

# **The Saint of Lost Causes**

# Chapter I

## *The Immaculate Saint*

The lonely town of St. Rita lies at the abandoned end of New Jersey. It is perched upon the coast, grasping up at the border of New York. It was once a place of exceptional wealth, but now the only visitors it receives are occasional lost travelers on their way to grander places. Their cars will lumber out from the tree-line, progress unsure, engines roaring in the seaside silence, and pull up to the little diner whose windows peer out at the black forest beyond. If the town is lucky, the new arrivals will step in for a moment, order a drink and catch their bearings. They will exchange a few hurried words with the woman behind the counter—always in a whisper, always strangely afraid—and let their coffee or tea or hot cocoa go tepid at their fingertips. Then, having been informed of the proper path, they will return to their cars and depart, rendering the lonely town of St. Rita silent once more.

St. Rita sweeps up the cliffside, the roads winding and twisting between the aged hovels and crumbling bricks before finally arriving at the sea, the old port stretching out towards the deep steely blue as if wishing to flee from the town behind it and the forest beyond.

The lowest point is also the town's poorest. Small wooden shacks lean against each other at either side of the road, and ugly metal mailboxes peer down their crooked noses at passerby like wretched old storks. The houses of the highest quality earn the right to tin roofs. The winters in St. Rita are especially harsh, with spray rising off the sea and great bitter clouds of mercury gray. Rain pools in the grooves and edges of the roofs, and great rotten patches of rust coil out from the strained, groaning metal. Often, you will see the residents of these homes perched atop ladders come the morning of a winter day, shovels in hand, casting the snow away for fear of the malaise its melted form will bring.

The only entertainment available to the denizens of St. Rita's lower portion is the strip club at the edge of town, improperly referred to as the "Home of Saints." It is owned by John Palmer, a stocky, balding man caught in the slow decline of his middle years. The mural of a woman reclining in a languid pose once adorned the side of the Home of Saints, but the salt and spray made short work of it, and now only the barest hint of it remains. Once the frequent abode of lost sailors arriving in from port, now only the lonely drunkards remain, rambling on and on about the tales those old seafarers once brought to the empty halls of the club.

Samuel Palmer—John Palmer's teenage son—had gone on a flaming crusade through St. Rita around three years prior. The result: the destruction of six homes and Alfred Benny's once-famous steakhouse, four dead, and one-point-six-million dollars in damages. Samuel would have continued on had Alyssa Sampson, Deputy Chief of the St. Rita Police Department, not put a bullet in his head.

It is said that, in the final moments before the bullet met his skull, Samuel Palmer proclaimed that he wanted to change something.

A memorial is held every year for those lost to the fire. The wound of the boy's rampage still throbs in St. Rita's chest, festering. The town hadn't had

enough money to clear away the charred remains of the ruined buildings. They clung to their old places like smoking tombstones, crooked and leaning and full of hate. Despite everything, John Palmer's business, the Home of Saints, went untouched by the flames.

The center of St. Rita lies at the midpoint between the cliff and the forest. In the town square sits an aging statue of the titular saint, an old woman with a deathly face. Main Street extends out from the square and serves as the cultural hub of St. Rita. Miller's Auto Repair, the General Store, Tim Barkley's barber shop, *The Drowsy Sailor*, and the clinic, courthouse, school, and town hall all sit somewhere along Main Street. It is not uncommon to see young couples—the few there are—enjoying a nice Spring day on the benches beneath the statue of Saint Rita, or the town sheriff, Alan Barkley, brother of Tim, sharing a watchful drink with the DeWitts, owners of *The Drowsy Sailor*.

Hovering above that placid scene, and any other in the town of St. Rita, is the old lighthouse. St. Rita was once a prosperous fishing village, known for its extensive port and its delectable flounder and cod. Sailors came and went, and the wharf once looked like a great wintery forest, the white masts of the boats the leave-shorn, branchless trees, laden with snow. A constant clamor and hubbub always gave life to the now-silent air, air now filled only with the soft susurrations of the sea.

Then, at the height of its prosperity, World War Two reared its wretched head. Many of the sailors went off to fight. Many of them did not return. In their absence, the cod and flounder grew great in number and soon devoured all that their ecosystem had to offer. They, too, passed on. The few sailors that came back tried their best, but it was not enough. Some headed North to New York, some South to unknown lands. A couple stayed, drinking themselves into oblivion in the strip club, the flashing neons dancing across their dead eyes. A few, however,

simply boarded their boats one morning, unmoored themselves, and drifted off to sea.

The wharf, once gleaming like the proud ivory of an elephant's tusk, faded into the dismal Atlantic gray. Boats listed and fell. Docks collapsed into the salt. The barnacles and mollusks and last remaining fish made the wharf's husk their home.

The lighthouse fell into disrepair following the death of its last keeper, Sal Barkley, the grandfather of St. Rita's current sheriff and barber. A well-respected beast of a man with hair as pale as an albatross, not a single soul in St. Rita bore ill-will towards Sal.

One night, riding home from a visit with her parents in New York, Sal's wife was killed in a car crash. When news of her death came, no one in town saw Sal for three days. When they began to get worried, a troop of townsfolk journeyed up the road to the lighthouse to check on him. They found him dead in his bed, face peaceful besides a curl in his lips. None were able to determine the cause of his demise. He was buried by the ocean beside his wife soon thereafter.

Sal's death came on the heels of the wharf's disrepair, and, seeing as how St. Rita no longer received the seaside attention it once had, the operations of the lighthouse—lens included—were moved up the coast to New York. The lighthouse upon the promontory soon tarnished and began to crumble, its swirling red-and-white paint and aging stone no longer able to withstand the assault of the sea without Sal's steady, earnest hand to help it. Its ruins are now home to a variety of seabirds, and have become a frequent spot for local teenagers to smoke marijuana. They pass each other in the night without a word, the moon peering forth from small holes in the clouds, and their eyes are dead and bloodied and unchanging, without a glow, and they hope to die, and know that they never truly will. Even when their bones are dust, evidence of their lives will still exist, and they will live

in St. Rita forever. Half-burnt blunts, used condoms, and bird droppings now litter the floor of the old lighthouse that the phantom of Sal Barkley can never repair.

Beside the lighthouse at St. Rita's peak lies the wealthy part of town, those that still cling to the memory of that lonely place's former glory. The houses are large, and few in number. Carved from stone and surrounded by iron fences, lawns immaculately trimmed and kept, cornices polished and regal and proud. The streetlamps on those roads seem to glow with a different sort of light than that which graces the other parts of town. It is warm, sensual. It pools in puddles against the pavement, across the sidewalks, in the roadside drains. The roar of the sea is most keenly heard upon those heights, a steady, throbbing reminder of the past.

The ancient home of Father Maarten Meijer, the founder of St. Rita, is still preserved on the spray-swept cliffside. A towering old menace, its black eyes peer out across the town, and the sagging boards of its expansive porch give the impression of hungry, yearning teeth. None dare touch it.

In the winter of sixteen-ninety-five, a wolf crept up out of the woods, entered Father Maarten's home, and stole away with his six-month-old daughter. There was no violence. The door had not been forced. It had merely gone unlocked. Not a speck of blood marred the baby's crisp white pillow. The only evidence that the wolf had ever been there were its muddied pawprints upon the carpet. It seemed as if the beast had taken the child into its jaws with the elegance of an angel and spirited it away into the forest.

A search ensued, but nothing came of it. Father Maarten passed into a sorrow of three days, locked away in his home, and many thought that he would die. Then, early on the morning of the fourth, something compelled the priest out into his front garden, where he stood, gazing up at the dark sky. He pondered there

for a time, and then, as the light of morning grasped above the tree-line and spilled across his face, he wept, and a smile contorted his face.

The townsfolk drew near, and he spoke at last. “I see it now. The beauty. Thank you! Thank you! I will remember her like this forever. I will remember her as the sweet, darling babe that brought light to my heart.”

Father Maarten died soon after, but no one laid a finger on his house. They knew it was not what he would have wanted.

Many, many years later, in the age of automobiles and rust and the crumbling lighthouse and the failing wharf, an age that would stretch on forever across the graying sky of the lonely town of St. Rita, a terrible cry descended from those heights. It swept through the early morning, swept along with the autumn light of the sun across the crystal crests of the sea. Filled with a banshee’s sorrow, it raced through the streets of St. Rita, and a great, fearful curiosity followed in its wake.

It was a woman’s cry. Of that, the townsfolk were sure.

Rina DeWitt, in the midst of opening *The Drowsy Sailor* for business, stopped in her tracks. She glanced over her shoulder at Ted, her husband, who stood behind the counter of the bar, dirty rag in hand, paused in the act of cleaning.

“Did you hear that?”

“Yeah,” he mused. “Yeah. I sure did.”

Officer Jim Marshall was sitting beneath the awning of Tim Barkley’s barber shop, reading the newspaper by the early-morning glow. When the cry reached him, he paused for a moment, staring down at his lap. He realized that his hands were shaking. *Like the Palmer boy*, he thought to himself. He set the paper down on the table beside him.

Tim Barkley stepped from the barber shop. The song of the bells hanging from the inside of the door jangled out through the mist. The first rays of easy

sunlight had just begun to lance down from the sky, and they cast glowing pillars across the silent street.

“It should be a beautiful day,” Tim Barkley said to no one in particular.

“You heard it too, didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” he replied, almost reluctant.

“Hm. Hoped I was just making things up.”

“You know where it came from?”

“Yep. Up in richy-rich land.”

Tim Barkley grimaced.

“We should go check it out.”

Barkley sighed. “I suppose so.”

“You don’t sound so sure.”

“Whatever’s needed. I’m sure as hell not going up there alone, though, I can tell you that much.”

A second scream pierced the cold stillness.

Mary Reinhold, wife of Mayor Tony Reinhold, was just stepping from the doors of the General Store when the second cry struck. Her hands went tight around her grocery bags, but her back remained straight. A crowd had started to gather beneath the statue of Saint Rita, and Mary made her way over to them, her steps falling even and proud upon the asphalt. When she finally arrived, a gleam came to the eyes of her companions that had not been there before.

Officer Marshall nodded to her from his place against the statue. Tim Barkley and the DeWitts also milled about, glances darting around.

“I’m guessing you heard it too?” Officer Marshall asked.

“It came from the hill,” she replied. “We’d better check up on them.”

He nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

The five began their ascent. Steep roads and strong winds greeted them, but none balked from the path. Mary stood out in front, with Officer Marshall following close on her heel. His fingers occasionally lingered around the butt of his gun, but, when awareness returned, he drew his hand away and back to his side. *Even after all these years, I still don't like how it feels on my hip.*

To break the silence, Marshall spoke. "How's the Mayor doing, ma'am?"

"Does that really seem important to you right now, Officer?"

"Just wondering."

She grunted. "He's doing a bit better. He should be back in the office around Tuesday."

"He's a real hero, ma'am."

"I don't need you to tell me that."

Mayor Tony Reinhold was a powerful man, but an aging one. His knee had been wounded during the Vietnam War, shot out from under him while he dove down to shield one of his companions from a hail of gunfire. Another had caught him in the lung, and breathing problems had pursued him all the way back to America. He walked with a cane, and spoke in a wheezing whisper beneath which lay the origin of his strength. Sometimes—during the cold months especially—his injuries would return in full force, and he would be bedridden for weeks on end. He had won reelection four terms in a row despite that. His wife was equally as strong and capable as he himself, and often served as his emissary during times of illness.

