

Pinned & Preserved

This life was wasted on me. I didn't deserve any of the celebrations or accolades, all the love or adventures. She, however, deserved all of it. That doesn't matter anymore, though, does it? I've been trying to write this since the incident, but couldn't muster the strength until now. I think it's about time I confessed to my sins and pray my God is a merciful one.

My childhood wasn't whimsical by any means. My parents got married young, after a night of too much fun and not enough protection. My brother, Benjamin, made his appearance shortly after, much to my grandfather's displeasure. The three of them stayed with my mother's parents until they saved up enough to buy 2426 Lincoln Lane. It was a mint-green fixer-upper, with an ivory picket fence and an American flag waving in the breeze. Over the next few years, they grew their family: twin daughters and one more son. The four of us were close in age and proximity, but that was about it. By the time I was old enough to hang out with them, they didn't want anything to do with me.

As a child, I'd often wander into the woods extending from our backyard. I found my best friends within that forest: soaring through the air or crawling under the rich soil. I'd rest against trees, sunlight shining down sporadically between the branches above me. That's the first place I remember feeling true happiness. My peace would inevitably be interrupted by the setting sun. Reluctantly, I'd get up, dust myself off as much as I could, and head inside. My mother would get upset with me for tracking in dirt, but it didn't faze me much. All I could think about was seeing my friends again.

A strong work ethic was instilled in me from a young age. I knew I was expected to get a job as soon as I could. My older siblings did just that: Benji rode his bike every morning delivering newspapers, while the twins helped our mother clean houses around the neighborhood. One morning, I woke up to my father telling me to be ready in ten minutes. I

threw on my favorite overalls and my work boots before running out the door and jumping into his rusty pick-up. As we cruised along the winding dirt roads, I repeatedly asked my father where we were going. Each time, he'd just smirk and tell me to be patient. I watched out my window as the cornstalks rushed by, wondering what could possibly be so important. About fifteen minutes into our drive, we turned down a long gravel road. As we approached an iron gate, a weathered sign caught my eye. It was near-impossible to read, but I could make out the cracked paintings of butterflies and moths lining the edges. My confusion began to morph into a bewildered anticipation.

Finally, we entered through the gate and parked. As I slammed the door shut, I examined the yellow farmhouse. I'd always noticed it when we'd go into town, but never paid too much attention to it. As I gazed at the rickety porch, a stringbean of a man opened the screen door and waved us over. I followed my father inside, where the truth was finally revealed.

After a small brunch and light conversation, the man, whose name was Leonard, said he had something he wanted to discuss with me. He explained that he owned and operated an insectarium, which is kind of like a bug sanctuary. He had heard from my father that I was interested in insects and wanted to offer me a summer internship. I practically jumped out of my seat with excitement. I agreed before he finished his sentence, and we shook on it.

From that point on, I interned at the Atlas Insectarium. My job mostly entailed caring for our little guys, suggesting how we can improve the enclosures, etc. I loved my job more than anything. I was always the first one there and the last to leave. I guess Leonard was impressed, because he asked me to stay on full-time after I graduated high school. I accepted, but I didn't really care about whether or not I impressed him. I just wanted to spend time with the critters: my own little chosen family.

As much as I loved my job, I didn't really make any friends while working there. I was friendly with some of my co-workers, but never talked about anything except butterflies or stinkbugs. I usually just kept to myself. However, that changed when Leonard introduced me to Atlas's new horticulturist.

That's when I met *her*, the most beautiful woman to walk the face of this Earth: Miss Magdalen Kelly. She was an apprentice for Roaring Roots, a tree nursery in a nearby town. Her mentor happened to be Leonard's right-hand woman.

I still kept to myself for a bit after that; avoiding her as much as I could while admiring her from afar. Magdalen, however, had other plans. One day, while I was talking to my moths about God knows what, she walked up to me and asked what I was doing. I tripped over my words as I tried to explain. She laughed a bit, and then asked if she could help me sometime. I was taken aback, but clumsily told her I'd love that. From that point on, she was always by my side.

About two years later, we tied the knot. We moved into a big ivy-covered brick house and started our own family. Maggie gave birth to Archie and Bennie on a warm spring night. We weren't expecting twins, so we were overjoyed as we swaddled our two healthy baby boys. We spent that first year learning to parent, sharing the exhaustion, and laughing with the happiest children we'd ever met. All this added to our excitement when we found out Maggie was pregnant again. We immediately started planning and scheduling doctors' appointments. This pregnancy was different, though.

One morning, I was feeding the boys breakfast while Maggie took a shower. I could hear her calling for me, but it was faint, as if she was struggling to speak. I looked towards her voice, as she leaned against the living room wall, inching her way over to the dining room. She was still

in her towel, soaking wet. I asked what was wrong, but before she could force the words out, she collapsed. I bolted over to her, checking her pulse and her eyes. I called the emergency number while I desperately tried to wake her up. The ambulance arrived shortly after, causing a stir amongst the families on the street. Mrs. Belle Caulfield, the sweet elderly lady who lived right next door, rushed over to check on us. As the paramedics lifted Mags onto a stretcher, Mrs. Caulfield offered to watch the boys for us. I thanked her, tears welling in my eyes, before entering the back of the ambulance. I laced my fingers between Maggie's as we rushed to Rosewood Medical Center. I kissed the back of her hand, praying she would survive whatever this was, praying our child would be okay.

