

ESTERBORNE:
THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS

By

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ABSTRACT

With the original idea coming to me at the beginning of 2022, I officially decided to embark on a creative exploration to challenge myself as a writer. I often found myself writing happy endings, therefore, I wanted to push my boundaries by creating characters that would go down the path of darkness. Steering away from what I was comfortable with, I knew that the seven deadly sins would provide me the opportunity to achieve what I sought to do. Originally, I had planned to have this long-term project where each sin represented a different genre. However, as time went on, the project took a different shape. Separated into seven short stories, with the introduction setting the foundation, I was able to explore a variety of sinful acts to accurately represent one of the sins.

To help in bringing this story to life, I created a tight-knit town called Esterborne. As the backdrop of my project, each of the seven stories focuses on a character I developed who lives within this town full of their own fleshed-out history. By doing so, I had hoped to create an interconnected world that would allow anyone who reads to be fully immersed in, not just the characters, but the town as well.

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INTRODUCTION

Many years before civilization in Esterborne, there was only a desolate wasteland. It was a place where danger lurked around every corner and death was always just a step away. But there was one being who lived in this harsh and unforgiving land, alone with nothing but shadows to comfort him. His name was Daemon, and he was a creature of complete darkness. As a ruler of darkness, Daemon was in charge of all the negative and evil things going on around the world. For centuries, the land he inhabited with demons of the night served as his kingdom. He used his powers to terrorize and despair those who crossed his path.

One fateful day, a group of travelers stumbled upon Daemon's playground as they searched for a piece of land to call their own. Daemon and his dark creatures went to war with the travelers as they fought for the land, resulting in many casualties on both sides. Daemon allowed them this victory, swearing to return for revenge. He disappeared without a trace. For many years, the travelers transformed the land, creating a thriving community. The story of the battle for land motivated them to continue to grow the land into something more. The land became known as Esterborne, a place of peace and prosperity. Their history was rich and kept alive in the local museum.

With the upcoming generation, things have evolved and been forgotten. The story behind the land, and Daemon's threat, faded into nothing. The only thing keeping the stories alive were the artifacts in the museum, which fewer and fewer people visited. The ruler of darkness, Daemon, has decided to carry out his promise of revenge. No one fears his return, or what he can do to the town, which allows him to make them remember.

Daemon will plunge Esterborne into chaos and mayhem. With a sinister plan put into motion, the ruler of darkness will target seven individuals, each being manipulated into indulging in their deepest desires and temptations. As Esterborne unravels, Daemon's plan will take hold, leading to the eventual downfall of the once peaceful community.

PRIDE

There is only one family name that everyone who's been or lived in Esterborne knows of.

The Steele family is the founding family of the small town, opening their arms to anyone who stumbles into the quiet town. For their kindness and generosity, the area has grown slowly over time and become the quiet small town it is known as today. The family had relocated from the heart of town. This was a way to show that while they founded Esterborne, the people made it what it is today.

The Steele residence was a two-story red brick house with beige accents around the windows. It had matching pillars on the front porch that matched the stairs leading up to it. On the porch was a small bench for those days when the family wanted to sit out and enjoy the weather. There was a small table on the right side. A single flowerpot stood proudly on top of it with white irises – pure white and full of life. It stemmed from their ancestors, as white irises belonged to the founder Dahlia Steele. As the stories unfold, flower study has become a necessity for females in the Steele family. From their findings, white irises symbolize purity and innocence, which was exactly what the family tried to uphold for the town. It became a signature of the family and a well-known welcome gift for anyone who moved into Esterborne.

Six family members reside in the Steele residence: Grandma Steele, Mr., and Mrs. Steele, and their two boys and one girl. They're a lovely family, so poised and polite whenever they have people over for some random event. And while out intown, they always spared some time for citizens who came up to them for small conversations. Known around town, and loved by everyone, the Steele family was perfect.

As the typical story goes, Mr. and Mrs. Steele met when they were younger because so many people lived in Esterborne. Being in a small town meant everyone knew each other, so there was no shock when Mr. and Mrs. Steele were in the same classes growing up. Liam Steele fell for Claire Moore first, trying to win her over by bringing her flowers every other day once they hit high school. And because those white irises were always full of life and freshly bloomed, Claire accepted his advances. By senior year, the two promised a future together that didn't surprise anyone in town. Not long after graduation, Liam and Claire married and began their life together.

Grandma Steele was the only known family member alive or who bothered to stay in the small town. Liam's older brother and sister moved away from Esterborne after graduating to continue their education in different states. They each went their own way, only phoning Liam occasionally to ask how their mother was doing. But they didn't ask about anyone else, his children or his wife. But Liam didn't care. He knew that the day his siblings ventured off on their own, he would be left to care for his mother. He was sentenced to spend the rest of his life in Esterborne. But Claire liked it here, so he always tried to make the most of things.

Liam may be the one who keeps the family together. However, it was Claire who tried to keep their image of an ideal family. It was the last name that gave Claire this power. Claire knew that marrying into the family that founded Esterborne long ago had an image to uphold. Liam had talked about it so many times back in high school about the scolding he got when his parents were alive. He and his siblings were always yelled at and taught to be on their best behavior and greet everyone with a smile. Even if it meant the person they despised the most was standing in

front of them. They had to bear it, fake a smile, and greet them as every other citizen in this small town.

It was one of the things about his family that Liam didn't care about, and wished it were different. But Claire completely disregarded his thoughts and agreed with his parents.

"They're right, though." She had told him one night in the car, parked in the parking lot of one of the most popular burger joints in town. "Your ancestors founded this town. You have power here, and everyone knows it. So, you might as well have fun with it, right?"

He only nodded along, taking another bite of his burger, before letting her ramble on about her family situation back at home.

Liam spent so much money on flowers for her. He intended to try to get her to be his before another guy could sweep her off her feet. But did he even think about how different they would be? This moment should have been a clear sign. However, he ignored it and instead zoned out while she complained about something her best friend said at the time.

It wasn't a surprise when they first got married. But with the death of Liam's father, Grandma Steele refused to live by herself and moved in with the family. She lived in the large house passed down through generations. And while the kids were away, Liam headed off to work in the community. Claire had no other choice but to become her mother-in-law's caretaker.

Claire and Grandma Steele were civil when introduced to Liam's parents. Claire was always respectful of her, going out of her way to say hello whenever she came to visit during high school. She made small talk with her at family dinners and even brought small gifts when

spending different holidays together. She was the ideal girl for a young Steele man whom Liam's mother often scolded whenever he would zone out on her, do something that made her upset, or do anything else that Grandma Steele deemed disrespectful.

The two got closer once Grandpa Steele died. The whole town mourned, and they sent condolences to the founding family. So many flower arrangements were sent to the house, each containing white irises. It got to the point where Liam tossed them in the trash. But Grandma Steele loved them and knew they had become a signature flower for the family. She asked Claire to ensure all the arrangements were nicely placed around the house and keep her husband's hands off them. So, she did, and Claire got closer to her mother-in-law while clearing out flowers in vases.

"Liam refuses to listen anymore." Claire plucked any dead petals off the flower arrangement on the island in front of her. "He just doesn't understand how much your ancestors invested in this town. Just as you said one time, it's time to give rather than take."

Grandma Steele nodded, plucking at another flower arrangement nearby. Her skin wrinkled, and her hair grew white as time passed. But for the most part, she didn't look over sixty-six. Grandma Steele was moving and grooving as if she was younger. She kept herself busy, rather than giving in to any body aches she might have had as she aged. She refused to give in to time, and Claire aided her whenever asked.

"Liam never cared about our family history. Growing up, he played with his toys, rather than listening to stories about our ancestors." Grandma Steele waved a hand in her daughter-in-law's direction, before picking the dead petals off one of the flowers. "He thinks that as

time passes, the history of this town becomes less and less relevant. Times are changing, he says.”

“He has a point there,” Claire nodded, turning the vase to work on another section of the arrangement. “But still, history is important, especially in this town. I want our kids to know they're part of a great family. How important it is to know that the Steele family founded this town and made it the town it is today.

“Don’t say that to him, though.” Grandma Steele turned her own vase, checking for missed spots, before sliding it back into the center of the dining table. “Liam would argue that Esterborne was made by the people, not the other way around.”

Claire rolled her eyes. “It’s irritating.”

After plucking a few more dead petals off the arrangement, Claire twirled it once, before picking it up and heading into the living room. She rounded the couch and stopped in front of the coffee table. Setting down the vase in the center, she looked again before nodding to herself. Wiping her hands off on her pants, she returned to the kitchen with Grandma Steele.

The two continued their conversation, throwing the petals into the trash can and grabbing a rag to wipe down their mess. It wasn’t long before Mr. Steele entered through the front door and put his keys into the bowl nearby on the side desk. Slipping off his watch and shoes, he put down his bag in the front room before emerging into the kitchen. He went to his mother first, planting a kiss on her head before heading to Claire. Kissing her on her cheek, Liam instantly felt a strange energy in the kitchen.

Liam's wife and mother bonded quickly after she moved in. With Claire being a stay-at-home mother, the two spent a lot of time together. It was expected that the two would have a close relationship. And Liam hoped that would be the case, so he did not have to deal with any drama between the two. But since moving in, things haven't gone well for him. Sure, he had his mother with him, who helped babysit the kids whenever the two wanted to go out. Her health was okay, she needed only a check-up now and then, which Claire was more than capable of. But the physical part of his mother living with the two wasn't the issue, it was their own opinions.

The two bonded over many different things and gossiped about the town just like anyone else. Their conversations flowed like a river, from one family to the next. Whatever the latest gossip, the two talked about it for hours.

"Did you hear about the Warren girl?" Claire questioned Grandma Steele, then turned to her husband. "Apparently her grades have slipped so much that she doesn't hold the top-ranking spot at Esterborne High."

"Let the poor girl be," Liam waved her off, rolling his eyes. "She's a kid, she doesn't need to be perfect."

"Well, if her father says she is, she needs to back it up with that brain he brags about." Grandma Steele rolled her eyes at her son. "How was your day?"

"The usual," he said, feeling both eyes burn into him. "We got some tourists who stopped by the community center and asked about Esterborne's story."

Claire smiled. “Did you tell them about your family? The small museum we have here with all the artifacts your family found?”

Liam avoided her gaze, nervously scratching his head. She caught on and scoffed.

“Your family put so much work and time into Esterborne, and you won’t even acknowledge it.” She snapped, turning to her mother-in-law for support. “That’s a shame.”

“My family founded this town, that’s true.” He shot back. “But the residents helped it grow into what it is now. Don’t forget that Claire.”

“It wouldn’t be anything without our ancestors.” Grandma Steele piped up, backing up her daughter-in-law. “You need to take more pride in your background. It’s okay to brag occasionally.”

“That isn’t who I am, though,” Liam explained, leaning against the kitchen sink. “And you know that mom, so please don’t put stuff into Claire’s head.”

“She isn’t putting anything into my head, Liam.” His wife moved closer to her mother-in-law, placing a hand on her shoulder. “I’ve always thought the same thing your mother had when you met me.”

Liam shook his head, exiting the kitchen to venture into the living room. As he left, he heard his mother and wife speak among themselves.

“The people of this place have forgotten who started this town,” his mother harshly whispered. “One day, I hope he finds it in himself to take it all back.”

Liam knew his mother wasn't necessarily trying to be quiet, so the living room didn't help him. Deciding to go upstairs to the small study in the house, Liam left his wife and mother to themselves. Ascending the stairs, he headed down the hallway, before reaching the door at the end. Standing proudly in the center, he grabbed the doorknob, turned it on, and entered the room. Closing the door behind himself, Liam made his way deeper into the study. Bringing himself to the desk in this house longer than he has, Liam fell into the chair and let out the breath he had been holding.

Liam and his parents had the least loving relationship. His older siblings tended to get more attention, as they were known as the legacy of the founding family. He often envied them for it, as they did it so well throughout the years. They didn't succumb to the satisfaction of being part of the Steele family. Instead, they moved on with their lives and left Esterborne. He applauded them for it but held resentment as the next generation of the founding family ultimately landed on him.

When his last sibling moved out of town, things with his parents grew worse. They forced him to smile, and fabricated answers for him that met any questions tossed at him regarding his siblings' sudden change of pace and move from Esterborne.

"They wanted to visit places where our ancestors were before Esterborne, learn more about our own family history," he would say, the obvious signs of a repeated response drilled into it. But the people around him nodded and quickly changed the subject.

He was sculpted into Liam Steele, rather than himself. He didn't fight it much, though he sometimes didn't bite his tongue. Instead, he voiced his own opinions about the nonsense he was raised to brag about. This ultimately led to moments like those with his wife and mother.

Mr. Steele turned in his chair, looking at the small bookcase nearby. Liam's eyes glanced at every book on that shelf before one caught his eye. Tempted, as he swore he hadn't seen this one before, Liam stood up from where he sat and drifted to the bookcase. He raised his hand and pulled the book from where it was. Its leather cover was warm against his fingers as he returned to the desk, sat down, and flipped it open.

The pages were old, yellowing with age. The writing didn't look printed but cursive. Thanks to his parents, he could read it like it was printed out. But the pages made no sense, as none made coherent sentences. Words were written out of place, so that it might seem like a child had written it themselves. One word, though, stood out to him. Bold and double-underlined, a single name was plastered in the center of one page.

“Daemon.”

A hiss escaped his lips as he lifted his thumb toward himself. Sucking in a tight breath, Liam noticed the paper cut on his finger. Making a face at it, blood slowly emerged from the open wound. Trickling down his finger, it fell onto the pages of the book he had opened.

“Crap.” He muttered, noticing the blood drop on the name in the book.

Shutting down the book, he pushed it aside before wiping his finger on his jeans. He brought it up to his face again. When he saw more blood emerge from his wound, he pushed

himself out of his chair and headed for the door. The bathroom was his destination, hoping to find the small bin of bandages his wife had stocked up in case their children got hurt.

The book remained on the desk as Liam exited the room, closing the door on whatever was left behind.

As days passed, Liam did not step foot back into the study. He put more time towards the community, rather than being at home, helping other families, and working alongside the mayor of Esterborne. He occupied himself with things that didn't require his attention but made it a point to stay out of the house longer and longer each time.

Staying away from home meant he didn't have to deal with his wife and mother ganging up on him about the town, the ancestors, or anything else they wanted to nag him on. Claire and Grandma Steele caught on to this quickly, though, and talked about Liam. The two concluded that Liam was a lost cause when it came to spreading and sharing the history of Esterborne and the Steele family with any tourists who decided to visit the small town. Claire agreed with Grandma Steele that everyone deserves to be reminded of the founding family and decided to throw a party at their house in honor of the Steele family. Invitations were sent out quickly, and it didn't take long for Liam to hear of the event being held at his residence.

It was late at night when he had gotten home, fully intending to bring up the silly party that his wife and mother were planning. With his finger still wrapped in a band-aid from the paper cut that didn't seem to show signs of healing, he ran it along the top of his cup of whiskey. He didn't bother to greet his children, wife, and mother in the living room, and instead went

straight to the kitchen to pour himself a drink. He chugged a bit in the glass, before filling it up again and letting the warmth of the whiskey calm his frustration.

Something inside him was bubbling, growing more and more into rage as he thought back on the conversation, he had with the Montag family.

“It says it’s in honor of the founding family,” Mrs. Montag explained, turning her head to her husband in confusion. “We were confused when we got the invitation, as the founding day isn’t for another month.”

“We always do the festivities on the day of,” Mr. Montag explained, pulling out the invitation from his pocket. “So, my wife and I were confused when we got the invitation to your home. Of course, we don’t mind it at all, as we respect your family a lot. But we just thought it was strange.”

“I don’t know a single thing about this,” Liam clarified, taking the small slip of card stock into his hand. “I’m sure my wife and mother are behind this.”

“Oh, bless your mother,” Mrs. Montag piped up. “After the death of your father, we were worried for her. But if she wants to have a little party in honor of your family lineage, then so be it, anything to keep her happy during this dark time for her.”

And that was all that the Montags had said before parting ways with Liam, talking among themselves about what they should bring to the party. Liam was left to his own thoughts, irritation fueling him as he clenched his fists. He wasn’t sure what his mother and wife were getting at, and what their intentions were for this party, other than to brag about the founding of

Esterborne, which couldn't have been done without Liam's ancestors. With his fingering still aching from the papercut, Liam headed home with the only thing on his mind being to confront the two women.

He needed some confidence, though, so he poured himself something to drink and let it sting down his throat before pouring himself another. With his blood no longer fuming with rage, and his finger with that lingering ache, Liam grabbed hold of his cup and headed into the living room.

