor. He looked up.

"I think Tiffany's in trouble."

Case showed Adam his palms. "Wait. What do you mean?" Adam stood up. He rubbed the back of his neck. Case threw his hands out at his sides. "Speak, boy! Say something!"

Adam looked up. "I, uh... I don't know. It's weird."

Case nodded. "Well, is it just a feeling, again? Like at the rest stop?"

Adam shook his head. "No. I *saw* something." He looked at the floor and sighed. "I

saw Tiffany's arm." He looked up. "There was something written on it."

Case narrowed his eyes. "You saw Tiffany's arm?" Adam nodded. "You're sure? You're sure it was *her* arm?"

Adam showed Case his nails. "Her nails were all different colors. And..." Adam slid his sleeve back. He slid his finger up his forearm from the wrist. "And, her wrist was slashed." He dotted his arm with his fingertip. "And, there were little burn scars all over it."

Case folded his fingers in front of his lips. "Yep, I'd say that's *Tiffany's* arm you saw." He lowered his hands. "What was the message? Why do you think she's in trouble?"

Adam licked his lips. "It said 'help me'." Case heard hummingbirds in ears. He shrugged up his shoulders and shuddered. Adam threw his hands out at his sides. "See? What the hell?" Case looked towards the counter. He exhaled through his nose.

"When did you see this?"

Adam motioned towards the counter with his head. "Just a second ago." Case looked at Adam. He pointed at the floor.

"When we were here?" Adam nodded. Case licked his lips. "Why didn't she call?"

Adam squinted. "What? What do you mean?"

"Well, if she was in trouble, why didn't she just call us on my cell?"

Adam nodded. "I don't know."

Case shook his index finger. "Something's up." He stuffed Tiffany's pentacle in his pocket and left the bedroom. Adam gathered the dolls and followed. "Something's definitely wrong."

"I know," Adam remarked. He laid the dolls on the counter. Case snagged Tiffany's cordless phone. It hung on a wall behind the counter. Case pressed the talk button and typed his



cell number. He held the phone to his ear. There was no ring. The call went straight to Case's voice mail. Case shook his head. He pressed the talk button and hung up the phone. He looked at Adam.

"We gotta get over there. Right now."

Adam nodded. "Mm-kay." He picked up three of the dolls. Case snagged the other two. Gabrielle wandered in. She had a bundle of sage tucked under her arm. She looked at Adam and Case.

"Is something wrong?"

Case pointed towards his car. "Yeah. We need to get the hell out of here." Gabrielle's eyebrows fell at the sides. She looked at Adam. Adam turned and headed for the door.

"I'll explain later."

Andre wandered across the attic. Tiffany lay over his shoulder, whimpering. Andre dropped his daughter on the floor. She crumbled against the wall with a gasp. Andre knelt and flipped Tiffany on her stomach. He crossed her wrists behind her back and wound a piece rope around them. He weaved a knot and pulled the rope back. Tiffany arched her back and shouted. Jack, Henry, Hank, and David gathered behind them. Andre took out another strand of rope. He grabbed Tiffany's calves and flipped her over. Tiffany kicked her feet. She scrambled against the wall and panted. Tears poured from her eyes.

"Dad..." she gasped. "*C-Come on, man...*" She cleared her throat. "Don't do this." Andre snagged a hold of Tiffany's ankle. Tiffany whimpered. Andre leaned in and grinned. His eyes were angry and fierce.

"You're *my* daughter." He smashed his knuckles against the floor. "Mine! And, I'll do whatever the hell I want to you." Tiffany sucked air through her teeth. She slid her foot away

from her father's fingers. She curled up her leg and smashed her heel into Andre's nose. Andre slid away and clutched his face.

"Ah!" he shrieked. Blood gushed through his fingers. It dotted the sock on Tiffany's right foot.

"Jeez..." Jack groaned. He stood beside Andre and held out his hand. Andre looked at Jack. He dropped the rope in Jack's hand. Then, he stood and backed away. Jack stuffed his hand inside his camouflage jacket. He took out a chrome whiskey flask. He tossed it to Andre. Andre unscrewed the cap and took a drink. Jack knelt in front of Tiffany. He slung the back of his hand across the apple of Tiffany's cheek. Tiffany growled. Her head snapped to the side. She felt her neck buckle. Jack stared at Tiffany's chest. It was heaving. He noticed the little, black star dangling from her neck. He slid his fingers underneath. Tiffany scrunched up her nose and looked into Jack's eyes. Jack had hazy, light blue eyes. He tilted his head. "What's *this?*" he asked.

Tiffany exhaled a shaky breath. "Mr. Holiday, please. Don't." Jack smirked. He curled his fingers around Tiffany's star. He jerked the necklace off her neck. Tiffany whimpered. She closed her eyes. She tilted her head back and banged it against the wall. Jack dangled Tiffany's necklace in front of her eyes.

"Let me guess," Jack remarked. "From Louis?"

Tiffany exhaled through her nostrils. "*Screw you...*" she whispered. Jack wadded Tiffany's necklace in his fingers. The star dangled from the end of his palm. He lifted his hand, made a fist, and jabbed the star into Tiffany's forehead. Tiffany shouted. Jack cackled. He raised his fist again. He smashed the icy, metallic points into the same place. Tiffany pinched her eyes shut and groaned. Jack stood up. He reeled back and slammed the star into Tiffany's

scalp. “Gah!” she yelled. She melted on her side and moaned. She looked up. Jack fluttered his eyebrows. He dangled the necklace in front of his lips. Tiffany’s blood was dripping from the points of the star. Jack flicked his tongue like a snake. He laid Tiffany’s star against his tongue and licked it.

Tiffany felt sick. She closed her eyes and shook her head. Blood leaked down her forehead. It pooled around her crisp, white collar. Jack cackled. He tossed Tiffany’s necklace across the room and knelt in front of her. He snagged a hold of Tiffany’s ankles and dragged her away from the wall. Tiffany gasped. She looked up. Jack crossed Tiffany’s ankles and wound the rope around them. He made a knot and pulled it tight. Tiffany scrunched up her nose and tilted her head back. Jack looked over his shoulder. Andre smiled and nodded.

“You wanna gag her?” Jack asked.

“No,” Andre replied. “I want to hear her scream.” Jack grinned. He looked at Henry, Hank, and David.

“What should we do to her, boys?”

David squinted. “You guys know what a thit-fist is?” Tiffany squealed.

Case drove down the sidewalk. He passed a block’s worth of cars, ran a red light, and made a right. Adam sat in the front, passenger seat. He dug his fingers into the squishy vinyl he was sitting on. He looked at Case.

“Louis, jeez!” Case glanced at him. “Will you slow down? You’re driving like a nutcase!”

“I *am* a nutcase,” Case replied. He drove on the wrong side of the road and passed three cars. He swerved in front of the first one just in time. A bus was barreling towards him. Case looked at Adam and smirked. “You never noticed?”

Gabrielle folded her arms on the back of Case and Adam's seats. "You're not a nutcase," she remarked. "You're just scared." She narrowed her eyes. "What do you think happened to her, anyway?"

Case shook his head. "I don't know." He jerked the steering wheel to the left. The car fishtailed around a corner. Gabrielle slid across the seat. She dug her fingers into the back of Adam's seat to stop herself. Her big, blue eyes popped open. Case recovered the car's traction. He stomped on the gas. "But, something's up." He glanced over his shoulder. "I mean, why would she turn the phone off?" Case tore through an intersection. It had a four way stop sign. There were two cars waiting to go. They stopped to avoid hitting Case's car. Adam threw his hands out at his sides.

"Louis, will you just take the freeway?"

"I'm not getting back in that mess," Case replied. He looked at Adam. "The back roads will be quicker." Case skidded around a truck pulling a trailer and hung a right. Gabrielle slid to the other side. Case looked in the rearview mirror. His eyebrows fell in the middle. "Gabrielle, *put* your seatbelt on!" he yelled. Gabrielle eased back, slid the left, passenger seatbelt across her chest, and buckled it. Case glanced at Adam. "Look, just hang tight guys. I'll have us there in ten minutes. Okay?" Gabrielle and Adam nodded.

Andre loomed over his daughter. She looked up at him. Her bottom lip quivered. Jack stood next to Andre. He crossed his arms over his chest. Andre handed Jack his whiskey flask. Jack took a sip. He screwed down the lid and stuffed the flask in his jacket.

"Well, Tiff..." Andre remarked. He wore a thick, leather belt. He unbuckled it and slid it off. Tiffany pinched her eyes shut and shuddered. "I guess it's time." Andre flung his belt across Tiffany's chest. It bounced off her breasts.

“Ah!” Tiffany shrieked. Andre lashed her chest from the other direction. “*Guh...*” Tiffany groaned. She fell on her side and curled into a ball. Andre narrowed his eyes.

“Oh, you’re going to be a little cunt, today. Huh?” Andre held his belt above his head. He whirled it across Tiffany’s body. He lashed her again and again. Tiffany screamed bloody murder. She buried her head between her knees as best she could. Mostly, Andre hit her back, shoulders, and shins. He stopped to catch his breath. He looked at Jack. Jack shrugged.

“She’s a squirmer.”

Andre sighed. “Maybe I’m just getting old.”

Jack flicked his wrist. “Nah. You just need to relieve a little tension. You know?” Andre cackled. “You *have* been locked up for a while.”

Andre nodded. “Yep. I think you’re right.” He straddled Tiffany’s midsection. He unbuttoned his jeans and slid down his fly. Tiffany looked up. Her eyebrows fell at the sides. “Get up, Tiff,” Andre remarked. “Time to suck Daddy’s dick for him.” Tiffany’s Ouija table slid across the floor. It smashed into Andre’s belly and shoved him across the attic. Andre collapsed on the table. His eyes popped open. “Ah!” he shrieked. “What the hell?!” The table slammed Andre into the northern wall. It stopped next to the window. Jack pointed at Tiffany. His eyebrows slid up his forehead.

“Witch! You little witch! What did you just do?” A pair of tiny feet began shuffling. They started at the end of the Ouija table and dashed towards Jack. Earl became visible a few feet in front of Jack. His eyes glowed yellow. His mouth opened wide. It was filled with razor sharp teeth. Lightning flashed through the windows.

“*Get out!*” Earl squalled. His screaming shook the walls. Jack’s eyes lit up. His mouth stretched to its limits. He shook like he was screaming. But, nothing came out. “*Get out!*” Earl

yelled. “*Get out! Get out! Get out!*” Jack crashed through the southern window. The funky, blue glass came apart in large, jagged pieces. They swirled across Jack’s clothes and flesh. They ripped him to pieces. Jack landed on his head. His skull shattered. His brains oozed out. His neck snapped like a twig. Chunks of blue glass fell from the sky and burrowed into his flesh. Jack ended up a bloody, mangled, twisted mess. Earl whirled around. Andre shoved the Ouija table aside. He stared into Earl’s hideous precipice. Andre’s eyes looked like ping pong balls. Earl’s eyeholes narrowed towards the middle. He looked angry.

“*Get... out...*” he growled. A chunk of Earl’s sheet body stretched towards Andre. It looked like a long, skinny arm. “*You leave Tiffany alone...*” Andre dropped his fists at his sides and shrugged up his shoulders. He screamed like a little girl. Tiffany looked at her father. The crotch of his jeans was wet. He’d pissed himself. Andre dashed across the attic and stomped down the stairs. His girlish screaming continued through the front door. Tiffany heard Jack’s pickup start. She looked towards the northern window. She heard her father peeling away. She looked at Henry and Hank. They slid across the wall, staring at Earl. Earl glared at them. He turned as they passed. He snarled like a dog. Henry and Hank looked out the southern window. They saw their dad’s brains scattered along the grass. Henry curled his fingers in front of his lips. He and Hank looked over their shoulders. Earl was right in their faces.

“*Boo!*” Earl shrieked. Henry and Hank screamed for their lives. They slid past Earl, tore across the attic, and dashed down the stairs. David watched them go. He slid his lips to the side of his face. He heard the Cammy doors open and close. The engine started. David scrunched up his nose and parted his lips.

“Those bath-tards are gonna *leave* me here.” The Cammy could be heard peeling away. David looked at Tiffany. “What a bunch of pussies.” He looked at Earl. Earl snarled. David

flipped him off. “Bite me, ghost boy.” Earl growled. He whirled through the air, smashed into the floor, and disappeared. David looked at Tiffany. He smirked. “Well, then,” he remarked. David started towards her. He rubbed his palms together. “I guess it’s juth you and me, Pussy Lips.” Tiffany whimpered. She sat up and rested against the wall. She tried to pry her arms apart. The rope around her wrists dug into her flesh. David sat in front of Tiffany. He cupped his palm under Tiffany’s chin and gripped her cheeks. He stared into Tiffany’s dark brown eyes. Tiffany looked away. David shook her face.

“Look at me!” he shouted. Tiffany exhaled a shaky breath. Her eyeballs bobbed around and focused on him. Her lips quivered.

“D-David, please leave me alone,” she begged. “C-Come on, man. For old time’s sake?” David grinned. His gums were swollen and hideous.

“You know, I alwayth had a thing for you, Tits.” He squinted. “Ever since we were little.”

Tiffany blew a breath through her lips. “You’ve got a funny way of showing it.” David smirked. He slid out his tongue and flicked it like a snake. He could hear Tiffany’s breathing. It blew through her nostrils in short, quiet spurts. A tear dribbled down her cheek. David laid his tongue on Tiffany’s tear. He slid it up her cheek. The tear was warm and salty. Tiffany’s eyebrows fell at the sides. David backed away and looked into Tiffany’s eyes. “*David...*” Tiffany gasped. “*I’m begging you. Don’t.*” She glanced over David’s shoulder. Then, she looked into his eyes. David had pale, blue eyes. “*Come on. You didn’t do anything. Just untie me and let me go.*” David grabbed a fistful of Tiffany’s hair. He pressed his forehead against hers and glared into her eyes.

“Don’t worry,” David told her. “I’ll *ease* it in.” Tiffany pressed her lips together. She

looked up. A plastic trash liner slid over David's face. He felt a scrawny, bony chest pressing against the back of his skull. He was jerked away and dragged across the floor. David tore at the liner over his face. He breathed out a pair of muffled protests.

"Well, if it isn't old No Tooth Sweeny!" Case screamed in his ear. He rested his chin on David's shoulder and looked into his eyes. David stared back and shook his head.

"*Row!*" David shouted. "*Row!*" Case grinned and gritted his teeth. He looked at Tiffany. She looked terrified. Her breathing was quick and shallow. Her chest looked like it was going to burst.

"*Louis!*" she rasped. "*Don't...*" She swallowed and looked into Case's eyes. "Stop." Case narrowed his eyes and exhaled through his nostrils. He slid the trash liner off David's face and tossed it aside. David fell on his side and clutched his throat. He filled the room with coughs. He gasped for breath. Case wandered across the room. He dug through a box and found a roll of duct tape. He knelt next to David, crossed his wrists behind his back, and wound them together. He rolled David onto his stomach. David looked over his shoulder and panted.

"*Damn it!*" he gasped. "*I'm gonna beat your ass!*" Case crossed David's ankles and duct taped them.

"Fool, you'll be lucky if you survive this," Case told him. He bound David's ankles to his wrists. He rolled the tape around them several times. Case tossed the tape across the room. He stood and stomped the back of David's skull. "Bitch." David gritted his molars. Case looked at Tiffany and sighed. Tiffany tilted her head back and sobbed. Case wandered across the room and sat beside her. He laid his fingers across a gash in Tiffany's forehead. Blood trickled down his fingers. He looked over his shoulder. "*I'm gonna kill you, David.*" David glared at him. Case slung Tiffany's blood off his fingers. He slid his arms around her shoulders.



“Come here, honey.” He laid Tiffany across his lap. He laid her on her stomach. Tiffany rested her cheek on Case’s knee and closed her eyes.

“*Oh, man...*” Tiffany groaned. “*My arms are killing me.*”

Case poked at the rope around her wrists. “I know, man. Just hang tight.” Case picked a wad of knots loose and unraveled the rope. He slid the rope away from Tiffany’s wrists and tossed it aside. Tiffany sighed. She flipped over and looked up. Case slid his fingers around Tiffany’s wrists. They were littered with blue and red rings. Tiffany sucked air through her teeth. Case looked at Tiffany’s left arm. It had “help me” written on it. Case smirked. He looked into Tiffany’s eyes. “Adam got your message.”

Tiffany smiled. “I figured.”

“Awe, thit!” David squawked. Case and Tiffany looked at David. “*That’s* what that was?” Case laid Tiffany on the floor. He rested her feet in his lap.

“Who all was here?” he asked. He loosened the rope around Tiffany’s ankles and tossed it aside. Tiffany pinched her eyes shut. She shuddered. Case exhaled through his nose. He peeled back Tiffany’s socks. There were red and blue rings around her ankles as well. Case bent over and kissed her ankles. He sat up and slid his fingers across her legs. “Who was it, honey? Just tell me. Me and Paloni’ll take care of it.” Tiffany licked her lips. She looked at David.

“*This* freak...” David scrunched up his nose and parted his lips. Tiffany held her arms in front of her face. She looked at her wrists. “Mr. Holiday and his boys...” She folded her arms over her stomach and looked at Case. “And... my father.” Case narrowed his eyes. He pointed at the floor.

“Andre was here?” Tiffany pinched her eyes shut and shuddered. She breathed out a shaky gasp and nodded. Case looked at David. “Seriously?”

David grinned. “Yeah, fool! He was gettin’ all boom-diggity and thit!”

Case slid Tiffany’s feet off his lap and hopped up. “Just a second...” He picked up the duct tape and stomped across the room. David looked up at him.

