

Sophia Kofoed

### **Alabaster Skulls**

The yellow house looked the same as ever  
as we pulled into the circular driveway  
gravel crunching underneath our rental car's tires.  
Bleached alabaster skulls with curled horns grinned  
into the pebbled rocks  
As if to proudly reinforce a midwestern stereotype

Just the wide concrete walkway  
covered in chalk drawings,  
Red flowers, rainbow butterflies, and a sloppily drawn hopscotch square  
Proof my cousins had been there

Led to the two green faded porch swings,  
their fabric torn with time  
and the three generations that had swung on them,  
sipping lemonade in the blistering summer sun

Though desperate to get out of the stuffy car  
after so many hours of travel,  
I leaned back against the too hard fabric of the shiny black SUV  
And closed my eyes  
and thought about life and people  
and my complicated, difficult, lovable family

### **Obsidian Night**

We all quietly gather on the porch,  
Mema, Papa Dave, Dad, Mom, Kiara, and I  
as we gaze onto the desolate golf course,  
Sipping beer and orange juice

Not a word needs to be passed from our lips  
Other than a voiceless understanding.  
The power of silence.

Not a sound echoes through the night

Other than the rush of a slight summer breeze  
Cascading softly through the long grasses  
and rustling our hair.

The deep hoot of a lone owl  
can be heard from the highest peak of a solitary towering pine

The night fades into a rich cobalt blue,  
Bare trees limbs turn into  
Shadowy figures  
Miles of green fading into  
an obsidian night.

### **Storm**

Dad Perched Against Garage  
Strong and Firm  
Light Green Eyes  
So Much Like Mine  
Flashing

Papa Dave  
Arms Crossed  
Defiant and Steady  
A tidal wave declaring its imminent crash

Poseidon and Zeus Preparing for Battle

Thundering Fighting  
No Understanding,  
Just the Coursing Anger  
Permeating the Dry Cracked Air.  
Like Electricity.  
The Words. I Don't Understand.  
"Alcoholic. Treat my Daughters Well. Alcoholic"  
Over and Over like a torrential insatiable storm

As the voices escalate,  
And the winds hurl and the waves rise, and the hail pounds

on the roof like marching soldiers  
Feeling the Storm Weather its Way Into Our Lives  
Will the boat survive the onslaught?

We hide inside,  
the adults gather uneasily on the porch,  
Shifting back and forth,  
Back and forth

Pretend and Talk of Nothing

It Has Always Been the Best Way To Hide.

### **“Kicked Out”**

Years Later,  
the memory of that night  
hangs firmly in my mind  
Imprinted forever,  
etched bitterly into stone

*“Kicked out”*

A Sour Taste In My Mouth  
Like Beer and Orange Juice  
On the Porch  
Stained with a broken promise.  
A voiceless understanding.  
Shattered.

### **Our Return**

Kiara,  
once the toe headed toddler  
Now the seven-year-old little girl  
With straight blond hair,  
a missing front tooth  
And easy contagious laughter

Only a vague memory

of porches and alabaster skulls

Dad, once thick brown hair  
circular accountant glasses,  
and sweatpants  
Now shiny scalp, a sharp black business suit,  
Laughter lines crinkling the edges of his green eyes  
So much like mine.

Me, hair darkened to brown and grown out  
from the fateful days I was called “boy”

I’d grown up, we all had  
five years passed like the flip of a switch  
And suddenly the realization hit of all we had missed

The alabaster skulls, the porch, and the fire  
Mema and Papa Dave,  
Our love, our desires.

So on that day,  
Dad, Kiara, and I boarded a plane  
Not quite having forgiven, Mom abstained.

We arrived in Colorado,  
the snow-topped mountains loomed behind  
As our shiny rental car  
Sped down the desolate freeway line

Dad was glaring at the road,  
His silent frown and intense stare  
Permeated the dry cracked air.

Finally, we turned into the long road  
I remembered,  
New tennis courts, a bleak strip mall, and rows of twin developments,

Yet everything else was exactly as it had been,

Five long years ago,  
the golf course, the grassy front yards,

The long sprawled houses  
my dad had grown up playing at  
And still called by the original occupant's names.

And we begged him to tell the stories of his childhood  
The ones that always upturned his lips.  
He begrudgingly smiled and painted a picture  
about the long summer nights  
Where the neighbor's kids  
joined the four Kofoed siblings

Playing Kick the Can and Star Bright Star Light  
late into the night.

And as we neared Mema and Papa Dave's  
And as we pulled into the circular driveway  
And gazed at the yellow house  
with its old lamppost flickering  
to the beat of my heart

I feel a paradox of emotions,  
happy and sad, nostalgic and wistful  
For the life we could have had.

The house looked the same as ever,  
Yet it was not at all.

But still,  
gravel crunched underneath our rental car's tires.  
Bleached alabaster skulls with curled horns grinned  
into the pebbled rocks

And the buttery yellow paint reminded me  
Of home.

**Back in California**

Back in California,  
Thinking about my family in Colorado.  
My little cousins growing up, and going to elementary school  
Swinging on the old tire swing, running to the pool.

The TV incessantly blasting in the background  
Mema and Papa Dave reading on their leather chairs.

Mirroring their lives back at home,  
Missing them as they grow up  
Kiara starts high school.  
Junior year begins  
And life moves steadily ahead.

### **Papa Dave**

We get the call in the night.  
*Something is just not right.*  
Dad leaves swiftly and quietly on a plane,  
We know that when he returns life will never be the same.

Papa Dave, my dad tells us over the phone,  
his voice heavy and tired,  
*Is in the last stage of his life.*

And with a terrible feeling of De Ja Vu,  
He recounts it all again  
The visits from Hospice, the pain, the morphine,  
My grandfather's face whitening and turning gaunt,

And yet a stubbornness to live  
To see his grandchildren grow  
His mind prevails, even as his body goes.

*Tell him I love him* I say to my dad.  
*That one day I may continue the Kofoed law practice like he had*  
My dad says he will with a weary sigh,  
And I suddenly say goodbye because  
I feel like I'm going to cry.

Is it wrong to wish he peacefully leaves in the night?  
Instead of holding on to such a painful life?

### **Gone with the Hawks**

My mom tells me and my sister after school,  
In my favorite cafe,  
After I've chatted about nothing for 10 minutes.

I'm in shock, it's surreal.

And then a day passes and I realize  
He's gone,  
I'm never going to see Papa Dave again.  
He's never going to sit in the old leather chair in front of the ball game again,  
Or ask us about our plan for the day,  
Or tell us it's beautiful out while propped in front of his newspaper.

My dad calls that night,  
And scratchily asks us how we are.

He tells us how it happened,  
how all four kids were around Papa Dave,  
Giving their unfailing love and their permission for him to go  
His wife and brother-in-law holding his hands,

And how Mema said to him, "Go with the Hawks, Dave, go with the Hawks,"  
And how outside it was dark and cloudy,  
until that moment when the clouds parted  
and the sun beamed down onto the golf course,  
And in the last breath of his life,  
a hovering hawk shrieked  
Outside his window

And then Papa Dave disappeared  
Into that beam of light  
Soaring with the hawks,  
Flying out of sight.