There, he spotted his children playing among themselves while his mother and wife watched TV. Liam had gotten away later than dinner, so Claire made sure to wrap it up and place it in the microwave for when he got home. And he knew this but decided against it when he opened a cabinet to find a bottle of his father's favorite whiskey.

"Kids, go to your rooms." His voice was laced with whiskey and darkness as he took another sip from his cup. All eyes turned to him. "I said, go to your rooms."

Sensing the coldness within his voice, something so strange and unusual for someone like Liam, the kids scrambled to their feet and darted off into their rooms. Doors closing echoed around the house as he turned towards Claire and Grandma Steele, eyes narrowing at how close they sat together.

"What is the problem, Liam?" Claire asked, taking notice of the cup in his hand. "And why are you drinking? You have to be up early tomorrow."

“You’re throwing a party? In honor of our family history?” He questioned, inching closer to the two.

“We just wanted to go over the history of it all,” Grandma Steele stood to her feet. “You should be proud of your family and all that they’ve accomplished through the years. Yet you ignore it, take everything for granted, and let the town walk all over you.”

“We don’t need a party to talk about the history of this town,” he explained, taking another swig in between his sentences. “We have the founding day next month, festivities all week leading up to it. Why do we need to glorify finding land when the citizens helped make this into what it was?”

“Our ancestors did more than just settle down on land, Liam. The Steele family helped build these buildings we walk into every day; we help fund whatever is needed in town. What’s wrong with making it known how much we do for Esterborne?” Claire was the next to stand to her feet, arm lightly outstretched in front of her mother-in-law.

“You were married into this family! You don’t get to say you’ve done so much for this town!” Liam shot back, finishing up the last of his drink. “It’s my money! My family’s money! Without Steele to your name, you’re nothing more than everyone else in town!”

“It’s just a party, Liam, I don’t understand why you’re getting so worked up!” Grandma Steele cried, taking notice of Claire, who had gone silent.

“It’s more than just the party!” He threw his cup, aiming for the wall closest to the television. Bursting into tiny pieces, the cup fell into a pile on the wooden floor. “I don’t want

the stupid family name if it means I constantly have to put up a facade! My siblings got away and left me to fend for myself. Left me to continue on the legacy!”

The Steele family founded the land that made up Esterborne. Rightfully, they were considered the founding family. Mr. and Mrs. Steele, during that time many years ago, was assigned as the leaders of those who wished to relocate. Their speech filled with ambition and promise of new land moved many people. After settling, Mr. and Mrs. Steele continued to be the leading force for the town, often having the final say in matters that revolved around food, buildings, and anything else that required their word. Many of the buildings still standing today were done under the eye of the ancestors of Liam.

Times change, though. And while the Steele family still gets recognition for finding the land and being the starting point of Esterborne, it was the growth and hard work of the towns’ people that helped make it what it has known to be. Few in Liam’s family strongly believed they should have more of a say in what happens around the town, continuing to be the final word in important discussions and decisions. But he had taken on the legacy after his siblings ran off, leaving him to try and keep the town held up with the stories of their ancestors and by providing input and advice.

“Liam, you need to calm down,” Claire whispered, shaken by his outburst. “It’s not that serious, it’s just a party-”

His bandaged finger burned with pain.

“You and my mother have been ganging up on me since I first introduced you two, telling me how I should be and act,” he spat. “And you know what? I’m tired of it.”

His mother eyed him, grabbing hold of Claire's arm and gently pulling him towards her. Claire was quick to understand what she meant and took a few steps backward to meet her at her side.

"You want me to gloat about the Steele family? Want to throw this stupid party?" He let out a chuckle, rolling his eyes as he made his way to the stairs. "Then fine, let's have this party. But we're doing it my way."

Without saying much else, Liam made his way up the stairs to the study and closed the door shut behind him. Claire and Grandma Steele looked at each other, unsure of what had just happened. They didn't expect him to have an outburst like that, as he was usually more on the less violent side when it came to disagreements. After letting a few seconds go by, Claire pulled herself away from her mother-in-law and headed to the kitchen to get the broom. Before she grabbed it from near the refrigerator, her eyes caught on the vase of flowers on the island. She made a striking sound as she noted the white irises that looked like they'd been welting. Grabbing the broom quickly, she reentered the living room and began to clean up the broken glass.

"The flowers in the kitchen are welting," she told Grandma Steele, bending down to scoop up the glass with a pan. "We'll need to clean them up tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, yes." Grandma Steele said her face grave as she looked back at the stairs her son took.

The two were silent as they looked over to see if there was any leftover glass. Nothing was found, so the two shut things off downstairs and checked on the children. Once confirming

they were okay, Claire helped Grandma Steele to her bedroom, before turning in the opposite direction and heading to her shared bedroom with Liam. Upon entering, she noticed his lack of presence and was quietly thankful he had yet gone to bed. She changed into her sleepwear and curled up under the bed. A few minutes went by as she waited for him to come in, but never did. Claire went to sleep that night, with the other side empty and cold.

The next morning, Claire woke up bright and early in hopes of catching her husband on his way out. She got herself ready, longingly looking at the bed as she realized he didn't come in last night. Claire closed the bedroom door behind her and headed downstairs, but there was no sound of him anyway. She knew he was supposed to leave the house at seven-thirty, so she made sure to get up before then to catch up. But it was now going on seven twenty, and he was nowhere to be found. She thought perhaps he had gone already, but her suspicions were stopped as he came down the stairs dressed in what he wore yesterday and smelling of whiskey.

“Shouldn't you get cleaned up?” She asked, following him to the front door as he tightened his watch around his wrist.

“I am cleaned up.” Was all he said as he grabbed his keys and opened the front door.

“I'm serious Liam,” she followed after him, shaking her head as the two walked onto the porch. “The town will talk, you know, I won't hear the end of it.”

“Just like how I hadn't.”

Without as much as a look back, Liam made his way to the car. Getting inside, he fixed his mirrors, before starting his engine and pulling out of the driveway. Turning the car, he continued down the road where the sun was rising.

“Ridiculous.”

Claire sighed as she shook her head-to-head back inside. She closed the door behind her, not noticing the front planter near the bench. The usual white irises that complimented the front of the house were dead, rotten to the stem, and slouched over. It was a horrendous sight that she hadn't caught, it meant she was paying attention to no one else but her husband.

Days passed, and Liam's attitude changed like a flick of a switch. His once humble personality had dwindled to nothing as he now stood with his shoulders straight, chest puffed out, and with a smug smile plastered on his face like his mother had taught him long ago when he was a little boy. The town of Esterborne noted this change in him, as he became more and more overbearing and controlling. But no gossip spread, as his presence became far more dominant and intimidating whenever around people. The town was afraid to speak ill about him, unsure how to start a casual conversation with him. But they noticed the rapid change, noticed the band-aid always wrapped around his finger.

Something was amiss, but the town of Esterborne wasn't prepared for what was to come.

LUST

Alice preferred to spend her free time out of the house, often finding herself in the corner of one of Esterborne's coffee shops.

It was the town's least popular one, in the quiet part of town closer to where she lived. Alice didn't need to drive there and enjoyed the little walk she had to go on. Alice always took the current book she was reading, along with her phone and headphones, and made her way to Haven Cafe. She'd put on her most updated playlist as she walked down the sidewalk, before making a sharp turn. Just a bit longer down the street, the typical coffee shop would soon come into view. Alice greeted the owner with a smile and a small wave, before finding her spot back in the corner, out of sight and out of mind.

The elderly lady at the counter whipped up her drink and topped it off with a scone on the side, before placing it in front of her and leaving her on her own. Alice offered her a nod before pulling out her book, turning up the volume, and traveling into whatever world she was currently reading. And it wasn't that she had a reason to escape to a fantasy world; she just enjoyed being somewhere other than Esterborne.

Alice is the only child in the Greene family. A very private family that chose to live in the quiet part of Esterborne, which has died out since its first expansion. People around town agreed this was a trait the parents had passed down to their daughter, considering she was like the parents – quiet and kept to herself. The grass did turn as bright and green as it did in the newer parts of town, and the flowers didn't last long despite someone having a green thumb. The houses were on the older side, rather than the newer ones built when Esterborne first expanded. However, the house had been in their family for generations, so the Greene family kept it like that. Mrs. Greene was a stay-at-home wife, while Mr. Greene worked as the town's high school

football coach. Their only daughter, Alice, was about to graduate high school at the top of her class.

Alice always did what her parents told her, but she didn't mind it at all. She was their only child, so she tried to do as much as possible around the house. She did the dishes, helped set the table, and cleaned whenever her mother had to go out and buy groceries or other things around the house. She knew it was the least she could do, so she never thought to complain. Especially since her parents often let her be whenever she would head out to the coffee shop. She would be out for a couple of hours and then return home with a small bag of treats from the coffee shop owner, sending Alice back to her parents with warm regards.

Her eyes scanned over the words, reading along in her head as she took a small sip of coffee. She sat down the mug soon after, adjusting the volume on her headphones, before leaning back in her seat. She brought one of her knees up and tucked it underneath her in the booth. Flipping through the page, she allowed her mind to wander as the descriptions she had read played out in her mind.

She was at the part of the story where the main character finally put the pieces together and realized that the person, she had been searching for was the one painted to be the villain. It was a typical trope, but it was one that Alice loved so much that she didn't care how many times she had read through it. She had countless books at home, each similar to the one in her hand. The only difference was the different places in time where the story took place. The current one she read through was set in a magical world with royalty, witches, and other mythical creatures. A magical world that, with each turn of a page, continued to tempt her into staying.

Drifting into each world was far too easy for her, and that's what Alice loved the most. She often made herself laugh, though, thinking that if she didn't have the opportunity to read, she

wasn't sure what she'd do with her life. That's why these moments of quietness and being alone were so important to her because she never was truly alone. Not when she had a book to travel into, imagining herself as the main character, rather than as an individual. She desperately wanted her own story, a replica of the one she loved to read so much. But that was only if she had a choice.

Alice didn't realize someone had sat across from her until she had gone to take another sip of her coffee. When she peeled her eyes away from the page she was currently on, she noticed a hand just a bit away from her mug. Mentally noting the exact word she had stopped at, Alice sat her book down and pulled out one of her headphones.

"Excuse me?" She glanced over at the person in front of her. "Do I know you?"

The figure in front of her looked young, perhaps around her age. His tousled hair was jet black, matching the darkness in his brown eyes. He had a sharp jawline and a thin nose, and his skin was tanner than most. He didn't look like anyone around town, and Alice couldn't think of a family that would match his prominent features. The young man who sat in front of her had to be new in town or had stopped on his way to his next destination.

"Oh, sorry about that!" He quickly waved his hands to show her he meant no harm. "I just noticed you were sitting by yourself, and then I saw the book you were reading. It's one of my favorites!"

She raised an eyebrow, letting her eyes look over at the cover before returning to focus on him.

"Are you serious? Or are you playing some sick joke?"

He chuckled a bit, shrugging as he leaned back. "I don't; I just wanted an excuse to talk to you."

She sighed, beginning to pick up her book and pushing her coffee to the side. Alice wanted her time alone. But the fact that it was now interrupted only irritated her, and now with the moment gone, she'd much rather try to hide out in her bedroom. And the guy in front of her caught on quickly, following her as she stood up.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable," he scratched the back of his head, taking a few steps away from Alice to allow her to breathe. "I moved into town not too long ago, and I remember seeing this coffee shop on the way to our new house. And when I saw you sitting here, someone around my age, I thought I'd try to make a new friend."

Alice cocked her head to the side, pulling her small tote bag up her shoulder. "You're new here? I don't remember hearing about anyone new moving in."

He nodded, trailing after her as she headed to the counter where the elderly lady greeted her. The owner handed Alice the familiar white bag she always gave her, filled with little treats to take home to her parents. She murmured a small 'thank you' before turning back around to head to the exit. The elderly woman watched as Alice left the coffee shop with an arched eyebrow, though she remained silent and turned back to tidying up the counter.

"It was sudden. My grandfather wanted to move to a small town after my grandmother passed." He explained, allowing the door to close behind the two. "He thought it would be hard to continue living in the house she died in, so we moved."

"And where in Esterborne?" She inquired, picking up her pace as she walked toward her house. Alice noticed him walking behind her and instantly stopped when a small feeling of uneasiness crept up in her stomach.

"Our house is just down here," he pointed. "It's on the corner of Willow Drive, the one house with the overgrown grass and bushes."

"Wait, seriously?" She questioned, immediately knowing which house he was referring to.

The house he had mentioned hadn't been lived in for almost a year. The last owners, without telling anyone, had just packed up and left. It was sudden but wasn't completely unexpected. The family consisted of a mother, a father, and three children. Their middle child had died suddenly in that house, and no one knew how. The parents were both gone at work, their oldest had taken a quick trip out of town with friends, and the youngest was staying late for an out-of-school activity with the club they were involved in. The parents didn't push it and wanted to keep everything hush-hush, knowing that Esterborne was a nosy town. So, after a small funeral service, the family got up and left without another word.

The house hadn't been lived in for a while, so Alice didn't even think it was still up for sale. The grass on the front lawn had been overgrown, and the bushes surrounding the gate leading to the backyard were also overgrown and had begun to drift into Greene's yard. The porch was also chipped and looked unstable in a few areas. As for the house itself, it was built very similar to the Greene's. It was a two-story house, not too large but not too small, and was painted in a light brown color with white and light gray accents. But compared to the family next door, this house looked less lively. There was no denying that it was left behind to be forgotten, not exactly to be lived in.

"My grandfather didn't seem to care about all the yard work that needed to be done," it seemed as if he could read her thoughts, answering the questions that seemed to cross her mind. "As long as he got away from it all, that's all that mattered."

"Esterborne is a small town, so don't be surprised if people begin to offer you and your grandfather sweets," Alice explained, turning the corner with the guy following suit.

"That'll make my grandfather happy. To him, it shows that people care."

"Or that they're just nosy."

He laughed, to which Alice cracked a small smile.

"I'm Daemon, by the way." He formally introduced himself as their shared neighborhood came into view, with his house being the first one they noticed. "And you?"

"Alice," She replied, adjusting the strap of her tote bag on her shoulder. "I'm Alice Greene."

The two stopped right in front of the first house on the street.

Alice took a few seconds to fully observe the guy she had met. He was taller than the girl, probably by a foot and a few inches. And he was dressed in a black hoodie, baggy jeans, and white tennis shoes. His clothes were a bit on the softer side despite his prominent features. And at this moment, Alice couldn't help but clutch the book she was reading and bring it closer to her chest.

Alice hadn't had the chance to experience something from her books, which was why she read so often. She didn't bother to put herself out there, only focusing on school and nothing else. She wanted to keep her parents happy and ensure they had nothing to worry about when it came to her. Other than reading, schoolwork was the only other thing Alice did. She didn't give much thought to her social life, but it wasn't like she had the desire to.

Keeping to herself was something her parents had done, and she just found herself matching their lifestyle. Which was why books were so important to her. Specifically romance novels. Her favorite trope was the love story between the main character and the painted villain, who had been good all along but was willing to be made to look bad for whatever reason. Upon

meeting Daemon, she couldn't help but label whatever was beginning between herself and the new boy in town to the trope she had read so much of.

Right now, the only thing that painted him as a bad character was his striking features and dark clothing. And what else could Alice add to this? The strange way he had approached her in the coffee shop had to be another thing. It was sudden, unexpected, and a bit alarming, considering she had never met him. But the fact that he had explained himself seemed to ease whatever she had felt earlier when they had first made their way back to their neighborhood. Either way, Alice ticked it off on her mental list.

"I'm gonna get going, but it was nice to meet you." Alice looked over at the house, noticing an elderly man in one of the front windows. His eyes met hers.

"Yeah, I'll see ya around." Daemon shoved his hands in his pockets, following her gaze. He took a few steps around her, heading towards the front door.

Alice pulled her eyes away from where she met the young man, taking one last look at Daemon before making her way back down the street. She couldn't shake off the feeling of being watched and took one glance behind herself. She picked up her pace when she saw nothing and headed straight home. Taking one last look behind her, Alice turned towards her house to be safe and headed straight inside.

Greeting her mother, she headed straight to her bedroom to finish the chapter she was on back at the coffee shop. She tried her best to stay focused on the book in her hands. She wanted to travel back to the world she had gone to when she was back at the coffee shop, but Alice's mind wandered back to the young man she had met. She couldn't help but allow herself to replace the characters in her book with Daemon and herself.

Alice didn't take his words seriously when they departed after their first meeting about seeing each other around. She thought it was just something he said as a courtesy, but apparently, there was some sort of meaning to it. As Alice walked down the street, heading to school the next Monday morning, she quickly noticed Daemon standing outside his house with his backpack. And from that moment on, Alice made her first real friend.

