All The Little Things: Cover Letter

On October 1st, 2020, I woke up in a startle from a dream where I died in a car crash and had been resurrected. I had this dream plenty of times, spending most of my life in the passenger seat of a car, hitting the road for hours and hours, to a destination unknown. But this time, there was something different. An idea. Naturally, in my half-sleep state I took to my phone, jotting down the seeds of an idea about a boy who dies and comes back to life with the newfound ability to stop time.

This idea was never supposed to be my senior project. However, that quickly changed when I took Fiction 2 with Professor Lewis and wrote the first draft of *All The Little Things*, at the time a twenty paged short story. The story featured my protagonist, Rafael Acosta, who woke from his resurrection faced with two strangers: a man named The Reverend, leader of the Church of Light, and Queeny Callahan, the Fourth Apostle with the ability to manipulate nature. Overwhelmed by his lack of memory, the unfamiliar environment, and the strangers, Rafael's anxiety sets off his power and when the two men are frozen in time, he flees. But he doesn't get too far before Queeny is able to go after him. The two quickly form an unlikely bond as they embark on a road-trip along the East Coast in pursuit of The Handmaiden Killer, the infamous serial killer, who challenges their morals and faith.

The short-story version gave insight to a larger world, a world that was not meant to exist within twenty-pages, but as Professor Lewis recommended, a novella. Professor Okasi wanted an epic, but instead, I settled for something in the middle, a novel. When I write, I have always written with a bigger world in mind. Ironically, when I wrote this story that was not the case. I didn't see it as something that could be bigger, but once that was discussed during the workshop I saw it too. As I began to expand the story, I became more involved with the Church of Light. The original 100-paged

draft that I wrote under the guidance of Professor Okasi focused more on its creation, its theology, and the subtle cult-like behaviors that shaped its community. However, as the story progressed Rafael's journey became something in the background, not fully developed. During our final meeting before summer break, Okasi recommended to focus more on Rafael's psychological journey and a month before the Fall semester started, I scraped the 100 pages and rewrote the entire thing with Rafael as the focus. However, his journey still needed development and I was stuck.

Professor Wright recommended drawing out a psychological map for Rafael. It was something that had never occurred to me. I'm a visual learner, a former Illustration student. I went online and found the biggest whiteboard I could and spent hours drawing diagrams, rewriting words, connecting lines to events that happened in his life. I needed to figure out what it was that kept him up at night until I was too. Within the 150-paged manuscript I am finally able to delve into Rafael's psyche— one riddled with loss, guilt, and anxiety that stem from his upbringing with the Roman Catholic Church, his mother's unsuccessful battle with cancer, and his best friend, Loren's suicide.

Queerness in religion and Hispanic culture is a very important topic to me, as someone who is queer and grew up in a Dominican-Puerto Rican household. Upon introduction to the church of Light, Queeny explains to Rafael that only sinners were brought back to life because their "desire to change was stronger than death and [they were] given a second chance by God to do that" (11). At this point in time, the only "sin" that Rafael associates himself with is his sexualy which he had spent 18 years of his life trying to suppress. I am one of three in the first generation of family members who have been openly out and accepted. Prior to myself and my two cousins, many of my family members who were queer had been forced to marry someone of the opposite sex and their sexuality was only "out"

long after their deaths. They had never gotten the chance to accept themselves or be accepted during their lives, so it was important for me that in his rebirth, Rafael is able to do that. When creating the Church of Light, I felt it was necessary for The Reverend to tell Rafael that it was not loving his best friend that made him sinful, but rather, something else and it is left to Rafael to discover what his true sin is.

This novel required extensive research, especially when it came to the Apostles. I tried to parallel the Church of Light's powers to Jesus' Apostles and what they represented. For example, The Apostle Peter was a fisherman so Adelyn, the Church of Light's Eleventh Apostle can control water. I am not religious in the slightest and my family is selectively religious. The only knowledge I have was during my youth when my mother and I briefly got involved with the Church of Latter Day Saints. I am very fortunate to have friends who are knowledgeable about Catholicism and can answer my questions and clarify certain topics. But I also relied on texts, specifically children's versions of the Bible for its digestibility and *Kingdom of the Cults* which dissected many religions and their cult-like behaviors (including Mormonism). The cult aspect of the Church of Light is something that I am unfortunately not able to delve into too much for the Senior Project version of my novel, simply for the page limitations which I've already stretched, but I left seeds throughout so that when I write the full manuscript I can expand on those themes.

While the Apostles' power is an integral part of the novel, it is not magic that solves Rafael's problems, but rather, the truth and acceptance that he keeps buried within him. The magical aspect of the novel is heavily influenced by my love of magical realism. The genre derives from Latin American and tends to heavily critique society and their governments. I took a course last year that focused on

this particular genre led by Dr. Kerry Manzo, a professor whose courses have had a lot of influence on my work. A text we read, *Palm-Wine Drinkard* by Amos Tutola, came to mind in the way that the story bounces around from one place to another as the main character goes forth on a journey. The novel itself was like a magical road-trip and a large portion of my novel deals with Rafael and Queeny being in a truck, driving along the East Coast as they search for The Handmaiden Killer and learn more about each other.

In a similar vein, I grew up reading a lot of fantasy. It was a genre I always gravitated towards reading a lot of the "classics" like *Harry Potter, Percy Jackson,* and so forth. A series that really impacted me, though, is the *Darker Shade of Magic* trilogy by V.E. Schwab. I find that her writing style is riddled with intricate details and crafted poetically. As someone who is incredibly observant I love capturing the most minute details in a setting or in the way a person's body shifts, the way their eyes flicker, or the way their tongue runs over the side of their teeth when they're about to laugh. This level of observation is something I utilize through Rafael's character while he struggles to recall major events in his previous life before his resurrection. The only things he can remember are the little things that made him fall in love with his best friend in the first place.

Writing this novel has been an equal measure of joy and frustration. My time at Purchase has allowed me to feel more confident in pursuing the ideas that develop in my head and let them run wild. I am forever grateful for the time I spent under Professors Okasi, Lewis, and Wright who have all pushed me to challenge myself, to ask the hard questions, and to see things in a different light. All of these things I've had to instill onto Rafael's character. In doing so, I've discovered a lot of myself through him, in his fears and anxieties, in the questions he poses, and in the way he allows himself to be

vulnerable. Writing has always been something that I've held very close to me, that only strangers online could see or a select few in my personal life. This is the first time where I feel proud enough to share my work with a large audience because I know how much I put into it and how much I've grown. Through flash fiction, I've learned the power of word choice. Through short stories, I've learned how to find the beats of a story to make it cohesive and complete. I've learned to step out of my comfort zone and dive into topics I know nothing about. I also took the care to visit some of the locations in the novel with dear friends and when my car wanted to cooperate, spent plenty of time on the road to channel my inner-Queeny. I would say the biggest hurdle that came to completing this novel was listening to Professor Okasi's very wise words, "Mason, just trust your gut." I have a terrible habit of overthinking every word I write until it's the day before I have to hand in pages. It seems only in those hair-pulling, wrist cracking, and finger numbing moments that I am finally able to get out of my head and write. I don't know how long it will take me to break that habit, but if there's one thing writing this novel has taught me, it's taking a moment to step back, breathe in the nice crisp fall air, and appreciate all the little things.

All The Little Things
By Mason Martinez

Chapter 1:

Rafael Acosta felt the sprinkling of glass against his face; his eyes were shut, not daring to sneak a peek. He didn't think he could open them, even if he wanted to. The force was so sudden, so unexpected, that his initial instinct was to shut his eyes and pretend as desperately as he could to be anywhere else than where he was. His mother used to tell him that all the little things would come falling back into place. He remembered asking her, when she was on her deathbed, the cancer taking her away slowly and definitely, "Is it all coming back?" She had smiled at him, tiredly, reaching out with her aging fingers to lock hers with his.

"Every little thing." She died the next morning.

It was just after midnight when Rafael fled into the pitch black with nothing but the clothes on his back, his best friend's car keys, and a weight on his chest that was becoming harder and harder to carry. Driving was a distraction, a way for him to focus on one thing and one thing only. But as he took the back roads to Baxter Boulevard, he was reminded of all the things he was running from. It had only been six months since the marking of Before and After. For a short while he was able to find a friend in the shadows of the night that created false memories on the popcorn ceiling of his bedroom. For a short while he was able to escape into his head, to remember Before, and pretend that nothing had changed. But as he drove, the yellow lines blurred, the trees a sloppy fingerpaint of a backdrop, he *remembered—*

Glistening golden eyes,

Peach colored cheeks,

Bubbling laughter,

Knees pressed against knees—

He didn't recall the dip in the road that made the right tire spin out of control, or how his foot wouldn't let up on the gas, or how, for a second, he had felt peace in those golden-tinted memories, of a world of light, of bliss, and a world where everything had been just like it had Before. Before the shattering of glass, before Rafael was dead, before—

He couldn't feel anything anymore. Rafael was left in the dark for only God knew how long. Only the empty weight of the world let him float by day by day. He didn't know it then, but his body was slowly starting to wake. The first thing he felt was the lightness of his eyes. The world that was previously in the deepest shade of black shifted slightly. Through his eyelids his mind understood that if he opened them, he would see lights. He heard movements, the rustling of paper, a chair screeching against the floor, footsteps coming in and out, the crackling of a television—

"*—Live in Downtown Portland, I'm Chelsea Trington standing outside the Marshes' family home where just one month ago mother and daughter, Ava and Isabella Marshes' bodies were found with no signs of visible wounds—"*

"Is he up yet?"

A sight from his left. "No," The voice was soft. "No, not yet. The doctor said he should be waking up any moment now."

"Do we know what he can do?" The first voice sounded gruff and impatient. Rafael could hear heavy footsteps tracing the room, circling in on him.

"We won't know until he wakes up, but he was running— maybe that's what he can do."

"He was in a car."

"Yes, but he was running away from something. It doesn't have to be literal all the time, you know." The softer voice sounded like a father dismissing his son. The way the disgruntled voice sounded, it could very much have been that.

Rafael recalled very little. Even as he willed his mind to swim through a sea of memories, most of them came back as overexposed photographs. He remembered his best friend, Loren Deguiz, sweet Loren, from Sunday School. They sat next to each other behind the pillars, trading Pokemon cards between the Hymn pages when their moms weren't looking. Their whispered excitement drowned out by all the low-sung voices. He remembered Sydney Lancaster's lips on his in the Dicoses's parking lot after a Halloween dance; she had tasted like apple cider. He could see Loren's smile, a noiseless laughter escaping the young boy's pink lips. Rafael had felt tension in his body, a gasp escaping his lips. He remembered his mother's warm embrace and cold hands. He heard a voice. Then the sirens. Then—

Nothing.

He jolted out of bed, feeling nothing but pure panic. Every muscle in his body tensed, his heart stopped all while beating madly in his ears. He felt static all throughout his arms and legs. He paid no mind to the two men that jumped at the sudden interruption in their conversation. What did they think, that he'd wake peacefully, elegantly? Rafael threw the thin sheets off his body. The men were

trying to talk to him, he could hear his name and reassurances as he moved in quick motion. His mind told him, *get out, get out, run!*

"Rafael, you're okay—" This was the softer man. He wore a high collared black suit with a white square by his Adam's apple. A reverend, surely. But Rafael knew all of them in town. Hell, he knew all of them from Cape Elizabeth up to Popeville. He could not put a name to this man's face. The Reverend reached out.

"Don't!" Rafael couldn't recognize his own cry. His body felt out of control, the static burning through him began to hurt every molecule. Rafael was the furthest from *okay*.

The Reverend never dropped his hand, but he didn't move it either. His hand floated mid-air in perfect stillness. Rafael backed away from the bed, his heart slowing with each footstep, his mind kept telling him: *run, run, run.* He watched The Reverend, but the elderly man didn't seem to notice him. He stared plainly out at the space Rafael previously occupied. Even the other man, large with tattoos running up and down his arms, was unmoving. It was only when Rafael's back hit the wall that he noticed the air was different too. Still.

Through the half-turned blinds, Rafael could see nurses walking up and down the corridor at a leisurely pace. He spotted a detective standing not too far away from his door, notepad in hand, as he exchanged words with a doctor. He felt his body recede into the shadows of the room. He didn't want to be noticed. He wanted to get out. He looked back towards the two men frozen in time, then back to the animated blue-gowned people, puzzled. He had to do something; the static building inside of him was screaming at him now. He heard laughter loud in his ears coming from down the hall. He heard

the beep of a monitor, maybe his, maybe the one next door. It was all too loud. Rafael moved. His legs first, then he was out the door.

Rafael ran. He ran until the pain in his lungs outmatched the static burning throughout his body. He ran until the bustling streets gave way to long stretches of road where trees replaced buildings, and the cries of cicadas became a melody. Rafael only stopped when his knees nearly gave out and he stumbled as if he were drunk. Heat radiated off the pavement soothing his aching muscles. The air had its natural hum hovering over him. He listened to it, or at least tried to, over the sound of him catching his own breath.

It was then that it had occurred to him that he did not know where he was. Rafael curled into a seated position, turning his neck from side to side. He did not know this road. He looked behind him, noting that it seemed to stretch on for miles. Towards the horizon there were less trees, the tall grass was yellow — maybe wheat. He frowned, trying to remember how he ended up here.

He was in a car crash, that he knew to be true. He remembered how his face felt hot and sticky from the thousands of little cuts left by the shards. His fingers reached for his face, smooth and soft, albeit a little damp from the running. He didn't feel a single scratch. Surely, that could not be possible. In fact, it was impossible. His heart started beating quickly again. He stood. Everything about this was impossible. He did not wake up and *stop time.* He was dead. The impact of the car against the stone pillars was enough to kill him, nevermind the glass. It wasn't possible. Or perhaps he was still asleep, in a coma, maybe. This was the crossing over between life and death and he had to make a choice. He could walk back towards the hospital and choose life. Or, he could walk down the road towards the

horizon and the wheat and say goodbye. Maybe his mother would be there with open arms, caramel in a pot, sickly sweet, as she prepped the oven for flan.

But even as Rafael turned to join his mother, he felt painfully aware that he was still alive, despite having been in a fatal crash. Surely if he were dead, he would not be this in tune with his body. He would not feel the bubbling static in his arms, or the pain in his head, or how sweaty his underarms had become. He was alive.

In the distance, Rafael's ears perked at the sound of an engine. Its low rumble came closer and closer. He turned back towards where he had come from to see a pastel blue '98 Silverado, its paint chipped, making its way towards him. He squinted his eyes. In the driver's seat sat a broad man wearing a neatly pressed white collared shirt, the sleeves rolled up past the elbows. The man had dark hair and a thick beard that was shaved close to his face. The man stopped the truck alongside Rafael, aligning the passenger seat window to where the boy stood. He had two hands tattooed around his neck as if being permanently choked.

"Get in."

"How? You were—" Rafael gestured between the truck and the distance, referring towards the hospital where the Reverend and the tattooed man had been frozen.

"Yeah, I'll admit it was something neither of us expected. It wore off after ten or twenty minutes. My consciousness returned before everything else started coming back," The man paused, then pointed at Rafael with an index finger that had the letter 'O' tattooed on it. "You ever do that shit on me again we're going to have problems, understood?"

"But *how* did I do that?"

The man sighed. “I’m supposed to say it all has to do with the big man upstairs. Maybe it does, maybe it doesn’t. Whatever helps them sleep at night.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Listen,” He took his hands off the steering wheel, jerking the truck into park. “I’d love to play twenty questions with you, but I have shit I need to take care of and the Rev wants me to take you back to the Church. So, hop on in and you can ask him all the questions your heart desires.”

Rafael’s eyes swept over the truck, old and rusted. The windshield was covered with the remains of bugs who didn’t look before flying. Rafael looked at the man who looked back impatiently. He didn’t even seem like the kind of guy who attended church once a year, let alone the weekly Sunday Mass. “What’s your name?” Rafael asked.

“Queeny.”

Rafael nearly laughed. He didn’t know what was funnier, the absurdity of what he was capable of now or this burly man staring him down. Maybe this was all a test, and this road — Rafael looked back at the horizon and the wheat — was the highway to hell. The song’s melody slowly came back to him. His mother would never have approved of a song like that. She wouldn’t have approved of a lot of things.

“Well then, *Queeny,* I’m not going anywhere with you. I’ve given up on religion a long time ago.”

Queeny’s jaw clenched. His hand was back on the steering wheel as if he were considering leaving Rafael on the desolate road. The truck’s condenser let out a hiss the longer it sat idling, a small stream of water trickled towards him. Queeny nodded to himself, sucked his teeth, and promptly got

out of the car. Rafael felt tension in his body, the static spreading down to his hands. His mind told him to *run, do it again, stop him.* But he never had the time to react.

Queeny rounded the car, a slick, shiny metal gun in his hand. He walked with it coolly. He never reached out, never aimed the gun at him. But Rafael's legs were suddenly locked. He yelped as he lost his balance. Thick green vines sprouted out of the ground, easily five inches thick, tight against his ankles. They were prickly against his skin.

"What the fuck—!" Rafael yelled. He could feel them from every angle, clawing its way out of the cracks in the pavement, gatherling like waves with a desperate urgency to keep him down. They encompassed him by the waist, the chest, even bound his wrists together. A thin vine carefully wrapped itself around Rafael's neck like a collar. It slithered against his skin before tightening. Rafael pressed the back of his skull against the pavement. "Listen," He struggled to catch his breath. "I don't want anything to do with God or Church or whatever the fuck. I don't know what's going on. Okay? I just want to go home."

Sunlight backlit Queeny's face. He was handsome, despite the obvious self-neglect. The beard made his skin look darker, oilier. He had wrinkles all over that the tattoos couldn't cover up. He wavered the gun at him without a care. He wasn't going to use it, Rafael realized. The vines were much more dangerous than the gun in his hand. They tightened around his body, all except for the one around his neck. It kept twirling around him as a reminder. Rafael cried out for breath.

"Well too bad," Queeny crouched down. "Looks like He wants something to do with you."

Chapter 2:

Queeny pulled into a gas station about 45 miles from where he had scooped Rafael off the side of the road. He turned the engine off. The silence only lingered for a second before laughter broke out from the car in front of them. A young couple laid lazily around a white convertible. A woman with a pale blue A-line dress that hung nicely around her frame with soft blonde hair pinned into delicate, thick curls. The man had a kind smile and blue eyes to match.

"Happiness is an allegory," Rafael watched the couple, trying to imagine the last time he laughed like that. Queeny turned to look at him and continued, "and unhappiness is a story."

Queeny blinked. "I certainly have stories." He popped the gas tank open and got out of the truck. Rafael watched him as he filled up the tank.

"So then what is your story?" Rafael finally asked.

The tension from the pump gave. The gas stopped. Queeny pulled the nozzle out of the tank. "It's true you do die," he began. "The person you were before your death is gone and now you're a new person. Reborn. I was declared dead ten years ago. The Rev found me, said I was one of the first like him," His hand hovered in the air, palm towards the sky, in a symbol of unimaginable power. "There were only four of us then, now there's eleven," Queeny paused. "Twelve now, with you that is."

Queeny screwed the lid back on the gas tank, placing the pump back into its holder. It let out a soft click. "Anyways, when I woke up I thought I was in a rainforest. The Rev said I was in a coma for three months after being resurrected, but kept growing shit. You wake up to something like that, well, how can you not believe it?"

Rafael looked down at his own hands, uncertain. A higher power was an easy answer to give to something unexplainable. It happened all the time, the masses called them *miracles.* He almost laughed, thinking of how often the Acostas tossed that word around. *La vida es un milagro, papi,* his mother would always coo at him with her constant upbeat personality. Only once did he allow himself to give in to the idea, but his miracle was short lived, now buried in a wooden coffin six-feet deep where Rafael couldn't reach. If God had any role in his resurrection, he wanted to know *why him?*

"I was skeptical, too," Queeny said as if reading his thoughts. He leaned his body against the side of the truck. "What the hell was happening to me and why me, you know?"

He shrugged his broad shoulders, watching as the woman walked on the tips of her toes towards the market while the man walked over to the pump, fingering the sliver of a silver ring that made the rest of his finger bulge. "I made a lot of mistakes in my life, some more than others and towards the end of my life — my last life — I started realizing it. That's how it always goes, right? Just when you're ready to change, all of a sudden *BANG*!" Queeny slammed a heavy hand on the roof of the truck. Rafael startled. The man gave them the side eye. "You're dying and you think, this is it, *this* is all I've done with my life?"

He looked up towards the sky, squinting his eyes. Rafael couldn't help but stare at the heavy ink on Queeny's neck, so gruesome and permanent.

"The Rev said that want, that desire to change, was stronger than death and I was given a second chance by God to do that and I don't know," Queeny let out a low chuckle. "You want something bad enough you'll believe in anything, you know?"

"And if you don't?" Rafael asked slowly.

"Believe in it?"

"Change."

Queeny looked down at him inquisitively. "Not up for some repentance?"

"No, I mean, it's not that. It's... I don't know, what if you can't change?" Rafael scratched at the skin near his thumb. He always did get dry patches there.

"The Church gives you two options," Queeny leaned in, creating shadows over Rafael's body. "Join them and serve or go back to being dead."

Rafael looked puzzled. Thousands of questions ran through his head, but he settled for one. "How do they pick who gets to come back?"

The corner of Queeny's mouth pulled into a dangerous grin. He gave Rafael a pat on the arm before pointing his chin towards the man who was slipping the pump back into its holder, his girlfriend sauntering back to him on cue. The man opened the door for her as she tucked her dress beneath her rear to keep it from wrinkling. She gave him a peck on the cheek before ducking in. "They're not fucking."

Rafael looked over. The man hesitated before rounding the car, his hand rubbed at the back of his neck. "What?"

"She's one of those saving yourself till marriage kinda girls, got the cross wrapped around her neck and an abstinence ring on her finger. He's got one too, but he's played with it at least three times since we've been here. She's a nice girl. He's trying to be."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"He's gonna fuck someone else," Queeny leaned against the truck. "Maybe he'll get into drinking too, socially. Then, a little too frequently. She'll notice, but will be too passive about it. She'll mention it to her women's group at church, but it'll be a hypothetical and about a friend. Their relationship will crumble, he'll ruin his life with drinking or maybe drugs too, I can't tell yet. And at the end of it all, she's done everything she's supposed to do and she'll just die. And that bastard, he'll get to come back and get a second chance at life again."

Rafael let the scenario play in his head. The backlights of the car gave off a soft white glow. The tires began moving, slowly at first. Then the man merged onto the highway, picking up speed. "So, you're saying the Church picks cheaters?"

"No," Queeny looked pleased. "The Church picks the bad guys."

Rafael struggled to find the next word, but Queeny didn't seem to care or mind. He walked off with a bounce in his step towards the gas station's market, leaving Rafael alone with his thoughts. Rafael let him go. He sank into the withered leather seat. He fixed his gaze on the empty spot in front of them where the young couple occupied and filled the space with their polished looks and easy-going laughter. Rafael had been happy like that once. He could remember snippets of it like those old film reels that came with a stack of photos in an envelope. He used to hold them close to his eyes to get a better look, even though the fully developed photo lay within reach. It was always more satisfying having to decipher the photo from its film.

What stood out to him on the reel? Friday night dinners at Lenny's 24 Hour Diner with Loren and Sydney. She used to reach her feet towards him, so they were always touching but no one noticed.

Except Loren always noticed and he'd bite his tongue until it was just the two of them walking home in the dark.

"Could you two be any more obvious?" Loren had said, sending a rock onto the front lawn of Mrs. Greene's yellow house. Loren couldn't be bothered with Sydney. When they were freshmen in high school, their dislike for one another had always been something that could be brushed off or dismissed with the wave of a hand. It was expected. Loren and Sydney bickering until the end. But now?

"Just because you can't get a girlfriend doesn't mean you have to take it out on me." Rafael had been too happy, too in love to care what Loren thought.

"Has it ever occurred to you that maybe I don't want a girlfriend?"

Rafael laughed. "Why wouldn't you want a girlfriend?"

Loren said nothing and walked ahead of him for the rest of the night.

Rafael's stomach turned, and sweat developed along the collar of his shirt. He tried to take one inhale, count to three, exhale. He could feel the static in his body slowly wake from its temporary slumber. He tried to count the stickers on the window of the market— all advertisements for Redbull, Marabellos, Juuls, and one very discreet *God is with us, 31:8.* Do not be afraid, Rafael remembered, do not be discouraged.

Queeny returned with two cups of coffee and a white paper bag crumbled in the crook of his arm. He was rushing on the tips of his toes, trying to keep his grasp on the bag. It fell onto the hood of the truck at the last second.

"Here," Queeny passed one of the coffees through the open window. Rafael cradled it in the palms of his hands. Queeny grabbed the paper bag with his now available hand and hopped in, the truck shifted at the sudden weight. "I got you a boston creme. You seem like a creme kinda guy."

"What does that even mean?"

Queeny shrugged. "If it makes you feel better I'm a sucker for strawberry frosting and sprinkles." He dug through the bag for his choice of sweetness before handing it over.