We found out Maggie had experienced a hypertensive crisis. Her blood pressure was too high, causing her to faint. Dr. Montgomery put her on bed rest for the remainder of the pregnancy, saying it was the best chance she, and the baby, had. From then on, I planned everything. I took care of Maggie and the boys, with Mrs. Caulfield's help, and made sure everything was ready for when our little one arrived.

Cornelia Belle Remington was born on a crisp autumn night; a beautiful, healthy baby girl. Mags was a warrior, going through a labor that lasted almost twice as long as her first. She handled the labor the same way she handled the rest of her pregnancy. She smiled through the pain, laughed at my poor attempts at making jokes, and did extremely well throughout the following days. The moments after Corie was born were magical. Sitting on the bed with Mags and our three beautiful children, I finally understood the meaning of life.

During the coming years, we'd spend our days going on outdoor adventures and teaching the children, and each other, about entomology and horticulture. I would've taught them about taxidermy as well, but Maggie insisted our children didn't play with dead things. Despite her

concerns, Maggie still loved the insects I preserved. I'd often find her in my study, examining them so closely her breath fogged up the glass cases. She always said she'd come back in the next life as her favorite moth: a Magdalen Underwing. She'd say she was destined to be reincarnated as one. I used to shake my head at the idea of reincarnation. However, since I lost her, I'm often visited by a daring little Underwing. I don't know about you, but I don't believe in coincidences.

We've been so lucky. We went on so many adventures together: backpacking across Europe, studying Amazonian insects and foliage, visiting and meeting her family in Glasgow. We raised a family, watched them start their own families, and even helped Corie move to New York. We experienced so much together, always with our fingers intertwined. Maggie was such an amazing woman. The compliments and recognition she received were unmatched. She was always so humble, saying she just wanted to help the world. She liked to joke that Mother Nature was her best friend, but that I was a *very* close second. Every day spent with her was a miracle. It felt too good to be true, like God was playing a trick on me. Unfortunately, I was right.

I remember sitting at the table, eating my apple pancakes while Mags took a shower. Suddenly, I heard her say my name, her voice timid and trembling. I turned around and she stood in a robe, tears running down her face. She took a deep breath and said she felt a lump on her breast. Cancer. The doctor said she could go through treatment, but her chances of survival were slim. I gazed into her eyes, silently pleading with her to do it. Pretty soon, chemotherapy was another one of our weekly rituals.

Every Wednesday morning at eight on the dot, we'd go to our favorite diner, For Old Times' Bake. We sat in our favorite booth and ordered the same thing we always did: A bacon, egg, and cheese everything bagel with a vanilla chai latte for Mags, and deep-fried apple

pancakes with a glass of orange juice for me. Our friends, Walter and Winnie, always came in around eight-fifteen and sat at the table closest to us. Walter and I would discuss current events while the wives talked about their latest projects. Then we'd walk to the Rosewood Medical Center for her treatment. She'd laugh with the nurses, make small talk with other patients, tell everyone about our grandchildren. I loved being there with her, seeing her light up the most depressing room I've ever entered. I'd sit in that extra chair next to her, admiring her as she squeezed my hand lightly, reminding me she was still there.

We finally told our kids when her health rapidly declined. At first, they were upset that we hid it from them, but that anger was quickly replaced by concern. The boys put on brave faces and tried to be there for us as much as they could. Archie called every day to check in on us, while Bennie brought us groceries every week, and Corie flew back home for about a month to help us settle into our new reality. During that month, she helped me do everything: installing a stairlift in the house, scheduling all of Maggie's appointments; she even taught me how to braid her mother's hair.

Although a bit overwhelming, I was doing a pretty good job. I made sure Maggie always got enough to eat for every meal, even when she didn't feel like eating. I continued to take her to her appointments until she was deemed too weak to leave the house. After that, Luna, Maggie's new nurse, would come over every day and administer her meds. She always joked around with Mags and never made her feel like a patient, but like a friend. I'm extremely grateful to Luna and I know Maggie was too. Hearing Mags laugh again and being able to admire her smile once more was refreshing. She didn't do that much her last days. She was in a lot of pain, I know she was. The coughing would echo across the hall and I would hold back what was left of her hair as

she vomited from the medication. I just couldn't stand it anymore. It felt like my Magdalen hadn't been home in ages and I knew it would never be the same. So, I did what I had to.

One night, when I made her tea, I slipped in some crushed sleeping pills. She was too gone at that point, not lucid enough to notice a change in flavor or texture. Once she was out cold, I disconnected her oxygen. Then, I grabbed a nearby pillow, put it over her face, and held it down, tears welling in my eyes. I kept shushing her, in an attempt to reassure her as she slipped away. I felt her take her last breath, her chest rising and falling just one more time. Then, it was still. The only noise was my sobs as I held her in my arms, telling her how much I loved her. I hugged her for hours, only realizing it as the sunrise peeked between the curtains.

My sweet Magdalen deserved better: a better life, a better husband, a better ending. I've loved her for over sixty years, and I won't ever stop loving her. I couldn't stand by and watch her suffer for so long. As I felt her body grow cold, I wiped my eyes and began taking care of her.

This next bit is a little morbid, so I won't go into too much detail; the thought of it still makes me nauseous. My father was a skilled taxidermist. I would help him out in his workshop, stuffing roadkill he'd found on his way home. We made a good amount of money at the farmer's markets and even accepted commissions. So, I know a thing or two about taking care of the deceased. I just took everything I learned from my father and applied it to Maggie's body.

