

The Phoenix Rising

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THE PHOENIX RISING

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MONDAY
OCTOBER 13

GRAHAM

1

The papers piled higher and higher. The day dragged on in a constant monotony. It was nearing five when a knock sounded against his door. It rang out eerily, ominously in the stillness of the office and the permeating silence. Graham shuffled some papers to the side before calling out. He expected his assistant, Raul, to enter the door, but instead he was greeted by two uniformed Police Officers.

"Mr. Lazario?" The younger officer asked solemnly, his eyes never leaving the ground.

"Yes? What can I help you gentlemen with?"

"Do you know of a man named" He paused, "Christian?"

"I have a brother named Christian, why?"

"Sir, can you come with us?" The younger officer said, his voice growing in confidence.

"Why? What's wrong?" Graham looked up suddenly, averting his eyes from the countless story ideas littering his desk.

"Sir, please. It's important you cooperate with us, we will explain everything." Stern eyes pierced Graham, and then suddenly all at once they softened.

Graham weakened, his eyes becoming misty, "What happened to my brother?"

"We need you to identify...a body." The younger officer's voice cracked.

He stood up then, news articles flying left and right. He wobbled over towards the officers. They walked out of the building and entered a waiting police cruiser.

* * *

Graham shrugged and blinked away the tears as the haze of long dead memories faded with the setting sun as he turned his attention to the building in front of him. "Fifteen minutes." He winced as the clouds suddenly lifted and the bright rays of the October sun reflected off of the gilded sign shooting into his eyes, blinding him.

The man went prone, eyeing the sign: *Lion's Gate Hotel*, home of *café Pimento*. Ten minutes. He lifted it, testing the angle, perfecting the shot he was about to take. He weaseled his way into the grass and stared straight ahead. Shadows flicked this way and that; the sun was beginning to set above *café Pimento*. Five. He smirked now, thinking of the payment that was to come. Justice, vengeance, and a fine lump sum, all wrapped into one. *It's perfect*, he thought.

His cell phone vibrated against his leg, the silent alarm triggered. It was time. He hoisted it up and peered through the lens, making the final adjustments, preparing to take the shot.

* * *

The man in the suit strode confidently towards *café Pimento*, his dark skinned company clinging to his arm, smiling seductively.

"Good day, Mayor Reibert." The young usher said as he opened the door, a smile on his face. "They're expecting you inside."

"Thank you sir," Reibert nodded, slipping a hundred dollar bill into the young boy's jacket, "For your troubles." He then smiled and laughed, but his voice did not echo his jovial appearance, "And your silence." He moved towards the doors, and the young lady stole one last glance behind her.

And then there was a quick flash of light.

* * *

Click. Click. Click. Graham pressed the trigger quickly, zooming, readjusting the shots as was needed. With each click, he assured his place in history. And then the woman looked back. *Perfect.* He emptied the cartridge and stood up suddenly, rushing down the hill, an evil grin planted on his face.

His work was done. The camera was empty.

Graham Lazario shouldered his camera as he ran down the hill hailing the nearest taxicab. "PS 532." He barked as he got in and slammed the door. The taxi sped off, whizzing in and out of traffic as it headed towards the destination.

Graham smiled and leaned back in the leather seat. *Every newspaper in the state will want these photos. If the family man is having an affair, then who's to say he isn't cheating the public? And that, after all, is what the Right to Know is all about.* He smirked and reached into his backpack, pulling out his handwritten notes. He flipped through them anxiously awaiting the end of the journey and the destruction of Lyton's Favorite Family. *It will be beautiful.*

"Six bucks man," The taxi driver's thick Jamaican accent and deep voice startled Graham, pulling him out of his revelry.

"Right." He nodded as he exited the vehicle; he flashed his badge at driver, "Charge it to *The Courier*." He said as he pulled his backpack out, slamming the door before he turned and walked away.

The vehicle sped off, tires squealing.

JESSICA

2

Half days were always her favorite. Today was exceptionally perfect. Jessica couldn't have asked for better luck. The sun was shining high in the sky, the air surprisingly warm for an October day. The trees were afire in their bright fall foliage, splashing wave upon wave of color onto the dying grass beneath her feet. Lunch had just passed and she had already shrugged off the notion of even returning inside. How could she? It was a beautiful day out, and there were only two more periods before the end of the day. *The Half-Day*. She thought *no one comes to classes on a half day*. She glanced at her watch. Forty minutes. And then two days off for teacher conventions.

She danced about the common area outside the school, tumbling and laughing. Relishing the day. It was like she was a little kid again. It was like she didn't have to worry about watching her every step. It was like her father had never accepted his career. It was like she was normal. Like she wasn't the mayor's daughter. She didn't have to be watched and second-guessed on her every move. It was like she didn't have to hear her mom's whispers in her ear each night: *Be more ladylike*. She scowled.

Her mother always seemed to look down at her, never approving of a single thing she did. The young girl leaned back against the stout trunk of the oak tree, gazing upwards towards the heavens. She tossed back her long black hair and checked her watch again. Five minutes.

Her mind began to wander, biting her nails and chipping off the blackened nail polish. *What if he doesn't show? What if he's like all the other guys, they say they'll be there and they never are.* She tried to force her mind back to the images dancing above her. She focused on the puffy white clouds lazily strolling through the afternoon sky. *He should be here by now.* She stood up and removed the letter from her back pocket, double-checking the date, time and location. Everything was as it should be. *Where is he?*

She coughed and went for her purse, removing a slender cigarette from her pack. She sparked it and puffed away ferociously. The nicotine entered her body and pierced through to her soul, calming her worries. She glanced across the courtyard, squinting.

And then she smiled. He had arrived.

* * *

"Miss Reibert?" The man called out as he ran, the camera smacking against his leg. He ignored the blunt pain until he could come to a full stop in front of the dark haired girl standing in front of him. "I'm sorry I'm late."

She giggled. "It's okay! So does this mean you're here to interview me?"

Graham smiled and couldn't help but to wink, "Of course. I think the Lyton teenagers would just love to have a chance to meet you." Then he stood back, looking

her up and down. He eyed her black laced dress warily, "Is that what you are going to wear during the photo shoot?"

Jessica's eyes left his, she looked down solemnly. "It's my favorite. You don't like it?"

Graham's eyes fixed on her buckled boots.

"Well, I think it's cute." She puffed her chest out and flicked her cigarette into the grass.

He shrugged, "Whatever you want." Reaching into his pocket he removed a small notepad and blue pen. "So what's Lyton's most famous teen do for fun around here?"

"Well," she began, her eyes darting about, "My friends and I don't do much. I mean I can't really go anywhere without worrying what people think about me. We mostly just go to," she paused, "clubs and stuff like that."

He nodded, scribbling into his notebook. "Why do you feel people are judging everything you do?" He chuckled softly to himself and looked up at her appearance, he knew the answer.

"I think it's cuz they all see my father when they see me. It's like I don't have a life of my own. God forbid I do something on my own. My mom always yells at me too." She grumbled, reaching for another cigarette. "She doesn't like anything I do. She hates me."

"Why is that?"

Jessica fumbled with her lighter, trying to spark a flame. "Damn, I just bought this yesterday."

Graham went into his bag and removed his silver lighter. He flicked the case open and sparked it, the heat causing the blackened cross that was painted onto the cover to change to a beautiful shade of blue.

"That's pretty." She said.

He smiled, fingering the lighter, flipping it up and catching it. "Present from my brother." He sparked his own cigarette and sat down. "So why does your mother hate you?"

She sighed, inhaling the smoke, letting it ease her mind. "She says I'm different. Thinks I should be a 'pretty girl' or something, and I tell her that it's *so* not me! And she just gives me a mouthful and tells me to shut up. I try to speak my mind, but she won't hear it. All she has to say *ever* is 'everything you do reflects on your father.' But I'm not my father. I'm me. Plain and simple." She exhaled sharply, "Why don't people understand?"

Graham laughed, "My brother was pretty famous too. I know what you mean – it's like we're always shadowed by what they do."

"Really?" Her eyes peeked upwards.

"Yeah, he was on the city council. He made all these great suggestions that no one listened to. At least no one that mattered." He shrugged, and flicked the ashes into the wind.

"What happened?"

"He's not on council anymore..." Graham shrugged and let his voice trail off.

They sat in silence for a while, inhaling their cigarettes.

Jessica was the first to finish, "So..."

Graham blinked and shook his head, remembering where he was. "Oh. Oh. Right." He flipped through the empty pages on his notebook. "Who are your friends here? I think it'd be a nice touch of humanity to interview them, you know – make you more real. That way, maybe people won't keep looking at you as nobody and maybe they'd realize that we are all real people."

She shrugged, "They don't go here."

Graham nodded gently, "So where do they go?"

"Nowhere."

He blinked and looked up at the sun. "I'm sorry; I'm not really good at this stuff. My editor just sent me here, told me they needed something tangible by tonight. I really didn't have anything thought out yet. So I figured I would take this opportunity find out the more personal side of the 'Royal Family'." He laughed, "That's what they call you all inside the papers. I actually heard them compare your dad to Kennedy. There's a rumor going around that he's going to run for Senate. And everyone's supposed to back him. You're practically already the next House of Camelot! Your father is quite well liked."

Jessica's eyes began to water, as she sniffled a little. "I thought this was about me! Why are you talking about my dad? Why can't people see that I'm me! DAMN IT! I'M JESSICA REIBERT." She wiped away her tears. "Go away."

