

A Murder In Noir

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The Theater

The clock strikes 4 A.M.

"Do not disturb the peace that I have made, and if you do you shall face the worst that I can be."

The empty auditorium echoed her words around the seats until her voice returned. She cast her gaze around the stage, waiting for someone to listen, to acknowledge her. Standing there with her head held high and her nose pointed towards the most expensive seats, Claire wallowed in the silence.

Tap... Tap... Tap...

She recognized the sound of the Oxfords **testing the structural integrity** of the mahogany floor, which shrieked with every step.

"Shakespeare?" a deep voice asked, questioning her words. She'd known who it was from the moment he had entered the building, but her brother's figure was recognizable anywhere. The tall, bulky aesthetic worked well for him, striking fear into the hearts of anyone unfortunate enough to find themselves walking on the same sidewalk.

"I say my thoughts and nothing less, A poet I am, no, I digress, you have the... wait... damn. What rhymes with less? You're seriously impairing my performance here, Luca." replied Claire, frustrated with her mistake.

"I see you're now the living representation of an iambic pentameter... So are you planning on becoming a poet while you watch our empire crumble?" asked Luca, curtly. His little sister, although adopted, was always his father's favorite. Her charm overtook anyone who tried her, but Luca had always resented her as being the cause of his father's negligence.

"Why don't you leave the smart words to the smart people... I'm sorry. Did you just call a bunch of guys with handguns in their pockets an empire? And you want me to take charge? I'd rather pursue an art! I've never had an interest in taking our *empire*, but we both know that if you ever gave an order, we'd all be in jail before we can say Venturi." Claire had never been one for order. Luca insisted that all of her success was a result of a series of luckily ordered chaotic events that everyone attributed as talent, or skill.

Luca physically felt his hypertension begin to take a toll. "Even at four in the morning, you don't ever stop, do you? Dad's on his deathbed, and within a week or two, I'll be slaving for you. Here, with your fancy words and poems. I hope dad realizes that you were never really a part of the family." Each word raced out of his mouth, laced with venom.

Her eyes flashed, and for a second, all 5'6" of Claire frightened Luca more than his father ever would. She was a fierce 21 year old, and speaking like a mafioso didn't help. Her short, curly blonde hair gave a false impression of her personality, and anyone foolish enough to think she was to be trifled with was given a sharp sting; if she was having a good day, she'd simply snap back with a poisonous retort. Otherwise, they'd deal with one amongst a thousand goons that she had control over. With a simple snap of her fingers, or more often than not, her father's, anyone could be dealt with. Anyone except Luca. She couldn't get rid of him just yet.

She always thought of Luca like a plague, or a parasite. He was never enough for their father, and they both knew it. Luca used to be a pacifist; he grew up a dove, and when he was confronted with his father's empire, he was forced to make a decision he hated. His father's slow, and yet relentless brainwashing forced Luca onto a violent extreme, which yet again made him an unlikely successor to his father. Their father, who was the leader of the Venturi family, had to choose a choose between them, and Claire was the likely decision.

"I'll remember this, you di-" she was abruptly interrupted by the backstage crew who were beginning to set up their equipment for the next show.

"I'm sorry ma'am, but you gotta leave now. Yes, I know who your father is, but we have a show in 2 hours." Claire was not in the current situation to make yet another enemy, and so she decided to leave it at that. She picked up her charcoal

grey walking suit off the stool, and she strutted through Luca and into the brisk New York air.

The privilege reeked off of Carnegie Hall, and yet as she walked down towards the 59th street bridge, which had been built around 12 New York winters ago in 1909, she felt uneasy. She pulled out a packet of Camels from her purse, and retrieved a thin cigarette and placed it tightly between her lips. "There's nothing like a camel!". She never quite agreed with that statement, and the first time she inhaled a cigarette, she vowed never to do so again. Nevertheless, she did, and was spending a sizeable chunk of her disposable income on tobacco.

"I'm sorry, can you just help me cross the bridge? I just need to reach queensbridge park, if that's possible?" She asked a taxicab driver, who was pulled up on the curb. The yellow-black striped car was a steeple for Claire, specifically with her endless budget and tremendous need to be everywhere at once. New York did not disappoint, and had the cars everywhere. The taxicab driver nodded, and noted down a quick "50 cents" on a notepad. The car sped off, and Claire looked out into the distance.