Rafael peered inside, an extra pink donut with sprinkles and the boston creme sat at the bottom, its color smearing on the walls of the bag. Queeny took a bite of his donut, one yellow sprinkle catching on his beard.

"No kidding." Rafael laughed softly. It felt unfamiliar, but he relished in it, even if only for a moment. He could pretend that this was normal, sitting next to Queeny with coffee and donuts like they'd been doing this their whole lives. But the more he smiled, the more the cup of coffee felt heavier in his hand. He could feel his chest open up and accept the clouds that washed over him.

"Hey," Queeny said softly. "You're allowed to laugh, you know."

Rafael met his gaze and immediately regretted it. It was that same, sorry look of his that he'd grown so sick of after his mother died.

He forced himself to laugh and nod, a skill that quickly became second nature to him, but it was hard to pretend when everything felt too real, too present. So he sipped the coffee instead, averting his eyes from the horizon, and the uncertainty that lay ahead. After all, the world couldn't take anything more from him when it had taken everything already.

Chapter 3:

Santana Marie Acosta often told her son that everything was covered with a veil, not just the bride. She created this metaphor during the dizzying aftermath the chemo left her under before she traded sunlight for the light at the end of the tunnel. The first time she told him this, he asked her what she meant. After all, he knew of no brides and he sure as hell wasn't ready to get down on one knee at sixteen to ask Sydney to marry him. But he wasn't about to tell his dying mother that. Santana provided him no answer, just left him with a pat on the hand, and with as much wisdom she could conjure said, "You only have to know where to look."

But he never knew where to look. Veils were translucent things, at least in the Bible. They were the passing between one world and the next, a way of atonement. Rafael didn't think of himself as much of a sinner. But he didn't think of himself as a Giver, either, or whatever it was the Do-Gooders or Church Go-ers called themselves. He was just trying to get by.

He went out of a sense of familiarity. The Roman Catholic Church was a second home to him. He'd spent his childhood in the Dioceses, from camping trips to day-trips into the city. He'd made all of his friends there. Had his first kiss in the church's parking lot, his first sip of wine, his first cigarette. It wasn't a bad place. It wasn't even a place he disliked. It just wasn't a place he wanted to devote himself to.

Rafael watched his mother devote her life to it. Every Sunday from morning till evening she was there. Every Tuesday she held the Young Women's Group in their house. Every month she'd host a couples gathering. She sang in the choir and worked at every food-bank. All it got her was cancer. So,

no, he wouldn't waste his Tuesdays, or Thursdays, or whatever. He'd give them his Sundays and that was it.

Maybe it was cynical. But he liked being realistic. The veil the church cast wasn't one he wanted to be trapped under. He just wanted to serve his time and get out. But only half an hour had passed and mass was an hour long.

When the church was lifted in "Amen" Rafael managed to let a sigh escape his lips. It would have gone unnoticed if Sydney hadn't been watching him. He could feel the heat of her gaze on his right cheek, while Loren ignored him, the contrast between them chilling.

"Are you listening to a single thing Reverend Gabriel is saying?" She hissed.

"Of course I am." It probably wasn't the best time to lie.

"Your mother would be disappointed."

"Thank God she's not here then."

"Amen." Loren muttered, flipping through the pages in the hymn book. It was the first word he said since they settled down in the pews. Rafael let out a low chuckle. Sydney shot Loren a glare that went unnoticed. that was never received.

Over the last several months, Loren had said less and less, no longer giving into their bickering ways. Whenever Sydney spoke, he ignored her. She'd walk up to him at school, and he'd walk past her. If Rafael invited him out and she was around, he found a way to get out of it.

"He's jealous, you know," Sydney liked reminding Rafael of this. He could picture her now, admiring her slim figure in the distorted mirror at the foot of his bed. She'd wear her signature grey halter dress, exposing her plain pale back. "Loren can't stand us together."

Maybe Loren was. Maybe he wasn't. But Rafael couldn't blame him — he was starting to not be able to stand her either.

He didn't know when the change had started. Rafael had always liked Sydney. As kids she always seemed like an impossible dream. She was daring and adventurous. She was smart and polite, but never held back. She could drink three milkshakes in a row without a stomach ache. She'd waste her Sunday nights helping Rafael study for a chemistry test until one in the morning because, yes of course, he neglected to study again. When they finally kissed on Halloween, freshman year, for the first time in his life he felt like things were going right, like he could live this way forever.

Now, a year and a half in, he couldn't help but feel like it was all *wrong.*

She'd become insufferable after his mother died. Sydney was always around, always wanting to talk. He was tired of talking. He knew, deep down, she didn't really want to know what was going on in his head. The truth was, he wished his mother had died a lot sooner. Rafael had let the vibrant woman he once knew— the woman who'd always have a plate of fresh beef empanadas (no olives, they made him sick) waiting when he came home from school, who'd toss a baseball back and forth even when her arm was cramping— go once she was diagnosed.

He still just wanted to let his mother go, but no one would let him. Sydney wouldn't let him. He knew the second mass was over, he'd have to rush out because, even still, six months later everyone was still checking in on him.

"We haven't seen you in the Young Men's Group since—"

"Why don't you come over to dinner on Thursday night, we'd be so happy to—"

"If you ever need anything—"

Loren cleared his throat, the tip of his dress shoe colliding against the side arc of Rafael's foot. One tap, two, three. Rafael turned, with his eyes not his head, because Sydney would notice and scold both of them. Loren stared straight ahead at the choir that was beginning to rise for the fourth hymn of the day. Mrs. Deguiz was leading the group. With both of her long brown arms extended she commanded the room to stand.

Sydney was the first in their pew. Then Loren. Then Rafael. In the midst of the noise Loren leaned over, "Page 247."

Rafael knitted both brows.

Loren gestured with his chin to the hymn book still resting in its slip on the back of the bench.

"You know I don't sing."

"Just open the book."

Rafael reached for it, resting the spine against the palm of his hand. The book opened right where Loren wanted it to because nestled tightly between the crease was a glistening, sharp Pokemon card. Rafael nearly snorted.

"I have to admit," Rafael whispered, his hand tracing the outline of the energy card. It was nothing special, something they had an abundance of in their old binders. "I stopped collecting when we were eleven."

Loren rolled his eyes. "Flip it over."

The choir started off with a low hum before slipping smoothly into the words where the rest of the audience would join. He heard Loren's soft voice first. He'd been vocally trained when they were in

middle school, but he preferred being overshadowed, allowing his words to be drowned out by the noise of everyone else. Rafael didn't bother. His mother wasn't here to nudge him anymore.

He flipped the card, revealing a blue sticky note that was taped onto its back. In small black ink Loren's scratchy handwriting read: *Woods after mass.*

Rafael leaned over, feeling the need to remind his best friend of the fact that immediately after mass he'd be bombarded by everyone's desire to help out a parentless child. But as soon as the song began to give way to silence and Reverend Gabriel began the closing prayer, Loren grabbed Rafael by the wrist and dragged him away.

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Rafael rubbed his wrist, staring absently at the veins that pulsed beneath the layers of skin. He thought about the vines that only two hours ago had kept them locked together, while two years ago they'd been cradled in Loren's soft hands. What happened afterwards? Rafael furrowed his brow, and tried to wrack his brain around the woods outside the church. He kept pushing at his skin, hoping and praying that maybe if he grabbed at himself in such a way the memories would come flooding back.

"What are you doing?" Queeny asked, sparing a quick glance over at him.

Rafael let his hands drop to his sides. In the fleeting background, a sign that read *Welcome to Rhode Island: The Ocean State* reflected back at him. In all his life he'd never left Maine. It sounded silly now that he thought about it. It was such a small space to be confined to, but he never had any real desire to leave. Not even after his mother died. There, Rafael at least still had Loren.

"Am I dead?" Rafael asked.

"I already told you—"

"I know that I'm not *actually* dead anymore, but do the Deguizes think I'm dead? Sydney?" Rafael felt his throat tighten thinking of Loren's family. The Acostas were close-knit, smaller than Santana would have liked, but her husband had left when Rafael was three and her body simply couldn't take the pressures of having another baby. Having Rafael was risky enough. When the Deguizes moved in a month before his fifth birthday, and Rafael's abuela was still alive, Santana welcomed them in and their family gained three new members. On that day, he was no longer just Rafael.

He'd become RafaelandLoren, entangled forever in eternity.

It was only natural for the Deguizes to take Rafael in after Santana passed.

It had only been six months since the Deguizes buried their son and now—

Queeny sighed. "They buried you last month."

"*Last month?*"

"The Rev has been doing this for years, you think he doesn't know how to trick the system?"

Rafael didn't know what to think. He'd been sitting in the car with Queeny over the past two hours trying to piece together the day's events. He'd lost track of the number of times he asked himself how the hell he ended up here in the first place. The feeling of crackling static within his body that seemed to dull since the lighthearted coffee and donuts started again. It was a slow sensation, much like waking up in the hospital bed earlier. It started at the tips of his fingers, then his palms, into his wrists until it covered his whole body. When he held out his hands, though, they were steady. It made him think the static was a figment of his imagination. But it burned too much to truly convince himself of that.

"I should call them." He couldn't even remember his last interaction with Loren's parents. All he could remember was seeing Mrs. Deguiz's crumpled body in the living room foyer. Her husband held her as she wailed, *mybabymybaby.* Loren's body had already been taken out to the ambulance on a gurney, covered in white cloth.

"You can't." The way he said it didn't make Rafael think it was up for debate. So, instead he reached for the radio. He flipped through the stations; the presets that worked in Maine were nothing but pure static. He ran through them quickly, trying to find something local. He could hear the tires against the pavement loud in his ears. Why was he so sensitive to noise now? He settled on a station with a low, yet urgent speaker. Rafael was ready to flip it, but Queeny sat up reaching out to swat Rafael's hands away. "Wait, keep it."

Rafael looked between him and the radio, its faded numbers staring back at him. It crackled the deeper they drove into Rhode Island, where the highway gave way to short buildings of various colors. Though the sun was beginning to set, Rafael imagined a sweet charm to the place that reminded him of East Deering.

"*—WJAR coming live to you from Mount Pleasant with updates on The Handmaiden Killer—*"

"Another one?" Rafael sank back into his seat, resting his arm against the window frame. He vaguely remembered the phenomenon that had started back in the spring of '02. It had gained traction throughout his high school years once a pattern was detected and the killer dubbed his infamous name. No one in Rafael's town paid too much attention to it until it made its way further up north.

"*—local authorities are reminding everyone in the Providence region to lock their doors at all times. Curfew is in effect at 8pm. Single mothers are recommended to stay with friends or family if available, as the only common trend amongst victims is that they are single mothers and their children—"*

This was another moment in his life he was grateful his mother wasn't around. She wasn't as young as the women targeted, but a single mother nonetheless.

"*—cause of death heart attack in the mother, but a trace of poison was identified in six year old—"*

"How many is that now?"

"*—witnesses have reported that the suspect last seen interacting with the Brookes family had been a broad man in his mid-thirties disguised as a UPS worker—"*

"Does it matter?"

"*—reason to believe he is still in the area. Law enforcement will be patrolling all night long. If you have any information, please call this toll free number—"*

"Just what I thought." Queeny muttered, lowering the radio as the violent update faded into a chirpy Counting Crows song.

Rafael waited for Queeny to say something else, but his only response was to press on the gas pedal a little harder, grip the steering wheel a little tighter.

"So, a guy like that gets to come back?"

"No," Queeny said, certain. "A guy like that stays dead."

Rafael watched as Queeny's jaw worked beneath his thick beard. The truck was suddenly filled with tension. As the light from the sky trickled away, sinking deep into the horizon on Rafael's left, he

couldn't help how reminiscent it felt of years past. Of course, Rafael had never known Queeny until this day. But he'd been a passenger all his life. He sat in the backseat of his mother's beat-up Camry and Loren's Civic. He had watched from this angle the way Loren used to laugh, used to hold back, used to pretend that everything was fine. He could read Loren from how he gripped the steering wheel. Queeny was no different.

"Queeny, where are we going?" Rafael finally asked.

The truck carried them out of the claustrophobic setting of Providence and onto more desolate roads that gave way to more trees. They were driving away from the Woonasquatucket River, away from the small city. In the rearview mirror, Rafael could still see the warm glow of string lights that zig-zagged back and forth down the main street they arrived on. Once Counting Crows turned into Billy Joel, Rafael was tempted to ask again but the truck took an unexpected dip.

To their right, Queeny led them off the side of the road into an opening in the woods. Rafael reached for the grab handle as the truck rocked side to side. The canopy of trees swallowed them whole. Rafael remembered the gun in the glove compartment. The static in him made him grit his teeth. Maybe Rafael was wrong. Maybe Queeny was lying. Maybe there was no Church, no being brought back to life, maybe Rafael was just dead. If he wasn't, this was the moment. Queeny dragged him all the way from home to kill him in some random set of woods in a town he'd never heard of before today.

Run, run, run.

The truck rolled onto a gravel road. In the middle of the woods, there was a large opening of neatly cut grass with a small ivory chapel in the center. Nestled tightly between the chapel sat two sharp pointed towers. This far away the property's circularity was clear, with twelve smaller houses along the

outer-edges right before the rest of the woods. Queeny let the truck idle for a moment as they took in the sight of the landscape before darkness swept over the land.

"To find God." Queeny said, his voice nearly drowned out by the unmistakable melody of "Only the Good Die Young."

Chapter 4:

The Church of Light's architecture complemented the surrounding nature, or rather, the way that nature complemented it. Trumpet vines crawled up the corners of the Church, along the gutters up to the highest point in its middle where the leaves tangled together into a thick cross.

Queeny carried them forward, driving slow enough for Rafael to tilt his head back and admire the unfamiliar sight with his mouth agape. Its heavy wooden doors were held open by a miniature statue of an Apostle he couldn't identify. As they drove, he noticed a dome-like structure of about three stories to the left of the Church with windows every foot or so. The dome atop the building itself was glass, held together not by steel but—

"Is that gold?" Rafael squinted his eyes to get a better look.

Queeny hummed his confirmation. "Every archway and trim you see is made of gold," Before Rafael could ask, he continued. "The First Apostle can manipulate the earth and all of its metals."

Rafael licked his lips, feeling more in awe at the possibilities of power instead of afraid of it. "Someone like you?"

"No," Queeny paused. "Someone like us." There was a youthful mischievous look in his eye when Rafael looked over that he couldn't help but smile at.

They drove past a pavilion that connected to the Church's right hand tower, its roof covered in moss, and garrya elliptica hanging from the edges. Just past the pavilion was an open space adorned with two hedges and a pathway towards a marble fountain. Queeny circled it, parking the truck on the clipped grass. Rafael didn't think this was an appropriate place to park, but the truck was already off and Queeny was out. A small girl rushed towards them out of the pavilion, a flurry of what Rafael

could have sworn was a blonde head of hair crashing into Queeny's broad shoulders. Queeny rustled her dark brown hair, laughing.

Rafael circled the truck, shoving his hands deep into his pockets so no one could see him picking at the dead skin between his fingernails. The girl pulled back from Queeny with a bright smile on her small, dull freckled face. There were bits of gold woven into her braided hair.

"I thought you weren't coming back!" The girl cried, throwing her head back as Queeny pushed off his knees.

"I promised you I would, didn't I?" Queeny ran a hand against the back of his neck, almost embarrassed by this soft-naturedness about himself. He shifted his attention from the small girl over to Rafael, clearing his throat. "Evie, this is—"

"The Apostle Rafael!" Evie's bright brown eyes widened. "The Reverend's been praying for you for years."

"Years—?" Rafael frowned.

Queeny placed a hand on his shoulder. "Speaking of which we should find him—"

"No need," The Reverend stood at the foot of the pavilion, arms clasped behind his back as he admired the marble fountain. Rafael looked at it now, a heavy-set woman with luscious waves of hair floating in six directions. The palms of her hands directed at the sky where water poured between each finger into the pool beneath her. He had never seen such a thing. The Reverend smiled. "Beautiful thing isn't it? God's Creation."

Rafael wanted to tell him otherwise, but he couldn't find the words. His mind had been whirling uncontrollably since the moment he'd woken up and for the tiniest fraction of a second,

everything in his head was silent. There was just the trickling of water. Evie's delightful laughter. Queeny's sheepish smile. How could he disagree?

The Reverend approached him slowly, his eyes watching Rafael studiously. He laughed, dipping his head when he did. It made him seem young. "Evie's right," He gestured towards her. Evie tilted her head with a bright smile, because yes, of course she was. "We've been waiting for you for a long time."

Rafael was ready to ask him how that was possible, but The Reverend looked away from him and towards the marble fountain again. He stepped back so they stood side by side, warmth protruding off his body. Evie tugged Queeny away towards the pavilion. Rafael wanted to call him back. The space to his left that this strange, obnoxious, and threatening man had occupied over the last several hours felt painfully empty. He didn't want to let that go just yet, but Queeny was already at the foot of the steps, leaving him alone with The Reverend.

"There was a time we thought Adelyn was the last Apostle," The Reverend explained. Rafael admired the statue, trying to conjure the image of a woman who could control water. Queeny who could control nature; and Rafael, who could control time. He'd seen it, felt it firsthand. Why was it so hard to believe? "It's been nearly six years, you know. The Lord called to me so often during the Church's Creation that when I heard only my own voice speaking back to me, I felt fear for the first time. Doubt."

Rafael averted his eyes, trying to focus on the reflection of the moonlight against the choppy water in front of him. Doubt was something he'd grown far too familiar with as he got older.

Something that had started long before his mother was diagnosed, he realized now. He'd never wanted to admit that before.

"But doubt is a lot like distance, it makes the heart grow fonder. It deepens our faith. It strengthens our connection with God. Wouldn't you say?"

Rafael thought it was a funny way to think of it, but he couldn't help but think of all the times he found himself pleading with the dark.

"If you've been waiting for me for years, how is it possible that I've never heard of this, any of it?" Rafael asked, finally meeting The Reverend's eyes. They were a bright grey with dark lines cutting between the irises like the rings of a tree, marking all the years passed.

"Because you weren't ready to listen."

Rafael wanted to scoff, roll his eyes in disbelief. He'd always listened, always did what was asked of him, did what his mother would tell him a good servant of the Lord would do. He'd ask, time and time again, what more could God possibly want from him? But there was a hint of truth in what The Reverend was saying to him. Listening meant accepting the truth, and there were too many truths to Rafael that he didn't want to accept.

"Why did you run, Rafael?" The Reverend asked him softly with a tilt of his head. A small string of silver-grey hair fell between his thick, sharp eyebrows.

He furrowed his brows as he thought of those waking moments. It was one thing to be trapped in that silver lining between life and death. But for him, there was no in-between. He had died. There was glass cutting through him. The impact against the pillar. There was fear. There was adrenaline. Excitement and then—

HopeandDissapointmentTangledTogetherInEternity.

Hope because he'd have a family again.

Disappointment because he was alive.

He swallowed nothing but the emptiness in his throat. When he woke in that hospital bed, he had hoped time had rest. He hoped that those distant voices he'd heard over the last month that belonged to Queeny and The Reverend had been his mother and Loren. But they weren't. He was alone and afraid and it all came rushing back to him and he did the only thing he knew how to, but instead something else happened first. Time had stopped.

"Perhaps I've asked the wrong question," The Reverend laughed to himself, feeling a semblance of embarrassment, as if he had asked something too personal too soon. "Perhaps it's not why you ran, but where you were running to?"

"Home."

He didn't need to think twice about it. He wanted his room with its stained yellow walls, untidy bed, and water damaged books that he'd get for free off the sidewalks in cardboard boxes. He wanted to find Loren sitting at the foot of his bed with his homework discarded on the floor, a Nintendo 64 controller clutched between cramping knuckles. He wanted to hear his mother's deep laughter echoing off the walls. But his childhood home was sold. His things consolidated into a small guest-bedroom in the Deguizes' home. Loren buried six feet under. And Rafael was dead and alive with nowhere to return to.

"Home is something that is never lost but gained. It is something movable and moldable. Ever-changing and reimagined. It grows with us. It takes the shape of the lives we lead and continues to

exist not in the way we remember it, but how," The Reverend began, He reached out and took Rafael's hands between his. He stroked a thumb against Rafael's dry patch that sent warmth throughout his body. "After all, that's why you and all of the other Apostles have been given a second chance."

Rafael's brows furrowed. For a moment, the static inside of him seemed to melt away with each and every one of The Reverend's words, soothing him into a peace he had only felt once before. In another life. In someone else's hands. But as he looked down at their hands, he found himself longing for a way out, a way to escape it all. He didn't believe in miracles or Gods or Apostles anymore. He wasn't sure if he ever had truly believed in it and he didn't have to pretend to. He didn't owe anyone anything, not when a god like Him could be so greedy to *take, take, take.*

He slipped out of The Reverend's embrace, crossing his arms over his chest. A gentle breeze swept through, softening the tightness in his throat, reminding him to breathe. Rafael could feel The Reverend's eyes on him, so he looked past the statue of Adelyn, past the pavilion where somewhere Evie's delightful squeal could be heard over the open distance.

"There is still hope for your future, Rafael," The Reverend started slowly, clasping his hands behind his back. "You have seen this world through a unique light, one of anguish and pain and remorse and it is through that, that *you* will be able to make the world a better home for everyone else in it. Do you understand me?"

Rafael nodded slowly.

"We cannot change what has already been done, but we can — and I hope you don't mind my butchering of Jeremiah's word — hope for a better future His children can return to."

"Do you really think that's possible?" Rafael asked distantly.

"I think anything is possible," The Reverend said surely. "With your faith in the right place, we can teach you to become what God has always wanted you to be."

"And what's that?" Rafael scoffed.

"An Apostle, of course."

He wanted to feel the doubt he'd been so acquainted with. How could a sinner like him possibly be brought back to become an Apostle? But The Reverend reached for his hands again and the thought evaporated. He bowed his head, inviting Rafael to join him. Silence settled over him like a cool mountain-top fog. There was no room for the prickling sensation of the static or the ringing in his ears or the thoughts that kept him up for eight nights until the day of his death, June 15th, 2009.

Rafael looked up at the sharp outline of the moon above him. It never failed to amaze him that despite how far away, he could see the intricate details along its surface. Another possible-impossible thing.

The Reverend followed his gaze, blinking in a slow and blissfully happy way. "Isn't it funny how the Catholics believe that even before we can conceive a single thought we are sinful and given a chance to be cleansed of it, but not when we need it the most?"

A star somewhere brightened. Another dimmed. Another traveled with alarming speed that he had to second guess where it was a star or plane.

"Children lack thought and reason, there is no malice or ill intention. That's why they're forgiven." The words eased out of Rafael webbed from a distorted memory like the glimmer of a figure in dark water.

"And what of the circumstances? Or a person's environment?" The galaxy looked back at him in The Reverend's eyes as Rafael turned his attention towards him. He squeezed the space between Rafael's thumb and pointer finger. "This is a crucial detail as to why a person commits sin in the first place. Wouldn't you agree?"

For a moment, Rafael was standing in a different set of woods, beneath the comforting embrace of the sun's rays, angelic light pouring through the breaks in the leaves.

"These Western religions want to save the damned when they're the ones condemning them."

Rafael was ten years old the first time his mother dragged him to the confession box. His pulse thrummed loudly in his ear. He didn't understand. He had only shared a bed with Loren. They'd shared tents, clothes, toys, and, more times than Rafael liked to admit, a toothbrush. Why couldn't they share a bed?

"And now," The Reverend's voice dropped and his eyes darkened. He readjusted so that they were no longer standing in front of each other, but side by side, two equals looking out at the dark landscape. All the intricate details Rafael had noticed of the Church had vanished; he could only see the silhouettes of the buildings, the ragged edges of nature, the curvature of the glass dome.

Words ran rampant in his mind so suddenly he gasped.

Liar. Cheater. Sinner. Damned. Apostle.

The static force itself out of its locked box somewhere deep inside of him, pain sent him doubling over. The words replayed in his head alongside Mrs. Deguiz's cries. His best friend. His—

The water that trickled out of Adelyn's statue stopped mid-air as Rafael dropped to his knees. He felt a heavy hand on his shoulder. The static lifted away, blasted by the impact, but quickly fell back

into place. The Reverend's hand was just another extension of it. Rafael expected the other man's hand to stay planted on his shoulder unwillingly. But The Reverend curled his fingers into Rafael's shoulder, whispering, "The Damned will be the ones that save them."

Chapter 5:

Rafael didn't remember falling asleep. It seemed he must have, when light poured into a simply decorated room with buttery-yellow walls. He squinted against the sudden interruption of a dreamless sleep, partially feeling annoyed, but when his eyes adjusted his heart lurched. He sat up, eyes scanning the room for the familiarity of his bedroom. To his right he'd see a battered up wooden dresser, the top right drawer slightly open and extremely crooked. To his left, he'd see his closet door cracked open, overflowing with crap he was too lazy to designate a proper home for.