Preserving her felt like the least I could do for her.

Afterwards, I made sure to dress her in her orange sweater and comfiest pair of brown pants. She always felt better in earth tones, saying they looked best on her. Next, I wove her hair into a fishtail braid, draping it over her shoulder. I sprayed her with her favorite perfume, a scent of honey with notes of gardenias. Then, I gently nailed her hands and feet to a thick wooden board I found in our shed, courtesy of my "carpentry phase". I drilled four holes, one on either

side of her neck and the same by her temples. Then, I looped wire through the holes to keep her head in place. I couldn't lift the board very high, especially with her attached, so I kept her leaning against the wall. She was scared of heights, anyway.

I know you think it's sick. It's more than sick. It's vile, monstrous, inhumane even. But I don't care. The punishments I may receive in Hell are nothing compared to the thought of living a single day without Maggie by my side. I'm sorry; not for what I've done, but that others will come to know about this. Our children will see me as the devil, I'm sure. I just hope one day they'll find it in themselves to forgive me. They should know that we loved them with all of our aching hearts. I'll never see that day, unfortunately. However, I'm at peace knowing I did what I did out of love and sacrifice for my sweet Magdalen.

Go to the second floor, and enter the first room on the left. You'll find her up there with all the other beautiful specimens. When you find her, you'll find me. My body will be still, but my spirit will be celebrating. I truly believe we will reunite in the next life as two moths, fluttering through the night.

Hitched

For over thirty years, The Intermission has served as a refuge for travelers: weary vacationers, hungry night owls, and lonely truckers alike. However, no one loved the Intermission like Mac Bradkey did. After driving his usual route, hauling lumber between distribution centers, Mac would always stop in for a bite. His favorite seat was at the counter, catching up with the employees and joking with fellow patrons. He did this every night for ten years, until he met *her*.

One night, after finishing his Italian beef and closing his tab, Mac said goodbye to his friends, and walked out the door. As he left, the lights of the diner and conjoined gas station flickered, triggering concerned mumbling from inside.

“Damn storm. Haven’t had a power surge like that in a while,” the waiter commented.

Thinking nothing of it, Mac filled up his tank, hopped into the cab of his truck, and set course for his next destination. As the rain beat down on his windshield, Mac squinted, trying to get a clearer view. As if out of nowhere, a pale figure emerged from the nearby cornfield, a bolt of lightning illuminating her silhouette. Mac stopped as quickly as he could, trying not to hydroplane. He looked out his window to see a girl in a white dress staring back at him. He motioned for her to join him. She jumped up and opened the door, smiling sheepishly at him.

“Miss, you okay?” Mac asked as she slammed the door shut.

The girl was drenched, shivering from the downpour. Mac reached behind his seat, pulling out a blanket and draping it over her shoulders.

“Y-yeah, just a little wet”, she smirked.

“What were ya doin’ out there all alone?”

She sighed as she used the blanket to scrunch her hair dry.

“Oh, you know, just the classic ‘girl pisses off her fiancé, fiancé abandons her in the middle of nowhere’...”

“Oh, shit. He just...left ya out there?”

“Yeah, it’s whatever. He does this kinda thing all the time. I would’ve been fine if it wasn’t for this damn cyclone.”

“Yeah, I guess ya chose the wrong time to piss him off, huh?” Mac laughed before realizing his mistake. “Oh my god, no. I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to-”

After looking at him in disbelief, the girl gave him the sweetest smile he’d ever seen, teeth so white they were practically glowing..

“Don’t worry, that really *is* just my luck,” she giggled.

A moment later, their laughter faded into an uncomfortable stillness.

“Oh, I’m Mac, by the way.” He reached his left hand across his body.

“Lilly,” she responded, returning the handshake.

“That’s a really pretty name, it suits ya,” he glanced over, noticing her blush. She noticed him too, immediately straightening up.

“Thanks. Your name’s...kinda on the nose, isn’t it?”

“What d’ya mean?”

She stared at him, before motioning all around them, “You’re a *truck* driver named *Mac*...”

“Oh, yeah, guess you’re right.”

There was a moment of silence between the two of them, only interrupted by the hammering of the rain and soft radio static.

“So, uh, where exactly am I takin’ ya?”

“Oh, uh, wherever you want, I guess.”

Mac looked over at her, puzzled, “What? No, where d’ya live?”

Lilly shrugged, watching as the road slightly flooded before draining into the ditches.

“I’m more of a ‘nomad’, lately. We got evicted a while back, so I kinda just float around these days.”

“Oh, okay.” he nodded awkwardly, “but what ‘bout money?”

“I’m a traveling nurse. I’m on leave right now, for my wedding, funnily enough.”

“Oh, uh, wow.”

“Yeah...but, um, what about you?”

“Huh?”

“Where’d you come from?”

“Just a small midwestern town. Nothin’ too special ‘bout it. Just a lotta cows and corn.”

“Did you live alone?”

“Nope, I’ve got a big family, so it’s pretty hard to be alone back there,” he laughed.

“How big are we talking?”

“I’ve got six or seven aunts and uncles on both sides of my family, a helluva lot more cousins. My mom just had me and my twin sister, but she died when we were real young; so we never got to grow up together.”

Lilly gasped, “Oh my god, I’m so sorry.”