### Ode to Grandma's House

Oh, the nostalgia of sunflowers scattered on wallpaper, of a family of five crowded around a circular enamel table. The memories rendered by the sweet scent of cinnamon sugar covered snickerdoodles and freshly cut grass. Oh, lovely shelves decorated with a colorful array of preserves: orange marmalade, mint jelly, molasses, and strawberry jam, all glowing in the light of the mid-afternoon sun. The padding of cherry-red Mary Janes over faded powder-pink carpet, sneaking about an attempt to play with ancient teddy bears, narrowly avoiding Grandma's piercing eyes. Hours of little eyes glued to a Shirley Temple VHS on repeat and gentle hands cautiously petting a cat named Bubbles, who's not so bubbly personality often brought swipes and hisses to the well-meaning child. Grubby little hands aching to play tea party with precious china, ever wishing to grab hold of porcelain cat figurines, forever out of their reach.

Oh, the strain of the heart missing diving boards and days spent attempting to drown siblings and cousins. Oh the magic of discovering a family of ducks has made their home in the chlorinated water, yearning to hold a little duckling and observe it up close. Oh, the lingering fear of being pushed in by a brother, or the threat of being locked in the spider-infested pool shed. Hot summer days spent longing for cool water to hit sunburned skin, but instead, put to work weeding in the garden. Though, all complaining was forgotten once artichoke leaves were dipped in butter, and corn cobs husked at summer barbecues.

Oh, the phantom sting of a bee's needle on the bottom of a bare foot. The bite of a yellow jacket after the hive, nestled in the corner of the greenhouse, was hit by a wiffleball bat, swung by a bored older brother. Oh, the smiles when pincher bugs were found under garden stones, and the anger of a little girl shooting her brother away after positioning a magnifying glass to shine a dangerous spotlight on her little ladybug friend. Hands slapped away after trying

to sprinkle salt on a snail, attempting a slow escape from the wrath of a destructive child. The flinch of short arms pricked by the thorns on the orange tree, standing on tiptoes, reaching for a refreshing sweet treat. Freckled noses scrunched at the disgust of a worm found in a half rotten apple, fallen from a tree.

Oh, the shiver of staring into blank eyes in black and white photographs of dead ancestors, concocting stories of ghosts that haunted the house. The excitement of closing the chain curtains in front of the fireplace around a little body in the game of hide-and-seek, emerging with a face covered in ash and the fear of future reprimand. The rush of sneaking behind the big chair to sniff the hidden bag of scented pine cones. Sneakily running a finger across the screen of an old TV preparing a weapon in the game of shock tag, poking an older brother in his side as the static electricity leaves the finger and shocks him.

Oh, the sound of car wheels crunching over white, sparkling, wishing stones, and rakes scraping against pavement, piling up leaves to jump into. Oh, the tug of the heart strings when driving by the shopping center that formerly housed the frozen yogurt shop parents would reward their kids with after spending their Sundays at Grandma's. Oh, the tears brought on with thoughts of Grandma's smile, and thick-lensed glasses. Oh, the sobs when reminded of the big backyard tree, planted by a father and his twin brother, where a portion of Grandma's ashes lie.

## That Night

The entire neighborhood woke to Mrs. Keaton's chilling screams ripping through the muggy air. Her cries slowly cut through the sleepy languidness of the street, a knife struggling to sever molasses. Despite the urgency in her voice, no one in the small town of Destrehan, Louisiana, was alarmed. Mrs. Keaton was a living example of the boy who cried wolf, embodied in the form of a crazy old woman with an addiction to martinis.

And so, as Mrs. Keaton carried on, no doubt about ghosts who had supposedly invaded her house, Ida clapped a pillow over her face and groaned. She flapped an arm uselessly at her side in an attempt to close the open window by her bed but soon abandoned the effort.

Ida clenched her teeth in anger, catching the fabric of the pillowcase in her jaw, and stifled the miffed screech that threatened to escape her lips. Someday, she promised herself, she would wail so horribly that even Mrs. Keaton would have to shut her mouth for a minute and listen.

With a grunt, Ida tossed the pillow to the floor and rolled off the bed in one fluid motion. She stumbled to the window and leaned on the sill, peering through the gauzy curtain that fluttered in the humid breeze. Outside, on the front lawn of the house next door, Mrs. Keaton crouched on the grass with her head tilted to the sky. Her howls traveled to the moon and back and for a second, Ida pictured Mrs. Keaton as a werewolf crying to her pack.

Tonight's shrieks were different than the previous night's, though. This time, Mrs. Keaton refused to calm down. As Ida watched, unfeeling, from her window, doors up and down the street swung open and confused homeowners wandered outside toward the woman. Most

people were used to Mrs. Keaton's fits, but Ida couldn't remember her neighbor ever having an episode of this scale.

"Somebody help me!" Mrs. Keaton's noises were becoming interpretable words.

"Somebody help me! Please!"

By now, Ida's father, Sergeant Abbott J. Henson, came rushing out from her house with his bathrobe flapping as he ran. Still, Ida didn't move. She didn't care.

A self-diagnosed sociopath, Ida was convinced that she was emotionless. Ever since discovering WebMD in sixth grade, Ida maintained her prognosis as sociopathic, having never truly cared about another person, at least in her recent memory. It wasn't a condition she flaunted, but whenever someone questioned her disinterested demeanor, she offered sociopathy as a quick, simple answer.

The thin wooden door to her bedroom crashed open, banging against the wall and jolting Ida from her contemplative state. Her mother barged into the room and, upon seeing Ida's typical teenage scowl, narrowed her eyes to match Ida's displeasure.

Cora Henson was a slender woman with large sapphire eyes and perfectly curled hair that bounced just above her shoulders. She ran a small boutique in downtown Destrehan, giving her the position as the town's fashion expert. Cora was always perfectly clothed, even at this late hour of the night, and never failed to look down on her daughter's grungy outfit choices, an opinion that only fueled Ida's desire to rebel against her mother's more classic styles.

Ida greatly resembled her mother, a prospect she wasn't too excited about, no matter how beautiful Cora was, with chestnut hair and the same large, blue eyes. The only difference was the

bleached blond streaks that ran through Ida's stick straight mane and the significant height difference between Cora and Ida, who had always been vertically challenged.

It wasn't any surprise to Ida that her mother was already worked up into a frenzy. Cora's emotions were usually at least ten times the reasonable level of feeling and were showcased all over her body. Ida found this display of concern annoying and fake since it differed so much from her own aloof attitude, but her mother's persona served as a neverending reminder of Cora's failed attempts to break into the Hollywood movie scene in her youth.

"Ida," Cora's southern drawl was almost inaudible over the noise from outside. Ida forced herself to tear her gaze from the live soap opera unfurling next door. "I think Mrs. Keaton might be serious this time. She called the police and everything. Who knows, we might have some true-crime on our hands." Cora wrung her hands with worry but Ida only rolled her eyes. Her mother had been watching too many cable TV shows again.

Glancing back to the open window, Ida observed her father kneel next to Mrs. Keaton as a crowd grew around them. In the distance, police sirens sang their high pitched tune, which sent a nervous buzz through the neighborhood.

"Ida," Cora said softly, her tone losing all its earlier hints of woe, "What's that on your shirt?"