"My apologies, ma'am."

"Don't worry about it. I'm sorry for snapping."

"Never thought I'd hear that from you."

She smirked. "Don't get too used to it, Officer."

"Wouldn't dream of it, ma'am."

Just as their breaths were starting to fall thick and heavy with the strain of the journey, the path leveled out, and the homes of St. Rita's rich and powerful stretched before them. Waves crashed against the rocks at the base of the cliffside far below, their roar growing and lurching through the sun-dappled air.

At the back of the group, Tim Barkley muttered the word "Pigs" beneath his breath.

Rina DeWitt turned to him. "You don't like them, huh?"

He shook his graying head. "We've been here a long time, my family and me. Long enough to see these people come out of their shells and show everyone who they really are."

"I don't know. I kinda wish I knew some of them."

"And I've been here long enough to know that you don't really want that."

The old house of Father Maarten glared blackly out from the tree-line at the end of the road. Tim Barkley raised a finger towards it with a shudder. "And *that*. How can they bear to live near *that* thing?"

"Pretty frickin' creepy," Ted DeWitt replied.

"That's the town's history," Mary said. "You should respect it."

Tim Barkley snorted. "That old psychopath? No. That's not our history." He pointed to the lighthouse, thin and cracked and bleeding paint against the sky. "*That's* our history. The history that all of these people couldn't help maintain. The history that they let fall into the hands of some big-shot up in New York." He spat the final words. "I guess it's fitting that they all live up here, right next to the ruins of that old madhouse."

"If you care so little about them, why are you here?" Mary's words came hard and sharp and stung like salt in an open wound.

Tim glared down at his feet and said nothing.

Mary continued. "I won't pretend that I'm very fond of them either. But they're still our people, no matter what they did or didn't do. Clearly, something's going on up here, and it's our job to make sure they're all right."

"They wouldn't do the same for us if the roles were reversed."

Ted DeWitt murmured his hushed agreement before his wife jammed her elbow gently into his ribs.

Barkley went on. "Besides, how do you know I'm not just here 'cause you forced me into it?"

"Because you're about as pleasant as a drunk shark, and I'm not entirely sure I could force you into anything if I tried. The only reason you haven't gone out of business by now is because there's no competition."

The others laughed. Tim Barkley's thin, pale lips curled into a grin. "Well shit, you got me there, Mrs. Reinhold. You got me there."

They continued on.

A third cry quivered through the air. It was closer now, and faded at the edges like a fraying tapestry. The group froze where they stood, muscles tense.

"It's coming from the Mayhews' house," Mary said.

"Ms. Mayhew threw a fit one time down at the Drowsy Sailor. Refused to pay," Ted DeWitt said with a shake of the head.

"We still sure we wanna do this?" Tim Barkley asked. He chuckled slightly, but no one joined him. His light, uneasy laughter faded into the morning mist.

Dew gathered on the perfect lawn of the Mayhews' house, the black iron spears of the fence rising like a line of infantry against the group. They paused for a moment just beyond the gate, eyes turned to the great stone edifice standing before them. Not a single light flickered behind the many wide windows stretching across its face. The glass of the front door lay divided by swooping, wooden designs, like vines twisting from an ebony plant.

Mary stepped up to the door and rapped upon it three times, quick and hard. She waited a minute, knocked again, and waited longer. Not a single sound reached them from within. She wriggled the doorhandle, but it didn't budge. Stepping away from the porch, she placed her forehead against the nearest window and cupped her hands around her eyes, peering inside. The dining room stood silent and empty, the wall of wineglasses muted in the early-morning dark. *What would it be like*, she wondered, then tamped the thought down. A useless thing.

Stepping away, Mary turned back to the group. "We have to break in."

Officer Marshall gasped and took a backwards step. "What?"

"Officers of the law are legally allowed to enter a residence without a warrant if there's enough evidence to suggest that someone inside is in danger."

"A scream doesn't exactly meet that requirement, ma'am."

"What about three?"

He pursed his lips, pressed a hand to his forehead. "I don't know, Miss. I don't know."

"I do." She strode around to the side of the house, came to a stop before the fence and the locked gate. "One of you, help me up. I'm going in."

"What if there's something dangerous inside, ma'am?"

"Then I guess you'll just have to follow me. But I'm going first."

"You heard her," Tim Barkley said. He lowered himself onto his knee before her and cupped his hands together. "Ready?"

She nodded. Mary planted her foot into Tim's waiting palm, and, with a quick grunt, he boosted her up and over the fence. A moment later, the easy sound of her feet hitting the grass on the other side. A *click*, and the gate creaked open on its hinges. Mary was already turning the corner onto the back patio. The others followed close behind.

The group walked down a grassy corridor, pinched between the fence and the house. They emerged out onto a patio, a line of hedges surrounding them. Great carved pillars of pockmarked sandstone supported a terrace above their heads. Plush cushions lay across couches woven from soft, delicate wicker. The slow trickle of water escaping the jacuzzi through a thin slit in the side, and the subsequent splash of it striking the surface of the pool. Glass doors lined the far wall; views into the living room and their own reflected forms alternated across the windows as their perspectives shifted.

Silence hung above the home, weighty and tyrannical. It clung to them like frost whipping from a winter storm, bore them down as if dampening their coats and sweaters. It left a filmy residue in their mouths, one that could not be banished with any number of swallows.

Ted DeWitt pulled on the handle of one of the sliding doors. It wheezed open, and the stillness flowed and drifted from the house. He held his breath for a moment, and did not speak.

“Sure seems like a fun place. Now I get why Ms. Mayhew’s such a ball of joy.” Despite his attempt at levity, Tim Barkley still spoke in a whisper. When none of his companions replied, he began to scratch at his shoulder.

At the opposite end of the patio lay a line of thick shrubbery, a passage carved through its center. Just past it, a stairwell, intermittently switching from wood to stone and back again, wound down the cliffside to the rocky beach far below. In the distance, the white swells of the sea rose and crashed, the sheen of mist in the air rendering the shore an ashen dream.

Officer Marshall worked his jaw until his ears popped.

“Tim, you and the DeWitts should check the house. Officer Marshall and I’ll head down to the beach and see if anything’s wrong.”

“Can you see anything from up here?”

“No. The fog’s too thick.”

Tim nodded, motioning for the DeWitts to follow as he headed through the open door.

Mary turned to Officer Marshall, and, without a word, they began their descent.

In the mist, it seemed as if the stairs would never end. An endless purgatory, a slow degradation of every sense. The only sight the abysmal slate-gray of the fog and the sea, the only sound the constant hum of the waves and their feet against the stairs, the only smell the sharp twang of salt. Officer Jim Marshall trailed his hand across the banister, another anchor in that lonely void. The silence upon his tongue.

The silence also existed beneath all other things, the silence of infinity.

“Did you know,” Mary said, “that when you’re exposed to something for a long enough time, you start to adapt to it? You don’t notice it anymore. Like a humming fan. It just becomes another part of the world. Nothing worth changing.”

Officer Marshall said nothing, could not bring himself to answer.

“I don’t know why I said that. Forget about it. Let’s keep going.”

At last, their feet struck the sand, and the beach stretched before them. The waves battered the shore at the edge of their sight. The mist gathered close, only allowing them a view of the few feet ahead of them. They struck out, and, soon, the stairs faded from view. They walked for a time.

Then, it hit. A new sound, one so cataclysmic in its subtlety that it amplified the other stimuli around it. With its introduction, awareness of the world rushed back to Mary and Marshall. They stood still for a moment, unable to move.

It was a low murmur, a weeping moan. At once a sorrowful and hateful thing.

The pair rushed forward. Soon, a black shape resolved from the mist, kneeling upon the sand. Then, two more, one laying flat on its back, the other

standing, staring down at the other's reclined form. The kneeling one was crying, hands raised to her face. The other two were silent.

Officer Marshall's hand went to his gun, drew it from the holster without a second thought, without any thought at all.

Mary and Marshall came to stand a few feet away from the gathered figures. The standing one was a young man, just on the cusp of adulthood. His lips quivered, and his gaze remained locked on the reclined girl.

For the one on her back was a girl, around his same age. Her eyes were glassy and dim, dead as the mist, dead as the spray off the salted sea. Sand gathered against the thick, stringy locks of her wet black hair. Her clothes had been darkened by the waves. A strand of seaweed clung to her hips and trailed away across the beach as if trying to escape and finding it could not. A small crab, tiny and pale, darted from her lips and out into the mist.

The girl was Jessica Mayhew, and the woman was her mother, Sylva. The boy was a stranger. Marshall did not recognize him.

Sylva Mayhew turned to face the pair. Her eyes were wet and shining and her hands trembled against her chest. Her lips moved, but gave no sound.

"What... What?" Mary asked.

Sylva Mayhew raised a bony finger at the boy. Her face folded and contorted into some unspeakable concoction of rage and sorrow, and Marshall nearly averted his eyes. "Him," she hissed. "Him. Him."

The boy said nothing.

Mary turned to the boy. "Who are you?"

No reply.

"Is this true? Did you do this?"

Silence.

"We don't want to hurt you. We just want to know what's going on."

The boy's eyes briefly raised to Jim Marshall's gun, clasped firmly in hand, and then trailed back to the drowned corpse of Jessica Mayhew.

"He did it," Sylva said. "He drowned her. He drowned her."

One of the boy's eyes lay trapped in a pool of bruised darkness, purple and blue. A trickle of blood trailed down his cheek. It came from a gash a few inches long, one of three that ran across his face.

The nails on Sylva Mayhew's left hand were chipped and broken.

"If you don't give us anything, we'll be forced to take you into custody," Mary continued. "Do you understand?"

The boy's gaze finally raised to meet Marshall's. His face did not move. He stared out blankly, a walking corpse. He made no sign he intended to reply.

Mary released a trembling breath. "Take him."

"But..."

*"Do it, Jim."*

"We don't have anything to go on." He didn't know why he resisted. The last thing he wanted was to touch the boy, to be forced into contact with him.

"I'll do it myself if I have to."

Jim Marshall, unblinking, pulled the handcuffs from his belt. He stepped up to the boy, got behind him, gathered up his wrists and secured the cuffs. They clicked into place and their resonance slashed out like a blade across the beach.

The boy did not stir, or protest, or struggle. He simply stared off into the mist, off into the gently-tossing waves. Officer Marshall recited his Miranda Rights, greeted by silence, and the pair turned to leave.

"I'll make a call to the station once we get back up to the house," he called over his shoulder to Mary.

She nodded.

With a guttural moan, Sylva Mayhew rose to her feet and turned towards Officer Marshall. Her hands went rigid at her sides, and her eyes gleamed with a deadly light, that of a cornered, beaten dog.

“He killed my daughter.”

“Sylva, we understand—”

“He killed my daughter.”

“We’ll deal with this, I promise you.”

Sylva turned to Mary. “You don’t know me. He killed my daughter.”