“Awe, man. What the hell?” Case peeled back the end of the tape. He bent over and wound the tape around David’s lips and head. He made ten passes and tore it off. He patted David’s head.

“There, that’s better.” Case dropped the duct tape next to David’s face and turned around. “Now, I can hear myself think.” Tiffany sat up. Case wandered across the attic and sat next to her. He kissed Tiffany’s cheek. “You okay, sweetheart?” He slid his arms around Tiffany’s waist. Tiffany tensed up. Case narrowed his eyes. He lifted Tiffany’s shirt and vest. Her body was littered with red and blue lashes. “*Oh, man...*” Case whispered. He slid his fingers across his girlfriend’s flesh. She sucked air through her teeth. Case slid down Tiffany’s shirt and looked up. He motioned over his shoulder with his head. “Who fell out the window?”

“Mr. Holiday,” Tiffany replied.

Case looked towards the southern window. “What do you mean? Is he okay?”

Tiffany shook her head. “*No...*” she gasped. She leaned forward and curled her fingers over her lips. “I think he’s dead.”

Case looked at Tiffany. “Yeah?” Tiffany looked into Case’s eyes and nodded. Case faced forward. He blew out a deep breath. He slid his fingers through Tiffany’s. “Come on. Let’s go look.” Case helped Tiffany to her feet. They wandered towards the window and peeked out. Jack lay in a puddle of blood and brain matter. His head was twisted around. Tiffany scrunched up her nose. She buried her face against Case’s chest. Case slid his fingers through Tiffany’s hair. “Bummer.”

Adam's head poked through the hole in the floor. "Is it safe now, Louis?" he asked. Case looked over his shoulder. Gabrielle popped up next to Adam.

"Yeah. Can we come up, now or what?" Gabrielle and Adam looked at David. He stared back. Adam pushed his mouth to the side of his face.

"I told you two to stay in the car," Louis replied. Adam looked at Tiffany. Tiffany looked up and wiped her eyes.

"Um... you okay, Tiffany?" Adam asked. Tiffany sniffled and nodded. Adam wandered across the attic. Gabrielle hopped up and followed. Tiffany sobbed. Adam threw his arms around her. Tiffany hugged him back.

"My little hero," she remarked. She slid her hand across the back of Adam's frosty, leather jacket. Tiffany looked at Gabrielle and held out her arm. "Come here, Gabrielle." Gabrielle wandered up and hugged her. Tiffany slid her arm around Gabrielle's shoulders. She cringed. "Yeah... not so hard guys. Take it easy." Gabrielle looked up. She relaxed her arms.

"Sorry."

Case patted Tiffany's shoulder. "Where's my phone?" Tiffany looked over her shoulder. She rolled her eyes and sighed.

"Oh, man... I think I broke it."

Case nodded. "Did you drop it or what?" Tiffany nodded. Case shrugged. "Well, where is it? I need to call Paloni."

Tiffany motioned towards the steps with her head. "It's on the floor by the bar."

Adam let go of Tiffany. "I'll go get it."

Gabrielle let go. "Me, too." She and Adam wandered across the attic and stomped down the steps. Case patted Tiffany's back.

“Let’s sit back down.” Tiffany nodded. She took Case’s hand and led him across the room. They sat across from David. David stared at them. Case’s eyebrows fell in the middle. “What the hell are *you* looking at, Sweeny?” He extended his index finger and flicked his wrist. “Face the wall. Or, I’m gonna break my foot off in your ass.” David faced the other direction. Tiffany took Case’s hand. She slid Case’s arm around her back and laid her cheek on his chest. Case kissed the top of Tiffany’s head. He motioned towards David with his head. “*So, what do you want to DO with that piece of shit?*” he asked. Tiffany looked into Case’s eyes. She smiled and exhaled through her nose.

*“Nothing. Let’s just turn him in.”*

Case nodded. “*You sure? We could always drop him down an old well or something.*” Tiffany snickered. She patted Case’s chest.

*“Tempting. But, I’ll pass. Okay?”*

Case slid his fingers across Tiffany’s arm. “Figured.” He narrowed his eyes. He laid his hand on Tiffany’s chest. “Where’s your little star?” Tiffany sat up. She pointed across the room. Case looked where she was pointing. He stood and wandered towards the northern wall. He found Tiffany’s necklace below the window. It was lying in a tiny pool of blood. Case picked up the necklace and looked it over. He looked at his girlfriend. She looked up with a pair of big, brown, sad eyes. Case held the star by a ring at the top. He slung Tiffany’s blood aside. He returned to Tiffany’s side and sat down. He held her necklace beside her face and looked at the wounds on her forehead. He shook the star in front of Tiffany’s eyes. “Who did this to you?”

Tiffany motioned towards the broken window with her head. “Mr. Holiday.” Case smacked his lips. He handed Tiffany her necklace. Tiffany swabbed it with her vest and looked

it over. She fidgeted with the clasp. She looked up and held out her hand. “Do you have my pentacle?” Case stuffed his hand into his pocket. He took out the necklace Valerie gave to Tiffany and handed it to her. Tiffany slid the pentagram off the chain. She replaced it with the shiny, black star Case gave her. Case smiled. Tiffany dangled the necklace in front of Case’s eyes. Case took it and looked it over. He tapped the molar near the clasp. Tiffany snickered. “It’s Valerie’s.”

“I know,” Case replied. “You told me.” He laid the chain around Tiffany’s neck and clasped it. He slid his fingers down the necklace and held the star in his palm. He looked up and nodded. Adam and Gabrielle popped in. Gabrielle brought Case his cell phone. Adam brought Tiffany a wad of wet paper towels. He wandered across the attic and squashed them over the gashes on Tiffany’s forehead. Tiffany scrunched up her nose. She slid her fingers through Adam’s and held the paper towels in place.

“Thanks,” she remarked. Adam nodded. Gabrielle dropped Case’s phone in his hand. Case looked it over. He pushed his mouth to the side of his face and looked at Tiffany. Tiffany’s eyebrows fell at the sides. “I’m sorry...” she groaned. “It was an accident.” She sighed. “I, uh... I’ll get you a new one. I promise!” Case shook his head. He slid his arm around Tiffany’s waist and kissed her temple.

“It’s just a phone, sweetheart. Don’t worry about it.” Case pressed a button. The screen was cracked. But after a few seconds, it lit up. “Eh...” Case remarked. “It still works.” Tiffany smiled. She laid her fingers on Case’s shoulders and looked at the phone. Case punched in Paloni’s number. He held the phone to his ear. Gabrielle pointed at the southern window.

“So, what happened over *there*?” Tiffany’s eyes lit up. She waved her hands in front of Gabrielle’s face.

“Whoa! Don’t go over there. Okay?” She slid her hair behind her ears. Gabrielle narrowed her eyes. She slowly nodded. Adam looked towards the window.

“It’s Jack. Isn’t it?” He looked into Tiffany’s eyes. Tiffany nodded.

## Chapter 19: "A Cigarette Break"

Tiffany and Case sat against the eastern wall. Adam and Gabrielle sat across from them. David Sweeny lay on his belly against the western wall. He was hogtied with duct tape. His mouth and head were also wound with duct tape. Tiffany stared at her lap. Adam stared at the top of Tiffany's head. He was waiting for her to say something. Tiffany looked up. Tears were pouring down her cheeks. She sniffled and wiped her eyes. She looked into Adam's eyes. She pressed her lips together.

"*Adam...*" she squeaked.

Adam smiled a little. "Yes, Tiffany?" Tiffany cleared her throat. She folded her fingers in her lap.

"Can I bum a smoke?" Adam's jaw dropped. He threw his hands out at his sides.

"Tiffany! What the hell?" He crossed his arms over his chest. "How dare you accuse me of having cigarettes!" He laid his hand over his heart. "That hurts, Tiffany. Really." Tiffany narrowed her eyes. She sat back and folded her arms over her chest.

"Adam, I *know* you have cigarettes. You *always* have cigarettes." Adam and Gabrielle looked at each other. Adam sighed. He stuffed his hand into his pocket and faced Tiffany.

"Since when do *you* smoke?" Adam took out his cigarettes. "*You* of all people." Tiffany sighed. Adam fished out a smoke and handed it to her. Tiffany plopped it between her lips. She held out her hand.

"Lighter?" Adam put his cigarettes up. He patted his pockets and looked up.

"You took it. Remember?" Tiffany looked at her lap. She stuffed her hand in her pocket and took out Adam's lighter. She flipped it open and held it in front of her lips. Her fingers were trembling. She rolled her shivering fingers across the flint wheel. The lighter wouldn't

ignite. Case stared at Tiffany's fingers. He held out his hand. Tiffany exhaled through her nostrils. She dropped the lighter in Case's hand. Case lit Adam's Flippo lighter with a snap of his fingers. He held the lighter in front of Tiffany's face. Tiffany held back her hair, leaned forward, and pressed the tip of the cigarette against the flame. Case flipped the lighter closed and tossed it to Adam. Adam pushed his mouth to the side of his face. He took out a cigarette and put it to his lips. He flipped open his lighter.

"Enh!" Tiffany snarled. She snapped her fingers and pointed between Adam's eyes. Adam shrugged.

"What?"

Tiffany shook her head. "Adam, if you light that damn thing in here, I'll kill you." She wrapped her first and second fingers around her stogie and pulled it from her lips. She inhaled through her teeth and exhaled through her nostrils. Adam rolled his eyes and sighed. He put his cigarette with the others. He put his smokes and his lighter in his pocket. Gabrielle smiled. She laid her palm on her boyfriend's shoulder. Tiffany placed her cigarette between her lips and turned to Case. Case was smiling. Tiffany pressed her lips together. The end of the cigarette glowed bright orange. Then, it stopped. White streams of smoke dashed out of Tiffany's nose. Tiffany narrowed her eyes. "What are *you* smiling at?" she grumbled. Case surrounded the bridge of Tiffany's nose with his thumbs. He slid his thumbs across her cheeks. Tiffany's cheeks were soaked with tears.

"Are you going to be okay?" Case asked. He laid his hands on Tiffany's shoulders. Tiffany was shuddering. She looked at her lap. Her palms were sweaty. She wiped them on her jeans. She looked at Case from the tops of her eyes.

"*Um, Louis...*" she gasped. She swallowed. "Will you... hold me?"



Case kind of laughed. “Of course. Come here.” He slid his arms under Tiffany’s and dragged her to his lap. “I mean, that’s what boyfriends do, right?” Tiffany snickered. Case wrapped his arms around Tiffany’s waist. Tiffany let out a slow breath and relaxed against Case’s chest. Her anxiety wavered. Her thoughts slowed. She felt safe and secure. It was nice. Tiffany closed her eyes. Case laid his chin on Tiffany’s shoulder. “*Is that better?*” he whispered. Tiffany exhaled through her nostrils. She slid her fingers along Case’s arms and found his hands. She curled her fingers around his.

“*Don’t ever let go...*” she whispered.

Case scrunched up his nose. “That’s gonna make it really hard to drive.” Tiffany laughed through her nose. She opened her eyes and faced him.

“We already *did* that. Remember?”

Case bobbed his head. “That’s right. We did, didn’t we?” He kissed the back of Tiffany’s head. “I’ve got you. No one can get you, now. Just relax.” Tiffany took a drag. She took the cigarette from her lips, held it aside, and flicked ash from the end.

“*Yes, sir...*” Tiffany whispered. She held the cigarette to her lips. It smelled like shit. It reminded her of her father. Tiffany sighed. She pressed her lips together and looked into Adam’s eyes. Adam smiled. Tiffany held up her smoke. “Here...” she told him. “I can’t finish this.” She looked at Gabrielle. “*You* guys take it.”

Adam shrugged. “I’m good with *that*.” He yanked the cigarette from Tiffany’s fingers and put it to his eager lips. He took a puff and handed it to Gabrielle. Adam squinted. He looked towards the southern window and exhaled smoke. He stared at the floor in front of the missing pane of glass. He wasn’t sure why. After ten seconds, Earl appeared. He stood quietly, watching them. “What about Earl?” Adam asked. Tiffany’s head lay against Case’s chest. Her

eyes were shut. She'd almost fallen asleep. Her eyes opened a crack. She swallowed. Case looked at the top of Tiffany's head.

"Earl saved me," Tiffany remarked. She looked at Adam. Adam was facing south. Tiffany looked towards the broken window. Case and Gabrielle did the same. The air turned to frost. Squiggles of lightning ripped across the sky. Earl's mouth was closed. His eyes were big and black. He didn't move. Tiffany looked at David. David was looking at Earl, too. Tiffany faced the little ghost boy. "Hi, Earl." Earl stared at her. Tiffany sighed. "I'm sorry for..." She shrugged. "I shouldn't have burned all that sage." She pressed her lips together. "This is *your* house." Earl looked down. He lightly shrugged. Tiffany licked her lips. "Look, I want you to stay. Okay?" She looked around. Everyone nodded. Tiffany faced Earl. "But, we need a place to live, too. We need this house very badly." Earl looked into Tiffany's eyes. Tiffany smiled. "That was a very brave thing you did, Earl." She narrowed her eyes. "You were trying to protect me. Right?" Earl slowly nodded.

"Why?" Case asked. "I mean, earlier you were telling us to get out."

Tiffany threw her hands out at her sides. "Yeah! So, why did you chase those guys away?" She pointed at Earl. "You said, 'Leave Tiffany alone'." Earl narrowed his big, black eyes. The Ouija table skidded across the floor. It stopped next to Tiffany, Case, and the kids. Everyone leaned in and watched. The pointer was in the northeast corner of the attic. It hovered across the room and rested on the table. It pointed to the letter "I." It slid to the word "like." Then, it pointed at the letter "U." Everyone looked at Earl. Tiffany laid her hands over her heart. "Then, what do you think, Earl? Do you think we can live here... together?" She exhaled through her nostrils. "I mean, without waking up in the middle of the night..." Tiffany motioned towards the roof. "And, a bunch of blood starts dripping off the ceiling?" Earl puffed

up like he was taking a breath. He exhaled an icy sigh that chilled the room. Adam bobbed his head. The cigarette was between his lips. He took a puff and handed the smoke to Gabrielle.

“Come on, Earl. It’ll be fun, man. We can hang out and play some B-ball or something.”

Adam pointed at Case. “You *are* going to put up a basketball goal, right?”

Case shrugged. “Sure.”

Adam nodded. “Good. Because, a house without a hoop just... isn’t a house.” He looked at Earl. “What do you say, buddy?” Gabrielle handed the cigarette to Tiffany. Tiffany put it out on her tongue. She laid the butt beside her and Case. Earl pointed. Everyone looked at the Ouija board. The pointer pointed at “O” then “K.” Tiffany, Case, and Gabrielle looked towards the southern window. Earl was gone. Adam stared at the northern window. His eyes narrowed. “Paloni’s here,” he remarked. “The paramedics are close.” Adam hopped up and headed for the stairs. Gabrielle followed. Case began to stir. Tiffany’s eyes popped open.

“No!” she cried. She looked over her shoulder. “No. No. No. No. No.” Tiffany snagged a hold of Case’s hands. They rested on her thighs. Tiffany crossed Case’s arms over her chest. “Don’t go anywhere,” she begged. Case grinned and shook his head. Tiffany relaxed against Case’s chest and sighed. “Stay here with me. Please?” Case tightened his arms. He leaned forward and kissed the back of Tiffany’s head.

“I’m sorry,” he told her. “I won’t go anywhere. I promise.” Tiffany pressed her lips together and whimpered. She shook, nervously. Case slid his fingers across her arms. “You know, Gina never let me hold her like this.” Tiffany closed her eyes and nodded. “I always wanted to. I like it.” Tiffany looked at Case from the tops of her eyes. She smiled.

“I like it, too. I never had anyone to hold me, before.” Case smiled back. Paloni popped in. He wore a brown, corduroy jacket, khaki slacks, and brown dress shoes. The collar of a

white dress shirt poked out of his jacket. He looked around.

“Uh...” Paloni spotted David. He pushed his mouth to the side of his face. “Hmm.” He looked at Case and Tiffany. “You guys okay?”

“We’re fine,” Case replied.

Paloni nodded. “Good.” He motioned towards the front of the house with his head.

“Why don’t we wait out front for the paramedics?”

Tiffany dug her nails into Case’s arms. “I am not leaving!” she growled. “No!”

Paloni pressed his lips together. “Okay.” Case slid his fingers through Tiffany’s. He yanked her nails out of his flesh and lowered her hands.

“She’s very upset,” Case remarked. He laid Tiffany’s hands in her lap. “She doesn’t want me to leave her, again.” Tiffany lowered her head. Paloni climbed into the attic.

“It’s fine, Tiffany. I understand.” He knelt next to David. David looked up. “Mr. Sweeny, I take it?” David exhaled through his nose. Paloni found the end of the duct tape around David’s mouth and head. He pinched it and unrolled the tape. David exhaled a grateful sigh. He looked into Paloni’s eyes.

“Sank God!” David blathered. “Get me away from these psychos, will you?”

“Sure,” Paloni replied. He motioned towards the stairs with his head. “I’ll just chunk your ass down the steps. How’s that sound?” David narrowed his eyes. Paloni looked at Case and Tiffany. Case shrugged.

“I think you should take him down to the station like that.” He nodded. “Just like *that*. Then, you ought to throw him in the slammer with all them gangsters and shit.” Paloni smirked. He looked at David.

“That sounds good to me.”

David's eyebrows fell in the middle. "Bitch, I'll *kill* you."

Paloni narrowed his eyes. "You ever try to rape my best friend's girl again, I'll kill *you*."

David smacked his lips. "Fool, I wasn't gonna *rape* nobody." He looked at Case.