Mac waved it off, “It’s all good. Like I said, a lotta cousins. I never really missed out on bein’ a brother. Don’t get me wrong, I miss her all the time, but I can’t do anythin’ to bring her back.” Mac could feel tears welling up in his eyes, but was determined to keep himself collected, “So, I just keep on keepin’ on, and tryin’ to make her proud, until I see her again.”

Lilly smiled at him, putting her hand over his on the gear shift, “Well, I bet Maddie’s smiling down on you right now.”

Mac froze. His somberness instantly turned to panicked confusion.

“What was that?”

“I just meant your sister’s probably incredibly proud of you. You seem like an amazing guy.” Her grip tightened as she turned towards her window, gazing into the darkness.

“Oh, right...,” he muttered.

Mac took a shaky breath as he continued driving, wondering how this stranger knew Maddie’s name.

“Hey, Lilly. I think I’m gonna pull off at the next truck stop, I gotta fuel up.”

“Yeah, of course.”

The rest of the ride was silent, aside from the pounding heartbeat in Mac’s ears and the alarm bells ringing in his head. After about twenty minutes of tension, they pulled up to a small truck stop.

“I’m gonna go pee real quick,” she said, finally releasing his hand from her grasp.

“Sounds good,” Mac agreed, timidly.

They both jumped down from the cab; Mac watched as she made her way over to the glass doors, swinging them open and vanishing into the building. He hurried back into his truck and pulled away from the gas station as quickly as he could. After driving for about forty-five minutes, Mac finally let out a breath he wasn’t aware he was holding. He constantly looked in his rearview until he was back on the interstate. Hours passed before he felt a real sense of relief.

Suddenly, everything went black. Mac screamed, echoes reverberating around him. He felt weightless, unable to tell if he was floating upwards or downwards. Out of the darkness came a voice as familiar as it was blood-curdling.

“It’s time, Malcolm...”

As quickly as he was taken away, Mac snapped back to reality. His knuckles were gripping the steering wheel, turning white from the force. His heart was racing and his breath was almost non-existent.

“What the fuck...” he muttered to himself.

Then, he felt the wind hit his neck. He loosened his grip and reached to roll up his window. That’s when he realized the air he felt wasn’t from outside. Confused, Mac attempted to check the passenger side. Before he could turn his head, he felt something slam into the side of his face, banging his head into his window and losing consciousness.

The next thing Mac saw was the bright fluorescent lights of an emergency room hallway rushing by overhead. He was surrounded by muffled yells, black spots clouding his vision. As the hospital staff wheeled him into an operating room, they began prepping him for surgery. Still fading in and out, Mac could tell there was someone looking at him upside down.

“Okay, Malcom, here we go,” the figure announced as they put a mask over Mac’s nose and mouth.

Just then, Mac began to hear screaming, accompanied by ripping and banging and slashing. He struggled to speak, but couldn't let the words out. Then, he felt something wet hit him. Slowly, Mac saw a face rise up to look down on him. He couldn’t see much, besides the twisted smile that had been sitting in his passenger seat earlier that night. This time, however,

those pearly white teeth were crimson-stained. Everything went black again, and Mac heard the familiar voice one last time.

“It’s time, Malcolm. It’s time to see Maddie...”

Emilee Renee Tosh

Coincidences

I used to see predictability as a straitjacket, keeping me from straying into the unknown. I used to crave excitement and spontaneity. Now, I'd give anything to feel certainty's safe embrace once again.

That morning, I woke up the same way I always did, trying to crush my alarm clock. I pulled myself out of bed, shuddering as my feet hit the cold wooden floor. Horns blared outside my window as commuters fought to get to the office. I looked out my window, just in time to see the Jackass. This guy always tried to get through traffic before everyone else. He loved to swerve between lanes, cut people off, and rev his engine at the stoplight outside my apartment complex.

"He's gonna kill someone someday," I muttered as his exhaust wafted up to my apartment.

I closed my window, ignoring the growing cacophony outside. I stumbled to the bathroom, splashed my face with water, and got ready to confront the day.

I walked down to the kitchen, still wiping the drowsiness from my eyes. I filled the only clean bowl available with Lucky Charms and poured a red Solo cup of orange juice. I sat down in my thrifted recliner, pulled over the nearby ottoman, and switched on the television. I leaned back and chewed my cereal as the cops on-screen explained some murder from thirty-odd years ago.

I rinsed my bowl out before quickly gathering my stuff. I swung my bookbag onto my shoulder as I used my tongue to dislodge a relentless marshmallow. Clutching my keys, I left for the day, letting the unreasonably heavy door slam behind me. I waved goodbye to Carl, the "concierge" guy, and headed to work.

As always, the streets were bustling, and the traffic was bumper-to-bumper. However, I didn't expect so much congestion. It was crazy, even for a Monday morning. As I began my walk, police lights slowly came into view. I became invisible to onlookers as they brushed past me, their phones held in front of them at arm's length. The smell of burnt rubber lingered in the air, mixed with a twinge of diesel. Reporters lined the street, their cameramen hanging on to their every word. A murmur buzzed in the background as cops demanded the crowd back up.

There had been a crash, and it was *bad*. A sedan was sitting diagonally on the road. The front had been crushed, windows shattered, airbags deployed. The other vehicle was a truck, stopped in the middle of the street, with barely a scratch.

That truck was the same truck I saw every morning: Jackass's truck. A man was in handcuffs, sitting on the curb opposite where I stood, sobbing his eyes out.

Then I saw it.

Sprawled out mid-intersection, a sheet hid the still body of an innocent person; a scarlet pool surrounded their body.