Alice didn't have any classes with Daemon, so she didn't see him throughout the day. Before school, after, and on her weekends off, she was always on Daemon's side. The two had learned much about one another, especially Alice.

She learned early on that Daemon had lived with his grandfather for as long as he could remember. From what he told her, he was an only child, and his parents died when he was young. He has lived with his grandfather and late grandmother ever since, helping around the house however he can. Like her, he did his best in school, so his grandparents didn't have to worry about him.

Alice learned little facts about him. His favorite color was black because it went with everything and was easy to style when it came to clothes. He liked his coffee with no creamer or sugar, and it had to be fresh from the pot. Daemon didn't care to read in his free time, but instead just listened to music and tried to find new artists. His favorite fruit was an apple, which had to be red because the green ones were too sour for his liking. And one pet he always wanted was a pet snake because he thought they were misunderstood creatures and wanted to be one of those people who gave them a chance to prove society wrong. But, when Alice asked him to choose between a dog and a cat, like many people in Esterborne, he chose a cat. And it had to be black because that was his favorite color.

He was not very upbeat, Alice noticed, unlike many people in Esterborne, and she noted that he was different from many others her age. While people chose to go out into town, go to popular diners or little stores that sold similar styles of clothing with different colors and prints, Daemon preferred to stay inside. Or if he weren't inside hiding from the town of Esterborne, he'd be alongside Alice in Haven Cafe. And while she continued to read her novel, Daemon occupied himself with his phone and headphones. He'd drift off to sleep in the booth, not even bothering to touch the extra coffee mug Alice had begun to order for him specifically. The shop owner didn't bother to question it, and Alice didn't scold him for wasting the ordered drink.

Alice had finally thought her own romance story had finally begun, and this moment of realization had come to her back when she was driving down the street with Daemon in the passenger seat. The two had decided to go on a late-night drive to get out of the house for a bit. There was complete silence between them in the beginning, as the windows were rolled down and light music played from the car's speakers. Daemon, though, was the first to break the silence between them.

He asked her what got her into reading first, and Alice smiled. She explained that reading allowed her to escape Esterborne, to travel to another world that allowed her adventure and excitement. When Daemon asked her about the book she was reading when they first met, Alice made sure to be brief about what it was truly about. She was embarrassed to tell him it was a romance story, but Daemon wasn't dumb. He quickly realized the truth when she blushed and got flustered, saying that it was just this girl who was enemies with this guy. And that's all she had to say for Daemon to get the hint. It was silent for another moment or two until Daemon was the one to disturb the silence again.

"Have you ever thought about writing your own story?" He asked, looking at her from his spot in the passenger seat. Alice only shook her head.

"I never thought of being a writer. I'm not sure what I'd write." She had said, giving him a small smile before looking back at the road.

"Then we'll make one together," Daemon stated, rolling down the window from his side. "Every night, we'll drive and brainstorm ideas about what you can write. That way, you can escape to your world rather than others."

She didn't say anything, only looking at him with bright eyes. Daemon stared back at her, a simple smile playing on his lips, before he turned away to look out the window, letting the breeze take him away. Alice turned back to face the road again, allowing herself to drift into her thoughts while also including Daemon's words. She couldn't help but let her heart swell with something unfamiliar, making her blush even more. She wasn't used to the attention Daemon had given her ever since they first met; it was all so new and exciting. That was the sole reason she continued to sneak out at night to see him.

But one night, in particular, caused her parents to suddenly notice the shift in Alice. Mr. Greene had caught his daughter entering the front door late. He had woken up in the middle of the night due to a strange feeling from one of his dreams. He had headed downstairs to grab a cup of water, hoping the little journey to the kitchen would help clear his mind. And on his way back upstairs, he had caught his daughter trying to sneak back into the house through the front door. The moment Alice turned around after closing the door behind her, she was greeted by her father, who only looked at her with disapproval.

"Alice, what do you think you're doing?" He questioned, flicking on the nearby light. "Where are you coming in from?"

She only shook her head, unsure how to tell her father that she had returned from a late-night drive. But her father didn't allow her to get away so easily as he stepped closer to her, tensing up his body, hoping she would understand her situation.

"Alice, don't make me ask you again."

She sighed, giving in to her father in hopes that she could head straight to bed as soon as possible. Alice briefly explained that she had gone for a ride with the new neighbor's grandson next door. She had told him they weren't out long, so she went for a quick ride around the block and returned. Alice was extremely tired and wanted nothing more than to go up to bed and sleep. Mr. Greene, unsure whether his daughter was telling the truth, made sure they would discuss this tomorrow and allowed his daughter to be excused. She kissed him quickly and quietly ran up the stairs and to the room.

The next morning, Mr. Greene had filled his wife in on what had happened the night before. And as promised, Alice had to sit down and listen to the lecture she had gotten from her mother and father. She assured them it wouldn't happen again and said she had become good friends with the boy next door. They confirmed it was okay, but to not sneak out again and be sure to inform them when she'd leave the house. She had promised them and left on her way to school, stopping in front of Daemon's house to wait for him before heading on their way. Their lecture to Alice didn't leave much of an impact, as it only lasted for very few days.

Daemon had told Alice that he was getting antsy and liked when they would go for their late-night drives. He missed them, and Alice admitted she did too. So, he convinced her, though it took some time. And soon enough, Alice quickly allowed Daemon to sweep her off her feet. She began sneaking out again, but this time she was far more cautious with how she did it and

got back inside. Her parents were completely unaware of where she was going and who she was going with.

Sneaking and staying out at night was an issue, but it started to become far more than that as days went on. Talk around town began to spread of Alice not showing up to school, which Mr. and Mrs. Greene had heard first from Mrs. Steele and her in-law in the next aisle over in the market. Mr. and Mrs. Greene looked at each other with concerned looks, before quickly hurrying back home after buying the essentials. As if on cue, they had gotten a phone call from the principal at Esterborne High not long after school was supposed to be let out. And the news the principal had left for them was something they were not expecting.

“She hasn’t been to school for how long?” Mr. Greene asked despite the number of days already being told to him. “And her grades? That much?”

Mrs. Greene bit her nails, waiting for her husband to get off the phone to learn more about their daughter. It was only a few minutes before Mr. Greene bid the principal farewell and hung up. He explained to his wife what has been going on; how many days Alice has missed, and how her grades have shown a decline due to this. Mrs. Greene sighed, a headache forming due to stress. The two agreed to speak to Alice the second she gets home.

The moment she did, Alice got an ear full. It was a lengthy talk that consisted of her parents’ disappointment in her and her grades, her sneaking out after being told not to, and the weird shift in her attitude. But they didn’t get a word out of their daughter, only a look that seemed too distant from the present. Feeling their talk was not getting to her, Mr. and Mrs. Greene sent her to her room for the rest of the night and would be called down when dinner was ready.

Once again, as she approached the dining table for a family meal, her eyes stared beyond what was in front of her.

Deep in the night, Alice changed into a black hoodie, denim jeans, and tennis shoes before looking around her room. She was trying to see if she needed anything for the ride she was about to go on. But she had her phone in her pocket and wallet, so she was sure she didn't need much else. Creeping past her parents' rooms, she descended the stairs and headed to the kitchen. She looked around, trying to find something specific that Daemon had asked her to bring.

Alice's eyes landed on the fruit bowl in the center of the kitchen counter. Reaching forward, she grabbed hold of the brightest red apple her mother had bought and grabbed the car keys nearby. She left the house swiftly, unlocking the door as Daemon slid into the passenger seat. Alice handed him the apple, allowing him to take a bite as she started the car. With Daemon by her side, Alice had driven off into the night.

As she passed through the quiet streets, stopping at any red lights and speeding up whenever some flashed green, she thought back to the books she had always read. The main character always had a rough beginning with the story's villain. But in time, it would come to light that the evil guy was only portrayed as the villain and was good all along. He did everything he could to keep her safe and from whatever harm came her way. And finally, once whatever they were fighting against was gone, they began their happily ever after together.

This was nothing like that. Alice wanted it to be, thinking of Daemon as evil due to how he approached her. However, their story did not follow the same path as the ones she had read. Instead, she had grown to learn so much about his likes and dislikes. The two became great

friends in such a short time, and Daemon was willing to give her the quietness she wanted whenever she read her book in the coffee shop. He respected her boundaries and even got her to start thinking of her own story, rather than consuming others. He had shown her a new way of living beyond just inserting herself into stories that had already been written so many times before.

This story of hers was far different, but the ending was the same. Alice had continued to drive out from Esterborne and into the future ahead of her with Daemon. Her happily ever after with the boy who had shown all the right attributes to win her heart was just the beginning. Alice turned to express her excitement and joy to him, but her eyes only found the bitten red apple on the seat beside her.

Mrs. Greene had woken up soon after; a feeling of concern had washed over her as she heard a car start up just outside the house. She slid her feet into her slippers nearby and immediately dashed to her bedroom window. Looking out into the driveway, she noticed a car pull out and speed off. Immediately, she rushed back to the bed and shook her husband awake.

"Get up! It's Alice! She left!"

"Shouldn't we inform this boy's grandfather?" He asked her, opening up the front door for his wife. "I mean, if Alice is going out with that boy, then I think it's important we tell the one in charge of him."

"But she's already gone, and we don't know where she goes!" Mrs. Greene cried.

"They have to come back, honey." Mr. Greene stated, gesturing to the house next door. "Let's just give his guardians a heads up, okay? We should do that first before making any rash decisions."

Mrs. Greene was against it, but she knew she was acting on emotion. She wanted to go after her daughter, but her husband was right. Informing the son's guardians was the right thing to do, especially since they may not know what the two have been doing so late at night. With a heavy sigh, Mrs. Greene followed her husband to the house next door. And after a few knocks on the door, it didn't take long for the owner to slowly open up. Standing there in pajamas, looking as if he had just woken up from a deep sleep, was an elderly man. He had wrinkles, but his eyes still had a glimmer of life to them despite his age.

The elderly man only stared back at the couple, looking between the two. Despite never speaking to them, he remembered they were one of the few families who hadn't gone to greet him when he first moved in. He didn't take any offense to it, though; he knew that other people had their own lives to worry about and focus on. At least, that's the conclusion he had come to.

Taking one last look at Mrs. Greene confirmed the resemblance to the young girl who often stood outside his house in the early hours before school. She'd stand there, talking to herself, before heading to the town high school. He had first noticed her strangeness the first day he had moved in when she stood in front of his house with her bag hanging on her shoulder and her book clutched to her chest. Her mouth was moving as if she was talking, before looking over and catching his eye.

She then began on her way, often looking back behind herself, before heading into her own home and closing the door behind her. The elderly man tried not to get weirded out by it, as he heard from the families who came to greet him that Esterborne had a strange history. He never bothered to learn more, though, considering he knew he wasn't getting much younger as time went on. He thought he'd let her be, considering she didn't harm him.

"Sorry to disturb you, sir." Mr. Greene started, placing a hand on his wife's shoulder. "We just wanted to inform you of what was happening with your grandson and our daughter."

"Pardon?"

"Your grandson," Mr. Greene had repeated himself, taking note of the elderly man's confused expression. "The one who befriended my daughter when you two first moved into town."

The elderly man shook his head, and a look of distress finally found its way onto his face. "Is this some sick joke?"

Mrs. Greene cocked her head, squinting at the old man. "A joke? Your grandson just drove off with my daughter, and do you think this is a joking matter?"

"Well, it sure seems like it," he shot back, opening the door wider in the process. "I have no clue what you're talking about."

"Our daughter, Alice!" Mrs. Greene shouted, suddenly losing her temper. "Your grandson had befriended her right when you two first moved here; surely you've seen her around before."

"Your daughter is the one who's always been standing in front of my house in the early hours, isn't she?" He questioned. "Strange one, she is. She stands in front of my house every morning before school, and then walks off."

Mrs. Greene looked at the man, before looking over at her husband. She knew her daughter had gotten up early, and as she had mentioned, Mrs. Greene was well aware that Alice would walk with the elderly man's grandson to school. But what didn't make sense to her was what the man was saying. His grandson was friends with her daughter, and the two had just left to who knows where. Why on earth would this man make up a lie about not having a grandson?

"I'm sorry, sir, but I think you have her confused with someone else." Mrs. Greene piped up. "My daughter is friends with your grandson."

"My grandson died a year ago," the old man whispered. "He died in a car accident with my wife. That's why I moved here; it was too hard to bear that pain."

"Your grandson died?"

"Yes, he died the same day my wife died." He explained, shaking his head as to forget the painful memory. "Listen, I have no idea what's going on, but since the day I moved into this town, I have lived alone. Now please, hurry home and let me sleep."

And with nothing left to say, the old man had closed the door in their faces. Mr. and Mrs. Greene walked back to their house, utterly confused about what they were just told. It didn't make any sense, especially since Alice had spoken about this friend as if he was a real human being. And if what the old man next door had said was true, just who was Alice driving away with at night?

As the two returned to their own home, they decided to stay up and wait for Alice to come home. Mrs. Greene made coffee while Mr. Greene sat waiting. There was complete silence between the two as they tried to think about what was happening. Neither one wanted to consult with the other, too afraid, as they believed the other might think them crazy. And surely the situation would call for that.

It had made zero sense who Alice was spending her time with, especially since there seemed to be no new boy next door. There was an explanation, not one that seemed reasonable. As Mrs. Greene poured a cup of coffee for her husband, Mr. Greene's eyes scanned the kitchen counter before resting on the fruit bowl in the center. A single piece of fruit was missing from the bowl, but he paid it no mind.

Alice Greene never came home from that late-night drive.

ENVY

The top spot at Esterborne High belonged to Priscilla Warren.

It started to become a trend in middle school when Priscilla would gloat about her excellent grades to her close friend Leila. Her friend didn't mind, because she knew that if she got grades like Priscilla, she'd be the same way. Priscilla was one of the most intelligent kids in their class, and it later became known that she was one of the most intelligent students in the grade level once she entered high school. Good grades meant everything to her because she had a better chance of leaving Esterborne.

When she could connect her thoughts and feelings, Priscilla felt uncomfortable in Esterborne. It wasn't the people who always had their noses in other people's businesses. And it wasn't the old buildings that needed excellent remodeling after so many years of standing. The atmosphere made her feel like this town was alive, and not in a good way.

The street lights turned on when the clock struck six, and the sun started to set. So even when she stayed after school for any activities that required her presence, she was semi-okay with walking home from school. She wished her Leila lived in the same direction, so the two could walk together. But over the years, Priscilla learned to deal with it and stayed on high alert on her journey home.

Mr. Warren worked at a department store a few miles from where they lived, on the outskirts of the small town. Only the two lived at home since Priscilla's mother died when she was just a baby. She didn't know much about her mother, so she tried her best not to dwell on her death but instead did everything she could to help her father with things back home. While Mr. Warren worked late into the night, Priscilla cleaned the house, made laundry, cooked dinner, and among other things to ensure her father always came home to a spotless house. He never asked

her to do these things, often telling her that it was okay for her to be a teenager. But Priscilla insisted and did all necessary household chores before laying out any graded work she had gotten returned to her on the table.

There was always an 'A' or a 100% written in red ink at the top of her papers whenever he came home. He'd smile, take a closer look at whatever she did, and put it on the refrigerator door until the next batch of graded papers came in. When she had extra time, she'd read ahead on the lessons, so she was better prepared for the next chapter.

Many people wondered how a kid could be brilliant, consistently staying at the top of her classes. They asked if the mother helped her during their free time, but then that'd lead to the somber conversation of how poor Mr. Warren and his daughter were without Mrs. Warren. Other times, the people of Esterborne talked about whether Mr. Warren helped his daughter. But just like the mother's conversation, this would lead to a dead end, as everyone remembered he worked on the outskirts of town, leaving little time with his daughter, as commuting may take longer depending on any visitors. All the conversations about Priscilla and her intelligence often led to parents trying to talk up their kids.

"Have your ears been ringing?" Mr. Warren asked his daughter suddenly at dinner, shoveling a spoonful of macaroni and cheese into his mouth.

"Have my ears been ringing?" She cocked her head to the side, lowering her fork. "What do you mean?"

"Your mother used to say that ringing in your ears means someone is talking about you," he explained after swallowing. "Some superstition she went on about before you were born."

Priscilla shook her head, laughing a bit before taking a bite out of her plate. "No. Definitely no ringing in my ears."

Mr. Warren smiled to himself before looking up at his daughter. For a split moment, he swore he saw his own wife sitting before him. "That's good to hear."

"Have people been talking about me?" She asked.

"You know this town talks, Priscilla. It's not a secret," he took a sip of water. "They talk about your brain; say they have no idea where you get it from."