"That's not what *I* heard you say," Case replied. He looked down at Tiffany. "Tiffany?"

Tiffany looked up. She faced David and nodded.

"*Yeah...*" she gasped. She sniffled. "He was going to rape me." She looked over her shoulder. Her eyebrows fell at the sides. "And then, you saved me."

David scrunched up his nose. "You lying bitch! This is bullshit! I didn't do *anything*!" Tiffany let out a shaky sob. She sniffled and looked into David's eyes.

"*I asked you to let me go...*" she squeaked. She swallowed. "I said, 'You haven't done anything, yet'." She pressed her lips together. "You remember?"

Case nodded. "I heard that, too." David faced forward. He shook his head, angrily.

"Man, whatever."

"Mm, mm, mm..." Paloni hummed. He smacked David over the back of the head.

David looked over his shoulder.

"Hey!" he cried.

Paloni shook his head. "You're looking at some serious time there, Sweeny."

"Man, I didn't do *this*!" Sweeny spat. He motioned towards Case with his head. "It's *this* fool. *He* knocked all my teeth out!"

Paloni shrugged. "I've got an entire crew of construction workers saying you started the whole thing." He looked at Tiffany. "They're ready to testify." Tiffany smiled a little. Case laid his hand on Tiffany's shoulder. She curled her fingers around his. "It's all up to you, Tiffany," Paloni remarked. "You wanna press charges against this creep?" Tiffany looked into

David's eyes and sighed. She slowly nodded. Paloni looked at David. "Then, I guess we'd better take a trip down to the station, Sweeny." He laid his palm on David's shoulder. "You and me."

David shook his shoulders. "Bitch, get off me!" he snarled.

"Where did Andre and Jack's boys get off to?" Paloni requisitioned. "Hmm?"

David looked over his shoulder. "Bite me, bacon boy!" Paloni rested his arm on his knee. He rested his chest on his arm.

"I'll tell you what, Sweeny. If you tell me where Andre went, I *might* un-tape you." He grinned. "How's that sound?" David shrieked, furiously. He pounded his forehead into the floor. Paloni pressed his lips together. He waited for David to stop shouting. Then, he leaned in. "So, where is he?"

David looked up. "I have no idea." He looked at Tiffany. "I'm serious! Those bath-tards left me here!" Tiffany exhaled a shaky breath. David squinted. "I hope he kills you." Tiffany shuddered and looked away. Case rested his chin on Tiffany's shoulder.

"*Don't listen to him,*" he whispered. Tiffany closed her eyes and nodded. Case looked at David. "He's just mad because he's about to become some gang-banger's bitch." Tiffany chuckled. David glared at Case.

"Threw you!" he spat. Paloni held a switchblade in front of David's face. David focused on it. Paloni flicked it open. David's eyes popped open. Paloni uttered a single laugh. He cut the tape between David's wrists and ankles. David collapsed on the floor. He breathed out a grateful sigh. Paloni slid his knife through the tape around David's ankles. He patted David's wrists and looked at Case.

"You never *were* by the book." Case shrugged. Paloni nodded. "But, it's close enough."

Paloni helped David to his feet and headed for the stairs. Case and Tiffany looked towards the northern window. A siren was approaching.

“Paramedics?” Tiffany inquired.

“Yeah,” Case replied. He rubbed Tiffany’s shoulders. “You want them to check you out?”

Tiffany nodded. “Okay.” Adam’s head popped in. He looked at Case and Tiffany.

“I see the freak’s gone.” Case nodded. Adam climbed in and turned around. Gabrielle was right behind him. Adam helped her in, and they wandered across the attic. Adam sat beside Case and Tiffany. Gabrielle sat in Adam’s lap. Adam threw his arms around her. The kids looked at Case and Tiffany and smiled. Case scrunched up his nose.

“What do you two think you’re doing, huh?” Adam and Gabrielle giggled. Tiffany’s eyebrows fell in the middle. She narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Are you making fun of me?”

Gabrielle gasped. “No! I swear!”

Adam shook his head. “Awe, man. We were just kidding around.”

Tiffany slowly nodded. “Uh-huh.”

Case patted Tiffany’s shoulder. “You want me to let you go?”

“No!” Tiffany shrieked. She looked over her shoulder and pointed. “Don’t you *dare* let go of me!” Case laughed through his nose. He looked down and nodded.

“I’m not. Relax.” Tiffany sighed. She lowered her arm and turned around. Case rubbed Tiffany’s arms. “Relax, sweetheart.” Gabrielle reached across Case’s lap. She took Tiffany’s hand. Tiffany looked at her.

“Yeah, Tiffany. Take a chill pill. Would you?” Tiffany exhaled through her nose. She

looked into Gabrielle's big, blue eyes.

"You know, he's out there right now." Tiffany looked at Case. "He could be anywhere."

Case nodded. "We have to find him, Tiffany. Any ideas?" Tiffany shook her head. A paramedic popped in. He had dark hair and dark eyes. He wore a white, long sleeved shirt, white slacks, white tennis shoes, and latex gloves. A nametag was pinned to the left breast of his shirt. It read "Patrick." There was a red cross on both of his shoulders. A stethoscope dangled from his neck. He carried a white, tin case with a red cross on the lid. He looked at Tiffany and Case.

"Which one of you is Tiffany?" Patrick asked. Tiffany looked at the floor. Case looked Patrick in the eyes. He patted Tiffany's shoulder.

"Right here." Gabrielle let go of Tiffany's hand. Patrick wandered across the room. He knelt in front of Case and Tiffany. He laid the white case on the floor, opened it, and took out a tiny flashlight. Another paramedic came into the attic. She had blonde hair and blue eyes. She wore the same thing as Patrick. Her name was "Flo." Patrick turned on the flashlight and looked at Tiffany. He eased Tiffany's head back and waved the light across her eyes. Her pupils barely responded.

"Hmm," Patrick remarked. He curled his fingers around Tiffany's wrist and held it up. He looked over his shoulder. "She's going into shock," he told Flo.

Flo threw her hands on her hips. "We should take her to the bus." Patrick nodded. He looked into Tiffany's eyes. He tugged her towards the stairs.

"Come on, Ms. Haynes. Can you walk?"

Tiffany jerked her arm away. "Piss off!" she screamed. She curled up on Case's lap and gasped for breath. "I'm not going *anywhere!*" Case was wearing his red, plaid coat. He tore it



off and laid it across Tiffany's arms and chest.

"It's okay," he told Patrick. "*I'll* treat the shock." He pointed at the gash in Tiffany's forehead. "Just stitch her up." Patrick sighed. He looked at Tiffany.

"Would you like a valium?" Tiffany let out a shaky laugh. She looked at her lap and shook her head. Patrick sat Indian style and opened his case. "I've got to clean this up." He took out a tiny bottle of iodine and a round, cotton pad. He doused the pad with iodine. He pressed it against the gash in Tiffany's forehead. Tiffany sucked air through her teeth. Case slid his fingers through hers.

"Squeeze my hand," he told her. Flo stood next to the southern window. She peaked outside.

"Oh, God," she remarked. She looked at Patrick and pointed out the window. "Patrick, did you *see* this?"

Patrick nodded. "Yeah, we've got a stiff out there." He looked over his shoulder. "How bad is it?" Flo's eyes popped open. She nodded, slowly.

"It's *bad*."

Patrick faced forward. "We get to scrape that up, next." He set the pad aside and returned the iodine to the white, tin case. He took out a syringe and a tiny, glass container. Tiffany's eyes widened. She let out a shaky sigh. Patrick removed a cap at the end of the syringe. There was a long needle underneath. Patrick held the vile upside down. He slid the needle into the end and pulled back the plunger. He set the vile aside, held up the syringe, and thumped it. He looked into Tiffany's eyes. "I'm going to do a local." Tiffany pressed her lips together. Patrick smiled. "You've got a thing about needles, huh?" Tiffany stared at the long, shiny needle sticking out of the syringe. She looked at Patrick and nodded. Case squeezed

Tiffany's hand.

"Close your eyes," Case told her. "That's what *I* always do." Tiffany bit her lip and pinched her eyes shut. Patrick slid the needle into the gash. Tiffany whimpered. Adam leaned in.

"Cool," he remarked.

Gabrielle looked away. "Yuck!" She held out her palms and spread her fingers. Paloni wandered in. He stood beside Patrick and watched. He held a glass filled with orange juice. He slid his hand into his pocket and took a sip. Case bobbed his head.

"Is Captain Fraud down there?"

"You bet," Paloni replied. He took another sip. "He's plenty pissed, too."

Case shrugged. "Well, I figured *that*." Patrick held a thick needle with a pair of tweezers. The needle was shaped like an arc. A strand of suture dangled from the end. Patrick slid the needle into Tiffany's flesh, next to the gash. Tiffany scrunched up her nose.

"Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow!" she gasped.

Patrick raised his eyebrows. "Does that still *hurt*?"

Tiffany forced her eyes open. "Uh... no." Paloni and Case chuckled. Tiffany sighed. "No. It just feels all weird." Case looked at Patrick. He bobbed his head.

"Do it." Tiffany closed her eyes and squeezed Case's hand. Paloni looked at Case.

"How did you know to come back?"

Case narrowed his eyes. "Do what?"

Paloni motioned towards the northern window with his head. "You guys were at the magic shop, right?" Case nodded. "So, how did you know to come back? You said you came flying back in your car."

Case patted Tiffany's shoulder. "Show him your arm." Tiffany's arm was below Case's coat. She eased it out and held it up. Paloni looked at the message Tiffany scrawled on her arm. He squinted and looked at Case.

"Wait, what are you saying?" Paloni inquired. Case sighed. He looked at Adam. Paloni looked at him, too. Adam threw his hands out at his sides.

"What?"

Paloni pointed at Adam. "You're telling me *he's* a medium?" Case nodded. Adam smacked his lips.

"Awe, fool. Whatever." Paloni smirked. He folded his arms over his chest and looked at Case.

"You're bullshitting me."

Case motioned towards the stairs with his head. "Go get something to write on."

Paloni nodded. "Alright." He turned and headed downstairs.

"Sergeant Paloni!" Adam called after him. "Man, don't do it! He's screwing with you!" Tiffany gritted her teeth and groaned. Case squeezed Tiffany's hand.

"It's alright," he told her. "I'm right here."

Patrick looked into Tiffany's eyes. "Almost done." Tiffany closed her eyes and exhaled. Adam looked at Case. He shook his head.

"Damn it, Louis. Stop telling everyone I'm psychic."

Case looked at Adam. "No. We might need you."

Adam squinted. "Why?"

Case tilted his head. "We've used psychics to track down people before."

Gabrielle gasped. "You mean, you're going to use him to find Andre?"

Case shrugged. “Maybe.” Adam exhaled, angrily. He threw his arms around Gabrielle’s waist and shook his head. Gabrielle looked over her shoulder.

“See, Adam? You could help.” Adam looked into his girlfriend’s eyes. “You could help find Tiffany’s dad.”

“And, done,” Patrick remarked. He laid the tweezers in the tin case. Tiffany looked at Adam.

“Would you do that for me, Adam?” Adam glared at her. Patrick took out a white patch. He peeled off the back and held it in front of Tiffany’s forehead. Tiffany pointed at him. “No!” she shrieked. “Don’t touch!” Case snickered. He took the bandage from Patrick.

“I’ll do it.” Patrick sighed. He closed his case, stood, and headed for the stairs. Flo followed. Case tossed the patch aside. Tiffany looked at Adam.

“Adam?” Adam looked at the floor. He lightly shrugged.

“He’ll do it,” Case replied. “Or, he’ll be sleeping up here, tonight.” Case looked at Adam. “With Earl.” Adam glared at Case. Paloni returned. He held up Tiffany’s backpack. Tiffany held out her hands. Adam sighed. He dropped his forehead in his palm and shook his head. Paloni laid Tiffany’s backpack in her hands. He still had the glass of orange juice. It was half gone. He took a sip. Tiffany found some index cards and a felt tipped pen. She tossed her backpack aside. She handed Paloni the index cards and a pen. Adam looked up.

“Man, fool!” Paloni looked into Adam’s eyes. “I’m telling you. They’re pulling your leg.” Paloni looked at Gabrielle. Gabrielle shook her head. She tapped the index cards with her index finger. Paloni set his orange juice on the floor. He opened the pen and stuck the cap on the bottom. He wrote something on the top card. It read “inolaP.” Paloni looked into Adam’s eyes.

“Anything?” Adam narrowed his eyes. Paloni nodded. He stood between Adam and Gabrielle and Case and Tiffany. He showed the card to Case and Tiffany.

“Awe!” Adam yelled. “Damn it!” Paloni grinned. He looked over his shoulder.

“Do you see something, Adam?” Adam looked up. He exhaled through his nostrils.

“It’s your name... backwards.”

Paloni looked at Case. “From showing it to two people? Really?”

Case shrugged. “He can do it with one.”

Paloni shook his head. “Bullshit. Show me.” Paloni handed Case the pen and a blank index card. Case wrote “01000011 01100001 01110011 01100101.” It was his last name in ASCII binary. It was an old trick he and Paloni came up with during prior psychic investigations. When Paloni saw Case’s name in binary, Case knew he’d know what it meant. Case looked at Tiffany. He motioned for her to look away with his head. She looked away and cupped her fingers beside her eye. Paloni stood beside Case. Case showed him the card. “Ha!” Paloni remarked. He and Case looked at Adam. “Now, *that’s* a test.” Adam looked at Case. Then, he looked at Paloni.

“It says ‘Case’, right?” Paloni smirked. He looked at Case.

“Man, that is *weird*.” He looked at Adam. “Like it or not Adam, you’re a medium.” Paloni folded his arms over his chest. “No doubt about it.” Adam faced forward and sighed. “And, based on what you just did...” Paloni took the card from Case. “You’re the most extraordinary one I’ve ever met.” He handed the card to Adam. Adam looked it over. He smiled and looked up.

“Inside joke?” Paloni nodded. He looked at Case.

“So, how do we find him?”

Case shrugged. “I have no idea.” Tiffany sighed. She sat in Case’s lap with her legs crossed. Her foot felt funny. She held her foot in front of her and looked it over. Her father’s blood was all over her turquoise, argyle sock. Her eyes popped open.

“Uh...”

Case peeked over Tiffany’s shoulder. “What?” Tiffany yanked off her sock and looked it over. She smiled. She dangled the sock in front of Case’s eyes. Case slid his mouth to the side of his face. “I don’t understand.” He poked Tiffany’s sock. “Who’s blood is that?”

“It’s my father’s,” Tiffany replied. She turned to Adam. “Did you bring a Berend?”

Adam nodded. “There’s a whole bunch of them downstairs.”

Tiffany looked at Paloni. “I have an idea.”

## Chapter 20: “Merge”

Tiffany made the Berends herself. She stitched them from white wool. She stuffed them with down alternative. She sewed little Xs on the faces for eyes. The Xs were made of black fabric. The little dolls were Tiffany’s number one seller. On the rare occasion a person entered the magic shop, they were sure to buy one. They were so cute and cuddly. Also, a person could use them to harm someone who’d pissed them off. Marketing something like that to recent ex-lovers, sadists, and wannabe witches was child’s play. The little dolls had an opening in the back. Tiffany stuck a safety pin in each opening. It made for easy access to the doll’s contents. The contents of a Berend could be just about anything. Tiffany recommended using a lock of hair. Hair created a link between the Berend and the person it came from. But, any piece of divinity would do. This included nail clippings, teardrops, beads of sweat, or even snot.

Tiffany stuffed her sock into a Berend. It was dotted with her father’s blood. That was plenty of divinity to create a link. It was weird, but it would work. Tiffany looked up. A safety pin from the doll’s back dangled from her lips. Everyone was in the living room. Tiffany and Case sat on a squishy, blue loveseat. Paloni, Gabrielle, and Adam sat across from them. They sat on a matching couch. The couches were Case and Gina’s old living room set. Tiffany’s legs were folded like a pretzel. Tiffany looked at Adam. Adam squinted.

“What are *you* staring at?” Tiffany yanked the safety pin from her lips. She wove the safety pin next to the hole in the doll’s back. She motioned towards the end of the loveseat with her head.

“Come here for a sec,” Tiffany replied. Adam pushed his mouth to the side of his face. He looked at Gabrielle.

“She’s going to do something to me. I just know it.”

Tiffany smacked her lips. “Adam! Don’t be like that. Come here.”

Gabrielle shrugged. “Just do it. She won’t shut-up until you go over there.” Adam glared into Tiffany’s eyes. Tiffany exhaled through her nose.

“You said you’d help. Now, come over here.” She motioned with her fingers. Adam sighed. He hopped up, wandered across the room, and stood next to Tiffany. Tiffany smiled. She motioned for Adam to lean in. Adam threw his hands out at his sides.

“Man, what the hell?”

Tiffany smacked her knee. “Bend down! I wanna tell you something.” Adam bent over. He leaned in and cupped his fingers around his ear. Tiffany yanked out a wad of Adam’s hair.

“Ow!” Adam shouted. He hopped away. He dropped his hand over the spot the hair came from. Gabrielle laid her fingers over her lips and giggled. Tiffany pressed her lips together.

“I’m sorry, Adam. I had to do it.” Adam rubbed his head. There was a tiny bald spot. Tiffany scooped over. She patted a small space next to her. “Now, sit down with me.”

Adam furrowed his brow. “What are you going to do *this* time? Punch me in the balls?” Case cackled. Tiffany smiled and shook her head.

“I’m not gonna hurt you anymore. I promise.”

Adam nodded. “Uh-huh.” He sat next to Tiffany. He kept his eyes on her. Tiffany took his hand. Adam looked at his and Tiffany’s hands. He looked up. “What is this?”