At first, her smile wider than the taxicab driver's food palette, and yet, her teeth became less and less visible. This was New York City! It was the land of dreams, where anybody from a dying town in Iowa could come and make it big! Star in Broadway, or run a shop! And yet, her eyes defied what she was promised. When her father heard of America, he was ecstatic. The sicilians were being hunted down, and America was the perfect new breeding ground for a new mafia; a

mafia that he would control. He followed the citrus trade - Italy was indeed known for their magnificent oranges - and he made it on the shores of the New York Harbor. Crime was worse than petty, and Antonio Venturi saw himself as the crime messiah. He rounded up the rest of the sicilian immigrants, and saw to the uprising of organized crime.

Naturally, this was a relatively empty market, and so he got control, and he got it quickly. Before he knew it, he was responsible for a vast amount of trade coming into and out of the city, and with prohibition overlooking the United States, money was flowing in faster than he could spend it. His wife, and Luca's mother, died of cancer shortly after Luca's birth, and Antonio couldn't bear the pain. On impulse, he adopted a little blonde local girl, named Claire, and raised her. Luca always saw Claire as a futile attempt to replace his mother, and despised her for it.

All of these thoughts raced through Claire's mind as she looked across the New York skyline, admiring the city. Past the skyline, however, she knew that the city was in socio-economic ruins, with many of the poor becoming poorer, and the rich becoming richer. She had hoped that one day that would change, but it didn't seem like it. Her father's own "business" had contributed much to the suffering that she had seen, and this shattered her heart.

Claire had often thought of her heritage... Was her mother the strong, independent woman she envisioned her to be? Was she a leader, and had to give up her daughter for reasons unbeknownst to Claire? Claire knew that she was

probably the product of whiskey and morphine, generally one or the other. The thought that had been in the back of her head ever since she could form her own opinions, and she soon realized that was nothing but a replacement; an association made by the grief of her stepmother's death. She was a mere distraction, and her father's love only dwelled on her because she reminded him of a simpler time, when he had a whole family, sans the adopted daughter.

Claire's complex web of thoughts was cautiously interrupted by the taxicab driver - he had obviously known who she was from her "VENTURI" engraved golden necklace hanging around her neck. It would be foolish for any one in any of the five boroughs not to recognize the name and give anyone bearing it the respect they deserve.

"We've crossed 59th bridge, and we're at queensbridge park. That'll be 50 cents, Miss Venturi." Although she couldn't show it, Claire still hadn't gotten used to being recognized all over New York, and yet her adoptive last name served as a stark reminder that she'd never get an ounce of privacy in her life. She quickly placed a dollar onto the taxicab's hand, and left the car before he could sort out any change. She pretended to be in a hurry and rushed into the park, with the sun only beginning to make its way above the horizon. She walked across the railing, and sat on her favorite bench - it's view of the east river was unparalleled, and it was Claire's favorite spot to pull out a cigarette and enjoy the sunrise.

As the sun became clearer, and its light flooded through the cracks between the leaves and the branches of the surrounding trees, Claire stood up to leave. She

picked up her cigarette butt, and threw it into a metal container she had; she was aware of the trash her father had caused and refused to be a part of it. As she was about to walk away, she heard a familiar sound - the same oxfords that she had heard in the theater.

“Too much of a coincidence to bump into Luca here” She whispered to herself, but she was a firm believer that just as murderous as curiosity can be, it can save the cat too. She quickly scurried behind a tree, hoping her gray coat wouldn’t give away her presence. She heard the voice of the man in the shoes, and her brain momentarily paused.

“What if someone sees us? He **CANT** find out!”, a feminine voice whispered.

“Don’t worry, no one is insane enough to visit a park in the morning. No one that’ll keep me away from you!” replied Luca’s mellow, deep voice.

Claire was trying to put a face to the very familiar feminine voice, but couldn’t do it. Before she could get any further with her thought process, she peeked behind the tree.