"People do things differently," Priscilla shrugged. "It's all about knowing what works best for you and moving forward with that method."

Mr. Warren raised an eyebrow at his daughter, before chuckling and continuing with his dinner. The conversation on Priscilla's intelligence didn't come up anymore, as they swayed to one another's day about their highs and lows. Priscilla finished her dinner first, picking up after herself and placing her dirty dishes in the sink, before moving to her father. Gathering his things, she took them to the sink and began to wash dishes. Mr. Warren kissed her on the head goodnight and excused himself to get cleaned up and ready for bed.

After finishing the dishes, Priscilla wiped down the table, before shutting the lights off behind her. Ensuring both the front and back doors were locked, she looked around the living room before heading to her own room at the end of the hall.

It was a good size for her, with enough room for her twin-size bed and a desk in the corner. She had a small closet that held her clothes and a window that looked out onto the front of the house. The entire Warren house was more on the smaller and humble side, but it was perfect for the family of two. Priscilla couldn't complain since she had a warm place to stay at night with a roof above her head.

She closed the door behind her and turned on her bedroom light, which flickered a few times before settling to the usual yellow. Unzipping her jacket, she tossed it onto her bed and

grabbed her backpack by her door. Taking it to her desk, she unloaded everything she needed tonight and rested her bag off the side. Priscilla slipped off her shoes, settled into her chair, and began her work for the night.

It was a more uncomplicated night this time. She had gotten feedback from one of the most recent essays she turned in, so she only had to make a few suggested edits before moving on to her math homework. One of the more challenging subjects for her, which was why she often split it into sections to give her brain a break. But tonight, she'd much rather go to bed tonight, so she breezed through as much as possible before stopping. Pushing it off to the side, she went through a mental list to see if she needed to check anything else before settling down for the night. When she confirmed nothing was left to do, she headed back to shut off the light and slipped into bed.

Priscilla was confident that the conversation with her father at dinner was the cause of her weird dream last night. As she dressed for school, she remembered the way she stood in a field with grass. Half of it seemed alive, while the other half was yellow. Her body refused to move, as she could only look around at her surroundings. There was nothing in the distance, but the fading of more plains. Different patches looked dead in the field, while the grass that looked alive was dark green and moist.

There wasn't anything to do but stand and endure what came next. Despite the sun above her in this dreamland, there were slowly forming clouds that loomed over the entire area. Jet black and whispers of thunder began to sound above her. And as she looked up, Priscilla was met with what looked like rain. It fell from the clouds, so she assumed it was that. However, the color was far from it. Inked in the matching color of the clouds, the onyx rain trickled down and

stained her body. All while the rain continued to fall, ringing accompanied it. Through her ears, Priscilla was greeted with the irritating sound of constant ringing.

She didn't wake up scared, as she wasn't one who usually got afraid of things like that. But that didn't mean she didn't dwell on it as she dressed, grabbed a perfectly red apple for breakfast, and left the house in a hurry. The walk to school was quiet as she ate her apple in silence, thoughts lingering back to the strange dream she had the night before.

Priscilla was greeted by her friend Leila, who instantly perked up from her spot at the school's front sign. The two had a casual conversation as they entered the building, talking about their latest essay.

"Pretty much, the entire thing was marked down." Leila sighed, stopping beside her locker. "I don't even know what doesn't need editing."

Priscilla lightly laughed. "I'm sure it's not that bad. You did it at the last minute, so all your thoughts were mixed together."

Priscilla went to open her locker, which was beside Leila's. A sudden ring began to pierce her ears as she lifted her hand. She crouched forward, holding on to her right ear as a small whimper escaped her lips. As every second passed, the ringing got louder and louder, like raising the volume on the TV.

"Priscilla?" Leila reached a hand out to her friend. "What's up? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, it's just this ringing in my ears." She explained, groaning as the awful sound began to get even louder. "I don't know what's-"

A figure had bumped into Priscilla, causing the ringing in her ears to come to a halt. She turned, still cupping her ear, as she looked at the person who had run into her. Priscilla looked at

the figure up and down, trying to figure out who this person was. Yet she couldn't place her finger on it.

His jet-black hair reminded her far too much of the clouds and rain of her dream. His eyes were darker than his eyes and didn't seem to hold any sign of kindness within them. The boy was a foot taller than her, so she had to crane her head to look at him. Everything about him seemed ordinary, except for his eyes. Dark in color, it seemed almost unnatural.

"Sorry about that," he said, placing a hand on her shoulder. A faint chill had gone down her spine. "I wasn't looking where I was going. I'll be more careful."

And without saying anything else, the boy disappeared down the hall through the different crowds of high school students. Priscilla could only look after them, watching as his figure got mixed among the other students. The ringing in her ears ceased to exist at this point, so she was thankful for that. It stopped when he bumped into her, which was weird, but made some sense. She could stop focusing on that annoying ringing and brought her attention to the boy. As long as the ringing stopped, she didn't care how.

"That's the quiet boy in our English class," Leila took a few steps closer to her friend. "Quiet boy? I don't remember seeing him in our class."

"He's always sitting at the back. Doesn't talk to anyone, keeps to himself." Leila explained. "I don't know his name, but he always has his hoodie on."

Priscilla shook her head as she looked back at her friend and then at the hallway where the boy had disappeared. Shaking it off, she returned to her own locker and grabbed the necessary textbooks before closing it shut.

The girls bid farewell before heading off to their own classes. Leila and Priscilla didn't have the same courses other than English, so the two didn't see one another much throughout the

day. But it was fine, especially for Priscilla. She focused too much on her schoolwork anyway to socialize in class with other students, especially with her best friend. But when the time came for their last course of the day, which was together, Leila made sure to bring up the boy earlier this morning.

"Back of the class," she insisted, whispering to her friend as they entered the classroom.

"See?"

Priscilla instantly followed her friend's directions, taking notice of the boy who sat in the far back corner of the classroom. Her eyes widened slightly as she looked him over, noticing the hood draped over his face as he kept his attention forward. He ignored who entered the classroom as his eyes focused on something straight ahead.

"I guess you're right," Leila smiled triumphantly. "So, what's his name then?"

"No clue," Leila shrugged. "It starts with a C, I think?"

The two girls talked among themselves as they took their seats near the middle of the class. Their conversation drifted from topic to topic as they waited for their teacher to enter the room. And as he did, the entire class quieted down and waited for his instructions.

"I have your previous essays graded," Mr. Duncan had stated, opening his suitcase, and pulling out a stack of papers. "They all were well written, but there's always room for improvement. I'll be passing these out, and for the time being, please begin to work on your next draft for this upcoming essay. That's all we'll be doing for today."

Without much else to say, the entire class began to pull out their own papers and work on their edits, while Mr. Duncan started to swerve through the aisles. He laid each essay on the corner of his student's desks.

Leila was the first to get her essay back, and it wasn't surprising when she got no more than a B+ on her assignment. She grabbed it and smiled to herself before showing Priscilla. It wasn't a bad grade, and actually higher than her friend usually got, so she congratulated her before noticing her own essay being slid onto her desk from the corner of her eye. Smiling to herself, Priscilla turned to grab it, before seeing what letter was written on it.

"A C+?" Leila whispered over her shoulder, eyes bulging out of her head. "That can't be right."

Priscilla shook her head. "I never got anything lower than an A, and I don't get it."

"Did he leave any notes? He had to have left something." Priscilla flipped through the pages, searching for any written notes that may have been done between her own lines. But she couldn't find a single mark.

"Well done, Chase!" Mr. Duncan called from the corner of the room, to which all students in class turned in that direction. "You got the highest mark this time around; nicely done."

At the sound of it, all eyes turned to stare at Priscilla. Everyone looked at her in disbelief, wondering if it was confirmed that the quiet student in their course did get the highest mark, rather than her. What confirmed their suspicions was how quickly Priscilla shoved the essay she had brought back into her backpack. Leila didn't even try to speak to her friend, knowing that Priscilla did not want to talk to a single person. Instead, the girl worked in silence, hoping everyone in the class would stop staring at her with widened eyes.

The rest of the class flew by as Priscilla kept to herself and didn't even bother to make small talk with Leila. She was too much in disbelief to hold a conversation, as all she wanted was

to get away from her classmates, who she knew was still staring at her as if she was an animal in a zoo. She quickly collected her things, shoving them into her backpack at the final bell.

"I'm just going to head straight home," Priscilla said, staring down at her feet in defeat.

"I'll see ya tomorrow."

"No problem. See you tomorrow, Priscilla." Leila said, resting a gentle hand on her friend's shoulder. "And don't worry too much about it, it's just one low grade."

That said, Priscilla left the classroom and headed straight for the school's exit. She didn't bother to stop at her locker on the way, wanting to get out of school as soon as possible before she could hear the gossip about her spread. And as she began her journey home, Priscilla couldn't ignore the faint ringing in her ears that followed her.

It was supposed to be just one low grade; that's what Priscilla told herself. That's what she said to her father when he got home from work. Mr. Warren overheard the latest gossip at work. The moment he could head home for the day, he rushed to see how his daughter was doing. He knew getting the best grades were important to her, so Mr. Warren was prepared to face whatever Priscilla was going through. But when he walked into the door, she said nothing. And it was like that for the rest of the night, no matter how hard he tried to converse with her. That night, Priscilla dreamt of nothing but had that faint ringing noise stuck with her, making it difficult for her to get some natural sleep.

Days continued to pass, and Priscilla hoped her one low grade was old news. However, things began to take a turn for the worse. More and more graded work began to be passed back to students every other day. Every time work slid onto Priscilla's desk, the letter grades seemed to get lower and lower in each class. Every time something got passed back to her, people in her

class waited for her reaction. It was like her classmates' own form of entertainment, as they waited to see what grade she got, rather than their own. And that only seemed to make Priscilla even more irritated.

She knew her father didn't care too much about her sudden grade drop, knowing that it must've been because she was getting burned out. Mr. Warren knew his daughter and knew she would bounce back from whatever slump she was going through. It wasn't that, though. Priscilla wasn't entirely sure why she suddenly started getting such bad grades. It started when Chase from her English class had gotten the sudden top score on that one essay. That's when it all started, and since then, she believed he was slowly climbing the ranks.

That was the latest gossip that followed Priscilla's, as everyone began to wonder who was slowly taking over her top spot in the school. And upon hearing that, she became increasingly resentful of the quiet kid in her last class. With every essay the course got back, he would be complimented on his high marks. They weren't always at the top, but they were high enough to hit Priscilla where it hurt.

It had reached the point where Priscilla waited until the end of class to speak to Mr. Duncan one day after receiving her assignment with a letter grade of a D. She slowly packed her backpack, allowing other students to leave the classroom before her. Leila didn't even bother to say goodbye to her, knowing that Priscilla was planning on pulling Mr. Duncan aside. Instead, she whispered to her friend words of encouragement before leaving. Once the students left the classroom, Priscilla pulled her backpack over her shoulder and made her way to her teacher.

“Mr. Duncan, I wanted to talk about my grades recently.” She said, approaching his desk.

“I see, is something wrong?” He looked down at her, stopping his hands from what they were doing.

“They’re getting significantly worse each time I get something back, Mr. Duncan,” she explained, her tone getting a bit defensive. “But each time, I don’t see any notes that would better guide me.”

Mr. Duncan cocked his head, looking at her with confusion.

“Mr. Duncan, look.” She unzipped her bag, pulling out the latest work she had gotten back. “It’s a D, don’t you see? But there are no comments anywhere!”

Just as Mr. Duncan was about to grab hold of her assignment, someone returned to the classroom.

“Mr. Duncan, Principal Ridley wants to see you.”

Priscilla’s ears began to ring.

“Ah, Chase Lawson. Thank you, I’ll be right there.” He nodded along, to which Chase glanced over at Priscilla.

She was hunched over a bit, one of her hands covering her ear, while the other gripped the paper in her hand. She made a face as Mr. Duncan turned back towards her.

“Forgive me, Priscilla, but I have to go. We can set up a meeting tomorrow to go over your assignments. I’m unsure of what you’re talking about, but we’ll get it figured out.”

With a simple goodbye, Mr. Duncan excused himself. Priscilla glanced over to where Mr. Duncan had left, her eyes landing on Chase, who still stood by the doorway. His eyes were dark as he looked back at her, not offering her any sign of wanting to chit-chat. And instead, slowly, he turned around and exited the room. Instantly, the ringing in her ears began to lower.

Priscilla was frustrated, as this was her chance to get things sorted out. And while Mr. Duncan had mentioned talking tomorrow, she’d much rather get things settled now. She needed

it done now. She needed answers, some form of guidance on what she is doing wrong to get such awful grades. She couldn't wait though and instead decided to handle things herself.

It's what led to the current position she's in now.

Rushing over, she looked out into the hallway before closing the classroom door. Priscilla took one last glance through the door window to make sure no one had seen her. Making sure the coast was clear, Priscilla rushed over to the desk belonging to Mr. Duncan. There wasn't much on top of his desk, other than a small computer, some papers that were out of place, and a few pencils that looked worn down.

Her eyes brushed over the desk, trying to find something she could tinker with. Priscilla wasn't sure what she was actually looking for, only that something had driven her into the classroom. She wandered around the desk, closer to the whiteboard, and moved aside the different papers on the desk. They looked like plans for today's lesson, going over the upcoming assignment on the current book they were reading. It looked as if they would have to write a literary analysis. That wasn't what Priscilla needed.

Very suddenly, as her hand drifted closer to the computer, the ringing in her ears began again. Louder and louder, repeating itself like a broken record player. The ringing was nagging as she covered her ears, small sounds of pain falling from her lips. The echoing sound in her ears had become more frequent since that strange dream she had, but never had it been so strong and loud as it was now.

A faint whisper caused all the ringing to stop.

"The computer," it said, the ringing halting in its place. "Check the computer."

As if something had grabbed her wrist, her hand moved on its own. Priscilla's hand gripped the mouse, moving it slightly to awaken the computer. The screen lit up, revealing the last thing Mr. Duncan had been working on.

On the screen was the grading system, with a list full of names and letters ranging from A, B., C, D, and F. Each person on the list had different notes in a column based on whatever assignment was being inputted. Priscilla began to scroll as the ringing in her ears got slightly louder. The list seemed endless, as she saw names of different students from various other classes that Mr. Duncan had taught. She tried desperately to find her own name.

The ringing intensified as she continued to scroll through. Leila's last name, Montag, was quickly spotted.

The ringing picked up.

Priscilla continued scrolling, trying to find her own name on the list.

Even louder the ringing got.

Priscilla found her name, seeing the inputted numbers of her previous assignments. She scowled at them, hating how often she saw the letters "C" and "D."

The ringing in her ears hit its highest the moment her eyes landed on Chase's name. Right there underneath hers, Priscilla tried to ignore the irritating sound in her ears as she looked at all the "A's" he had in his row. Gripping the mouse, she glared down at his name.

As if in tune with her actions, the ringing thudded against her ears as Priscilla's body moved on its own. Pulling the keyboard closer, she clicked and typed away at Chase's column. The ringing grew and grew, but too invested in what she was doing. Priscilla continued to change the grades under Chase's name.

When she had finished, so did the ringing in her ears.

The next day, Priscilla didn't hear any ringing in her ears. She was pleased when she walked into class with a slight smile at the fact that she heard no ringing in her ears. Only the sound of chatter around the classroom greeted her. Mr. Duncan entered the classroom, greeting his students, before setting his things down and preparing for the lesson.

Sitting at her desk, she took out her notebook and a pencil. Leila entered the classroom and sat at the desk next to her, scribbling the date on a blank sheet of paper. Like her friend, Leila pulled out her notebook and pencil and wrote down the date on her own blank sheet of paper.

"Apparently, we have a late practice today," Leila spoke up, to which Priscilla turned to give her friend her attention. "Can you believe that?" Bianca said the coach told her to spread the word.

"Is Bianca suddenly her favorite?" Priscilla whispered, leaning forward a bit.

Leila rolled her eyes. "I don't understand why she's been in the coach's eye recently; it makes no sense. She gives her attitude all the time!"

"Well, it's no secret she's rude, especially in this town." Priscilla shrugged. "Everybody knows everyone's business."

"Yeah, the word did travel fast about your grades slipping."

Priscilla made a face at her friend, who offered a nervous smile. "Sorry."

Priscilla glanced at the seat in the far back corner. However, the boy who usually sat there was nowhere to be seen. She tilted a bit, thoughts rummaging as she studied the area.

"Do you know where Chase is?"

Leila casually leaned closer to her friend, trying to catch her whispered question. And when she did, Leila looked back to the empty desk in the corner. She, too, made a face before turning back to Priscilla and shaking her head. Leila turned back to her own notebook, writing down what Mr. Duncan said needed to be remembered about the period in which the assigned novel was written.