Ida twisted her neck down and pulled her shirt away from her body to get a better view of the stain her mother pointed at. Where her hands left their perch on the windowsill, red handprints rested in their place, seared into the white paint. The same red also clung to the blue silk party shirt she'd worn earlier that evening, a garment she hadn't bothered to remove upon returning home.

Cora caught sight of the handprints and gasped quietly. When Ida's eyes met her mother's, she felt panic travel from Cora's gaze into her body. She shook off the feeling, hating the way it churned her insides, and reminded herself of her self-proclaimed medical status.

Cora took a shaky breath and looked away. "Get cleaned up and come downstairs to watch your siblings. I have a feeling your father and I will be dealing with this drama for a while." She left in a hurry and shut the door behind her.

The only light in Ida's bedroom entered from the window. As more lights flicked on in the houses across the street, her room grew a tiny bit brighter, but still not illuminated enough for Ida to interpret the extent of the red splotches.

She racked her brain for their origin but found none. It was a rare occurrence that Ida's memory was inoperable, but she wasn't alarmed. The only thing she could do, she reasoned, would be to retrace her steps from that night.

Ida settled back on one of the pillows that lined the small bench under her window. From this vantage point, she could easily keep track of her small bedroom and the events unfolding on the street below at the same time. Mrs. Keaton was becoming progressively quieter and the flashes of blue and red police lights gleamed on the sides of the houses as the cars approached.

She breathed in slowly and strained her mind to remember.

Destrehan High School was always teeming with energy, but more excitement than ever pulsed in the air that afternoon. The school year was winding down and most seniors had given up caring about grades, teachers, and school itself. At that point, everybody who had a chance at

a successful future had already enrolled in college for the coming fall. With only one week left of education, Beau Carlisle was hosting a huge party that night.

Beau Carlisle was the most popular guy in school. Ida grimaced just thinking about him. His name was on the tongue of every single person in her grade at all times. Beau Carlisle was the most stereotypical rich, white southern boy Ida could think of. His perfection was even more accurate than Zac Efron's golden-boy performance in *High School Musical*.

When the final bell rang at the end of the day, Ida made a beeline for the bathrooms and changed into a new outfit as the school emptied of students. She didn't feel like going home. Instead, she would head straight to Beau's for a pre-party before the main event began.

In the dirty bathroom stall, Ida stripped off her black jeans and replaced them with shorts of the same color and material. As she pulled the jeans from her skin, a chill passed through her body as her legs were freed from the confines of her pants and exposed to the hot air. Her shirt was changed as well, and when Ida emerged from the stall, a spaghetti-strap, ocean blue silk shirt hung from her small frame.

Within minutes, Ida was pulling out of the now-empty school parking lot and driving south down the main road through town, Ormond Boulevard, toward Beau's house near the Mississippi River. At this time of day, the roads were fairly quiet, occupied only by fellow students making their way home.

Ida's old car bumped over potholes and grumbled angrily every time she stopped and started again at a stoplight. The eleven-year-old Volvo had been a gift from her grandfather who had decided to upgrade his vehicle when he moved to Florida after retiring. It clunked along, spitting exhaust until Ida reached the end of Ormond Boulevard and the fork that marked the end

of the road. From there, she turned right onto River Road and Beau's antebellum mansion came into view.

Ida wasn't sure how to characterize her relationship with Beau. He was the boyfriend of Lala Keaton, a girl who matched him in popularity and beauty. Lala and Ida had grown up next door to each other and lived in Destrehan their entire lives, only leaving Louisiana on a school trip in their sophomore year of high school. It was Mrs. Keaton who had brought them together, strangely enough, and the girls had bonded over the woman's mid-life crisis that resulted in her absurd belief in ghosts.

Ever since Lala had gotten together with Beau, Ida's popularity had suddenly increased. She didn't mind Lala's relationship, that was the benefit of being heartless, but she detested the false niceties of the people who used her as a way to enter the "inner circle." Ida spent most of her time avoiding small talk and almost all forms of communication, but her new social status had made her involuntarily change her ways. It was the only reason she was excited for the pre-party. Perhaps now she could avoid pointless conversation and focus on Lala and Beau's rambunctious but entertaining friends.

The black wrought iron gate creaked as it opened automatically for her, revealing the beautiful estate inside the fortifications. Tall white pillars rose up from a large front porch at the front of the house and stretched up to reach the roof two stories above. A large front lawn set the home back from the street and on the other side of the road, an expanse of green grass and trees preceded a view of the river. It was cooler here, closer to the water, and Ida allowed herself to spend a few seconds soaking up the air before leaving the car unlocked, tossing the keys on the passenger seat, and making her way up the stairs to ring the doorbell of the Carlisle residence.

The gate would keep out any intrusions and, even if it didn't, she didn't much care whether sedan was stolen anyway.

The police were inside Mrs. Keaton's house now and shouts rang out through the confused neighborhood. Ida allowed herself to abandon her memory search for a minute and internally wondered about Mrs. Keaton. Lala wasn't with her mother, which was odd, Ida admitted, but other than that, she had a feeling all this turmoil was just the community overreacting. She figured that Lala was still at Beau's house.

An image flashed in Ida's vision: Lala lying on the floor, completely still, blood pooling around her lifeless body. For the first time in seven years, Ida's heart raced and her pulse pounded in her ears. The red spots in her bedroom looked more and more like blood. The remaining liquid on her hands had dried sticky and was flaking off. When Ida licked her finger tentatively, a tang of salty copper lingered in her mouth even after she swallowed.

An hour after Ida arrived at Beau's house, she lay giggling on the floor of the common room on the second floor of the large house. Being an only child, Beau usually had free rein over the property when his father, a successful lawyer, traveled out of town for cases, bringing Mrs. Carlisle along with him. Ida was stoned and tipsy at the same time, but not as far gone as Lala and the others, some of Beau's friends from the football team, who struggled to walk in straight lines and form coherent sentences.

Lala danced, flailing her arms, knees buckling and almost falling every few seconds. A red Solo cup sloshed liquid onto the floor whenever she faltered, but Lala didn't care. A waterfall

of wavy platinum-blond hair cascaded down her back, lighter than Beau's color, and her brown eyes were closed as she swayed to the music that played over Beau's portable wireless speaker.

The other boys watched Lala in a trance, a few getting up to dance with her, but with a stern look from Beau, they quickly fell to the floor once again.

Beau was soberer than the rest of them and he watched like the king of the castle from his spot on the upholstered sofa. He lounged, body stretched across the pillows and manspreading.

Somehow, Ida mustered the energy to hoist herself up and flop onto the couch. She rolled onto her side and laughed at her incompetence. Her head rested on Beau's lap and she could feel his stomach move as he chuckled.

In her right mind, she would know this action was wrong. She shouldn't have been touching Beau, let alone been using him as a backrest, but her foggy brain was struggling with discerning right from wrong.

She wasn't sure how much time passed before he spoke, but his voice vibrated through his body and Ida's heart fluttered ever so slightly.

"Lala's great, ain't she?" His eyes were trained on Lala, who was spinning in slow circles and pouring alcohol from her cup into the waiting mouths of Beau's friends. She cast a fleeting look at Ida and both girls threw their heads back in laughter.