Claire recognized the face the moment she could see the source of the feminine voice. The sharp, accentuated jawline, with the classic red lipstick, and the jet black hair. It would be rather difficult to not recognize your own best friend, regardless of whether they were kissing someone that wasn’t their fiancée.

“You have a HUSBAND!” Claire blurted out, forgetting she wasn’t supposed to be there. She realized that, now that she was seen, she might as well tell them both what she thinks. “Elena has A HUSBAND, you absolute PIG.” Claire continued to yell at both people until her face turned a deadly shade of beetroot.

Both Elena and Luca went through all five stages of grief within approximately 5 seconds. At first, they were in denial of Claire’s existence. What were the chances that Luca’s sister and Elena’s best friend was hiding behind a random tree in a back alley park? Luca’s face then shifted to anger, as he knew that Claire would do nothing helpful with this information. Elena then skipped directly into bargaining...

“Claire. Please, think rationally. You can’t tell anyone about this. We’re nothing more than friends. This is GOING to stop when we have the wedding, I just need you to promise not to tell Marco anything, `` Elena said with an increasingly alarming tone. Claire could not hear anything through an evident lack of communication between her ears and her brain. She backed up slowly, and fell over a sidewalk barrier, and Luca quickly caught her.

“Get your HANDS off me. I can’t look at either of you right now. Please get out of my way,” Claire said while trying to squeeze her way between both participants of the affair. They put up a fight first, but she pushed through and quickly ran away with her heels leaving a tipper-tapper getting further and further away.

Claire was running through towards the street as fast as possible. At this early time, finding a taxicab in front of a bridge shouldn't have been too difficult, and she was adamant on staying as far away from the affair as possible. Once again, her thoughts were running a marathon.

For Claire, this whole situation seemed to be like a test. Realistically, what does she do? Marco, Elena's Fiancee, was a close friend of Claire's as well. Does she stick with her best friend? Does she do the right thing, and tell Marco? She considered the repercussions of this and her mind was swirling with ideas. She was faced with a dilemma, of which she just couldn't bear any consequences. During all this, she stumbled upon a bustling street, and a car drove up to her and **HOOOOOONK.**

"This isn't a pathway, get out of the damn wa-" a driver shouted, but immediately closed his mouth as Claire turned around. She eyed him down, and when he started looking at his steering wheel, she slowly walked back to the path. She took a last look at the park before walking away.

Luca slowly comforted a crying Elena...

"I'll kill her. I swear to god I will".

The Kingsbridge Inn

The clock strikes 7 A.M.

Claire was walking towards the Kingsbridge Inn, with her situation exacerbated. It was a crisp, warm morning, something that was unlikely to see in December, and yet she felt more frozen than she had ever felt before. She looked around for two police officers that were bothering her the day before. Approached her about a missing case, but she lied and told them that they had gone to the wrong location. She was hoping they wouldn't return, as to not have to deal with them a second time.

She got to the heavy, mahogany door and pushed it with all her might, and it wouldn't budge. "Mrs. Partridge, if you could maybe open the door for me that would be very much appreciated. I need to get in, it's cold out here." A pudgy old lady, no taller than 5'3', waddled from behind the lobby counter and opened the door with a single pull. Her face was sullen and droopy, with her eyes showing the same emotion as would be expected from a stationary table.

"Maybe if you'd eat more, I wouldn't have to open your doors anymore, Claire. Seriously, I put the food on the table, and half the time you don't even pay me. Maybe try independence for once in a while", Mrs. Partridge quickly replied after Claire walked in. She walked back towards the counter and perched up onto the stool, waiting for another customer to come by. Claire walked off into the reading room, which consisted of a red and gold velvet sofa, and a massive bookcase with

lights around it. At first, it was meant to be the lobby, but when Antonio Venturi came to Mrs. Partridge asking for his, and his friend's children to be housed, the Kingsbridge Inn became almost a home for Claire, Luca, Elena, and Marco.