I froze as the realization set in.

He's gonna kill someone someday.

I was right. He *did* kill someone. My heart stopped beating for a moment, as if my entire body went into shock. Instinctively, I looked over at Jackass. He looked up from the ground, making eye contact with me. I could feel myself about to cry. I felt his gunmetal grey eyes bore deep in my soul, as if he *knew* I had something to do with it.

Even though I didn't.

Because that's impossible...right?

I stood there for what felt like an eternity. My eyes were trained on that sheet. I couldn't stop staring at the body.

Who were they? Where were they going? What plans did they have that day, or even the next?

My stomach churned, knotting deep within me. I cleared my throat and straightened up before continuing my walk. My unease gripped me all the way to the office.

I kept thinking, *There's no way I caused that.*

I had nothing to do with it.

It's all his fault.

I knew it was illogical. I knew it was just bad timing. Yet, I struggled to convince myself.

I finally felt like I could breathe again as I stepped onto the elevator of my office building. Just as the doors were about to close, they were interrupted by two hands and a drink carrier filled with coffee. As the doors parted once more, I saw the same goofy face I saw every morning at 9:35.

“Hello, beautiful,” he sang as he handed me my drink, “Glad I’m not the only one running late.”

“Morning, Sanders,” I groaned.

I took a swig of my peppermint mocha and exhaled deeply. My body was still shaking as I tried wrapping my head around what had just happened.

He asked me a question as he struggled to remove his own drink from the cardboard, but I didn't really hear it. I couldn't stop thinking about the crash. Jackass's glare, the body, the bystanders turning it into an exhibition, as if someone didn't just lose their life.

The elevator dinged and brought me back to reality as we hit the fourth floor. I managed to slip over to my desk and start up my computer before someone turned on the news. I watched as my co-workers gathered around the bullpen's television. A reporter I had seen no more than ten minutes ago was center-screen, with a pained look on his face.

"This morning, around nine o'clock, a silver Chevy Impala was struck by a red Ford F-150 at the corner of Merchant and Evergreen."

Sanders let out a gasp. "Hey, Harper, isn't that your building?"

"The incident resulted in a single casualty and an arrest. Police have not identified either party and ask citizens to stay away from the area until the scene is cleared. We will keep you updated as information is released..."

I felt absolutely sick to my stomach. I bolted to the bathroom, dodging my co-workers in the hallways. Before I could even close the stall, I was tasting the Lucky Charms all over again.

I fell to my knees, chest heaving, as if I was breathing through a straw.

Just then, I heard a knock at the door.

"Hey, Harp? Harper? It's Sanders. Um, you okay?"

"Ye-yeah," I sputtered, before unleashing a minty bile-ridden rainbow into the toilet.

"Are ya pukin'?"

"N-no?"

“Okay...d’ya want me to come in?”

“...yes, please,” I whimpered, as I let myself fall to the floor.

I watched as the door across from me slowly opened, and Sanders peeked his head in. He tiptoed in, locked the door, and sat criss-cross in front of my stall.

“Wanna talk about it?”

I shook my head “no” before leaning against the wall and taking a few deep breaths.

“Okay. Then...wanna tell me why it looks like a My Little Pony Massacre in here?”

I furrowed my brow, “What?”

“Last week, I told ya to get Raisin Bran or Cheerios, right?”

“Oh, my god.”

“Ya’know I did. So why’d ya eat a leprechaun for breakfast?”

“You’re really lecturing me? Right now?”

“Yeah, I am. Ya didn’t take my advice, and now this bathroom’s a nuclear waste site.”

“Not the bathroom, just the toilet!”

We locked eyes and stared for a couple of seconds before we both burst out laughing.

“There ya go, Harp. That’s what I wanted.”

“Thanks, Sandman. I appreciate this, I really do.”

“You’d better, ‘cause this floor makes me wanna hurl.”

He stood up, dusted himself off, and extended his hand down towards me. I wiped the tears from my eyes and let him pull me to my feet. He motioned towards the sink, so I splashed water on my face while he flushed my vomit for me.

“Okay, c’mere, pretty lady,” he held his arms open, waiting to envelop me in them. I rolled my eyes before accepting the hug. He squeezed me gently, rubbing my back, “Whatever it is, it’s gonna be okay.” I inhaled slowly and exhaled just the same, feeling my nerves start to calm.

After a few moments, our bodies parted, and Sanders followed me out of the bathroom. We returned to our neighboring desks and continued on our recent projects.

A while later, I felt something hit me. I assumed it was just a bug and kept working. Then, I was hit again. I looked up just in time for Sanders to hit me in the eye with a jellybean.

“Oooh. I’m sorry, the spitballs weren’t working...” he apologized, eating a separate jellybean from the bowl on his desk.

“Ugh, why?”

“Look, the court jester has returned,” he smiled as he spun his chair around, and I followed his gaze to the office front doors.

Lottie, one of the duller knives in our drawer, had just walked in. She was carrying her heels in her hands while trying to wipe her clearly smudged lipstick off her face.

I chuckled as I smacked him in the arm, “Do you *know* how to be nice?”

“Oh, just to pretty girls who barf rainbows,” he smirked, swiveling back and forth.

“Whatever. I have to say, though, I was kinda hoping she’d gotten fired. I mean, she was gone long enough.” I commented, followed by an anxious sigh. The thought of having to redo all of her work, for a third time, was already starting to give me a headache.

“Harper, you know miracles don’t just happen, right?”