Bringing her attention back to the conversation, Ida pondered Beau's words. The rhetorical question seemed hilarious to her. Of course, Lala was amazing. She was the figurehead on the ship of optimism. Her priorities were straight, her goals were set, and no one had any doubt she would make it out of Destrehan.

"Yep," she sighed. "She's something, alright."

Beau grunted his agreement. "I just wish she was a bit more honest," he said wistfully.

On shaky arms, Ida pushed herself up and stared at Beau. The contents of her stomach swished and did a loop-de-loop inside her, and Ida barely stopped herself from vomiting. "What do you mean, 'more honest'?"

"She's not truthful with nobody. Not you, not me, no one."

"What are you even saying?" she demanded defensively. It wasn't any secret that marijuana made Ida's emotions flare-up, all the feelings she tried to suppress.

Beau raised his hands in submission as if to protect himself from an attack. "Come on, now. Don't pitch a fit. Y'know I'm right."

Slowly, Ida felt her burst of anger recede and she returned to a more normal state.

When Beau could see she had calmed down, he continued his analysis of Lala. "She's lying to you."

Ida sat back on the cushions and huffed. The weed vaporizers sat on the glass coffee table in front of them and Ida was tempted to take another hit, even though she couldn't be sure which one belonged to her. "What's she lying to me about?" She asked the question more to humor Beau and protect his ego rather than to actually find out.

But Beau wasted no time in his response. "She says all kinds of crap behind your back. She don't like you no more, she says. She just feels obligated to stay friends with you."

Ida shrugged in response, but her face did a terrible job of concealing her disbelief. Instead, she focused on Beau's poor use of grammar, typical for southerners. "She'd never say that," she croaked. Her throat had grown scratchy from the weed and she had a sharp craving for water all of a sudden.

“Believe what you want,” Beau said, “But I ain’t lyin’. Not like her.”

“What’d she ever do to you?”

“She took my life and made it hers.”

Ida had no response. She was in no position to answer such a ridiculous statement in her current stupor. Part of her thought no, Beau was just trying to stir the pot between Ida and Lala, but the other half argued that he was being truthful. Maybe she couldn’t trust her friend.

Beau preyed on the weaknesses of others, this Ida knew, but she had always prided herself on her inability to feel, and thus have nothing that Beau could manipulate. In her weakened state of mind, however, Ida’s walls came crashing down and her sociopathic protective devices did not work properly. And so, when Beau offered her a drink from a random Solo cup he handed her, she didn’t question its contents. She didn’t ask where he’d gotten the mysterious liquid and the small, white pill that fizzed at the bottom. She didn’t watch him create the beverage. But Beau watched Ida as she tipped it back and swallowed every drop.

From there, Ida remembered only bits and pieces. She vaguely recalled Beau’s voice in her ear, urging her to rid the world of the horrible Lala Keaton, a pretty princess who pretended to be everyone’s friend. She could feel the weight of the knife he’d pressed into her hand, telling her to hide it in her waistband until she got home. Lala and Beau’s words floated aimlessly in her head. Assembling their meanings to create an intelligible series of events proved challenging, but random flashes of Lala and Beau driving her home surfaced, providing a more comprehensible narrative. She thought of the burn of her knee scraping the pavement as Beau and Lala helped

her up the walkway to the Keatons' house. She remembered Lala and Beau yelling, arguing over Ida's convulsing body when she lay on the floor of Lala's tidy bedroom.

And then she evoked the memory of blood. Lala's blood. It had spread like water, seeping into Lala's grey carpeted floor and releasing a foul stench into the air.

Beau had stood over them, stoic, his light hair frazzled and stuck to his forehead with sweat. Ida cried, silently at first, and then louder. She cried when Beau wrapped his bloody arms around her, when he spoke words that traveled in one ear and out the other, and when Ida gingerly reached out and closed Lala's beautiful hazel eyes. Two bloodstains were left on Lala's eyelids where Ida's fingers brushed her friend's skin.

*No*, Ida thought. She forced the onslaught of memories from her mind, shaking her head vigorously as if to dislodge the grotesque images that swept her brain. She couldn't have killed Lala. It was all just a violent dream.

She reached down and brushed her knee. Sure enough, a dirty scrape stretched across the kneecap.

Ida's breath hitched.

She jumped to her feet, running to the en suite bathroom and flicking the light switch. Staring in the mirror, she saw the map of her night clearly laid out on her body.

Blood, caked on her skin, covered her arms, parts of her legs, and her face. It was matted in her hair, causing the brown locks to stick off in strange angles. Her face was screwed into an expression of horror and her eyes had widened even further than her mother's.

It was all there. The cut on her knee, the blood, the evidence. She was the textbook definition of the perfect suspect. But Ida had no idea whether she was the perpetrator.

Ida's head whirled back to face the window when the police yelled "homicide". Her heart dropped to her feet. She hadn't fully accepted Lala's fate, but there it was, plain and simple.

Her father's gruff voice floated into the house as he took charge of the police force, no doubt still in his pajamas. The paramedics would be arriving soon to declare what everyone already knew: Lala Keaton was dead.

Ida sprinted down the stairs to the kitchen, tripping over her feet, and sped out the open front door. At that moment, she didn't care what the consequences were. She just had to get out of that room.

Her mother saw her first. As Ida weaved her way through the crowd, Cora made a failed attempt to grab her arm and pull her back to the safety of their home. Ida's brain was working overtime. Thousands of scenarios played out in her head, each ending with Ida spending the rest of her life in prison.

Even if she wanted to turn back, it was too late. Ida collapsed on the Keatons' lawn at her father's feet.

Seven years without emotions vanished in the blink of an eye. Cold metal cuffs clamped down on Ida's wrists and she was yanked to her feet. She could see parents' lips moving in slow motion, protesting her arrest, but Ida didn't fight the inevitable. She deserved what she was getting.

A mustached policeman put a hand on her head and guided her into the squad car. Its sirens still wailed, red and blue flashes tinting the world the colors of law, order, and somewhat ironically, America, a country that prioritized freedom and justice for all.

The car door closed with a slam and caught a stray strand of Ida's hair, forcing her head to lie flat against the seatback. Her head twisted away from the Keatons' house, the home where Lala had begun and ended her life.

Alternatively, she gazed across the street to where a lone figure stood in the darkness. To interpret the man's features, Ida had to squint as the sirens' lights glinted off a metal object in his hand.

With a knife clutched to his side and covered in dark blood, Beau Carlisle stood watching the proceedings. Beau Carlisle with... the murder weapon.

Ida was done pretending to be a sociopath. It was stupid to have even thought she could maintain an aura of cryptic indifference. With every ounce of willpower still left in her body, she released a scream that curdled the blood of every person, breathing or not, in Destrehan. Her legs thrashed out and kicked the seat in front of her and her neck spasmed, launching her skull painfully against the headrest.

For the first time in seven years, Ida cared. She cared about Lala's death, her own role in the killing, and Beau, who would never turn himself in to the cops. She wasn't even sure if Beau had done anything wrong, and she cared about that, too.

Tears blossomed like flowers in her eyes and snaked pathways down her cheeks through the blood and grime. Ida continued to roar. She would never stop.

Maybe WebMD had been right. Maybe there was something wrong with her. Maybe, instead of being sociopathic, she was actually psychotic.