“Ms. Mayhew,” Officer Marshall began, “I assure you that we’ll—”

Sylva Mayhew lunged at the boy. She crossed the few feet between them in an instant, hands bared, nails flashing like claws. Marshall turned himself so that the boy was sheltered against his chest. Sylva’s assault fell upon his back. She clung to him, fingers scrabbling across his shoulders in the hope of finding purchase in the boy’s hair, the boy’s flesh. She shuddered with silent sobs.

Mary leapt forward and took hold of Sylva. She wrapped her old, strong arms around the other woman’s chest and held her close, dragged her away from the officer and his ward. Sylva’s feet made jagged lines in the sand as she struggled against her captor, arms flailing about.

“He killed my daughter! He killed my daughter!”

“Ms. Mayhew, calm down!”

“You bitch. You don’t understand. He killed my daughter!” Foam frothed from the corners of her mouth, and spittle flew from her lips.

“Jim, get him out of here.”

Officer Jim Marshall hurried back across the beach, the boy in tow. The struggling forms of Mary and Sylva receded into the mist, soon fading into nothing more than dark, squirming specters, Jessica’s corpse a piece of flotsam upon the shore.

“You better have a damn good explanation for this, kid.”

The boy did not reply.

The pair mounted the steps, the cliffside looming before them. Even as the two women vanished into the fog, now beginning to melt beneath the revealing rays of the sun, Sylva Mayhew’s mourning cries still reached them.

“My daughter. My daughter. He took her from me! Look at her. She’s dead! Drowned! Oh God. Oh God.”

The boy turned back and lurched against Marshall’s grip, trying in vain to return to the beach. Marshall tightened his hold on the boy’s shoulders and dragged him back up the cliff.

“Don’t you see her? He has to die. He has to! He took her from me. Oh, my daughter. My little, darling daughter! Jessica!”

After that day, the lonely little town of St. Rita, set on the abandoned end of New Jersey, rotting upon the coast, no longer knew the fitful peace of a slow, easy decay. Of a slow, easy death. No more. No more.

## Chapter II

### *An Old, Old Song*

“Jessica Mayhew’s death is a great tragedy. One this community will not soon forget. She was important to all of us in many ways. She was important as a friend, a daughter, a student, a role model. Many of you looked up to her, many of you found support in her, and all of you were glad to know her. Most of all, though, she was kind, and that is a virtue that is all-too rare in the modern day. She might have been going places, a high achiever, but she always spared time to offer a word of thanks, or a piece of advice, to one of her classmates.”

The crowded auditorium of Meijer High stank of sweat and mildewed boards, filled with the slow whisper of shifting bodies. Large windows looked out at the misty winter beyond. Rays of steely sunlight drifted in from above and splashed across the old wood floor. They bathed the portable lectern and ignored

the edges of the room, casting them into darkness. In the corner sat an abandoned basketball, tossed away haphazardly by two disgruntled sophomores at the assembly's start.

The pull-out bleachers set into the wall opposite the podium groaned beneath the weight of the gathered students. They all sat on white, plastic, backless benches that stretched across large swathes of the tiered metal bleachers. Patches of rust gathered in small dips and imperfections, and the seats were beginning to yellow around the edges like jaundiced eyes or the rotten crowns of bishops.

A caricatured depiction of Saint Rita, flanked by two ailing worshippers, lay plastered across the far wall. The paint was cracked and flaking in places, but her gaze remained steady and solemn.

Beneath her eyes, the stimulus of the auditorium, the presence and feeling of it, confronted Dylan with renewed force. The strange resonance of the principal's voice from far below. The piercing, iron light of the sun through the dirty windows. The wind howling against the glass, shaking a single rattling pane against its barriers.

Occasionally, it would swing wide, and wisps of snow would trail in from outside. The principal's words would briefly be drowned in its roar, and then it would slam shut once more. As Dylan shuddered against the cold, Principal Dane would continue on unaffected, eyes flickering between the paper on the podium and his audience, as if reciting some ancient script, as if all of his training had been specifically tailored towards preparing him for this singular moment, one that would repeat again and again until the day that he passed on the role to his successor. Until the day that he died.

Dylan shivered, and his shoulder brushed against Matteo, sitting beside him. Matteo turned, and their eyes met. His gaze reflected a sorrow, and a caustic, gallows humor. *This should never have happened to her. She deserved better than*

*this. She meant more than this*, it seemed to say. Dylan's lips drew thin, and he nodded.

Matteo shrugged, thin shoulders brushing against his bobbing blonde hair. It hung low and curled up at the edges, golden despite the grayness. He turned back to the lectern. Raising his thumb to his lips, he began nibbling on the edge of his nail. Dark, navy paint lay lacquered across it, flaking in places, its edges irregular where his teeth had worked against it previously. His lips were lightly stained blue in places.

Dylan watched him for a moment, caught in profile, and followed suit, turning back to the speech.

“—aided our community in countless ways. I'm sure all of you remember her charities, her clubs, and her exceptional spirit and passion. Jessica was a born leader, and she made sure to guide all of us down a path that we could be proud of. Had she been alive today, there is not a doubt in my mind that she would have brought her joy and life to this school's halls.”

A nudge on his left. Dylan turned, greeted by Tia's angered face. One hand lay in her lap, the other clenched around the fiery brown ponytail drifting across her back, intermittently pulling and releasing it, drawing her scalp tight and relaxing it once more. Her brows and lips were scrunched close, eyes burning. The image of a wrathful gerbil came to Dylan—a vision of which he had reminded her across the years—but he knew better than to voice it then.

*He has no fucking clue what he's talking about*, she mouthed.

Dylan's brows drew down in commiseration.

*He probably wouldn't even be able to point her out in the hallway*. She shook her head.

Dylan turned his gaze to the front row of the bleachers. Among the crowd, a single spot, marked by a crisp white paper placard, remained empty.

Tia nudged him again. *What is it?*

He pointed at the empty seat. *Her mother's not here.*

Tia's eyes flickered. *That bitch.*

Dylan sighed and shrugged again.

Tia turned back to the front of the makeshift auditorium, working furiously at her ponytail. Simple silver hoop earrings dangled against her cheeks, and, combined with her hateful expression, Dylan thought of an angry hamster dashing through its wheel, never gaining ground, always in fear of being swept backwards into that endless loop. It would drift back, and then, carried up, would arrive at the front, at its destination, before falling away once more, forced to endure the sight of that goal and its subsequent loss forever.

Dylan shook himself, and the vision vanished. *Now's not the time.*

“—must send our thoughts and prayers out to her mother and the rest of her family. The Mayhew family has served as one of the cornerstones of St. Rita for generations. If there is any clan that deserves this sort of tragedy least, it is surely them. Although she could not be here today, Ms. Mayhew—”

Tia shook her head.

“—greatly appreciates all of your condolences, and, if you happen to pass her in the street, or see her at the store, make sure to show her just how much this community feels for her. The Mayhew family is not a lost cause; they will continue to persevere through this great tragedy, and we will stand by their side all the while. Today, I hope that, as all of you walk through the halls of this school, you consider, for a moment, the impact that Jessica Mayhew had on your lives.”

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The old bricks and stones of Meijer High seemed caught in a perpetual, decaying mourning. Not the mourning of a tragic loss, of a great sorrow, but of a slow slippage, a gradual loss that would continue forever. It was the mourning of an old warrior who, after watching their companions be cut down before them, lays down their blade on the empty battlefield and waits for the sun to set.

The flicker of the failing fluorescents buzzed above the heads of the passing students, and lockers slammed and boomed through the half-empty halls. Dylan, wedged in the corner of the room, stared out the window of the class. The bell had rung twenty minutes ago, but students still stood gathered in the halls, groups of three or four leaning against lockers and quietly talking. A paper airplane soared above the scene, came to a screeching halt against the cool linoleum. A bored older boy, uncut stubble flaring from his cheeks, dragged his feet down the hall to retrieve it.

Matteo sat at his desk in the class across the hall, cheek perched on the knuckles of his raised hand. He turned to watch the paper airplane go by, followed its trajectory with his eyes, and, when it landed, met Dylan's gaze. He lowered his eyelids and let his lips droop in mock exhaustion.

Dylan grinned. He straightened his index and middle finger into the shape of a gun, placed it to his temple with a bored look.

Matteo giggled, silent from across the hall. He raised his lithe fingers to his lips to cover his laughter.

A small bud of joy bloomed in Dylan's chest like a flower unfurling its petals against the chill.

"Is there something more important you have to attend to, Mr. Garfield?"

Dylan whipped around. Mrs. Dane—the principal's wife—glared at him from the front of the room, fingers pinched around a piece of chalk. A half-finished equation stretched across the board before her.

Dylan swallowed, shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Dane."

She gave a guttural grunt, and did not reply. She turned away, and her lecture continued.

Dylan's gaze drifted to the window again. In the other class, Matteo's attention had returned to his teacher. Dylan sighed beneath his breath.

*This is gonna be a long one.*

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Meijer High's chorus group was caught in a strange sort of stasis. They had a decent reputation, had won the occasional honorable mention at some of New Jersey's various competitions, but had only once received any sort of trophy, that being the bronze medal for the annual Young Voices of the Garden State Championship nearly a decade prior. It hung behind Mrs. Marshall's desk, set at the center of the few faded blue ribbons fit to adorn the yellowing walls.

Mrs. Linda Marshall was a stocky, dour-faced woman, brows seemingly always drawn low in the face of some silent plight. She seemed like a perfect replica of her husband, Officer Jim Marshall, further exacerbated by the fact that the two were seemingly inseparable beyond their professions. Rumors had circulated for some time that the two were somehow related by blood, but no evidence besides their shared characteristics gave it any credibility, and Dylan had not participated in the spread of a single word of it.

This was not out of any affection for Mrs. Marshall. In his three years in Meijer High's chorus, not once had he received any sort of verbal commendation from his teacher. She doled out her criticisms liberally, and her praises rarely, and those were relegated to nothing more than quiet nods from her music stand.

The same could not be said for Liliana. Positioned just at the border between the altos and the tenors atop the old black bleachers at the center of the room, she had stood beside Dylan since his first day of chorus. Even back then, back before his voice gave way to richness, back when his face had bled with pimples and the sleeves of his jackets had grown too short to contain his gangly arms, she had offered him a kindness none other in that room had shown him. Even back then, her music had been something to admire.

He still smiled when he thought of that day. He smiled whenever he thought of her.

A row of dark chairs lay positioned in a semicircle in front of Mrs. Marshall's music stand, the piano lumbering in the far corner, and Liliana sat at the end of the line. The others milled about, whispering to each other beneath the yellowing glow. Dylan strode across the room and set himself down in the chair beside hers.

"I can't believe it," she said. She stared off through the tall windows at the far end of the room, watching the other students blankly come and go. Her blue eyes glittered at the edges, shone beneath the eyeshadow painted around her lashes, but beneath that gleam was a supple, lake-like sadness, a deep, self-aware isolation.

"Jessica?" he asked.

She nodded. "I just came from World History. She sat next to me, y'know? *Did you know?*"

"I don't think you ever told me."

"Yeah, probably not. She was so kind, Dylan, you don't understand." She turned to him. "She helped me way back at the start of the year. God, I could never keep any of those facts straight. All of those philosophers and religions and whatnot. She remembered all of it, though. Every single piece."