Priscilla took one last longing look at the desk before turning in her seat. She wondered where he had gone or if he even showed up today. But he was a quiet kid in their grade level, barely speaking to anyone unless spoken to. He wasn't talked about in the town either, as there wasn't much to say about him. But something in Priscilla was glad he wasn't in class today. She knew that seeing him would only fuel her jealousy of him and his grades even more. So instead of thinking about it longer, she focused on Mr. Duncan's words. By the time Chase returned to class, Priscilla's ears did not ring, as her grades began slowly getting back to where they were.

Priscilla knew she deserved nothing but the highest marks in her grade level. When the ringing in her ears became unbearable, she did the one thing she knew would help end it all.

Change all grades that threatened hers.

GLUTTONY

Mr. Duncan was perfectly content with living by himself in the town of Esterborne. He was a teacher at the town's high school, and that was something he prided himself on. He always stood tall whenever he brought up his students, glad to say he was teaching the next generation. He didn't have anyone at home to worry about, and both of his parents had passed a few years prior.

He chose not to marry, for the sole reason that he was fine. Mr. Duncan knew all the women in Esterborne, and all those women knew one another. It was like a circle, and if he had gotten with one and it didn't work out, then the other women would be well aware of it before he even had a chance to pursue anyone else. Esterborne was too small, too confined, that it only made the idea of marriage that much more difficult to desire.

Because he lived alone, Mr. Duncan had to work to bring in income, but also keep his own house clean. Though that wasn't really hard, considering his house was only a small one-story. He was extra careful not to make a mess unless absolutely necessary since no one was picking up after him. His house was a bit away from most people his age and instead was closer to where the elderly lived, rather than those more around his age. It was close to his job and not too far from the market, so it was a win for him.

He had no one to really look over him, Mr. Duncan took it upon himself to keep a healthy diet. There was no one at home to cook for him, to ensure he was drinking the amount of water necessary for his body, and to stay in shape. And for so long, he had grown to enjoy taking care of himself. It became second nature, and one of his favorite places to go to, other than work, was the supermarket.

His favorite days were Sundays, simply because most people in Esterborne had already gotten their shopping trips over with. A hefty amount of people in town went on Saturdays, as the next day was considered their day of relaxation. The adults would lounge around or do whatever hobby they wanted. The elders often visited or went over to dinner, and the younger ones did homework. It was one of the days in Esterborne where everything was still, and that stillness only contributed to how Mr. Duncan spent his Sundays.

He slept in a bit, woke up, and spent his morning reading. Mr. Duncan had done all necessary grading for his classes the night before, staying up late to ensure that his students each got the appropriate feedback on their assignments. He made sure that each of his students had written responses that would better give him advice on how to do better on the next paper, and even left notes for them to always speak to him for help if they wanted more guidance than what was offered on their paper.

After finally gathering up the energy to pull himself out of bed, Mr. Duncan cleaned himself up and headed downstairs to fill his stomach with some coffee and something small. He did a quick swoop around his kitchen, double-checking and writing down anything he needed to grab at the market while he was out. Writing down the items he was out of, Mr. Duncan grabbed a hold of his keys and left his home. Heading down the street in his car, he approached the market.

It was the only market in Esterborne, and it included various things. While it was the main place to go for food, there were a few parts of the store in the far back that had things beyond just food products. Other places in town were dedicated to bedding, furniture, books, etc. However, for the convenience of the town, there were a few things in stock for those who didn't

feel like stopping anywhere else. It worked out for Mr. Duncan, and it made his shopping days pretty easy.

Parking his car, Mr. Duncan made his way to the entrance of the market. Upon entering, he was instantly greeted by Mr. Steele. He had heard of his sudden change of personality and had been doing his best to avoid him as much as possible. But with Liam being out in the community much more than he usually did, it was hard to stay clear of his bath.

“Hi Nicolas, having a great day so far?” Liam stopped him just outside the main entrance. A large brown box was folded up and under his left arm.

“Ah Liam, yes, it’s been good so far. How about you? How’s your Sunday going?”

“Pretty good!” Liam flashed him a bright and extremely wide smile. “We got a small shipment of this new wine. I thought we’d do a small shipment to see how it does in sales before we stock up with more.”

“Really now? Some new wine?” Mr. Duncan arched an eyebrow.

“Oh, yes! It’s from a company outside of Esterborne.” Liam switched the box to the other side. “They offered to give us a few bottles to see if it would do well in our small town. Its name is Tartarus.”

“Tartarus? Quite a strange name, don’t you think?”

Liam shrugged. “I think it’s a fitting name. It’s a red wine, sweet in flavor that you can’t help but want to drink more of it!”

“Ah, so you’ve had it then?”

“Best wine I ever had!”

Mr. Duncan nodded along, trying to contemplate if today would be the day he’d try the new wine stocked in the store. He wasn’t one to drink. It involved too many calories for his

liking, so he often tried to steer clear of alcoholic beverages. Only on rare occasions did Nicolas Duncan have a sip of something other than water.

“I best be going now,” Liam patted Mr. Duncan on his shoulder. “The Mrs. and I are meeting for lunch. See you around, Nicolas!”

“You as well, Liam.”

Mr. Steele had walked towards his car. Unlocking it, he tossed the folded-down box into the back of his car, before getting in and driving away. Nicolas watched him go, before turning around and heading into the market. He grabbed a basket and made his way to the vegetables first, going through his small written list.

His trip to the market was quick, thankful to the list he had written before he left the house. Nicolas was able to breeze through, grab things off shelves, and put fruits and veggies into small bags to make sure nothing happened to them before placing them in his basket. He only had to do one loop around before making his way to the register. On his way, his eyes were met with a small rack of wine bottles.

“Tartarus.”

Nicolas had whispered among himself as his hand reached forward and grabbed hold of the bottle. It was jet black, to the point where you couldn't even see the outline of the liquid inside. A simple piece of parchment was on the front, with the name of the wine written in cursive. There was a vine with leaves, wrapping itself around the bottle, before covering the top acting as a cap. Mr. Duncan turned the bottle around in his hand, trying to find any other words other than the name of it. But alas, there was nothing else written on the bottle.

Shrugging and not thinking much of it, Mr. Duncan placed it into his basket before setting his things down. The cashier began to ring him up, making small talk about the weather,

how his class was doing, and even bringing up the sudden family that wound up in a town without even any sort of gossip surrounding their move-in. Nicolas let the older woman talk away, watching as she slowly scanned every item in his basket.

The last thing to get scanned was the wine bottle. The cashier eyed it up and down, before scanning it and placing it into the brown bag.

“Mr. Steele said this wine is supposed to be good,” she started, entering a few numbers before gesturing for Mr. Duncan to insert his card. “Apparently the brand is new, and they reached out to him. I'm not sure why but you know Mr. Steele these days, has been a bit off.”

“The small town may finally get to that man,” Mr. Duncan grabbed his bags after paying. “Well, thank you. Take care!”

Mr. Duncan left the market and headed back home.

Nicolas continued his week as usual. During the week, he'd wake up and prepare for his day, educating the younger generation. He prepared his lunch the night before, so all he had to do before leaving the house was prepare his coffee. And when he got home, he whipped himself up something quick and enjoyed his dinner.

As Friday finally arrived, Nicolas headed home completely done with the week he had. For some strange reason, things have been off with some people in the town of Esterborne. It had gotten to the point that even his own students were gossiping while he tried to teach them this week. The biggest thing that occurred was the sudden disappearance of his previous student Alice. No one had heard from her for a few days now, and the town has been a bit uneasy since.

It wasn't helpful either that Mr. Steele didn't seem to make any sort of announcement about the situation. Instead, he was apparently occupied with a sudden party that he and his wife

were throwing in honor of the Steele legacy here in town. But there was more to the gossip that the students were talking about. Apparently, Mrs. Owens was caught by the police for breaking and entering, though no one is certain that she was the one to have stolen from the town's museum. Things have been a bit off in Esterborne, so it was that Nicolas just needed a night to drift away from the town.

And while he couldn't necessarily leave, considering he had his job, he decided to pop open the bottle of wine he had bought when he went to the market. Tartarus had been sitting in his fridge, staggered off to the back behind his meal preps and bottles of water. He never drank unless it was for a special occasion. Yet his coworkers had brought up that the wine Mr. Steele had put on the market would definitely be to his liking. It was easy to drink and sweet. But not too sweet where it would make you sick. Just enough to easily glide down. And that sounded like Heaven to him.

Pulling at the vines, Nicolas popped open the bottle of wine and brought his nose to the opening. Sniffing, he was instantly greeted with an aroma that just felt alluring. It had a sweet smell, but not sweet as in strawberries, but sweeter as rich chocolate. He began to second guess himself, wondering if this would be a bit too sweet than he originally thought. With the thoughts of the strange happenings in Esterborne, Nicolas shook it off and grabbed a glass. Pouring himself a drink, he took a sip.

It was cold, and as it was said, the wine easily slid down his throat. It indeed had a sweet taste, one that was so intoxicating that Mr. Duncan couldn't help but finish what he had and poured himself even more. He finished that off, too. It was like a broken record. Pour, chug, pour, chug, pour, chug. Mr. Duncan continuously drank the wine. It only took him a few more

glasses to finish the bottle. For such a wine to be named Tartarus, Mr. Duncan was pleasantly surprised by the taste of it.

Nicolas was a bit unhappy because of this but reminded himself that he would simply just buy more when he went back to the market. Pushing the empty bottle aside, and setting his glass in the sink, Mr. Duncan began to prepare his dinner for the night. He made steamed rice and chopped up and cooked veggies, all while he thought about the wine he had drunk.

He expected it to have some sort of bitterness, but all that he heard from his coworkers was correct. It was sweet enough to where it was easy to drink, but not to where it was almost tooth-rotting. His thirst clouded his mind for more, and he didn't notice the vine wrap itself back up the bottle as if it had never been opened.

Nicolas couldn't wait any longer, though. The moment that Sunday finally rolled around, he woke up early. Preparing his breakfast, he quickly ate, grabbed his car keys, and rushed out the door. Not once did he glance around his kitchen to check for the items he needed to buy. Instead, his mind was only focused on buying more of Tartarus.

Mr. Duncan began to buy the wine in bulk. The town seemed to love it so much that the shelves began to grow more and more so that Tartarus could have more room. Every Sunday morning, Nicolas would prepare himself a small breakfast of nothing more than a single slice of toast with butter. He'd grab his car keys and drive to the town's market. From there, he'd buy at least 6 bottles of the wine. The cashier didn't even need to count or scan. She'd simply type the code in for it, and then the amount, which would always be the number 6.

"You seem to love this wine, Mr. Duncan." The cashier joked, though there was an underlying concern.

“I didn’t expect it to be so good,” he explained, his eyes dull and sunken as they solely focused on the bottles. “Mr. Steele did well on getting them here.”

“Yes, I suppose he did.”

With a quick goodbye, he grabbed his wine bottles and drove home. It wasn’t long until he was seated in his living room, television on with the bottle unwrapped from the vine. There was no need for a glass, not when it was much quicker and more convenient to simply drink from the bottle itself.

Each time Mr. Duncan drank from the bottle, he felt get pulled deeper and deeper into its grasp. He couldn’t escape the unimaginable and delicious taste of it, and it wasn’t like he wanted to. The feeling he had when the wine would go down his throat was far better than the buzz, he would get from drinking it. The leaves and vines that itched at his chin and above his mouth whenever he threw his head back and drank felt like little pampering kisses, further coaxing him into drinking more and more.

At first, Mr. Duncan had made sure to keep his urge for the wine under control when at school. However, when he finally got to the point of buying six bottles at a time, it began to show through his work. He’d show up to school smelling like that sweet and alcoholic juice, with the area surrounding his lips having faint scratches from the vines on the bottle. His students didn’t think much of it, just thought their teacher was having wild weekends. When the smell of the wine began to become stronger and stronger, and his coffee mug began to smell of it too, that’s when his students began to whisper about him.

“Didn’t Leila, from your cheer team, mention that Mr. Duncan smelled like that new wine?” Mrs. Owens whispered in the teacher's lounge.

“She mentioned his coffee mug smelled like it,” the cheer coach responded, looking over at the figure hunched over and passed out on the nearby table. Mr. Duncan was taking a nap during the lunch period. “Said when she went up to talk to him, he smelled of it.”

The two shook their heads at him, before turning away to further gossip about their co-worker's sudden alcoholism. The small town it is, with everyone gossiping and spreading things around every corner, word had gotten around so fast that by the time Mr. Duncan had caught wind of it, Principal Ridley was already in his classroom.

“Mr. Duncan, I need to speak to you.” Principal Ridley closed the door behind her, making her way deeper into the classroom. Instantly, she caught a whiff of the smell. “It’s about your drinking.”

“What about it?” He slurred.

“Sir, I cannot have you come to school and teach students under the influence.” She looked down at him, squinting as he took a drink from his mug. His coffee, today, wasn’t brown, instead, it was red.

“I’m not under the influence.”

“I cannot have you lying to me either.” She got louder with him. “You are excused from your position, Mr. Duncan. Please clear your things, you’re free to go.”

He stood up.

“You’re firing me?”

“It is completely unprofessional and wrong to come to school under the influence. On top of that, you’re drinking in class as well!” She turned around. “You are not to step foot on this property, Mr. Duncan. I apologize, but you are dismissed.”

Without another word, Principal Ridley left the classroom. Mr. Duncan gave her a vulgar gesture with his finger and chugged the rest of the contents in his mug. Grabbing his suitcase and coat, he made his way out of the classroom and out of the school. Loading up his car, he turned on the engine and rode back home.

He didn't think twice about his job, and how he was now out of work. The thought that he no longer had an income didn't even cross his mind. The only thing he could think about was the delicious and sweet Tartarus bottle of wine waiting for him. Not bothering to unload his things, Nicolas did all he could to grab his mug and keys. Locking his car, he entered his house and headed straight to his kitchen.

Old vegetables and fruits were lying out on the island, near the trash. A few fruit flies flew around, buzzing as he opened up his fridge. So many bottles of Tartarus wine were lined perfectly on each shelf possible in the refrigerator. All of them were perfectly placed, with the label facing the front. Not that he needed reminding of its name. Grabbing the one closer to the top left, he hummed to himself as Nicolas made his way to the living room. Flipping on the television, an old movie was playing as he began to tug and pull at the vines and leaves. He allowed himself to submit to the wine completely, throwing his head bag and chugging his life away.

From that day forward, Mr. Nicolas Duncan never returned to his teaching position and instead became known as the town's drunkard.

WRATH

"Are you sure you're going to be okay?"

Nodding her head, Leila took one last look at her graded essay and slipped it into her bag. She closed her backpack before looking back up at her friend, giving her a small smile.

"Yes, Priscilla," Leila noticed the slight frown on her friend's face as she glanced over her essay. "You always ask me this when I have to stay so late for cheer practice."

Priscilla shoved her essay into her backpack, tossing her pencil before zipping it shut. She grabbed her jacket and draped it over her chair as she stood, with Leila following suit.

"You never know, Leila. We all know each other here in Esterborne," Priscilla led the way through the aisle of desks when the final bell rang. "But do you know everyone in Esterborne?"

Letting Priscilla go on her little spiel, Leila followed her out of the classroom and down the hallway to approach their lockers. It was always the same conversation, led mainly by Priscilla.

Leila was considered to have a seemingly everyday life in Esterborne. She had a mom and dad, a little brother, and herself. A small family, as she would like to think. Everybody in the Montag family looked after each other and kept out of gossip whenever possible. No matter how hard they tried, the family couldn't escape fate, just like others had in Esterborne. Their struggles and achievements were always talked about among the townspeople.

Leila got used to it quickly as she grew up, knowing it was inevitable in a small town like this. So, she adapted and tried to find ways to minimize as much talk about her family and herself as possible. She did her best, but there were times when something would slip through the

cracks. Leila didn't try to stop it and ignored whatever anybody had to say about her life. She didn't care because she knew there was no point in fighting it all.

"Have your spots gotten better? Do you get any time in the front in that new routine you guys are doing?"

"Ugh, don't even bring it up." Leila shook her head, opening her locker as she began to rummage through it. "It irritates me so much, and I hate it."

"You should talk to your coach, Leila," Priscilla suggested, going through her locker. "I mean, she's not going to know unless you say something."

"I shouldn't have to tell her, and it should be fair all around." Leila replaced one of her books with another, trying to recall which assignments she had to finish tonight. "Besides, I think it's pretty obvious that I'm one of the best ones on the team."