Every nerve was on fire and intense pain took over her body, the outcome of either the drugs or her mental suffering. Beau Carlisle would never tell his story to the prosecutors who would throw her in jail. She would never clear her name. She could never make things right.

It was hopeless.

The car engine revved and they pulled away from the Keatons' house, Ida's eyes never once leaving Beau. A sadistic smile contorted his face and he presented a sarcastic salute while the car with its patriotic lights zoomed off. Realizing her hands were cuffed, Ida cursed herself for not being able to send Beau the middle finger in response.

The cop car's sounds couldn't mask Ida's cries. At least she'd achieved one goal, she admitted to herself. After all this time, Mrs. Keaton wasn't the most deafening shrieker on the block.

Upon realizing this fact, Ida started laughing, which only received troubled looks from the police officers in the front seats. Her crazed cackles filled the automobile. This entire ordeal was ridiculous. Within the span of a few hours, her entire future had been thrown away.

Lala was dead.

It was probably Ida's fault.

Possibly, Beau had committed the crime, but he seemed perfectly content allowing Ida to take the fall.

No one would ever know what happened that night. Lala, the only person in the world who knew the truth, other than Beau, was on her way to heaven. Sitting in the back of the police car, Ida went over what she *did* know, which was pretty much nothing.

Only one thing was certain: Ida wasn't a sociopath anymore. And she hated it.

Dear Class of 2020,

I am so proud of us. The world has thrown at us what it thought we could not handle— but we have prevailed. Together we have faced tremendous change, disillusionment, and destruction, and have come out as resilient, courageous, and powerful leaders. Each and every one of us a part of momentous history.

We were born during 9/11. Some of us wailed in our diapers as our parents made frantic phone calls, watching as news stations on TV displayed billowing smoke leaving the lungs of the towering buildings. Others of us listened to the broadcasts quietly, in the safety of our mothers' wombs. Together, our families share the fear of bringing new life, us, into the world during a time of such terror. But still, we came.

We grew up together, and we really grew up *together*, before tablets and smartphones could bring anybody apart. Instead of being glued to cell phone screens, we traded Hot Wheels and braided Barbie's hair. We learned how to scrape our knees on the sidewalk and climb the tallest trees before we learned what the phrase "social media" meant. We had raw, gritty childhoods. Some of the last of its kind.

We played hopscotch and double-dutch at school while our parents were at home, feeling the hit of the 2008 recession. We watched, oblivious, as our parents lost money, jobs, houses. We saw the paperwork, the "For Sale" signs, and heard the distressed phone calls. We shared the feelings of our parents, debilitated. We offered all the help our little second, then third grade hands could.

We held each other's hands at school when Sandy Hook, then Parkland shook us. We had the same nightmares. We pulled down blinds, locked doors, and hid beneath wood and metal in the dark. We were silent together. We shared a fear of hearing gunshots during 10 AM Algebra. We listened to the horror stories of other students whose nightmares turned into reality. We held on to each other.

We wiped each other's tears when we lost some of our own to death, and then to suicide. We cried, we prayed, we raged together. We mourned. We hugged each other tighter than ever before.

We stayed up countless hours through the night, cramming for exams. We studied, and studied again, and then studied some more. We pushed ourselves past points we didn't know we could even reach. Our lives were flooded with standardized tests, daily exams, and essay drafts. Academic pressure became our closest enemy. But we pushed on, in hopes of being "enough" for the most strenuous, demanding college standards in history.

We shared face masks when wildfire air filled the hallways and lunch spaces. We stood together, pointing up at the red sun, hiding behind thick grey, orange dust. We cried out at our television screens as images of melting ice, forests aflame, and dying animals flashed before us. We held in our hearts the ache of the planet, the damage that past generations left for us.

And just as we thought we would finally get to celebrate and enjoy our final days together, we face a global pandemic. We sit in bed, forcefully separated from each other, watching the sun move up and down the sky.

But I am not afraid, Class of 2020, because we held on then, and we will hold on now. We will not give up our fight. Have faith that after the storm, the sun will come out, and our flowers will bloom. We will have our time to shine. We just have to hold on to each other, this one last time.

With love,

\*Me, Class of 2020

## The Curse of Chance

Chances. People always say “oh you’ll get a second chance” or “you’re lucky you have another chance”. But sometimes you don’t get a second chance. Sometimes you don’t want a second chance. Chance never existed in my family. Things just happened.

My younger brother, who was eight at the time, was hitting me on the head with a stick, then proceeding to pretend to shoot me with a gun.

“Espera Sebastian!” I pushed him away angrily, knocking the stick out of his hand. I was trying to concentrate, making words in the mud in front of our small home in Escuintla, Guatemala. Someday, I hoped to have all the paper in the world, and many pencils that wouldn’t break into pieces when I tried to write.

“But I want to play with you...” he whined, his big hazel eyes widening with mock sadness.

“Can we play later-” I began to ask, but one look at his face mollified my feelings of annoyance. “I’m gonna get you!” I poked him in the chest, and he started to run.

Our yard wasn’t big, small actually, it was just a lot of dirt, but we went outside every day. Sebastian began to run outside of our broken, off white, gate, and into the street, his dark chocolate colored curls bouncing on his head. His hair. That was something I have to admit, I was envious of. My hair was darker, and straighter. Like mama’s. My brother got my papa’s hair.

“Sebastian,” I warned him. He turned around in the street, and stuck his tongue out at me.

“Que vas a hacer?” He laughed, “Whatcha gonna do?” Then, an old pick up truck comes out of nowhere, speeding down our narrow street.

“Cuidado!” I shouted, running into the street in front of him. The truck reached a halting stop, and three men got out. I shrunk back, recognizing them. They were part of my father’s gang. Señores de la Drogas, the Drug Lords. I stood up a little straighter, remembering what mama told me.

“Don’t let them see you’re scared..” The nights Papa came home, I could hear my parents arguing in raised whispers. I knew my mama disapproved of my papa being in a gang, but there wasn’t anything we could do to change it.

*I was four years old when Papa first tried to leave Los Senores. He came home telling us to pack our things. Mama (who was almost due with Sebastian) didn’t hesitate but began to pack silently.*

*“Que paso?” I repeated over and over again, my small mind struggling to comprehend the situation.*

*“Nada hija” Papa repeated, “Estamos empezando de nuevo, we are starting new”. I didn’t understand what this meant, but I trailed behind my parents as we slipped out of our house. I remember being so excited about all the stars in the sky-a whole canvas of possibilities. I quickly found out that these stars were too far for our family to reach.*

I began to ask what they were doing here, but the words had yet to come out, when my mama came running out of the house. Her typically neat appearance was frazzled, her hair astray, and her apron half on. We had all been on edge seeing as papa hadn’t returned home in two days. It was typical of him to be gone one night, but two...