But instead, when he looked to his left he saw a rounded golden mirror with inscriptions he couldn't make out from the bed. A beige three-drawer dresser occupied the length of the wall. On top sat a clock that had stopped keeping time. To his right, fluorescent light beamed through the crack of an open closet door. Where was he?

The cream closet door swung open abruptly, slamming against the opposite wall. Out emerged the broad shouldered tattooed man with his permanent scowl, eyebrows thick and furrowed so tightly that they blocked his dark eyes. A white linen shirt and beige straight legged pants were draped over his arm.

He peered up from the selected outfit. "Good, you're up."

Rafael tossed the thin sheet off his legs onto the edge of the bed. The memories of the past day hit him full force. The stilling of time. The vine around his neck. The gun hanging between Queeny's fingertips. The Reverend's soft touch and easy-going smile.

"Queeny," Rafael breathed. "Are we going somewhere?"

"Yeah," He dropped the clothes carelessly onto Rafael's lap, walking past him towards a wide rectangular window. It faced a small pond, small lily pads on the water's surface and ivory benches on the lawn around it. The tiny house faced the Church of Light's left-hand bell tower. "Brunch."

Rafael inspected the shirt. It had puffed sleeves and a golden emblem of the sun at the wrists. "Brunch?"

"Apostle tradition. Think of it like the last supper, except it's the brunch edition."

"Classy." Rafael stood. Where he expected fatigue to overtake him as it had the last half-year, he was surprised to feel calm and collected.

Queeny sniffed. "I'd say tacky, but to each their own," He spun on his heel so they faced each other. He wore a similar outfit, except the emblems at his wrists were dark green. Queeny caught his eye. "Every Apostle has a color that represents their power. Green for obvious reasons. Blue for obvious reasons. Red for fire. I would've gone for orange, but that's just me."

"And yellow?" Rafael looked down at his own emblem, running his thumb over it.

"The sun was the original clock," Queeny said matter of factly. "Orange would've worked for you too, now that I think about it."

Rafael hummed softly, switching his attention from the clothes to the room itself. There was a skylight above him with the triangular cutout of a sundial's gnomon. If Rafael looked close enough, he could see a light inscription etched on the floor with Roman numerals. Something told him the space was specifically designed for him. He remembered Queeny's mention of an Apostle who could mend the earth.

"I'll be outside when you're ready," Queeny said, already heading out of another door that, he now noticed, led down a short flight of steps. "The sooner we get there, the sooner we hit the road."

"The road?" Rafael called after him. Seconds passed with no response. Rafael was alone in a new world.

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Six chairs were arranged on either side of a long ivory-clothed table. One dark-cherry wood chair was placed at the head of the table. The table could have very easily hosted a party of thirty, not thirteen. Golden silverware and steel chalices were all adorned with a gemstone with each Apostles' coordinating color. When the two arrived, the room was full of loud laughter and drinks filled to the brim. Rafael expected silence to ensue as they stepped in and towards the only two empty seats beside The Reverend, but the room only got louder.

"I didn't think I'd live to see the day!" Perched at the far end of the left side of the table sat a platinum blonde boy of about twenty-one with piercing blue eyes that could be seen a mile away. His hair stuck out in erratic places in a way that the boy didn't seem to care about, or it was an intentional style. It was hard to tell. "Queeny at brunch!"

"To hell with brunch," This came from the opposite side of the table. A handsome middle aged man with short salt-and-pepper hair had both hands extended, one hand lazily holding a cup between the tips of his fingers. "Queeny's home for once!"

Laughter floated around the table as Queeny scraped the chair out from under the table and sat down without a word. Rafael followed suit.

"Well! Don't keep us waiting, *Quewe*!" Lukka scooted to the edge of his seat like an eager child with too much energy. "We want to know everything. It's been, God, *ages* since we last saw you! What was it like outside? Catch any bad guys? *Ooh, ooh!* What about that killer? You know the one—"

"Lukka, breathe," Adelyn wore a playful smile on plump lips. Her attention fluttered over to Rafael. She was just as beautiful as the statue, but what the carving failed to capture were her eyes. They were as dark as a swamp untouched by mankind, growing all kinds of algae. "Excuse him, he doesn't get out much." She propped her rounded face gently onto her wrist. "You must be our new Apostle."

The table settled down ever-so-slightly as all eyes fell on him. He'd never been fond of attention, always a back of the classroom type of guy. His teachers never knew what to make of him so they always told his mother that he was a pleasure to have in class instead of the God's honest truth.

In his peripheral vision The Reverend reached out for his own chalice, an iridescent gem that's color changed with each and every movement, and raised it. Without breaking eye contact, "This moment has been long overdue. For years we have waited for a miracle, the one person that would make us all feel whole and complete. No longer do we sit before an empty chair. Please join me in welcoming our new son, brother, and friend. Welcome Rafael. Welcome home."

There was a tightness expanding in his chest as Rafael realized he'd started to hold his breath. Around the table the Apostles all had their own cups raised towards him, each one of them glossy eyed and... *happy.* He couldn't understand why.

He forced himself to smile instead of giving in to his anxiety. He reached for his own cup, the yellow gem staring back at him just as bright as the sun. As he held the cup high, the temporary silence

broke, and witty banter and loud laughter resumed. Silverware clinked, liquids gurgled out of their nozzles, and cups clicked against the brim of someone else's. To the left of him an elderly man named Grey welcomed him with a polite smile, but without the same interest that everyone else had in him.

Grey leaned over across him, a chalice gestured towards Queeny. "Welcome home Q," he said quietly enough for only the three of them to hear.

Queeny grunted, throwing back whatever was in the cup in one swift motion. Rafael looked over where he sat silently, unphased, and indifferent. He moved in such a way that seemed robotic and unnatural. He didn't have the same laxness about himself that carried them all those miles to here. He lacked that smug smirk, foul language, and mean gaze. He was far away, from himself and this place. Somewhere far beyond that no one else but Rafael could see. And he could see it because Rafael knew it. He knew what it was like to move through the motions. Another day down. A lifetime to go. How much longer? *God, how much?*

But Rafael had no time to swell in the shift of personality when Lukka, the blonde boy, was demanding his attention.

Rafael blinked, looking up. "What?"

"Well, clearly, it's not super sonic hearing—" Lukka muttered sarcastically.

"Or mind reading!" Adelyn chimed.

"Like anyone could possibly hear or think with all the noise you lot make," Grey whispered under his breath with a subtle eye roll.

"What was that old man?" Lukka added extra loudly.

Grey sighed. Queeny poured himself another glass.

"I was *saying* since *Queeny* won't answer any of my questions," Lukka huffed and puffed, directing his razor blue eyes in the Fourth Apostles' direction before settling on Rafael. "Tell us where you're from — both location and, like, ethnically, you look Spanish, what kind of Spanish? Do you have a middle name? What's the latest blockbuster? Is Matt Damon still in? Who's topping the charts these days? What was it like dying?—"

Rafael sucked in a deep breath, trying to order the questions that just kept going in his mind. He reached his hand for the chalice that he hoped was filled with something strong, or strong enough, anything to blur the edges. He couldn't tell if the trembling he was feeling was the static crackling through his body or if it was his anxiety. He hoped it was just his anxiety, that was at least logical. He wondered if the other Apostles experienced it too.

"For fucks sake," Queeny's chalice clanked against the table. "You want him to piss in a cup too?"

"Only if he's willing." Lukka smirked.

A snort came from a woman with light brown hair sitting on the opposite side of the table.

The Apostles went around the table sharing their stories. It was part of their identity that they prided themselves in, after all, it was what birthed their power. Rafael quickly learned that Lukka and Adelyn, the last two Apostles, had died in the same bus accident that'd been derailed off a cliff, into the sea. They were dubbed the twin Apostles and fed into the image by finishing each other's sentences. Simon, the handsome middle-aged man, was a fireman in his previous life and died on the job, rescuing a family of four in a six-story building.

"He's full of shit!" Lukka chimed in. "He owned the building and burnt it down for the insurance."

Simon looked sheepish. "To be fair, I thought no one was home."

All eyes settled on Queeny, the last one left to speak besides Rafael himself. Queeny pushed absently at his food, his chalice empty for the third time. Sitting across from him, Rafael was able to notice the lettering across his knuckles. In gothic lettering the word, *HONEY,* was read back to him. As if feeling Rafael's eyes burning into his skin, Queeny looked up and dragged his hand beneath the table, keeping his secrets in the shadows.

Lukka made gunshot sounds from where he sat, slim fingers taking the shape of a gun, pointed directly at Queeny. Sloane, the brown-haired woman, swatted him. Lukka dropped his hand.

"I believe it's your turn, Rafael," The Reverend redirected the room's attention towards Rafael, but his eyes stayed glued onto Queeny whose gaze had averted back to his barely touched plate.

He sucked in a breath, trying to explain the fragments of what he could recall, the crash, the glass, the stone pillar to Edward Payson Park. But he couldn't offer them half the thrill of their own stories, which were carefully pieced together and easy to visualize like a film.

"It happens," Adelyn spoke with a melody Rafael couldn't quite pinpoint. "I got my memories back two weeks after the baptism! Everything came rushing back so suddenly it made me sick to my stomach."

Mica, the First Apostle and Earth bender, laughed. She was a petite woman with buzzed grey hair, easily the oldest of the group but she seemed just as sturdy as her own creations.

"So," Simon clapped his hands together. "Let's see it!"

Rafael felt his cheeks warm. He looked down at his hands trying to summon the static that bubbled inside of him throughout the previous day. He tried focusing, closing his eyes, wiggling his fingers, little things that might trigger his power. He pushed and strained but when he opened his eyes, he was met with eleven sets of waiting eyes. Queeny refilled his chalice for the fourth time.

"It happens!" Adelyn said again, leaning over the table to touch his hand. Her fingers were as cold as ice. "It's about calling on a memory and bringing it to the surface. The memory is attached to a feeling, the power attached to the feeling. You understand?"

"Yeah, yeah," Simon added. "And it doesn't have to be an old memory if you really got nothing in there," He tapped his finger to his own skull. "It can be something recent."

Rafael looked back down at his hands. He remembered running, the fear that came with it. The vine that traced his neck. The dread of not knowing whether Queeny was going to kill him or not. The way his breath tangled in his throat and made it impossible to breathe. He closed his eyes.

One tap, two, three. Queeny nudged him with his foot before nestling the tip of his dress shoe into the arc of Rafael's. For a moment, Rafael was sitting in the pews again with his arm pressed against Loren's. He had to force himself to focus on the hymns instead of Loren's relentless tapping. Always one tap, two, three so their eyes could meet, a small smile exchanged.

The static slipped out of him slowly like a steady stream trickling down its natural current. Queeny watched him from a safe distance, his foot the only thing keeping him in the present, ever-moving world. It happened one-by-one. Each of the Apostles watched one another, with a look of awe glistening in their wide eyes. Grey watched him with skepticism, his caterpillar eyebrows furrowed deeply until they were cemented. Simon laughed until it was cut short and he was stuck with his

mouth agape. Lukka's eyes no longer darted back and forth between the Apostles, nor did Adelyn's glisten. The room fell into an unsettling silence until it was only the two of them moving in a world where time had stopped.

Queeny leaned back into the chair while maintaining contact with a part of Rafael's body. "Not bad."

"How did you know that would work?" Rafael asked.

"I was walking back to the pavilion when I saw you with The Reverend last night. I could tell that something was different in the air so I stopped before I got caught in it too, but not before I saw him touch you," Queeny explained. "Your power isn't strong enough to extend that far. *Yet*."

Rafael's lips parted. "I can do...*more*?" He held his hands out in front of him, turning them side to side. Exactly how far could he go? Could he freeze an entire town? A stadium? A city? Could he stop a crash? A plane? Loren driving away the last time they saw each other?

The smirk came slowly, a flicker of mischievousness reflected back in Queeny's eyes. Rafael could feel adrenaline building inside of him, his own mouth curling ever-so-slightly. Queeny scooted back, sending the plate in front of him into the air just an inch.

He held a hand out for Rafael to take. Only when Queeny's fingers curled around his hand did the tip of his shoe depart and all of Loren's memory with it.

Chapter 6:

Rafael found himself losing track of time. He was beginning to believe the use of his power drained him completely because when he opened his eyes he saw a glittering blanket of stars above him. Instinctively, his finger went up and traced the Big Dipper as he had done with Loren time and time again. He anticipated Loren's finger appearing in his peripheral vision, their fingers attracting and pulling away like two magnets. Always so close to touching. He waited a second, two, three, and kept counting until his vision blurred and he felt tears trickling down the sides of his face.

The bed of the truck dipped hard. Rafael dropped his hand, pushing himself into a seated position where Queeny's dark silhouette came clambering in. He paused, mid-movement. "Sorry. Did I wake you?"

"Um, no, no," Rafael wiped away the tears from his eyes. He wasn't sure how much Queeny could see in the dim lighting. Behind him, he saw a small bundle of fire going a few feet away. "I was up."

Queeny nodded as he hauled his body in. Rafael took a moment to look around. There were two small duffle bags and half a dozen random blankets. Queeny rummaged through the garments until he found a light jacket and dug through the pockets, fishing out a small lighter.

"Remind me to get more," He muttered, a cigarette hanging from the tips of his mouth. He clicked the lighter one, two, three times before it finally caught. Rafael watched the tip glow, a steady stream of smoke tumbled out of his mouth and sailed away in the air. "Want one?"

Rafael scratched the dry spot on his hand. He'd never wanted to start smoking cigarettes, but he needed something to do with his hands when he got nervous. Loren had that effect on him

sometimes. Maybe most times. He always had a pack in the glove compartment and Rafael smoked through them faster than either of them liked to admit, or notice, for that matter.

"Sure." He found himself saying, intertwining his fingers together before letting out a symphony of cracks.

Queeny waved him over as he climbed back out of the bed of the truck and walked back towards the fire. Rafael followed suit, keeping a blanket wrapped around his shoulders. As he approached the area of light, he noticed newspaper clippings littered on the floor, several cigarette butts, and an empty can of pinto beans.

"Sit." Queeny told him, digging through a half-full carton of cigarettes. There was one log before the fire. He sat, gripping the blanket around him a little tighter. In the distance he could see the prickly silhouette of blue spruces. If he looked behind him he'd see an empty road that stretched for miles and miles.

"Where are we?" Rafael asked as Queeny handed him a cigarette and lighter. He flicked it six times before his companion swiped it from his hands, pressed on the switch a little harder at shorter intervals; he tried twice before Rafael's cigarette was lit.

"Take your pick," He tossed the lighter off to the side where it landed on top of a manila envelope with more newspaper clippings. "Walk forward fifteen paces you're in Vermont, walk back fifteen paces you're in New Hampshire."

Rafael pulled on the cigarette, letting the smoke sit in his mouth for a moment before he took it in and released it back out. He tried to watch the smoke but it tangled with the fire and he lost it as it

reached out towards the sky, dissipated by the wind. “The Apostles seemed surprised to see you earlier.”

Queeny shrugged his shoulders. “God might’ve believed in me, but that doesn’t mean I have to devote myself to him like the others do.”

“Didn’t you say that this power would make you believe in anything?”

“To an extent I do,” Queen explained. “I believe that The Reverend was led to me and given the tools to resurrect me. But a religion is still a religion. They say God is merciful, but I think we know better than that.”

Rafael clenched his jaw, flicking the ash off his cigarette. The little flecks settled on his knee. He brushed them away and they left a stroke of grey and black charcoal. He’d be lying if he said he didn’t agree too. Away from the hopeful promise of the Church, Rafael let the high drift away and looked at the reality of the situation; his situation. What good was it to do good to others when it resulted in suffering? Suffering came in the shape of decrepit old age, the deteriorating of the human body, the crumbling of the mind. His abuela couldn’t remember who he even was at the end. His mother was poked and prodded day by day, weaker and weaker by the minute. And Loren?

Rafael tried not to focus on it. Which wasn’t too difficult considering the shoddiness of his memory anyways. Despite Adelyn’s encouragement, Rafael wondered if he’d ever remember all his memories again. Or if this was a side effect of the coma or of his rebirth.

He turned his attention to the newspaper clippings all around them. He couldn’t tell what was filler for the fire or personal reading pleasure. He picked up one that was untouched, still in its whole form with three columns beneath a grayscale picture of a house he did not recognize behind yellow

caution tape. "NYT Best Selling Author of '*There's A Killer Under Your Bed: Tips and Tricks to Staying Alive,*' Julie Tompkins and 6-year-old daughter, latest victim in the pursuit of The Handmaiden Killer."

Queeny fiddled with the cigarette carton again. There was a bag near his foot, one that he presumed held all the papers littering the floor. He could see the tip of a book, battered and bruised, with hundreds of transparent flags pressed between the pages. Rafael looked among the other clippings, noticing the repetition, the murders, maps with red marks that signified all the victims long gone over the last seven years. Three murders a year, twenty-one families.

Rafael reached for the map with Queeny's thick, sloppy handwriting written in the margins with dates and last names. He saw the *Marshes' June '09* at the bottom of the list, he remembered hearing that name in the hospital. His eyes trailed over the topographical map, its design more color-based than a traditional map with all its busy lettering and highway routes. He didn't need them anyways to find home. His mind wrote out the small italicized letters of East Deering just slightly above Portland. Further above a sloppy star marked the *Johnsons March '05* in Augusta, the *O'Connolly's June '05* in Wells.

"I remember this," Rafael said quietly, his fingers tracing over the O'Connolly family's name. "I was sitting in the hospital waiting room while my mother was being diagnosed."

Queeny hummed, lighting another cigarette and leaving it between his fingertips to burn.

"It was the first time I noticed just how sick she was," Ash was building up on his own cigarette, crumbling apart and landing with a hard thud onto the map. Rafael blew it away into the

dirt. “She said it could be worse,” Rafael scoffed, feeling his throat tighten remembering his mother. “It could’ve been us on the TV.”

“No,” Queeny said with a tightness in his voice, a clench of his jaw. “It couldn’t have.”

He supposed Queeny was right. In the beginning, the trends weren’t obvious. All of the women and daughters killed died of heart attacks and aneurysms. All relatively young. Odd, yes. But not many people thought much about it. It wasn’t until the third or fourth murder when bible scriptures had been left behind that people began to catch on. After that, the name stuck. *The Handmaiden Killer* all of his victims were single-mothers and their daughters, never older than pre-teens. When the murder in Augusta happened, a girl in his freshman English course moved out West where it was safe. Then, three months later, the murder in Wells happened and three more girls moved. Even Sydney, with her high-school sweetheart parents, started to get antsy.

“We have to leave,” She had said, pacing the length of his room over and over again. “It’s only a matter of time before he hits Portland.”

“What makes you think he’d want to kill *you*?” Loren was fiddling with a faded Rubix cube that Rafael had gotten as a toddler. Most of the square stickers had been peeled off. It was a few weeks before he started coming around less, back when he still tolerated Sydney.

“He could kill *any* of us is the point. *You* because you’re always off on your own and Rafael because his mother’s sick and he’s all alone—”

“He’s not alone—”

“*The point!*” Sydney spun around, exasperated. “He could change his mind and come after either of you too.”

"And not be interested in women anymore?" Rafael asked absently.

"Yeah because *that's* likely." Loren muttered.

He felt a sharp sting between his fingers and gasped. The cigarette butt fell onto the ground with a soft thud, its coiled edges fading away as Rafael returned to the present. He felt his stomach churning as he placed himself back in front of the fire, amidst the papers and murders, in Queeny's deafening silence. What made someone obsessively follow something so cruel and gruesome?

"Why do you have all of this?" Rafael finally asked.

"Light reading."

"You have dozens of these." He leaned over, sifting through the organized mess. He noticed now that they were all laid out in chronological order from every newspaper outlet along the East Coast from small local papers to the big shots. He tried to make out Queeny's annotations but they were written tightly in a thick Sharpie marker between narrow columns.

"The man's been busy, lots to read." He lit another cigarette. Its tip Hell-fire red.

Rafael shifted in his seat, feeling the static come alive in him again as the beat of his heart felt a little more present. He noticed the static pressing down on his chest before trickling down to his fingertips. He looked towards the truck with its caked tires, rusty rims, and scratch all over. He heard Simon's voice in the back of his head, *Queeny's home!* He thought of the Apostles stories, their deepest and darkest truths, what made them sinners. Everyone but Queeny.

"Where do you go when you leave the Church?" Rafael found himself asking.

Queeny turned his attention away from the fire to him. "What?" It was not a question, but a demand, *try that again.*

"Where do you go?" Rafael repeated, fingers curling into the limp paper in his hands.

"You think I'm a killer?" There was a hint of amusement in his tone.

"You have a gun." He remembered how it hung loosely between his fingertips, like it was something he used so freely.

"So does most of America, so what?" Queeny scoffed. "But if you *really* want to know where I've been, these last three months I've been with you."

Rafael's lips parted as his brows rumpled. Queeny shifted, staring at the flames as he remembered. Words fell into place, painting a perfect image. "The first day I came to town, I followed you to an auto shop. You were driving that Civic. It just needed a cap, all the freon was leaking out from it. Then you took it back to the Deguizes' and sat there in the driveway for a few minutes. I could tell the AC was pumping now because your hair was moving, and then all of a sudden you got out of the car, slammed the hood up and tossed the cap."

"You *followed* me? For how long?"

"I don't know—"

"*How long?*" Rafael stood up abruptly, maps, newspapers, and blanket be damned.

"After." Queeny answered. There had only been one way Rafael had marked time. Before and After Loren. But now, he supposed, there was a new way.

Rafael let out a shuddering breath, he sat back down feeling his legs grow weak.

"I couldn't tell you how much of the Church's bullshit I believe in, but all I know is that for six years there was radio silence. The Reverend feared that the Church's connection to Him had been severed and..." Queeny's voice wavered. "He believed I was to blame for that. So, when God had finally

given him a name after all that time, The Reverend wanted me to be the one who was there for you, with you, for your rebirth. It's an honor to be chosen as a guardian and in all my time in the Church, it wasn't something I had ever wanted."

"What changed?"

The flames flickered, casting sharp shadows over Queeny's face. He laughed, a short, airy sound. "All God and this world had ever done was *take* and for once, I wanted to be the one to do it."

Rafael's lips parted. He looked through the fire, trying to place himself back in the driver's seat of Loren's car. He kept driving in circles through town, on the highway, going nowhere in particular. He was just going, trying to get away from Loren, but always finding his way right back to him.

"What do you mean?" Rafael frowned. "Were you there when the accident happened?"

"No. No, I got there afterwards. The Reverend called me and told me it was happening and I drove all throughout town looking for you and when I finally found you. I..." Queeny trailed off, the cigarette rolling between his clumsy fingers. His eyes were far away when Rafael looked up. A scowl reappeared on his own face.

"You what?" Rafael pressed a little impatiently.

Queeny's brows furrowed as placed himself in the present. He took the cigarette into his mouth, pulling long and hard. "I was going to leave you there. You see, even though you were chosen, there's still a process to follow to bring you back. The Reverend calls it the Guidance. It's why we're in comas afterwards, why we lose some of our memories. We have to be led back properly. If you're not guided, you're just stuck in that in-between world."

Rafael remembered the road where he and Queeny met, the horizon and the wheat. Would he choose to live or die? Go forward or backward?

"Why didn't you?" Rafael asked, his eyes burning with rage, disbelief, sorrow. Or maybe it was just the smoke from the fire that was aiming straight at him.

"Because I saw you," Queeny's eyes glistened. "*Dead.* You had glass straight through your throat," Rafael grimaced, his hand reaching for the phantom shard. He willed his mind to recreate it, to feel it again, but all he felt was the bob of his Adam's apple, his pulse throbbing. "And I thought, *he's just a boy.* I couldn't let you die. I couldn't let you be stuck in that in-between, in that unknown. As angry as I was at the Church, at The Reverend, at the world. I just... I couldn't do it. I couldn't leave you. So I helped bring you back."

Rafael's face softened. He tried to imagine the scene, how he must have looked. There must've been blood everywhere, his body riddled with dozens upon dozens of shards before he lost consciousness and traded light for eternal darkness. He remembered it, remembered the way time slowed. He could have counted every single shard if he wanted to. He let out a breath, shaking his head trying to rid himself of the thought.

"What changed?" Rafael asked again.

Queeny puffed his chest, letting out a long breath that pushed the fire back. "I've spent my entire life ignoring orders and things never panned out. I think I was just scared of it happening again and I couldn't sacrifice another person to my selfish mistakes."

Rafael nodded slowly, understanding. He thought of his own mistakes as he stared into the crackling fire. There was a flicker in his mind at the same moment a crackling pop flew into the air and

dissipated before it hit the ground. He could see Loren on the ground, staring up at him. His eyes were dark and filled with something like hatred.

He forced himself to sit up, but he couldn't look up yet. Queeny sent yet another cigarette past the fire onto the ground. Rafael kept his eyes trained on the litter-covered ground, all the makings of a killer staring him in the eye. Was this what The Reverend meant when he said Rafael didn't listen, that he wasn't ready to accept the truth? Was this his truth, that he caused Loren's death? There was a hitch in his breath.