“One can only hope,” I smirked, raising both hands and crossing my fingers.

“Well, if ya ask me, I think sh—”

“Lottie!”

We all spun around to see our office’s front door swing open. A woman came storming in, a baseball bat in hand.

“Where’s Lottie?!”

As she walked in, she repeatedly tapped the wall with her bat, then the receptionist’s desk. We all sat quietly, stunned by the intrusion. After a moment, someone piped up.

“Um, my name’s Lottie...” she admitted, raising her hand.

The woman glared at her, a vengeful expression washing over her face.

“Oh, you fucking whore!”

The woman quickly approached our co-worker’s desk, “Who do ya think you are?!”

“I told you, I’m Lottie...” she reiterated, matter-of-factly.

“Don’t play stupid with me—”

“I’m not playing!”

The woman let out a grunt before swinging her bat above her head and repeatedly smashing Lottie's computer. A collective gasp burst out across the bullpen as fragmented hardware flew in every direction.

She yelped as the mystery woman threw her bat aimlessly away from herself; the clanging noise cutting through our silent anticipation.

“Maybe you'll think about this the next time you get engaged to someone's *husband!*”

Lottie's eyes widened as she instinctively grasped her left ring finger.

“H-husband?”

The woman walked closer to Lottie until she was inches from her face.

“You destroyed my marriage. I guess we're kinda even now, huh?”

The woman turned around to walk out the front door, but not before hurling one more insult, “Don't let him knock ya up before the weddin'. Don't wanna look fat in the pictures.”

The room was silent. No one dared to say anything. Even if we had, I don't think anyone knew *what* to say. We all just froze, holding our breath, trying to comprehend what we'd just witnessed. Then, right behind Lottie, the conference room door swung open. Our boss, Mrs. Brockman, was standing in the doorway, and she was, understandably, pissed. Her usual happy-go-lucky demeanor was replaced by a grimace.

“Charlotte. My office. *Now.*”

Mrs. Brockman marched to her office without another word, slamming the conference room door behind her. Lottie, who hadn't stopped fidgeting with her engagement ring, sulked away after her.

The bullpen watched as she entered the office, closing the door slowly. After a few moments, Sanders swiveled to face me once again, both of our mouths agape.

“What the actual fuck?” he laughed in disbelief.

“A married man?” I asked in shock.

“The *wrong* married man, apparently,” he joked.

“Yeah, seems like it,” I agreed, with a slight laugh. I took a deep breath and tried to refocus on my project.

Sanders sighed, “Well, I guess you got your miracle.”

I quickly glanced up from my computer, “What d’ya mean?”

“Well, after all that, I’ll be surprised if she’s ever allowed back in the building.”

My stomach started churning again.

...I was kinda hoping she’d gotten fired...

“You’ve been wrong before,” I told him, mostly trying to reassure myself.

Just then, Lottie emerged from Mrs. Brockman’s office. We all turned once again, watching her walk of shame. About halfway to the door, she looked over at me, her dark irises popping against a pinkish backdrop. Her eyes stayed fixed on me until she reached the receptionist. The two women spoke for a moment, Lottie sniffing between phrases. She snapped her head back at me, as if she was blaming me. She then faced forward, weakly pushed the door open, and disappeared down the hallway.

“Well, I guess we got our answer,” Sanders commented, before sighing and returning his focus to his own computer.

I stared at the newly vacant desk, wires and metal bits lay sprawled across the surface. I could feel my face go pale, my hands shake, my breath tremble. I couldn't believe it. I made a single comment, just one, and she lost her job. There's no way I caused that...right?

"Whoa, Harper, ya don't look too good."

"I, um...I think I need to leave," my voice trembled as I looked up at him.

Just then, none other than Brockman walked by our desks, seemingly out of nowhere.

"Hey, Bishop? You doin' okay?"

As I opened my mouth to reply, my vision was blurred, interrupted by black spots. The only noise I could muster was the wheezing from my lungs as I tried catching my breath. The world began spinning, and I could feel the energy draining from my body.

If it had happened only once, I could chalk it up to a freak accident. But twice? In less than five hours?

"Harper?"

As I attempted to answer once more, those black spots took over, and suddenly the whole office was dark. I tried grabbing for my desk, hoping to steady myself as I stood up. Instead, I felt all my weight collapse under me.

"Harper! Someone call 911!"

That's the last thing I remember before waking up.

When my eyes finally fluttered open, I was lying in a strange bed, under dazing lights, staring at the ceiling. I reached up to my nose, where I could feel the cannula pushing air into my

lungs. I sat up to see an almost empty hospital room. On the right of the bed was a single chair, with a familiar jacket draped over the back.

“Sanders!” I called out, my voice shaking. I turned to the open door as Sanders came rushing in, making sure not to spill the coffee he was carrying.

“Oh my god, you’re awake!” he cheered as he hurried to my bedside. He set his coffee on the nearby tray and quickly took the seat next to me. He clasped my hand in his, squeezing our palms together and gently rubbing the back of my hand with his thumb. His eyes were tearing up, but he was smiling the biggest smile I’d ever seen from him. I winced as his thumb hit my IV, which I hadn’t noticed up to that point.

“Oh, sorry.”

I pulled my hand away, lifting it to get a better look. I glanced at Sanders, who was waiting for me to ask.

“What happened?”