Tiffany looked into Adam’s eyes. “I hope this works.” She looked around. “I’ve never tried anything like it before.” Case rested his elbow on an armrest at the end of the loveseat. He laid his temple on his palm.

“What do you mean?” he asked.



Tiffany looked at Case. “Well, I’ve never tied more than one person to the same Berend.” She looked at Adam. “It might get... weird.”

Adam gritted his teeth. “*That* sounds promising.”

Paloni pointed at the Berend. “Is that like a... Voodoo doll?”

Tiffany scoffed. “No!” She held up the doll. “A Voodoo doll doesn’t look anything *like* this!” Paloni scrunched up his nose. He sat back and folded his arms over his chest. Tiffany sighed. She looked at Adam.

“I’m going to put you and my father in the same body.” She narrowed her eyes. “Does that make sense?”

Adam shrugged. “Sure.” He pointed at the Berend. “Assuming that stupid thing could actually *do* that.” Tiffany’s eyebrows fell in the middle. She held the doll beside her face.

“Adam, this is a tradition that goes back generations.”

Adam threw his hands out at his sides. “So is Greek mythology!” Gabrielle snickered. Tiffany shook her head. She turned, laid the doll on her thigh, and spread the opening in its back.

“Whatever,” she grumbled. “I’ll just do it.”

Case smacked his lips. “Tiffany! Tell us.”

Tiffany wound Adam’s locks around her sock. “Nah. Everyone just thinks I’m stupid. Who cares?” Case snatched the Berend from Tiffany’s leg. Tiffany looked up.

“Finish what you were saying,” Case told her. He smiled. He laid his hand over his heart. “*I* want to hear about it.” Tiffany smiled back.

“It’s okay, Tiffany,” Adam remarked. “You don’t have to explain. I get it. You want to use my abilities to find your father. Right?”

Tiffany faced Adam. “Yes, well... You see, normally tying two people to the same body wouldn’t be anything special.” She looked at Case. “It would just make it to where the same incantations could be performed on them, simultaneously.”

Case nodded. “With you so far.”

Tiffany looked at Adam. “But, since you’re psychic...”

“Allegedly,” Adam interrupted. He waved his pointer finger around the room. “Allegedly!”

Tiffany smiled. “Tying the two of you to one body ties your physical body to my father’s.” She looked at Case. “Still with me?”

Case shrugged. “Adam will be able to see what Andre is thinking.”

Tiffany shook her head. “No. You’re not thinking big enough.” She looked at Adam. “You’ll be seeing what *he* sees.” She laid her hand over her heart. “You’ll feel what *he* feels.” She narrowed her eyes. “You’ll think what *he* thinks.”

Adam shrugged. “You lost me.”

Tiffany pressed her lips together. “But, you see. You’ll still be Adam. So, you’ll still have all *your* senses at the same time.” She gritted her teeth. “Now, do you understand? You’re going to be like two people in one body.” She laid her hand on Adam’s arm. “It will be the most intense feeling you’ve ever experienced.”

Case leaned in. “Sounds dangerous.”

Tiffany looked at him. “It *is*.” She narrowed her eyes. “He could die.”

Paloni pointed at Tiffany. “What if something happens to Andre?”

Tiffany held up the Berend. “It will happen to Adam.”

Adam’s eyes popped open. “Whoa! Whoa! What a minute.” Tiffany looked at Adam.

Adam pointed at the doll. “You’re telling me, if Andre gets hit by a car...”

“*You’ll* get hit by a car,” Tiffany replied. Adam took a breath. He sat back and crossed his arms over his chest. He looked at Paloni then Case.

“Well then, you guys better be *careful* with him.”

Tiffany laughed through her nostrils. “No! No! I’ll release the Berend once we’ve found him.” She looked at Case and Paloni. “Then, you guys can...” She looked at her lap and swallowed. “You know, whatever...”

Case laid his palm on Tiffany’s shoulder. “I’ll try not to hurt him. I promise.” Tiffany looked up. Case pointed at Paloni with his thumb. “Of course, I can’t speak for old trigger happy Paloni over here.”

Paloni pointed at Case. “Damn it, Case. If you could actually *shoot*, you might take your gun out once in a while, too.” Case glared at Paloni. Gabrielle looked around.

“So, are we doing this, or what?” Tiffany looked into Gabrielle’s big, blue eyes and sighed. She looked at Adam.

“It’s up to Adam.”

Adam pressed his lips together. “I said I’d help.” Tiffany smiled. She laid her hand on Adam’s cheek.

“Look, you don’t have to do this, if you don’t want to.” She looked at her lap. “Um, I’ll understand.”

Adam took Tiffany’s hand. “I want to.” Tiffany looked up. Adam smirked. “I want to help you. Okay?” Tiffany let out a shaky sigh. She licked her lips and looked around.

“Okay.” She looked at her foot. She smiled and pointed over her shoulder. “I have to go get another sock. I’ll be right back.” Tiffany handed Case the Berend. She hopped up and

dashed up the stairs. Case looked into Adam's hazel eyes.

"You sure about this, buddy?"

"Louis," Adam replied, "I'm sure." He looked around. He threw his hands out at his sides. "Besides... there's no *way* this is going to work. I mean, come on!" He smiled at Case. Case folded his fingers in front of his lips. Gabrielle folded her legs like a pretzel. She rested her elbows on her knees. She laid her chin in her hands.

"Adam, you know damn *well* this is going to work." Adam faced his girlfriend. He pressed his lips together. Gabrielle sighed. "Look, I don't know about this. It sounds dangerous."

Adam shrugged. "Well if *I* don't do it, who will?" Case laid the little doll in his lap. He slid his fingers across the doll's eyes.

"I don't know," he remarked. He looked at Adam. "There may be another way." Paloni eased back. He rested his arms on the back of the sofa.

"Well, *I've* got nothing. You?"

Case held up the Berend. "Nothing as good as *this*." Tiffany returned. She plopped down between Case and Adam. Case looked at Tiffany's feet. She wore a black, argyle sock on her left foot and a white sock with pink polka dots on her right foot. Case grinned and shook his head. Tiffany sighed and looked around.

"Are we ready?" She looked at Case. She held out her hand. Case handed Tiffany the doll. Tiffany laid it in her lap. The doll's back was facing up. Tiffany removed the safety pin. She pinched the hole and wove the safety pin through. She pointed towards Case's end of the loveseat. "Give me a bump." The little box of graveyard dirt was beside the loveseat. Case opened it and held it in front of Tiffany. Tiffany snagged a little dirt and waved the box away.

She sprinkled the dirt across the front of the doll. She turned and flicked some at Adam. Adam opened his mouth and scrunched up his nose. Tiffany looked at Case. She curled her fingers around the star he gave her. Case turned his head without looking away.

“Everything alright?” Tiffany pressed her lips together. She took Case’s hand and looked at Adam. The hair on the back of Adam’s neck stood up. Adam looked into Tiffany’s dark brown eyes. Tiffany smiled. She held the doll’s head to her lips.

“*Rut-pack...*” she whispered.

Case narrowed his eyes. “Rut-pack? Seriously?”

Tiffany looked over her shoulder. “It’s ‘capture’ in reverse.” Case opened his mouth and nodded. Everyone looked at Adam. He cringed. He pinched his eyes shut, stretched his legs and arms, and lay against the back of the loveseat. He felt dizzy. The room was spinning. But, it wasn’t. Adam looked at Gabrielle. He saw her and a stop sign at the same time. He was looking through two sets of eyes. Adam sensed distress in Gabrielle’s face. But, he had trouble focusing. After all, he was concentrating on something else, simultaneously. Adam’s alternate eyes looked at a row of sidewalk. There was a dime on the ground. It was covered with lime scale. Adam narrowed his eyes and tilted his head.

“Are you okay, Adam?” Gabrielle asked.

“You lost, buddy?” a man asked. Adam looked up. He was staring at the ceiling. He grunted in frustration. He faced forward and concentrated on Gabrielle. His alternate eyes looked up. They were staring at a man in his forties. He had crinkly, blue eyes, short, grey hair, and a red, flannel jacket. Adam bobbed his head.

“I’m fine, Gabs.”

Tiffany swirled her thumb around her shiny, black star emblem. “Oh, man. This is

totally working.” She looked at Case. “You ever wonder how a fly feels?” She whirled her fingers in front of her face. “With all those eyes... looking in so many different directions at once?” Case smirked. He and Tiffany looked at Adam.

“No, I’m good,” Adam remarked.

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes. “What?” Adam’s alternate eyes looked up. They were staring at a black sign. It was covered with squiggly, different colored letters. A row of lights danced around the edges of the sign. The letters read “Good Times Bar and Grill.” Adam looked down. He was staring at his lap. He pinched his eyes shut and smacked his thighs.

“God damn it!”

Tiffany laid her fingers on Adam’s shoulder. “What?” She slid her hair out of her face. “What is it?” Adam steadied himself. He looked into Tiffany’s eyes. Tiffany rubbed Adam’s shoulder. “Are you okay?” Adam scrunched up his nose. He looked over Tiffany’s shoulder. He spotted Case.

“He...” Adam’s alternate hand shoved a door out of the way. It was a red door with a round window. Adam’s alternate body entered Good Times Bar and Grill. The bar was filled with obnoxious country music. Adam’s alternate ears pulsed with annoying beats and whining guitar sounds. Adam scrunched up his nose. “He just walked into a bar!” he yelled.

Case showed Adam his palms. “Adam, you don’t have to yell. I’m right here.” Adam sighed. He laid his hands in his lap and shook his head. It made him dizzy. Adam groaned. He leaned forward and dug his fingers into his eyelids. Tiffany slid her palm across Adam’s back.

“Adam, do you need me to make it stop?”

Adam looked over his shoulder. “Huh?!” he screamed. “What did you say?!” Adam felt his alternate fingers sliding across the slick surface of a bar. The bar was covered with shiny

oak. Adam's alternate body sat at a stool in front of the bar. The chair felt wobbly and unstable beneath his alternate body's weight. Stools never felt that way to Adam. It was disconcerting. Adam heard Tiffany shouting. But, the country music in his alternate ears made her hard to understand. Tiffany turned to Case. She shook her head.

"I'm stopping this." She pointed at the box of graveyard dirt. Case held it up. Tiffany shook the doll above the box. That way, all the dirt she'd sprinkled on the doll wouldn't topple to the floor. Tiffany leaned forward. Her lips were next to the Berend's head. "*Cellar...*" she whispered. Adam melted on the loveseat. He blew a breath through his lips and laid his fingers over his eyes.

"*Oh, my God...*" he moaned. "*What did you DO to me?*" He laid his hands at his sides, opened his eyes, and shook his head. He looked at Tiffany. Tiffany looked worried. She laid her hands on the sides of Adam's face and scooted towards him.

"Adam? You okay?" Adam let out a shaky breath. He felt dizzy and nauseous. His head was throbbing. His palms were caked with sweat. He wiped them on his khakis. Tiffany sighed. She laid her hands in her lap. "That didn't work so well, I take it."

Adam showed Tiffany his palm. "Oh, it worked fine." He tore off his jacket and laid it over the arm of the loveseat. "It just really, really sucked." Gabrielle giggled. She hopped up and wandered across the room. She waved Tiffany aside.

"Move over." Tiffany smacked her lips. She scooted over and sat on Case's lap. Gabrielle sat next to Adam. She rubbed his arms. "Are you alright? What happened just now?" Adam patted Gabrielle's fingers. He looked at Case.

"He's at some place called 'Good Times...' something."

Case squinted. "Good Times Bar and Grill?"

Adam snapped his fingers and pointed. “Yeah. That’s it.”

Case nodded. “You... saw him go in there?”

Adam exhaled through his nostrils. “No...” He rested his elbows on his knees and folded his fingers. He looked at Case. “No, I *went* in there.” He narrowed his eyes. “That’s where he is.”

Paloni hopped up. “That’s not far from here.” He looked at Case. “We should hurry. We might could still catch him.”

“Alright,” Case replied. He patted Tiffany’s shoulder. “You going with?”

Tiffany looked over her shoulder. “Of course. Are you kidding?”

Paloni pointed at Adam and Gabrielle. “They should come, too. We might need them.”

Paloni took a walkie talkie out of his coat pocket. He put it to his lips. Case pointed at Paloni.

“Are you calling Ford?”

Paloni nodded. “Of course.”

Case smacked his lips. “Paloni!” He looked out the window. Ford’s car wasn’t there. Case looked at Paloni. “Leave him out of this. It’s none of his business.” Paloni furrowed his brow. He put the walkie to his lips.

“Ford, we’re going for a drive.”

There was a pause. “*Come back?*” Case grinned.

Paloni pressed a button on the side of the walkie talkie. “Everyone’s getting stir crazy over here. We’re gonna go drive around for a minute.”

Ford took ten seconds to respond. “*You and Case better not be up to anything, Paloni. You understand me? No funny business.*”

Paloni smirked. “10-4.” He stuck the walkie in his coat. He motioned towards the front



of the house with his head. “So, who’s driving?”

Case looked at Tiffany. “You wanna drive?”

“No!” Gabrielle and Adam shrieked.

Case flew down Kline Street. He was eight blocks from Good Times Bar and Grill.

Tiffany sat across from him. Gabrielle and Adam sat in the back seat. Paloni sat between them.

He looked at Adam. Then, he turned to Gabrielle. Gabrielle looked up and grinned. Case reached over the back of his seat. He held out his hand.

“Give me your gun.”

Paloni narrowed his eyes. “What? Why?”

Case looked at Tiffany. “We want him alive. Okay?” Tiffany smiled. Paloni raised the left side of his lip.

“Case, I’m not going after this guy without a gun. Are you crazy?”

Case looked into Paloni’s eyes. “Give it to me.” Paloni pressed his lips together. He reached inside his coat, unholstered his weapon, and handed it over. Case handed it to Tiffany. He pointed at the glove box. Tiffany opened the glove box and laid Paloni’s pistol inside. Case reached over the back of his seat again. He held out his hand. Paloni threw his hands out at his sides. “Backup,” Case remarked. Paloni sighed. He bent over, pulled up his left pant leg, and grabbed his backup pistol. He reluctantly dropped it in Case’s hand.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Case,” Paloni remarked.

Case smirked. “Haven’t got a clue.” He skidded around a corner and raced to the end of the block. He spotted Good Times Bar and Grill. He handed Tiffany Paloni’s pistol. Tiffany placed it in the glove box. There was a short row of parking spaces in front of Good Times. Case swerved into a spot and killed the engine. He looked at Tiffany. Tiffany laid her eyes in

her palms. Her fingers were trembling. Case laid his palm on Tiffany's shoulder. "You okay?"

Tiffany looked at Case. "Do you want me to go in there?"

Case shrugged. "He's *your* father, right?" Tiffany exhaled a shaky breath. Case unbuckled his seatbelt. "It's up to you, Tiffany." He looked at the back seat. "Me and old Paloni can handle it." Case faced his girlfriend. "But, I think we should *all* go in." Adam leaned forward. He patted Case's shoulder.

"I'm good with *that*. I know right where he's sitting." Case looked over his shoulder and nodded. He motioned towards his door with his head.

"Let's do this." Case pulled back his door handle and slammed his shoulder against the door. It didn't budge. Case rolled his eyes. An armrest was made into the door paneling. Case curled his fingers around the armrest, lifted the door, and shoved it out of his way. Paloni snickered.

"After this, maybe me and you should put some new bushings on that door," he remarked. Case hopped out and smacked his door. It slammed into the frame and swung back. Case threw his hands on his hips and shook his head.

"I think you might be right about that." He bent over, grabbed the bottom of the door, and eased the door shut. He looked at Adam. "Lead the way." Adam slid past, wandered in front of the car, and entered the bar. Country music shattered everyone's eardrums. Adam scrunched up his nose. He shoved his fingers in his ears and looked around. The bar was right by the door. Adam spotted the barstool Andre was sitting on. It was empty. Adam looked up. A bartender stood in front of him. He looked angry. He folded his arms over his chest and looked Adam over. His arms were blanketed with jagged, sweaty muscles.

"Aren't you a little young to be in here?!" he shouted.

Adam cupped his hands around his ears. “What?!” Paloni stood next to Adam. He took out a billfold, flipped it open, and showed the bartender his badge. The bartender’s arms fell at his sides. Paloni bent over. His lips were near Adam’s right ear.

“Where is he?!” he shouted.

Adam looked at him and shook his head. “He was right there!” He motioned towards the empty barstool. “But, now he’s gone!” Paloni nodded. He wandered up to the stool and rested his elbows on the bar. The bartender approached him. Paloni pointed at the empty barstool.

“There was a guy sitting right here!” he yelled. The bartender nodded. Paloni spread his hands. He held them even with his shoulders. “Big guy?!” The bartender nodded. Paloni placed his pointer fingers below his nostrils. He slid them away from each other and swirled them. “Long, handlebar mustache?!”

The bartender pointed towards the door. “He had a couple of drinks! Then, he left!” Paloni looked over his shoulder. Case motioned towards the door with his head. Paloni nodded. He turned around and patted the bar.

“Thanks!” Case, Tiffany, Adam, Gabrielle, and Sergeant Paloni exited the bar. When the door closed behind them, a peaceful silence filled the air. Adam and Gabrielle stood in front of everyone else. Adam tilted his head back and sighed.

“Thank the lord. I *hate* country music.” Gabrielle stood next to Adam. She stuck her finger in her ear and swirled it around.

“Man, it’s *loud* in there.” She looked at Adam. “Is that why you were shouting a while ago?”

Adam looked at Gabrielle. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Gabrielle rolled her eyes. She pinched the bridge of her nose and shook her head. Tiffany looked at Paloni and

Case. She threw her hands on her hips.