He tried to run his hands up and down his arms, but they were cemented to his skin. The only movement he could muster was to curl his fingers in, bury them deep until he bled. His lungs began to expand, larger and larger until all the breath and all of the smoke nestled deep inside the tunnels of his body and stayed there until it hurt so much that his eyes began to water. The fire was just a blur of orange, yellow, red, and grey. He had tried, hadn't he? He tried to make Loren stay, tried to make him talk, what more was he supposed to do?

He tried to breathe, but his breath came tumbling out uncontrollably, ragged and inconsistent until he was doubling over in pain. The static flurried inside of him, running wildly through his arms and down his legs.

"Raf?" Queeny's voice was somewhere distant, somewhere a lot farther from here.

"I can't—" Rafael sobbed. "I can't, I can't—"

"You can't what?" The voice was soft and smooth just the way he remembered it. "Raf, look at me. Please."

Loren's hand was on the small of his back. They were sitting on the floor of the boys bathroom that smelled of urine and bleach. It was the middle of the day, they should have been in English. Rafael's face was drenched with tears, snot ran down his top lip. All he could manage was the same repetition of words, *I can't, I can't.*

He remembered Loren kicking Sydney out. What was it he said? "Fuck off." That's right, because Rafael would never have the balls to tell her that. But Loren didn't care. He didn't care about anyone else but Rafael.

"Here," Loren said, pushing Rafael's curls back from his damp forehead. He had a thick stack of wet paper towels sitting on the side of his knee. He peeled back a few with one hand; the other kept Rafael's hair back. He draped the cool cloth along his hairline. Rafael let out a soft breath of relief. "Feels better right?"

Rafael nodded. A tear dropped onto his leg. The paper towels soaked through Loren's khakis. He'd spend the rest of the afternoon waiting for that one spot to dry. "I'm sorry." Rafael cried.

"For what?" Loren smiled at him, stroking the sides of his face, wiping away the tears with the side of his thumb. He didn't have dark eyes like Rafael did, but light muddy eyes that shone dozens of colors when the sun hit them. Sometimes green. Sometimes grey. Sometimes golden. They were grey now under the fluorescent lighting.

Rafael wanted to say for being himself, for making a scene, for being a burden, but all he could say was, "Your khakis are wet."

Loren tried to suppress his laughter, but his lips couldn't manage. He pressed the back of his hands to his lips, his eyes growing small and watery. Watching him laugh, Rafael started too, until his lungs didn't hurt from pain but from pure happiness.

They collapsed into each other, leaning on each other for support, laughing until their bellies begged them to stop. Loren was practically folded over in Rafael's lap, he came up for air, eyes sparkling with gold.

"Told you I could always make you laugh." Loren sat with his back pressed to the wall. There was a foot of space to the right of him, but he nestled into Rafael's side so the whole left side of his body pressed against the right of Rafael's. It wasn't humanly possible to fit this perfectly against someone else.

"Thank you." Rafael said softly, his voice hoarse from all the crying.

"For what?" Loren asked, looking down the end of his pointy nose.

"Everything." Rafael leaned his head against his shoulder, taking one deep inhale until it didn't smell like urine and bleach but of... *Lavender?*

Rafael breathed in again, taking in the sweet floral scent of lavender mixed with something else he couldn't identify. He heard his name again and again. He felt a hand on his arm, heavier than Loren's soft touch.

"Rafael?" Queeny stood over him. Rafael peeled his eyes open. He was flat against the ground with Queeny hovering over him, the fire illuminated the right side of his face like a steady lightbulb.

Rafael looked away from him, pushing his head back to see a thick blanket of floras blanketing his upper body. There were three different types of plant-life, closest to him, a long purple tail that

definitely smelled of lavender. He took another inhale wanting to savor the sweet smell. Across his stomach there were small little beads of white, yellow star shaped flowers drooping heavily to its side. Another inhale. Another sweet scent that he couldn't identify. By his arm an abundance of wrinkly green leaves drifted a citrus scent that was overpowered by the other two. Soon enough the tension in his face began to seep away. With every breath Rafael was able to inhale a little longer, exhale a little slower.

It took a few heartbeats, but soon the glow began to shift. He heard a loud pop above him shooting out of the fire.

"Is that better?" Queeny asked.

Rafael nodded slowly. "What is all of this?"

"Lavender for the limbic system with ylang-ylang and bergamot to compliment it." Queeny pointed to each one. "They lower anxiety levels."

He held out a hand for Rafael, who let his companion lift him off the ground as the stems fell away from him, curling themselves into tight little ball-like roots, back to the earth where they belonged. Rafael stood marveling at the way so much life could be brought and taken away so soon. Queeny let go of Rafael's hand when he felt the young man settle on his own two feet.

"What are we doing here?" Rafael asked quietly, staring at the fire instead of the newspaper clippings. Queeny wasn't a killer. He couldn't be.

"Making change," Queeny answered simply, leaning down to pick up each clipping one by one until the ground was clear, ridden of the world's true horrors. "Giving the world a miracle."

Chapter 7:

The sun was high in the sky when Rafael woke again. His body felt dreary from his middle of the night episode. The truck was parked in the middle of a burnt, desolate forest. It was the smell of smoke that stirred Rafael from his slumber in the first place. He had no recollection of clambering back into the bed of the truck, let alone the passenger seat. And yet, his head was pressed against the door's frame, and the same blanket he had slept with before was draped over his torso.

"There's breakfast for you." Queeny said through a loud slurp of coffee from outside of the truck. He rounded the vehicle, putting himself in Rafael's line of vision. At some point he'd changed out of the white button up he'd been wearing and replaced it with a red flannel, rolled up past the elbows, and a white undershirt that peaked out of the collar. To say that this man was the epitome of lumberjack was an understatement; it almost made Rafael laugh.

And there it was. A cup of coffee in the cup holder and another white paper bag sitting on the dashboard. Rafael reached for it, peering inside to see another Boston creme.

"How nutritionally balanced."

"Thank you. I tried. Now hurry up, I want to show you something."

Rafael left the donut behind, cradling the cup of coffee between two hands as he stepped out of the truck. His foot sank into a deep pile of ash that he now noticed blanketed the entire forest. He looked up where tall towers of trees should have been, but there was nothing but a cloudy grey sky. Charcoaled skeleton trees stretched for miles and miles. He could see through the forest as far as his eye could reach.

"Forest fire?"

Queeny hummed his confirmation, walking through the forest with a bounce in his step. He talked as he walked, more often with coffee in his mouth and a cigarette between his fingers.

"Started in Amy's Park late in the night from a bonfire gone out of control," Queeny started. "It would've been contained if the Parks department kept up with their prescribed burns, which they hadn't in nearly two years. So everything in here kept collecting and, well, look at what we've got." He explained that the fires kept spreading all the way up towards Bolton's Landing, New York, where they currently were, towards Lake George. It had only stopped there because of the large body of water that prevented it from spreading. It was there that the firemen were able to calm it until it was almost nothing. It took days and it would take years and years for the forest to look a semblance of what it once was.

"Or so they think." Queeny turned on his heel with a smug smile spread across his lips. Their eyes met and Rafael couldn't help the breath of a laugh that escaped his lips.

"No way," He said with a tinge of disbelief. "It's too much. It's—"

"*Impossible?*" Queeny shrugged his broad shoulders, swinging his head side to side, taking all of the destruction in. "It doesn't always have to be, you know."

Rafael twirled the cup of coffee between his hands. He had spent most of his life counting out all the things he considered to be impossible. When he was a kid, it used to be things like having a father, for his mother to not feel so alone. As he grew older, it became bigger things like his mother going into remission. Or Loren liking him back. The kinds of things that he tried to negotiate with

God about. Only one of them came true, but he was convinced it was only to torture him in the end. All good things came with a price. Even miracles.

"What's the point?" Rafael asked.

"We can't change the past," Queeny said, eyes scanning the broken treetops. "But in instances like this, it feels pretty damn close."

Rafael felt an involuntary smile tug at his lips. He'd seen what Queeny was capable of, but still. He craned his neck back. This was too vast of a space. The amount of power it would take to perform such a thing. He knew the stories of the way Noah parted the seas and Jesus healed the blind at birth. But, they weren't factual. They were stories passed down hundreds and hundreds of thousands of years. Everyone knew how a message got distorted through a simple five minute game of telephone. He'd been a believer once, in one way or another. He was trying to believe in the Church of Light, but this? This was too much. There was no greater power that could bring the entire forest back.

Right?

"I told you I grew a forest during my coma," Queeny handed him his cup of coffee before planting himself across from Rafael. They were three feet apart. "Now I can show you."

Rafael was hesitant. He knew what they could do was real, but there had to be limits and surely this was way past the limits of logic. All of it was. He'd been drowning in a world of unknowability for too long. The Diocese had tried to guide him throughout the years, using his mother's unyielding faith to ease him into it, but he could never truly give himself over to it. He had too many questions, too much doubt. He needed facts, something reasonable, something scientific. And yet, here the Church

of Light was, with its belief in God and the greater good, but with something the Diocese lacked. Knowledge that was tangible, and power. Actual power.

"Time it." Queeny dug a stopwatch out of his pocket, throwing it across the clearing where Rafael caught it against the side of his cup.

He looked at him with disbelief. "Are you serious?"

"Very. Now, get a move on. Times a' tickin'!" Queeny rubbed his hands together.

Rafael puffed his chest, shaking his head. This was ridiculous, was what he wanted to say, but instead he placed both cups on the ground. His thumb hovered over the start button. "Ready?"

"Ready."

Time started, the numbers marking each millisecond that passed. Rafael looked up, waiting for something to happen. There was a part of him that wanted this to fail just so he could tell Queeny that he was wrong, that they weren't Apostles who create miracles like this. They were just people. People who happened to be brought back to life by something unfathomable.

Why him? The question sprouted in his mind. He willed it away and focused on something else just as damning.

Hope.

There was a part of him that wanted this to be real, a part of him that wanted to believe that there actually is a high power and all those years praying weren't a waste. He wanted his mother to be right, because if she was, she was in Heaven, and if there was a Heaven, there was a way to get back to Loren.

Queeny's palms faced not upward towards the sky like the statue of Adelyn had been, but towards the ground. As Rafael expected, a small patch of grass unfurled out of the thick mound of ash. He expected the small radius around them to fill with life, a small bundle of flowers here and there. He expected lavender, bergamot, and ylang-ylang — if this was even their natural habitat, but none of this was natural, so Mother-Nature be damned. But instead, all of it came back.

It started like a wave pushing towards the shore. One foot after another, the grass slowly reappeared. The ash sank deep into the earth until it was all gone, buried for good, until ash became dirt that became grass. Every few inches or so the yellow heads of wild dandelions appeared before they, too, shifted to their white flurry counterparts, poised to be blown away with a child's wish. All of the charcoaled trees withered away until they were nothing and the entire forest was gone and nothing but an open field surrounded them. Then—

A loud break in the dirt, trunks of trees breached the surface, clawing their way out of the mounds of dirt like desperate hands clutching onto whatever was close by, praying for their lives. They darted towards the sky, branches expanding all around them until a canopy of leaves unraveled and blocked the sun from the sky. Rafael hung his head back, watching as the forest filled and the horizon became nothing but life in the wake of devastation.

His senses were overwhelmed. There was the sour smell of grass stinging his nostrils making him want to sneeze. He didn't know how it was possible, but life around him returned. The buzz of a bee returning to a bundle of flowers, the whizz of a dragonfly, the flapping of wings somewhere overhead. He watched the soft bounce of a tree above him as little blue jays hopped from branch to branch. The forest kept expanding and growing until Rafael couldn't see even a sliver of the sky above

them anymore. When he looked down at his feet, daisies brushed against the sides of his shoes. There were tears in his eyes.

Queeny stood before him, a line of trees growing on either side of him without so much as a bead of sweat on his hairline. When he dropped his hands, Rafael's finger stopped the timer. He didn't want to look down because he knew it would tell him that six minutes had passed and days of damage were reversed, regrown, reborn.

Chapter 8:

In the Book of Job it is written, “It seems impossible until it is done.” Rafael remembered those words the day his mother’s coffin was lowered into its grave. It took a year and four months for the cancer to take her away definitely and by the time it did he was...relieved. A secret that he had only whispered in the dead of night sleeping across from Loren.

“I thought it would never end.” Rafael admitted. What no one in their community seemed to realize was that it was hard for him to watch his mother disintegrate, day in and day out, until she was unrecognizable. Those days seemed like forever and all he wanted was for her to let go, give in, and be free.

He remembered those words today. Impossibility meant something different now. Impossibility was now a reality. He watched Queeny transform the world in its most natural form, reshape and remold it into something unspeakable and he made it look so... *Easy*.

The truck waited for them where they had left it, covered in moss that Queeny peeled away with a flicker of the hand. The drive back, though the same amount of hours, breezed by. As they made their way back to Rhode Island and the Church of Light, there was something burning alive inside of Rafael now. At first he thought it was the static, fizzling away inside of him, wanting him to call upon it to do something as incredible as what he’d just witnessed. He didn’t ponder how he could or question the logistics or limitations of what he could do, only that he could do something because he had power, too. It made him hungry. Hungry for change. Hungry for hope.

The feeling was intoxicating. He spent his entire life fearing change because of what that meant. His mother’s faith didn’t welcome change— at least not in the way that he needed to. Him

coming out would've been a slow tortue. It would've been polite smiles through gritted teeth. It would've been lingering stares and whispers. Of daily "I'll pray for you" promises as if that would fix him. Their isolated little town of East Deering didn't understand, not even when petitions were going around in May for the state to allow same-sex marriage. He couldn't be hopeful when everyone in his neighborhood refused to sign for it.

He couldn't change his town, but that didn't mean everything was impossible and even if it seemed like it, he didn't have to be afraid. When they returned to the Church of Light, The Reverend swept them into his arms and led them inside. He knew what it meant to send Rafael with Queeny, he knew by the childish, eager smile on his lips that he was ready to give himself wholeheartedly. All that was left for Rafael was to find his path, to figure out how it was that he could make change.

When they returned, Evie led him through the Church and into the basement where he traded his outside clothes for the Church's baptism attire. He'd been two months old when he was first baptized, learning very quickly that all humans were born with sin. Some more than most. He wondered if his mother realized just how much sin he'd been born with.

He stood before a full length mirror, attempting to focus on the intricate floral details that twisted and turned along the thick golden frame, but his eyes stubbornly found their way back to his appearance. He'd caught glimpses of himself in the truck's window, but this was different. He wasn't just an opaque reflection against glass now, but undoubtedly solid and human.

He met his own gaze in the reflection, feeling his breath collect in the middle of his throat. He saw his mother's dark eyes and her rounded nose. She always said she'd been grateful that he turned out

looking more like her than his father. He wasn't a bad man, she'd tell him on those rare occasions he came up, but he wasn't good.

"But you *mijo* you are good."

He wondered if she still thought that after all he kept from her. He had tried to change, hadn't he? He tried to do the things that she wanted from him. He went to Church every week even after she died, took up the Youth Boy's Group, prayed every night, got good grades in school, tried to be good to Sydney as much as he possibly could. And yet, all of it wasn't enough. He was still a sinner.

He wondered if, at the very least, his mother could be proud. He'd been given a second chance, hadn't he? To undo his sins, to make amends. Maybe this time he could actually change. He could actually be what she wanted him to. Someone who didn't have to try so hard to fix all the broken things. Someone who could love a girl like Sydney.

His fingers found the collar of his shirt that felt awfully close to his neck. He tugged at it, noticing all the ways he had changed. He was skinnier than before. His eyes didn't look as tired as he expected them to. His skin was not as grey as it had been since the months after Loren's death, but rather, a nice golden-brown, sun-kissed, heavenly. And despite it all, he still couldn't find it in his heart to love Sydney. To love a girl. Not when he'd been conditioned to believe he'd live a life of isolation. To love a boy meant losing his family, losing his religion, to losing a community. How could it be any different here?

"Here, let me help," Tears blurred Rafael's vision. His hands had been fiddling with the middle button of his dress shirt when Queeny stepped into the room, dressed in the same attire. For once, his sleeves were not rolled past the elbows but clipped at the wrists. The only ink Rafael could see was the

star etched into his thumb and *HONEY* written across his knuckles. Queeny blocked Rafael's reflection with his large body. This close, he could smell the woods, ingrained in Queeny's scent; it was like he was standing in the forest clearing all over again. Queeny's fingers straightened out the collar of Rafael's shirt, tugging on it roughly to keep it from bending to the wrong side. "That's better."

"What was it like?" Rafael asked, his voice shaking a little. He could feel his fingers trembling at his sides. He itched for something to hold, a cigarette, a drink, anything to blur the edges, to keep him calm.

Queeny took a step back, crossing his arms over his chest. He let out a heavy breath, tilting his head side to side. "Peaceful."

"I'm afraid." Rafael admitted.

"Of what?"

"Baptisms are meant to represent new beginnings, to cleanse the soul of all the sins we've created. What if I'm not ready to let go of that yet?" He dropped his eyes, running a thumb along the side of his wrist, trying to recreate Loren's touch. "What if I'm never ready to let go?"

"The things that matter never leave us," Queeny said quietly. "Even when we want them to."

There was an understanding when their eyes met, of all the things lost and taken away far too soon. Rafael didn't know how he knew this, but he could see the sorrow in Queeny's eyes. The darkness of a past that was unknown to him, in the same way that Rafael's past had a hold on him. They were all born sinners, found new sins along the way, and had been brought back because of them. That's what Queeny said, right? They picked sinners.

When he was ready, Queeny led him through another door that spit them out into an all-glass room with a pool at its center. An angelic light poured in overhead. Where the light's source was, Rafael couldn't tell, he couldn't see anything through the glass walls. All of the Apostles gathered around the pool. Adelyn watched him with a soft smile as Queeny led him towards The Reverend, who was dressed in all black attire. As they stepped closer, he noticed that The Reverend's suit was no longer one made of linen or cotton, but of the finest silk. He held out an aged hand that Rafael took, cold fingers intertwining with Rafael's.

They stood across from one another; Queeny falling into line with the other Apostles that watched quietly.

"This is the marking of a new beginning," The Reverend spoke. "Not just for you, but for all of us made to feel different and unworthy. We have been reunited in this new life by the grace of God and His mercy. Today, Rafael, you stand not before us, but before God. All He asks of you is to come to him eagerly, earnestly, with an open heart and open mind as He has done for you."

Awashed beneath the easy light, Rafael felt loose. There was no doubt, no tightness of his chest. He was a baby again, held carefully in the hands of a higher power, filled with the promise of a better tomorrow, a better future. All he had to do was *give in.*

"Do not be afraid, Rafael," The Reverend leaned in, his voice sounding less like his own, and more like Rafael's mother's voice. "Do not be discouraged. Through your acceptance of the past He will reward you for all that you sacrificed."

Just give in.

The Reverend led Rafael towards the steps in the water where Evie stood, knee-deep, waiting for him with open arms. He traded one set of hands for another and let them lead him in until the water reached his waist. The entire time Evie kept her eyes on him. In the light, her eyes changed from black to brown to green to grey. He tried to understand it, but before he could she was pulling him back into the water with a strength he didn't think she had. His arms floated over his head as his body dropped deeper into the pool, until Rafael was Christ of the Abyss himself. He didn't know how much distance grew between him and the surface, but he didn't care. He was floating and all he could hear was the water sloshing, the hum of the static that began to bubble inside of him, not uncontrollably, but in harmony with the beat of his heart. His eyes were shut, but where he expected darkness to flood his vision, his entire world was alight.

He expected all of his memories of Loren to wash away the moment his head went under. After all, that was his damnation, wasn't it? He could feel Loren's hands on his wrists, leading him to the woods, the creek moving slowly as Rafael sank deeper and deeper into the pool. He remembered the cigarette that passed between their hands, how much they tried not to let their fingers brush longer than they needed to. Loren led him down to the water where they discarded their dress shoes, their slacks, their white button ups to sit in the low-rise water like they were kids sitting in a kiddy pool on a hot summer day.

Loren was pointing with the cigarette towards a splash in the water where a fish treaded the surface. The light had hit him so his skin was glowy, the back of his hair was damp. They were sitting across from each other, their legs tangled beneath the water. They'd sat this way for years and it never

meant anything. Maybe Rafael was wrong. Maybe it meant everything and that's why he leaned forward and cradled Loren's face between his hands and kissed him.

He didn't taste like cheap discount store lip-gloss or apple cider, he tasted like the cigarette, familiar and addictive and Rafael never wanted to come back up for air. In just one motion everything in the world had aligned and made sense. Rafael had never felt safer with anyone else. He never should have let Loren go.

Rafael felt hands on his body as he was being lifted up. He wanted to protest, to keep on sinking, to be with Loren but his face was breaching the surface. He gasped for breath. Evie had her hand on the small of his back to steady him. The water dripped down Rafael's face, mixed with salty tears. Even still, out of the water he expected Loren to be gone, but he felt his presence all over his body. Only this time it didn't weigh him down as it had in the past.

"You're not here because you loved Loren," The Reverend broke the silence. Rafael turned towards him. The Reverend looked at him with sad grey eyes. "That's what you're thinking isn't it?"

"What else could I be here for?"

"Why'd you crash the car?"

He tried to remember those final moments between the glass shattering and driving through the darkness head on, with only the headlights slicing through it. But he couldn't. He couldn't remember what he felt, couldn't remember anything other than the glass shattering.

The Reverend hummed a soft little melody, the corners of his mouth upturned. "That's okay, in due time you'll remember," He held a hand out for Rafael to take. "After all, what is this new life if not to make amends with the past?"

Rafael looked from The Reverend's hands to his face. He wanted to hesitate, but instead he felt a pull towards the dark-cloaked man, to his easy smile and bright grey eyes. As Rafael made his way towards him, the water that had hugged him washed away all the sins and worries that had weighed him down all those years. He imagined his mother's proud smile and glistening eyes. He imagined Loren waiting for him outside by the edge of the woods, long before they became lost and broken. For a moment, his mother's pride and Loren's forgiveness seemed possible and he relished in it. It was enough to make him believe in anything, in a better tomorrow, in a better future. That was the true power of moving forward.

Chapter 9:

In the dead of night, a cicada cries unrelentingly. As Rafael made his way through the gardens, he counted in seconds, pausing at twelve before the briefest interval of silence. The ugly creature paused to catch its breath. Rafael was beginning to find his days filled with noise and people and all too many questions. At first he didn't mind, he anticipated it. He was an Apostle anticipated by God after a long dry spell. The Apostles had questions. More particularly, one: *why him?*

He asked himself the same thing.

If his rebirth had nothing to do with loving Loren, what else could there be?

Within that moment of silence, Rafael stopped walking, reaching the marking between the garden and the woods. If he looked back towards the Church, which was now a quarter of its size from the large distance he crossed, he'd see the silhouette of small houses signifying the rest of civilization. He'd notice the circular perimeter of the woods that surrounded them. He'd see the rectangular shape of Queeny's truck and a few other rusty-vehicles that he hadn't seen move since his arrival. But he wasn't looking to the past, he was looking forward. Darkness waited, ready to consume him.

Over the last three nights he tossed and turned, thinking of nothing and everything in particular. Once he dreamt of Loren. They were sitting in the Civic on top of a hill just outside of East Deering with soupy cups of ice cream and plastic spoons that scraped the bottom of paper cups. But more often than not, he dreamt of nothing. He had hoped his memories would come flooding back, but he was still just as patchy as he was a week ago waking up in the hospital bed. It didn't help that each Apostle's power relied on memory.

There were moments where Rafael recalled a sliver of a memory, things like the way Loren used to scrunch his nose and purse his lips when he didn't want to laugh at something Rafael said. They were brief, split-second memories. Details that he had never realized he noticed. He rewound them like a tape in his mind, clinging to them like his life depended on it. There were, too, things that came to him in flashes. Things that he was beginning to realize he didn't want to remember. A crackling fire, someone cheering his name. Loren in the middle of the night, beneath the glistening stars and the burning hot lamppost, drenched in river-water. They went as quickly as they came, but he wondered how much of it was out of his own volition. It was easier to move forward when the past wasn't dragging him back.

Since the forest fire and his baptism, his days with Queeny were becoming non-existent. He knew that Queeny didn't mix well with the Apostles, but there was something in him that hoped it'd be different this time. After all, didn't Queeny say something about this, him, was different? Instead, he spent one day with Adelyn. Another with Simon. Another with Lukka. Queeny didn't owe him anything, let alone his time, especially after he wasted so much of it. All Queeny had to do was resurrect him and drop him off. Mission complete.

But even with Adelyn's kind smile and Lukka's neurotic energy and Simon's encouragement, Rafael couldn't tap into his power. There was no real knowing just how much he could be capable of until he *did something*, but he knew it was nowhere near what the rest of the Apostles were capable of. He couldn't control the weather like Sloane could, or detect lies like Thomas could — Rafael refused to go to the confessions box for this reason — he couldn't teleport anywhere in the world like Lukka could. It seemed, to him, that all of the Apostles had found their purpose within their community

whether it be through structure (Mica), agriculture (Queeny), or healing (Grey). What good could Rafael possibly do with *stopping time?*

The truth was, he was a little embarrassed. He felt useless and it was those thoughts that kept him tripped up every time he was with the Apostles. They all seemed so *sure* about everything.