He sighed, reaching over and rubbing my arm the same way he’d rubbed my hand. He explained everything I remembered: the crash, Lottie, wanting to leave the office, then fainting. Apparently, the doctors thought I had a stress seizure. As soon as the seizure ended, I’d fall into another one. That happened several times, until they finally induced a coma.

“They started ya on some new meds a few days ago—”

“Days?” I interrupted, “Sands, how long have I been here?”

“About a week...” he trailed off.

“Oh.”

We both sat silently as the reality sank in. I looked over at him as he sniffled, wiping tears from his eyes.

“A-are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’ve just—,” he took a deep breath in, followed by a shuddering exhale. “It’s been rough without ya, Harp.”

This time, I rubbed his hand gently, using my other hand to lift his chin, before resting my palm on his cheek. He gazed at me, as if he hadn’t seen me in years.

“Can I tell you something?”

He nodded as I took a deep breath.

“I think I-, uh,” I cleared my throat, trying to blurt out the words, “it was all my fault,” I confessed, my voice shaking.

Sanders gave me a confused look, his eyebrows crinkled, “What d’ya mean?”

“That guy who crashed last week. It was, uh, it was Jackass.”

“The guy I hear ya complain about every morning?”

“Yeah. I woke up to the smell of diesel and his engine revving. That morning, I, um, I said he was gonna kill someone. And then he did.”

Sanders let out a slight chuckle, “Harp, that’s not-, there’s no way that’s your fault. Plus, you’ve said that about him, like, every day for the past year. If you did cause it, I think it would’ve happened a hell of a lot sooner.”

He had a point, but I don’t think he fully grasped what I meant.

“Well, uh, how about when I wished Lottie got fired? Less than twenty minutes later, she was sobbing while turning in her badge.”

He moved closer, barely on the edge of his seat, “Did ya make her sleep with that woman’s husband?”

I shook my head “no”, letting out a frustrated sigh, “But I landed myself in here when I said I wanted to leave.”

“Hon, you were already pale, and sweating, and clearly sick when ya said that. Ya didn’t cause any of that, they were just—”

“Just what?” I asked, getting more frustrated as he argued with me.

“Just coincidences,” he finished, his eyes worried.

“Coincidences? Really?” I repeated, pulling away from him. He left his hand on the bed, trying to calm me down.

“Harper, do ya really, *honestly*, think ya did all that?”

I nodded, lying back with my arms crossed. I was livid. I couldn’t understand why he didn’t believe me.

“You’re really worrying me,” his voice trembled slightly.

We stared at each other, the tension thickening with every silent second. He leaned back before using the arms of the chair to stand up.

He sighed, “I’m gonna go tell ‘em ya woke up, okay?”

I nodded again as he studied my face, his own filled with concern once again.

“I’ll be back,” he said quietly, before leaving the room.

I let out a huge exhale, a breath I hadn't known I'd been holding. I rubbed my face, trying to make sense of everything. Talking to Sanders always helps, except this time. I didn't know what else to do. I sat there for what felt like hours, my eyes closed, alone with my thoughts. The image of the covered body was burned onto my eyelids, and Lottie's sobs rang in my ears like tinnitus. Suddenly, I heard a knock.

"Sanders, I wanna—"

I opened my eyes, and Sanders hadn't knocked. It was an old man in a doctor's coat, holding a clipboard, grinning at me.

"Hey, Harper, how're you feelin'?"

I shrugged, "Not great."

He laughed as he walked closer to my bed, "We hear that a lot 'round here. I'm sorry you're not feeling the best. Honestly, we're just glad you're finally awake."

I stared at him, waiting for him to cut to the chase.

"Harper, my name's Dr. Barrett. Can I sit with you for a sec?" he asked, pulling over a chair I hadn't noticed on the other side of my bed.

"Sure."

"Thanks. So, um, your emergency contact—"

"Sanders."

He smiled, "Yeah, Sanders. Uh, how do you know each other, if you don't mind me askin'?"

"We're friends. Met him at work."

“Oh, okay. That’s a new one,” he chuckled. “Most people list a family member as their emergency contact.”

“So?”

“I’m just thinkin’, maybe there’s someone else we can call? A parent? A sibling…?”

I glared at him, getting more upset, “Nope. Just Sanders.”

Barrett nodded, setting his clipboard on the bed.

“Okay, Harper. That’s just fine,” he cleared his throat before changing topics, “So, Sanders told us he may know what caused your stress seizures.”

My entire body tensed up. “Where is he?”

He gave me another “reassuring” smile as he continued, “He ran to the cafeteria. He’ll be back up soon.”

I nodded, still glaring at the doctor.

“Harper, he told me you think you caused some pretty scary things to happen.”

I paused, considering my options, before nodding.

“Okay, can you tell me a little bit about that?” he asked, picking up his clipboard and pen.

Hesitantly, I told Barrett about everything: how I sent this energy into the universe, and how Karma acted accordingly, and quickly. Once I was done explaining, he nodded and thanked me for my honesty. Then, he told me he’d be back to check on me later and left me alone.

I sat there, confused. I couldn’t tell if he believed me or not. He just listened and left. I looked over at the chair Sanders had been sitting in. I started thinking about how happy he was to

see me awake, to talk to me, to feel my hand in his. Then I thought about his jacket, the one I had seen when I first woke up. It had been on the back of the chair.

It was gone now.

My eyes darted towards the door, which was now closed.

“Sanders?” I whimpered.