"I mean, yeah, it is obvious." Her friend cupped one of her ears, a slight groaning sound escaping her lips. "Geez, this ringing is getting annoying."

"Still happening, huh?"

Priscilla only nodded.

"I hope it gets better for you soon, I know it can be pretty irritating." Leila hiked up her backpack higher on her shoulder. "I must head to practice, but I'll talk to you tomorrow. Okay?"

"Yeah, see ya!"

And with that being said, Leila made her way to the girls' locker room. She quickly changed into her practice clothes, neatly folding her casual clothes, and placing them in her gym locker and backpack.

Leila has been part of the cheer team since she first entered high school. She had done the little girls' team growing up, as it was something her mom thought would help keep her

occupied. She loved it and wanted to continue it as she got older. Leila knew it might not have gone too far, as she expected to stay in Esterborne with her parents for a while after graduation. Her grades were okay, not bad, but also not at Priscilla's level. She knew cheerleading was where she shined and put her absolute best into practice and performances.

She was doing perfectly fine, but only recently had she been getting more of the worse spots in routines. At first, she didn't think anything of it, as she knew that others needed their time to be in front and center. However, as the year began to progress, Leila noticed how little front time she was getting nowadays. She's been enduring it most of the time, but now, it only began to get on her nerves. It only started to get a problem when another girl on her team began to comment on this, and she immediately took notice.

Bianca was another girl on her team who had done cheerleading for just as long as Leila had. The two go back to the beginning of the little girls' cheerleading team and have been cordial. Their rivalry was evident, as both girls strived to be in the front. And at first, Leila was winning this competition, as she often got the better spots in routines. Though now, there was no denying that the better spots began to be handed to Bianca instead, and this only seemed to fuel her anger and frustration even more.

Practice went as it usually did nowadays. The first half was put towards warming up the body and working on endurance as they went on a team jog around the school. The second half was dedicated to working on routines and stunts, as the coach often had a list of things the team needed to work on based on their latest performance in town or games. Leila enjoyed the first half, as she could drift into her mind as she worked on herself. But the second half she hated the most.

Being part of Bianca's stunt group, Leila had to hold up the girl in the air and the others who were part of this particular group. They were good, one of the most vital stunt groups on the team. Leila made sure not to let her anger and frustration with her spots show as she pushed the girl up into the air on the count of three, before lowering her a bit and raising her even higher by the count of eight. The group hit their mark before lowering Bianca back onto the floor, who thanked her teammates, but gave Leila, specifically, a sly smirk.

It took everything in Leila's power not to snap at her for being so fake, as the group worked on more stunts. They ran through their routines twice each before being done for the day. And as Leila changed out of her clothes with the other girls in the locker room, she couldn't help but listen to the conversation on the other side of the lockers.

"Yeah, that's what the coach told me earlier today," Leila could hear the smirk in Bianca's voice as she spoke. "I'm almost guaranteed to be captain next year, just need to continue doing whatever I am now."

"That's great, Bianca," another girl on the team encouraged her. "I think you'll be a great captain."

"The coach votes on who's the captain." Leila cut in, rounding the corner after she slipped on her t-shirt. "So, I honestly don't believe you one bit."

Bianca made a face at her, tying her shoes as she flipped her hair to the other side. She kept her attention on Leila as she tied the knot effortlessly on her sneakers. "Are you calling me a liar?"

"If the shoe fits," Leila snarled, squinting her eyes at her. "Besides, you haven't been doing anything at all. Just spreading the word like a messenger. Since when have you contributed to choreography?"

"You think you've done anything to help this team out?" Bianca pushed herself up, hands on her hips as she pushed a hip out. "You're just mad because the coach finally notices my potential."

"That's not it at all!" Leila barked back, clenching her fists. "You just haven't done anything worthy to add to the team! It's annoying that you put yourself on this pedestal as if this team will be lost without you."

Bianca shook her head, turning around as she shrugged. "Whatever."

Without another word Leila's way, she grabbed her back and headed out of the locker room with a few other girls trailing behind. Leila muttered under her breath, before grabbing hold of her belongings and running out of the locker room. She made her way out of the high school before stopping. Glancing around, she tried to see if there were any girls nearby, she could tag along to head home. But everyone seemed to have already begun their journey home or were picked up, so Leila sighed and started down the path to her house.

She didn't live too far from school, and luckily the lights that lit up her way home were on. Being in a small town meant it was usually safe to walk around alone, for the most part. Leila often tried to stay with a group of people when walking home, as Priscilla walked in the opposite direction. However, Leila often had no one to walk home with when it came to after-school activities. She only socialized a little with the other girls on her team outside of practice and any events they had to do. Her only friend she regularly talked to was Priscilla, who was likely already working on tomorrow's assignments. Thinking about all she needed to do for tomorrow made her groan as she rounded the corner.

Her eyes focused on the sidewalk ahead, recognizing every crack as she passed due to how often she walked home. Such a familiar path often allowed her mind to zone out as her body

acted on habit. But she was pulled out of her trance as one of the street lights flickered. Slowing her pace, she brought her eyes upwards as she took in the yellow light that lit up the path on the way home.

"It needs a new light bulb." She mumbled to herself, noticing the bugs that flew near the light. Leila made a face at them, before turning back to the path ahead.

As she took a step, a slight rustle of bushes came from her side. She jumped at the sound, turning to face the direction she heard it from. Leila spotted nothing from where the rustle of bushes came from. She began to worry, afraid of some sort of animal that could jump out at her. Esterborne wasn't located near a place with animals such as bears or foxes, so she knew that one of those animals wasn't lingering in the bushes nearby. Just as she was about to continue forward, another rustle of bushes sounded, this time a bit louder than before.

Leila yelped as a black snake emerged from the bushes. She frantically jumped on her feet, moving away from the creature that slithered up to her. Backing away, it seemed to inch closer to her even more. It stopped in front of her, staring. Her breathing picked up as she was frozen out of fear, unsure if the snake would attack and bite her or slither away. The snake revealed its tongue, flicking around before returning to its mouth. As quickly as it appeared, the snake slithered onto the street. As she blinked, it disappeared.

Snakes weren't that uncommon in Esterborne. Many people in town have mentioned seeing them a bit more frequently these days, though no one questioned it and instead blamed it on the weather. It was the most obvious answer, which doesn't usually leave room for further conversation, especially since they were pesky things that were a nuisance when it came to the younger children in town.

Heart beating fast, Leila shivered at the thought of it. She started jogging, wanting to get home as soon as possible. Looking back wasn't an option, as she continued to push forward. Before she knew it, she had made it home. Shutting the door behind her, she double-checked the locks were correct as if the snake could open the door by hand. She took one last look out of the window, before finally getting comfortable. Greeting her family, she laid her things down on the couch and ate dinner. After some light conversation and talking about everyone's day, Leila headed to the bathroom to get cleaned up and to bed, with no extra thought on the homework she needed to do for the next day.

Interactions with Bianca became more frequent as football season started in Esterborne. Practices became more frequent, and before she knew it, Friday games had arrived. Every time she had to be around Bianca, Leila's anger grew more and more. Like a ticking bomb, Leila could feel her body ready to explode and lash out at the girl.

Bianca seemed to catch on quickly to Leila's temper and made a joke out of it. She knew exactly what to say and do to get Leila's blood boiling. She had made it a game for herself, mentally noting how many times Leila had to bite her tongue in front of the coach.

Time had come around for the first game of the season, and Leila was excited to finally start cheering for games. It was one of her favorite parts of being part of the cheer team, as Esterborne had a good team that kept people on the edge of their seats. In a small town, football season was something everyone looked forward to, so cheering in general during this time made everything fun. And despite having to work with Bianca, Leila knew that even she couldn't ruin the season's first game.

The cheer team excitedly talked as their coach excused herself to use the restroom. Leila and Bianca were left in charge of one side of two lines, split down the middle. On Leila's side, the girls held their stance, only turning their heads to speak. On Bianca's side, the girls moved around, looking uninformed.

"They're going to get us in trouble, Bianca." Leila harshly muttered.

"They're just having fun, lighten up." She commented back, making a face before calling a cheer.

Leila rolled her eyes, before turning around and faking a smile. The cheer team chanted for the boys as the crowd followed suit, repeating the words of the same cheer that had been around for a few years now. It was outdated, but a fan favorite in Esterborne, so it's stuck around. When the joy was over, the girls ruffled their pom poms, before turning back to face the field again.

"Let's do some stunting," Bianca called the team together. "We can hype up the crowd more if we do."

"We shouldn't if the coach isn't back yet," Leila exclaimed. "We'll get in trouble."

"Didn't I just say to loosen up?" Bianca spat, tossing her pom poms lightly onto the floor. "Now shut up, and lift. We just got a touchdown."

Leila shook her head as she looked behind her to the field. Bianca was right; the team had just scored. The crowd in the stands was on their feet, shouting and cheering for the boys as the band began the designated school song. She knew Bianca was right, doing a stunt would keep the great energy going, but she also knew the coach wouldn't be happy to come back to find the team stunting without her watching.

"If you do this, the girls may vote for you for the vice-captain." Bianca mocked, laughing as a few of her friends giggled.

Anger fueling her, Leila glared at Bianca. She disliked how much pride Bianca seemed to have, no matter the situation. She gloated about many things, believing she was the best to ever walk on this earth. There was no denying that the whole town knew how different she was from her parents. So other than that, the people in Esterborne were only partially sold that she was indeed the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Conrad. Bianca reminded her of a snake of how sneaky and wicked she was.

And that's when the image of the snake she saw on the way home popped into her head. It just stared at her at the time, onyx eyes filled with something she couldn't figure out at the time due to her fear. But perhaps she could pinpoint it now that she wasn't sure if she'd be attacked. There was a sort of fire in the snake's eyes, so intense that Leila thought that was the reason why she was so frightened. Not because it was a snake, but because of what it held within its eyes.

"Come on, let's go." Bianca nagged, snapping Leila back down to earth.

Her anger grew; Leila sighed as she tossed her pompoms on the ground and went into her spot. Bianca went to the center, grabbing Leila's and another girl's shoulders before counting. On the count of five, she was lifted slightly into the air with her arms raised. A fake smile was plastered on her face as she waved her hands to the crowd, who only cheered the girls on.

"Let's go a bit higher," Bianca called down, mainly looking at Leila as if she knew she'd interject. "And then right back down before the coach comes back."

Leila didn't respond, too enraged to even bother trying to tell Bianca how this was a bad idea. Instead, her mind was focused on the snake that stopped before her on her way home. The eyes seemed to transfix her mind as she remembered the fire hidden in them. She disliked Bianca

so much, hated that she thought of herself so highly, and craved all the attention. Bianca needed to know her place and needed to be taken down a step or two. And Leila knew precisely what to do.

As the girl opposite her counted, she lifted Bianca higher into the air. Leila, however, let her hands go and moved out from under Bianca. The back spot quickly got under Bianca, catching her with her body as she tumbled down. A loud thud was heard as the girls began hurling around, pushing past Leila to check on their teammates.

"What is going on?" The coach asked, rushing over just as Bianca had fallen. "You're stunting while I was gone?"

"Bianca insisted, coach." Leila was quick with her words, flying out before Bianca or anyone else could say anything. "I told her not to and tried to stop, but she wanted to go higher. She said something about a competition on who can go the highest."

The coach looked at Leila, trying to find any lie hidden within her. But Leila put on a show, making a sad face, and looking down at Bianca as if she weren't the one who had caused the tumble. The coach nodded before turning her head to Bianca, who was in too much pain about her ankle to even fight back on the story.

"Let's get you checked out," Coach said, helping a few other girls get her to a position where she could hop to the designated first aid area with some guidance. "I thought you knew better, Bianca? No tumbling while I'm gone; this is why."

Bianca made a sour face towards Leila, before hopping on one leg, her arms securely wrapped around the shoulders of two other girls. Leila looked after them, a slight smirk playing on her lips as Bianca was taken away.

The anger inside her slowly seemed to ease away as she thought about how much pain Bianca must've been in. It was entirely out of her character to pull something like that, but Leila couldn't deny the satisfaction she got from letting her anger take over for a second or two. It was one of the best decisions she's made, though the consequences may come later, as the story will eventually come out.

Leila didn't care, though, as she picked up her pom poms and got the rest of her teammates back into their designated spots. There was no side chatter, as they all stood quiet, watching the game with some sort of regret at the thought of Bianca being hurt. They all knew they shouldn't have done that, but no one bothered to confront Leila about her fabricated story.

From that day onward, the intense glimmer in her eyes evoked a haunting feeling in anyone who met her gaze.

SLOTH

It was Caleb's way of understanding all the strange dreams he had started to have when he was younger.

Writing them down on whatever piece of paper he could find, drawing out the vivid images that stood out to him, Caleb tried to piece them together. His plan was to try and see if there was any correlation between all the dreams he had and if they were connected in some way, shape, or form. If there was a hidden message that he was supposed to grasp from it all. Those dreams consumed him so much that he drifted into himself and away from his family and the town of Esterborne.

Many considered him in his own world, mumbling nonsense to himself, and always writing or drawing in that leather journal that he always carried with him. He was friendly and well-mannered but kept to himself from time to time. He had a few close friends, but they ultimately realized he would travel back into his mind, that they sometimes forgot he even existed. Caleb didn't mind, though, because he found comfort in whatever clouded his mind from the night before.

His mother didn't seem to mind, though. His grades were a bit better than average; he was well-mannered and didn't argue back with her. All in all, Mrs. Knight thought that was just his hobby, so she often let him be. She didn't see anything wrong with it, especially since it kept him out of trouble, unlike other kids his age.

Mrs. Knight was often told that kids his age begin to try things out, test their parents' boundaries, and see how much they can get away with before they start to get in trouble. But she saw nothing, no sign of rebelliousness from her son. And it eased her mind just a bit to know this, considering the Greene family was dealing with their own situation with their runaway daughter. It had been just a little over two weeks, and the parents, including the town of Esterborne, hadn't heard anything about her whereabouts. It was strange, considering Alice was probably one of the few teens who didn't try to cross her parents. The town of Esterborne knew Alice was quiet, with excellent grades, and often stuffing her face in a novel.

But that only added nervousness to Mrs. Knight, as she often thought her child could eventually snap and lash out in some sort of way. But whenever she would walk by his bedroom door, sitting at his desk with only his lamp on, drawing or writing down something in his journal, Mrs. Knight shook off any doubt and continued to look at Caleb. He never sensed her watching him, too consumed in whatever he was doing, and that was okay. Mrs. Knight didn't want to disturb him, only taking in his presence a bit. And when she thought she had enough, she would lean into the room, grab hold of the bedroom doorknob, and close the door to allow him some more privacy.

Caleb didn't tell anyone what his dreams were about; he was too worried about making sure he wrote down or drew every detail. Every time he woke up from what he deemed a strange dream, he grabbed his journal and a pencil and began to do what he often would throughout the day. He preferred writing it out first, able to note all the things that had happened first to ensure he remembered all that he could. And then, reading through what he would write, Caleb would

pick out the most significant and prominent moments and flip to the next page, where he would sketch out whatever he thought he needed to see again.

That's where most of Caleb's dreams took place, in the desolate town of Esterborne, that his mind had conjured up whenever he closed his eyes. Frequently, it would be random things he saw while walking through Esterborne. A large tree with apples, a broken car, or even Esterborne. But the Esterborne he saw was different from the one today. It looked different, with the houses looking more like the older parts of the town, and many of the bushes and grass were overgrown. It looked like it didn't get taken care of, so no one bothered to try and clean it up. And despite how different it looked; Caleb knew it was still Esterborne. There was no denying that slight eerie feeling the town gave off, hinting at something more than the brief history the kids learned back at school.

That's where most of Caleb's dreams took place, in the desolate town of Esterborne, that his mind had conjured up whenever he closed his eyes. And from what he can recall, his dreams never took place anywhere else, even when he was younger. His mind somehow grew attached to his hometown but seemed to be the version of it from the beginning.

From what Caleb could remember, the first time he visited that version of Esterborne was that he was scared. He was younger and barely learning the town's small history at school. He blamed it on the fact that when he first woke up in his dream and saw the city, a mist formed above the ground and wrapped itself around his tiny legs. He had heard a faint whisper to his left, and that's all he needed to get him to wake up in the dead of night, a single tear rolling down his cheek. He didn't run to his mom and didn't cry despite the one tear that had rolled down his face.

He just sat in his bed, thinking why he would dream of that. When Caleb turned on the lamp that stood on his nearby table, he quickly noticed the brown leather journal sitting on top of it. He turned on the light, grabbed it and a pencil, and began to put his thoughts onto paper.