She entered the room and felt the warmth, and just for a second, her mind drifted off into emptiness. She picked up "A Study in Scarlet", and sat down, and sunk into the comfortable world of Sherlock Holmes and his budding detective assistant, John Watson. She always fancied the idea of being like Sherlock Holmes: powerful, sarcastic, witty, and smart... She'd been described all of those adjectives multiple times over, but she knew that they were all so differently sourced. She'd always thought that people would be too scared of her father to tell her otherwise, and so she eventually began distancing herself of anyone who fit the criteria, which was just about every nine out of ten people in New York.

~ Creaaaaaaak ~

The heavy door swung open once again, this time opened by a single person. Claire, who had been invested completely into the Sherlock Holmes fantasy, peeked around the corner to see Elena walk into the main lobby.

"Has Claire come back yet?" Claire heard her ask, in a very ominous, and yet surprisingly loud whisper. She then heard a classic Mrs. Partridge mumble, followed by Elena's heels clicking towards her on the wooden floor. Claire quickly straightened herself as if she hadn't heard a thing, and went back to her

book. She tried focusing on the words, but she felt Elena's gaze penetrating her skull.

"Claire. Look at me" Elena said urgently. She did not want to have to go through the trouble of yet another fiancée.

"Oh, sorry. Are you talking to me? You just never know these days, who one is talking to, who one is getting married, and who one is sneaking out to queensbridge damn park at 5 in the morning, but you know. I guess I'll just have to learn." Claire burst out. She just couldn't stop herself, and every word flew out after the other. Elena heard what she said, but she didn't listen.

"Marco has a RIGHT to know this. He's gonna be married to you. In sickness and in health, remember? You've seen the vows, you know what they mean. Till death do us part? No, till someone finds out, and word of mouth do us part. I cannot believe how unbelievably selfish and conceited you are! And with my brother? Five million people across five boroughs of this city, and Luca Venturi is the one you decided on?" Claire's eyes were now flashing red, and all the nervousness and her fear had turned to anger. She was angry that Elena would do this to Marco, a lifelong friend. She was angry that it was with her brother. She was angry that her best friend would even behave like this.

Elena opened her mouth to speak, but the words ceased to exist. She looked at Claire, who was now fully attacking her, and was absolutely speechless. Her facial

expression changed, and she was about to say something, but was interrupted by a voice from the other room.

“Marco, my boy. How was your first day of work? I hope Antonio didn’t pick on you too much?” Mrs. Partridge walked towards Marco with a smile that was a rare sight to see in the Kingsbridge Inn.

“Mama! How are you? No, don’t worry, Antonio was feeling ill today, and so he didn’t show up. Just had my father to deal with, but he’s alright. We moved a little Gin around Staten Island, easy stuff. Seems like something I could get used to. Hey, where’s la mia principessa?” Marco said, looking around for his beloved.

“There she is!” He shouted, after finding her in the reading room. He threw his arms around her, lifting her up, and carried a laughing Elena back to the breakfast table.

“We’re gonna get married!” He chanted. Normally, Mrs. Partridge would hate any sound that she could actually hear, but she raised Marco ever since he was a little boy, along with her own son, Davide. Claire sat back in her chair with an overwhelming sense of nausea. Every fiber of her being was telling her to tell him that he was going to be spending the rest of his life with a liar but she picked up her book, and headed up to her room.

In every wooden staircase, there would always be a specific step or two that would make loud sound - a certain disruption for anyone awake. Eventually, Claire had learned to avoid the specific steps, and tried convincing everyone else

to do so. Unfortunately, stumbling home drunk trying not to be found by the police generally tends to void such niceties, especially when it's sparing the comfort of others and not directly affecting the person themselves. Claire made her way up, making sure not to step on any landmines, and opened the room to her door.

Despite her clean and professional appearance at all times, Claire had an extremely messy room. When Luca used to say that her success was based off chaos, he wasn't entirely being metaphorical. Her room was unnavigable, and her clothes were strewn along every path from every main location in the room. Her bed, her dresser, and her desk, were all impossible to reach without stepping on something, and Mrs. Partridge took offence to this almost all the time.

"I let you live here as a favor to your father, and this is what I get? Please Claire, I don't care how much money your father has, I should be able to see the floor!" Mrs. Partridge loved complaining, and Claire's room was one of her favorite topics of conversation. Despite all that, Mrs. Partridge seemed to ignore Marco's equally messy room, for reasons completely and utterly known to the entire building.