“It’s a lot.”

“It *is* a lot. When I got my first quiz grade back, I almost cried. I came to class the next day and just tapped out. Mentally, y’know? I didn’t show it, but she saw right through me. She came up to me after class and offered to help, and, well...”

“She seemed like a good person.”

“I can’t believe that something like this could happen to someone like her.” She leaned forward, elbows balanced on her knees, and rested her head in her hands. “And that boy. Did you read the papers?”

Dylan shook his head.

Her voice curdled. “They found her on the beach, like Mr. Dane said, but what he didn’t mention is that there was someone else there. This guy. About our age. He was just standing there, and he didn’t say a single thing. Not a *word*. Can you believe that? Not even to the cops.”

“Have they talked to him yet?”

“The paper said they were going to today. I’ll have to check when we get out of school.”

A pause. The whispers seemed to rise in volume and intensity, nearly to a deafening degree.

“I wish I’d known her,” Dylan said. He reached down, gently took her hand in his, and squeezed it.

Liliana turned and met his eye. “Yeah. I wish you had too.” She straightened, squeezed his hand back, and released.

“I can’t today, but do you wanna get something to eat after school tomorrow? We can talk about Jessica, or something else. Anything you want.”

“I’d like that.” A smile. “You’re so sweet. You remind me of her. I won’t let that go.” Despite her rising humor, a hardness lay beneath her words, a steely strength.

He grinned. “I’m not planning on leaving anytime soon.”

“You better not. I’d have to chase you down if you did.”

The bell chimed, and Mrs. Marshall rose from her desk and came to stand before the class. She set a fraying piece of sheet music atop the stand and clasped her hands behind her back.

“Hello, class. I just want to begin by giving my condolences to any of you who were friends with Jessica Mayhew. I never taught her, but I’m sure that she was a lovely girl. Now, we’ve been working with this song for a while, and I understand that some of you may be crushed by the recent tragedy, and might not have the motivation to continue. However, this is not the time to admit defeat. We *have* to give this piece our all. We *have* to win the Young Voices Championship. I might not have taught her, but I am *sure* that Jessica cared greatly about this community. She would have wanted us to win this. So let’s give it our all, huh? For her. Alright? Places, everyone.”

They rose and moved off towards the bleachers a few feet away. Mrs. Marshall turned the music stand and positioned herself before the gathered students. She pulled the wire-rimmed glasses from the chain around her neck and, placing them on the bridge of her nose, began rattling off various notes and comments about the class’s prior performance.

“Andrew, I feel you lagging behind. I’ve told you this. Keep up with your classmates, and read the music.

“Kayla. You’re a soprano, not an alto. Stop trying to go low. It’s throwing everything off.

“Every time we do this piece, I hear you spitting, Leah. You’re spitting the words. Stop spitting them. *Sing* them.

“Dylan.” She raised her eyes to his and squinted behind her glasses. “I can’t quite pinpoint what’s wrong, but I can tell that something’s still off. It’s like you’re not fully invested in the song. Not giving it your all. That’s not the kind of performance that wins competitions.”

Liliana sighed beside him. He nodded to Mrs. Marshall and said nothing.

“Alright, class. That about covers it. Take all of what I’ve said into account, and clean yourselves up ASAP. The Young Voices Championship isn’t too far off, and we sure can’t go up there and present like this. So, all that out of the way, are we ready to begin?”

They all nodded.

“Good.”

For the past several months, the Meijer High Holy Voices had been working away at Mrs. Marshall’s newest grand obsession, the latest in a long line of songs that she believed would earn her the fame and admiration she thought she so deserved. “He Arose” was an Easter hymn. The town had been founded by a priest, after all, and, in the words of Mrs. Marshall, often found massaging the little silver crucifix dangling from her neck, “It’s about time we started acting like it.”

*“He is risen,” said the angel to the women,  
When they came to see him sleeping in the cave;  
Jesus burst the mighty bars of Death asunder,  
And arose to reign triumphant from the grave.*

Mrs. Marshall would sway slightly as her hands danced through the air, and would inevitably come to a screeching stop whenever she perceived there to be

some minor fault in the singers' performance. She would press her fingertips to her forehead, close her eyes, and dole out criticism as she saw fit. Then they would slowly start again, from the beginning, and the cycle would continue.

The song was only five stanzas, but they had reached the final one twice in all their many months working at it.

Across those months, Dylan had heard time and again the same critique. He knew exactly why, and, despite the constant ire that it placed upon him, he had no intention of changing.

Dylan hated "He Arose." He hated its meaninglessness. He hated its unoriginality, its repetition. He hated how it seemed to nudge his shoulder and wink and ask "You believe, don't you? Don't you?" He had listened to it so many times that he had become numb to its effect. Once, he had nearly cringed upon hearing it, loathed every note of it that reached his ears. Now, as the paper was beginning to crumble and bend, as the notes and staves started to droop with weary disdain, he felt nothing. It had hollowed him out, tossed away his anger, and planted a lump of cold, brown slop in its place, like mashed potatoes on a cafeteria tray.

Months ago, he had nearly spoken out about it to Mrs. Marshall. She had given her usual critique, finishing off with a bent-lipped "Any reason why?" Dylan had straightened himself, clenched his sweat-caked palms. He still remembered the feeling of his tongue in his mouth, bulging and wet and weighty. The power of it, the desire, and the awful anger welling in his throat. The lights had seemed to flare, their buzz rising to an unbearable hum.

"I..."

Mrs. Marshall's nostrils had flared. "Yes?"

"Nothing." A pause. "I'll try harder, Mrs. Marshall."

He no longer voiced his frustration with the song to Liliana. He no longer complained about it at lunch to Tia and Matteo. He no longer howled his disdain to his parents over dinner. “He Arose” was simply a fact, a reality. It leered above him like the crumbling lighthouse on his way to school. Like the lighthouse, he had no choice but to face it. Like the lighthouse, in some form, it would be there forever.

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“I can’t believe him. I can’t *fucking* believe him,” Tia said. She tore off a piece of her burger and wedged it between her teeth, worked at it with a jaw full of popping veins.

They sat at the corner of the cafeteria, Dylan and Matteo and Tia, as the wind shuddered against the windows beside them and the gray earth and dying grass seemed frozen in the act of rolling towards the forest, of collapsing into the woods. The homes of the rich rose at the top of the hill, and Dylan found his eyes drawn towards them again and again.

Beside them loomed the lighthouse.

“I know, Tia. It’s terrible,” Matteo said. His voice was a silky, sorry purr.

“I mean, he didn’t even know her. He *admitted* it up there. And to say those kinds of things? None of what he said meant anything. She was so much more than that. So much more.”

“That’s why it’s up to you to remember her as she really was.”

Tia nodded. “He’s just pretending. That’s all it was. Pretending.”

“Why?”

“It’s probably because she’s rich.”

Tia’s hand went tight on her ponytail. “Exactly. *Exactly*. Don’t you remember how they talked when Sam Palmer went crazy?”

“Yes,” Matteo replied. “They made him seem like a monster.”

“He *was* a monster,” Dylan said.

“Maybe. But there’s a reason that monsters are made.”

“And they didn’t talk about any of that. They just painted him like an animal. I mean, son of the strip club owner? Easy pickings.”

“I’m not sure it’s really their job to show that,” Dylan said.

“Why not?”

“That sort of thing’s scary. It can get dangerous, y’know, showing that kind of complexity. It opens up too many doorways for people to get bad ideas.”

“Isn’t it a school’s job to teach you things, Dylan?”

He shrugged. The melody of “He Arose” hummed in the back of his mind and sapped what little strength he had left. He had no will to argue.

They passed into silence for a time.

Dylan caught sight of Liliana across the cafeteria. He glanced down at his hands and gave a slight smile.

“Oh, yeah. I have some news,” Matteo said.

“What is it?”

He raised his thumb to his lips and began to chew, and his jade eyes glazed over like snow falling on two shining emeralds. “Charlie and I ended things.”

“That really lightened the mood,” Dylan said. He kicked himself under the table as soon as the words slipped from his lips.

Matteo snorted softly. “Yeah. I guess it’s not good news.”

“What happened?” Tia asked.

“He and his family moved to New York.”

“But that’s not *that* bad. I mean, didn’t you guys say...?”

“We did. But it was bound to happen at some point.”

“Those kinds of relationships last. My parents started dating in high school, and look where they are now.”

“Just because it ends doesn’t mean it was worthless, Tia. I’m fine. I’m fine with it.”

Dylan stared down at his lap and said nothing. The image of New York stung in his chest like a stitch in the side. Rotten streets, dirty billboards, aimless, wandering vagrants. In an alley, a beaten, bloody corpse. Dylan closed his eyes, breathed, opened them again. *He’s gone*, he thought, and knew not to whom he was referring.

The lighthouse pulsed at the corner of his sight.

Tia reached across the table and rested her hand atop Matteo’s. “Alright. Just, talk to us, okay? If you need anything.”

Matteo nodded and smiled.

“What are you gonna do now?” Dylan asked.

“Well, that’s sort of the nice part, isn’t it? I’m not really sure. I still have to find out.”

“I think I’d be scared.”

“Oh, I am. A little, at least, but everything new is a bit scary.”

*Like New York.*

The rest of the period passed in a haze. The other two spoke, and Dylan made brief interjections, nodding along and agreeing where it seemed fit. All the while, he turned over the idea of New York, of Charlie leaving, of Matteo’s change, like a piece of putty in his hand. It was a formless thing, a thing that would mold and shift to the slightest touch. *What’s this gonna become?* His heart beat quicker, and the wind outside seemed to rise in anger.

He put all of it out of his mind, focused back on the present, on Liliana, on “He Arose.” The tune began to play again. He took comfort in its sanded edges.

The idea of Matteo, alone, hovered in the background.

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The day ended, the final bell rang, and the students of Meijer High began to head home. Dylan pulled himself out of Gym, out of the rancid stench of the locker room, as soon as he could. He shivered against the cold outside, and slipped his jacket across his shoulders.

The boys inside had been talking about Jessica. Most had been mournful, a few indifferent, and one was outright hostile. She had rejected his advances a few months prior, and, since then, he had led a campaign against her, trying—in vain—to rally the other boys on the soccer team against her.

Words like “slut,” “whore,” “bitch.” Words that had next to no effect on her, and failed to incite any sense of injustice in the boy’s teammates. Words that soon ended when the coach, Mr. Wells, heard from his nephew, Brian DeWitt, of the horrible things the boy had been saying.

At the time, rumor passed around that Jessica Mayhew had been seeing someone from outside of town, but no one was able to confirm, and it went the way of all things lacking evidence.

While the boy in the locker room had attempted to reignite his rage against Jessica, anger of a different kind was spreading. Anger directed not at the girl, but, instead, at the strange boy that had been found standing beside her body. His picture had been posted in the town paper, and no one recognized him.

He had a dour, haunted look, and Dylan could not help but feel some sense of pity for him.

The other boys did not share that belief. They said, with supreme confidence, that he had done it, that he had gone out early in the morning and

drowned Jessica Mayhew in the sea. That he had dragged her back to shore and stood there to gloat. That he had done it to taunt a poor, aging woman. That he had to die.

“What do *you* think?” they had asked Dylan.