Graham stared, mouth agape. Not quite sure what to say he shrugged and apologized.

She ignored him and stood, turning to walk away.

"Wait. Tell me about Jessica Reibert. I want to know. The city wants to know."

"One day they'll see who I am. They'll accept me. The real me." She walked away.

The skies darkened.

JOHN

3

The Evening Star arrived shortly after dinner. John Reibert lounged in his easy chair while the television flickered in front of him, the daily reports of violence and bloodshed glorified for the evening news. John shrugged and pressed mute as he went to the door to retrieve the evening paper. He sat back down his chair and glanced at the headlines. "Honey, come here a minute."

The First Lady of Lyton poked her head through the alcove in the kitchen, "What is it?"

"That article I was telling you about ran already. It's got the approval ratings. Senator Rowlings picked me as his successor! He's putting his name on the line for my career." He continued reading. "They voted when I left today!"

He grinned, his voice rising as he read, "The Council today met secretly with representatives of the Senate. Members voiced their opinion on the current Mayor of Lyton..." he skimmed further down the article. "...In a surprising unanimous agreement..." His heart beat faster. "...the outstanding job Mayor Joseph Reibert has done in his two years in the city, has placed him as the number one candidate for the party's representative for Senator."

"Well congratulations, Mister Popular." His wife came over and planted a kiss on his cheek. She hugged him. "I told you. I knew you could do it."

He set the paper down before he could finish reading the remaining headlines. "Isn't this amazing? Nothing can stand in our way!" He squeezed the arms of Mrs. Reibert. "We've come a long way." He lay back in his chair, admiring the interior of the Mayoral Mansion's living room.

John Reibert smiled, "This really is paradise. It's like we're really in Heaven." He clasped his hands and said a silent prayer, thanking God for his prosperity. He lay back and stared in wonder.

It was a small castle fit for a king. This was his Camelot. Darkened burl wood paneling gave the room its earthiness, reminding Joseph that he was still alive and hadn't ascended into heaven recently.

The dreamlike quality of the palace was accented by the finest amenities. A sixty-inch big-screen television sat in front of him, a mahogany bookshelf sprouted up around it, encasing it in elegance. Leather-bound books containing the original town charter from two hundred years ago sat enshrined by a glass case. Beautiful frescoes added a splash of color to the room as plants grew about them, tended to by the best gardeners in the city. It truly was paradise.

Carol smiled and stood; she turned away from her husband to return to the chores. She dismissed the help with a wave of her hand. "I can take care of the dishes myself, Mrs. Garcia. Why don't you take off for the rest of the evening?"

"Thank you ma'am." Mrs. Garcia bowed as she left the kitchen, grabbing her coat. "Thank you sir. I'll be back tomorrow night." She smiled happily as she opened the front door and exited into the cool October air.

"Have you seen Jessica yet?" Carol called out from the kitchen.

"Nah, she's probably out with her friends. Don't worry. She'll be back later." Joseph shrugged and picked up his paper again.

"I sure hope so. I'm worried." She scrubbed at the pots.

"Don't worry about-" He stopped mid-sentence, his jaw opened wide as his face drained of all color. He stared at the headline and the accompanying photograph of his daughter.

Her favorite black dress was frayed beyond repair and appeared more lace than silk, her hair flew wildly in the wind and she clutched a cigarette in one hand as she leaned against a tree. The photograph had been digitally darkened to make the scene appear almost ethereal. The headline taunted him.

Camelot's Morganna
The Secret Life of Jessica Reibert
Our Exclusive Interview

SAM

4

His head hurt. Bad. Sam awoke with a start, groggily looking around. He blinked. Once. Twice. The room slowly came into focus around him. The only light shining through the darkness was the alarm clock to the left. Its colon blinked, casting strange shadows left and right and turned the white walls red. A low rumble sounded nearby, startlingly loud in the stillness of the midnight air. Sam buried himself in the covers to drown out the sound of his roommate's snores.

Tomorrow is mom's birthday. He thought, running the date through his head. *Has it really been a month since I was home? It's okay.* He reasoned, the house wasn't really his any more. It belonged to the city. It belonged to the Mayor. It belonged to his father. It just didn't feel real.

Four years ago he had a completely different life. Four years and twelve jobs later, everything was new. Everything was as it should be. He couldn't remember the last time he went without dinner, or without a haircut or clean clothes. It had taken a lot to get where he was. Times were tough then, sure. Mom was a cashier at *SaveNow*, dad sweated and grunted in the steel mills during the day, and froze in a guard shack at night. Back then everyone worked. Back then, going to college was as big a fantasy as flying horses and devils and monsters.

He sighed. For the first time in three years, he found himself thinking about Jessica. The baby. She was the only one that didn't have to work. Didn't have to work twice. She loved mom. And mom loved her.

It happened so quick, so fast. The change took three hundred votes, two debates, and an uprising of hope. It was a new revival of lost souls seeking salvation, seeking change. It was something to be proud of. It was Hope. His family – they were gods among men. *We were the kings and queens of Camelot. We were the future. And I was going to school.* They were the Heroes of the Headlines.

Sam tossed and turned some more, still not believing this was his new home. The clock ticked towards three am. He coughed and closed his eyes again. Tomorrow was a new day. And he had work to do.

CONSTANCE

5

Desolation set grim resolve. Constance found herself shivering against the autumn air as she tossed another newspaper blanket into the pit of flame. With a roar and a belch of heat, the cold died a slow death. Her frail hands reached out towards the warmth, but found only cold. Unnatural. Erotic. She watched a while as the flames danced their coital dance. Growing and rising. Sighing with the wind. It was warm. But so cold. So very cold.

Unnatural.

The dancing of the flames brought her into a world of terror. Devils, monsters. Sinners and Saints. Her eyes lost focus and the world grew blurry. Two quick blinks and the whisper of the wind brought the fluttering of angel wings to the tip of her nose.

Black wings.

Wings of Death.

The skull smiled, stared, laughed at her. She rose; eyes transfixed as all of the world was burnt to ash at that very moment. Constance turned her back to the heat and the night. Slow, deliberate, painful steps took her east and then half a dozen paces south of the flames. She bent down and her bones creaked with age, the weakness of death's embrace.

She stared into the hole and made a few desperate cries. Spasms and coughs wracked her body. Blood caked her lips. She reached through the hole and called his name: "Antony. Antony." Whispering now. "Please. Please Antony. Where are you?"

Skittering sounds and the sharp rake of claws on broken pavement brought her face around. She managed the last of her strength to turn around and stare at the creature before her.

The rat seemed to smile at her. His whiskers lifted up and down. He nodded his head, a greeting between friends.

"Mother. You hurt." His voice was high pitched and simple. Not Mickey Mouse pitched. But click and buzz pitched to the few around her.

Constance turned her head, shaking no. Her eyes said yes. Six days. It had been six long days since the last fix.

"I. Help?" Antony's red eyes frowned. "You sick. Need medicine."

Before she could answer, Antony had run off and began tugging on the jeans of a tall black man. Constance watched as the man tried to shake the rat off, then look down to see the white patch on its back.

Antony looked up at him with pleading eyes and pointed towards Constance. They ran to her.

GRAHAM

6

The story ran that night. A quick post on three blogs was all it took for the news to spread like wildfire. Now he was waiting for the checks to start rolling in. He had already sold the interview to *The Evening Star*. Page one, below the fold.

It was the perfect placement. The *Star* outdid itself today. Top of the fold was the beauty and the praise of the King himself. Below the fold was the ugliness and unholy prodigal daughter. The *witch*. Graham came up with the nickname all by himself. He smiled his crooked smile and flipped through the article.

He laughed as he read: *it was a dark and stormy night in May when the Morgana cast her spell, sacrificing a small rat to seal the deal with the devil himself.*

Graham had just finished reading his article when Mr. Johnson called.

"We expect your retraction of these lies by morning. You know the penalty if we don't see the text box."

Before Graham could reply, the phone went silent.

He opened the door and stepped into the darkened office. By now, most of the thirteen staffers had gone home from *The Right to Know*. He went down the steps from his office and opened the door into the chill night air.

"Walk with me a moment." Raul Mijar had been waiting for him.

"Thought you were gone for the night." Graham pulled his brown trench closed and gripped his briefcase with an ungloved hand. "Cold tonight. Make it quick."

"I read your article."

"And?"

"What's the plan?" Raul's voice dipped low, sinister.

"Our King won't be in power much longer. The pictures leak tomorrow. Go home. It's your article, your byline. Have fun with it."

"By six, it will be done."

"Make it three. *Star* needs to go to print at five. They've already guaranteed it above the fold. Make it good and the whole check is yours."

"The *whole* check?"

"Did I stutter?" Graham turned east, away from Raul. He began to walk away.

"I'll have it by noon. Do I get a bonus?"

"Don't get greedy." Graham continued eastbound and disappeared into the concrete jungle, leaving Raul on the steps of *The Right to Know*.

The air was crisp. Graham's breath puffed out in tiny white wisps. He inhaled deeply the scent of death in the air as the leaves shuddered and shed the last of their leaves. The subway was only six blocks away, and the heat was a relief from the mid-Atlantic autumn.

It was late. And the scent of urine and booze was overwhelming. Three bums were passed out along the steps. One slept under the turnstile. Graham kicked him as he stepped past. The train was late, as usual.

This was the last train home. It was full of unwashed, unholy beasts. He found a seat next to one of the wretched, smelly things.