*We thought leaving at night would work, that Los Senores would never know. But we were wrong. They came up beside us silently.*

*“A donde vas?” they asked, their voices rough. “Where are you going without us?” I could hear the sharp intake of Mama’s breath.*

*“No puedo continuar...” Papa responded. “I can’t continue my father’s legacy, this life isn’t meant for me.”*

*“How do you expect to survive then?” They laughed, “You don’t expect to find work in the United States...”*

*“We will find our way.” He said firmly, his voice so confident, so sure.*

“Maria,” she said tersely under her breath. “Take Sebastian inside.” I opened my mouth to say I am old enough, but she shook her head, and pointed to the house. I grabbed Sebastian by the arm, and pull him inside, pushing the door so hard that it almost falls off its hinges as it closes. I then ran over to our window, trying to make out through the thick coat of dirt what was going on. Another man steps out of the car. Papa. But something wasn’t right. My Papa visibly wore an expression of fear, an expression I’d never seen papa wear.

“Samuel,” my mama took a step towards him. Then I saw it. One of the men reached towards their pocket, placing their hand on a black object. It processed in my mind, and a panic enveloped me. I ran over to the door, slamming it open.

“Mama, papa, cuidado, a gun!” I shouted.

“Maria, stay..” My papa said to me, his voice wavering. He had his hand in front of him, defensively, locking eyes with the man.

“We can work this out,” Papa lowers his hand, “no me iré, I won’t leave.” He kept repeating this in a calm, slow voice, as if trying to reason with a toddler. Then he moves, pinning the man to the ground, wrenching the gun from his hand.

“Samuel, no!” Mama yelled fiercely. I looked at papa, who had the gun pointed at the man’s head. I felt a warm breath down my neck, and I shivered, turning around to feel cold metal pressed against my face.

“You shoot, she dies.” a voice says roughly. I look up to see a tall man with a long, black beard. His small eyes narrowed into slits, and he smiled at me, his teeth black.

Both my parents turn.

“Let go of my daughter!” mama snarled, “No tienes derecho, you have no right!” She turned to papa. “Samuel, drop the gun.”

Papa slowly lowered the gun, his brows furrowed, and his eyes reflecting the worry in mamas.

*Los Senores forced our hands behind our backs. Papa tried to struggle free, but eventually stopped. I whimpered silently as the men roughly grabbed me, forcing a sack over my eyes. I began to cry.*

*“No puedo ver las estrellas, I can’t see the stars.” I cried.*

*“Shhh.” I felt Mama’s hand on mine.*

*Los Senores burned the few possessions we had, all while I sat shivering in a blanket of darkness. This incident disappeared, just like the stars, but not without a trace.*

“Drop it.” The man says, motioning with his other hand to the gun Papa has.

Papa started to run towards me, his eyes brimming with tears.

“Mari-” he starts to say, but he never finished. There is a loud bang, and a piercing ringing filled my ears. Papa fell to the ground, a dark red stain quickly spreading across his back, like paint spreading across a paper, staining his blue shirt.

Another bullet hit him, and the dark red stain continued to engulf him.

I let out a hoarse scream foreign to my ears, running towards him and falling to my knees, tiny rocks biting my skin.

“Voy a matarte!” mama screamed.

*Guatemala isn't a place you live and expect to be safe. I learned this after I lost sight of the stars. But I still didn't understand why we couldn't just leave. The day after our neighbor was shot, I brought up the question to Papa.*

*“Why don't we leave?” I asked, my small mind confused. Papa shared a sad glance with Mama. “Why?” I repeated, “If we can have a better life in another place that is safe?” Papa shook his head.*

*“This is the life we were given.” He says slowly, his soft brown eyes looking into mine. “Come here mija,” he motions to me. I walk over and hesitantly sit on his lap. “God gave us a life that is meant for our family, a life that we can't leave.” He took a breath and glanced at Mama and she gave a discreet nod.*

*“God knew that we would make the best out of our chance at life”.*

*As I got older, I found out the reason our neighbor was shot. It was because he tried to leave. He tried to find a second chance, but God didn't give him one.*

I felt my face hardening, and I slowly got up. I remembered Sebastian taunting me earlier “Whatcha gonna do Maria?” His voice runs through my head.

I barely heard the screech of tires as the men drive away. I barely saw my mother fall to the ground next to me. All I heard was the bang of a gun. All I saw is the red that came from Papa.

It seems his blood tainted my thoughts and I ran after the car screaming. But I couldn't hear myself. I just heard the bang. On repeat, as if my mind hopes for a different outcome each time.

Bang.

It is then I realized those sounds aren't fragments of my imagination. But they were real.

If there is a God out there, I have a question: Why me?

My father didn't get a second chance at life.

My mother didn't get a second chance at life.

My brother didn't get a second chance at life.

But I did. Why?

I don't want another chance to relive this life.

## Conversations with Satan

A clarion bell rang in the distance, signaling the end of the morning work shift. Eager to leave the dank hall, Talia stood quickly and her wooden bench squeaked angrily as it rubbed the coarse stone floor. Talia scurried past the other Readers as she rushed toward freedom, earning a few peevish looks from her colleagues, and made her way to the large wooden doors at the end of the hall.

Outside was not much better than indoors. Crisp, moist air clung to Talia's skin and she clutched her robes tightly around her, although they did nothing to keep her from shivering. In the courtyard, members of the House of Lore were milling about, leisurely strolling to the dining hall a few blocks up the cobblestone street. Vibrant trees shed leaves into the swirling wind and Talia daydreamed that it was magic that ruffled her hair and tangled her robes, not ordinary air.

"Talia!" Talia whirled around and searched the crowd for the source of the voice. As she spun, her long brown braid smacked her cheek and Talia rubbed the skin with her palm in annoyance. Everybody in the House of Lore sported overly lengthy hair, and Talia absolutely detested it. She found it inconvenient to tame her locks every morning before work, using only a ratty old brush and the broken mirror in her tiny bathroom.

Talia was about to abandon her search and turn back to her voyage for lunch when Aelia fell in step beside her. "I can't believe you were just going to leave without me," Aelia scowled and nudged Talia's shoulder playfully.

Talia grinned and rolled her eyes at her friend. Aelia was a prodigy Reader who worked across the courtyard from Talia's dreadful building. Her superiority was made clear by the intricate robes she wore, which were decorated with ancient runes and mythological scenes that

sometimes proved not so fantastical. Aelia held the coveted position of Reader of Fate, a job every Reader in the House of Lore strived for. Talia had long ago given up any goal she had of achieving this office. She had enough trouble deciphering simple ancient texts. She would never be able to comprehend the elaborate language of the future.

Talia had grown up in Balbina, the town where the House of Lore was located, and had been trained to be a Reader her whole life. An unpromising orphan, Talia was easily the least qualified Reader in the House and rarely fulfilled her duties punctually and accurately. Due to her general ineptitude, Talia made only enough to afford a dilapidated apartment situated over the robe outfitters' store in Balbina, a block away from the central dining hall. Her role was straightforward, by the other readers' standards, but immensely complex to Talia, who spent hours pondering over passages in history tomes and writing reports that should have taken her minutes. She was so incompetent that the head Readers would not even let her read the more interesting volumes of magic and myth that advanced members used.

Aelia looped her arm through the crook of Talia's elbow and the girls continued their walk toward the grand dining hall, brushing past other Readers as they went. The uneven cobblestone ground was lost in a sea of swooshing evergreen robes and autumn foliage.

"How was it today?" Aelia asked optimistically, but her face signaled that she already knew the answer.