"It's okay, you know," Simon had made it a habit of finding Rafael everyday and reminding him of this. "It'll take some time, but hey, time's all you have now, huh?"

Rafael forced a smile.

"Just focus on recent memories and you'll get the hang of it in no time, alright?"

He couldn't help but think of his time on the road with Queeny, the bag of donuts in the truck. The cup of coffee and the granulated sugar against his tongue. The easy laughter that passed between them. He thought of the come down from his panic attack, the scent of lavender, ylang-ylang, and bergamot.

No. He couldn't possibly use that.

But now, standing before the darkness... He could at least *try* to, right?

With a nervous exhale, Rafael held his hand out towards empty woods. The cicadas' chattering was loud in his ears, but he focused on it. As he listened, he could hear when one started and where another began, like two composers trying to find their sound. Between their pause Rafael let his eyes flutter closed. No longer was there the slender silhouette of trees, there was only pure and eternal darkness. To his left, the cicada started to hum.

Rafael was flat against the dirt-covered ground again. He could feel the fire's warmth pressing against his forehead. He could feel sweat building along the collar of his shirt. He could see Queeny's face hovering over him.

To his right, another cicada began to whine.

Queeny's brow was scrunched ever-so-slightly as he tried to mask his concern with nonchalance. Rafael hadn't noticed it then, only noticing the scents that cooled him down from his high. There was Queeny's hand on his arm, fingers curled into his shirt, to keep him steady, to keep him calm. There was his name sliding off his tongue and into the air and—

Then there was silence.

Rafael peeked one eye open. His outstretched hand was still, with the rest of time. He began to count the seconds. There should have only been six seconds before the cicada to his left started its high-pitched song, but it wasn't long before six became twelve became eighteen.

"Incredible."

Rafael's arm dropped as he spun. The Reverend stood behind him a few paces away with the palms of his hands pressed together against his chin. The stars glittered in his eyes as the old man smiled.

"I'm sorry." Rafael fumbled.

The Reverend looked at him amused. "Whatever for?"

He rubbed his hands together, trying to think of an answer. The truth was, he didn't have one. It was just a force of habit from whatever minor inconvenience he may have caused.

The Reverend chuckled, shaking his head. He started to take a step forward, but his leg stopped mid-air. Rafael's heart dropped, thinking his power had extended farther than he realized.

"On second thought," The Reverend said as he placed his foot back down. "Maybe I'll stay here just until the cicadas sing again."

Rafael felt his cheeks blush. "I'm sorry." He said again, and then cursed himself for it.

The Reverend pushed along in the conversation, pressing his arms against his chest. "You've been practicing."

"Sort of," Rafael started, picking at his fingernails while he spoke. "I mean not typically at night— Not that I'm out here every night. I mean, only for the last couple of nights. I mean," He stopped himself before he tripped over anymore words. He could hear Loren's voice telling him to pause and take a deep breath. "I haven't been sleeping so I've been walking around trying to tire myself out, but the more I walk, the more I start to think."

The Reverend nodded as he listened, his eyes fixed on Rafael. "And what is it that you think about?"

Rafael shrugged his shoulders, looking down at the palms of his hands. The static was losing its intensity. He now had to look for its presence instead of feeling like it was splitting him at the seams. "I'm still trying to wrap my head around this, all of it. I know that we all start from somewhere and I won't be able to do nearly half the things that Adelyn or Simon or Queeny can do, but... I guess I just want to get to the good part, to do something good for a change."

He could feel the static pulsing in his fingertips like an itch. It didn't startle him as it had before. It reminded him that he was alive, different. He thought of Queeny in the middle of the forest again. They couldn't change the past, but they could try in little ways and he at least wanted to try.

"Why is that?" The Reverend asked. "Do you feel you've done a lot of bad things in the past?"

He'd grown so used to being a passenger all of his life. Any of the good-natured things he'd done, had been because of the expectations that his mother had set for him. He'd never been the one who *wanted* to do anything and the first time he felt that burning desire, he let it fester until he couldn't and he was leaning over, doing the unspeakable thing, kissing Loren.

"I guess I never felt like I did enough," He admitted slowly, rubbing his hand over his wrist. "Or *could* do enough and sometimes that'd hold me back, you know. I'd get so afraid of doing the wrong thing that I'd do nothing and I can't help but feel like that's worse, that *that* was doing something bad."

"Good people can do bad things in the same way that bad people can do good things."

Rafael thought about it for a moment. What was it that made a person bad anyways? Queeny had used an analogy for a man who cheats, but in the grand scheme of things was that really such a bad thing when there was a serial killer on the loose killing mothers and their daughters? What about himself? He spent his whole life fearing damnation for loving Loren, but The Reverend had told him that wasn't true — so what was it? What made him *bad*? Was it cheating on Sydney? Lying? He could admit that he was a little selfish, had a little bit of a temper, maybe a little problem with drinking that last year.

"You're trying to discern the difference between the two aren't you?" The Reverend was smiling at him.

"Is that your ability? Reading minds?"

"If only," The Reverend chuckled. "It would make a lot of things much easier. But no, no, the only power I hold is my connection to God."

If not for what Rafael had seen and done he would have snorted. But maybe there was some truth to that. Maybe The Reverend really had found God.

"The difference," He continued. "Is that a good person recognizes the wrong they're going to commit and a bad person keeps pretending that nothing is wrong."

Rafael dropped his gaze, feeling throat tighten. He'd felt *wrong* for longer than he had ever realized, but he had equated that feeling to the belief that surrounded him in the Diocese. When he was a child caught sleeping in the same bed as Loren with their arms and legs tangled together his mother dragged him to the confession box in his pajamas. He could hear her rosary clank as her hands traced the motions of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Inside the stuffy cherry-wood box he swapped the rightness he felt with shame and buried it far, far away.

For a while it worked. For a while he couldn't feel the butterflies that swarmed in his stomach when Loren's hand brushed against his when they were walking. For a while he could laugh with Sydney when she called Loren obsessive. For a while he could lay in Sydney's bed with his fingers in her hair without pretending to be kissing Loren instead. For a while, for a while...

He ignored all the signs until he couldn't anymore. When they finally kissed, the word *right* was the only thing on his mind. His heart was swollen. The clouds had parted for them so they could

be in the sun's spotlight. He could remember the look on Loren's face, the unabashed smile and his perfect teeth, the little dimple on the right side of his face. He could hear his breathless voice, still, saying Rafael's name. But then the clouds fell back into place and Rafael was panicking, grabbing his clothes, rushing out of the woods and away from Loren, away from everything that was right because it was all wrong and he couldn't have this— he couldn't possibly have Loren in the way he wanted to.

"You don't have to pretend anymore, Rafael." The Reverend stood in front of him now. He hadn't even realized the distance crossed, the risk he was willing to take, even if only temporarily.

The Reverend placed a warm hand over Rafael's and squeezed them. It was only then that he realized all the breath he was keeping inside of him, the tears that welled in the corners of his eye. He let out a shuddering breath, tears freeing themselves down the sides of his face.

"I'm sorry," He sniffed. "I just want to take it all back, to tell him I'm sorry, that *I* was the wrong one, not him."

"But you can," The Reverend dipped his head when Rafael refused to meet his eyes. "Maybe not in the way that you'd like to, but in what you can do." He lifted Rafael's hands between both of their faces. "Now when something is wrong *you* have the power to stop it."

Rafael shook his head, taking a long steadying breath to prevent himself from completely falling apart. He wanted to say, where was this power when he needed it the most, but he knew that wouldn't help. It wouldn't change anything.

The Reverend watched him intently, always with that patient and understanding smile on his lips. "Say it," He said softly. "I need to hear you say it."

Rafael let out an airy laugh. It felt a little ridiculous, but maybe that's what he needed. The Reverend playfully slapped his palm against the back of Rafael's hand. "Okay, okay," Rafael held in a breath, released it into the air and looked The Reverend in the eyes, "I have the power to stop it."

"Good," The Reverend beamed, lowering both of their hands so they were no longer touching. He tilted his head to the side, scrunching his nose. Rafael wanted to ask him what it was, but The Reverend raised a crooked finger in the air. "Do you hear that?"

Rafael listened for a moment and then there it was— to the left of them, the cicadas' shrilling cry. They stood across from each other for a while, listening to the many different harmonies they orchestrated in the night.

"What do you think of the saying that *good work is done in private*?" The Reverend asked after a short while. The sky shifted slightly, morning making its way soon.

"So that your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly," He had heard those words many, many years ago as a child growing up in the Diocese. "I don't know how true it is."

The Reverend hummed. The sky shifted slightly, morning making its way soon. "I need you to do something for me, Rafael," He said quietly, his demeanor changed. He straightened, stiffened. "Queeny will be hitting the road again and I'd like you to go with him."

Rafael pushed aside the feelings of excitement and looked at The Reverend inquisitively. "Why me?"

"There is something about you that Queeny gravitates towards," The Reverend started, his brows furrowed as he attempted to piece the words together. "Perhaps it is because he sees a bit of

himself in you. He was young when I found him, not as young as you, but still, just a boy in the grand scheme of things. A boy who had been lost and was praying to be found."

It was hard to imagine Queeny being young, bright-eyed with the world at his fingertips. He wondered what he was like and how he ended up in a circumstance that left him shot three times and left behind.

"And I felt it too, there was something different in him that I had not yet seen in Mica or Simon or Grey. It had only been the four of us until Queeny came along. It almost felt..." The Reverend laughed, his eyes glistening. "It almost felt like having a son," His voice wavered. "And I fear that I am losing him."

"But why?"

"The world is a cruel, violent place and trust me when I say I know that we've played our parts in it, but with this second life we have the power to right the wrongs we've made by doing good deeds, secret deeds. Some of us have bigger demons to overcome and I fear that Queeny will be tempted. Should he be, I believe you are the only one who can stop him, if not for who you are, but what you are."

"You want me to...keep tabs on him?"

The Reverend hesitated. "I want you to guide him and lead him to the right path, God's path. One of repentance. Surely, you understand. This Church is all we have now. There is no going back to the past, so the only thing we can do is keep it safe and keep it close. The world is simply not ready for the truth."

"The truth being our powers?"

The Reverend nods. “It’s why we must work in secret, why the Apostles work their miracles unseen. If we step out into this world with our abilities it only ends one way.”

“Nailed to a cross?” Rafael mused.

“Nailed to a cross, burnt at the stake, whatever the times deem fit. And for the sake of the Church, we mustn’t let others' temptations corrupt us, no matter the cost. We must keep that wrongness out of the Church, Rafael. To protect our home.”

There was that word, that wrongness seeping inside his mind. He liked being around Queeny for reasons he could not put his finger to just yet. He only knew that he felt a little safer, a little more comfortable around him. But there was still something gnawing at him. The tightness in his jaw, the flickering of the flames, the newspaper clippings, the darkness in his eyes. There was something that Queeny was not telling him, not telling anyone, not even The Reverend it seemed.

“Do you think Queeny is capable of murder?” The question sent a chill down his spine, but it had to be asked, didn’t it? They all had their histories. They were all sinners in one way or another. And murder, well, that was the ultimate sin.

The Reverend sucked in a breath, furrowing his brow. If there was anyone to speak for Queeny’s character it was him, not Adelyn or Simon or even Evie. Between the cicadas’ intermission The Reverend opened his mouth, and a stream of words Rafael had not anticipated followed. “For all our sake, I certainly hope not.”

Chapter 10:

"Live from Bolton Landing, I'm Daniel Rivera, standing outside of the Cat and Thomas Mountain Preserves where this 1,909 acre trail had been one of many parks decimated by the Bolton Forest Fires last week. Yesterday afternoon the park miraculously returned to life and now the parks department and local environmentalists are here, trying to find scientific reasoning behind such a phenomena. While there are no clear answers, the general consensus is that this was an act of God."

The radio fizzled the further they drove. In the course of an hour, Queeny drove sixty miles south, towards a small desolate town off the coast of the Thames river. Anytime the news gave way to commercials or the occasional song, Queeny would lean over and switch the station until the news was ingrained into both of their brains and they could recite the events any and every way possible.

"I didn't take you for being egocentric." Rafael commented after the eighth time Queeny flipped the station. He started fiddling with a crumbled map that was tucked away in the passenger side door. There were heavy red markings along the East Coast. Wells, Portland, Mount Pleasant, Providence. Rafael was holding the map up to his nose, trying to discern where exactly they were, when Queeny made a sharp left turn. Tires screeched against the pavement as the truck righted itself.

"Jesus!" Rafael cried, his hand instinctively latching onto the grab handle with all his might.

Queeny had a smug smile hidden behind that thick beard of his. "Sorry, almost missed the turn."

"I think you did it on purpose." Rafael muttered, leaning over to pluck the map off the floorboard where it had flown between his feet.

"Maybe I'm just trying to help you jog your memory." Queeny's sunglasses slid down his stubby nose as he peered over the brim, tongue sticking out of his mouth as he pulled the truck into a tight spot.

Rafael sat back up, flattening the creases on the map as he looked out the window. A brick-colored building stood before them with wide glass windows wrapped around the length of it. An elongated sign near the entrance read, "Uncasville Diner! Breakfast all day — CRAB CAKE BURGERS LOBSTER ROLL BEEF STEW COCKTAILS!"

"Nothing like some beef stew to go with a mimosa in the morning." Rafael grimaced.

"At least it's nutritionally balanced."

Rafael rolled his eyes, choosing to ignore him. "Where are we anyways?"

"What? You forgot how to read too? We're in Uncasville. Now hop out, I'm starving." Queeny popped the door open with his elbow.

Rafael shook his head in disbelief. Just when he thought he'd gotten a grasp of Queeny's mood swings he was thrown off again. Since they left the Church of Light, Queeny was skeptical. First, Rafael thought it had to do with his inability to properly control his powers. He'd been practicing, but not nearly enough to keep up with any of the other Apostles. But once they got in the car and Queeny had said *nothing* for an hour, Rafael wondered if The Reverend was wrong. Maybe Queeny didn't want him around.

They walked into a large space with brown leather booths and dark-wood finishing all around them. For a diner off the side of the road during brunch, the place was packed. Every booth was filled with large families and small children hanging over the edge talking with other kids they didn't know.

Temporary diner pals. There was a jukebox somewhere that rattled a tune he couldn't identify, but nodded his head to nonetheless.

Queeny led them towards the counter where a dozen bar stools stood, but only two were left specifically for them by the grace of God Himself. Queeny took the seat closest to the register and a glass display of donuts.

"They look good right." Queeny leaned his chin against his knuckles.

"I'm starting to think you have a problem," Rafael laughed as he took the seat between Queeny and another large man spooling out of his seat.

"Afternoon boys!" A peppy waitress with large box-dyed burgundy hair and matching lips bounced towards them. Rafael couldn't help but notice the time nailed into the wall in front of him that read 11:00 a... "The names' Jenny and I'll be your server today. Can I start y'all off with something to drink?" She asked as she placed two sticky plastic menus in the space in front of them.

"Two coffees and a mimosa for my friend here, please and thank you," Queeny politely smiled at her. He had wrinkles in the corner of his eyes when he did.

"I was joking about the mimosa," Rafael said once the waitress bounced away.

"You could use it," Queeny mumbled, dragging a heavy finger along the side of the menu. He tapped the same spot twice — a Cuban, Rafael noticed, before shutting the menu closed and meeting Rafael's gaze. "Anyone ever told you that you've got a staring problem?"

Rafael's cheeks burned, he tried to hide it by shoving his face into a random page in the menu. Jenny came back, three drinks cradled between slender fingers. Not a single drop was spilled on the countertop.

"Oh sweetie!" She giggled, placing one hand on Rafael's shoulder. "Dinner menu's not til 5, but if you *really* want something off there I can see what kind of magic I can work with the cook."

Rafael didn't think he could turn anymore red. She leaned her whole body over his shoulder, flipping over to the previous page with the breakfast and lunch options. "Um, thank you," He stammered, trying to ignore Queeny's muffled laughter.

"The eggs benny here is a real killer," She winked at him, her fingers still resting on his shoulder. She settled her sparkling eyes on Queeny. "And I'll make sure to wrap one of those up for you before you leave."

Rafael didn't think Queeny could smile so big.

"Where you boys from anyways?" She asked, rounding the counter and making a show of bending over to grab a white paper bag. Queeny kicked his leg.

Rafael kicked him back out of annoyance.

"Maine," Queeny answered, slapping Rafael hard on the back. Rafael winced. "Kid got himself into Connecticut College."

"No doubt! Congratulations!" She beamed at him, placing the donut bag on the counter in front of Queeny. Her smile faltered just slightly. "They still letting the kids come back this fall?"

Queeny raised a brow. "As far as I know."

"I'm sorry, why wouldn't they?" Rafael added.

Jenny's easy going demeanor faltered, she leaned over the counter beckoning the boys to come closer to her.

"It hasn't hit the news yet, but there was another murder this morning," Her eyes widened while she spoken, fear paled her skin. "Another mother and daughter."

Rafael looked over at Queeny whose jaw tightened.

"New London is a real college town, you know, with your college so close. It makes most of its money off the students. They thought with you-know-who's trail being so far away it'd be okay, but then last semester there was one in New London and it caused a real ruckus, especially since they couldn't find him. With Thanksgiving break right around the corner they just let the kids finish the semester from home."

"And you're sure?" Queeny's brows were scrunched. "That it's *him*."

"Autopsy report came back as a heart attack for the mother, but poison in the little girl. The local police will probably try to play it off, but that's how it always goes," Jenny took a glance around the diner before turning her attention back to them. "A friend of mine that works for the paper has been following his trail, said it didn't make any sense. Seven years of murders and he's never hit the same place twice."

"Do you know who it was?" Queeny pressed.

Jenny shrank into herself, grinding her teeth together, contemplating whether to share what she knew or not. "It was one of the middle school VPs. Juniper Lawrence, big personality, nice lady. Husband died a few years ago. She always liked her coffee straight."

"You wouldn't happen to still have a copy of that paper would you?"

"It's in my bag in the breakroom, just don't tell anyone you got it from me," Jenny stood, tugging at the hem of her dress shirt. She looked at Rafael. "You're not exactly the targeted audience, but my momma always said there's no limitations to anything, especially something so dark like that."

"Better be safe than sorry," Queeny added.

"Exactly," Jenny said with a sad smile. A loud bellow rushed out of her lips as she shook her arms at her sides, getting rid of all the bad energy that surrounded the conversation. She plastered the cherry red smile back on her face. "You boys drink up and I'll grab that paper for you."

Queeny thanked her again, turning to Rafael once they were alone. "Something's wrong."

Rafael faced him. "Besides murder you mean?"

Queeny sank back in the bar stool, twirling the cup of coffee between his fingers. His gaze was far away.

"The next kill should've been in Bolton," Queeny explained, holding a hand out as he drew invisible lines in the air to connect the dots. "After all this time, the common trend isn't *just* mothers and daughters or cause of death, but the proximity of a miracle. Do you remember the floods in New York?"

It happened three months before Loren. Queens, Brooklyn, and parts of the city had flooded over from three days of rain, decimating the city's infrastructure before anyone could do anything about it. He remembered a woman on the news, clutching a soaked baby to her damp chest. She'd been living in an illegal basement apartment when the walls caved in and the water reached the ceiling. She thought she was going to die, but then the water retreated, all throughout the boroughs until there wasn't a single trace of anything besides broken walls, damaged belongings, and trembling bodies.

"No one understood how the water just *left,* they called it God's work. Then the next day the Jones' were murdered in Brooklyn."

"Murder happens all the time, Queeny, it doesn't mean it has anything to do with the work that — *we* — do."

Queeny let out a frustrated sigh, sitting up with a sudden ferocity that made Rafael lean back, nearly knocking into the man behind him. He tossed his sunglasses onto the countertop as he readied himself to explain. And as his mouth opened, the words caught in the middle of his throat. A loud tire screeched against the pavement outside as a black jeep skidded roughly into the parking lot.

"Oh shit my truck—" Queeny jumped out of his seat at the same moment a loud *BANG* collided with the rim of the baby blue battered truck. The diner's door chimed and three men stepped in, guns pointed straight at the patrons of Uncasville's Diner.

Chapter 11:

The diner fell into silence, even the jukebox's melody quieted as the front man took center stage. Flocking him, two other men stood, one stout and the other lanky, their inexperience evident in their white knuckled grips on their guns. The front man walked with his own slow beat, piercing blue eyes behind a black mask making contact with each and every person in the room before finally settling on Queeny.

His lip quirked. "Is there a problem buddy?"

"Yeah, it's black with four wheels embedded in the back of my truck." Queeny fired back quickly.

Front man pursed his lips, shooting a glance at his buddies. The stout one locked the diner door, the lanky one walked the length of the aisle — fear gripped the patrons as they pressed their bodies into the corners of their booths. There was nowhere to run now, unless you headed straight for glass. Something Rafael was all too familiar with.

"Maybe if you're nice enough I'll make sure to leave you a nice stack, you know, common courtesy and all."

"How generous of you." Queeny spat.

"Why thank you," He turned towards the rest of the room. "*Now*, here's how this is going to work. You're all going to leave everything that's worth a dime on your tables, then you're gonna get down on the ground, let us go and no one gets hurt. Easy, right?"

There was hesitation in the crowd. A look or two passed between couples and tables. But no one was willing to move first.

The front man heaved a sigh, raising the gun straight towards the ceiling and out fired three shots. Rafael's hands flew to his ears. A woman screamed. A baby wailed. Chairs screeched and leather wrinkled as people clambered out of their seats and kneeled onto the ground, heads ducked low, hands above the head.

The lanky man was shouting obscene words as he ran the length of the aisle up and down, shoving the tip of the gun into the back of people's necks.

Rafael shuddered, feeling the static inside of him. He was slow to his knees, keeping his eye on Queeny's movements.

"What do we do?" Rafael whispered.

"It's all you," Queeny whispered back as he got to his knees, hands lazily above his head.

Rafael's eyes went wild. "Are you out of your fucking mind—?"

"It has to be subtle," Queeny hissed. The stout man was walking the length of the aisle nearest them. "If I start growing vines and shit people will see and ask questions. This is your chance. Do something."

"Hey!" The stout man rushed up towards them, the barrel of his gun knocking Queeny square in the forehead. He winced at the unexpected contact, instinctively buckling his neck back but the man pressed harder. "Got something to share with the rest of class?" Spit flew out of his mouth.

Queeny grimaced. "Think I'll pass."

Rafael's nostrils flared. Queeny's sarcastic humor wasn't doing him any favours. He sucked in a breath, dipping his head as he tried to call a memory to the surface, but his mind was racing too fast for him to latch onto anything. How was he possibly going to think in a time like this?

"Rafael," Queeny whispered when Stout's attention had drifted over to a man who coughed somewhere down the line of bar stools. "Just focus and relax."

"Easier said than done," Rafael quickly spat, frustration fueling him instead of the static. He didn't know what Queeny was thinking, he wasn't ready for something like this.

Queeny reached over slowly, reaching out to place a hand on his knee but his fingers just barely grazed Rafael when the gun was swinging back at him. Stout had a bewildered look in his eyes.

"Hey boss!" Stout hollered over his shoulder. "Tough guy's got himself a boyfriend."

"No shit!" Front laughed as he walked over, a little bounce in his step. "A truck that color I can't say I'm surprised."

"I've been told it brings out the color of my eyes." Queeny smiled.

In an instant, Front's smile vanished and was replaced with the look of malice. His arm swung back and knocked Queeny across the jaw so hard that a splatter of blood landed along Rafael's knee and across the floor. Someone in a nearby booth screamed. Lanky demanded silence from the opposite side of the room.

Queeny's body shook with laughter.

Front hummed. "Would you look at that," He squatted down in front of Queeny, the gun resting between his open legs. He looked up to meet Stout's gaze. "This is funny to him."

That easy smile was spread across his lips again, shoulders all loose and relaxed. He looked over at Rafael with the friendliest smile he could muster. It sent a chill down his spine. "Do *you* think this is funny?"

Rafael felt his lungs constricting. His hands were trembling at his sides at the sight of blood, but he tried not to focus on that and instead the man's hate filled blue eyes. He quirked a brow. "*Well?*"

Queeny straightened up. "He thinks it's fucking *hilarious*."

Front swung at him again and this time Queeny tumbled onto his side from the force, swearing under his breath.

Rafael's pulse raced in his ears, he shot up but Stout pressed the gun into his forehead, pushing him back down. "Slow down there, pretty boy, just answer the boss' question."

"Yeah, any day now Raf." Queeny wheezed, a thick glob of blood caught in his beard. He held out a hand to push himself back on his knees.

Rafael's brow scrunched as his eyes flickered between the three men. He found his mouth moving, but no words managed to come out. A gunshot sounded behind Stout and Front. Rafael tumbled forward, arms over his head, as if that would protect him.