"You done wif that?"

Graham blinked, looked towards the mass of newspaper and dirty clothes huddled next to him. "Excuse me?"

"The blanket. You done?"

".. .. What blanket?"

Instead of answering, Smelly grabbed the newspaper sitting next to Graham and wrapped it around himself. "Thank you" was all he said.

"What are you doing? Do you even know how to read?"

"Go fuck ya self. I'm tryin' ta stay warm."

"You haven't answered my question." Graham's lips twisted up in a sneer.

"Ya. I ken read."

"Maybe you should take a look at that before you piss all over it in your sleep."

"Yeh."

"I think you should read that."

"Piss off."

Graham stood up, his eyes growing dark. "Now, that wasn't very nice. Was it?"

"Yeh. Well. Welcome to Lyton."

"That, sir – is simply unacceptable. Must I teach you manners?"

"Yeh. I got manners. Please, shut the fuck up. Thank you." Smelly rolled over then. He farted loudly once and belched before licking his lips. "Chocolate."

"Do you believe in God, sir?"

"Yeh. I'm prayin' to him right now. He ain't listenin'."

The lights above him flickered and went out briefly. And in the dark, Graham seemed to glow.

Smelly sat up and pulled the paper off of him as the lights came back on.

"I think you'll find the information there – quite enlightening."

The fire went out in Smelly's eyes as he picked up the newspaper and turned to the interview. It took four stops before he finished.

"And?" Graham said slowly, staring at Smelly. Savoring his reaction.

"Them's bad people." Smelly scratched his head and skin flaked onto Graham's coat. He plucked two hairs off his head and bowed in shame.

Graham opened his hand as the hairs fell into his palm.

"Please say, mister is we firing him? We get good people then. Nice people."

"Soon." Graham dropped the hairs into his pocket. "We need to tell good people about the bad people first."

"I can help." Smelly said matter-of-fact.

"And how would you do that?"

"I call my Angels. Angels fight Devils."

"And Ninjas fight Pirates. She's a witch. A bloody *witch*. A – heretic. For this, I require something a little more – substantial than your delusions."

"Angels is real, sir."

"What if – what if I told you I could talk to God?"

"Me 'n' god is friends. I talk wif him at night."

"A different god. One that listens. One that – responds."

"Is he – real?"

"All gods are real. Mine is fire and ice. And everything nice."

The robot voice told them the train ride was almost over.

TUESDAY
OCTOBER 14

SAM

7

Golden rays filtered in through the slats in the blinds. Sam blinked and groaned, struggling to wake up. With a quick grunt, he stood up and ran his hand through the blackened locks, tousling them. He stole a quick glance at the clock and mumbled displeasure. Noon. Sam opened the blinds and ran towards the showers.

The white yellow light of the sun forced his roommate to stir and he groggily opened his eyes, "morning Sam." His voice cracked.

"Didn't expect you awake so soon." Sam said, opening the refrigerator door and pulling out the water pitcher.

"Don't you have class?"

He shrugged, pouring a glass, "Yeah I had a ten thirty. But I have to go get a present for my mom. It's her birthday today. I think I'm gonna surprise her with a visit." Replacing the pitcher, he shut the door.

"Isn't that a present enough? We're poor college kids. Gas is expensive."

"Henry..." Sam laughed, "You really should get a job."

"Campus jobs pay jack. Can't go off campus without a car either. We can't all be multimillionaire royal blood." Henry stood up and arched his back, stretching.

"You talk like I'm Prince Charles or something. My dad's just mayor, that's nothing major."

"Lyton's a huge city isn't it?" He walked into the closet and removed the shower basket from the floor.

"No bigger than Manhattan."

Henry slipped on his sandals. "But going to school in the city is different than living there – or ruling supreme there. Don't you agree?"

"Yeah, well, I don't know. I guess this is like a culture shock or something to you, huh? I mean it's gotta be pretty rough coming from a two-cow town in South Jersey." He smacked his friend playfully in the shoulder.

"Burned. You win this one. I'm goin' t'shower."

"Hey Henry!" Sam called after him. "I've got to go to the Village afterwards, you wanna come?"

"I've had enough city for the week, thanks." He turned to walk out, tossing his towel over one shoulder. "You know I hate the city. Too much crime."

Sam laughed. The door shut.

Shrugging off his pajamas, Sam searched through drawers until he found the perfect outfit. Sam pulled on his favorite pair of khaki Dockers and went into the closet to grab his favorite silk shirt. *Classy*. He thought. Buckling up his black leather dress shoes, he reached for his keys and ran out the door.

Village Towne, while beautiful, is most definitely, rather expensive. That's one lesson Sam wished he learned in school before deciding to look for the 'perfect gift' among the Bohemians and uninspired artists. It seemed like there was no chance of even getting ten feet without some spacer trying to hawk his wares.

Uninspired. Ugly. Disturbing. Those are the best words to describe some of the things thrown his way. Mother most certainly would not have approved of their 'art'.

He decided there'd be better luck at the shops hidden off the main strip. That was another terrible mistake. He walked into a shop on the corner of MacDougal Street, and was greeted by the gentle chime of bells. The smells of burning incense and candles assaulted his senses as the door jingled shut, an old lady hobbled over to greet him, shaking his hand.

"Welcome to *Cozy Corner*. I'm Rose." Her voice was feeble.

"Thanks." Sam smiled; she seemed a warm and friendly person.

"What can I help you with?"

"Well, um...it's my mom's birthday tonight. I wanted to get her something really nice."

"How sweet." She smiled, "Come with me."

She took him by the hand and began walking me around the store, pointing at various curios. They passed through a section dedicated to candles and incense; another was filled with exquisite hand-blown glass vases. Sam stopped to admire a small curio case lined with perfectly crafted pewter figurines. There was a small wooden cat guarding this aisle. Finally, in the far corner of the store, he found it. The perfect gift. A handcrafted porcelain rabbit sat quietly reflecting the flames of two nearby candles.

"That," Sam pointed at the rabbit. "How much for that? It's beautiful."

She sighed, "That rabbit was hand-crafted by my daughter. Everyone stops and makes a remark about how perfect it is. Thing is, it was the last doll my daughter ever made before she died. I've never been able to part with it." She paused a moment, "But business hasn't been that good lately. No one wants to buy handmade crafts soaked through and through with the soul of the crafter. I suppose." She softened and wiped a tear away, "If I have to let it go – I need the money to keep the store...even though it is more her place than mine..." Her voice trailed off.

"I'm sorry. How did she die?" He moved closer to the old lady who stood humbled before me.

"A bad accident on the Tri-City Bridge. Her car caught fire. She was trapped inside." The old woman shuddered, "It's getting late. You should probably get going..."

Sam blinked; she had changed moods so suddenly. "The rabbit?" He asked with a cracking voice. Would it be right to take her only treasure?

"Three hundred."

"Oh." He said, reaching into his wallet. "I'm sorry," He fished around the billfold, I had three dollars. "I'm sorry to waste your time, but I don't have that much." She scowled.

"I'm sorry about your daughter." He walked out the door and back onto the bustling streets of the Village. Sam looked down at his watch and blinked in amazement. Time moves quick.

He boarded the next bus to King's College.

* * *

Ten minutes was all it took to be back on campus. The skies were already darkening as the sun set in the background. Its fiery glow was toned to a more ethereal palette of pinks and purples, the golden leaves crinkled under his feet as he made his way to the school bookstore.

The bookstore was located at the student center, the hub of all student activities. There was an ATM and a cafeteria; a stage was on the second floor where students would perform sporadically. The top floor housed the computer lab where you could spend hours typing out that last minute report. It was painted in our school's blue and gold color scheme. An image of a Knight Templar, our mascot, was brilliantly painted onto the tiled floor in the center of the building.

Sam made his way up the concrete walkway, shivering in the chill October air. The night sky was slowly winking awake as the crescent moon popped out of its silvered cloak of clouds. The breeze blew gently, rustling the dying leaves. He pushed aside the heavy glass door and entered the pod protecting the ATM from the elements. He slid his card into the blinking slot and was welcomed with the familiar arcade sounds.

"A little bit extra can't hurt." He said, pushing the arrow to the hundred dollar max. The temperature dipped ten degrees as he left the small bubble and walked around to the main entrance.

The hallway was dimly lit. He walked past the cafeteria where everyone was beginning to set down to dinner. Loud voices bounced off the walls and laughter echoed through shadowy corridors. Sam nodded at a few of his friends, shaking his head as they pushed him towards their table. He still needed a present.

The stairs seemed to circle downward as he hurried towards the basement bookstore.

The bookstore was the brightest place on all of campus. Florescent lights shined down on each aisle, lined with the newest styles of tee shirts, stuffed animals, greeting cards, and any other supply you could possibly need for your home away from home. Books were thrown into a corner, arranged neatly in subject order. He stood for a moment before walking up to the clerk.

"Hey." She greeted him with a smile.

"Um. Hi Laura." Sam said, shuffling his feet.

"What brings you here? Shouldn't you be upstairs?"

"Um. It's my mom's birthday. Tonight. I need to...uh...get her a present."

"Aw!" She grinned, her eyes twinkling. "That's so cute!"

Sam laughed sheepishly

"How's the book?"

"Pardon?" He looked up at her, blushing. He couldn't help it.

"Your book? Prof said you were working on something. It's so cool that you have talent like that. I wish I had the patience to do that."