“Did he leave, or what?”

Paloni pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. “Barkeep says he took off. Yeah.”

Tiffany looked at Adam. Adam looked over his shoulder. Tiffany pressed her lips together.

“I have to... do the thing again.” Adam looked at the parking lot and sighed. His arms dangled at his sides. “Come on, Adam,” Tiffany begged. “He can’t be far.”

Adam looked over his shoulder. “If he’s even *here*.” Tiffany narrowed her eyes. Her eyebrows fell in the middle.

“Damn it, Adam. You *know* he’s here.” She pointed at him. “*You* saw him come here.” Adam licked his lips. He looked at the ground and nodded. Tiffany wandered to the car. She opened the door and grabbed the Berend from earlier. It was lying on her seat. Tiffany reached into her pocket. She’d dropped a handful of goofer dust in her pocket before leaving the house. She took out a little dirt and sprinkled it across the doll’s belly. She looked at Adam. “Ready?” Adam looked up. He bowed his head, folded his fingers, and rested them against his forehead.

“*I guess...*” he mumbled. “Ready as I’ll *ever* be.”

Tiffany held the Berend in front of her lips. “*Rut-pack...*” she whispered. A cold chill crawled up Adam’s spine. His eyes crossed. His head throbbed. He clenched fistfuls of his shiny, black hair. Gabrielle laid her hands on Adam’s shoulders. She slid her fingers across his arms.

“Adam?” Adam heard her say. “Are you okay?” Adam ignored her. He focused on the five alternate senses Tiffany gave him. His alternate body walked down a lonely sidewalk. His alternate eyes looked up. Hot, white lightning tore across a dreary, black sky. Adam grunted. He looked up. Hot, white lightning tore across a dreary, black sky. Adam looked at Gabrielle.

“We’re close. We have to be.” Tiffany took Adam’s hand. Adam faced her.

“Where *is* he, Adam?” Tiffany asked.

Adam gritted his teeth. “He’s...” Thunder filled Adam’s alternate ears. Thunder filled Adam’s ears. Adam scrunched up his face. He faced the ground and pinched the bridge of his nose. “*He’s really close...*” he groaned. Adam looked to his right. He pointed towards the end of the block. “I think... this way.” He began to walk. It was weird. Adam was walking. But, he was also walking. It was hard to concentrate. It made Adam sick and dizzy. Adam puffed up his cheeks and let out a breath. Case, Paloni, Tiffany, and Gabrielle followed. Gabrielle caught up with her boyfriend. She laid her hand on Adam’s arm and took his hand.

“*It’s okay,*” Gabrielle whispered. “*I’ve got you.*”

Adam exhaled a shaky sigh. “Thanks, Gabs.” Paloni shook his head. He turned to Case.

“This isn’t right. The kids shouldn’t be leading. *We* should be out front.” He faced forward. “It’s dangerous.”

Case shook his head. “He doesn’t have a gun, Paloni. Chill.” Tiffany slid her fingers through Case’s. She dug her nails into his knuckles.

“I feel like I’m about to have a heart attack.” Adam stumbled. Gabrielle steadied him. She helped him stand up. Then, they continued. Tiffany tightened her fingers. Case’s arm cramped up. He looked at his girlfriend.

“*Tiffany, relax!*” he whispered. “*You’re gonna rip my arm off!*”

Tiffany cleared her throat. “Sorry.” She relaxed her fingers a little. She held the Berend in front of Case. “Hold this.” Case took the little, white doll from his girlfriend’s trembling fingers. Tiffany curled her fingers around her star. She swirled her thumb around the shiny, black face. It felt gentle and warm. Tiffany smiled at Case. “Adam’s right, you know.”

Case looked at Tiffany. “About what?”

Tiffany flattened her lips. “You’re very charming.”

Case motioned towards Tiffany’s star with his eyes. “You mean *that*?”

Tiffany nodded. “With Valerie’s tooth, it’s already more powerful than my pentacle.”

Case smiled. “Cool.” Adam and Gabrielle reached the end of the block. Adam flattened against a wall of crimson bricks. Gabrielle stood next to him. Her breathing was quick and nervous. Adam peaked around the corner. He was looking at his alternate self, walking down the sidewalk. It was the strangest feeling Adam had ever experienced. He was watching himself, walking. Andre’s head bobbed from side to side as he walked. Adam watched Andre’s head bobbing. His alternate vision bobbed in sync. Adam flattened against the wall. He blew a nervous breath through his lips. Gabrielle looked Adam over.

“What?”

Adam pointed around the corner with his thumb. “He’s right around the corner.” He looked at Tiffany. Tiffany, Case, and Paloni stopped next to Adam and Gabrielle. Tiffany pointed at Adam.

“He’s...” Tiffany motioned towards the end of the block with her head. “He’s right there?”

Adam slowly nodded. “Please, Tiffany. Make it stop. My head is killing me.” Tiffany swiped the Berend from Case. She shook off the goofer dust and held the doll to her lips.

“*Cellar...*” she whispered. Adam crumbled to his knees. He tilted his head back and groaned, peacefully. Gabrielle knelt beside Adam. She grabbed his arm and patted his back. Paloni motioned towards the Berend with his eyes.

“Can’t we hurt him with that?” Tiffany glared at Paloni from the tops of her eyes. Her

eyebrows drooped in the middle. She shook her head.

“No! I never do that unless I have to.” She pointed at Paloni. “Understand?”

Paloni pressed his lips together. “Sorry.” He showed Tiffany his palm. “I-I didn’t know.” Tiffany exhaled through her nostrils. She looked at the doll and thought a moment. She looked up.

“There is something I *can* do, though.” She laid the doll across her palm, belly down. She unpinned the back. She pinched the lock of Adam’s hair and tugged it loose. She stuffed it in her pocket. Then, she closed the Berend. She looked at the sidewalk. “I need a... white rock.” She looked up. “Anybody see any?” Case spotted one. It rested in a corner between the red, brick wall and the sidewalk. Case bent over, picked up the rock, and handed it to Tiffany. “Thanks,” Tiffany remarked. She sat next to Adam and crossed her legs. She drew a circle on the sidewalk with the white rock. She drew a pentagram inside the circle. Paloni raised his eyebrows.

“Uh...”

“Trust me,” Tiffany remarked. She looked at Paloni from the tops of her eyes. Paloni showed Tiffany his palm and looked away. Tiffany laid the Berend over the pentagram. She sprinkled the doll with graveyard dirt and bent over. “*Rut-pack...*” she whispered. Case and Paloni winced. They heard hummingbirds in their ears. Case swirled his finger around his ear-hole.

“What the hell was *that*?” he inquired. Tiffany stuffed her hand in her pocket. She took out a tiny, plastic box. It was filled with straight pins. The pins had little, colored balls on the ends. Tiffany took one out. She slid it into the Berend’s left shoulder.

“*Nip...*” she whispered. She returned the box of straight pins to her pocket and looked

up. “Okay, he’s pinned.”

Case nodded. “What does that mean?”

Tiffany took a breath. “It means... he can’t hurt us. At least, not directly.” Her eyes switched between Case and Paloni. She grinned. “Do you guys understand?”

Case blew a breath through his teeth. “No.”

Paloni rubbed the back of his neck. “Not really.” Tiffany offered Case her hand. Case took Tiffany’s hand and helped her to her feet.

“Don’t worry about the specifics.” Tiffany looked towards the end of the wall. “Just remember, he can’t hurt us.” She looked at Case and Paloni. “If he bounces a baseball off a wall, though...”

Case smirked and bobbed his head. “Gotcha.”

Paloni motioned towards the end of the block. “Let’s do this.” Tiffany nodded. She looked at Adam and Gabrielle. She pointed at the Berend.

“Don’t touch this doll.” She pointed at Adam. “Don’t.” Adam looked into Tiffany’s eyes. He pressed his lips together.

“I won’t. I promise.”

“Adam!” Tiffany warned. “That’s my father in there. If you do anything to him, I’ll never forgive you.”

Adam smacked his lips. “Tiffany! I won’t touch it. I swear.” He looked at Case. “Why doesn’t she believe me?”

“Hmm,” Case remarked. “Probably because you killed my fiancée with one of those.” He turned his head without looking away. “Ring any bells?” Adam looked at Tiffany. Tiffany folded her arms across her chest. Gabrielle took Adam’s hands.



“Don’t worry. I’ll keep an eye on him.” Tiffany exhaled through her nostrils. She looked at Case and Paloni.

“Um, will you guys go first?” Case smiled. He took Tiffany’s hand.

“Why don’t we go together?” Tiffany snickered. She pointed at Case.

“I *like* that idea.” She dug her nails into Case’s knuckles. Case winced. He, Tiffany, and Paloni wandered around the corner. Andre was at the end of the block. He was sitting against a wall, staring into space. Tiffany looked her father over. He was shaking. He looked scared. His head turned. His eyes widened.

“Ah!” he shrieked. He stumbled to his feet and tried to run. He tripped over his own feet. He fell to the pavement on his face. The roads were still soaked from all the rain. Andre hit the street with a splash. Tiffany sighed. She looked at Case. Case looked back.

“Come on,” he remarked. Andre scrambled to the sidewalk. He clawed at the wall he was sitting at. It was a wall of old, yellow bricks. Andre looked to his right. Case, Tiffany, and Paloni were closing in. Andre whimpered. He looked down. His blue, plaid jacket, grey undershirt, and jeans were sopping wet. It made him shiver. Case, Tiffany, and Paloni stopped next to Andre. Andre looked up. His mouth opened. His teeth parted. He had something to say. But, it wouldn’t come out. Case snapped. His eyebrows fell in the middle. His face got all fiery. “What?!” he shouted. “Say something, you freak!” Andre’s eyebrows fell at the sides. The corners of his mouth drooped. He began to sob. “Say something!” Case demanded. He jerked towards him. “Say ‘I’m sorry...’ or something!”

Tiffany turned to Case and sighed. “Louis... Stop.” Case looked at his girlfriend. He flattened his lips.

“Is that from... your spell?” Case asked. He pointed towards the Berend. “Because he’s

pinned or whatever?”

Tiffany shook her head. “No. It doesn’t work like that.” Tiffany knelt in front of her father. She looked into his eyes. “Dad?” Andre looked up. “Can you hear me? It-It’s Tiffany.” Andre let out a shaky sigh. He swallowed.

“Hi...” he gasped.

Tiffany smiled a little. “Hi, Dad.” She patted Andre’s coat. “Man... you’re all wet.”

Andre nodded. “I know.” Tears dribbled down his cheeks. “It-It’s cold out here.”

Tiffany looked over her shoulder. Case and Paloni stared back. Tiffany tilted her head.

“We have to get him back to the sanatorium.” Andre’s eyes filled with fury. His face twisted with anger. He gritted his teeth.

“Argh!” he growled. “No!” He pounded his fists into the concrete. “No! No! No! No! No!” Tiffany’s head whirled around. She grabbed a hold of her father’s wrists.

“Dad, stop! No!”

Tiffany’s father shrieked in her face. “I’ll kill you, you fuckin’ bitch!” He snagged a hold of Tiffany’s argyle sweater. Tiffany whimpered. She looked over her shoulder.

“Louis!” Andre reeled back. He balled up his fingers and threw them at his daughter’s face. His fist stopped short of Tiffany’s nose. Andre felt like he was punching through water. He stared at his fist. He narrowed his eyes. Case buried his knee between Andre’s eyes.

“Gah!” Andre gargled. The back of Andre’s skull landed on the cold concrete. Case landed on top of him. He pressed his nose against Andre’s. He glared into his dark, frigid eyes.

“You wanna kill someone?!” Case shouted. “Kill *me!*” He dropped his elbow on the bridge of Andre’s nose. Andre roared like a lion. He folded his fingers over his nose. Blood squirted through his fingers. Case snagged a fistful of Andre’s damp, grey, undershirt. He lifted

Andre's head off the ground. "You can't hide from *me*, mustache boy!" Case slapped at Andre's hands. "Come on. Show me your ugly, little face!" Andre grunted. He turned his head. Case lowered his head. His lips were next to Andre's ear. "Show it!"

"*Louis...*" Tiffany whimpered. Case looked over his shoulder. Tiffany looked terrified. The outer tips of her eyebrows were sagging. Her eyes were crinkly and strained. Tears were dribbling down her cheeks. The corners of her mouth were dangling. She fought to catch her breath. She showed Case her palms. "*P-Please...*" she begged. She cleared her throat. "Please, stop." She shook her hands. "Stop. Stop. Stop." Case breathed out a shaky sigh. He looked at Andre. Andre's cheek lay on the concrete. His arms were folded over his head. Case closed his eyes. A tear trickled down his cheek. He shoved himself to his feet and backed away. He looked at Paloni. He motioned towards Andre with his head.

"Cuff him, Paloni. Please." Paloni breathed out through his nose. He knelt next to Andre, flipped him on his side, and clamped a set of irons on his wrists. He took out his walkie talkie. He put it to his lips and pressed a button.

"Ford," Paloni remarked. "We got him." Case swirled his fingers around his palm. He looked over his shoulder. Tiffany was staring at him. She wiped her eyes. Case held out his hand.

"Tiffany, I'm sorry." Tiffany sobbed. She buried her face in her palms. Case walked up beside her. He laid his hand on the back of Tiffany's head. "I'm sorry," he repeated. Tiffany peeled her hands away. She looked into Case's eyes. She responded with a shaky nod.

"*I know...*" she gasped. She laid her head on Case's chest. "*Thank you.*" Case slipped his arms around Tiffany's shoulders. Tiffany slid her arms around Case's waist.

"*Got WHO?*" Ford demanded. "*What are you talking about?*"

## Chapter 21: “Recent Construction”

Ford shut Andre in the back of his car. Andre stared at the back of the driver’s seat. His eyes were hazy and passive. Ford turned around. He was facing Case, Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle. He wore a tan trench coat, a crisp, white shirt, a pair of black slacks, and a pair of scuffed up, brown shoes. He offered Tiffany his hand.

“Tiff...” he remarked.

Tiffany sighed. “Tiffany. Please.” She slowly shook Ford’s hand. Ford smiled.

“Right, I’m sorry. I always forget.” He turned to Adam. “Adam, right?”

Adam nodded. “Yeah, man.” He held out his hand. Ford shook it.

“Nice job.” He narrowed his eyes. “We’ve worked with psychics before. But...” Adam exhaled an annoyed breath. Ford forced a smile. He turned to Gabrielle and sighed.

“The construction crew...” Gabrielle grinned. She blinked her big, blue eyes. Ford shook Gabrielle’s little hand. “And, what did *you* do, exactly?”

Gabrielle shrugged. “I had to make sure Adam didn’t fall over and bust his ass.” Ford shook his head. He turned to Case. He frowned.

“Case.”

Case smirked. “Bill.” Ford exhaled through his nostrils. He looked at the sidewalk. Paloni walked up behind him. Ford turned around. He cleared his throat.

Paloni looked at Case. “You guys gonna be alright?”

Case nodded. “I think so.”

Paloni nodded. “You mind if I leave my car in your driveway for a couple of hours?” Case shrugged. Paloni looked at Tiffany. He motioned towards the back of Ford’s car with his head.

“You wanna say ‘good-bye’?”

Tiffany pressed her lips together. “I said ‘good-bye’ to him a long time ago.” She looked at her father. He looked like a vegetable. “Take him back to Lincoln.”

Paloni nodded. “We’re going to drive him a ways. The Lincoln authorities are going to meet us halfway.” Tiffany looked at the ground and nodded. Paloni looked at Case. “What about those door bushings?”

Case smiled. “Oh, yeah. I forgot about that.” He scratched the back of his head. “I need to replace the front door and the attic window, too.” He looked at Tiffany. “On my brand new house.”

Paloni bobbed his head. “Maybe I’ll come by later and help you with that.” Case nodded. He looked down at Gabrielle.

“I might just have it covered,” Case remarked. Gabrielle glared at him. Case looked at Paloni. “But, sure. Come on by, if you want.” Blue squiggles danced across the sky. Case looked up. The sky was filled with black. Case frowned. “I just hope it doesn’t start raining real bad. The front should be fine. It’s covered by a porch. But, the attic...” Case looked at Gabrielle. “Man, Gabrielle would be mopping that up all *night*.” Gabrielle folded her arms over her chest. Her eyebrows fell in the middle.

“Louis! Bite me!”

Paloni nodded. “Yep. You’d better hurry up and put a window in there, Gabs.” Gabrielle glared at Paloni. She balled her little fists at her sides.

“Shut-up, Paloni!” Paloni cackled. Case sighed. He looked around.

“Well, I’m starving, guys. Let’s go get a steak.”

Paloni scrunched up his nose. “Case... Really?”

“Dude...” Gabrielle moaned. “Seriously?” She looked at Case and threw her hands out at her sides. “At Slow Frank’s?” Case nodded. “After we dug up the bathroom and all that?”

Case shrugged. “Well, I just thought I’d drop by. See how everything was coming along.”

Ford pointed at Case. “Stay away from that bathroom,” he warned. “You hear me?”

Case laid his hand over his heart. “Scout’s honor. I promise. I won’t do anymore digging in that bathroom.”

Ford nodded. “You’d better not.” He turned to Paloni. He motioned towards his light blue car with his head. “Let’s go, Sergeant.” Paloni looked at Case. Case bobbed his head. Ford and Paloni hopped into Ford’s car and drove away. Case looked at Tiffany. Tiffany watched Ford’s car drive to the end of the block. It turned right at an intersection. Tiffany’s head turned with it. Tiffany watched the car until it was out of sight. She licked her lips and looked at the ground. Case slid his fingers through hers. Tiffany looked up and smiled. Case smiled back. He rested his hand against Tiffany’s cheek. He slid his thumb across a row of stitches in her forehead. Case turned to Adam and Gabrielle.