She peeked back out the door and looked at the grandfather clock at the end of the hallway. *Tick... Tick... Tick*. When she first moved in, she could hear every single rotation in every single place in the building. They all could. It took them each month to be able to adjust their ears and continually ignore it. After a while, they'd only hear it if they wanted to, and that became pure bliss. As she stared at

the clock, it started right back saying “8:59”. Claire got back in her room and locked the door.

She walked over to her desk and looked at her papers, of which there was a stack of letters from today’s mail. She looked through the letters, most of which were placed by Mrs. Partridge. She sorted through them, and saw the majority of them signed from her father, Antonio Ventury, and placed them on the side to read them. One of which, however, was addressed to Mrs. Partridge herself. Claire ought to put it on the side and give it back to her, but one does not become a mafia boss by leaving secrets unopened. The letter was sent from Kips Bay Hospital Psychiatric Ward & The New York Police Department, and read:

“Dear Mrs. Partridge,

It is with our greatest regret that we are forced to send you this letter.

As Davide was being transported to the police department for a mandatory psychiatric check up, he escaped and ran onto the street, and was promptly hit by oncoming traffic. He suffered massive internal bleeding and numerous other injuries, and was taken back to Kips Bay hospital. A dispatch team was immediately sent to find the remaining family, which is only you, Agatha Partridge. Upon arrival to the location of the “Kingsbridge Inn”, a young lady, described as “Approximately 20 years of age, with blonde hair”, refused entry to the dispatch team. She warned them of strict consequences if they wouldn’t leave, would not listen to their message, and completely denied them entry. Without another family member to accept the “no responsibility” clause of surgery, Davide passed away due to the blood hemorrhaging.

Please contact us immediately.

Kips Bay Hospital”

Claire felt her begin to swell up and began to hold her tears back, hoping that this was some sort of mistake. It was addressed to Mrs. Partridge, and her son’s name was Davide, but why wouldn’t she just pay the hospital bills? Why was Davide in the hospital in the first place, especially the psychiatric ward? She dropped the letter, and made a stark realization. She quickly made the link between the two officers that she talked to the day before, and dropped the letter.

Her face , and she quickly picked the letter up and placed it back in the envelope. She tried her best to reseal it, but it was very evident that it had been tampered with, and she just quickly stuffed it in, with her tears wettening the envelope. She rushed to the bathroom to quickly wash up and noticed her Elizabeth Arden mascara had smeared all over her face, and so she quickly washed it off and ran downstairs.

Before entering the main living room, she attempted to compose herself. Any sort of emotion, and Mrs. Partridge would instantly realize. She took a deep breath and walked into the room, finding Elena, Marco, and Mrs. Partridge engaged in a deep conversation about Antonio’s business.

“If it were run by me? I’d just control all the bakeries in New York. Bread has to come from somewhere and trust me! People want bread more than they want whiskey” Mrs. Partridge was trying to convince Marco of her ultimate master plan.

“No, see. I think both you and Antonio are wrong. The ultimate business idea? Drugs. I’m talking Cocaine, but I’m talking big time. I’ve seen some folks do it? It’s not just for toothaches anymore, I’m telling you. This stuff? Gets anyone hooked, and it’ll make mad buck. That’s where the mafia has to go. For now, all this prohibition stuff is making Antonio a fortune, but he just doesn’t spend a dime.” Marco said, slowly diverting off his initial point.

Claire interrupted the conversation as she nonchalantly walked across the room, attempting to look as normal as she usually does.

“Jesus H. Christ Claire, what happened to your face?” Mrs. Partridge asked, alarmed. Claire’s paranoia kicked in, and she felt her throat closed up, but was interrupted by Mrs. Partridge again.

“You look look positively haunted, Claire. I think your mascara smudged... everywhere? Go wash!” Mrs. Partridge said, judgingly.

“Uh, right. Before I do that, I think you accidentally left a letter in my room while you were handing them out. I saw it and put it on the side, and just got downstairs. I’ll go put it on your desk in the reception.” Claire tried to get the

letter to a place that Mrs. Partridge could read while was alone, but Partridge seemed particularly cheerful that day.