She knows I exist. Sam was shocked. She was holding a conversation with him!

Blinking, he looked into her eyes. She was beautiful.

"You know, I could use some help on that paper. Hey, maybe when you become a best seller I can tell my friends that you helped me ace Freshmen English. I hate British Literature, it's so-o boring."

Flutter. Choke. Don't be stupid. Sam couldn't believe what he was hearing. Was she asking him out?

"It's not so bad." He said, face growing hotter. "What...what should I get?"

She blinked and sat silent for a moment, gauging his words. "Oh. Right!" She said with a giggle, tossing her long brown hair backwards, behind her shoulder. Her blue eyes twinkled. "This way."

She led him to the gifts section of the bookstore and began hurriedly pointing out every stuffed animal, "This would be so-o cute! Oh my God. I love the white one. It'd be so cute if someone bought me one." She smiled, hinting.

"What about..." Sam choked on the words, "...your boyfriend?"

"I don't have one. I guess I could buy one for myself, but that's not the point of a gift, you know."

Awkward laughter.

"Look at him!" She gasped and picked up an off-white bear, its brown eyes beady and wide with wonder. It had a pennant in its hand that read "Knights" and the accompanying blue and gold sweater with our school's crest.

"How much?"

"Twenty." She winked at me as she walked back towards the counter.

He handed her the cash, as she took it. Her fingers played gently against his hand.

She smiled sweetly, "See you in class, Sam."

"Yeah..." His hands were shaking. "Take care."

"You too."

He walked out of the bookstore clutching a blue and gold box. He could still smell her perfume.

The path to his car was cold and lonely.

8

"Happy birthday, sweetie." John Reibert laughed, hugging his wife tight. "Dinner's almost served." He kissed her forehead and then called out, "Jessica, get down here. Food's almost ready."

There was no answer upstairs.

* * *

Shadows paced anxiously about outside the metal gates as the wind tossed the dead and dying tree limbs from side to side. Lights flicked on inside the mayoral compound. And they flicked off at the lonely guardhouse at the top of the hill.

The shadows stretched, smiling as they slinked toward the gates, clinging to the darkness. Movement. The shadow placed its back against the wall and edged onward.

There was a roar of the engine and the lone guardsman's vehicle's lights switched on. The gates swung open. The vehicle turned left, becoming engulfed in night's inky maw.

Sensing its chance, the shadows ran forward. The gates slammed shut with a clang that echoed into the still night air. It was home.

* * *

My car shuddered as it shifted into drive, lurching out of the parking lot. It stuttered sporadically as the engine warmed up.

Traffic was relatively light. I looked down at the clock on the dash. 6:00.

I sighed. "Dinner in about twenty minutes." Turning up the radio, I continued cruising.

* * *

"I just don't understand teenagers anymore, sweetie. Why couldn't she be like Sam?" John was saying to Mrs. Reibert as he set the silverware.

"It's just a phase." She had begun to say as she turned off the stove and set about preparing the mahogany table.

It was a meal fit for a queen. The Queen of Camelot. And for her King, and their bratty princess.

Streaming broth was poured from a ceramic pot into the Reibert fine china. It was pure.

Mayor Reibert poured three crystal goblets of the finest red wine from its own crystal decanter. The leanest roast beef money could buy had been simmering in tomato soup on the stove.

"Jessica! This is the last time I'm calling you. Get down here," John shouted as he finished pouring.

"Yeah! Hold on," She shouted back down.

"Why can't she be more like Sam?" John asked. "That girl will be the death of me and my career."

"Now, sweetie, you know Sam had his moments."

"His nose was always buried in a book or planted against a computer screen, that's not a moment. It's a moment of peace."

It made its way up the driveway, ducking and weaving through the shadows. Its image was masked by the clouds floating overhead, which concealed even the moon's pale, watchful eye. The figure slowed up as it came to the walls of the compound. Pausing for a moment, it bent to the ground and searched the area. It looked upwards towards the window, a sick grin crossed onto its face as it tipped a canister, as a foul smelling liquid began pouring out. It removed another canister and then one more. It carried them back, dumping the contents, creating a slimy trail that led out the gates.

It sparked a match and disappeared into the inferno, vanishing with the smoke. A sinister laugh echoed in the wind.

* * *

The pot roast simmered on the stove, its fragrant odor masking the stench of death that was soon to engulf the Reibert family. Flames whooshed closer to the compound, licking against the red brick.

It was hungry, and death had come for dinner.

Jessica Reibert sat upstairs on her bed. She was angry, and upset. Angry at the interview she had seen in the papers, angrier for the way her mother reacted. Her mother was busy thinking about her future as the Queen of Camelot, and she took her anger at the scandal out. She took it out violently.

She sobbed gently and clutched at her bruised forearm. The Perfect Wife had committed a most imperfect act. She had struck out in her rage; struck out against her daughter. And Jessica had feebly attempted to block. Her forearm was hurt, but at least her face was scabbing over, it would heal within a day or two, perfect for her to go back to school like nothing had happened.

She swore fitfully as she rolled over and moved towards the mirror. "It's not that bad." She said aloud as her fingers traced lightly against the wound.

"JESSICA, GET DOWN HERE! I'M NOT TELLING YOU AGAIN!" She had heard her father call out.

She moved towards the windows to draw her shades, and that's when she saw it. It rode in on its fiery chariot.

* * *

"She's never like this." John Reibert was saying to his wife as he sat down to dinner.

"Maybe she was just as upset about that article as you were, sweetie." She touched his arm lightly, "Thank you for cooking."

He smiled, "Yeah." He called up again, "The soup's getting cold."

No answer.

"She's probably not hungry." Carol Reibert said coolly.

"Jessica!" He called out one final time.

And then he got his answer.

The fires of Hell had come. The smell came first, and then the explosion. Like the great roaring of some mythic beast, the flames screamed, cried out to them. Tearing at the walls, it ate its way through the living room. It smelled human flesh, and soon it would taste it.

Carol screamed, but the roar of the fire had drowned out all sound.

John turned towards his wife and pleaded, "Go. Get out. Save yourself."

* * *

Upstairs, Jessica had seen the blaze and meant to call out to her family. She had seen the figure slink away and become one with the smoke. She moved now, running towards the door. She was hoping to escape to the hallway. She ran as fast as she could. The flames licked their way up the wall. They broke down the walls, and tore through the windows, splintering glass shards everywhere. Her bedroom succumbed to the blaze. The smoke became thicker; she was forced to her knees. She moved towards the stairs.

* * *

The flames were too fast, too hungry. They devoured everything in their way. The fire had one desire. Total consumption. Total destruction. It had a need to feed. John had run up the stairs. He called out desperately.

Carol stood her ground in the kitchen. She went for the crystal goblet. She poured out the sweet-smelling wine and fought to replace it with water. She splashed some onto the flames. They stopped momentarily, considering this new threat. And then, they laughed it off, growing angrier at each splash. They approached with a newfound desire.

* * *

Jessica was crawling her way down the steps. The flames saw their prey escape. They rose to stop it. Eating away at the ceiling, they dropped a few beams down her way, thinking it would delay her, assuming it would weaken her spirit. She stopped and watched as the beams fell.

Looking up she gasped, as the last second approached. It came crashing down. Slamming against her back, she collapsed in a heap.

She saw blackness.

* * *

John had climbed the first few steps and began calling frantically for his daughter. There was no answer. He peered into the blackening smoke and saw a figure go limp as a beam collapsed. He screamed and heaved himself up the next few steps. The beam came crashing down.

Her body lay crumpled in a heap at his feet. He bent down and whispered, running his fingers gently through her hair. "Jessica. Jessica wake up, daddy's here. Jessica?"

There was no response.

"Jessica?" He called her name again.

The smoke grew thicker; it was becoming increasingly difficult to breathe.

"Jessica?" He coughed, groaning, "Please wake up."

The flames licked at his feet.

He screamed as he bent down, using all of his strength; he lifted the beam off of the crumpled form of his daughter. Heaving and groaning, he carried her down the stairs.

He took two steps and the stairway collapsed.

* * *

Carol fought valiantly. She wanted desperately to reach her husband. Each step she took became slower, her breath became labored. She coughed as she inhaled the black mists of the hellfire. She was forced to a crawl. She gulped and sucked down as much oxygen as she could as she crawled ever onward.

They lingered in front of her, wavering in the heat. An oasis of hope. And then hope shattered. The flames danced in celebration. And then they came.

Sirens filled the air as Lyton Fire Department rushed towards Camelot. Red and blue lights danced in the darkness. The gates swung open and in rode Company 17.

Chief Roman slammed on his brakes as he came in behind Company 17. He stepped out of the red and white SUV, his rotund belly jiggling as he called out, "Alright men! Line up. Set those hoses up. Right then. The hydrant's about 250 feet behind us. Come on, hurry up! This isn't a weenie roast. We got people in there! **Move! Move! Move!**"

The doors opened and the firefighters filed out, quickly busying themselves with setting up the hoses, a group of three men took off running to connect the hose.

Corporal Jeremiah Laddice stepped down last, coming from a truck that brought up the rear of the company. His team of three men rushed out and prepared to defend life and property.

"Glad you could make it, Jerry." Chief Ronan sneered as he wobbled towards the latecomers.

"No one toned us out. I heard everything on the scanner. Had to make a few phone calls, bothered these guys at dinner. But a fire's a fire. We got work to do."