“So... Slow Frank’s?” Gabrielle’s arms dangled at her sides. Her tongue dangled from her lips.

“Bleh...”

Slow Frank’s was buzzing. There was only one bathroom, thanks to Case. Yet, it didn’t slow down business. Case, Tiffany, Adam, and Gabrielle sat at the same table as the other day. It was in the middle, across from the parking lot. A window hovered above the table on the wall. It overlooked an air conditioner unit. Five rows of concrete squares lay across the ground. Elm trees stuck out of every third square across the second and fourth rows. The sky was like a cola.

It was alive and bubbly. It was black and mysterious. Orange, violet, teal, and emerald colored squiggles raced across the churning, black canvas. It wasn't raining, but rain was on the way.

Gabrielle stared out the window. Her eyes popped open. She looked around.

"Eat fast, guys." She and Adam sat on the west side of the table. Tiffany and Case sat on the east side. Adam and Tiffany sat next to the window. Case looked up and smirked.

"Got you on the edge of your seat, do I?" Thunder rattled the walls. Gabrielle shrieked. She stuffed her little fingers in her ears. Tiffany patted her chest and looked out the window. Her eyes were like saucers. Even Case jumped a little. He turned, took Tiffany's hand, and looked out the window. Adam didn't respond. He didn't even look up. He sat, staring at his plate. It was empty. He'd downed a sixteen ounce T-bone, two baked potatoes with everything, an ear of corn, and two dinner rolls. He was still hungry. Something wasn't right. He glanced at the floor. It was covered with blue tiles and black grout. Adam looked at the table. It was made of ancient wood. So were everyone's chairs. Adam pressed his lips together. He returned his eyes to his plate. He narrowed his eyes. He felt compelled to look up. He looked up. Case and Tiffany were staring at him. Adam looked to his right. Gabrielle was glaring at him. Adam's fingers lay on the table. Gabrielle laid her fingers on Adam's.

"You okay, Adam?" Adam looked at Case. He squinted.

"Do you guys *smell* something?"

Case shrugged. "No."

Adam looked at Tiffany. "Tiffany?" Tiffany shook her head. Adam looked at Gabrielle.

"Like what?" Gabrielle asked. Adam closed his eyes. He inhaled through his nose. The air was moist and frigid. It was thick and unsettling. It made Adam's heart race. Adam exhaled through his lips. He opened his eyes and looked around. Something smelled dead. Adam faced

his girlfriend.

“I don’t know. I just smell something. You know?” Gabrielle shrugged. Adam flipped his hand over. He slid his fingers through Gabrielle’s. “It’s probably nothing.”

Gabrielle nodded. “Probably.” She and Adam hid their hands under the table. They looked at Case and Tiffany and smiled. Case and Tiffany smiled back. Tiffany laid her fingers over her star. She got an idea. She took off her necklace and laid it on the table. She shoved her hand into her pocket. She took out the chain that belonged to the black star. She also grabbed the pentagram Valerie gave her. The chain the star was on belonged to the pentagram emblem. Tiffany returned the pentagram to the chain with Valerie’s molar. She shoved it into her pocket. She looked at Case. Case took a sip of iced tea. He set down his glass and looked into Tiffany’s dark brown eyes. Tiffany pressed her lips together.

“Louis...”

Case smiled. “Yes, dear?”

Tiffany snickered. “Will you give me a lock of your hair?”

Adam narrowed his eyes. “Oh, sure. You *ask* him.”

Case sighed. “Oh, I guess.” He bowed his head. “Just don’t scalp me. Alright?”

“I promise.” Tiffany reached across. She yanked out a crop of Case’s hair. Case groaned. He sat back and sighed. He laid his palm on his head. He stared at Tiffany’s fingers. Tiffany weaved the small gathering of Case’s locks. She made a tiny braid. Case looked up.

“A charm?”

Tiffany nodded. “For the star you gave me.” She looked into Case’s pale, blue eyes. They were bright and poppy. “When I paired it with Valerie’s tooth, I felt it’s true power for the first time.” Tiffany smiled. “It’s the most powerful charm I’ve ever had.”



Case nodded. "If you say so." Tiffany laughed through her nose. She patted Case's arm.

"It is." She turned and continued braiding. "It's far more powerful than that, though."

Case stroked his chin. "Yeah?" Tiffany looked up. She laid her hand over her heart.

"Adam was right. You're very charming." Tiffany looked down. She twisted the ends of Case's hair together. She knotted the braid around a tiny ring. It was near the clasp of Tiffany's necklace. "So, I'm going to put a piece of your divinity on the clasp." Tiffany held up her necklace. Case smiled. He took an end in each hand. He laid the star on Tiffany's chest, reached behind her neck, and clasped the chain. He rested his elbow on the table. He laid his cheek in his hand.

"You're not going to leave the tooth on there?" Tiffany smiled. She shook her head.

"You can't put charms from different people together." She tapped her fingertips together. "They clash." Case bobbed his head. Tiffany shrugged. "It's fine for black magic. But, *I* don't like to do that. Over time, the items lose their charm."

Case nodded. "Is it working?" Tiffany pressed her lips together. She swirled her fingers around the little, black star. She smirked. She took Case's hand. She laid his fingertips on the star. Case exhaled slowly. The little jewel felt warm and tingly. Everything in the room felt like ice. The table was cold and slick. The chairs were like ice sculptures. The silverware was frosty and dead. Tiffany's little star felt soothing and affectionate. Case was familiar with the feeling. It felt like Tiffany's fingers sliding across his back. It felt like her arms around his shoulders. It felt like her hands on his. It was like a soft, fuzzy coat liner. The little star felt cozy and snugly. Tiffany slid her fingers across Case's. She looked into his eyes.

"Louis?"

Case smiled a little. "Yes?"

Tiffany squinted. “Will you... hold me again?”

Case nodded. “Of course, sweetheart.” Tiffany slid off her seat and sat in Case’s lap. Case slid his arms around Tiffany’s waist. Tiffany rested her head against Case’s chest. She exhaled through her nostrils.

*“Thank you...”* she whispered.

Case rested his chin on Tiffany’s shoulder. *“You’re welcome.”* A piece of classical music began to play. Case closed his eyes and scrunched up his nose. “Damn it.”

Tiffany tugged Case’s sleeve. “Don’t answer it.”

Case pressed his lips together. “I have to.” He fished his phone out of his pocket. He looked at the tiny window on the front. It read “Lee.” “It’s my pappy,” Case remarked. He flipped open his phone and put it to his ear. “Hey, man. What’s up?”

*“Louis!”* Case’s father beamed. Case smiled and rolled his eyes. *“How did everything go?”*

Case wrinkled his nose. “How did it go?” He looked at Tiffany. “Well, Andre got loose while Tiffany was visiting...”

*“Oh, my,”* Lee replied.

“We managed to get him under control.”

*“We?”* Lee inquired.

Case nodded. “Mm-hmm. Yes.” He exhaled through his nostrils. “Then, he escaped.”

There was a pause. *“What?”* Case’s father demanded. *“You’re bullshitting me!”*

Case and Tiffany looked at each other. “He came after her, Dad. Him and some of his buddies.”

Lee sighed. *“Oh, my God. Is she okay?”*

Case patted Tiffany's shoulder. "She's fine, Dad. Couple of stitches. No big deal."

"*Hmm.*" Lee patted his leg. "*Did you catch him?*"

Case nodded. "Andre's in custody. So, is David Sweeny." Tiffany pinched her eyes shut. "He was an old buddy of Tiffany's." Tiffany uttered a sarcastic laugh. "Stalker, I should say. One man was killed."

"*Killed?*" Lee asked.

"Yeah." Case hugged his phone with his ear and his shoulder. He took a sip of tea. "He took a dive out of our attic window."

There was a pause. "*The magic shop has an attic?*"

Case narrowed his eyes. "Oh, didn't I tell you? We got us a place, Dad."

"*I'll be damned. Nice place?*"

Case shrugged. "Well, yeah. It, uh... It's *really* nice."

"*Righteous. Was there anyone else?*"

"Jack's kids," Case replied. "The man that fell out of the window. He has two sons. Henry and Hank." Tiffany shuddered. Case rubbed Tiffany's shoulder. "They got away."

Lee exhaled a throaty sigh. "*Is she there?*"

Case smiled. "Yeah, man. She's right here."

"*Can I talk to her?*"

"Sure, Dad." Case held the phone next to Tiffany's face. Tiffany looked at the phone then looked at Case. Case smirked. "He wants to talk to you." Tiffany faced the phone. She pressed her lips together and took it. She slid her hair aside and put Case's phone to her ear.

"M-Mr. Case?" she inquired.

Case's father sat in a dark brown, leather chair. It had wooden handles and wooden legs.

Lee was thin like Case. He wore a light blue, button up shirt with long sleeves, a pair of dark brown trousers, and a pair of shiny, brown, leather moccasins. He had short, black hair. It was peppered with silver. A footstool sat in front of the chair. It matched the chair. Lee was holding a shiny, white cell phone to his ear. He smiled and sat back. He rested his feet on the footstool and crossed his ankles. "Hi, Tiff," he remarked.

Tiffany's eyebrows fell in the middle. She narrowed her eyes. "It's Tiffany."

Case's father made a fist. He dropped it quietly on the arm of his chair. "I'm sorry. You have a thing about that, huh?"

Tiffany smiled a little. "It-It's okay." She wrinkled her eyebrows. She laid her fingertips on her forehead. "I-I-I..." She closed her eyes and took a breath. "I'll be alright."

Lee stroked his chin. He pushed his mouth to the side of his face. "So, Louis tells me you guys had quite a weekend."

Tiffany swallowed. "Yeah. We, uh... We went and saw my old place."

Case's father smirked. "Yeah? How was it down there?"

Tiffany licked her lips. "It sucked." She slid her fingers through her hair. "It-It brought back a lot of bad memories."

Lee nodded. "You still having night terrors?"

Tiffany closed her eyes. "Yes..." she gasped. Flashes of dreams flooded Tiffany's thoughts. Tiffany heard her heart thumping in her ears. She sniffled. "It, uh..." Tiffany felt a tear on her eyelashes. She opened her eyes and swept the tear away. "It's been pretty bad, lately. You know?"

"Uh-huh," Lee replied. "*That's what Louis tells me.*" Tiffany exhaled through her nose.

Lee sat up. He rested his feet on the floor and laid his arm across his lap. "Tiffany, you

need SSRIs.”

Tiffany rolled her eyes. “N-No, Mr. Case. I can’t take those. No.”

Case’s father smiled. “They’ll make the nightmares go away.”

Tiffany sighed. “Yes, I know. I’ve taken them before.” She shook her head. “But, they turn me into a vegetable.”

Lee licked his lips. “Did they help with the night terrors?”

Tiffany let her head go slack. She looked across the room. She appeared frustrated. “Y-Yes. Th-The bad dreams went away.” She sighed. She looked at the floor and rubbed the back of her neck. Case patted Tiffany’s back. Tiffany smiled.

“Tiffany, I want you come see me,” Lee remarked. He eased back. “Will you do that?”

Tiffany pressed her lips together. “Um, sure.” She rested against Case’s chest. “When?”

“*Tomorrow*,” Case’s father replied. “*How does that sound?*”

Tiffany tilted her head. “O-Okay. I mean, I guess that’s fine.” She bowed her head and pinched the bridge of her nose.

Lee nodded. “Have Louis bring you by around seven. Okay?”

Tiffany smiled. “Okay.” She looked over her shoulder. “You wanna talk to Louis some more?”

Lee shook his head. “No. Just tell him to bring you over, tomorrow.” He smiled. “It was nice talking to you, Tiffany.”

Tiffany nodded. “Y-You, too. Bye.” She closed the phone and handed it to Case. Case narrowed his eyes.

“What did *he* want?” He slid his thumbs across Tiffany’s cheeks. They were sopping wet. Tiffany took a breath.

“He wants you to...” She cleared her throat. “He says for you to take me to see him, tomorrow.”

Case nodded. “Okay.” He narrowed his eyes. “Is that what you *want*?”

Tiffany bit her lower lip. “I think so.”

Case tilted his head. “Well, alright then.” He looked at Adam and Gabrielle. “You guys wanna meet my parents tomorrow night?”

“Sure!” Gabrielle beamed. Adam shrugged. He turned his head and inhaled through his nose. Something smelled strange. Tiffany pointed at Case.

“He said to go by at seven o’clock. He was very specific about that.”

“Okay,” Case replied. He slid his arms around Tiffany’s waist. “Well, we’ll go do that, then.”

Adam slid back his chair. “I gotta pee.” He hopped up and headed towards the bathrooms. There was a pair of red doors with circular windows at the east end of the restaurant. They led to a hall with two bathrooms. There was a sign taped on the door to the men’s restroom. It read “Out of Order.” There was an arrow below that. It pointed towards the women’s restroom. Adam wandered down the hall and entered the women’s restroom. He locked the door behind him. There was a potty and a sink. Adam stood in front of the pot and undid his fly. He looked around as he peed. The walls were covered with yellow tiles, arranged like bricks. Adam looked at the floor. It was covered with fresh concrete. It wasn’t even cracking, yet. The floor looked odd. It looked lonely and sad. It smelled funny. Adam narrowed his eyes. He felt like he was tripping on mushrooms.

“*What the hell?*” he whispered. Adam finished peeing. He zipped his fly, flushed the commode, and lowered the seat. He dropped to his knees, laid his hands on the floor, and looked

around. The floor reminded him of a coffin. It felt strange. Adam smirked. He looked away and shook his head. He caught a whiff of something. It was hideous and foul. It was the same thing Adam had smelled since he walked through the door. It smelled like... death. Adam lowered his head. He closed his eyes and inhaled. The awful stench was coming from the floor. Adam's eyes popped open.

Case looked at Tiffany. Tiffany's eyes were closed. Her eyelids were fluttering. She was dreaming. Case exhaled through his nostrils. He slid his fingers across Tiffany's shoulder.

"Hey..." he whispered. Tiffany awoke with a gasp. She looked into Case's eyes. Case smiled. He laid his hand on Tiffany's cheek. "*You okay?*" Tiffany looked at her lap. She slowly nodded. Case looked to his left. Adam was standing next to him. He looked pale and sickly. Case patted Adam's arm. "You alright, buddy?" Adam sighed. He pointed towards the restrooms.

"I found him."

Paloni and Ford were at a rest stop convenient store. They'd just handed Andre to the Lincoln police. Ford's light blue car was parked next to a gas pump. It was filling up. Ford was inside, using the restroom. Paloni stood next to Ford's car. He was flipping through a gun magazine. A clip of hard, fast, metal music began to play. Paloni slid his hand into the pocket of his brown, corduroy jacket. He took out his phone and looked it over. Paloni had a red, flip phone. There was a tiny window on the outside. It read "Case." Paloni flipped open his phone and put it to his ear.

"Yes, dear."

Case stood in front of the girl's bathroom. The door was open. Case was facing the doorway. He turned around and rubbed the back of his neck. He was wearing a pair of safety

glasses. “We dug up the wrong bathroom,” he remarked.

Paloni’s eyes popped open. He tossed his magazine on the hood of Ford’s car and pointed at the phone. “Case! Don’t even *think* about digging up that damn bathroom. No!”

Case looked at the floor of the girl’s bathroom. It was covered with chunks of concrete. Four jackhammers were scattered along the northern wall. Case slid off his safety glasses and folded the earpieces. “It’s too late,” Case replied. “We already did it.”

Paloni looked at the sky and sighed. “*God damn it...*” he groaned. “God damn you, Case.” Paloni bowed his head. He slid his fingers through his slick, black hair.

Case looked down. Gabrielle wandered up and stood next to him. She wore suede work gloves and a pair of safety glasses. She folded her arms over her chest and looked up. Case smiled. He patted Gabrielle’s shoulder. “We found Jerry Nelms.”

Paloni’s head fell back. He exhaled a heavy breath. “Well, thank the lord...” He faced the convenient store and slid his hand into his pocket. Ford came out. Paloni motioned for him with his fingers. “It’s about damn time.”

Case nodded. “Yeah...” Tiffany wandered up and took Case’s hand. She was also wearing safety glasses. “You guys better get down here.”

“Sure, man,” Paloni replied. “We just dropped off Andre. We’ll be right there.” Paloni hung up his phone and dropped it in his pocket. Ford shuffled towards him. He threw his arms out at his sides.

“*What?*” he wheezed.

Paloni held out his hand. “Hand me the keys, Captain. I’m driving.” The gas nozzle thumped.

Case pressed a button to end the call. He slid his hand into the pocket of his jeans and



took out his billfold. He dug around and found a tiny slip of paper. He looked it over and returned it. He returned his billfold to his pocket and typed a number into his cell phone. He pressed a button and held the phone to his ear. After two rings, there was a click.

*“Hello?”* Mrs. Nelms inquired. *“Is this Detective Case?”*

Case licked his lips. “Yes, Mrs. Nelms. It’s me.” He looked at Tiffany. “I... have some bad news.”

## Chapter 22: "A Good Dream"

Tiffany had a good day once in a while. When she was fifteen, she had a really good day. It was spring. White, puffy clouds drifted across an indigo sky. The sun was on its way down. There was an hour of daylight left. Tiffany was on her way home from school. She didn't have any homework. So, she wasn't carrying any books for once. She wore a teal turtleneck, white khakis, a black sneaker with white laces, and a red sneaker with black laces. The black sneaker was new. But, Tiffany lost the other one the day prior. She paid the price when she got home. Her father beat her senseless until she passed out. The red sneaker was sloppy and worn out. The sole was floppy. The laces were knotted in four places. Tiffany found them hanging out of a dumpster a while back. It was better than nothing.