Talia groaned and shook her head as if trying to jolt the boring memories from her brain. "Terrible," she said finally after racking her mind for a harsher criticism but finding nothing. "If I'm stuck in that room *reading* for the rest of my life, my time on this planet will be extremely short."

Aelia laughed and squeezed Talia's arm sympathetically, her perfectly proportionate face growing more cheerful with amusement. Aelia's physical flawlessness was just one more thing Talia was jealous of, something she would never tell her friend.

"Please don't die," Aelia pleaded jokingly. "I'll have no one interesting to talk to."

"At least you wouldn't be able to torture me with how slow you walk."

Aelia punched Talia lightly and darted ahead to showcase her newfound speed. About to follow, Talia jogged a few steps before a loud voice made everything stand still.

In the square behind her, a regal black carriage driven by dark horses was parked amid curious Readers. On the carriage door, the crest of the House of Mortem was painted in blood-red and a sharply dressed man stood on an intricate footstool in front of it. He faced the crowd with arrogant certainty and Talia immediately noted, with envy, that the middle-aged man's silver hair was cropped much shorter than the average style in Balbina.

But that piece of information was clouded by the fact that he had said her name. Shouted it, in fact, to the entire society of Readers.

One by one, heads turned in Talia's direction, seeking her out, and Talia felt the full weight of the stares from every member of the House of Lore. As if in a choreographed dance, the Readers parted and cleared a path that would lead Talia to the center of the square and the carriage that seemed to be waiting for her. But Talia didn't move. Her mouth hung open, gaping, her hazel eyes frozen wide in shock, and rosiness crept from her neck to her cheeks in response to all the attention. She felt Aelia return to her side, but Talia could not muster the resolve to turn and face her or internalize the words Aelia whispered.

The man at the carriage cleared his throat, a deafening sound against the sudden background of silence. Even the wind stopped whistling to listen to the strange visitor.

“Talia Harlen,” said the formidable man, “The High Priest of the Mortal Realm requires your presence at Inferos by tomorrow evening. You will now be escorted to the Court of Diablo where you will receive further instructions.”

The crowd murmured uncomfortably, casting wary glances from Talia to the man, then back again. Talia clasped her clammy hands and shuddered from cold and fear. As far as Talia knew, no Reader had ever been called to the Court of Diablo in Inferos, the capital where the House of Mortem ruled over the Mortal Realm, dictating tasks to societies such as the House of Lore and the House of Magus, which dealt with sorcery. Representatives of the House of Magus frequented the capital, but few Readers entered its towering walls, having been deemed too “unimportant” by the House of Mortem to experience the majesty of Inferos.

“Talia,” Aelia’s panicked tone broke her trance. “What are you going to do?”

Swallowing the bile that was accumulating at the base of her throat, Talia set her shoulders back and forced a display of courage onto her features. “I don’t think I have much of a choice,” she replied.

The carriage bumped over the unpaved road, tossing Talia’s breakfast like a salad in her stomach. She had pressed herself into a corner of a carriage and now gripped the velvet seat to steady herself with each jolt. Every time the cabin rocked, Talia’s cloaked knees brushed the legs of the man sitting across from her. He was closer to Talia’s age than Ignatius, the older man who had made the announcement in Balbina, and had stayed in the carriage during the proceedings.

Like Ignatius, Julius, as she had been instructed to call him, constantly wore a cocky expression, even as he surveyed her with mild disgust. Their frigid demeanors caused Talia to avoid meeting their gazes and instead to turn her attention to the surrounding landscape.

Outside, tall trees bordered the road on both sides and swayed in the breeze. The sky was the same gloomy gray as it usually was, but nothing was normal about Talia's current predicament. They were miles from Balbina, miles from the only place Talia had ever known. She had no idea how far they were from Inferos, but Talia's heart sunk further with every mile they traveled.

Answering her unspoken question, Julius said, "It will be a while until we get there. Might as well get comfortable."

Talia snuck a glance at him and instantly regretted it. His mouth was twisted in an unnerving smirk, his unruly dark hair the same color as his eyes: pitch black with a hint of recklessness.

Ignatius's stubbled face contorted into an even more painful glower as he regarded his companion. "What Julius means to say is that the trip will be quite extensive and you should be prepared to settle in for another few hours."

Talia nodded but did not say anything. Ignatius and Julius wore similar outfits, black suits with gold embroidery and crimson lapels, but an insignia on the breast pocket of Ignatius's jacket symbolized his higher status within the House of Mortem. Silently, she remarked on Ignatius's odd behavior toward her. It was almost as if he were... afraid of her presence.

But that couldn't be true, Talia thought to herself. The House of Mortem bridged the Mortal Realm with the After World. They were the practitioners of dark magic, the summoners

of the Devil, the rejectors of Heaven, and the worshippers of Hell. If anyone had reason to fear, it was most certainly Talia.

“We’re not afraid of you,” Julius snapped, and this time, Talia knew his words were not a coincidence.

“How did you--,” she began but halted as soon as she noticed Julius’s smug smile.

Ignatius sighed and flicked a gray strand from his eyes. “Julius is a Mind Reader; that is his purpose in the House of Mortem. Much like your Readers in your House of... Lore.” He said the words with such contempt that Talia had to clench down on her lip to keep from offering a fiery remark in return.

Julius chuckled, aware of the anger in her mind, but Talia ignored him. “And what would you know about my House?” Talia retorted. “You are the first people from the House of Mortem to visit Balbina in my lifetime. Surely you can’t so quickly judge what you have barely seen.”

Julius sucked in a small breath almost inaudibly, but Ignatius only appeared entertained. “The House of Lore is perhaps the most disappointing establishment in the Mortal Realm,” Ignatius explained in an inflection that was so obnoxiously intelligent it made Talia want to jump from the vehicle. “Again and again they disappoint us. It has been a long time since the Readers have made a useful discovery. One wrong step and their existence will be in jeopardy.”

Redness flamed between Talia’s ears as she searched for a rebuttal. “If the Readers are so worthless, then why am *I*, the most ineffective Reader, being kidnapped to Inferos?”

“You’re right,” said Julius, leaning forward and destroying his previously relaxed, lounging position on the seat. “You should be completely irrelevant to the Mortal Realm. I *wish* you were as unimportant as you say. Sadly, Satan himself, through the High Priest, of course,

commands you to be his connection to the Mortal Realm. You are the connection between life and death.” Seeing her astonishment, he added, “It’s an extremely coveted role, which you do not deserve to have.”

Talia cast her most withering glare at him and cursed his name in her mind, knowing he could hear her insults. “Is this true?” Talia turned her attention back to Ignatius, anything to avoid Julius’s sly face. “Am I supposed to meet Satan?”

Ignatius nodded slowly, the creases around his eyes crinkling with worry, and a pit opened in Talia’s stomach. “Tomorrow you will enter the Netherworld, the small space between the Mortal Realm and Hell, and be accepted by Satan.”

“And what if Satan doesn’t accept me?”

Ignatius sighed, suddenly uncomfortable with the speech he was required to deliver. “For everyone’s sake, let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

Talia sat back with her heart pounding in her ears. Never had she imagined her life to look like this. As much as she despised Ignatius and Julius for stealing her from her home, she couldn’t help but feel attached to them now. It seemed as if they were the only people standing between her and certain doom.