"We? You don't got any work to do. Last I heard you and your company was suspended from our ranks. Too many risky adventures, or at least that's what I was told."

"You expected me to let that kid die? He was on the fifteenth frickin' floor. He was six years old. Six. Firefightin' ain't saving some poor kitty up in a tree. I go there to risk my life for somebody else, while you sit there on your fat ass and bark out orders that you never followed a day in your life." Laddice growled.

"That's why you're still a Corporal, son. You're too thickheaded. You're a risk to my entire company. I'll not have you here."

Fire glinted in his eyes. Jeremiah shrugged, "Fine then, if you won't have me in your company I'm my own man tonight. Consider me a Good Samaritan doing a good deed. I'm going in there."

"You'll do no such thing until this blaze is out. That's an order!"

"You said I'm not allowed to follow orders, Chief. Now back off. There's a family in there. And I'll be damned if I let them burn in that hell."

"And if you go in there I'll damn you myself. You won't see another day, mark my words. I have half my company working on this blaze."

The three men returned and the hoses sprang to life, hitting the flames and releasing a sickly *hiss*.

The inferno fought back bravely, water seemed to have no effect on the blaze, except making it angrier.

"Damn it." Laddice grumbled, "Suit up boys, we're going in."

"No. You're not."

The remainder of Corporal Laddice's company paused, weighing their options.

"You go nowhere." The chief growled.

The group lay back and set up their hoses to join the fight.

"Fine. Boys stay back then, if you want. We're only firefighters. No reason to risk our lives for someone else." He stomped off towards the blaze, tipping down his shield and attaching his oxygen, he entered the inferno, never to return.

* * *

Traffic was moving again, slowly, but it was better than sitting here all day. I made my way out of the tunnel and turned my attention to the reason for the setback. I gaped in horror as I saw the smoldering remains of a luxury car, red and blue lights blinked in the night as men in white zipped up a bag and loaded it into the back of an ambulance.

* * *

They fought valiantly. Medics arrived to treat those who were suffering from heat exhaustion and dehydration. No one was injured. The only casualty was the foolhardy young Corporal Laddice. The Chief had believed that the family would have evacuated the residence. The smoke detectors surely would have alerted them. This seemed nothing more than an accident. Someone left the gas on when lighting a candle for the evening meal. It had to be. There was no other explanation. Or so the Chief thought.

But still, he had to go in. He had to make sure that everyone had gotten out safely. He had to make sure that he got Jeremiah's remains, to insure a proper burial and respect. No matter whether he deserved it or not. *The boy was brave, stupid, but brave.* Chief Roman thought as he strapped on his gear, "Boys, the flames are down. I'm going in. I'll report back. Good work."

"Be careful, chief." Came one of the Company, Roman was unsure which one. The name wasn't important anyway. It was just a simple warning. Something polite one said.

The ruins of the mansion loomed ominously in the distance. There were still small trails of smoke rising. Parts of the structure had melted or otherwise been damaged in the blaze and the ensuing water damage. The most notable damage appeared to be a fraction of the roof had collapsed on itself most likely burying the second floor. He stepped through the ruined portal as glass crinkled under his feet.

Inside was dark. The beautiful antiques had been completely obliterated. The remains of a fine oaken table lay on the ground, nothing more than a pile of blackened ash. There was glass everywhere.

His search began in the living room. A posh reclining chair had been destroyed and torn apart by the water damage and the leather and polyester upholstery lay

melting, dripping in small puddles with the blackened water. He moved around the first floor, noting nothing.

He entered the kitchen and found Jeremiah's still body. "Radio, we have one confirmed near the hallway, in the kitchen on the western side of the building."

"Ten four, Chief. I'll alert medical examiner."

"No need, contact his family first. He's one of our guys. Corporal Laddice. I'm continuing my search." He said sadly as he clicked off the radio.

"Ten four sir, be careful."

He slowly made his way towards the steps, pausing in shock as he saw the Mayor's tomb. *He was brave. A good man.* The Chief paused to reflect on the body.

The man had died saving his daughter; he had tried to carry her to safety when the stairs collapsed. He was entombed in the crack. His upper torso was still barely recognizable. He clutched in his hands a crumpled figure wearing a blackened dress. *Jessica.* He thought, thinking back to the article he had read last night. "She was too young for this," He cursed silently and reached for his radio when he discovered a third form. He had almost stepped on the skeletal remains of Carol Reibert. Her flesh clung loosely to her body.

He coughed. "This is bad." He reached for his radio, "Dispatch. Three bodies located. On the stai..." He never finished his sentence.

There were embers still glowing in the kitchen. One sparked near the stove, the gas line still open. An explosion sounded, rocking the building to its foundation. Everything collapsed around him all at once. The fireball shot out, consuming all.

SAM

10

The car shuddered as it shifted into drive, lurching out of the parking lot. It stuttered sporadically as the engine warmed up. A storm rushed up to greet him as the rain poured down.

Traffic was relatively light for the commute. Six o'clock. It was the heart of rush hour and not a car on the road.

He sighed. "Dinner in about twenty minutes." Turning up the radio, He continued cruising. A few minutes down the road and he saw why there was no traffic on the surface road. The car approached the tunnel and encountered commuter hell. Half of the city had to be tangled up in this traffic jam. He switched the channel over to the AM radio stations for the traffic report. After fifteen minutes of not moving, he gave up and killed the ignition. And waited.

And waited.

Ten minutes and traffic was moving again, slowly, but it was better than sitting there all day. He coasted towards the light at the end of the tunnel, glancing a quick look over his shoulder at the delay.

He gaped in horror as he stared at the remains of a sedan. Red and blue lights blinked and reflected off the rain soaked streets as the medics loaded a white bag into the back of a waiting ambulance.

He was frightened, terrified. He couldn't stand to be there. This was the closest he had come to death, and he was scared. Upset. It wasn't fair.

As usual, traffic had snarled to a stop again, blinded by the blue stare, enthralled by flashing lights. Staring like it was some damn carnival show. His car slowed to a stop right in front of the smoldering metal cage. The Medical Examiners had finished their work and were carrying the body away in an ambulance. With a yelp, the emergency vehicles sped off. Traffic resumed to normal flow as the yellow lights of a tow truck appeared, backing its way up the shoulder of the road.

He drove on in silence, in quiet reflection. Who was it? What were they like? Did their family know? Did they care?

Another twenty minutes and he was making the left turn onto his street. Slowing, as the car came towards the wrought iron gates. Tiny wisps of smoke rose up into the air.

He smiled, "The fireplace is on. It is kinda cold out." He sniffed the air. The smell of burning wood permeated the area. Sam approached the gates and noticed a massing of people outside the gates. *The preliminary votes must be in. The reporters are here to interview my dad.* His eye caught the satellite dish on top of a blue conversion van. News. Good, he hoped.

He pressed the door opener on the visor. The gates creaked open slowly. People looked on in amazement as his beat up Plymouth rode towards the hill, ambling up the slow curve. He took the last turn and he saw it.

Ruins. Smoke trails lingering in the air. Glowing and dying embers blinked in the blackness. There was nothing. Nothing left. Just rubble.

He shivered. It was cold.

The wind picked up, moaning, the dead limbs above rattling. He grasped desperately for his cell phone, ripping it from the cradle. Dialing.

Nine. One. One.

"Lyton PD, Dispatcher Four."

"My name...my name is – Sam Reibert."

"Yes sir?"

"What – what happened – to – to my house?"

"I'm sorry sir, I don't understand the question."

"The Mayoral Mansion on the top of the hill! What happened?"

"When sir?"

"I don't know. You tell me!"

"Sir, we just changed from day to evening shift, we haven't had any calls for that address. What exactly happened? I'll send a patrol."

"Please, my family. Where are they?"

"I can ring your house if you'd like. Do you want someone to check your residence? When did you see them last?"

"Are they gone?" He shivered, voice cracking.

The tree limbs swayed back and forth in the wind.

"Sir?" His voice was calm, "Maybe you should check back in the morning?"

Sam dropped the phone.

The dispatcher's voice was muffled and then grew silent.

He sat, staring into the embers.

They flickered, blinking, in the distance. The night grew colder and the wind crisper, the glow ceased. There was no sound. Gray wisps danced in the darkness, ascending towards the heavens. The only part of the building that remained was the simple red brick façade, even that began to crumble and collapse. Its bright red turned to inky black.

The phone rang underneath his seat, startling him.

He bent down to pick it up, "H-hello?"

"Mr. Reibert?"

"Y-Yes?"

"My name's Detective Ryan. I just wanted to tell you I'm sorry about what happened."

"Where's my family?"

"Oh. You don't know?" He paused, swallowing, "They're – gone, sir. The fire was too much. Too hot."

"Stop."

"We lost two of our firefighters in the blaze too, including our Chief. He was brave, went in to look for your family."

"Stop. No." I gulped, sniffing.

"I just want you to know we're actively investigating this incident. I don't have much to tell you right now. Fire just cleared about a half hour ago. We've got our best men working on this though. Don't worry."

"Don't – worry? But, they're – dead"

"Yes sir, I apologize for your loss."

"Mom? Dad? Jess?"

"I'm sorry. Our firemen tried. They did their best."

The wind rose again, howling, moaning.

"I – I have to – to go." Sam said.

"Yes sir, if you need anything, you can call us," Detective Ryan said as he hung up the phone.

The moon disappeared, blinking out, as a wave of dark clouds assaulted it, taking it over. The area grew black.