"Hey!" Front yelled, Rafael temporarily forgotten. He sailed across the diner where Lanky had just fired his pistol at a man curled on the floor in his own piss. A small little girl wailed at the tops of her lungs, her face distorted and bloodshot red. "What the fuck are you doing!?"

"The fucker was trying to leave!" Lanky defended himself, his arms held out beside him like *what the hell did you think I was doing?*

Queeny dug his heel into Rafael's thigh. He hissed in pain. "*Hurry up*."

"I—"

Front and Lanky started yelling at one another.

The little girl let out a deafening scream, choking on her own sobs.

"WILL YOU *PLEASE* SHUT HER UP!" Front screamed. "JAY, BE USEFUL!"

Rafael couldn't focus. He squeezed his eyes shut until he saw lines of white blinking back at him. He could hear Stout's (or rather Jay's) heavy footsteps ringing louder than the gunshot in his ear. He could hear the rustling of the girl's dress as she was ripped out of her mother's hands. He could hear her kick at the air, screaming louder and louder and LOUDER—

"Rafael," Queeny's voice was still a whisper. They were alone in their corner. Just them. He placed a hand on Rafael's knee. "*Breathe.*"

The mother was crying now too, over and over again, repeating the same phrase—*mybabymybabymybaby* until it was no longer her voice Rafael heard, but Mrs. Deguiz. She was kneeling in the threshold between the living room and the narrow hallway that led upstairs where the gurney was carried down, away from them, into the unknown.

Rafael tried. One shuddering inhale.

All the noise in the world—

One shuddering exhale.

—drowned out in an instant until there was only—

Rafael breathed again.

Silence.

When he opened his eyes, Front and Lanky were frozen mid-argument, the little girl had her knee pressed into Stout's chest trying to release herself from his grasp, his other hand held a gun pointed at the mother with an equally red face, arms outreached.

Queeny's hand dropped from Rafael's knee and he pressed himself off the ground with more restraint than he anticipated. He ran the back of his hand along his nose until it was covered in blood. "It'd be nice if you could do this before I get hit."

"You could've shut up."

"Where's the fun in that?" Queeny heaved himself onto his feet, he almost lost his balance but he caught himself on the back of the bar stool. "Plus, it heightens the stakes."

"I think you like raising my anxiety."

"Learn to call on your memories and I won't have to," He held a hand out for Rafael to take, lifting him off the floor. "That's your problem you do realize, don't you?"

"My lack of memories?"

"No, you think too much. You're searching for the right memory, but that doesn't matter. Just grab hold to whatever one speaks to you first and lean into it. That's all it is," Queeny grabbed the back of the chair and lifted it up. "Grab one."

"You make it seem so simple," Rafael said as he followed Queeny's orders. They dragged two chairs into the middle of the room, facing them back to back.

"Because it *can* be. You're only fighting with yourself," Queeny grabbed one more. Blood dripped onto the floor from his nose. He wiped it along his shirt sleeve. "It's not that you *can't* remember, you just don't want to."

"Why wouldn't I want to?"

"Because," Queeny walked up to Stout, delicately plucking the little girl from his grasp. It was awkward, Rafael watched him peel the man's fingers off the girl's dress, all while keeping the weight of

her against his shoulder. He placed her between her mother's open arms so the two encompassed one another. He took a step back, tilting his head as he looked solemnly at them. "It means remembering the pain."

Rafael chewed on his bottom lip, remembering those split-second memories he kept buried away. A tree's trunk pressing against his spine. Fire in Loren's eyes. The senior class closing in on them—

"What in God's name..." Jenny stepped out of the shadows, clutching the newspaper to her chest. Her eyes frantically scanned the diner surrounding them.

Rafael jumped.

"I heard the commotion from the breakroom," Her eyes fell on the woman and her child, then to the three chairs dragged to the center of the room. "And then I couldn't hear anything anymore. How, how did you—?"

Queeny held out both of his hands towards her with a soft smile spread across his lips as he walked towards her. "Hey, hey, look at me."

Jenny raised a trembling hand to her mouth. "What is this—?"

"They're all just frozen with fear," Queeny answered quickly. "These men," He pointed at Front, Stout, and Lanky. "They were going to kill this man. Do you think that's right?"

"No!" She cried. "No, of course not. But, but how—?" She frowned trying to make it make sense in her mind.

"It's a mechanism in the brain," Rafael explained without much thought.

"Like a deer in headlights?" She looked to him with glistening eyes.

Rafael smiled at her with a soft laugh. “Yeah, like a deer in headlights.”

She nodded quickly, seemingly convinced by the idea of it.

“But,” Queeny started. “When the lights go away, the deer runs, right? And we can’t let them go because they’ll still try to hurt you. So, I need you to get me duct tape and a lot of it and when you come back, you need to tell the cops that there was an attempted robbery.”

Jenny looked back at him, her hands visibly shaking. She nodded once, then twice, and then it was all she knew and she looked like a bobblehead glued to someone’s dashboard. “I— I can do that. Sure. Yeah.”

She placed the newspaper Queeny had asked for earlier on the counter and rushed back to the breakroom, her heels clicking against the floor.

“Is this bad?” Rafael asked when they were alone again.

“I don’t know.” Queeny answered quietly.

They waited in silence until her heels were audible again and she was rushing towards Queeny with the duct tape in one hand, a cellphone in the other. The call was quick and precise despite Jenny’s flustering. Queeny dragged the men and forced their bodies to bend into a seated position while Rafael taped them to the chairs, careful to limit his contact with them.

Queeny tested the bonds before he took a step back. They waited until they heard sirens in the distance. He walked over to the counter, grabbing his belongings and the newspaper. Jenny stood before the criminals with her fingernails in her mouth.

Queeny placed a hand on her shoulder. “Listen, they’ll be waking up any moment now. People might be a little confused, but they won’t notice that any time has passed, alright?”

"What— Why not?"

"The fear thing." Queeny said and Jenny was nodding again, willing herself to make it make sense. Rafael could only imagine how she must have felt. "I need you to do me one last favor," He took her hand carefully in his. "Leave this, and us, out of the report, okay?"

She squeezed his hand, looking between the two of them. "Yeah, yes, of course. I... Yes. Thank you."

"No, no, thank *you*."

Rafael unlocked the door, holding it open for Queeny as they stepped back out into the early afternoon air and towards the decimated truck. Rafael prayed that it would start and by the looks of it, Queeny did too. It was only when it did and they had covered enough distance that Queeny was finally able to break the silence.

"Deer in headlights? *That's* the best you could do?"

Rafael stammered. "I don't fucking know."

Worse things were sure to be said.

Chapter 12:

Hell took the form of small quaint towns by the sea with broken asphalt and graffitied walls. As they drove through New London with its lazily painted pastel bricked walls and tight streets nestled with bars, ice cream parlors, independent artists, and vegan this and vegan that, Rafael couldn't stop the swelling of his heart. He remembered now, sitting in the library of his high school with Loren, flipping through pamphlet after pamphlet of different colleges, trying to find something that would give them some semblance of home. They didn't want a bustling city like New York, with its promise of acceptance and freedom and its jungle of cement and glass-buildings. They wanted something quiet enough, somewhere they could stumble home drunk from, somewhere they could bask beneath the moonlight and Loren could count the stars and Rafael could count the freckles on his face.

They had wanted this.

Queeny pulled the truck into a narrow driveway next to an auto shop with a hand-drawn sign on an eight by eleven piece of paper that hung crookedly behind a dirty window. It was a small corner shop with dim lighting and rusted gates, vehicles parked on the street instead of a lot. Rafael had known plenty of shops like this back home where the decades of reputation matter more than the aesthetics.

When Rafael stepped out of the truck and went to wait for Queeny outside on the curb, he could feel the salt sticking to his skin all heavy-like. He used to spend his weekends walking down the Back Cove Trails along the boulevard after picking walking sticks with Loren when they cut through Edward Payson Park. Loren liked walking to Tukey's Bridge, where they'd stare out towards the horizon where the Cove became the ocean.

"If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you?" Loren would always ask.

"Wherever you are," Rafael always replied.

Loren used to press him for a different answer, but he never had one. It was the truth. It didn't matter what four walls, what set of woods, or what street he lived on as long as he had the one person who always felt like home. Rafael tugged on the laces of his shoes, turning his attention from the ocean's breeze, a seagull's gawk, and the soft clang of a bell somewhere beyond his eye could see.

Queeny stepped onto the street, folding his wallet and stuffing it in his pocket. "It'll take a few hours." He hiked up his pants before dropping down into the empty space, stretching his legs out into the street.

"How's your face?" Rafael asked, undoing the knot of his laces.

"Sore," Queeny responded, looking down the street towards a multi-functional brick building that served as the post office and Amtrak station. "How're the nerves?"

Rafael shrugged, not really sure how to explain that there was always that base level of anxiety that existed inside of him. It lived in his head through second guesses and overly-analytical bad habits.

Queeny eyed him, humming as he did so. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Talk about what?"

"Him."

Rafael paused just as he got the lace through the loop. Queeny reached in the space between them towards a crack in the earth where a small weed peaked its head out. He held his hand out until a bouquet of various green leaves in different shapes, sizes, and thicknesses fully blossomed. He admired

it between two pinched fingers, the thumb of his hand had an elongated star etched into his skin, before he handed it to Rafael.

"It's always about the people we love."

Rafael lifted his head, grabbing hold where Queeny's fingers had been and twirled the bundle between his knees. It smelled different from the anxiety remedy he'd conjured last week. He couldn't smell any lavender, instead peppermint and cardamom and something else that was on the tip of his tongue.

"Did you love someone?"

From the corner of his eye, Queeny scratched at the star along his thumb. His easy-going demeanor shifted ever so slightly as his jaw tightened and his posture straightened.

"Her name was Sarah," He finally said after a long silence. "We met at the library down that way," Queeny pointed to the end of the street, past the post office and the train station where a train's horn blared as it passed through. "Caught me stealing a book, slipped it out of my hands and hit me on the head with it."

Rafael tried to suppress a laugh, but it bubbled out of him before he could stop the rest of it with his hand. Queeny laughed too.

"She used to take the kids in her Sunday group to the library after lessons. I'd never been to a library before, we were twelve at the time, so I didn't know I needed a card or anything so she let me use hers."

"Don't they teach you about that in school?"

Queeny shrugged. "Wouldn't know, I never went."

"You never went or...?"

"We were off the grid. Lived between towns in an unmarked set of woods. We only came to town for medicine, sports magazines, beer and cigarettes, you know, stuff like that. Everything I'd learned up to that point was through trial and error. Then I met Sarah and I... I saw something that I never thought I could have."

"Love?" Rafael mused.

"A life," Queeny rocked his knees side to side, growing fidgety the more he talked and reminisced. Rafael was well versed in that feeling, the need to do something with your hands, to look at something else, to think of anything else. *Run. Run. Run.* Queeny sucked in a breath, willing himself to stop moving. He flexed his fingers against his knees, feet firmly planted on the ground.

"It didn't last too long though. My old man was always coming and going before he just stopped showing up and then my mom died suddenly when I was sixteen. It was just my brother and I then. I think I lasted two weeks in that house before I got up and left in the middle of the night, moved to New York City and stayed there until I died."

"You said you were shot," Rafael remembered. "You never said what for."

Queeny thought about it for a moment. "Revenge, probably."

He heaved himself off the sidewalk, dusting the flecks of dirt that stuck to him. They gave into gravity and fell onto the ground like little bits of comets plummeting to the earth.

"Let's go for a walk," Queeny was already crossing the street. "There's something I want to show you."

Rafael watched him leave for a moment, two, before pulling himself off the ground, knowing well that no matter where they went, he'd follow.

The further they walked along Broad Street, the more the buildings started to spread out, the more Rafael felt like he could breathe. The streets became reminiscent of home and less like a dream that had been buried with Loren. For half an hour they walked and for half an hour Queeny didn't condemn Rafael to silence, but finally, answers.

"Why New York?" Rafael was going to ease into the revenge question.

"It's a big city, easy to get lost in, hard to be found in."

"Why—"

"It's my turn." Queeny interrupted.

"What?"

"You don't think I'm just going to *tell* you everything, do you?" Queeny stopped in his tracks, his body unmoving when Rafael crashed into him. He placed two hands on either side of him and looked down. It was the first time that Rafael had realized just how tall he was and for the first time, he felt painfully aware of how small and insignificant he was. "We each get ten questions, no bullshit, deal?"

Rafael pursed his lips. "Does that one count?"

"Does *this* one count?" Queeny smiled crookedly at him, releasing his hold on him.

Rafael puffed, rolling his eyes. "Fine. Ask yours."

Queeny resumed his walk, a little slower this time, so that they walked side by side instead of Rafael trailing behind him.

"Favorite song."

"That's not a question."

"Fine," Queeny rolled his eyes. "*What's* your favorite song?"

"Are you serious?"

"I'll count that as a question if you don't answer in five, four, three—"

"I Will Follow You Into The Dark," Rafael answered instantly, immediately shrinking into himself and regretting his answer. Even now he could still remember the first time he heard the song between the chirpy melodies of whatever was on the top charts. Its slow melody caught his attention before its first line: "Love of mine / Someday you will die." It was the night after he and Loren sat on the rooftop of his house. He'd finally seen how tired Loren was, the darkness that blossomed beneath his eyes, the distantness of his voice. It was the first time Rafael felt truly afraid.

Queeny hummed, nodding his head slowly as if he were trying to recreate the song in his head and find his own reasoning. But maybe Rafael was just being paranoid and he was just waiting for the next question.

"When you were in New York, what did you do there?" There was a slight incline in the road that he was beginning to feel in the back of his thighs.

"I did what any foreign sixteen year old kid did with no family or friends and got mixed in with the wrong crowd," Queeny answered carefully. "It was the 90s. Washington Heights was the drug capital, I'm sure you've heard the stories," He shrugged his shoulders. "I was a good fit for them. It's hard to track a kid down when there's no trail of you in the system. They took advantage of that. For a while I didn't mind. I was young and naive and it was better than an empty home."

"What was the deal between you and your brother—?"

Queeny gave him a sly look, swiftly moving on to his next question. There was a lonely coffee shop between two parking lots with large windows and dull greenery hanging from the ceiling. The leaves sat upright and turned a vibrant green as they passed by. "What's your favorite home cooked meal?"

Rafael raised a brow at him. Queeny had followed him in East Deering for three months; surely there were more important things he'd want to know. "Mangu con queso fresco y salami. My abuela made it best. I used to smash the plantains for her when her hands got too weak. We didn't have it too often, but it's a versatile dish. Breakfast, lunch, or dinner doesn't matter."

"Can't get that up in Maine."

"No, you can't," Rafael laughed. There were so many things that he wanted to know, but he only had eight questions left and he didn't want to waste them. He'd save the brother question for later, sure that Queeny was expecting it. Instead he asked, "What's the real deal between you and the Apostles?"

Queeny seemed amused by this. "They're pompous assholes who can't think for themselves. If The Rev asked them to kiss his ass they would because it's *God's path.*"

"And I'm different?"

"I'm counting that as a question," Queeny said with a quirk to his brow. "So far, yes. You still have reasonable doubt. You still ask questions. They don't. I get two now so don't interrupt."

"Fine."

They stopped at a light near a memorial park. Queeny turned to him. “Favorite memory with your mother.”

Rafael mulled this over. He had a hard time thinking of the good times when the bad times were so much more recent. He thought of his first birthday after his abuela died; his mother had just gotten her first chemo treatment. He didn’t even want to celebrate, he just wanted to hole up in his room with Loren, play video games on the Nintendo 64 until their vision got hazy and they passed out beneath a fort made of sheets. Instead, they got in the car. Just him and his mother and drove out to the sea to a small dock where a narrow canoe waited for them with two oars.

He was hesitant but his mother wasn’t. She climbed in, held her hand out to him. “*No tengas miedo, papi,”*

Do not be discouraged, he finished. They rowed until their arms were sore and sat in the middle of the lake where she revealed a small wicker basket beneath a small cloth. They devoured everything inside of it, breaking pieces of bread and flinging them into the sea.

“*Para ti abuela,*” Rafael said.

“*Para ti mama,*” Santana whispered.

Rafael told Queeny this in all of its sadness and beauty. He gave into the clenching of his heart and instead of feeling a hole there, he felt warmth. His mother was a bundle of light that could never dissipate.

“Do you really think she wouldn’t have loved you if she knew?”

The white light signaled them to walk. Rafael led this time with no idea where they were going, but he didn't care. The question should have been, would his mother have chosen her son over her faith, he had no way of knowing. He wasn't going to waste time over it.

"What was the deal between you and your brother?" Rafael repeated.

Queeny walked a step behind him. "He was the older one, closer with my father and his line of work. After the old man left, Hollis — my brother — blamed me for it. We never saw things eye to eye as it was and the shift in the house just intensified it so I left. Why Sydney?"

The question caught him off guard, Rafael nearly tripped.

"I've tried figuring that one out for three months, but I got nothing."

"We were friends for a long time and she was sweet and helpful and smart—"

"You mean she was *there*," Queeny chuckled to himself softly. "I know you didn't love her so you don't have to try to convince me of that, I was just wondering what it was that made you think you were."

"My mom used to say she was perfect, exactly the kind of girl I needed, so I thought maybe if I had her I wouldn't need Loren."

They walked past a Dunkin and he saw Queeny instinctively gravitate towards it, but he fought against his bodily response and walked straight ahead.

"If you could go back in time, go to school, what would you study?" Rafael asked after a brief silence and they passed a dingy looking 7-11.

"Biology with a focus on botany," Queeny answered quickly. "When did you know?"

He mulled this over quietly, trying to relive what little he remembered, searching for the signs. There weren't any crushes on celebrities he secretly fawned over. He didn't stare too long at the other boys in the locker-room. He supposed, once, he thought the soccer team captain was cute, but outside of that... There was nothing that stuck out to him. It was just Loren. It had always been Loren. Just that one thought made him certain that it wasn't *just* Sydney that wasn't right for him.

He'd known the moment Loren stepped into his life and flung his arms around him. He'd know the first time he heard him laugh, heard him cry, heard him scream.

"Part of me always knew," Rafael started. "But it wasn't until the day by the creek when I kissed him that I knew."

They approached two ivory pillars with a black ironed gate. There was a small plaque that read *Cedar Grove Cemetery* in a delicate script. They walked along a paved road, past a small stone building with cherry wood doors and red trimming. The path was flanked with luscious straight trees until they gave out to a wide flat field adorned with hundreds of headstones.

Down a windy road towards the latter part of the cemetery beneath the comforting shade of trees where even God couldn't see those who weep, Queeny led them to a small plot of six family gravestones. There was a statue of Saint Mary watching over the plot. They stood in front of a white headstone that looked more recent than the rest.

In loving memory of a dear mother and daughter, Sarah O'Connolley (April 2nd, 1972 — June 10th, 2005) and Delilah Callahan (January 23rd, 2001 — June 10th, 2005).

Rafael felt a tightness in his chest, his eyes trapped on the word Callahan. A name derived from

the gaelic *Ceallachain.* Bright-headed. Lover of churches. A word that was the stark opposite of what Queeny stood for. But here, beneath the trees and a cloudy sky where the sun was absent now, Callahan was the one thing that kept Queeny tethered to the real world, a real life, just as he always wanted. A family. A daughter.

Then it hit him full force. The newspaper clippings. His obsession. His disappearance. Queeny didn't have anything to *do* with the murders. He was a victim of them.

"The Handmaiden Killer," Rafael finally breathed. "That's why we're here isn't it?"

"The Reverend told me to leave it alone. A path of vengeance isn't God's will," Queeny started slowly. "It really makes you think what kind of God creates a man like that."

Rafael's throat tightened. How many times had he asked a question like that? When piece by piece, person by person was taken away from him and he was left all alone in a world that didn't welcome him, that didn't want him, that wouldn't let him just *be.*

"I've been looking for him for years," Queeny started slowly. "But now he's back and he's *here.* He wants me to find him."

Rafael opened his mouth, but Queeny was faster. "What were you thinking the day they buried Loren?"

They were still playing. He remembered for the first time in his life feeling afraid of himself and the things he would do. He would've torn the world in two for Loren.

"I asked God to take me too." Rafael turned to him, tears glistening in his eyes. He didn't want to think about Loren right now. He tried, instead, to focus on Delilah. Delilah Callahan, only four

years old. Four years of memories to take into the afterlife. He couldn't help but wonder how many with her father. And they said God was merciful?

How?

"When you disappear, this is where you go isn't it?"

Queeny nodded. "Even when I was in New York, I'd write to her. I always told her I'd come back, but at that point I was so wrapped up in everything out there that it was impossible to leave. When I was resurrected I knew I had to come back. For her."

"What about the Church? Why didn't you take them there?"

"I tried, but it was too late," Queeny started quietly, averting his gaze from the headstones down to the grass that had regrown, small daisies appeared as the wind pushed through. "I had too much doubt and I don't know which one led me down the wrong path. When I first got there, I was prepared to give myself wholeheartedly to the Church and for a while I did. But there was always something in the back of my head that kept me from fully giving in. A feeling that I only noticed when I was away from them. I was never alone there, but if I was on the road I could be. You find comfort in those moments, you know. You feel free."

He couldn't deny it, out here on the road with Queeny things felt normal, like how it was *before.* He knew there was no going back, but it could be okay. He could find something in this new life, even if it was just a semblance of what it once was.

"Don't you get tired of having things taken from you, no matter how big or small? How we can't be happy no matter how good we tried to be, or how bad we became," Queeny's eyes darkened for a moment. "You can change that, you know, *we* can and The Reverend fears that, doesn't he?

That's why he asked you to come here because he suspects something is *wrong* and I might do something."

Rafael gulped, his eyes flickering between Sarah and Delilah's names. What was it that Jenny said? There were no such things as limitations with something so dark. He thought of The Reverend that night by the woods. Rafael had asked him if Queeny was capable of murder. "Yes."

"One question left." Queeny reminded him.

What did the bible say about vengeance? *They shall know I am the Lord, when I shall lay my vengeance on them.*

"Do you think you're capable of murder?"

"By the end of the night, I will be."

Chapter 13:

There was no escaping murder, Rafael realized as he flipped through every local radio station. It was the same tidbit over and over again — "*totalling twenty-two families dead, the latest in New London where the victims, 42 year-old Margret Reese and her 8 year-old daughter were pronounced dead at the scene this morning at 8:05am—"*

Since they picked up the truck, neither of them had spoken a word. Queeny's voice echoed in his head as they drove away from the ghostly reminiscences of a hopeful college town, abandoning the skeletons of the past for a path to vengeance. It was exhilarating. At least for one of them. Queeny pressed on the gas pedal a little harder, gripped the steering wheel a little tighter.

They drove until the sea was in the rearview mirror and the open streets with their brick buildings became trees and all Rafael saw from the corner of his vision was blurring greenery. He finally gave up on trying to lighten the mood with the radio's song or tacky banking commercial and instead tried to pinpoint where Queeny was leading them. He figured they were going to the crime scene to sniff around for clues and unfolded the map in his lap.

Where they should have taken a left turn onto Jefferson Avenue that would've eventually led them to make a right onto Gardner Avenue, Queeny kept going straight down Broad Street until it turned into Route 85. Urgency expressed with inclining speed.

"Q—" Rafael started, but Queeny cut him off by turning the dial on the radio a little higher instead.

"*—Reese was last heard from around nine pm moments before a Con Edison van pulled into the driveway and stayed shortly after eleven pm. Local Con Edison provider has yet to confirm sending a van to the house last night—"*

"Keep an eye out." Queeny told him as he lowered the volume.

"And do what?" Rafael pressed.

But he had no answer. Instead, he looked into the rearview mirror. No cars in sight other than them.

"*—No visible wounds found on either victim, but a trace of poison was found in—"*

Rafael went to speak again, but the truck veered off the road into a discreet opening in the woods. His hand latched onto the grab handle as the vehicle rocked side to side. A canopy of trees swallowed them whole as they trudged on. For a moment, he remembered the gun in the glove compartment that Queeny threatened him with the day they met. There was that voice in the back of his head telling him to *run, run, run.*

He fanned his fingers along the handle, setting his jaw as if that could solve the problem stirring inside of him. The static trickled through his arms slowly and steadily, ready. Maybe this was a mistake, Rafael thought. Maybe The Reverend had a little too much faith in him. He wasn't strong enough. Not to prevent Queeny from doing something. From killing someone. He knew what it was to *take* and *this* didn't feel like his to take.

But he couldn't just let it happen.

Could he?

If it were Loren, would Rafael kill for him?

The truck rolled onto a gravel road in the middle of the woods. There was a large opening with a neatly cut front law and a white-one story home built in the center. Queeny let the truck idle for a moment as he devoured the sight before darkness swept over the land.

"If you were on the run, where's the one place you'd want to go?" Queeny broke the silence with a low voice that belonged to a broken, tired man.

Rafael would have wanted to go to the only place in the world he couldn't go. "Home."