Ripping the blanket off my body, I swung my legs over the edge of the bed. I shuddered as my feet hit the cold linoleum floor. I gripped the drip stand my IV was connected to and dragged it with me to the door. I turned the doorknob, and it barely moved. I jiggled it a few times as I realized it was locked. Panic started to set in. I could see nurses outside my door, walking around and filling out paperwork.

“Hey!” I started hitting the door with my palm, jostling the IV in my hand. “Unlock it!”

Nurses glanced at me before ignoring me and returning to their work. I just kept hitting it and hitting it, calling for Sanders, Dr. Barrett, anyone who’d let me out. Suddenly, I saw Sanders racing down the hallway towards me.

“Sanders!”

He ran to the door, pressing his hand against the glass. I aligned mine with his as my breath fogged up the window.

“I’m here, Harper! It’s okay, it’s okay.”

My breath started to slow, my nerves calming. We pressed our foreheads to the door, sharing the moment as if nothing separated us. All I needed was Sanders.

“Sands, open the door,” I smiled with relief.

He didn't reply. I looked up at him, his forehead still against the door.

"Sanders. Open the door." My smile faded the longer he stood still. I jiggled the knob once again, the relief rushing out of me.

"Sanders! Please..."

His head slowly lifted, meeting my tearful eyes with his own. He muttered something, followed by a shaky breath.

"I can't hear you."

His face grew more and more red as he quivered, tears rolling down his cheeks.

"I'm so sorry..."

"Sanders?"

"They said they can help you. The seizures, they did something."

"What? No..."

"It's for your own good, I promise. I love you, Harp."

Sanders stared at me as he began walking backwards. I cried out for him, begging him to come back. I slammed my hand against the door as I screamed at him.

"Come back here! I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!"

As soon as Sanders passed the nurse's station, he turned around and disappeared down that sterile hallway. Dr. Barrett passed him while coming to talk to me. He stood in front of the door as I tried beating it down.

"Harper? I need you to calm down for me."

“I’m not doing anything for you!”

“Please, Harper? We just wanna help y-”

I fell to the floor sobbing. “Don’t hurt me! Please don’t hurt me!”

I heard Dr. Barrett trying to diffuse the situation as he called for “backup”.

“Let me out! Let me out!”

I’ve never felt so helpless, so lost, so trapped.

That’s when it hit me.

I managed to catch my breath, tears still rolling down my face. I struggled to stand, using the doorknob to lift myself to my feet. Once I was stable, I looked out the glass and saw Barrett in a frenzy, and I could hear him yelling at someone to bring restraints. As soon as he realized I had stood up, his whole demeanor changed.

“Hey, Harper. Good job. I’m glad you calmed down.”

I continued staring as he rambled about how I was “taking the first step.” Holding the newly acquired restraints, he unlocked the door and started towards me.

I balled my fingers into fists. “Y’know, it’d be a shame if this place burned to the ground.”

He stopped dead in his tracks. “What did you just say?”

I doubled down. “And it would be terrible if you couldn’t get out.”

He furrowed his eyebrows for a second before giving me a weak smile.

“Now, Harper, that’s not funny. That actually hurt my fee-”

I released the tension in my hands. Barrett was interrupted by the fire alarm, sounding overhead. While he was distracted, I ripped the IV out of my hand before lunging at him. I stabbed him a few times and snagged his keys before darting out the door. I closed it behind me, imprisoning him. He screamed at me to let him out, pleading even. He looked at me the same way Lottie and Jackass had. Only this time, I *knew* why.

I smiled and waved at him before turning around and walking the same way Sanders had. The flames surrounded me, clawing at the walls and devouring everything in their path. Everything except me. I could hear his screams, but they sounded different compared to what I would've imagined. His cries for help turned into a beautiful melody, one I've had stuck in my head since.

As I made my escape, I came across the lost and found; ditching my hospital gown for a hoodie, sweatpants, and a pair of gym shoes. Then, I made my way to the front entrance.

Once I was outside the hospital, I could hear the sirens rushing towards me. I turned back in time to witness Lakewood Medical Center become engulfed in flames. Onlookers gasped and screamed and cried. All I could do was watch it burn to ash.

As the third-floor windows shattered and rained down from above, I threw my hood up and slipped away from the scene. I walked until I hit the familiar outskirts of town. As I was walking along a dirt road, I thought I heard voices. I ran into the forest, trees rushing past me. Eventually, I stopped to rest on a fallen tree. My breathing was heavy, my body ached, and the adrenaline was wearing off, but I was alive and free. That's all that mattered.

I've been on the run for three weeks now. I keep looking over my shoulder every time I hear a noise: a stick snapping, a bird tweeting, a car honking in the distance. Barrett may have

gone up in flames, but he wasn't the only one who knew I was there. Nurses, other doctors, Sanders. They all escaped the blaze. They all know it was me. So why wouldn't they rat me out?

I'm a *murderer*.

A *killer*.

A *monster*.

I'm sure the police have a warrant out for me by now. That is, if they don't think I'm already dead. I've just gotta lay low until this all blows over.

I've wanted to see Sanders since he disappeared that day, without so much as a look back. I don't know what I'd say or do if I did, though. The confusion I felt as he walked away has morphed into anger, a feeling of betrayal I still don't understand.

Until I can change my identity and get far away from here, I can't let anyone know where I am or draw attention to myself. I have to be vigilant and be ready for the unexpected. So, I'll camp out in these woods for a while and come up with a plan of some sort. Until then, I just have to hope Sanders doesn't notice me. He always loved the way this forest looked from his balcony.