Deathly black.

* * *

Henry was lounging on his bed when the room phone rang suddenly. He switched off the TV and rose to answer.

"H-Henry?" It was Sam.

"What's up bro, how's the party? Did your mom like the gift? What did you get her anyway?"

"They're gone, Henry." Sam said his voice straining.

"Wha-what do you mean?"

"There was a-a fire. They're gone." Sam said, emotionless.

Henry shivered, unsure how to react.

"I don't have anything. They're gone. Nothing left. Ruins. I. I." He stammered, breaking down his defenses, he sobbed openly.

"Do you have anyone there you can go to?" Henry asked.

"Nothing. Gone. Everything."

"Come back to school then, at least there's people here. People you can talk to."

"Oh."

The phone disconnected.

Henry shuddered and closed his eyes. "Why?" He said, burying his face into his pillow as he collapsed onto his bed. "Why him? Why, God, Why?"

WEDNESDAY
OCTOBER 15

CONSTANCE

11

Sunrise brought a new light to her eyes as she pulled the needle out of her veins and sighed in ecstasy. It was strangely warm for an October day in the City. Constance spent the morning leaning against a hollowed out warehouse, begging for change. Pissing in bottles, and filling her veins. Antony lay nearby, lounging on a windowsill. Businessmen in their crisp, perfect suits walked past her, ignoring her like a street sign or lamppost. She was part of the scenery to them, never changing. Always there, blighting their industrial revolution. Pissing on their cheerios and leaving a generally bitter taste in the mouths of the wealthy. And so she stood on her corner, hawking her wares:

“Tarot for a dollar. Read your palms, I can! See your future. I will.” She shuffled her dirty cards and found her first customer.

“Wealth in your future, I see. Stocks are high! Buy, buy, buy!”

“When? What? How do you know?”

She shook her can and he dropped a ten.

“Two weeks, time to buy. Not until then, don’t even try! You’ll see, you’ll know. I told you so. Call your broker, throw your bones.”

He tried to ask more, to find his super stock. She couldn’t give that information, she hadn’t a clue. What she did know, she couldn’t say. He wouldn’t pay.

A faint aura of red and blue surrounded him, a halo over his head. As she stared into the swirling mass, two faces appeared. One was a newborn baby boy. The second was his mistress. She would die in childbirth before the end of the month. The baby would be thrown into the court system; another empty mouth to feed. The fate of the unborn was one of terrible tragedy. He had three homes, six dads, two mothers, a cat and a fish. The cat ate the fish on his twelfth birthday. Four years later, the slavers would take him away.

This and more she knew, but could never say.

For every twenty that would stop and stare, or point and laugh – one would drop a few bucks in her can. And number five of that one stopped and asked for a Reading. So, she delighted them with stories of love, wealth, or other goodwill coming their way. She knew it was bullshit, she hoped they did too. She couldn’t tell them what she really saw.

It wasn’t good for business.

SAM

12

Sam lay in bed, sighing sadly as Henry shook him: "Sam, you can't live this way. I know it hurts. Believe me, I know. But if you just lay there it's going to make matters worse. Get up. We need to get to class. Please, Sam?"

He shrugged and gave the little bear a tight squeeze, wiping his eyes.

"Sam, you've been to this class once since school started." He paused, "What good will it be to go on brooding and then just failing out of school? I don't think your parents would have wanted you to become a failure because of what happened to them. You have to go to class."

"SCREW CLASS!" Sam's eyes glowed with tiny lightning bolts, "What good is learning about quarks and atoms and all that other garbage? MY FAMILY IS DEAD, Henry. I have to plan a FUNERAL for my whole family tonight. My whole family. I didn't even get to say goodbye." He wiped his eyes, "Go. Take notes for me."

"Sam, it's better if you come too. You have to fight it."

"Fight what, Henry?" Sam clutched the teddy-bear with all his strength, "Fight what?"

"Fight the urge to just give up. The police will take care of everything. They'll know what happened. They're good at that, it's their job."

"Henry, it's their job to STOP crime. What use is picking up the pieces to a shattered life? I don't want to go on expecting some donut-chewing lard-ass is going to make my life all better by telling me what I already know."

Henry stood transfixed in place, shaking his head as Sam continued speaking.

"I know they're gone. Forever. Nothing can bring them back. Do you know what it's like to never be able to talk to your mother again? To never laugh at your sister's dumb jokes?" He stood up, wiping the tears from my eyes. "Never be able to hear your father's speeches again?" Water ran from his eyes and nose. Holding the bear with one hand, he continued: "To never hear your mother say...I love you?"

Henry came over then, he put his arm around Sam's shoulder, a weak attempt to console. "I know it hurts. And it's going to keep hurting. But you just have to be strong."

Sam faced the window, staring out at the beautiful oranges and reds, the leaves turned and danced down to earth. It was the height of autumn, and he never felt more alone.

"Be strong." Henry said.

There was a gust of wind, the leaves swayed on the limbs, dancing mysteriously. *How like fire.* He thought, eyes misting over again.

Henry moved towards him. Sam raised one hand, stopping Henry in his tracks. He set the bear onto the windowsill, its two button eyes faced out onto the courtyard,

gazing out towards the life below. Sam turned around and faced him, "It's easy for you to tell someone to be strong. It's hard for someone to be strong."

"Sam. I."

He sighed, "Go to class. I'll be fine." His voice trailed off to a choked whisper, "I just want to be alone."

"Oh...okay," Henry said, picking up his books. He threw one last glance at Sam before turning away. He walked towards the door. "I'll tell Ms. Barry you won't be in class."

"Thanks."

The door slammed shut. Sam went back to bed, drawing the covers tight about his head.

Outside, the skies darkened.

GRAHAM

12

"I know what you did." The man in the business suit strode forward, slamming a briefcase down onto the desk in front of him, "You can't deny it any longer. We've already seen the first run of the papers. I'll ask you once nicely. PULL THE PICTURES."

"Mister Johnson," Graham coldly said, "my integrity is not for sale."

He turned and pulled the briefcase in front of him; pressing a few buttons and spinning the dial, Mr. Johnson snapped open the briefcase. Turning it back towards Graham, he let the man's eyes settle on the stacks of hundred dollar bills, which lined the interior of the case. "Even you have expenses, my friend."

"No."

"Come now, a small paper such as yours cannot afford the everyday expenses of running a press. It would be a shame if one of your machines suddenly – *broke down*." Johnson nodded and the two men flanking him turned to walk away.

"Mister Johnson," Graham pressed his fingers together, "Didn't your friend's story teach you anything? The *Right to Know* is stronger than you think. You can destroy my presses, but people *will* wonder. Yes, come morning, when their papers are not at their front door, they'll want to know what happened. And after such a..." He paused to conceal the smirk slinking its way across his face, "...tragedy last night, people will want to read. That move would be foolish. Foolish indeed."

"Instead of covering the fire you'd cover a scandal? An alleged affair? An affair you can NOT prove?"

"Mister Johnson." He laughed. "A picture *is* worth a thousand words. Of course, the fire is going to be above the fold. But what's below? Another scandal? Seems that Camelot wasn't as perfect as made out to be. Was it now?"

"Your smear campaign is getting nowhere. What good is destroying the name of a dead family?"

"Mister Johnson. I am a journalist. This is news. We print news. If the Mayor was not faithful to his wife, who is to say, he's faithful to the public? Everything remains the same. Take your dirty money and go. Good day."

"Graham, my dear friend, this money would more than pay off your debt. Remember, the money we leant you. No, the money we *gave* you to bury your brother. I highly suggest you reconsider."

He glared at the man. "I said, good day."

"You've been warned. We'll be back." Mister Johnson and his thugs removed the briefcase and marched out the door.

SAM

13

He awoke with a newfound passion. The truth. He wanted answers. The police are useless. He came to that conclusion after my second dealing with law-enforcement. It took two tries to get any information out of the lazy bastard of a dispatcher.

Two tries.

Sam threw his phone onto his bed and sighed. He caught sight of the clock out of the corner of his eye, "How am I going to plan a wake in six hours?"

He picked up the phone and frowned.

"Lyton Medical Examiner's Office, this is Cynthia. How can I direct your call?" Her voice was rather cheery for being around death all day long.

"Hi. Sam Reibert. I um. My family is there. The Dispatcher said I need to call about releasing the bodies so it would be possible to have a wake tonight for them."

"I'm sorry about your loss, Mister Reibert. But I have good news for you."

"They're not really dead?" He frowned, that would be the best news of all. If all he did was awaken suddenly and find out it was all a bad dream.

"I'm sorry sir. But a man named Mister, um...Johnson, I think his name was, well he come in here last night. He said he had already taken care of all of the necessities and that he was arranging for a wake to be held tonight at around seven. He said it would be private. Hush-hush."

"Mister Johnson? My father's publicist? Why? Why would he do that without even talking to me?"

"He said it was important for politics and they needed this all put to rest so a new mayor could be brought in. He said the quicker we took care of it, the better the city would be."

"Why did you give him authorization? I'm the mayor's son, damn it!"

"There was a matter of official documentation. He gave us a copy of the Power of Attorney as well as the legal doctrines that gave him authorization. We had no choice. I'm sorry."

"Where is the wake?"

"I don't know." She sounded sad.

"What do you mean you don't know? You gave the bodies of my whole family to some stranger flashing around fancy documents and you didn't even think to ask where he was taking them?"