“I’m not really sure,” he had replied, and then the bell had rang, and he had escaped.

Across the cracked, yellowing tile, through the miasma of sweat and testosterone and piss, out into the cool, indifferent glow of the winter in St. Rita. He pressed himself to the brick wall of the gym and zipped up his peeling jacket as throngs of students passed by and away from him, out into the parking lot, out into the town at large.

In the mass, he picked out a single figure, blonde hair bobbing, clothes new and pristine. Matteo. He pushed through the crowd to reach him.

Dylan came to stand beside Matteo, and the other boy smiled. They slipped away from the flow.

“What’s happening?” Matteo asked.

Dylan’s mouth worked for a moment, and he grasped at the reason, now fled, why he had wanted to talk to Matteo. “Oh. Nothing. Nothing really. I just wanted to apologize.”

“For what?”

“For that thing I said at lunch. You’re going through a lot, and I—”

“Oh, it’s fine.” Matteo laughed. “It’s fine, trust me.”

“Do you wanna talk about him?”

“Charlie? I mean, I’m not really sure there’s much else I could even say at this point.” He ran a hand through his hair.

“He was really nice. You guys were good together.”

“Yeah. Yes, he was.” A sigh, and a silent, downward stare. “But, hey. More opportunities now, I guess.”

“Yeah. Of course.”

A pause, filled by the rushed, hurried roar of the passing students.

“If you ever need to talk about anything, I’m here. You know that, right?”

Matteo raised his eyes to Dylan’s once more. “I know.” He smiled. “Thank you, Dylan.”

“That’s what I’m here for.”

“You have to share more about yourself. I feel like I’m always piling all my problems onto you.”

Dylan shrugged. “Just don’t have that much to say. Life’s not too eventful over where I’m at.”

A corpse rotting in a New York alley. A torn, tear-stained newspaper, and a buzzing telephone, bobbing on its wire.

“Whatever you say. But thank you again. It means a lot.”

“Of course. Any time you want.”

Matteo nodded, turned to go. He passed into the throng, his head bobbing in and out of the flow, and passed between the pillars at the front of the gym. As he descended the front steps, he whipped around on his heel. He waved and smiled at Dylan. Dylan nodded, lips curling. Warmth spread through his chest.

Matteo swept around and continued off through the parking lot. He stepped through the school gates, around the corner, and disappeared down Main Street.

Dylan watched him all the while, hands growing sweaty in the pockets of his jacket. His fingers looped around each other and away again. Finally, as the herd of students thinned, he shook himself. He slipped into the crowd, seamless and

unnoticed, and followed them, unsure where his feet were leading him. As he left Meijer High in the distance, he began to hum the tune of “He Arose.”

*He arose, my savior,  
He arose, my savior,  
He arose, my savior,  
Triumphant from the grave.*

## Chapter III

### *Blood on the Carpet*

Sylva Mayhew sat beyond the one-way glass of the St. Rita Police Department’s single interrogation room. No one had seen her since her daughter’s body had been discovered the day prior; she had refused to come to the station after the confrontation on the beach, refused to say anything at all after the boy had been dragged away.

Mary had later told Officer Jim Marshall that, when the boy vanished into the mist, the woman had collapsed, sobbing, into her arms, had not stopped until the first batch of officers zipped Jessica's corpse up into a black plastic bag and ferried her back up the thin stairwell to the yard of the Mayhew's house.

Now, raising his mug to his lips, he saw her again. With her head tilted towards the surface of the cold steel table in the center of the room, her graying hair became a curtain beneath which shadows loomed and danced. The fluorescents dripped across the bridge of her nose, the edge of her cheek, the back of her neck, and the rest of her face was bathed in darkness. Her eyes gazed dimly out from the blackness, for all the world like empty sockets. Her hands lay splayed before her, palms flat, as if she were studying them, as if they might fly up to some awful task without her constant supervision.

Deputy Chief Alyssa Sampson shook her head. "Seeing someone like that, it's..."

Officer Marshall nodded. "Yep." A pause. "Do you know her?"

"Know *of* her. They only ever come out of that castle of theirs to make a donation to the school once in a while and parade around for a bit while Admin kisses their feet."

"Don't like them?"

"Can't say I'm a huge fan, but still. I'd rather she were an asshole than whatever *this* is."

Marshall looked over at his companion. Her arms lay crossed, palms pinched in the crooks of her shoulders. He knew that her hands had begun to sweat ever since the day she had been forced to kill Samuel Palmer. He never spoke of it. It was an untouchable subject, a shared memory that drifted through the halls of the SRPD like dust. Sometimes it would scuttle through the walls, squeaking and scratching like a rat, and those nearest would glance up from their work and regard

it momentarily, stone-faced, before returning to their papers. Phone calls would pass into the void, pens would trail along the page, and the strings of deduction would fall flat in the face of its immensity. And then it would pass on, vanish, disappear, and all would return to how it had been just moments before. Even then, the scorch marks still stretched across the wall of the squat brick building the police force called home, bare for all to see.

On some nights, Jim Marshall, laying down his official designation at the day's end, would slip from his bed and come to stand beside the window, his wife snoring softly in the background, and gaze out at St. Rita slipping away from him in the night, and the streetlamps hovering and flickering above the potholed streets would seem to him like flames, rising, rising, rising into the darkness, and the stars were embers, the embers of dreams that would fall to the earth and ignite, and there would be no way to face it, no way to stop it, and all the while Samuel Palmer had been sitting in the chair in the corner of his room, rocking back and forth and laughing and saying that he wanted to change something, and the blood was leaking from the bullet-hole in his head and staining the carpet red and Jim Marshall knew he would never be able to clean it all up.

Officer Marshall glanced away from his superior and said nothing.

"I think it's about time you went in and talked to her," Sampson said.

"Yeah. Yeah, you're right."

"You have to do it."

He nodded and did not speak. He set his mug down on the table before him, made to enter the interrogation room, turned back and reconsidered.

Deputy Chief Sampson noticed his indecision. "What is it?"

"I don't know if I should take the cup in or leave it."

Sampson sighed. "Get in there, Jim."

"Alright."

He took the mug with him and stepped through the steel door.

Sylva Mayhew only looked up once he had already set himself down in the chair across from her. For a moment, there was nothing, the slow rise and fall of Officer Marshall's breath drifting through the stillness.

Sylva Mayhew straightened, the only hint of curve in her posture found in the slight bend of her neck.

"Ms. Mayhew."

She was silent.

"I'd like to begin by saying how sorry I am." A pause. "It's... It's a terrible thing, losing a child. I won't pretend to know what you're going through, but I know that it can't be good. I don't want to make this process any more difficult for you than it already will be, so we can end today's meeting whenever you want. Alright?"

Sylva Mayhew blinked.

"Alright. I'd like to begin by asking you to give a rundown of the events leading up to your discovery on the beach. Anything might help, so I urge you to include as much detail and information as possible."

"He killed her. I don't know what else you need."

In the newfound silence, Officer Marshall could not hear the sound of his own breath. Flat and hard, cold as a blade, cold as the fluorescents buzzing above their heads. That was how her voice had come.

Jim Marshall suppressed the urge to swallow. "That may be, but I'm afraid that that's not enough for a court to go on." Her words had clashed against his authority, confronted it in an uncomfortable way. He felt off-balance, as if his chair wobbled upon an uneven leg.

"You found him on the beach with my girl. You saw exactly what I did."

“Ma’am, if you’ll excuse me... I don’t know what I saw. I *want* to know. I *want* to bring justice to him, if he’s really the one responsible. But, with the facts I have right now, I can’t be certain of that. That’s why I need your help, Ms. Mayhew.”

She sat and considered, and all the while the muscles of her broad jaw worked beneath her skin. Her fingers began to drift across the surface of the table, still pressed flat.

“When I woke up, she was gone. I couldn’t find her.”

“And that isn’t normal?”

“We eat breakfast together every day. Every day. She wouldn’t leave without it.”

Officer Marshall nodded for her to continue.

“I searched around everywhere for her. I went to her room first. Her bed was unmade, the sheets were all thrown around like she’d just gotten up. That was odd. She’s a very neat child, you see; she’d never leave her bed just laying like that.” She paused. “There was another strange thing. She always takes a shower in the morning—one right before she goes to bed, the other right when she wakes up—but the bathroom was completely dry. Nothing was wet. Nothing.”

“I didn’t see a note or anything, so I started to get frantic. I looked around the rest of the house, calling her name, but she wasn’t there. Everything was silent.”

“I noticed that there was only one car in the driveway. I assumed it was yours. Did it occur to you that she might have driven off?”

“Jessica doesn’t have a car.” Her hands went still.

“Oh, my apologies. Please, continue.”

“After I was certain that Jessica wasn’t in the house, I went outside. She wasn’t there. But I noticed something. There’s a great deal of sand at the top of the

staircase down to the beach. We track it around on our shoes and feet.” She raised her eyes and met Marshall’s gaze. “There were footprints in the sand leading down the stairs. Of course, I immediately went after them.”

“Ms. Mayhew. Were there two pairs, or just one?”

“I’m not sure. But there seemed to be too many to have been made by one person.”

He nodded.

“The fog was thick on the beach.” Her words rattled through the air like lonely coins in a tin can. “There’s a spot that Jessica and I always used to go to when she was little. It was right where the beach started to bend. She loved it because you could just see the sun rising around the edges of the rocks early in the morning.

“That’s where I found them.”

“And what was it like when you found them? What was different? What was happening?”

“Exactly what you saw. She was there... on the sand. And he was standing above her. He didn’t say a word to me. He didn’t even look up.”

“And you’re sure that’s all?”

“Yes.”

“Was there anything else to suggest that he might have been the perpetrator? Some sign of physical struggle?”

She looked up, lips growing flat. “You’re asking about the black eye, aren’t you? About the scratches?”

Jim Marshall nearly reeled back in his chair.

“You don’t think I remember his face?” Sylva Mayhew leaned in close, palms quivering against the table. “Of course I remember.”

“What do you know about the marks on his face?” His composure starting to return.

Sylva looked down at the broken nails of her left hand. “I attacked him when I first saw him. I jumped onto him and started scratching at his face. He struggled and threw me off.”

“And you didn’t pursue him any further?”

“No. That was all.”

“So—”

“I did not give him that black eye.”

A pause.

“It was fresh,” she said. “I know it was. Fresh.”

“That’s not for me to say right now.”

“It was *fresh*.”

Officer Marshall said nothing.

“It was him. It was him. He killed my daughter.”

“I don’t disbelieve you, ma’am.”

“But you don’t believe me.”

“I don’t think I can make a judgment right now about that boy’s guilt.”

“You would side with *him* instead of *me*?” she sneered.

“It’s too early to take sides.”

“You’re going to let him get away just because you weren’t convinced.”

“I’d rather justice take its time, if that meant it would come to the right decision, Ms. Mayhew.”

She leaned close. “I’d like to leave, Officer Marshall.”

“Why, ma’am?”

“I find this office to be unreceptive to my emotional needs. I would like to go home.”

*Me too, Ms. Mayhew*, he thought to himself. He closed his eyes, pressed them shut, and opened them again, lights dancing briefly before his sight. “Alright. I’ll let you go. If there’s anything else we think of, we’ll be sure to let you know.”