Across from her, Julius’s expression softened, no doubt his reaction to listening to her horrifying thoughts, but Talia did not want his pity. Training her gaze out the window, she rode the rest of the trip in silence and studied the dark spires that rose out of the trees in the distance, marking the outskirts of Inferos, the Devil’s city.

The next evening, Talia stood in the Court of Diablo before the High Priest of the Mortal Realm dressed in a flowing ebony dress with a ruby-encrusted bodice and a long train covered in diamonds that shimmered like stars. Her hair was swept into an impeccable updo and tall gloves that matched her gown covered her arms past her elbows. She felt more beautiful than she ever had before, but her excitement at her appearance was overwhelmed by the sinking feeling in her gut.

The past twenty-four hours were a blur. After arriving at the gothic palace surrounding the Court, Talia had been whisked to a plush room in the eastern tower to sleep. Julius, who was evidently her chaperone, whether she liked it or not, had stayed just outside her door all night. When she peeped into the hall the next morning, he was still there.

Now Julius and Ignatius stood a few steps back on either side of her ornate skirt as she faced the High Priest. All day, Talia had been trapped in a room with frantic maids and stylists in an attempt to make her more presentable and Talia's feet were beginning to cramp from standing in teetering high heels. Her apparel was so heavy that Talia was already sweating from the exertion of simply standing.

The High Priest was dressed similarly to Talia, though his garb was a little more understated. His power was made clear by the tall bejeweled Mitre hat perched atop his balding head with a scene of the Devil meeting his followers illustrated on it in rhinestones.

Talia had zoned out of the entire ceremony, overcome with anxiety, but she snapped back to reality when the High Priest murmured some alarmingly esoteric words and began reaching toward her. Talia resisted the urge to pull away and bit the inside of her lip to distract herself from what was to come.

As if in slow motion, the High Priest's bony, pale hand stretched toward her forehead, his thin lips stretched in nervous anticipation. She could feel the presence of Ignatius and Julius behind her and she felt the sudden desire to run and hide behind their impregnable bodies.

But before she could open her mouth to blurt the word "stop," the High Priest placed his skeletal finger between her eyes and the room faded into darkness.

Talia stood in the cathedral alone. When the High Priest had performed his rite, the people around her had disappeared, but Talia remained in the intimidating church with its towering obsidian pillars and blood-red accents.

Her gown had changed as well. Instead of the floor-length fabric and ostentatious train, the dress ended just below her knees, and the hem was on fire. At first, Talia had panicked, but she quickly realized that the flames were not going to envelope her and were merely lapping at her skirt playfully.

She hadn't seen Satan yet, but she didn't dare call out into the dim cathedral. Waiting for his arrival, Talia stood with her arms stretched out in a "T" shape, scared of allowing her fingers to accidentally brush the blaze on her clothing. It was that position in which Satan found her when he strode with carefree arrogance into the room.

"What are you doing?" Julius grinned as he came to stand in front of her.

Panic flared through Talia's body, creating an unpleasant prickling sensation. *Why is he here?* she shouted in her head. Too late, she remembered his mind-reading abilities.

Chuckling Julius said, "I'm Satan. I appear as a human in the House of Mortem to keep track of their... policies. Honestly, I'm surprised you didn't find out my true identity sooner."

Talia's mind reeled, baffled. How could Julius be Satan? He was too... normal. An average, immature, conceited teenager, just like herself. But there was one thing different about him, Talia noted. His eyes had changed color from inky black to deadly scarlet and they flashed dangerously as he absorbed her new appearance.

"If you're in the Mortal Realm already," Talia said slowly, begging her voice not to crack, "then why do you need me to 'link' your world and mine? It seems like you're already doing a pretty good job yourself." Talia hastily shut her mouth after giving her statement and stumbled embarrassingly as she attempted to inch away from Julius--no--Satan.

As she moved away, Satan moved closer, all while sweeping his unruly locks from his temple in one swift motion. "You're right. Why would I need a worthless human like yourself to communicate my personal agenda?" Seeing her bristle, he closed the remaining space between them and brushed her cheek with a threatening hand. Talia stiffened and tried not to vomit. "It's tiring crossing between realms," Satan said and finally glided away from Talia, relocating himself to lean against a magnificent column. "Once our connection is formed,--once I accept you as my second-in-command--you will carry out my plans for all eternity. And in return, you will rule with me in the After World."

Talia gulped. "Why me?" she demanded.

"Because," he pushed away from the pillar and stood before her again, "you don't belong in this world. You don't *fit* anywhere. I'm as unhappy about it as you are," he grinned and waved a hand lazily at her, "but you're the chosen one."

Talia had no idea why she, of all people, was the "chosen one," but she gave up questioning Satan. Sure, she had never truly belonged in the House of Lore, that much was

obvious. But Talia had always assumed that teendom had created these feelings and that they would fade with age. Her mind reeling, Talia abandoned logic. Everything Satan tried to explain only made the situation more complicated.

But Talia was not evil. How could she work for the Devil, inflicting damage and pain on everyone she cared about? And she would never understand why it was *her* who had to give her soul away for a cause she did not believe in. The House of Mortem hated the House of Lore, her people. She could not give herself to a group that despised her very existence.

But Talia was not sure if she belonged in the House of Lore. If she was honest, she never had been certain. Maybe she was somehow connected to the House of Mortem through her deceased parents or some forgotten magical oath.

As much as her heart told her to refuse, her head was positive that Satan was her only way out of the life that was not hers. She wasn't a Reader or some random girl from Balbina. She was *chosen*, whatever that meant, and she had an opportunity to change the world, build it the way she had always dreamed of with magic and harmony. They were silly fantasies, but Talia could bring them to light. If she carried out Satan's bidding, she would gain unimaginable power. She could do anything.

"I assume you're saying yes," Satan chuckled coyly.

Talia set her shoulders and nodded. The last thing she saw was Satan's triumphant smile.

One hundred years later, Talia, having left her mortal life behind to become a fully-fledged demon known as Satana, faced off against a young magician from the House of Magus in the same cathedral at the Court of Diablo where she had met Satan. The magician

covered before Talia and Talia grimaced at the weak pose. Talia hoped she hadn't entered the same fetal position when she had had her own conversation with Satan.

"Satana," the magician addressed Talia. The magician's turquoise eyes were wide with suspicion and awe as she gazed up at Talia in her short dress that dripped with liquid magma. The magician intently studied Talia's glowing red eyes and Talia couldn't help but grin at her own obvious importance.

But Talia's excitement soon faded as she listened to the girl's inner thoughts, watching as the magician's innocent face altered with the thought of unspeakable power.

*I can save the House of Magus from the House of Mortem. I will be a hero to my people. Satana will provide everything I need, as long as I fulfill her ambitions.*

Talia frowned but attempted to hide the expression by glancing at the High Priest's altar. Carved into the shrine was an image of Satan and Satana commanding a sea of bowing people. Her heart lurched into her throat. She had become everything she had sworn to avoid. Power made anyone forget their pure intentions and turn instead to ulterior motives. Sourly, she admitted she was living proof of that.

And so, as the magician got down on her hands and knees and pledged her servitude to Satana with altruistic goals still playing in her head, Talia wished she could warn her.

Once she tasted power, there was no turning back.