"Sir, it is a private affair. I can't tell you the location over the phone."

"Fine." Sam dropped the cell phone, and then plopped onto his bed right next to it. He lay there a while, trying to absorb everything. And then, like a great tidal wave washing over him, the tears came.

The phone rang. He let it ring, pushing it to voice mail. Then it rang again. Sam reached for it this time, pressing the button to send the call to automatic voice mail. The phone grew silent. He frowned and put it back down on the bed. It rang for the third time and he grudgingly picked it up. Hitting the talk button, he murmured: "Hell-hello?"

"Sam? Is that you? It's me, Bob."

The voice on the other end was Bob Johnson's.

Bob had a forked-tongue that was worshipped by every politician, every public-relations specialist. He was *the* person to go to when you needed to wash your hands of whatever dirt you have accumulated over the years. And he worked exclusively for my dad.

"I just want to tell you I'm sorry about what happened. Your father was a good man. If you need anything, let me know."

"Thanks for your sympathy," Sarcasm.

"I just wanted to let you know, everything has been taken care of."

"Thanks."

"The wake's tonight, at seven." He said, "Funeral at nine tomorrow."

"Thanks."

"It'll be at the Chalet on Rose Street. Funeral's at Saint Thomas Cemetery up on 22nd. There's a family plot there. It's at the top of the hill. If you stand there you can look out on almost the whole city. I thought it would be nice."

"That's good," Sam said his voice distant. "I'll. I'll...see you later."

Click.

The rest of the afternoon passed in baleful silence, the clouds grew darker, more ominous outside. The wind picked up force, swaying the fiery leaves to and fro, casting tree limbs to the ground. It was nearing four when Henry came home.

"Hey, man," Henry said, stepping inside and shrugging off his jacket. "Looks like it's gonna storm. How you holding up?"

"The wake's tonight. At seven."

"Oh." He said, not quite sure how to respond.

"I want you to come with me."

Henry dropped his books on the floor.

"You were telling me to be strong. I need you there to help me be strong."

He nodded solemnly, "Whenever you're ready."

They arrived at the *Chalet* around six-thirty. The sharks were already circling. Cameras were being set up as we entered. A reporter grinned and shouted at Sam before snapping his picture. For being a "private affair" it turned into no less than a media circus. He watched as all around grim-faced men in their most expensive Armani struggled to keep stoic as they walked towards the caskets.

The Deputy Mayor entered, flanked by the Chief of Police and an honor guard draped in blue. Behind him, Mr. Johnson walked. He wore a black suit with a crimson red vest. His coal black eyes expressionless, he nodded in Sam's direction.

Shrugging and biting down on his lip, he moved to stand near the caskets of his mother and sister. Their gold finished boxes were pushed aside and left in the corner, forgotten. Dad assumed an honorary position on a dais cloaked in the finest velvet, fresh cut flowers strewn about. Mom and Jessica rested in the corner, candlelight flickering angrily shadows across the lonely caskets.

The media circus paraded about Father's casket. Politicos in mock sympathy bent towards the casket, wiping away at an imaginary tear as cameras flared to life all around.

Mr. Johnson came up next, crossing himself. He knelt down next to the dais and muttered a silent prayer while the cameras rolled. Standing up, he tapped the casket twice and looked off into the distance. His eyes met the back of Sam's head and icy daggers pierced him to the core. Johnson walked towards the shadowed boxes, towards Henry. Towards Sam. A lone camera followed his every move. It remained shadowing him as he walked forward.

"I'm sorry about your family."

The wick on the nearest candle crackled as it sparked.

"I don't know why they're here. I swear."

"You said it was private. Small. You said it was only family and friends." Sam choked up, "My dad was never friends with NBC or CBS. We don't have any family working for the local papers. Why? Why are they here then?"

"I don't know. The media has a way of finding these things out." He smirked and then shook his head, concealing his mirth, "I doubt any of these men would do something like that. These are all his colleagues. His most trusted colleagues. None of us meant any dishonor to you or your family."

Sam wheeled about, turning on him, "You're full of shit!" He growled, "You know that?"

Johnson took a step back.

"You've always been jealous of my father. You always had to be in control. You had to go and tell the rest of the council. The media! You brought them all here so they could play the sympathy card and win votes!" Sam caught his breath, trying to regain his emotions. "You disgust me."

Johnson turned and walked away.

Henry sighed, and stared off in silence. After a few moments he turned towards Sam and put a comforting hand on his shoulder, "He's not worth getting angry over. I'm sure your father would have wanted the rest of the council here. But as for the media, I agree." He paused, "That's too much. They should have some respect. Leave the damn cameras outside. But, a story's a story, I guess." He paused again, "You know how it is."

Sam sighed, knowing all too well how it was. He had lived with the media following his every move for the past four years. And now he had become one.

He was an Investigative Reporter for the school paper. They were doing what he would do. A sick feeling crawled out from the pit of his stomach.

"Hey, who's that?" Henry pointed to a figure cloaked all in black walking slowly towards the casket.

She approached slowly, sadly. She wore a blackened veil over her eyes. Her tanned skin was reflecting the golden light near the dais. She held a single white rose in her hand. Her head lowered as she approached, she paused at the casket, resting the rose on top. She stood in silence. And then she wept gently.

This newcomer confused the sharks; they flipped through notepads trying to discover her name. They shrugged angrily, one man signaled for his photographer to start filming. The rest of the rats followed as they hoisted their video cameras. The flashing of cameras drowned out the subtle glow of the candles.

The strange lady stood, unwavering. The veil concealed her identity; a long flowing black dress hid her body, revealing only the golden tan of her hands. She was beautiful, whoever she was.

Sam pushed past Henry and made his way towards his father's casket.

She sensed my approach and held up her hand, "No comment."

Sam moved closer, "Miss?" He said, curiously.

"I said, no comment," her voice was cool, calm.

"I'm..."

"Don't you reporters ever learn?" She turned, angrily. "I'm not telling you again. Leave. Now. Take your fucking camera with you. Your kind is most not welcome here."

"...his son."

"Oh," She said, turning back to the casket.

"You're right though. They have no reason to be here."

Her fingers traced against the scrawling on the casket.

"Who are you?"

"A friend," her voice was emotionless as she spoke.

"I don't remember ever seeing you before. Did you work with my dad?"

"You could say that."

"Oh." He turned towards the casket, cupping his hands respectfully below the belt. "How long have you worked with him?"

"Four years. I knew him well." She wiped away at a tear.

"What's your name?"

"Goodbye, Sam." She said, turning to walk away.

"Wait, no." He called out after her; she was the only other person there to pay respects. He had to talk to her.

She disappeared through the doors.

* * *

Henry took a few steps forward. "Who was she?"

"I don't know."

He nodded slowly.

"Can we leave now? I don't want to be around these people anymore."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

* * *

The hotel room was dark and dank. Henry had paid for it out of respect. It was located right across from the *Chalet* and looked out across the way towards the lonely hill where the Reibert family would rest eternally after tomorrow. Two beds sat in the center of the room, directly in front of an ancient television set.

Sam moved to flick on the light, it sputtered and died. "Oh, this is cute."

"Sorry." He said, as he turned on his dresser lamp, it sputtered and crackled but remained lit.

"Well, that's good." Sam laughed a little. Laughing was good.

Henry flipped the TV on and turned to the news channel. His family was the top story. Then there was footage of the wake. A reporter came back on and was talking about how "sweet" Mr. Johnson was for arranging the proceedings and allowing the media in so the city can say goodbye to their favorite Mayor. They flicked over to the footage of him crossing himself and leaning down, the crocodile tears visible in his eyes.

A live feed cut in suddenly; Johnson had taken a podium and was giving a speech.

"Turn it off."

Henry stood up and flicked off the TV.

"I hate him." Sam rolled over.

The light clicked off. He closed his eyes and listened to the sounds of the city. Sirens rang out in the night air. People were screaming in the distance. More sirens.

"I know it's hard." Henry was saying.

A door slammed across the hall.

"I know what you're going through. My – my mom died in a house fire."

More sirens.

"I was young. I didn't really – know her that well. But still. The smoke was everywhere. I remember my mom screaming at me. She was yelling for me to get out."

A neon sign buzzed and flickered to life.

"I was scared. I mean, I crawled out. There was a fireman there; him and some EMT's took care of me. I went to my dad's that night."

A bug crawled up Sam's hand, tickling him.

"I never saw my mom again."

He swatted at the bug. "Oh."

"Yeah," Henry sighed and wiped at his eyes. "She was an alcoholic. She used to hit me. My dad said it was a cleansing fire." Henry wiped at a tear rolling down his cheek, "Said that God spared me because I was pure. He said she was evil. And when the fire came, she was redeemed and was waiting for me in Heaven."

"Oh."

The silence was deafening.

"I went to my dad's church. He made me feel better about everything. I heard there's a new one opening by school. You should go there. They might be able to help you better than I could."

Thunder clapped in the distance, a storm rolled in. Lightning flashed in the heavens. Sam tossed and turned restlessly, fighting with himself.

Inside, the fire burned. And in his dreams, he saw the smoke rising up from the ashes.

GRAHAM

14

The flames danced happily, their red and orange light flickering in the fireplace. Graham tossed a black pile to the hungry flames. He sat back and laughed a moment as they tasted the fabric and then hungrily devoured it.

He stood up and brushed off his clothes, "They're close. I can feel it." He hobbled off to finish packing. Death would be coming for him. Tonight.