“Thank God for that.”

They stood and approached the door, their reflections in the one-way glass growing closer and closer until their hands seemed to meet on the doorknob. Officer Marshall—his title once again assumed—slipped the door open, and Sylva Mayhew retreated through it without a word or backwards glance. With a sigh, Marshall followed.

Sylva quickened her pace to the door of the room beyond. Deputy Chief Alyssa Sampson turned to regard the pair as they entered.

Sylva turned back, the station’s activity buzzing across the window behind her. Her gray-eyed gaze fixed onto Officer Marshall. “Whatever you find, I hope you make the right choice.”

She whirled around, threw the door open, and disappeared.

Marshall watched her receding form through the window in the door.

“That was something,” Sampson said.

“Yep. It sure was.”

“She’s grief-stricken, Jim. She’s probably going mad up in that tower of hers.”

“I know, Miss.”

A thoughtful pause. “The black eye’s interesting.”

“You think Jessica gave it to him?”

“The woman wasn’t wrong. It seemed fresh when I looked at it.”

He nodded. “That’s true.”

“You’re not convinced?”

“Are *you*?”

“Not particularly, but my mind’s trending more towards one side of the equation.”

“I haven’t even started to make up my mind.”

“So far, the evidence seems pretty stacked against him, I’ll tell you that.”

“And that boy’s gonna face life in prison if we don’t find anything else. I doubt she’ll gun for anything less than that.”

“You can’t know that for sure at this point.”

“I can’t. But I can make an educated guess.”

Alyssa Sampson approached him from across the room. “You almost make it sound like you don’t want him to be guilty.”

“I don’t want anyone to be guilty, Miss. Some people just are.”

“And maybe this boy is one of the guilty ones.”

“I saw his face. I saw how he looked at that body.” Silence. “This is something different. I’m not ready to write him off just yet.”

Sampson shrugged. “Well, whatever you think, you’d better get to it. I don’t particularly enjoy the idea of Ms. Mayhew coming back down here to eat our faces off for slow procedure.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll get going.” He turned and walked towards the door.

“Oh, Jim. One more thing.”

“Yes?”

“While you’re doing all this, just make sure to remember... *him*. Okay?”

She shoved her hands into her armpits and went silent.

The air grew heavy. He nodded. “I will, ma’am. I will.”

Somewhere, far off, a rat scurried through the walls, scratching and screeching, howling into the coming dusk.

## Chapter IV

### *Mantra of the Heart*

The boy would die. Retreating from the mildewed glass doors of the SRPD, Sylva Mayhew held the idea close, coiled herself around it until it pulsed and throbbed

beneath her ribs like a second heart. The boy would die. The boy would die, and she, in some way, would be the one to kill him.

Upon exiting the station, Sylva hugged the brick wall to her right, walked along its edge until she turned the corner and the entrance fell out of sight. The station sat at the end of Main Street, the first barrier against the shaded forest beyond. The street, the town, the life she lived vanished in the background. A few feet before her sat a line of uneven shrubs; past that, a chain-link fence; past that, the woods.

Somewhere, distant, the sound of a battered truck belching smoke into the bruising dusk sky.

Sylva rested her back against the wall behind her, head held high. Her chest and belly began to tremble. Her eyes burned, the slow, nagging pulse of her veins beating against her temples. She raised an absent hand to her cheek. It came away wet.

She studied her palm for a moment, unsure as to where the water had come from or for what purpose it had been created. Her body still writhed, and, growling, she told it to stop.

The boy would die. The boy would die.

*Jessica.*

The moment fell apart. Clarity bathed her in its cold, unfeeling mass, and she collapsed to the ground, back still pressed against the wall, hands quivering through the unkempt grass. Sylva Mayhew began to sob, unable to close her eyes, unable to stop herself.

The long grasses swayed against her palms. Running her hands through Jessica's hair, a small child, before she took off running down the beach. The image, the presence, the sensation of it as clear as if it were playing out once more before her. She ripped her hands away from the grass.

She lay there as the shadows grew long and the first stars began to twinkle and flicker in the dark. The sky, once full of flame, blackened further. She stood, brushing herself off. The tears had dried upon her cheeks and the skin groaned and stretched as she steadied herself. Sylva turned and made to leave.

The wall behind her was ashen and burnt and still smelled faintly of smoke. She stared at it for a time. Samuel Palmer was a distant memory.

*Weren't we down on the beach when it happened?*

Flakes of burnt brick clung to the back of her sweater. She pulled it around and sighed, swatted at the ashes with the palm of her hand. The large clumps fell away, but small streaks of it still coiled through the baby-blue threads. She sighed and replaced her sweater, turned, and left. The wall glared blackly out at her as she departed.

Sylva Mayhew strode through the streets of St. Rita, ignoring the sideways glances and averted stares of the townsfolk. Billows of orange and red light forked up above the trees, spilling down across the buildings until their edges began to glow. The first streetlamps were just starting to ignite. Beneath one stood two men, both clutching close a bottle of beer as they talked in low tones. Tim Barkley stepped from the glowing door of the barbershop behind them and shared a friendly word with the pair. He was the only one Sylva recognized.

The three turned their heads briefly as she passed and said nothing.

At that time of day, the beach would be bathed in shadow, hidden from the sun by the great craggy wall of the cliffside. Sylva Mayhew pressed her eyes shut to purge the vision from her sight and gave silent thanks to the falling night for concealing the gesture.

She passed a few meters down the road and broke out into the town square. The statue of Saint Rita loomed tall above the scene, a ring of half-empty benches surrounding her like a group of ailing mendicants. Only a few cars buzzed along

the brick streets, shuddering above the hills and potholes that had never been repaired, and Sylva crossed over to the foot of the statue without consideration for the traffic.

The low sound of conversation beneath the howl of the wind off the sea. A bronze plaque lay affixed to the low wall surrounding the statue, and Sylva came to a stop before it. A yellow streetlamp hung behind her, the aged words still readable by its light.

*This statue of the good Saint Rita of Lost Causes is dedicated to the family of Father Maarten Meijer. Your memory hangs above us all, and may we be sheltered by your grace and magnanimity. Our eternal prayers are sent to you.*

The sound of footsteps behind her. The quick clearing of a throat.

“Ms. Mayhew?”

She turned. A girl stood behind her, likely a junior from Meijer High. A ponytail lay across her shoulder, and one hand worked absently at it as she waited.

“Yes?”

“I was a friend of Jessica’s. I just want to tell you how sorry I am. She was a great person. Really, she was. Everyone loved her.”

Sylva nodded absently to herself. “Thank you. Yes. Yes, she was.”

“Jessica always had something nice to—”

“Yes.”

The girl nodded, lips working across her teeth. “Have a good night, Ms. Mayhew. We’re here for you.”

The girl turned and walked back to her bench, sat down beside a boy her same age. His hair was long and blonde and almost seemed dazzling in the



twilight. The pair passed into conversation. He raised a thumb to his lips and began nibbling at the painted nail.

*He needs to cut his hair*, Sylva thought to herself. *And get rid of that paint.* She turned and passed off down the street. She did not know where she wished to go, only that home was a hell she was not prepared to face.

Around the bend of the street, across the cracking bricks, down the other side of the street. The people's numbers were thinning, most having already arrived at their chosen destinations, and only a few remained on the sidewalks. A woman in a suit leaned against the brick wall of a building, phone held to her ear. She spoke in piercing tones, brief spats of laughter serving as punctuation. Sylva turned a hateful glare to her as she passed. The woman's nostrils flared, then, recognition dawning, shrank back. Her conversation quieted as Sylva retreated along the road.

A dark, hunched form lay on the opposite sidewalk. Sylva paused and turned to face it.

Across the street sat a baby carriage. It lay beneath the glow of the General Store's windows, its contents hidden in darkness. Sylva paused, gazing at the lonely carrier. No one tended to it. The night was nearly silent but for the slow, staccato hum of the crickets in the boughs of the forest. She glanced back and forth, peered across the street into the windows of the store, waited nervously for someone to appear.

None came.

Sylva began to shift, hopping back and forth on the balls of her feet like an impatient child. Night had truly fallen. The pools of warmth spilling from the store's windows served as the only reprieve. The streetlamps lining the road flickered briefly on and off, the mechanic's touch a distant memory.

The darkness would take the child. She was sure of it. It would take it up into its rotten tendrils and whisk it away into the forest, off to the den of wolves,

off to the land of carnivorous savagery, off to the place that had claimed the daughter of Father Maarten so many years ago. There, it would consume the child, bones and all, until not a single trace of it remained. Not even a single speck of blood. Only the grief. Only the lonely little carriage abandoned on the roadside, bobbing with the wind off the fetid sea.

Sylva hurried across the road. She did not check for cars as she passed. The night was lonely and the child lonelier, and the little rounded carriage was the entire world, and Sylva knew that it was going to get colder and someone had to hold it close and shelter it. The gleaming neons of the General Store throbbed at the edges of her sight, but her eyes remained trained on the stroller.

At last it lay before her. Slowly, carefully, she circled around to the front of the carriage, stepping lightly so as not to disturb the child within. A breeze blew in from the forest, trailing down the center of the street. A howl.

She came to a stop before the child.

Deep blue eyes flickered out from a pudgy face. Soft coils of light golden hair had begun to spill from the crest of her head. Her hands lay clasped above her chest, squirming above a polka-dotted shirt. Rolls of fat curled up and down the baby's arms and fingers. It was helpless.

The child studied her for a time, great wet eyes quivering in the darkness of the carriage. She raised a finger to her lips like some infantile scholar and pondered the stranger standing before her.

"Do you know where your mother is?" Sylva asked, voice low with reverence.

The child, seemingly having deemed the old woman something of a curiosity, gurgled happily, arms squirming at her sides.

"Is she in there? In the store?"

A line of spittle dripped from the baby's lips as it smiled.

“You’re a beautiful little girl. You know that, right?”

The child’s hands grasped up out of the carriage towards Sylva’s face. She bent down before it, knelt so low that the baby’s fingers nearly brushed her cheek.

“No one should leave their child out all alone. That’s terrible. You need to be held. You need to be protected.”

A lock of hair slipped from Sylva’s bun and swung out towards the carriage. It fell against the child’s hand, and she took hold of it, twining it about her thick fingers.

“Let me hold you.”

Sylva reached into the carriage, took the baby into her arms, and rose back to her full height. Her hands moved of their own volition, as if by instinct, and balanced the child in the crook of her elbow, its head resting against Sylva’s shoulder. The strand of her hair still lay curled in the child’s hand, and the girl began to nibble absently on it as she gazed up into Sylva’s eyes.

Sylva bobbed her knees slightly and began to sway around. The child’s head tossed gently back and forth. She gurgled again, and Sylva smiled.

They stood there for a time in silence, for all the world like mother and daughter.

After a while, the baby began to yawn. It released the strand of Sylva’s hair from its grasp and, reaching towards its mouth, wedged its ring and pinkie finger between its lips. It sucked on them, saliva dripping down its chin.

A bitterness crept into Sylva’s chest. It lay like oil slick above her heart, pungent and sour. Bile rose up through her throat and lingered at the back of her mouth.