Tiffany looked at the sky and smiled. A light breeze wafted through her short, black hair. It felt tranquil and loving. Tiffany reached Jackie's clothing store. She looked it over. All the letters were lit for once. The ones that were intact, anyway. The "e" was still missing. So was the bulb. The broken windows along the front had been replaced. But in Lincoln, it was only a matter of time. Tiffany passed Jackie's. She looked to her right. David Sweeny was sitting behind the building. He was wearing a brown sweater, a pair of dark blue jeans, and a pair of white sneakers. He looked at Tiffany and smirked.

"Hey, Piss!" David sneered. Tiffany stopped. She exhaled a shaky breath. David pointed at Tiffany. "You know, you're about the ugliest looking little freak I ever seen in my life."

Tiffany pressed her lips together. "Okay." She faced forward and resumed walking. David's eyebrows fell in the middle.

"Hey!" he shouted. He hopped up and trotted after Tiffany. Tiffany stopped again. She

pinched her eyes shut and exhaled through her nostrils. David's left shoe was untied. It was bound to happen sooner or later. David stepped on a loose lace, pitched forward, and skidded across the parking lot. Tiffany looked over her shoulder. David skidded to a stop five feet from her. He wrinkled his nose and rolled onto his side. "*Awe, God...*" he groaned. He laid his fingers on his left knee. His jeans were torn open. Soft chunks of flesh dangled from his knee. Blood drizzled to the pavement. David looked up. Tiffany faced him. She laid her elbow in her hand. She rested her chin in her palm. David glared at her. "What the hell are *you* staring at, Tits? *Piss off!*"

David looked at his left elbow. His brown sweater was ripped open. It was torn from the elbow to the wrist. David sucked air through his teeth. He slid his fingers across his forearm. It was dotted with blood. David looked up. Tiffany was looming over him. David gasped. He backed away and pointed. "Hey, back up, Tits!" Tiffany sighed. She knelt in front of David and slid her hair out of her face. She grabbed David's hand, lifted it, and looked his arm over. She looked into David's eyes.

"It's not that bad." She looked down. Her sweater was ripped along the bottom. Andre tore it a couple nights prior during a scuffle. Tiffany tore off a chunk of her sweater and folded it. She held David's wrist and dabbed his arm. It stopped bleeding fairly quickly. David retracted his arm. He looked it over. He fluttered his sleeve with his fingers.

"My dad's gonna kill me," he remarked. Tiffany slid her lips to the side of her face. She rested her foot on the pavement. She looked at the bottom of her khakis. The leg was ripped up the side. There were five safety pins in the tear. Tiffany took two of them out. She took David's arm.

"Here..." She rolled David's sleeve down. She stopped when the torn part of the sleeve

was inside out. She weaved the safety pins along the tear. Then, she unrolled David's sleeve. She looked into his eyes and smiled. "Maybe you can sneak by without him seeing." David looked at his sleeve. He looked at Tiffany and bobbed his head.

"Yeah... maybe." Tiffany licked her lips. She patted David's knee with the wad of fabric she'd torn from the bottom of her shirt. David sucked air through his teeth. Tiffany looked up.

"It doesn't hurt *that* bad. Does it?"

David glared at Tiffany. "You calling me a wuss?" Tiffany pressed her lips together. She laid the chunk of sweater across David's knee. She slithered to her feet and folded her arms across her chest.

"Awe, whatever. I'll see you around."

David shrugged. "You're leaving, huh?" He looked at the pavement and tilted his head. Tiffany exhaled through her nostrils. She threw her hands out at her sides.

"I don't like you, David." She slapped her hands together. "You're a jerk." Tiffany turned and walked away. She wandered nine blocks and made a right. She was on Bernard Street. She waved hello to the old man with the tall grass. She gawked at the old, rusty car. G.B. wasn't home. His yard was vacant. Tiffany looked at *her* yard and grinned. Her father's van wasn't there. Tiffany made a fist and slid it towards her. She mowed the lawn the night before. So, it was neat and tidy. Well, it was a weed ridden piece of crap. But, the green stuff was short. Tiffany wandered through the front door. The house smelled okay for once. The smell of beer, sweat, and stale cigarettes didn't kick Tiffany in the stomach ten yards from the door. Tiffany remembered glancing at the trash that morning. It was ready to be taken. Tiffany figured her father hadn't bothered.

Tiffany opened the pantry. Twelve beer cans poked out of the trash can. The pantry was getting smelly. Tiffany nodded once. She tugged out the trash liner, tied it, and laid it beside her feet. She put a fresh liner in its place. She looked over her shoulder. The house was peaceful and silent. Tiffany's stomach growled. She looked down and patted her belly. She thought about calling Valerie. She usually came into town Friday evening. She could take Tiffany somewhere to eat. Tiffany patted her pocket and smiled. She even had a little cash. Tiffany closed the pantry. She tossed the old trash liner over her shoulder and wandered out the back door. She trudged through the backyard and stopped at the gate.

Tiffany laid the trash liner on the ground. She untied a rope. It was tied around the last tree limb in the gate. The rope fed through a hole in the picket next to the gate. Tiffany eased the gate towards the fence. The bottom hinge was about to give way. Tiffany didn't want to encourage it. She recovered the trash liner and wandered to the dumpster. It had a steel lid with a flat handle. Tiffany curled her fingers around the handle. A man in black clothes popped up next to her. He was wearing a tan stocking over his face. Tiffany looked into the man's eyes. They were wild and wiry. His lips were twisted into a hideous grin. Tiffany shook all over. The trash liner dropped from her fingers. Her eyes popped open. Tiffany couldn't move. The man in black slithered behind her. He buried a thick, sharp knife in Tiffany's right shoulder blade.

Tiffany whimpered. She pinched her eyes shut and fell to her knees. The knife slid into her left shoulder. Tiffany bowed her head and threw her arms over the back of her scalp. She panted like a dog. The man in black began to giggle. He dotted Tiffany's upper back with three additional knife wounds. Tiffany wailed each time. She fell on her side and curled into a ball. The man cackled like a crazy person. He knelt beside Tiffany. He jabbed the knife into her right, upper back. Tiffany shrieked. The man in black giggled. He stabbed Tiffany above her

left kidney. Then, he hopped up and dashed down the alley. Tiffany listened until the man's laughter faded away. She turned slowly and laid her palms on the dirt. She groaned. She looked at her arms. Hot crimson dribbled down her teal sleeves. Tiffany eased to her feet. The wounds on her back felt weird and painful. The flesh flapped as Tiffany moved.

Tiffany awoke next to Case. She was soaked with sweat. She lay beneath her red comforter. She slid out, sat on her pillow, and flattened against the wall. She wore a grey tank top and a pair of pink flannels. She curled her legs and hugged her knees. She bowed her head and closed her eyes. She breathed silently. She remembered what Case always told her. *"In through the nose, out through the mouth..."* Tiffany inhaled through her nose. Then, she exhaled through her lips. She breathed out until she couldn't stand it. Then, she took a breath through her nostrils. She repeated the process a few times. She felt a lot better. Tiffany smiled a little. She looked at Case. Case was sound asleep. He lay on his right side, facing Tiffany. The covers drooped peacefully over his left shoulder. Tiffany thought about waking him up. She scrunched up her nose and shook her head.

*"No,"* she whispered. *"I should just go back to sleep."* She exhaled through her nostrils. She missed feeling safe. Tiffany always felt safe and secure in Case's arms. It was the best place in the world to her. And, she needed to go there, now. She closed her eyes and nodded. She opened her eyes. "Louis." Case's eyes blinked open. He stared into space. Then, he looked up and smiled.

"Hi, Tiffany."

Tiffany smiled. "Hi."

Case held out his hand. "You okay?"

Tiffany laid her hand in Case's. "Yeah," she replied. She slid off her pillow and folded

her legs like a pretzel. She shook her head. “No.” She closed her eyes. “No, I’m not okay.”

Case slid his fingers across Tiffany’s knuckles. “Don’t worry. I’m right here.” Tiffany looked at Case. She pressed her lips together.

“Will you... hold me in your arms, again?”

Case smiled. “Oh, Tiffany...” He held himself up with his forearm. He opened his arms. “Come here.” Tiffany exhaled. She scooted next to Case, slipped under the covers, and laid on her right side. Case wrapped his arms around Tiffany’s shoulders. “*Okay, then...*” he whispered. He adjusted the covers and lay down. He slid his fingers across Tiffany’s arm. “*Is that better?*”

Tiffany nodded. “*Yes.*”

Case kissed the back of Tiffany’s head. “*You know, you don’t even have to ask.*” Tiffany laughed through her nostrils. “*You can just scooch over here and throw my arms around you.*” Case shrugged. “*I don’t care.*”

Tiffany looked over her shoulder. “*I love you, Louis.*”

Case lifted his head. “*I love you too, sweetheart.*” He kissed Tiffany’s lips and lay down. “*I’m taking you to see my father, tomorrow. Okay?*”

Tiffany slid her fingers across Case’s forearm. “*Okay.*” She sighed. “*I just KNOW he’s gonna make me take those stupid SSRIs.*”

Case nodded. “*Well, look. My father... He’s one of the best psychiatrists in the country.*” Tiffany looked over her shoulder and nodded. “*Whatever he says to do, I want you to do it.*” Case slid his fingers through Tiffany’s hair. “*Alright?*”

Tiffany nodded. “*Okay.*”

Case rubbed Tiffany’s shoulder. “*I just want you to be happy, Tiffany.*” He closed his

eyes. *"That's all I want in the world."* Tiffany patted Case's fingers. She laid her head on her pillow and closed her eyes.

Gabrielle lay on her right side. She had two pillows. One was red with white polka dots. The other was brown with yellow flowers. The brown pillow lay between Gabrielle's head and her forearm. The red pillow was stuffed between Gabrielle's thighs. Case's grandmother's old quilt was draped across the bed. It rested above Gabrielle's elbow. Gabrielle's eyes were closed. Gabrielle was shivering. Five tiny dents appeared in the quilt near the top. They slid over the top and disappeared. The spot where they disappeared became wadded. The quilt was tugged where it was wadded. It slid above Gabrielle's shoulder. Then, the wadded part relaxed. Gabrielle's eyes opened. She inhaled through her nose. She exhaled through her lips. A pair of dents appeared in Gabrielle's long, brown hair. They brushed her hair aside and tucked it behind her ear. Gabrielle smiled and closed her eyes.

*"Thanks, Earl..."* she whispered. There were three pats on Gabrielle's shoulder. A few seconds later, there was a squeak at the end of the bed. It was the groan of an old, wooden board in the floor.

Adam lay on his left side. A red, plaid blanket lay across Adam and the bed. The bed was covered with black sheets. Adam had two pillows. They were covered with black pillow cases. The pillow cases had thin, red stripes. Adam's room was dim and peaceful. It was nice and quiet. Suddenly, Adam's eyelids fluttered like June bugs. His eyebrows drooped in the middle. Minutes passed. Adam became caked in cold sweat. He gritted his teeth and snarled. His hand shot out the top of his plaid blanket. His fingers curled into a fist. Adam's eyes popped open. He was filled with anger. He felt like destroying something. He threw his covers off the side of his bed, batted his pillows aside, and slid off the end of the mattress. He wore a



white t-shirt and a pair of red shorts. His fists dangled furiously at his sides. Adam trudged out of his bedroom, slipped down the hallway, and stomped down the stairs.

Gabrielle's eyes popped open. She sat up and looked towards the doorway to her bedroom. She blinked her big, blue eyes.

"Adam?"

Adam reached the end of the stairs. His eyes were piercing and intense. Adam swirled around and stomped across the den. He slipped past the bar and wandered towards the refrigerator. He needed a drink. Adam curled his fingers around the cold, steel refrigerator handle. He jerked the door aside and looked around. There wasn't a decent beverage in sight. There was just milk, orange juice, and a few sodas. Adam scrunched up his nose and curled in his lips.

"God *damn* it!" he grumbled. He slammed the door, laid his palm on top, and bowed his head. He tapped his fingers against the slick, steel surface. He felt like killing someone.

"Adam?" Gabrielle inquired. Adam whirled around. He glared at his girlfriend.

"What?!" he growled. Gabrielle stood on the other side of the bar. She wore a black tank top and a pair of red, flannel pants with white stripes. She looked her boyfriend over. Something was wrong. Adam looked... troubled.

"What are you doing?" Gabrielle asked. Her mouth stretched open and her eyes pinched shut. She began yawning. She cupped her hand in front of her mouth until she finished. She looked into Adam's hazel eyes. "We should get back to bed. We have to go to school, tomorrow." Adam rolled his eyes. He flattened against the refrigerator, folded his arms over his chest, and glared into Gabrielle's eyes.

"I need... a fucking *beer*, God damn it!" He pounded his fist against the cold, steel door.

“That’s all *I* know.”

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes. “Adam, what are you...” She held her hands out at her sides. “Since when do you drink beer? You *hate* beer.” Adam exhaled a quick breath. He squinted and tilted his head. He waved his pointer finger in front of him and thought.

“Hmm...” he mused. His head tilted back. He stroked his chin. Gabrielle folded her arms on the bar. She sighed.

“Adam, are you alright? What the hell’s wrong with you?” Adam faced forward. He slid his lips to the side of his face.

“Gabrielle...” he began. He stopped and exhaled through his nose. Gabrielle’s eyes widened. She turned her head without looking away.

“What?” she asked. Adam looked around. He threw his hands out at his sides.

“How did I *get* here?”

## Chapter 23: “A Warning”

Case wore a collared shirt. It had broad, yellow and blue stripes. Case’s red and white, plaid, wool jacket was thrown over that. Case also wore a pair of black corduroys and a pair of black sneakers. The sneakers had three diagonal stripes along the sides. Case exited the freeway. He looked next to him. There was a shiny, white box sitting in the passenger’s seat. It was filled with donuts. Case skidded through a labyrinth of lonely roads. The last road he came to curved through the fence surrounding Case’s new home. The fence consisted of square, iron bars. The bars were painted black. Case drove towards the garage. He leaned forward and looked at the sky. It was swirling and dark. Rain was pouring across Case’s windshield. Case’s wipers could barely keep up. Case smiled.

“I’m glad we got that window replaced.” He looked at the passenger’s seat. Brandy was sitting there. The shiny, white box sat in her lap.

“*No kidding, right?*” Brandy replied. Case smirked. He reached towards his visor. A garage door opener clung to the edge. Case tapped a button, and the garage door rolled up. Case parked in the garage. The door closed behind him. Case killed the engine and took out his phone. He looked at the tiny window on the front. It was 7:03. The phone began playing a piece of classical music. The numbers on the window changed to “Paloni.” Case rolled his eyes. He flipped open his phone and put it to his ear.

“What, God damn it?”

Paloni shook his head. He stood in front of a mirror with a towel wrapped around his waist. The mirror was caked with steam. Paloni wiped it away. “I took a chance you were up,” he replied. “Can I chat with you for a sec?”

Case shrugged. “Make it quick, Sergeant.”

Paloni smirked. He ruffled his hair. It was wet. "I've got a... proposition for you."

"Ooh!" Case hooted. He looked at Brandy and smirked. Brandy smiled and rolled her eyes.

Paloni slid a comb through his slick, black hair. "Look, what you guys did yesterday..."

Paloni slid his lips to the side of his face. "I mean, between you and Tiffany and Adam..."

Paloni smirked. "And, Gabrielle..."

Case smiled. "Paloni, what the hell?"

Paloni straightened up. He began combing his hair. "The department wants to hire you back."

Case shrugged. "I thought I made myself pretty clear about that."

Paloni nodded. "Look, Ford has agreed to hire you on." Paloni slid the last tooth of his comb across the top of his head. It made a nice, straight part in Paloni's hair. "As a private consultant."

Case narrowed his eyes. "Really?"

Paloni licked his lips. "Yes. He wants to keep you on retainer until..." Paloni bobbed his head around. "You know, until we need your... special skills." He narrowed his eyes. "You, Tiffany, and the kids, I mean." Paloni exhaled through his nose. "Ford has also agreed to let me oversee your duties."

Case fluttered his eyelids. He looked at Brandy. "Meaning?"

Paloni slicked his hair to the sides. "Meaning, he's agreed to give you your space. You'd be working under me. And, Ford's agreed to keep his fat-ass out of the way and let you guys operate." Paloni pressed his lips together. "No matter how crazy you guys decide you need to get."

Case cackled. He shook his head. “Seriously? He seriously wants to try that?”

Paloni rinsed his comb. “Yep.” He laid the comb on the edge of his sink. The sink was porcelain with little, squiggly, brown swirls.

Case pressed his lips together. “There’s some kind of a catch. I can feel it coming.”

Paloni took a breath. “Ford’s very impressed with the way you guys apprehended Andre. He’s also impressed with the way you managed to find Jerry Nelms’ body.” Paloni shook his head. “The department’s never seen anything like it. As you know.”

Case looked at Brandy. Brandy shrugged.

“*And, Gina?*”

Case faced forward. “And, the R.G.K. case, I take it?”

Paloni nodded. “Yep. That one, too.”

Case nodded. “So, you guys want us to handle all those *weird* cases.” He looked at Brandy. “The ones that usually go unsolved?”

Paloni looked at himself in the mirror. “Anything that comes through the department with a paranormal feel to it...” Paloni looked at his sink. “We would like *you* guys to handle it.”

Case tilted his head. “The department’s never hired anyone to do that, before.” He shrugged. “I always said they *should*.”

Paloni grabbed his side. He laid his arm on top. “Well, I guess we’re finally going to do that.” Paloni squinted. “What do you think?”