Graham threw a black collared shirt into the suitcase and grabbed for a book on his mantle, his fingers traced lightly, reverently, over the gold inlay cross. He placed the book carefully over the clothes and slammed the briefcase shut. The windows shattered behind him, sending twinkling glass shards everywhere.

Turning around slowly, he noticed a dark figure move towards his bedroom. Graham stepped back towards the living room. Then it happened.

It lashed out, grabbing at his neck, throwing him onto the ground, it growled, "He told you to stop the printing. You didn't listen. We warned you, but you persisted. Now you die." It lunged.

Graham fell backwards, rolling with his attacker, reversing his momentum. The assassin went flying, landing on top of a coffee table that shattered on impact. It stood up, swiftly, and came again.

Graham stared down at the figure as it reached suddenly into a concealed pocket. He saw the glint of steel. He felt the whoosh of air as the blade soared past him, scratching his cheek, drawing blood. There was a thud as it settled into wall behind him. Graham was stunned momentarily.

A moment was all it took; the assassin hurled himself upon Graham, knocking him back, towards the fireplace. It reached into its clothing and removed another blade, the dagger pressed against his neck.

"Now you die muckraker." The blade pressed against Graham's throat.

There was a stinging sensation as the blade pressed against his throat, drawing a thin line of blood. He reached up, tried to grab the blade and pull it away from his neck.

"You're through, old man."

The blade bit into his hand, but Graham pressed on. He squeezed at it and reached his other hand up to grab the pommel. He turned the blade around, and with a groan, he pushed with all his might. The dagger found a new home inside the assassin's chest. Graham kicked upwards, sending the body flying. He grabbed his luggage and fled into the midnight air.

THURSDAY
OCTOBER 16

SAM

15

The Heavens wept for the royal family. Sam and Henry stood outside as rain fell gently, saturating the earth. An Honor Guard consisting of Mr. Johnson, the Deputy Mayor, Police Chief, and a strange old man carried the mayor to his final resting place.

Holes had already been dug. Mom and Jessica were resting already inside their earthen tombs. Rain pattered against the wooden box and onto the earth, splashing mud down into the holes.

Sam stared off into the distance as a scraggly haired man casually poured dirt on Jessica's casket. Mom laid forgotten a short walk away, already forgotten.

The highest-ranking political officers in the city carried Dad. Sam watched as they slowly lowered him to the ground. Few words were said.

With a grunt and a heave of all of his strength, the scraggly haired man tossed the final batch of dirty onto Jessica. He wiped at his face and eyes, straining the water from his face.

Sam sniffled, choking back tears as he watched the dirty man step away and shake the dust from his hands. The shovel was thrown against the tombstone where it clattered and clanged against the marble. Sam's ears cried out in pain as the crowd looked on to watch.

Mr. Johnson walked towards Jessica, not to pay respects, but to pick up the shovel. And for a fucking shovel he stepped on her grave, cursing as his Berluti got stuck in the muck.

Revenge. Sam thought. My sister knows. She feels my pain.

The priest stopped humming as Mr. Johnson picked up a shovel. He threw the first layers of dirt onto Dad's casket as the young priest was speaking. Sam couldn't hear his words over the clang of the shovel on soil.

The hole slowly filled with dirt as a young woman shoved past him, clad in a black dress and veil. She was carrying a red rose. Sam blinked and watched as she stood there. Stood there watching the dirt fall onto the casket. She dropped the rose into the hole and mixed her tears with the earth. She turned and walked away slowly.

They had finished burying Dad. Gave speeches and paid their *respects*. The men in suits filed out, leaving only Henry and Sam. And the half buried corpses of Jessica and Carol Reibert. Two men came up then suddenly and picked up the shovel. Their faded overalls soon became covered in dirt as they struggled to finish the rest of the royal family.

The priest didn't dare stop to say a few words; they were all below the mayor, apparently. And the priest had been paid to speak for the mayor. No one else, it seemed so wrong. Sam wanted to scream. Wanted to tell them all how he felt. How weak, alone, and absurd he felt.

But no one cared.

"God go with you." The priest said, stepping down and walking towards a waiting limo.

Sam screamed then. They were still people. They were people with lives, people with names. They had hopes, dreams, aspirations. They had Names.

"They forgot us. They forgot Dad worked in the factories. Forgot Jessica was a student. It's just not fair, Henry. It's not fucking fair. Where were they?! Where were the people he worked with? Where were our friends? Did we even have fucking friends!?"

"Didn't that guy say everyone was here?"

"Henry, I saw suits. I saw suits and more fucking suits. Trust me; there wasn't a soul there that was a friend of mine. Not one that was a friend of dad's. No school kids, no teachers. Jessica's coven didn't even show."

Henry stood watching as the dirt was flung haphazardly onto the caskets.

"I mean, it's not like this is their faith or anything. But friendship transcends faith. Friendship is supposed to be the one thing that makes us all different. It makes us human. Mom never liked it, but she accepted it. Jessica was a witch. She was a bloody fucking *witch*."

The click and swoosh of the dirt onto the casket was a hushed whisper reply.

"But she was my sister. I loved her. Her friends loved her. Mom loved her. No one wants this. No one wants this. This – this is such a fucking joke, Henry. Don't you see?"

There was no respect.

"We're here, Sam. We can be their witness."

"Will you say a few words? Please?" Sam choked up and wiped his tears.

"Lord of Mercy, as we mourn the death of Jessica and Carol Reibert, we cannot stop but to thank you for the times we shared. And though we grieve today, we know they are with you." Henry looked down at the two holes as he fingered a tiny cross on his neck.

"I'm so sorry, mom." Sam said, choking up. "Jessica. I miss you guys. I'm so sorry."

"I'm sure they were great people, Sam. They're angels now, one with God and the Light. Their souls float freely in the Heavens. They're watching over you. All you have to do is look up at the stars. Look up, and you will see their Light shining down upon you."

Church bells sounded in the distance. The grunts went to lunch.

And so Sam picked up a shovel and cast dirt down, burying his mother and sister. Henry joined him.

"Mom used to cook the best pot roast. Jessica wanted to be an actress."

It was a silent moment, a shared moment.

The Heavens wept.

CONSTANCE

14

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SAM

15

Later that afternoon, the rain stopped.

Sam and Henry came back to the dorm to find a note taped on the door. The RA wanted to see him. That never was good news. Sam read through the note quickly. It wasn't nearly as bad as he thought. Well, it was. But not that edge-of-your-seat holy shit scared that you usually get when the RA wants to see you.

"Maybe you should have gone to class..." Henry said coolly.

Sam looked him in the eyes. "Go inside."

It took a few minutes, Henry gave him the *look*. But Sam held his ground. "Go. I'll tell you later."

"Promise?"

Sam nodded, and Henry acquiesced. With a quick look back, he stepped through the portal and shut the door. He didn't shut it all the way, just enough for that little bit of privacy you can get when you share a suite with six others.

"Hey Joe."

"Come on in Sam, I got a package for you from the mail room. Just need you to sign here." He pushed pause on his game and stood up, grabbing a piece of paper. He returned with a pen. "Sign here."

"Oh. Okay. Thanks." Sam absently scribbled on the page, missing the X.

"You alright kid? You don't look so good."

"I'm fine. Just some stuff going on."

"Oh. I'm here if you need me. Here you go."

Sam gave a polite thank you and accepted the brown envelope. He walked back to his room and stole a quick glance at the sender line.

"What was that about?" Henry said as I closed the door.

"Some envelope for me."

"Who's it from?"

"No clue." It was an honest answer.

"Well, open it up then."

Sam shrugged, "Maybe later."

"It might be important." Henry said, pressing.

"I guess you're right." Sam turned the envelope upside down, tugging on the metal clasp. He overturned the envelope on his bed, emptying the contents. He just stared. They were newspaper clippings. Hundreds of them. Some were yellow, some were brown, and some looked to be a week or a day old.

"Maybe stuff about your dad's campaign." Henry said. "A tribute to the great man he was. Is it a college? That's a pretty big honor, to take that time."

He was half right. Sam looked down and read the headlines. Each one was another knife through the heart. There were pictures too, pictures of Dad; and pictures of some woman, some dark skinned woman. She looked familiar. He picked up a few clippings. He read, stared, felt something burning deep inside of him. They were stories of blood, death, loss and one of surprise.

"What is it, Sam?"

"N...nothing." Sam said, reading the headlines, face draining of color.

"Come on, what is it Sam?" Henry stood up and moved towards the clippings.

Sam stuffed them back into the envelope, hiding them. "You were right. It's – it's a tribute – to my dad."

"Oh." He said, smiling, "I told you they were good people."

At the bottom of the envelope was a white piece of paper, it didn't fit back into the envelope. Sam thought it was garbage. Then something caught his eye. He picked it up and read silently:

Mr. Reibert:

I am truly sorry to hear about your family. That is most depressing news. If you wish to know more about what I am sending you, please contact me at this phone number.

The Right to Know

At the bottom of the note, he found a phone number and an address. Sam stared at it a few minutes, wondering, playing with the idea. It couldn't be. The address and the name sounded familiar. It sounded too familiar. He just couldn't remember where he knew the name. Why it was so damn important. It nagged, stabbing him in the back of his head, prodding his memory banks, begging to be retrieved.

No answer came immediately. So, he did what he thought was only logical.

He called. Then he lost his nerve, hung up before the first ring.

Not thirty seconds later, the phone rang.