Jessica, when she was an infant, had sucked on those very same fingers. Her teeth had grown in snagged and snarled because of it, and her father had scolded her when he caught her in the act. She had made every appearance of stopping, but

Sylva knew that she kept at it. Sylva had caught her once, late at night. Jessica had torn the fingers from her mouth and begun to wail, and Sylva had run to her and shushed her and held her close. “Don’t worry, sweetie, don’t worry,” she had said. “I won’t tell Daddy.” Jessica had continued to suck, and her teeth grew more jagged by the day. Eventually, exasperated, her father had taken her to the orthodontist and got braces installed in her mouth. “Maybe now she’ll get her damn teeth straight and smile like the other girls,” he had said. His frustrated prophecy came true, and Jessica’s teeth lined up in a row like happy children posing for a family photo.

Sylva never forgave him for fixing Jessica’s teeth.

Now, it was gone. A part of her had left her womb long ago and formed itself into a thing of its own, separate yet whole. Even as it grew and aged, even as it assumed the name “Jessica”, even as its dreams and desires began to differ and diverge from Sylva’s, it had remained a part of her all the same. There had been a part of her that loved walks on the beach and studying history and sucking on its ring and pinkie fingers. It had never left. It had simply sprouted off and grown legs and arms and eyes and a heart, but half of that heart was Sylva’s own, and they had adapted to their new existence. That part of her was gone now. It had drifted away, spluttering and coughing, into the vast salty gray of the sea, and the only evidence that it had ever existed was currently lying in a morgue beside the police station that Samuel Palmer had once tried to burn down before a bullet had lodged itself in his brain. It was gone now, and with it went half of her heart.

She began to sob again. Her face lay halfway between rage and sorrow, a sorrow so deep and cold that its name was emptiness. She tried to still herself, did not wish to disturb the child, but it was no use. She continued all the same.

The baby struggled from its reverie, dazed and confused. She gazed up into Sylva’s face, but the darkness had fallen so thick and heavy beyond the lights of

the General Store's windows that her features were hidden from view. In that moment, Sylva was thankful.

"It's alright, baby. It's alright. Just go back to sleep."

The slow rumbling hum of a car turning the corner. Its headlights tracked through the night beneath the failing streetlamps. As it approached, the light grew brighter and brighter, casting itself across Sylva's shaded features. She looked up, panicked, and tried to sweep her hair in front of her face, shaking her head from side to side as the graying strands swung and lurched as if she were denying some deep, miserable truth that she could not forget.

The child, now given full view of her captor's writhing face, began to wail. Her lips curled in fear, and great, bubbly tears slipped from her eyes and down her smooth, pudgy cheeks. She flung her arms out to the side and began to struggle in Sylva's grasp.

"Shhh, shhh, shhh. Don't cry. Don't cry." Sylva hiccupped between words.

The child cried louder.

Two little bells rang out through the night, hounding the rumble of the passing car, and the doors of the General Store swung open and closed.

"Sorry, baby. That took Mommy a lot longer than expected."

Sylva's head whipped up to greet the newcomer.

A young woman pulled herself from the store, bags lengthening beneath her eyes as she gathered her coat across her shoulders. Three plastic bags lay looped across each arm. The woman's eyes traced across the street, and she shivered in the chill wind off the dark sea. The fluorescents from the store windows spilled across her, made her glow as if she were made of flame, as if she would melt away and take everything else with her.

Unconsciously, Sylva pulled the baby closer to her chest. It cried harder.

As the child began to wail again, the woman turned. The frosted wind swept through and around and between them, and the woman's eyes widened, the mother, and her hands fell to her sides and clenched and unclenched as the bags slipped from her arms and tumbled across the pavement, tin cans singing, paper towels bouncing and rolling.

Something akin to electricity lanced through the air between the mother and the child. A brutal connection, a dangerous one, one that threatened any who stepped in its way. A ponderous one. That moment would live for eternity not only in the mind of the mother, but in that of the child as well. Even when that moment, that confrontation, had faded from her memory, the aftershocks of their connection would linger in her heart until the day she died. That rising wave of love and the fear that made it taste so much sweeter, sting so much harder. It nearly made Sylva's hairs stand.

"I never got to do this for my baby," Sylva said, so quietly that only the child could hear.

"What are you doing?" the mother asked. She had gone deathly still.

Sylva opened her mouth to speak, to explain herself, but found that she lacked the words to properly convey why she had crossed the street and taken the child into her arms.

"Please. Whatever you want, just put my baby down."

"It's dark out, you know," Sylva said.

"I know. Just put my baby down."

"It's dark, and it's cold." She looked down into the eyes of the wailing child.

"*Please* put her down." A shriek hidden beneath a whisper.

"How could you do this?"

"What?"

Sylva met the mother's eyes, lips curling. "Leave her out here like this. How could you?"

The woman's tongue worked around her teeth, but no sound emerged.

"Look at her. You have such a beautiful child. So beautiful. And what did you do with her?"

Tears struggled from the mother's eyes, veins bulging and red.

"You *left* her out here. You left her."

Sudden recognition flared across the woman's face. Her quivering lips drew back in fear, and her hands, palms open, hovered before her chest as if to protect herself, to placate a raging beast. "You... you're..."

Sylva paid her no mind. She turned once more to the baby, still screeching, and nuzzled its pudgy chin with her fingers. Spittle flew from its mouth. She recoiled, brows drawing down. "No. That's not how you behave."

The baby began to struggle.

"D- don't speak to my child that way."

"You haven't taught her right."

Saliva slipped from the corner of the baby's lips and fell across the sleeve of Sylva's sweater.

"Look what you've done," she shrieked. "That isn't right. That isn't right." She jostled the child lightly in her grasp.

"Get your hands off of her!"

"You haven't taught her how a lady ought to behave. Look at this. Look! You're disgraceful."

"She's *my* child. *Mine!*"

"She shouldn't be. What have you done to deserve a girl like this?"

Their cries went unnoticed, unheeded, in the lonely night.

Sylva felt as if her heart was a bonfire, blazing and sputtering, and that a great dust devil had swept through it all, cast it all away, stolen the flame. Now, the original fire was dying, struggling against the cold, but the vortex, in its passage, had been set ablaze. It raged through the darkness, lashed out against the land, contrived towards one singular, destructive, wretched purpose. No wall or barrier or blockage could stop it. It would live as long as its fuel remained.

The child wormed and writhed as the two women continued to scream at each other. She nearly slipped from Sylva's arms, and the old woman bent down on her knees and shoved the baby back into its stroller.

"Stop crying. Stop it," she said, finger pointed at the baby's face.

Screwing up her face in rage, the child curled her lips and spat, arms flailing. It streaked through the air and exploded across Sylva's face, sloppy and wet, bits of food still caught in the gleaming mass.

She stopped. Her jaw worked. Her fingers stiffened. She raised herself up and drew back her hand, palm out, fingers straightened. The muscles in her arm tightened like a scythe shearing through a field.

The child's mother screamed for her to stop.

Jessica learning to walk. Jessica greeting guests. Jessica picking out clothes, and, later, dressing herself. Jessica growing into a young woman, a true lady, a beautiful girl with a beautiful smile. A beautiful smile that she offered to everyone. To too many, perhaps.

The way that that smile had begun to fade. The way that it had dripped away, leaving behind a lady with no spine to make her proper, no elegance to lend her grace. She had still been beautiful, though, even then.

All of that reduced to salt, reduced to a little white crab that scuttled off into the mist.

Sylva's hand went still and fell back to her side. Shakily, she stepped back, the child still screaming before her. Her eyes flickered to the baby, the mother, to the baby again. "I... I..."

The mother rushed past her and knelt before her baby. The child cooed as its mother came into view, as she gathered it up into her arms.

Sylva shivered as the night wind pressed close. Her arms were leaden and awkwardly empty. She began to back away from the pair, eyes still wide, and toward the town square. Before, she needed to be as close to the baby as possible. Now, she had to be anywhere but right there, on the sidewalk beside the loving mother and the child she had feared would be ripped from her grasp.

Sylva slipped, turned, and raced off down the sidewalk.

The mother cried after her, told her to stop, but she paid her pleas no mind.

The town, that strange, timeless town where she had lived her whole life, where she had grown up and flourished and married and raised her child, was foreign to her. It passed by her in a blur as she ran, reduced to the barest elements of its existence. In its naked state, she realized that she knew nothing about it or its people. She searched for relief, but every passing building and shop seemed to glare out at her with hostile eyes. *You are not a part of me*, it said. *You are separate. You are foreign. I have no love or pity to offer you.* There was no difference between it and the forest. Both were cold and dark and frightening, and both would destroy any who failed to conform to its laws. Both would steal things from you. Both harbored wolves.

*The Drowsy Sailor* gleamed in the night before her. She stumbled, palms flat against the cool brick of the bar. Tentative, breathing deep, she glanced through the window.

Low, warm lights hung above the old oak bar. It was aged and scratched but polished to a shine. A woman in her fifties tended it, sliding drinks to the seated

patrons. A teenage girl slipped between the black tables scattered across the floor, taking orders from those seated and delivering them back to the woman behind the bar. Behind the counter lay a full view of the kitchen, where two men hurried and leapt about and flames flew from tossed pans and pots. The low sizzle of fat and the sharp clink of glass wafted to her ears, but she did not know whether they came from the bar itself or its image in her mind. Either way, a bar was a gathering place. It was a congregation of sorts, one that she, despite being foreign, could slot herself neatly into. Where else did she have to turn? Home offered no relief, nor did anywhere else.

With a trembling hand, she opened the door and stepped inside.

The corners of the wide room lay in shadow, spaces the dim lights failed to reach. Sylva slid into the table in the corner nearest, lowering her face. She was pleased that none had recognized her. None had even remarked at her entry.

A few minutes later, the girl came and got her order, seemingly startled to find anyone sitting there at all. The hints of realization played around the edges of her eyes, but she also failed to recognize Sylva. After a time, she came back with Sylva's drink, and the old woman sipped away at it as she retreated, the world passing by around her.

A bass, chattering hum hovered through the room. The topics of the day failed to hold Sylva's interest, but the presence of discussion pleased her. She could sink into her stool, fossilize around her drink, grow so still that the patrons of the bar would simply regard her as another fixture of their favorite watering hole and pass on by without another word.

But she could not. The boy still lived. He still sat within the SRPD, silent and gloating. She would not be still, truly still, until he was planted so firmly in the earth that not even the worms could reach him.

“Mind if I sit?”

She looked up.

Before her stood an aged, balding man of average height. Thick coils of graying hair spilled from his lips, tangling into a beard below. A large belly bulged beneath his black shirt. He raised a thick arm, meaty fingers brushing back and forth across his scalp. His green eyes gleamed. For all his bulk, he seemed almost like an embarrassed schoolboy.

Sylva stared at him, still caught halfway between rumination and the waking world.

“Figured you wouldn’t wanna be alone.”

She said nothing.

The man sighed. “Well. Guess I’ll sit.” And he did, resting his glass on the table before him with a quiet tap. The stool creaked beneath his weight.

“Who are you?”

He held out his hand. “John Palmer. Nice to meet you.”

She shrank back.

John nodded. “Yep.” He paused as if to say more, then fell silent.

Sylva’s eyes darted towards the exit. Her fingers slid into her pocket, searching for the money to pay for her drink.