He hummed as he inched closer to the house. The truck's headlights reflected against the white paneling left spots of colors in Rafael's eyes. The static rushed to his brain leaving behind a prickly sensation that burned in the back of his head. He could see millions of little spots of grain like old photographs. How long would it take for the static to blind him? He wondered. Forever left watching the world through a black and white film. What if, over time, the noise would be replaced too with that loud, unbearable crackling?

The truck's engine died out as Queeny pulled the key out of the ignition. They were left in that pre-night light, a muted blue that made everything feel eerie. Rafael eyed the house suspiciously. There was nothing that indicated any recent sign of activity. The blinds were tightly shut. Not a single light was on. The house looked like it'd been locked up for years, maybe even a decade.

Queeny leaned over, hooking his fingers beneath the handle of the glove compartment. It unhinged its mouth with a loud thunk. Inside were an abundance of napkins from various bakeries, cafes, and gas station markets. Then finally, in the midst of the mess, the slick gun. "Take it. Just in case."

"In case of what?" He demanded, but Queeny was already popping the door open and lifting himself out of the truck. It was only when Rafael held it in his hands that his companion unlocked the front door and let himself in.

The inside of the house had been stripped of most of its belongings. Bright white square spots graffitied the walls where picture frames once hung. What would he have seen anyways— a happy family? Summer vacation photos? The carpeted floor absorbed their steps as they walked into the living room where a mini-blue bubble television with its long antennas played WTNH to an empty crowd, running a segment in the latest Handmaiden Killer case. News reporters stood outside the town's Con Edison store with its spokesperson answering questions into a microphone held closely to his face.

He looked down at the gun in his hand. It felt awkward and far too heavy. He'd seen enough television to know that he'd have to take the safety off first. But if the moment came where he'd have to use the gun to protect himself, would he remember to switch it off?

He let his arm fall limp to his side. He was formulating a hopeless plan.

"Queeny—" Rafael started, unsure of what he would have even said. He just wanted to break the silence, to know what was going on.

Queeny raised a heavy finger in the air as he stepped into the kitchen. Rafael stopped in his tracks. Both of their eyes settled on a floral arrangement at the center of the kitchen table. Queeny tilted his head with a cat-like curiosity. The flowers' heads hung so low they grazed the tabletop. Their leaves curled into themselves, black at the edges. When he reached towards them, Rafael could hear

them crinkle against his skin before detaching from its stem. Though he'd only touched one leaf, four fell. Rafael waited to see them return to life.

Nothing happened.

Queeny stood upright, his eyes scanning the room. Attached to the ceiling was a pot of string-of-pearls, wilted away, only the ends still green. On the windowsill basil, rosemary, and tomatoes hunched over. In the corner of the room a majestic palm sat with crisp brown fringe.

Rafael opened his mouth, but before he could say anything Queeny frowned, a kind of thing that made his whole face look twisted. "Do you smell that?"

He frowned, too, only now realizing the scent wafting towards him. There was something sour like cheese being melted and the unmistakable scent of beef was heavy in the air. It was nauseating. Between blue cabinets sat a blue oven with a golden light buzzing. Queeny walked towards it. The oven clicked away slowly as the temperature continued to rise. He heaved the door down. An invisible cloud of scent rushed out, attacking them both.

"Is that *shepherd's pie?*" Rafael asked, dumbfounded.

A gunshot sounded. He ducked, his own gun still clutched between sweaty fingers. The smell of meat made his mouth water as the hoarse and sour taste of bile started making its way up his throat. Had he? No, no. Queeny stood before him, shutting the oven door. Unphased by the sound.

Rafael looked up with trembling hands.

Another shot sounded.

Queeny turned, blinking at him.

Was he not hearing it too? Had Rafael lost his fucking mind?

"Put that away." Queeny said.

"What the hell is going on right now?" Rafael held the gun out on its side. It looked unchanged. It didn't feel hot. There wasn't smoke drifting out of its nozzle. The safety looked back at him, laughing. He didn't want it. He didn't want it in his hand. He didn't want it near him.

Another shot.

Rafael nearly dropped it on the floor.

"Tuck it in the back of your pants, make sure he can't see it."

"*He?* Who is he?"

"*Rafael,*" Queeny's voice dropped an octave with all the tenderness of someone who cared about him. His heart skipped a beat. "Do yourself a favor, take a deep breath and *relax.*"

Rafael felt his fingers curling tightly around the handle of the gun as the rest of his arm moved back, slipping it between the fabric of his jeans. It felt cool against his damp spine. Queeny tilted his head to the side, taking him in. The static began to fizzle away. He could almost visualize the way it trickled down his body from his shoulders to the tips of his toes before it felt nearly nonexistent. Nearly. Relax, Queeny said. *Relax*. Rafael was beginning to believe that was his favorite word for him.

Queeny placed a hand on either side of his arms. Rafael sucked in a deep breath, expecting some kind of uncontrollable reaction, for Queeny to take control of him, to command the static and bend it to his will. But Rafael only felt the warmth of his hands through his shirt. He leaned into it desperately, forgetting what it was like to be touched by someone else.

"Better?" Queeny asked him.

Rafael nodded slowly.

A gunshot sounded again, but this time Queeny held him in place. “Ready?” He waited for Rafael to nod. “Good.”

Queeny led him to the back door that spit them out onto a chipped burgundy porch. A plastic beach chair sat in the middle of an unkempt backyard with a small rusted tray table hosting an ashtray with smoke drifting into the open air. Only a few feet away stood a man in a navy blue jumpsuit, the top tied around his waist exposing a colorful inked backside. A bright orange disc sailed in an arc through the air, shattering into a dozen pieces by a bullet.

“I could hear you down the road,” The man said into the night. “Been waiting for that sound a long time.”

“You’ll draw attention to yourself with all that noise.” Queeny commented.

“There’s only one person’s attention I need,” Another disc flew into the air. “And luckily, He always watches.”

“He’s not the only one.”

The man spared a glance over his shoulder, pressing down on the trigger at the same time. The clay disc cracked in half. A devilish smile spread across thin lips. “That’s five in a row.”

Queeny crossed his arms in response.

“What was your record again?”

Before he could respond, the man held out a finger to pause the conversation. In one swift motion he cocked the shotgun and sent another bullet sailing through the air at the same moment another orange disc was at the peak of its arc. It broke into six chunky pieces, falling amongst all the other damaged pieces. He let the gun swing to his side, turning on his heel.

"That's six now." He inhaled on his cigarette, its tip burning with light creating sharp angles against the man's face. Rafael squinted as the sky darkened, the gloomy blue swapped for a richer, deeper hue. The man sauntered over, tossing the cigarette onto the open land. It let out a soft hiss as it landed against the dry grass. It was only when they were separated by the beach chair that Rafael was able to make out more distinct features. A scar that disrupted the man's left cheek, dark bags contrasting bright eyes, a permanent smirk along dry lips, white embroidery logo on the right side of the jumpsuit that read *Con-Edison*. The man's eyes flickered over to Rafael, only now realizing someone else was there. "You've brought someone home."

Keep an eye out, Queeny told him. *For what?*

Rafael felt the static returning to him as his eyes scanned the horizon quickly. There was no van that he could see. Only empty green lands and luscious trees and the man's burning gaze.

"What? You're not going to introduce me to your friend?" The man bounced on the heels of his foot, smiling a bright and brilliant and terrifyingly wrong smile. He held out a tattooed hand, a bright red rose with dark block outlines covering his knuckles. Only the tips of his fingers were left untouched. "Excuse my brother's poor mannerisms, the name's Hollis."

For a moment there was absolute silence. Hollis' hand stood mid-air waiting for him and Queeny was as still as a statue. His pulse was loud in his ears. His fingertips trembling with the power of the static, but there, somewhere in the distance, was a *crack!* of a branch. The world was still turning. Time still ticking.

Hollis dropped his hand. "So, you like him?"

Rafael paused, unsure of what to do with the overwhelming amount of information staring back at him. Hollis. Queeny's brother. "The Handmaiden Killer."

"Hell of a name isn't it?" Hollis grinned. "But I have to say, for all of the media attention and its glory nothing quite beats this. What do you say, little brother?"

Rafael felt a slight tremble from the ground. Queeny stood with both arms crossed tightly over his chest.

"Now, now," Hollis was saying. "No need to get worked up on an empty stomach. Why don't you two come inside? I'm making mom's special recipe."

He didn't wait for either of them to move. Instead, he made way for the house. His head perked in the way that an animals' ear would extend towards the sky to help their hearing. Rafael tried to swap his fear for confusion, preferring the constant cycling of questions that ran throughout his head. He was quickly getting accustomed to adding more questions to the pile of things that would not be answered. He didn't know what he was doing here with Queeny and a serial killer half of the East Coast was searching for. How was it so easy for him to slip away unseen, just a few miles away from his latest kill where an entire town was upturning the neighborhood looking for him. And here Hollis was, shooting clay discs and making Shepherd's Pie, waiting for his brother to return home.

Queeny had said the Church picked the bad guys.

But he also said that guys like Hollis stayed dead.

Chapter 14:

"What do you think God's path is for you, Rafael?" Somewhere in the distance, the lunch bell's shrill faded away as classroom doors slammed shut, chairs scraped against the floor, and textbooks creaked open. Not for Rafael. No, he'd been taken out of lunch a few minutes early. Someone ratted on him.

A month after his mother's death, they were nearly done clearing out Rafael's childhood home, his life packed into five moving boxes from Home Depot. All that was left was the pantry closet that Rafael was fishing through. His mother's champagne bottle tucked away in the back of the closet for special occasions. Those last few months everything became a special occasion. Getting out of bed? *Pop!*

"What are we celebrating?" Loren had asked as he stepped in from the backdoor, wiping his hairline with the back of his hands. His cheeks were pink from the day's work.

Rafael's hand was curled around the slender neck of the bottle. Sydney was in the living room, her soft voice echoing off the hollow walls of his house. Mrs. Deguiz was humoring her, as she always did.

"Nothing yet." Rafael answered, leaving the bottle where he found it until late in the night, when even Loren couldn't deny the darkness and gave into the blissful nothingness of sleep. Rafael wished he could. He wished for everything to slow and still, all he wanted was a moment of peace, a moment of silence. He found himself wishing for his father's return, if only so Rafael didn't have to bear the weight of his mother's death alone.

On the kitchen floor, Rafael found his thumb tracing the foiled cork of the champagne bottle. He marveled at the emerald green and the way the moon's light reflected against it from the windowpane. He felt that ghostly reminiscent of depression sinking into his bones, molecule by molecule, until it tore him apart at the seams. He didn't remember thumbing the cork or the pop that let out. He didn't remember the sweetness that trickled down his throat or the fizziness on the back of his tongue. He only remembered with each sip the heaviness dissipated and he didn't have to feel anymore.

When the sun rose, Loren found him slacked against the tiled floor. Hot and sweaty from the alcohol. Loren didn't scold him the way Sydney would have. He didn't say anything other than, "It's time to get up." And did what he could to nurse Rafael back to health, even if it meant indulging in his bad behaviors for one day. Together, they filled a water bottle to the brim with the last bottle of champagne and Rafael was half-way through the day before Sydney caught on, ratted on him — he knew it was her — and Reverend Gabriel came to the school with his glistening sorry eyes asking him of God's path.

Rafael could have given in, humored him, let him feel better about helping his sorry ass. But instead, he curled his fists and gritted his teeth, took one deep inhale, one exhale, just like the school counselor told him to and, for the first time in his life, told the truth.

"There is no God, Reverend."

Now, two and half years later, Hollis stood across from him with a butcher's knife between clean cut fingers slicing through layers of beef, cheese, and potatoes. "Do you believe in God's path, Rafael?"

They sat at opposite ends of the kitchen table. Queeny tucked away in the corner beneath the frayed edges of a majestic palm tree that reached towards him as if pleading. He paid no mind to their imagined cries. There was a stack of floral napkins in a silver holder in the space between them. The truth had taken a turn from him now.

"I don't know." Rafael took a piece of napkin between his fingers, using it to do origami. He folded it down into a smaller square, a triangle, a half-attempt at an airplane that would go nowhere because he always forgot how to properly fold the wings.

"You don't know?" Hollis peered up at him mid-slice. There was crust along the edges of the glass pan that would stick to his teeth if he bit in. "You mean to tell me you've been given the chance of a lifetime and *you don't know?*" He let out a sharp laugh, exchanging a look with his brother as if they were in on some kind of side joke. Queeny paid him no mind, sticking to the shadows. Hollis ignored his brother's lack of interest in the conversation and turned back to Rafael. "Where are you from?"

"Maine." Rafael answered simply, trying to ignore the way his voice cracked.

"And your parents?" Hollis pressed.

"Also Maine." Though he wasn't entirely convinced. He hadn't seen his father since he was a baby, couldn't remember what his face looked like, or the way he used to laugh — he imagined his father must have laughed at some point in his life.

Hollis didn't like this answer. "And your grandparents?"

"What are you getting at?" Queeny finally snapped.

"I'm just saying you don't go to Maine for their tacos."

Rafael felt heat rising to his cheeks. "I'm Dominican."

"Same difference." He seemed a lot younger than Queeny under the light of the stained-glass chandelier. His skin was a lot smoother, where Queeny had wrinkles forming in the corners of his eyes that branched out towards his temple until they vanished. Where Queeny looked dirty and in desperate need of a long sleep, Hollis looked like he stepped out of the shower and hadn't lost a second of sleep in years. Was it truly possible that this man could feel no remorse?

"What did you do before? You know BC. Before Church? Or BD might be better. Before Death?" Hollis turned to his brother. "Is there a phrase?"

Queeny ignored him.

"I was a student." Rafael answered. Though that wasn't entirely true either. He was in that weird grey area post-graduation, pre-college. He hadn't responded to any of his acceptances after Loren's death. It seemed pointless to go on living life like his entire world hadn't been flipped upside down.

"A student," Hollis repeated. "And that's it?"

Rafael nodded slowly, uncertain of what more Hollis wanted out of him.

"You seem to misunderstand me," Frustration was on the tip of his tongue. He pointed the knife at him. "What did you *do*?"

Rafael frowned. He thought of Sydney and the weight of her lips, soft and glistening from the sticky peach flavored lip-gloss from the discount store downtown. He thought of Loren's hands clasped safely around his wrists, like a sliver of Loren was still tethered to him, calling him. He thought of the thousands of shards of glass that cut through his skin. The blood that seeped out of him, trickling onto the pavement. He remembered fire in Loren's eyes, hatred and disgust mixing together

in his irises. Or maybe it was the bonfire that had grown too tall in the middle of the woods for the pre-summer party. The night Loren left. The night Rafael let him walk away.

A chill ran down his spine towards the nozzle of the gun tucked behind his waistband. There, in the back of his head, were the memories he didn't want to face. Rafael shut his eyes, but in the darkness, memories of Loren lingered.

"Nothing," Rafael answered slowly. "I didn't do anything."

"Liar."

Rafael opened his eyes, half-expecting to be staring back into Loren's. Hollis sat before him with bright green eyes and a crooked grin. He'd never heard the chair scrape against the floor. They sat across from each other, knees against knees—

"You can tell me," Hollis cooed. The knife between his spread out thighs. "No judgement here. Right Q?"

"Don't call me that." Queeny gritted his teeth.

The smile on Hollis' face was impossible to contain, his teeth pulled on his bottom lip. Hollis dipped his head so that they were close enough for Rafael to smell the Marabello Golds, masking the sweetness and crisp bitterness of a Stella on his tongue. His eyelashes were blonde. "Even as kids, he was always a sensitive one. Not us though," The chair creaked as he leaned back, taking Rafael in slowly. "You're stronger than you realize."

"No," Rafael said, certain of this at least. "I'm not."

"I dunno," Hollis let out a puff of a breath, running his thumb along the knife's edge without cutting himself. "I sure as shit don't have the balls to kill *my*self. Do you, Q?"

"I won't say it again—" Queeny started.

"Alright, alright." Hollis raised his hands in a mocking surrender.

"I didn't kill myself." Rafael insisted, but even as the words came out of his mouth, none of them believed it. It wasn't true.

But he didn't want to think about that. Thinking meant admitting and admitting meant that he had to acknowledge the truth. He didn't want to admit to all the things he had done — or *hadn't* done — that led him to that moment before the shattering of glass, the right tire spinning out of control, and the utter peace he had felt when it was all over.

He didn't have to feel guilty anymore when he no longer had to feel.

Hollis watched him with tentative eyes, a relaxed smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. He leaned in again, brushing a curl away from Rafael's forehead with the knife's tip. Rafael stilled, the static bouncing off the walls of his body, ready to come alive. Hollis traced the knife lightly against his skin, leaving a wake of goosebumps along Rafael's jawline down to the side of his neck.

"But what I want to know," Hollis whispered, his lips slightly parted. The knife beneath his chin. "What was eating you alive that made you do it?"

There was Loren sitting on his rooftop, looking distantly out at the empty horizon. No longer counting down the days where real life would begin, but when it would finally end. There was Loren beneath the light of the lamp-post in the middle of the night, water dripping off of him like rain. Rafael ran out into the night just as Loren's knees buckled, the weight of his bones too heavy for him to bear alone so Rafael took it for him. There was Loren, shivering in his tight embrace beneath three layers of blankets. His wet clothes hung over the radiator that muffled his cries until he drifted off into

a state of nothingness. There was Loren, promising to take it day by day until the day came where he couldn't take it anymore and killed himself.

There was Rafael—

His body trembled against the knife, eyes glistening with tears. Queeny leaned forward in his own chair. "Hollis, enough."

"No, no! If your Reverend wants to pride himself on turning ex-convicts into Saints I wanna know what makes *him* worth it?" He turned back to Rafael. "What did you do?" Hollis asked again, tipping Rafael's head back with more pressure on the knife. Eye to eye. Knees against knees.

—Standing in the wake of the bonfire that crackled and popped, casting jagged lines on familiar faces like masks, rendering them dark and cruel and unrecognizable. One moment he was with Sydney and her friends from the cheer team, nursing cups of beer. In the next, he was kissing Loren in the woods, away from the noise and the crowd, before Dennis Flynn from History stumbled in, trying to take a piss, when he saw Loren kiss him back. Now, there was a large crowd surrounding them, packed tight like they were in an enclosed space instead of the open woods. These were the kids who openly laughed in the face of petitioners for same-sex marriage because their parents told them it was wrong. The same boys who would sneer slurs at each other for any sign of tenderness. Who pushed and shoved. Who were taught affection was aggression and that was the only way to live. Someone's arm was holding his chest back as Dennis slammed Loren onto the forest floor.

Loren rolled over onto his back, coughing the dust out of his lungs.

Dennis crouched down before him, taking a look at the crowd that had surrounded them in a semi-circle. The other boys were cheering. Someone was yelling for a fight. Sydney was somewhere,

shrinking in between her friends who would do nothing even if it was wrong, but watch with a grimace.

"Do you know what happens to boys who think it's okay to kiss other boys?" Dennis asked.

"I'd imagine something like this," Loren wheezed.

Dennis swung. A splattering of blood from Loren's bottom lip on the ground. Rafael moved forward but he was forced back into the crowd.

"Is *this* what you want Raf?" Dennis asked him, fire in his eyes.

The other boys watched him carefully, as if by Dennis' command they'd fling him onto the ground and beat the shit out of him too. Sydney's eyes were on him, waiting for him to tell the truth.

Loren sat up, spitting blood onto the ground.

"No." Rafael answered quietly, not meeting Loren's gaze.

"Then hit him." Dennis said. A cheer rang from the crowd.

Rafael's heart stopped. "What?"

"Prove it," Dennis said, slowly getting up. "*Hit him.*"

"No," Rafael said again, licking his lips and forcing himself to meet Loren's gaze. Hatred and disgust mixed in his irises. "He's not worth it."

The knife nicked his chin, a small bead of blood bubbling out of a thin line. Rafael let out a shuddering breath as he collapsed onto the ground, his eyes shut tight until spots of white appeared in his vision. He sucked in a breath, getting caught in it, trying to take in more, but none of it was going through his body. It was all collecting in the middle of his throat, releasing back into the air, just to repeat the process.

Queeny scrambled to his feet, kneeling in front of Rafael, taking his shaking body into his. "Raf, it's okay—"

Hollis stood slowly, the knife discarded on the floor. "So this is him, huh? The great Apostle Rafael."

Rafael's heart twisted and turned inside of him. He felt a hand go straight to his chest as he struggled. The static was running wild within him, but there wasn't a single cohesive thought going through his brain. The lights on the ceiling were blinding. Queeny was a blurry figment and Hollis—

"*Breathe,*" Queeny said to Rafael calmly, one hand pressing back the curls from his face. He turned sharply over his shoulder towards his brother. "What the fuck is your problem?"

"My problem?" Hollis smiled as he stepped in front of the chandelier, its light a halo above his head. His fingers curled at his sides as he watched from above. "My problem is that he's given a chance of a lifetime and didn't do jack shit to deserve it. Look at him—"

Queeny raised a hand to his left, calling on the majestic palm's dirt and conjuring the herbs that Rafael was quickly becoming acquainted with.

"Pathetic."

Rafael cried, white spots blinding his vision. The tips of his fingers where the static should be trickling felt cold.

"Listen to me," Queeny was saying, his voice far, far away. Rafael cried as his heart clenched tighter. He coughed, his face red and cold. Sweat beaded along his forehead. There was panic in Queeny's dark eyes, but he kept telling him, "*Relax, Raf, follow my breath*."

But the pain in his heart was splitting him at the seams. He could feel his lungs retracting further and further as if they could be pulled out of his body forever like elastic. How could he explain that the weight in his chest was too heavy and there was nothing that could release him from it? Nothing but the stillness of everlasting time, of time frozen in place, of absolutely *nothing.* Rafael's vision darkened until there he was, promising to keep all of he and Loren's secrets even when it killed the both of them.

Chapter 15:

All at once, the memories of Loren came rushing back into place. He remembered the way they would sit on opposite sides of the room in a suppressed silence after an argument until one of them eventually cracked. The way they sat without speaking, in a comfortable quiet, listening to the buzz of the bees that had a nest outside his bedroom window, the crinkling of paper, the clicking of the gas stove downstairs. He remembered running along the East End Beach with one foot in the water, another in the sand. They were just kids, laughing and tumbling into each other, on top of one another. He remembered the way the sun had hit the back of Loren's head, the way the tips of his cheeks turned cherry red. He had wondered if the racing of Loren's heart was from running or their closeness. Rafael had hoped to God it was because of him.

They had been in love. They had always been in love.

As Rafael's heart slowed and his body became cold, he remembered those final moments. There was Loren cutting through the woods, his body bruised and bloodied. Dirt stuck to his hair like gel. Rafael ran after him, the alcohol making him stumble, but he was determined. He didn't care. He was going to fix this if it was the last thing he could do. Loren was opening the door to the Civic when Rafael flung himself on it, slamming it shut.

"Get out of my way, Raf." Loren spoke distantly, staring straight through the car's window, past his dark reflection. There was a bruise already blossoming in the corner of his right temple.

"Loren, you have to understand—"

"*Understand?*" Loren let out a sharp laugh that could cut right through his heart. "You know, I was perfectly fine being just friends for the rest of our lives. I was prepared for it, to keep those feelings

buried inside because with time they'd have to go away, right? You'd marry Sydney and I'd be your best man because that's how it was supposed to be. But then you kissed me," He faced Rafael, his brows furrowed. "*You* made the first move. *You* told me that you loved me. *You* told me that you were *ready*. Is that true, Rafael, are you really ready? Is that what you want?"

Rafael was quiet. He wanted to be. He wanted to be everything that Loren deserved. But all he saw was Dennis Flynn throwing Loren to the ground. The cheers from the crowd as if Loren deserved it just because he was different. He saw the look on Sydney's face — the grimace, the heartbreak, the disappointment. As he looked at her, all he could think of was his mother. He imagined her praying for him to be fixed, to be forgiven, to be cleansed of his sin. All of those little things that told him that he was wrong.

"It's okay, Rafael, I understand." Loren said quietly, his voice beginning to strain. "I understand that I'm not worth it."

"No, no, that's not it. You don't understand—" Rafael reached out, wanting, needing to touch him. Any part of him. And Loren let him. Their bodies resting perfectly into each other's crooks, Rafael's chin sat on top of Loren's head. He could feel his hot breath on his neck, the dampness of tears that trickled out slowly.

They stood like that for a moment until Loren pulled back. "Then go on, make me understand," Rafael couldn't see the colors of his eyes. Sometimes green. Sometimes grey. Sometimes golden. They were indistinguishable in the darkness. "Say something. Anything."

But Rafael couldn't. He didn't know how to put the words together. How could he want something so bad, but be so afraid to fight for it? His fears were too closely entangled with the things

he wanted and it was eating him alive. He always felt guilty— for lying to Sydney, for lying to his mother, for hurting Loren. How could he be brave when any sign of innocent affection had sent him to the confessions box with his mother praying over him to be fixed?