Case looked at the door leading to the den. He rubbed the back of his neck. “Hmm...” He shrugged. “I mean, I suppose that could work.” Paloni cackled. Case narrowed his eyes. “No Ford bullshit?”

Paloni smiled. “No Captain Ford. He’ll stay in the shadows.”

Case rolled his eyes. “Yeah, right. Like *that’s* gonna happen.” Case took the donuts from Brandy. He laid them in his lap. “That sounds great, Paloni.” Case motioned towards the den with his head. “I’m gonna talk to Tiffany and kids about it, first. I don’t know how *they’ll* feel about it.”

Paloni nodded. “Well, you do that. And, let me know something right away.”

Case nodded. “Sure.” He looked at his lap. “Boss.”

Paloni smiled.

Case smirked. “I gotta go.” He flipped his phone closed and dropped it in his coat pocket. He looked at the passenger’s seat. “Well, that was unexpected.”

“*Are you going to do it?*” Brandy inquired.

Case shrugged. “I don’t know.” He picked up the donuts, hopped out of the car, and wandered inside. Tiffany came down the stairs. She wore a light teal blouse that buttoned up the front. It was decorated with little pictures of yellow and red roses. Tiffany wore a maroon sweater over that, tan corduroys, and a pair of black, leather shoes. The sweater was open in the front. Tiffany’s britches were a little short. Case could see a pair of white socks with red stripes above the tops of Tiffany’s shoes. Tiffany looked at the floor on her way down the stairs. When she reached the bottom, she looked at Case and smiled.

“Hi, Louis.”

Case smiled back. “Hi, Tiffany.” Tiffany wandered across the den. She threw her arms around Case’s waist. Case threw his empty arm around Tiffany’s shoulders. Tiffany backed away. She pointed at the box in Case’s hands.

“Is that what I *think* it is?” she inquired.

Case shrugged. “Of course.” Tiffany took the donuts. She walked behind the stairs and

set the box on the dining table. She went into the kitchen and gathered four glasses. She filled each glass with milk. Then, she returned to the table. She and Case sat next to each other. Tiffany handed Case a glass of milk. She set a glass in front of her. She set the other glasses in front of the other chairs. Case patted Tiffany's shoulder.

"Thanks, honey." Tiffany nodded. She opened the white box and looked around. There were three chocolate donuts, three vanilla, three cherry, and three glazed. Tiffany took a cherry donut. She passed the box to Case. Case took a chocolate donut and closed the box. He squashed the sides of his donut, dunked it in his milk, and took a bite. He looked at Tiffany. Tiffany took a tiny bite and stared at the table. Case rubbed her arm. "You okay, Tiffany?" Tiffany looked up. "You seem kind of down."

Tiffany shrugged. "I think I'm kind of..." She crinkled her eyes. She rolled her eyes and shook her head.

"Sleepy?" Case suggested.

Tiffany scrunched up her nose. "Mm... That's not what I was..." She tilted back her head and sighed, impatiently. Case raised his eyebrows.

"That's not the *word* you were looking for?"

Tiffany snapped her fingers and pointed. "There you go. That's it." She took another bite. Case took Tiffany's hand.

"You know what aphasia is?"

Tiffany looked at the tops of her eyes. "Um..." She looked at Case. "I-I mean, I've *heard* that... said before." Case dunked his donut and took another bite.

"It's the inability to speak or to retrieve a word." Tiffany looked at her lap and nodded. Case swallowed. "Technically, it's the inability to interpret retrieval cues." He narrowed his

eyes. “Do you have any idea what I’m talking about?”

Tiffany licked her lips. “I think so.”

Case slid his fingers through Tiffany’s. “It’s common with depression.” Tiffany looked down. She sighed and rolled her eyes. Case sipped his milk. He looked at Tiffany and smiled. “SSRIs help with that.”

Tiffany looked up. “Yeah?” Case nodded. Tiffany took a tiny bite. She shrugged. “I’m actually kind of looking forward... to that.” She looked at Case. “To... going to see your dad, tonight.”

Case smiled. “Yeah?” Tiffany smiled a little. She nodded. Case dunked his donut. “It’ll be fun, man. Yeah.” He looked into Tiffany’s dark brown eyes. “My dad...” Case shrugged. “He’s quite the character.”

Tiffany sipped her milk. “Well, if he’s anything like you, he can’t be too bad.” Case pointed at Tiffany. He raised his eyebrows.

“Hey!” He shook his head. “He’s *nothing* like me.” Tiffany snickered.

Gabrielle wore a white blouse with red and brown diamonds, a white sweater, open in the front, mahogany corduroys, and brown, leather boots. She looked down. She pinched the thighs of her pants and shook her head. She looked up. She dangled her tongue from her lips.

“Bleh!” she groaned. She hated borrowing clothes from Tiffany. Gabrielle stood at the foot of her bed. She dragged her quilt to the floor and smoothed the sheets. “*Tiffany dresses like a dork*,” she whispered. She looked around and smiled. “Huh, Earl?” There was a faint knock on the wall. A single knock was ghost talk for “yes.” Two knocks meant “no.” Gabrielle nodded. “Yep. That’s what *I* think.” She wandered to the head of the bed. She laid her pillows side by side. Then, she threw the quilt over the bed and adjusted it. She looked towards the



doorway. Adam walked in. Gabrielle smiled.

“Hi, Adam.”

Adam bobbed his head. “S’up, Gabs?” He wore a red and black, plaid shirt, black jeans, red, canvas shoes, and his black, leather jacket. Gabrielle licked her lips.

“Man, what you said to me last night...”

Adam shrugged. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Gabrielle sighed. Her arms dangled at her sides.

“Adam, come on. Don’t start this crap, again.” She pointed at her boyfriend. “You know *exactly* what I’m talking about.” Adam turned his head without looking away. He raised his eyebrows.

“Last *night*?” Gabrielle’s eyebrows drooped in the middle. She threw her hands on her hips. She knew where her boyfriend was going. She slowly nodded. Adam looked at the floor. He rubbed the back of his neck. “We didn’t talk last night. I went to bed around eleven. And, my alarm woke me up at six-thirty.” He looked up. “That’s what *I* remember.” Gabrielle folded her arms over her chest. She pressed her lips together.

“Adam...”

Adam pointed at Gabrielle. “I *told* you,” he remarked. “I told you, man.” Adam crossed his arms over his chest. “What did I *tell* you guys, huh?” His eyes widened. “Didn’t I say to leave it alone? Didn’t I *say* that?” He squinted. “Haven’t I been trying to tell you that all along?”

Gabrielle threw her hands out at her sides. “Adam, we have to talk about this.”

Adam shook his head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Talk about *what*?” He tilted his head and smirked. He looked at Gabrielle from the tops of his eyes. Gabrielle sighed.

“Adam, we have to tell Tiffany.” Adam rolled his eyes. He turned and headed for the door. “Adam!” Gabrielle yelled. Adam stopped. He looked over his shoulder. Tears dribbled down Gabrielle’s cheeks. “Adam, please. We have to tell her. We *have* to!” Gabrielle motioned towards the bottom of the stairs. “Look, whatever’s going on, she’ll know what to do.”

Adam shook his head. “It’ll take care of itself, Gabrielle. It always does.” He headed towards the door. Gabrielle dashed across the room and closed the door. She turned around, flattened against the door, and held out her arms. She glared into her boyfriend’s eyes.

“No! Talk to me, Adam.” Adam stared at Gabrielle. Gabrielle snagged a hold of Adam’s jacket. “Talk! Say something!” Adam smirked. He turned his head without looking away. Gabrielle let go. She showed Adam her palms and looked at the floor. “Okay, look...” She took a breath and looked up. “What about what Tiffany did, yesterday? Do you at least...” Gabrielle made quotes with her fingers. “‘Remember’ *that*?”

Adam closed his eyes and shrugged. “I guess, man. Yeah.”

Gabrielle nodded. “She tied you to her father.” Gabrielle folded her arms over her chest. “Right?”

Adam rolled his eyes. “Sure. Whatever.”

Gabrielle laid her hand on Adam’s chest. “Okay. So, what if he’s still in there?”

Adam squinted. “What do you mean?”

“Andre,” Gabrielle replied. “I mean Andre. What if he’s still *in* there?” Gabrielle laid her fingers on Adam’s forehead. “Inside your head?” Adam exhaled through his nostrils. He curled his fingers around Gabrielle’s.

“I can handle it. Okay?” Gabrielle’s eyebrows fell at the sides. She sighed. Adam threw his arms around her. Gabrielle laid her face against Adam’s chest. “Listen, Gabrielle.

I've been living with this for fourteen years. I know how it works. I know how to deal with stuff like this. I've done it before. Remember?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "Adam..." she groaned. "We have to tell her." She gritted her teeth. "It's Tiffany's *father!*"

Adam nodded. "*I know*, Gabrielle." He shrugged. "But, I don't care. Just let it go." Gabrielle backed away. She looked into her boyfriend's eyes. She wiped tears from her cheeks and sniffled.

"If you don't tell her, I will." Adam stared into his girlfriend's big, blue eyes. He slid his mouth to the side of his face.

"No, you won't." He eased Gabrielle aside, opened the door, and slithered out. Gabrielle threw her hands on her hips and stared at the floor. She exhaled a shaky breath.

"God *damn* it!" she snarled. She wiped her eyes, walked out, and trudged down the stairs. Adam wandered into the dining room. He smiled at Case and Tiffany.

"Morning, guys."

"Hey, Adam," Tiffany replied. Case bobbed his head. Adam sat next to Case. He grabbed a vanilla donut and took a bite. He held it up.

"Thanks, Louis." He showed Tiffany his glass. "Thanks, Tiffany."

Case patted Adam's shoulder. "Sure, buddy." Gabrielle wandered in. She took the fourth seat and scooted in.

"Hi, guys," she remarked. She put her glass to her lips and took a sip. She got a cherry donut and took a bite. She looked at Adam and chewed. Adam stared back. He smirked and sipped his milk. Tiffany grinned. She turned and slugged Gabrielle's shoulder.

"You guys *psyched* about going back to school?" Gabrielle rolled her eyes. Adam

looked at the table. He raised his eyebrows.

“Oh, yeah. Can’t wait.” Case looked around. Everyone was gathered at the table. Case figured it was as good a moment as any.

“The department wants to hire us.” Adam looked up. Gabrielle narrowed her eyes. Tiffany raised her eyebrows and smiled.

“What?” Tiffany asked.

Case smiled at Tiffany. “Well technically, it would just be *me*, I’m guessing. But...” Case took a drink. Adam patted Case’s arm.

“You mean you’re getting your badge back?”

Case shook his head. “No.” He set down his glass. “They want me to be a private consultant.” He looked at Tiffany. He squinted. “Like you, me, and the kids would solve cases together.”

Tiffany nodded. “What kind of cases? What do you mean?”

Case looked around. “Weird ones.” Case looked at Tiffany. “You see, there’s a lot of cases that go through the department each year that never get solved. Cases like Jerry Nelms. *You* know.”

Tiffany laid her hand on Case’s. “You mean, like Gina?”

Case pressed his lips together. “Yes. Weird ones... like that.” He looked at Adam. “What do you guys think?”

Adam pointed at his chest. “Would *I* get a paycheck?”

Case laughed. “I don’t know, buddy. I doubt it.” Adam rolled his eyes. Case looked around. “But, the department wants us to work them together. You see?” He looked at Tiffany. “Paloni and Ford were really impressed by your... special skills.”

Tiffany raised her eyebrows. “You mean the occult?” Case shrugged. Adam narrowed his eyes.

“Well, what the hell do you need *me* for?”

Case looked at him. “You’re the psychic.”

Adam furrowed his brow. “Psychic? What in the world are you talking about?” He shook his head. “*I’m* not psychic.”

Case narrowed his eyes. “Paloni’s already witnessed it, Adam.” He smiled. “You can’t hide it, forever.” Adam crossed his arms over his chest. He looked at the table.

“Man, whatever. I don’t even know what you’re *talking* about.”

Gabrielle shrugged. “What about *me*?”

Case faced forward. “You’re the muscle.”

Gabrielle smacked her lips. “Damn it, Louis!” Case snickered. He pointed at Adam with his thumb.

“We need somebody to keep *this* jerk in line.” Gabrielle giggled. Adam leaned back.

“Well, *I* don’t like it.”

Tiffany pointed at Adam. “Well, you’ll do it, anyway!” Case looked at Tiffany. She looked back. “We could use the money.” Case looked at the table. He took a breath.

“It wouldn’t kill us.”

Adam smacked his lips. “Awe, man. Are you serious?” He threw his hands out at his sides. “You want me to... prostitute myself?”

Case patted Adam’s arm. “Adam, come on. We *need* you, buddy.”

Adam scrunched up his nose. “Guys, I’m not a machine.”

Case grabbed another donut. “I’ll see if I can get you on the payroll.”

Adam smirked. “Hmm... Well, alright. I’ll think about it, then.”

Gabrielle looked at her boyfriend. “Yeah, that figures.”

Case looked at Tiffany. “What do you think, Tiffany?”

Tiffany smiled. “You mean I would get *paid* for a change?” Case chuckled. “Like, I would actually be making money while I work? Not standing around in a shop all day, waiting for someone to come in and buy something?”

Case shrugged. “I need to talk to Paloni about the specifics of it. But, yeah. I assume so.”

Tiffany tilted her head. “You bet. Count me in.”

Case took Tiffany’s hand. “Alright. That sounds great.”

Case looked at Gabrielle. “Gabs?”

Gabrielle shrugged. “Sure. I’ll do it.”

Case nodded. “I’ll call Paloni later and let him know.” He took out his phone and looked at the front. He looked around. “It’s about that time, guys.”

Adam folded his arms on the table and laid his head on top. “Awe, man...” he groaned.

Gabrielle stuck out her tongue and pointed down her throat. “Bleh!”

Tiffany patted Case’s arm. “You’re going to come pick me up at lunch today, right?”

“Yes,” Case replied. “You bet.” He kissed the side of Tiffany’s head.

Case dropped Tiffany and the kids off. Adam and Gabrielle were headed towards their first class. It was a B week. That meant Adam and Gabrielle’s first class would be Art with Ms. Tschauner. The hall was nearly clear. Adam and Gabrielle were next to the girl’s restroom. There was a row of ten lockers on the other side of the bathroom. There were two rows of five. One row was on top, and one was on bottom. Gabrielle tugged Adam’s sleeve. Adam stopped

and looked at his girlfriend. Gabrielle motioned towards the restroom with her head.

“Wait here, will you? I need to go.” Adam nodded. He backed against the wall next to the lockers and folded his arms over his chest. Gabrielle wandered into the restroom. A tall, wooden door closed behind her. Adam looked to his left. Brittany came wandering around the corner. She wore a rainbow colored beanie, a violet sweater, black jeans, and black, high heeled boots. Coils of crimson dangled from the rim of Brittany’s beanie. Her cheeks were swollen and bruised. But, they were healing. Adam narrowed his eyes. Brittany noticed him. She looked at the floor and faced the lockers. The lockers had built in, combination locks. Brittany curled her fingers around one of the knobs. She began turning it. Adam bounced off the wall and wandered towards Brittany. Brittany glanced at Adam out of the corner of her eye. She unlatched her locker and swung the door aside. She looked up.

“Um... Hi, Adam.” Adam scrunched up his nose and smiled. He’d been thinking about Brittany all weekend. He knew exactly what he wanted to say to her.

“Hello, Brittany.” Adam laid his hand on Brittany’s shoulder. Brittany looked Adam up and down. She snagged a book from her locker and closed it. Adam looked around. The hallway was deserted. “Lovely day, isn’t it?”

Brittany smiled. “It’s raining cats and dog out there.”

Adam nodded. “Yes, it is.” He slid his fingers down Gabrielle’s arm. He took her hand. “So, I’ve been thinking a lot about what you did, Wednesday.”

Brittany raised her eyebrows. “You have?”

Adam narrowed his eyes and smiled. “Yes, I have.” He nodded. “I’ve got something I’d like to say.” He pointed and raised his eyebrows. “Would you like to hear it?” Brittany shrugged. She curled her fingers around Adam’s.

“Um... Sure, Adam.” Adam grinned. He showed Brittany his pretty, white teeth. He let go of her hand.

“Well, Brittany... it goes something like this.” Adam laid his fingers against Brittany’s cheek. He slid them up and down, gently. Brittany smiled. Her heart thumped in her ears. Adam slipped his fingers inside Brittany’s beanie. He snagged a fistful of her crimson locks. “I don’t care what you do to me, Brittany.” Adam jerked Brittany’s head to the side. Brittany’s emerald eyes popped open. She whimpered. Adam shook his head. “I really don’t give a shit.” Adam smiled. He pointed at his chest. “I *don’t*! Seriously!” Brittany gritted her teeth. Her book toppled to the floor. Adam’s eyebrows fell in the middle. He yanked Brittany’s little beanie off her head and tossed it across the hall. He tilted her head back and laid his forehead against hers. “But, if you *touch* my girlfriend again... I’ll snap your fucking neck like a twig!” Adam smacked Brittany across the face. “Understand?”

Brittany crumpled to the floor. Her temple bounced off a locker. She looked into Adam’s eyes. She fought to catch her breath. Her teeth chattered. She scraped her book off the floor and backed away. Adam grinned.

“Have a nice day.” Brittany exhaled a shaky breath. She slid across the hall, grabbed her beanie, and disappeared around the corner. The door to the girl’s bathroom opened. Gabrielle came out. Adam turned around and smiled. He motioned towards the end of the hall with his head. “You ready?”

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. “Oh, yeah. Can’t wait.” She took Adam’s hand. Adam and Gabrielle wandered around the corner of the hallway and headed to class.