As Caleb got older, he began to add color more and more as he remembered his dreams. The drawings he did became larger in some cases, with one, in particular, being his pride and joy.

There was one night when he remembered the town far more vividly than in past dreams. He woke up in the middle of the night and turned on his desk lamp. Pulling out a separate piece of paper, he laid it on his desk and grabbed the nearest writing utensil he could find. With a single stroke of the pencil, he created his first larger piece of drawing of the abnormal version of Esterborne he had seen so many times before. He recreated the overgrown trees and bushes, the dead grass, the cracked concrete for sidewalks, and the broken town storefronts in the heart of the town. And in the center of it all, the nature of Esterborne was the gazebo that many in town got married to when they wanted an outside wedding.

And this gazebo, alone, was the only thing not broken down despite everything else in the town. It was white, with a brown covering on top. White fenced railing and stairs on equal sides. In the center of the gazebo, dangling and often seen swinging in the wind, was a charm in the shape of a cloud, with wind chimes hanging just below it. In his dream, they chimed and blew with the wind as the mist crept slowly up the stairs to stick to the wooden platform. And every time Caleb had walked to the gazebo, he always made it just in time to watch the mist creep up

the stairs. As soon as it finished engulfing the platform, the wind chime would go off for a few seconds before stopping entirely, but it still continued to blow against the wind.

When Caleb drew his first big picture of the town he visited so often, he emphasized the wind chime and the mist that always coated the gazebo. He needed to do this, but he wasn't sure why. He was too caught up in recreating everything to look exactly as he saw it in his dream, that the 'why' in question often was left in the back of his mind.

Caleb had gotten good early on in recognizing his dream, knowing when he was dreaming. At a young age, he learned how to lucid dream. Being aware of his plans and able to control them and do as he please, Caleb quickly learned how to be in control. He could travel deeper into the town and not only be guided to the gazebo. He entered different stores, and walked through the dead grass, ignoring the vivid crunch whenever he took a step. He paid no attention to the cracks on the sidewalk, stepping on every one of them and forgetting the silly saying of how you break your mother's back when you step on a crack.

Despite gaining control and moving on his own to different areas in town, Caleb could not change the location of his dreams. No matter how hard he tried, he could only go somewhere else besides the odd version of Esterborne. It was like his mind wanted him there and nowhere else. Wanted him to be connected to it beyond just residing in it. To fully understand and grasp the history of Esterborne, and do what? Caleb didn't know, and he didn't question it. He only drew and wrote all that he saw, even if much of it was repeated in previous entries.

The larger image he drew was hung up in his room, above his desk, and beside his bedroom window. It was colored to look like in his dreams, which didn't have much bright color.

Brown, beige, white, and black were the only colors he used in this image. There was no sign of any other color; even if there was, Caleb knew he couldn't include it. The way this Esterborne looked in his dream was far different than the brighter one he lived in outside his mind. Much livelier with citizens who constantly gossiped and stuck their noses in everyone else's business, instead of focusing on their own lives. Kids ran around, and wives shopped and ordered their favorite drinks from one of the most popular coffee shops, while their husbands concentrated on working and providing income. It was far different than the Esterborne that Caleb had visited and grown attached to over the years.

Mrs. Knight was downstairs preparing dinner, while Caleb was in his bedroom doing what he was always doing, sketching out another main thing from his dream. He was coloring in the red apple he had seen back in his dream, and from what he remembered, it was bitten on the side. Caleb wasn't sure what had caused this, as he didn't remember anything specific in the town, and he was always the only one there. So, a bitten red apple didn't make much sense to him, but he tossed it aside and decided to just draw it as he did with anything else that popped up.

The bitten apple was just the start of it all, as the next strange thing he had drawn was a snake. Sure, there were a few garden ones sometimes spotted in Esterborne, but the one in the town of his dreams was a bit longer, thicker, more significant in size, and jet black. Its eyes were bright red, just like the apple he had drawn before. Those eyes were what he saw first, visible within the mist that covered the ground. And despite how it presented itself, Caleb didn't have

any reason to fear it. Instead, it only stared back at him, its tongue wiggling around before being pulled back in. That was the first thing Caleb had drawn when he woke up, and he knew he had to remove the snake.

By the time Mrs. Knight had finished dinner, Caleb had fallen asleep at his desk. She called him three times before deciding to head upstairs. The door was slightly ajar, and she could see that his lamp was on from where it stood at his desk. Knocking lightly, she called to him again, before pushing the door open just a bit more. She sighed, looking over at her son's slumped-over figure, noticing it rise and fall with each breath he took.

"Caleb? Dinner is ready, come on."

Mrs. Knight entered his bedroom, heading over to where he sat. Getting ready to tap on his shoulder, she instantly noticed the drawings her son had been scribbling down for as long as she could remember. His journal was wide open, lying beside where his head rested on top of different sheets of paper. Instead of pulling out the trickier ones, she opted for the journal left open. She made sure he was asleep before picking up the journal he always had his face stuffed into. Flipping through the pages, she took note of all the details and writing inside of it. It wasn't until she noticed the drawing of the town's gazebo that she drew an eyebrow.

In front of him, Esterborne resembled a ghost town. It wasn't decorated with different little paintings made by the town's youngsters. The gazebo didn't have a wind chime like the one he had drawn, with a bit of cloud charm hanging beside it. And finally, there wasn't any mist like the one he had drawn, at least at night when it was colder weather. Mrs. Knight wasn't sure why he would recreate it with such strange details added.

Looking back at her sleeping son, Mrs. Knight turned back to the page he was once on and tried to place the journal back to how it was before. Ensuring it looked almost exactly like how he had left it, she tapped her son on his shoulder. He stirred a bit but didn't wake up. Grabbing his shoulder, she shook him with more strength than the tap. Caleb started and lifted his head, yawning, before turning to meet his mother's eyes. He blinked a few times before looking back at his desk, taking in the drawings he had done before dozing off. A bit uncomfortable, he scrambled to put them in a pile, before shoving them into one of his drawers. Shutting his journal, he tossed it into the same drawer before slamming it closed.

"Interesting drawings, honey," Mrs. Knight started, hoping she'd get him to explain whatever he had drawn. "But why the gazebo? And what was that with the snake and apple?"

Caleb shook his head. "It's nothing."

Mrs. Knight opened her mouth to ask him more, but he stood up instead and gestured for his bedroom door. "Dinners ready, right? Let's go before it gets cold."

And without saying much else, the two headed down to eat for the night. Since then, Caleb has avoided bringing any attention whenever he draws or writes about his dreams. Mrs. Knight believed he was embarrassed, especially since no one had ever seen his creations other than himself. She didn't pressure him to explain, but Mrs. Knight was more curious about what was happening around his head. She tried to find any signs through his actions, how he began to speak less and didn't even bother to leave his room unless he ate, got cleaned up, and went to school. Caleb had started distancing himself in his room, drawing and writing the entire time.

The next thing that alarmed Mrs. Knight was how long he spent in the bathroom. Each time he took a shower, it seemed longer and longer. And at first, Mrs. Knight didn't seem to notice, as she was too busy getting her own things ready for the next day, calling herself cleaned up. It wasn't until she had passed by around twenty minutes after he had first entered the bathroom that she questioned how long he had been in there. She could see the steam from the heat creep under the opening at the bottom of the door, dispersing as soon as it entered the hallway. And the moment Mrs. Knight knocked at the door, the water turned off, and the mist had stopped drifting to the hallway.

The steam from the shower reminded Caleb a lot of the mist from his dreams. He realized it after he dropped a soap bottle on the ground. When he picked it up, he noticed the mist at his feet and was instantly brought back to his dreams. The one that filled the desolate Esterborne and almost swallowed the gazebo he had drawn many times. Just like his drawings, the way he would describe every little thing he had seen in his dreams provided him with comfort. He was drawn to it like a moth to a flame, and as if he was back in his dreams, he could see the familiar piercing red eyes that often crept up in the mist. And the bitten, ruby apple would roll by and stop right in front of his feet. It had been so vivid in his mind that the line signifying the difference between reality and the mind began to blur.

Caleb was falling deeper and deeper into the solace of his dreams.

Mrs. Knight didn't know how things led up to this point. No clear sign showed Caleb had drifted too far into his mind. Sure, he drew images all the time, writing in that journal he kept so

close to him. But that was the only thing that may seem off, but Mrs. Knight didn't think much of it during that time. She felt his hobbies just consumed him, and he found joy in that, as far as she could tell. But perhaps that should've been her clue. How close he kept that journal of his, the drawings he stuffed in his drawer and kept out of sight despite the larger picture hanging up in his room.

It should've alarmed her the first time she came home and noticed all his drawings on the floor. She was confused, closing the door behind her as she saw different papers scattered at the front door, with a few scraps leading up to the stairs. She quickly picked them up, calling after her son somewhere in the house. And right away, when Mrs. Knight had finished picking up all the pieces of paper, Caleb emerged from the living room. He looked at the pile of papers in her hand and lunged forward, grabbing hold of them, and pulling them to his chest.

"Why are you going through my stuff?" He questioned, to which Mrs. Knight shook her head.

"You left them all over the floor Caleb, I was just picking them up."

"You went through my stuff, didn't you?" He raised his voice a little, shooting his mother a look of disapproval. "Can't I just have a little privacy? Please? That's all I want."

Mrs. Knight didn't even have a chance to scold her son for his tone of voice, as he quickly took one last look around the entryway and headed up the stairs, likely to his bedroom. His mother was going to call him down and have him apologize for raising his voice at her but decided to wait until dinner as she heard him slam his door with a loud thud. And as she had

thought, when it came down to dinner, Caleb had apologized on his own terms for his outburst but did continue to express that his drawings and writings about his dreams were personal and wished to keep it that way. Mrs. Knight agreed, as long as he didn't leave them lying around like she had found them when she returned home. Though he informed her he didn't do it, Caleb agreed with her only request.

That was the only real moment that Mrs. Knight disagreed with her son. But it was quickly resolved, and he promised to keep his things where they had meant to be, rather than leave them lying around the house. And it was okay for the next few days; Caleb's drawings and writing weren't scattered around the house. Everything was pretty much back to the way it was. At least for the time being.

Mrs. Knight had returned home after being out to get groceries. She called for her son to help her unload the car when she stepped into the house. She got no response, so she called for him again as she made her way to the kitchen to set down her belongings. The moment she sat down her bag, she took a second to catch her breath, before noticing a single piece of paper lying on the kitchen counter. It was the familiar gazebo Caleb had drawn in his journal. The paper seemed ripped out from wherever it was drawn in, placed neatly in the center of the counter with a single apple resting on top of it, acting as a paperweight.

Immediately, Mrs. Knight snatched the paper and called for her son again. She didn't hear him and wondered if he was even home. She tried to recall whether he had plans today, but then quickly remembered he had been hiding in his room for a while now. Getting antsy, Mrs. Knight headed up the stairs as she continued to call out to Caleb. Rounding the corner, she ran

down the hallway and stopped outside his bedroom door. She called to him again, allowing him to open the door for her. Knocking three times, Mrs. Knight waited for her son to let her in. She got no response and eventually gave up. Turning the doorknob, she pushed the door open and entered the room. It was dark; the only light came from the lamp on his desk. Memories of the last time she found him like this filled her mind as she entered the room, calling out his name as she set his drawing of the gazebo beside him.

This time, on his desk, there were no drawings around. Everything was nice and neat, with his colored pencils and outlining tools in his holder. There was no sign of his pictures anywhere. And the large one that usually was hung up was nowhere in sight. Confused about what was happening, she grabbed his shoulder and shook him from where he was slumped over on his desk. Caleb stirred but didn't wake up. A small groan escaped his lips as he moved his head to rest on the other side. And in that brief second, Mrs. Knight took notice of the leather journal. Resting underneath him as a pillow, Caleb slept on the one thing that kept him connected to the things he dreamt of.

“Caleb, get up.” She shook him again, a little rougher than usual. But he didn't budge.
“Caleb, I need help with the groceries. Get up!”

She shook him, concern and confusion beginning to take over as she grabbed his shoulders. Shaking him, she kept calling his name to wake him up. But the only response she had gotten from him was a small grunt and a deep breath of release. Mrs. Knight stopped what she was doing, inching away from her son. She tried to think of who to call, who would believe her when she said her son wouldn't wake up. But no one in Esterborne came to mind, and that only

caused Mrs. Knight to cry out from her son's room. Continuing to shake him, Mrs. Knight took the next few minutes to try and wake her son up from the deep slumber he was in.

Caleb woke up in his dream closer to the storefronts. They looked the same way they had examined the last time he had visited. The grass was overgrown and dead, the bushes were not as lively, and the familiar mist had begun to swirl around him. It was so familiar and welcoming that he couldn't help but allow the fog to guide him deeper into the barren version of Esterborne. It was insanely quiet; the only sound was the crisp cold air that greeted him the way the mist did. The crunch of the grass was no longer as loud as it had been in previous times. He couldn't even hear the chime that often came from the gazebo as he walked deeper and deeper into his dream.

Slithering from the mist to meet him, the black snake's eyes were the first to catch his attention. Piercing red, staring back blankly, the snake stood tall and proud as its tongue greeted him. Caleb said nothing, as he could sense no hostility from the creature. Instead, he allowed the snake to lead him toward the gazebo in the town center. Despite the mist surrounding the area and him, Caleb could point out the long and slithering figure that guided him. His steps felt light and air-like the closer he got to the gazebo. It wasn't decorated, and the wood looked more worn down than the previous. The white paint it was once covered with had begun chipping away in some areas. The wind chimes from the center blew with the wind, but no sound could be heard despite how harshly it swung.

Like a faint echo in the distance, the wind chime let a little tune play suddenly. It had a blissful feeling, further tempting Caleb to head up the gazebo stairs. It wasn't like the sound it

usually played when Caleb closed his eyes, but the same feeling of familiarity still radiated from it. And that was convincing enough to get him to step onto the sturdy but creaking stairs that led to the center of the gazebo. With each step he took, the sound from the wind chime got louder and louder, matching his pace. Making it known to him that they equaled and that it had always been there for him since the start of time when he fully understood the depth and power he had when he began to dream.

Caleb took one final step, allowing himself to stand directly underneath the wind chime that had played its tune for him. He let his eyes scan the area, trying to find the snake that had led him to the gazebo. He had only looked at it from afar in previous dreams, but never bothered to actually stand in it. The one that had guided him was nowhere to be found; the red eyes he drew and dreamt of so many times were nowhere in sight. Caleb could only see the mist that stayed close to the ground begin to rise. It encased the gazebo, blocking the view of the buildings that made the rundown town of Esterborne look as it did. And before Caleb could try and escape it, a red apple rolled from one side of the gazebo to meet his feet. His eyes trailed down and back to the direction it had come from, but there was no sign of any other source of life around.

The red apple stared back at him, shiny and bright, and just asking to be a bit into. It looked perfect and rolled to him with little effort. Caleb bent down, grabbed the apple, and stood back up. As he was about to take a bite, he suddenly felt a dip in the fruit. Twirling it in his hand, his eyes widened. He didn't notice it before, but now that he had brought it to his face, getting a better look at the fruit pushed towards him, Caleb saw a single bite mark. And at that moment, he finally sensed its return. He turned around and greeted the snake like an old friend.

Caleb Knight never woke up from his slumber and instead has been in a comatose state since his mother found him.

GREED

The move-in of the Owens family in Esterborne surprised the townsfolk, as they had managed to move in without anyone noticing.

The family before them had moved on short notice. They were a family of three, with a small dog that had the habit of keeping the neighbors nearby awake in the early morning hours. The dog, even though it was small, had a bark that made up for it. At crazy hours of the night, the dog would run outside through the doggy door and bark in a series of six before going silent. The next-door neighbors, according to gossip, had calculated that the dog would bark six times every hour, beginning at exactly three o'clock in the morning till six o'clock. A total of eighteen barks were accounted for every night, up until the family had moved.

No one knew where they had gone, nor why they had moved in the first place. Just like the tales of Esterborne, the family was slowly forgotten.

The Owens moved into the house, which was just a short distance away from the town's gazebo. It was one of the older houses, meaning it had much more history than those farther out. The walls could use more paint, the grass could be touched up, as well as the rose bushes near the backyard gate. It had not been touched since the family before had moved out, and because the townsfolk saw no moving van during the big move, many suspected that countless things were left behind.

The incoming family consisted of the mother, father, their eldest son Wyatt, and their newborn daughter Maya. Word got around that Mrs. Owens had gotten a job at the town's high

school, where she would take over the art teacher position. Mr. Owens decided to put his time into helping the community by doing some service around town. He often did most household duties while his wife worked, from what the town concluded.