John Palmer slipped a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet and slid it across the table to her. He shrugged. “Not sure how much your drink was, but I bet that’ll cover it.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“ ‘Cause I know who you are. I heard what you’ve been through. Everyone has.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Maybe I just wanna share a drink with someone who understands.”

“I *don’t* understand. We are not the same.”

“You’re a lonely parent. So am I. Makes sense to me.”

Sylva leaned across the table, her face inches from John’s. “Don’t you *dare* put my daughter and your son in the same group. My daughter was an angel. Your son—”

“Was a monster?” He raised the glass to his lips and took a long sip, set it back down, gazed long into the amber waves. Then he shook his head. “No. I love my son. I love Sam.”

“Your son is dead.”

“Do you love Jessica?”

Sylva reared back.

“That’s what I thought. Yes, he’s dead. And yes, I love him.”

They passed into silence for a time, their eyes wandering about the quiet room. The girl returned, and John ordered another drink. He turned to Sylva.

“You hungry?”

She shook her head.

The girl departed, and the two stared down at the table before them. Where once the man had seemed timid, now he squared his shoulders with a deep, endless conviction.

“They think he’s the devil, y’know.”

Sylva’s gaze rose to meet John’s.

A little wheeze escaped his lips as if he had been trying to snort. “Most just in a symbolic sense. Others in a literal one. You know what the priest said after they put a bullet in my boy’s head?”

She shook her head.

“‘**The** Beast hath risen, and we hath staved him back.’ The *Beast*. They called my boy ‘the Beast’.”

“Your son torched half the town.”

“No, no, you’re missing the point.” He sighed. “He was just a kid. Just fifteen. And they cheered. They cheered when that deputy shot him. They cheered when the priest called him the devil. And every year, they shoot him again at that damn memorial.”

“So you don’t think they should remember the people your son murdered?”

“*No!* Damn it, don’t act like you care about those people either! That’s not...”

Sylva rose halfway to her feet, one palm still resting on the table.

John pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. It just gets me.” A pause. “If you wanna leave, I understand. I’m sorry for wasting your time.”

Silence. Sylva stared down at the man. He sat with his head held low like a penitent. Her glance rose to the door, then back.

*What else is waiting for me?*

She sat back down.

“Thank you. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

Sylva nodded.

“Of course those people should be remembered. I think about them every day. Sam did a terrible thing; I’ll be the first to admit it.”

“Then why...?”

“ ‘Cause that’s not the point of the memorial. The real point, at least. The point of it is to put my son down, to strip away that little bit of human dignity he still had left. No matter what he did, he was still a person. He wasn’t responsible for what this town made him, what it made him do.”

“How can you still love him, being associated with that?”

“I knew all of him. No one paid any attention to him except for that one awful moment. Now, he’s trapped. He’s trapped as that *thing*. I still see Sam. All

they see is the devil. That's the point of that memorial. It's just to punch that image deeper into people's heads."

"People see you as a monster too, you know. They look at you oddly. Even in here, they've been staring at you all evening."

"They're waiting to see who I 'truly am'. I'm the dad of the devil, after all. Must be something wrong with me," he said with a hateful toss of the hand.

"What's the point in this? Why not just give in?"

"Because I don't give a fuck what they think of me. I love my son. They're the ones who ruined him. If suffering people's stares is the price to pay for remembering my son the way he really was, then I'll endure. I won't let him stay stuck in time forever."

"Stuck," Sylva mused to herself, playing with the word in her mouth. It sent ribbons of red through her mind. Her heart began to race, and a bead of sweat trailed down her temple. The flames from the pans in the kitchen seemed to heat the place to a feverish degree.

Jessica running down the beach, wind dancing through the air behind her, the sun tossing golden coins through the gray waves. Running, running, running forever.

"Are you alright?" John asked.

"That boy will die."

"What?"

"That boy *will* die."

"I don't think..."

The little white crab was scuttling away. She had to grab it. She had to reach down and clamp her hands around it and keep it from running off into the mist. She would keep it there and hold it close and safe.

"He has to. He has to." She rose to her feet.

“Ms. Mayhew?”

She stumbled away from the table as John started to stand. Sylva turned, hurried to the door. Her hands slipped feebly across the doorknob, struggling with it until it turned and spilled her out into the night. The dark, arctic wind lashed at her flesh, and she did not care, for her tears were like mist against her face and anything that ripped them away would please her. Mist concealed killers and flotsam. Mist tore everything away.

Sylva Mayhew struggled to the town square, now empty. She collapsed into one of the benches beneath the gaze of Saint Rita, cupping her head in her hands. The stars twinkled in the night. The sea began to roar. The statue creaked and groaned. All the while, Sylva repeated to herself the four words that had been carved across her heart that awful day, the four words that had unmade her existence and built it back up again.

“The boy will die.”

“The boy will die.”

“The boy will die.”

## Chapter V

### *Rotting in an Alley*

Dylan rested against the cracked white plaster of the diner's wall. A pink neon sign begrudgingly announced that the restaurant was open for business through the window hanging above his head. Once, when Dylan was still young enough to forget, a hurricane had curved up the coast and collided with St. Rita. No one had thought to depart, so it was a miracle that everyone had managed to survive. The diner's name had not, however, and the owners had never bothered to repair it in all the years of its absence. It remained a nameless place, sinking lopsided into the earth at the edge of town.

The diner seemed like a fixture of the forest surrounding St. Rita, its walls shaped by roots and the twining leaves of the trees, and the waiters that shuffled about across the broken black-and-white tiles were ents woven from wood. Wild and dangerous and unkempt. When he and Tia were younger, they had sat at the top of the hill, just before the trees broke and laid bare the old lighthouse, and stared down at the lamps flickering in the town below. They had heard, on many nights, the howls of woodland beasts rising above the darkness. Those cries had always come from the direction of the diner, and, still veiled in mystery, the pair had chosen to believe that the diner was their source. They had first giggled over the idea of wolves and deer sitting down to dinner together in that lonely little place. Then they passed into silent reflection, their innermost thoughts unknown even to themselves.

That had been so long ago, on the cusp of Matteo's entry into their lives. Dylan could hardly remember his life before their duo had become a trio; Matteo's influence had so comfortably sidled up alongside the normal habits and routines of the other two that it seemed as if they had always been there. It was a kind of glowing presence. A completion.

Ashen, tombstone clouds drifted through the sky, the sun a hazy bulb bobbing in the chill air. A wind rose from off the sea, bending the tips of the pines. Dylan gathered his coat tighter. He thought about Liliana, sure to arrive soon, and tried to smile. He found himself unable to hold it for long. The world seemed to pile atop the corners of his lips. Tia, with her sharp tongue and glittering eyes, or Matteo, with his bobbing golden locks and easy smile, would surely have found a way to sweep away the clouds and bring the sun back to its rightful place. Dylan could not.

Dylan's gaze fell from the sky and came to rest on the ground. He kicked at the gravel by his feet, small pebbles skittering out across the parking lot pavement and into the drainage ditch at the edge of the road.

The road. To the right lay the rest of St. Rita, a slow, winding path up the hill. The crest of the lighthouse and the Mayhew's home were visible even above the tree line, hovering just to the left of the diner's flat roof. Dylan's gaze returned to the road. To the left lay the rest of the world. A place he had never seen. For all he knew, it was just a sea of trees, a wilderness where only beasts still lived. Perhaps all of humanity lay within St. Rita, and the history they were taught in school was a fabrication. They were deterred from venturing further through sheer boredom, kept safe with a pleasant little lie.

*Jessica loved history. That's what Liliana said, at least.*

Dylan had never taken a liking to it.

His bike lay chained to the rack beside him. He turned to it. Rusted and twisting, it still managed to bear the burden of his weight. He didn't like to think of it breaking, even though he knew it was inevitable, could come any day now. It still worked well enough, and it was a reliable thing. He always made sure to change the subject as soon as he could whenever his parents turned to the topic of getting him a car.

His eyes flickered back and forth between the bike and the road. After pulling out from the parking lot of the diner, it continued to the left for a few hundred feet before vanishing past the tree line. No one passed by on foot or otherwise, and the few that sat within the diner had their attention turned elsewhere. How easy it would be to free his bike from the lock, climb atop it, and pedal off down the road away from St. Rita.

He imagined reaching the first intersection, face steaming with sweat, and glancing between the two green signs marking the divided path. In his vision, he

paused for a moment to catch his breath, something glorious resting on the back of his neck. Then, he veered off north, traffic rushing by as he drew closer to the gleaming lights of New York.

According to his parents, he had once left St. Rita with them, had gone to New York on a family trip. They were not an affluent crew, and their money could only stretch thin enough to allow them a short vacation, but it was one they gladly took. Dylan had no memory of it. Julian, his brother, had loved it. He hadn't stopped talking about it for weeks on end.

The wind receded, and Dylan prayed for it to return, to give him something else, something other than his thoughts.

A bird began to squawk as it passed overhead, a dark shadow against Friday's encroaching dusk.

The hurried, clockwork *clacking* of a bike's shifting gears. An easy sound that drifted across the potholed pavement with a satisfying *snap*. Dylan raised his eyes, catching brief glimpses of her from between the trees. At last, she rounded the corner, sweeping into the parking lot, her legs paused as she let gravity guide her way. When her eyes met Dylan's, she smiled, and he smiled back.

Liliana dismounted and guided her bike over to the rack. She pulled the lock from the basket and, bent, fastened it around the body of her bike, laying it to rest beside Dylan's. Then, she straightened, placing her hands on her hips as she stared down at Dylan's own.

"Seems a little old, don't you think?" she asked, lightly nudging the rusted green thing with the tip of her toe.

Dylan shrugged. "Works for me. Never had an issue with it."

The tires were so old that they had to be refilled every other week, and the gears were so ghastly and frayed that he could no longer shift them. They remained stuck at the highest setting; Dylan found no joy in the knowledge that he would

have to bike his way back up the hill to St. Rita proper. His legs ached with the thought. He shuffled about on his feet but said nothing of it.

Liliana bent down before the bike. “Jesus, Dylan, look at this.” She brushed a gentle finger across a jagged piece of metal jutting from the center of the bike’s main body. “You’ll tear yourself up on this thing.”

“It’s not that bad.”

Once, a few years back, he had sliced his knee open on the little dagger. Afraid and unsure, he had told his parents that he and Tia had been messing around near the gym and he had fallen and cut himself on the rusted old fence by the dumpster behind the school. They had taken him to the doctor and given him a shot, and everything had turned out alright. Later, he learned that his parents had told Tia’s, and they had given her, as his mother had called it, “a talking-to.” Knowing her parents, he was sure it had been more than that. He felt guilty, but the bike was safe, and that was enough.

Tia had never said anything of it, but a few hurried, betrayed glances shared in the weeks after told Dylan all he needed to know. She knew about his lie. He hoped they’d gone easy on her, but he was doubtful.

Liliana was watching him, her finger still leveled at the rusty barb sticking out from the body of his bike.

Dylan waved a hand. “It’s fine. It’s fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Let’s go inside. I’m getting cold.” He walked up the steps and opened the door for her, and she stepped inside with a quick glance back at him.

He felt a twinge in his knee, but thought nothing of it, and followed her in.