Loren nodded to himself slowly, gathering the courage to push Rafael away from him so he could open the car door with the little strength he had left. When he was inside, the hum of the engine filling the empty silence between them, Loren looked up. “You know what your problem is, Raf? You’re so afraid of everything that you don’t even try.”

Rafael said nothing. Loren drove off without another word and was gone the next morning.

The static trickled out of him. It levitated into the air, into the electrical buzz that kept the Callahan house alive, and into Hollis’ stern, cold eyes and his white-knuckled fists. Molecule by molecule, the static took over and time began to still. The invisible clutch on Rafael’s heart released and he could, at last, breathe.

He pushed through the pain in his chest before his eyes peeled open. Queeny watched him with a perfect stillness that for a second made Rafael panic. They were touching. Rafael was draped over his thighs and Queeny’s hand curled around his. He should be moving.

“Jesus, fuck,” Queeny breathed, the tension in his stance coming undone. “I thought you were dead.”

Rafael sat up, feeling the warmth of Queeny’s hand near the small of his back. The herbs that had grown from the majestic palm fell off his chest with a soft thud. He couldn’t recall Queeny conjuring them at all.

"What was that?" Queeny was asking as Rafael collected himself. He focused on Hollis, frozen, his narrow eyes focused on the empty space where he had previously laid. The hairs on the back of his neck stood. "I've seen you have a panic attack before, but that was different."

It was different. Rafael rubbed at his chest, his heart already resuming its normal beat. He could feel the blood in his body recirculating the more he moved and shifted. Hollis' fingers were curled into the palms of his hands. His brain felt hazy. He tried to remember the newspaper clippings that Queeny had kept that night as they slept beneath a blanket of stars.

"The women," Rafael started as he stood onto two unsteady legs, using the ledge of the table for support. "How did he kill them?"

Queeny followed suit, carefully hovering nearby to catch Rafael if he fell. "Every autopsy report came back with heart failure. Heart attacks or aneurysms. Sometimes there was a trace of poison by injection. That's why he was able to go undetected in the beginning, until he started leaving scriptures at the scenes. But he stopped doing that after… After Sarah…"

They both circled around Hollis' statue-like body. He seemed almost harmless, just a man who finished a long eight-hour shift and was ready to spend the rest of his evening with his family. But the embroidered Con-Edison logo was staring back at them. *Almost.* Rafael wanted to see some sign of what he had done to the Reeses, a drop of blood, a tear in the fabric after a desperate attempt to fight, but there was nothing.

"I was remembering everything with Loren," Rafael started. "And at first it felt like my anxiety, you know, but then… There was this hold on me, on my heart, and it was nothing like I'd ever felt

before and his hands—" Both of their eyes fell onto his white-knuckled grip. "It felt like he was *squeezing* my heart."

They were both quiet for a moment, two, three.

"Do you think it's possible for Hollis to be an Apostle?" Rafael asked.

Another moment passed in silence before, in the living room, the television resumed its chatter.

"Looks like we'll find out." The house trembled as Queeny raised his hand. The herbs on the windowsill, the string-of-pearls, and the majestic palm all unraveled, shedding their dead leaves for fresh, crisp new ones.

From the potted dirt, unfamiliar vines sprouted and slithered across the tiled floor like snakes without heads. The closer they got to Hollis, the more they began to bloom. One, three to five pointed leathery leaves with razor sharp tips gathered around his wrists and ankles. Rafael recognized them as Holly leaves with their red berries. As they curled, the leaves sliced into Hollis' skin leaving behind papercut sized scratches that would sting once he came to. The other Rafael did not know. More like branches than vines, they were studded with long two-inch prickles. They stabbed into the tips of each of Hollis' fingers to prevent his hands from curling in. Queeny was taking no risks.

Air came rushing out of Hollis' lungs mixed with the confusion of time resuming and the sudden attack on his body. He looked down at his fingertips that dripped blood onto the floor and laughed.

"You've really outdone yourself, Q!" Hollis breathed, eyes glistening with delight. "And *you!*" He shifted his attention towards Rafael. "Well, shit, I'd heard about you, but I didn't think you had a power like that. Incredible, you know, think about all the fun we could have—"

The holly leaves tightened, more blood drawn. Hollis winced. "It's always the little ones that hurt like a motherfucker. Come on now, Q, let me go. I didn't come all this way just to hurt you."

"But you sure did go all the way to Wells just to hurt me," Queeny took a step towards him so their faces were only inches apart. "Like it or not, they were *your* family too."

Hollis' jaw clenched as he struggled against the thorns. They kept growing around his body, cutting into his skin. New ones, too. Ones that were black with hundreds of short daggers along its spine. Ones that were needle fine. "I didn't kill them Q. You have to believe me."

"*Believe you?*—"

"Your Reverend did."

Queeny hesitated, like there was something to believe in what Hollis was saying.

"I'll admit, after you came home all those years ago after you had been resurrected and told me everything, I started it all because of you. I wanted in. I wanted power and I was prepared to do whatever it took to get it. But I was afraid he wasn't noticing. Not God. *The Reverend.* So I left the scriptures. I needed *him* to know. Then I go to Wells to visit Sarah and Delilah. I hadn't seen you in years and I thought, maybe, just maybe, you'd be there. And when I saw them, finally, I understood what you felt. *Love.*"

"When I got back to my hotel room that night The Reverend was waiting for me," Hollis spoke urgently. Queeny took another step forward. "He said I had that same kind of desperate want

that you and the other Apostles had, all that was left was a sacrifice and I could have it all. So I told him to name his price and he said it— Sarah and Delilah have to be next."

"Bullshit."

"No bullshit!" There was desperation in his voice. "I told him no and he said I didn't have a choice. A price needed to be paid. The next thing I know I'm moving without thinking, I'm in the car in the dead of night driving to Sarah's. I never even knew where she lived, Q. I was *led* to her. After... After I... I've killed before, but this time it was different. I felt pain in my chest, like my heart was being ripped out of me. I'm in her living room having a fucking panic attack or whatever the fuck when The Reverend and some other guy show up—"

"Who?" Queeny demanded.

"Hell if I know, some older guy. Probably around The Reverend's age. He sat down with me and put his hands on me and I could feel it— his power coming into me and I could feel my heart slow until there was nothing. A mother later I woke up in a room I didn't recognize and that was it. I haven't seen The Reverend since and I've been trying to get him to come back. Only recently did that older guy come back—"

"Grey?" Rafael offered, remembering the Church's healer who had been indifferent towards him, but kind to Queeny.

"Yes!" Hollis nodded frantically. "The Reverend sent him to tell me the Church had all its Apostles now and I wasn't needed. That's how I learned about you and I went digging. Didn't find much other than the local news headline about your suicide. Congrats by the way," The holly leaves dug into Hollis's wrist. "For fucks sake Q!"

Rafael ignored the comment. “So you killed more families?”

“What else am I supposed to do?” Hollis snapped. “Your Reverend made me kill Sarah and Delilah and *for what?* Just to toss me out? He *owes* me. Plus, it’s not like the Church of Light is in the fucking phone book. You’re like a fucking cult. Don’t you ever feel it? That *wrongness?*”

Rafael thought of that night with The Reverend, overlooking the black forest. They’d spoken about that feeling that kept festering inside of him. He didn’t realize it then, but there was something wrong about that moment, too.

The string-of-pearls shot out suddenly and wrapped itself tightly around Hollis’ neck. He yelled, clutching at his neck before collapsing onto his feet until one by one all of the greenery in the room got unnaturally longer and thicker until every inch of Hollis’ body was held down and restricted.

“Queeny wait!” Rafael reached out for him. “What if he’s telling the truth?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Queeny said. “Go wait for me in the car.”

“But—”

“He stays dead,” Queeny said firmly. “Now go wait for me in the car.”

Rafael spared one final glance between the two before he reluctantly walked away, giving into Queeny’s command, the understanding that something horrible was going to happen. He forced himself to move and with every step he felt a piece of himself had been removed until he, too, looked like Queeny did separate from his body. Rafael would do nothing and let it happen.

He was halfway through the threshold when Queeny called out to him again. “Would it make you feel better if I told you that all would be forgiven in the end?”

Chapter 16:

A casket was lowered into a grave; a body sank into a bed of dirt. Nature tore Hollis apart limb from limb. Rafael pressed his hands against the frame of the truck to steady himself when he heard the first scream echo throughout the empty landscape. He felt like there were two versions of himself now. Before and After. He was standing before a recently dug out grave, watching Loren's casket sink in. He was supposed to throw dirt in, but he wanted to throw himself instead. *It should've been me.*

When they arrived at the Church of Light, everything was quiet. The sky was still the deepest blue, but in the distant horizon the sun was coming soon. The library's glass-dome was normally lit with its golden light, but tonight it was black. Queeny led them up the ivory steps of the Church when Rafael asked, "Where is everyone?"

"It's the night of the Cleansing," Queeny told him. "Once a month The Reverend holds a ceremony in the baptism room. We sink into the water and relive our most recent sins, over and over again until we are pure in His eyes again."

"So you'll have to relive...?" He thought of Hollis' body and felt bile coming up his throat.

Queeny nodded in response.

They walked in silence through the marbled entrance flocked with tall statues. They weren't typical ones like he'd seen, Pieta or The Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus. But of an indistinguishable man carved in a moment of movement. He was posed with an arm crossed over his chest, his body just slightly twisted as if he were running on a slant. Twelve smaller statues of dogs were placed oddly in the room, an entire scene chiseled out. A golden plaque on the wall read: *The Shepherd and the Flock.*

He supposed that's all they were in the end.

Their footsteps echoed off the hallowed walls of the Church, down into the basement, until they finally arrived in the baptism room. On the opposite side of where they stood, Adelyn walked the length of the pool, her long white tunic dragging along the floor. The water mimicked her movements as she walked up and down, up and down.

"Where is he?" Queeny shouted.

"He doesn't want to see you," Her fingers danced in the air. The water levitated, another extension of her. "He said even the Cleansing cannot rid you of the sins you've committed."

"*Where is he?*" Queeny repeated.

"I said *no*." Adelyn turned on her heels. There was something different about her face, something plain and distant. She extended one arm out, pulling it towards her chest. The water did the same, reaching out like a large wave. It grabbed Queeny's body and yanked him in. Rafael reached for him, but his hand couldn't get to him fast enough. He was suddenly at the center of the pool, his large body flapping around and the water thrashing with him.

Rafael went to jump in—

"Don't," Adelyn said, her voice even and calm. Despite the commotion, he could hear her clearly over the noise. "There's still hope for you."

"Let him go," Rafael said. "He'll drown."

"I know." Her lips curled as she twirled her finger. The water circled, a mini-whirlpool at its center. Rafael watched as Queeny struggled to reach the surface. He could see him fighting against the current, it was pulling him further and further down as if the pool had no bottom and he'd sink forever.

Rafael shut his eyes and for once he did not allow himself to overthink, to get caught up. He breathed and thought of the drive to New London where they stopped at another gas station. Rafael waited in the truck, watching the number of gallons climb on the pump as he listened to the crackling radio that played from a shitty speaker outside. *Gives You Hell* was playing, his head swaying and his hands banging on an invisible drum set. He used to do this with Loren when they were kids, staring at their reflections in the full-length mirror and not seeing his disorganized room, but of a grand stage and a faceless crowd jamming back to them. A child's dream of being a rockstar.

Queeny caught him and Rafael froze as if his own powers had an effect on him. Queeny only laughed and shook his head. When they were ready to go he turned the radio on, switching from the news they had listened to the whole way, to something lighter.

"It's a good look on you." Queeny said after a few minutes of cruising on the highway.

"What is?" Rafael looked over, cradling a coffee between his fingers.

"Happiness." Queeny smiled.

"That time on the road has served you well," The Reverend's voice came from somewhere above him. Rafael craned his neck towards the ceiling. There was a cat-walk at the head of the pool and he could see the glimmering silver head of The Reverend's begin to peak until he stood fully before him. His arms widely spread along the edge. "You must feel proud. I know that I am."

There was a warmth in his chest that was coming alive in him. There was a part of him that wanted to give into the feeling. In those words he imagined his mother, the words he always wanted her to say to *him*, the real him. But he pushed his wishful past away because now, in the present, there was something much more pressing, something that he could actually change.

"Is it true?" Rafael called out. "About Hollis? Was he one of us?"

"Yes." The Reverend answered. "He had powers like the rest of us, but he wasn't an Apostle. Consider him a necessary evil. God's Satan. Jesus' Judas."

"A necessary evil controlled by you."

"Now that is a serious accusation, Rafael. All I did was play into his predisposed behaviours. After all, it was *he* who made the choice to be The Handmaiden Killer, not I."

"How did you do it?" Rafael asked.

"Simple," The Reverend smiled softly. *Let go—*

Rafael heard the voice in the back of his head.

Give in—

He felt the static turn inwards, and the sloshing of the water resumed.

Give up—

Queeny's head breached the surface, a loud gasp for air before the water slammed him back in.

Rafael shut his eyes, his hands flinging up. Another memory. Another lifetime. The Reverend clapped as time stopped again. "You're getting quicker, but still not quite there." He smiled, watching from above like it were a game.

He was right. If there was any way of getting Queeny out of the water, Rafael had to extend his power to fill the whole room. He had no real way of knowing just how to do that. Only that it was possible.

"Do you remember what our one rule was, Rafael?" The Reverend asked.

"The past stays in the past." He recalled. Queeny had told him that it didn't matter what memory, but maybe for something like this it did. He needed something bigger, something that he could—

"Precisely and yet, Queeny failed to do that. You know, those two are no different. Hollis betrayed those women. They invited him into their homes and he killed them. And Queeny, I invited him into my home, treated him like a son, my most *beloved* son, and he betrayed me. Did you know that?"

He remembered Queeny saying that The Reverend blamed him for the radio silence between him and God. But he never said what he was to blame for.

"After that first year, he ran away for a little while. He went back to New London and told Hollis all of our secrets and even after all this time, I could never really figure out why. His brother never loved him, not really. He just wanted to use him. That's why he did it all, you know. Why the murders started."

Rafael needed to refocus. He needed to be in a memory and present enough to move through his power, to redirect its motion—

"If your mother knew about you and Loren and rejected you, would you have ever returned?"

Rafael hesitated.

"I wonder what kind of a mother makes her child feel like a sinner his whole life."

"Stop it—"

"I would've given the two of you a home, a place where you truly could be. Isn't that what you two always wanted?"

Rafael's jaw tightened. He was in two places at once. Here with The Reverend, and standing outside the living room foyer. His mother had been sitting on the couch with her legs draped over the arm of the chair. It was during the early days of he and Loren's relationship, when their giddiness outweighed the fear. He told her he was applying to colleges out of state, colleges with Loren.

"What about Sydney? Will she go with you, too?" His mother had asked.

"No, *mami*," Rafael fiddled with the pamphlets in his hands. "I want to be with Loren."

It was the closest thing he could get to the truth with her. She had only nodded in response. There was no real way of knowing. He knew that his mother loved him. He knew that she would've done anything for him. He could only hope that even if she didn't get it at first, she would come around. That she would still love him because he'd always love her, even if it hurt him.

He let his memory of his mother flow through him and into the air. He pushed through the static until the whole room was his to manipulate, his to control. The Reverend's voice could not reach him here. Only when he heard absolute silence did he move, diving headfirst into the water. He cut through it quickly, sinking low to where Queeny's arms stretched over his head. As soon as they touched, Queeny was alive and both of their legs were kicking up to the surface.

They heaved themselves over the edge. Queeny hurled water out of his body, wheezing as he did so.

"Took you long enough," Queeny struggled.

"Fuck off." Rafael kicked him.

Queeny laughed, his body trembling. He looked through his hair that hung over his eyes now. "Thank you."

"What do we do?" Rafael asked, staring at the rigid body of The Reverend. Those grey eyes pierced through him.

Queeny coughed, still composing himself. He rolled over onto his side, towards where Adelyn's hand was pointed at the water. "That wasn't her."

He thought of the blankness in her face. The Reverend's voice in the back of his head. It was possible he was controlling her too. "Are you sure?"

"She's not my biggest fan," Queeny admitted. "But she doesn't want me dead."

Through shared glances, Rafael got onto his feet making his way over to Adelyn. He carefully placed a hand on her arm. He noticed her eyes coming back to life first. They darted frantically at the water that sloshed at nothing. She dropped her hands, brows furrowing. Her head cleared on its own.

"What—? Rafael? What are you doing back?" She looked at him, then Queeny who waved from the floor. Both of their bodies soaked through and through.

The water began to calm.

"Is it over?" She asked.

"Almost." Queeny said, nudging his chin towards The Reverend's frozen body.

Adelyn followed his gaze. "Why am I getting the feeling like we're talking about two different things?"

"We can explain everything later," Queeny started, joining them in their little semi-circle. "But first, I need Simon."

Chapter 17:

"*—the fifth forest fire along the East Coast this past week, the most recent in Providence, Rhode Island in an unmarked set of woods. Local authorities were notified earlier this morning, evacuation was unnecessary after the city's firefighters were able to contain the fires from spreading further. There are reports of one possible fatality after discovering the remains of a building—*"

"Will you turn that shit off?"

Rafael sat on the hood of the battered blue truck, watching as the price climbed the more gallons it consumed. Queeny returned with two cups of coffee and two paper bags, one with donuts and the other with sandwiches as per Rafael's request.

"Don't you want to know what they're saying?" He twirled around so he faced Queeny on the driver's side.

"What for?"

"To make sure, you know, *he's dead.*" Rafael whispered that last part. They stayed until the building caved in on itself, until Evie stopped crying, until one by one the Apostles departed and left the past in the past and embraced the uncertainty of the future with no Church, no Reverend, just a new beginning.

"He's dead." Queeny said, certain.

The gas jump clicked and he made no indication that he was going to do anything other than lean against the truck and drink his morning coffee before they hit the road to only God knew where.

Rafael rolled his eyes playfully, slipping off the side and going through the motions. He felt the tug of a smile on his lips as he turned to see the back of Queeny's figure resting against the truck. When everything was back in place, he rounded the vehicle and found a comfortable spot next to his friend, where they both looked up at the sky and watched the way the clouds moved peacefully by.

He took a long drag of his coffee and relished in the way it reminded him of his mother, of home. "Q?"

He hummed.

"What are you going to do now that there's no Church, no serial killers to obsessively follow?"

"I don't know," Queeny let out a long dramatic sigh. "What do *you* want to do?"

"Me?" Rafael paused. He had always wanted to get out of Portland and he supposed he did. This new life granted him much more than power, it gave him Queeny and his shitty truck, overpriced highway coffees, and miles and miles of places that he wouldn't have seen without him. He lived his whole life in fear and let it hold him back from everything he had ever wanted. He didn't want to live that way anymore.

He wanted to take advantage of this new start, to do things differently, to live a little more freely, anywhere and everywhere he could. He liked the idea of pulling off the side of the road and sleeping in the bed of the truck. Like The Reverend said, home was something moveable and moldable. He didn't have to run from it anymore, he could take it with him. If he could find a way to make a home with Loren in his shitty Civic, why couldn't he do that here with Queeny? "You ever go out West?"

Queeny smirked. "Am I hearing a road trip?"

"Why not? We've got time." Rafael held out a hand. "Plenty of it."

Queeny snorted. "You learn how to control your power once and you think you're the shit. Get your ass off the hood and get in, I think I know a good spot where we can kick it off."

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The engine's hum gave way to the soft chirp of birds, a gentle breeze in the wind. Somewhere, not too far, a wind chime clattered, angling its high tuned pitch towards the two men. Rafael was out of the truck first, his hand glued to the frame. The cemetery didn't look how he had remembered. The ground was green and luscious, he could smell the sweetness of freshly cut grass burning in his nostrils. Pockets of flowers extended towards the sky, drooping from the heaviness of their leaves. Rafael turned, wondering if Queeny had anything to do with the cemetery's appearance but when he did, the big burly man was fiddling with the keys to the truck.

"Are you coming?"

Queeny ran a hand down his thigh, clapping his lips together. "Do you want me to?"

The last time Rafael was here he nearly drunk himself to death after Loren's funeral. He had come back stumbling, swearing, cursing God for all that He had taken from him. He begged, *take me, take me.* He wasn't superstitious like his abuela had been, but he would've given himself to any God or Devil if it meant Loren could be alive instead of him. Sydney had found him, collapsed over Loren's grave with his snot and tears mixed together. He could still feel her delicate hands pressing against the back of his spine, trying to get him to sit up.

"It's going to be okay, Raf. It's going to be okay."

It was the same thing people had said to him when his mother died and it was never true. Sydney tried to tuck a strand of hair behind his ear. Rafael recoiled, stumbling onto the back of his thighs before he lost his balance and he was flat against the Earth. He sucked in a shuddering breath, trying to catch a whiff of Loren's scent somewhere in the dirt he was buried in. He couldn't smell a goddamn thing.

She reached for him again and every time she touched him, he could feel Loren's hands on his skin. Toes against toes. Knees knocking into knees. Fingers brushing, lips interlocking. Every single one of Sydney's touches were trying to erase Loren's and all Rafael wanted to do was get away, run away from her.

He rolled over onto his side, his sobs ripping a hole in his stomach. Everything hurt. He could feel his lungs straining. Every single piece of him tearing apart, over and over again.

"Rafael, you have to breathe!" Sydney yanked him off the floor, pressed his back against hers and held him as tight as she possibly could.

He tried to fight her, tried to pry her little tiny fingers off his skin but she only dug her nails deeper, repeating again and again, "*Breathe.*"

He did, after what felt like hours, he was able to feel the rhythm of her heart against his back, feel her breath against the back of his neck and minute after minute he was able to breathe again until the pain had subsided and all he felt was—

Nothing.

Sydney ran her thumb against the dry patch on his skin. "I know how much he meant to you."

"No," Quiet and stern, Rafael sat up, creating a small gap between the two of them. He cradled his knees close to his chest, eyeing the stone grave with Loren's name etched in it. "You don't."

As Rafael and Queeny made their way down the winding gravel paths that led to Loren's grave the clouds parted and let down an angelic stream of light. They shared a glance at the convenient timing, pondering first whether they were followed by one of the other Apostles. But the cemetery was quiet in the early Sunday morning glow. A sliver of Heaven on Earth.

Atop Loren's grave sat a fresh bundle of flowers tied together with twine sitting on top of a brown card. He didn't need to look at it to know that inside he would find Mrs. Deguiz's neat script, writing letters to the dead so they could stay tethered to the Earth.

He'd written Loren a letter once. A month after Loren had been buried, Rafael didn't go to graduation. He told Mrs. Deguiz that he'd meet her there, but he couldn't. He started to walk and then he felt his breath stop in his chest. He felt heaviness in his bones. The buzzing of his phone as the minutes ticked away.

Where are you?

Are you coming?

Loren would want you to walk.

He tossed his phone into the lake, watched it sink with all its guilt to the bottom.

He walked aimlessly until his bloodied feet brought him back to the Deguiz's house, to his small room where they tried to make a home for him after his mother died. No one was home yet.

No one but the empty stationary meant to keep Loren alive.

So he wrote. He wrote until his words for Loren became less and less about him and more about the emptiness he had always felt since the day God had taken his mother and now Loren, too, and more about how religion was a lie and they'd been lied to ever since and they missed out on the world because they were too afraid to live because they were too busy thinking about death and the afterlife and being good. To hell with being good, Rafael wrote, I should have loved you the way I was always meant to.

The words on the page did more damage to him than if they stayed in his head.

They were real.

Tangible.

He looked at them.

I loved him. I always loved him. And I still love him.

They say the dead always knows, but *how?*

That was the night Rafael got in Loren's Civic and crashed it.

All he had wanted was to tell Loren that he loved him.

"Raf." Queeny was no longer at his side, but standing a few paces to the right of him, where another headstone sat with a similar bouquet of flowers and its own personal note. There was a small smile on Queeny's lips. "Take a look."

It was his.

Tangled together in eternity, a loving son and best friend, Rafael Acosta 1991-2009.

He looked back at Loren's where the same set of words looked back at him.

Tangled together in eternity.

RafaelandLoren.

"So, you gonna tell me?" Queeny nudged him with his elbow.

His face was wet with tears, his throat tightening. He tried to wipe them away as best he could. "Tell you what?"

"Your story."

Rafael sniffled. "Don't you already know it?"

"Not this one," Queeny looked at both graves. "Not the story of Rafael and Loren."

Rafael playfully rolled his eyes and shook his head.

Queeny laughed too. "Come on, enlighten me."

But he didn't even know where to begin. Had their story started before or after they had been placed into each other's lives? If there was a path to believe in, Rafael believed in that one. Where they were always destined to find each other, in this life and the next. For over a decade Rafael watched that sweet boy from Sunday school from the corner of his eye, admired his smile, his unabashed laughter, the darkness behind his eyes on cloudy days. He watched him from the passenger seat, counted the 52 freckles on his face a million times. Told him to pick up his feet after the third flight of stairs. Dragged his fingers through his silky hair when he fell asleep in the middle of a movie. He would take these memories into this new life, hold them close to his chest, because that was how he was going to keep Loren alive.

So, Rafael told him all the little things.