Mrs. Owens was a lover of art and all things vintage. On her days off from work, after completing any paperwork that needed to be looked over or art pieces to be graded, she spent her day at the town's thrift shop. She'd walk around the aisles, looking at clothes, furniture, and little trinkets that she thought would suit her or her children. Oftentimes, she would find things that she thought would fit her husband, buying him many different clothes that were definitely not his style. But because he loved his wife and enjoyed seeing her happy doing something she loved, Mr. Owens always accepted the gifts with gratitude.

As for her kids, she often brought home little things to help decorate their bedrooms. When they moved into the house, many of the old things left behind got moved up to the attic, in hopes that the Owens could make the house their own. They didn't bring much from where they moved from. She hoped they could decorate the children's rooms to suit them, but also had a bit of the new town's vibe mixed into it.

Sundays were the days when Mrs. Owens went out to do her shopping. But as a particular Sunday finally arrived, she finally decided to go through the items left behind in the attic and try to sort out what could be given away and used to decorate her classroom more. She had a fondness for Esterborne and the vintage feel of it all that she wanted to incorporate into her classroom. As of now, her classroom was plain with a few art pieces she had brought from home. But they were too modern compared to the old school.

Going through the belongings left behind, Mrs. Owens began to bring things downstairs and into the living room. She brought down what seemed to be an endless flow of boxes, each of them dusty and written in sharpie with what looked to be either cursive or very sloppy handwriting. She couldn't tell and instead began to open each of them one by one. Books, different clothing items, and jewelry were scattered throughout many boxes. Every item pulled out a smelt of dust and a hint of lavender. Mrs. Owens couldn't help but make a face at the mix of smells, tossing every item into the largest box found.

Rummaging through the boxes, Mrs. Owens stumbled upon an old handheld mirror. Pulling it out of the box, she began to examine it. There were visible signs of rust, and the mirror part of it was all scuffed up. It was round and silver, with intricate designs of vines and leaves outlining the mirror. At the top, in the center was a red gem. It was a very eye-catching detail, considering it seemed the only part of the mirror that didn't look like it had aged.

She rolled it in her hand, fully examining it. While she knew she had no use for it, she couldn't escape the feeling she got whenever she stared at her reflection in the mirror. A sort of uneasiness welled up in her stomach as she stared back at herself. Her eyes examined every inch of herself, starting from her large hazel eyes, her naturally straight jet-black hair, and the single dimple on her left cheek that appeared even with the faintest smile. Even though she was examining herself, her eyes always found themselves taking quick glances up at the red gem. It was ruby red with not even a single scratch or chip in it.

A glint shone across it.

“Vanessa?” Mrs. Owens dropped the mirror, startled by the sudden call of her name.

“Are you okay? Did you find something?”

A sound of broken glass and clattering combined as Mrs. Owens turned to look behind her. She was greeted by her husband, who had his hands filled with brown bags filled to the top of what looked like groceries. Her fingertips grew warm, and she quickly glanced down to see if she might have cut herself. Mrs. Owens saw nothing, but she could feel the light sensation welling up in her fingers.

“Vanessa?”

She whipped her head around, being pulled away from where she was gazing at her hands. “Hm?”

“Are you okay?”

She nodded.

“Broken mirror,” Once more, Mrs. Owens looked back down at her hands. “I need to clean it up.”

“Uh oh, seven years of bad luck for ya!” He joked, chuckling as he went to set things down in the kitchen.

Mrs. Owens stood up from where she was and took a small look around below. Her eyes scanned for the red gem, fingers itching. She twiddled them, turning around in a full circle ever so slowly. After turning around six times, unable to locate the gem, she stopped. Facing the

direction of the kitchen, she went to grab a broom. As she came back to the living room, fingers no longer burning, she began to sweep up the mess.

“Do you think you can help me unload when you’re done?” Mr. Owens appeared once more, holding two more bags in his arms. “There’s still a lot left.”

“Yeah.” Vanessa simply said, sweeping up the broken mirror and turning around. “Let me throw this away.”

Without another word, she made a beeline to the trashcan in the kitchen. She threw the broken shards away, put the broom back where it was before, and headed to the front door to help her husband unload the groceries.

The gem was no longer a thought in her mind.

Days passed, and the items in the boxes were sorted out. There were far more items Mrs. Owens decided to keep than originally planned. Many items included old miniature statues, different books that she could use as decoration, and a few other items that could either be hung on the wall or placed somewhere around the house to better spice up the living place.

A few items found in the boxes were not the style Mrs. Owens was aiming towards. No matter where she placed them within her house, it looked odd. She felt there was no need to send it to the trash, as she was certain someone with the right touch could use it. There were other items that looked out of place in her house yet seemed to have some weight. Brassy trinkets,

silver items, and old gold-like coins looked like they may have some value. Not sure where else to go, Mrs. Owens decided her best solution would be to take it to the museum first.

There were a few items that didn't exactly fit into the style that Mrs. Owens was doing for the house. Yet it didn't seem like it was items that could just be sent to the junkyard. There were little trinkets and items Vanessa had found she wasn't sure how to use. So instead of straight throwing them away, she decided to take them to the one place in Esterborne that might find a place for them.

The museum of Esterborne held so many things that have shaped the town into what it was today. There were a few items in the Steele residence, but nothing else was meant to be on display in the heart of the town. Mrs. Owens took a smaller brown box of the trinkets on her Saturday morning. She woke up early to prepare some breakfast for her family before she had gone out to drop off some items.

As she entered the museum, Mrs. Owens was immediately drawn into the different sculptures, paintings, and other items around the single room. It was small, but there was enough there to show the small history of Esterborne. Going deeper into the museum, Vanessa's eyes landed on the little brooch pinned to one of the long coats. Her eyes zoned in on it, taking note of the Victorian side profile and the blush pink color of the background.

"Ah, hello!" Mrs. Owens turned. "Welcome to the Esterborne Museum. Is there something I can help you with?"

“I’m Vanessa Owens. My family and I moved in not too long ago.” She sat down the box and shook the gentleman’s hands. “I was going through the things left in our house and wanted to drop them off to see if they are of any value to the town.”

The gentleman bent down, rummaging through the box of trinkets. He pushed his glasses further up his nose as he hummed, pulling out things here and there. He scanned each one, before placing them all back into the box and picking it up.

“I’ll have to call Mr. Steele to see if his family had mentioned anything about these,” he gestured to the box. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

Mrs. Owens quickly glanced over at the brooch, an odd smile playing on her lips.

“No sir,” she turned back to him. “That’s all. Thank you! Hopefully, there’s something in there that could be added to the museum.”

“I’m sure there are at least one or two things,” he nodded along with his words. “Mr. Steele is usually the one who deals with the final say of what gets put in the museums. He’s from the founding family, did you know that? Knows much more about this town than my wife and I combined, and we’re older than him!”

The two laughed, but Vanessa couldn’t help but keep glancing at the brooch. Saying a quick goodbye, the gentleman whisked away and headed towards the back part of the museum. The moment he slipped through the back door, Mrs. Owens pressed up against the coat.

Her hands lightly brushed up the arm, feeling its cotton against her fingertips. She glided it across the chest area, before resting it against the broach she had been eyeing. Her fingers burned the longer she kept her hand on it as if it was merging with the broach. A feeling of desire and want filled her up entirely. She took a quick glance behind her, checking to see if there was anyone around. Vanessa looked over at the back door, where there was no sign of the gentleman from a few seconds ago. Without thinking much else other than her want for the broach, she swiped it and quickly headed to the front door.

Mrs. Owens tucked the broach into her pocket and headed back to the car. She couldn't contain her excitement as she drove home, thinking about the broach she had gotten from the museum. It was such a beautiful and old piece. The moment she got back, she entered the house, told her family she was going to take a quick nap, and rushed up to her shared bedroom.

Closing the door behind her, Vanessa went to her vanity. Sitting down on a chair, she stuck her hand into her pocket and pulled out the broach. As if she had set her eyes on it for the first time, Mrs. Owens fell in love with the brooch again. The blush color of the entire thing, the white, intricate design of the Victorian female side profile, and the golden linings on the outer part. The broach was right up her alley.

She snapped it onto her shirt, making sure it was on correctly. Immediately, her eyes looked into the mirror. They landed on the broach, studying it on her shirt. Her fingers itched, and her mind was clouded with thoughts of other items in the museum.

Because it had something such as this, there must be more there. All Vanessa had to do was take some time to look around and decide what she wanted to try next. There was no way she could choose just one, though, right? No way!

She wanted them all. All the pieces that were just as pretty as this one.

Looking away from the mirror to unclasp the brooch, Mrs. Owens didn't quite catch the small cracks in the upper corner of her vanity mirror. A faint red glow appeared for a moment or two, before disappearing into the cracks.

Attention being drawn away from the vanity mirror, Mrs. Owens swiftly removed the brooch. Taking it off and lightly setting it into one of the drawers, she pushed herself up and headed back downstairs to join her family. And as she closed the door behind her, cracks began to cut through in the upper corner of her vanity mirror. A faint red glow, like the shade of the lost gem, radiated for a few moments before fading into nothingness. Taking a moment to pause, Mrs. Owens' fingers burned, and within her, a growing feeling of want fueled her. She had wanted more. More vintage items. More trinkets from Esterborne's past. The ones that held the most stories behind them.

And she wanted them now.

Over the following week, Mrs. Owens proudly wore the brooch. Her husband was able to point it out, noticing that it must've been new. He complimented her on it, though he couldn't help but sense something was off with her since she returned from the museum.

She came down the stairs after heading to their shared room, she kept twitching her fingers and fiddling with them. Vanessa bounced her leg during dinner, and while she used one hand to bring the fork to her mouth, she used her other hand to strum the table. It had gotten to the point where Mr. Owens was getting anxious just being in her presence. When he asked her what was wrong, her strumming stopped.

“Nothing is wrong.” She looked up at him, eyes glossy and dark. “Why do you ask?”

“It just seems like you’re on edge.”

Mrs. Owens only pushed herself up and grabbed her plate. She stared down at the food and then back up at her husband. “I’m just tired. Can you get up tonight if Maya wakes up? Busy day tomorrow.”

Vanessa didn’t give her husband the chance to respond before swiftly moving to the kitchen. She emptied her still pretty full plate into the trash and then placed her dirty dishes into the sink. With a quick goodbye to her family, she made her way upstairs. Mr. Owens was left to clean up the table, sending his son off to bed. He made quick work of the dirty dishes before heading to Maya’s room, making sure that she was fast asleep before heading to his shared room with his wife. He hoped to get a chance to talk to her once more, but she was already fast asleep.

He instantly noticed the brooch next to her bedside table. The way it seemed to have an illuminating effect due to the moonlight coming in from the window sent a strange chill down his spine. Mr. Owens couldn’t fight the feeling that something was amiss, but he wasn’t sure what exactly. Ignoring his thoughts, he got ready for bed.

Mr. Owens was right, though. Something was definitely wrong with his wife. She started getting up extremely early in the morning. She usually did, though, as she often spent time getting ready and preparing for the day ahead teaching the kids in Esterborne. But, after catching her waking up at exactly three o'clock in the morning, the brooch in her hand and standing eerily by the bedroom window, he knew he had to have a talk with her.

Her strange behavior was having an effect on his well-being since he was constantly being woken up in the middle of the night. Not only was she getting up at strange hours and admiring that brooch, but she was also beginning to miss meals with the family.

During the week, Mrs. Owens would come home far later than she usually would. She'd quietly greet her husband, who would be cooking and spending time with the kids as they did their homework. And instead of staying for a few minutes before heading up to change, she'd just make her way up the stairs. At first, Mr. Owens figured she'd be back down. It had been a long day, and he knew some family time would do them all good. Being a part of their children's lives was important to them both, and now was the time to really be together. Alas, Mrs. Owens did not come downstairs.

It had been an ongoing thing, resulting in Vanessa being more and more distant from her family. And when Mr. Owens tried to confront her, she'd only look at him with her glossy and dark eyes, strum her fingers against the brooch in her hand, and tell him that she was busy. She'd turn back to her vanity mirror since he had been catching her sitting there, and just staring at herself. A small smirk would always be on her lips as her eyes focused solely on the brooch.

Mrs. Owens woke up at three o'clock that Sunday, like she had been doing, and stared out the window with the brooch in her hand, waiting for the sun to come up. An intense yearning for more had driven her mad and she so desperately wanted to satisfy that want. She cleaned herself up and headed out for the day, not even bothering to say goodbye to her family.

Her late return had been due to spending her time at the museum after getting off of work. Mrs. Owens didn't take anything else off the museum's hands for the time being, wanting to allow the brooch its moment to shine. But during this time, she found her interest in the museum to spark drastically. Instead of going to her stores, she went to the museum and walked around. Suppose that could be her own version of shopping, considering her underlying agenda.

Though during her time there, she heard many stories from the gentleman who usually worked during those hours. He shared with her the brief history of Esterborne as if she hadn't heard of it from Principal Ridley on her first day at school. It was interesting, too. She learned a lot more about the Steele family, and she was introduced to Mr. Steele shortly after.

The gentleman at the museum, upon her arrival, had mentioned that Mr. Steele wanted to see her after dropping off some items. Mr. Steele arrived a bit after, where he thanked her and mentioned that many items didn't have any real value to Esterborne, but there was one or two that played a part. Liam Steele had asked her how she got ahold of them, to which she explained they were up in the attic.

“Mmm, I see.” He said, shoving his hands into his denim jacket as the two looked at one of the paintings in the far back. “The family that lived there before moved without telling anyone. From what people saw when passing by, there was no moving truck.”

“That sure is strange,” Mrs. Owens shrugged. “Well, I’m glad a couple of the items had some value to the town. I don’t know what I would have done with them at my place.”

“You won’t keep them?” He questioned, turning to her with his dark eyes. A taunting manner danced in them as a sly smirk played on his lips. “Really?”

She looked him in the eyes, a small chill running down her spine.

“I don’t see the problem of wanting things,” he chuckled. “Do you?”

Mrs. Owens turned to him, looking straight into his eyes. A chill ran down her spine as Mr. Steele studied her. Once his eyes met hers again, she could see how noticeably darker they got in color.

“Of course not.” Her fingertips began to lightly burn.

Mr. Steele gave her one last smirk before excusing himself. While Liam left, Mrs. Owen’s eyes drifted over to a clear case nearby. She inched closer, examining the items inside of it. A few older pens were inside, along with a pocket watch. Rusty, but the gold was still visible. Just like the broach, her fingers itched and burned with the want to touch them. To hold them. Her eyes wandered to the box itself, taking note of the size before falling on the keyhole.

“Here again, Mrs. Owens?”

“I can’t help myself,” she turned at the sound of the gentleman. “There’s a lot of interesting things on display.”

“Yes, there is. A lot of them have many stories dating back to the beginning of the town,” He explained, adjusting his glasses. “Although so much time has passed. Not many people talk about Esterborne’s history anymore.”

Mrs. Owens’ fingers felt on fire.

“Really?” She questioned. “Why is that?”

“Each passing generation gets consumed with their own problems and life,” The gentleman shrugged. “They may learn it in school, but the history of Esterborne is nothing more than a unit they need to study.”

“So why keep the museum open?”

“The Steele family who led the group of travelers back in the beginning had wanted to keep it open. They say it’s to remember where we started.” The gentleman guided her near the front desk. “However, Mr. Steele nowadays has been a bit off. He says it’s time we start to change things, starting with the museum.”

Mrs. Owens cocked her head to the side. The gentleman only nodded in confirmation, pulling out the newest edition of the town’s newspaper. He unfolded it and then laid it out on the front desk.

“You see? He’s even had some new wine imported. Says it’s from a nearby town, but I’m not entirely sure which one.” Mrs. Owens’ allowed her eyes to scan over the paper, but deep within her, she’d preferred to take a look at other trinkets that the museum had.

“So then, the museum will be closing?” Mrs. Owens looked back up at the gentleman; a hopeful tone played into her words.

“Not closing,” He shook his head. “Just being reinvented. I’m not entirely sure how many items there are. But it’s Mr. Steele’s town so we best listen to him.”

“I love old things,” She pushed herself away from the desk, using her head to gesture to the items behind her. “If Mr. Steele needs these taken off his hands, be sure to let him know to give me a call.”

The gentleman laughed. Mrs. Owens excused herself, calling over her shoulder that she’ll be staying for a bit longer. A burning desire of want and need filled her inside as she brisked past clear cases of cups, plates, vases, and anything else that dated back to the beginning of Esterborne. The familiar sensation in her fingers got to its highest point as she stopped abruptly in front of a clear case. Inside the clear case, on display, was a silver thorn necklace with a red gem as its focal point.

Without needing to be asked, Mrs. Owens helped to clear out the local museum.