“What? Wait no, Claire, give it here. I’m sure it’s just the rent or something, it’ll be fine”. Claire felt her heartbeat elevate, but turned around and placed the letter on the table.

“I have to go do some work, you all don’t have fun without me” Claire said, leaving, also knowing they will very much definitely not be having fun. Mrs. Partridge's eyes flashed at the letter and saw the “Kips Bay Hospital Psychiatric Ward” stamp and quickly snatched the letter off the table before either Marco or Elena could see anything. She rushed into the kitchen and locked the door, leaving the newly engaged couple in confusion.

Mrs. Partridge:

Character Background:

As a lady of principle, Mrs. Partridge was quiet. At no point in her time taking care of the Kingsbridge Inn had she been obnoxiously loud, and that was just in her nature. Her husband, Arnold Partridge was forced to go fight in the Great War. Her hatred of the government stemmed deeply from the loss of her husband, and how he was taken away from her for a few men's squabbles. He would've turned 51 in a week, and yet at the age of 50, he was technically still mandated to go fight. She considered the entire situation a stroke of dumb luck for the military, and a tragedy for her. Arnold was a sweet, peaceful old man that would never hurt a fly, although he was massively in debt. The Kingsbridge Inn, which had originally been owned by both Arnold and Agatha Partridge, was then defaulted, and bought out by an immigrant.

When the mysterious buyer first visited the inn, Agatha was still there. She had been waiting until the very last day to leave, and felt completely and utterly devastated. The buyer walked in, wearing a sharp three piece suit, with his hair slicked back, and a dense mustache growing above his top lip. She remembered that he was very tight lipped, and only spoke once, asking her if she ran the place. She said yes, and he told her that he would love for her to keep it, as long as she'd

send him a rent cheque and the finances for the inn, ensuring that the place was well kept.

That interaction initiated a business relationship with Antonio Ventury, that would eventually become a lifelong friendship. Eventually, all of Antonio, and his friends' children were moved to the house. He longer found it safe for them to reside with him, and so he cashed in his favor with Agatha, and that's how she became Mrs. Partridge.

Agatha's tragedy mainly lies in her son, Davide. He was an only child in the Partridge family, and was taken off to war with his father, except Davide returned. His mother, already bedridden at the news of her husband's death, Davide was put in charge of the Kingsbridge hotel temporarily, until Agatha was able to make a full recovery. That's when he met Marco, who treated him as a brother. Over time, Davide changed. His breathing became shorter, his sentences became more and more incoherent, and he began waking up in the middle of the night shouting. He said he heard guns and bombs, but everyone was inclined to ignore the person claiming that he heard gunshots in a completely peaceful area of the city.

He tried talking to Marco, but he couldn't make him understand. Eventually, he became a shell of what he once was. Occasionally, he'd string together a sentence or two, usually about his father, who was a popular choice of conversation for Davide's final days. He'd often be found seated in the same position for hours and hours on end, not moving, eating, drinking, whatsoever. He was placed in the

Kips Bay Psychiatric Ward, paid on the behalf of the Venturi family, but his condition worsened. Eventually, visits became infrequent, then rare, then once in a blue moon.

Claire had returned back to her room with her copy of a Study in Scarlet mocking her from the table. She felt the glare of the book shine into her eye, begging to be read, but Claire couldn't focus on one thing. Her days were usually eventful, but this was one to be remembered, and she wasn't particularly enjoy it. She put her ear to the door, to try and make out any noises coming from downstairs, but it was ominously silent.

The Kingsbridge In was many things. It was a great place to have a homely meal. It was a brilliant place to go, stay for a couple nights (or years), or even to go read a book. However, the one luxury that the residents couldn't afford was silence. If it wasn't someone stepping on the creaky stairs, it would just be something else, like Marco announcing his engagement at ungodly hours at night, or someone sneaking off to someone else's room. Claire now realized that the culprits of the midnight sneaks just might not be who she expected it to be. Regardless, a petty affair was the last thing Claire had to worry about at the moment. The more she thought about it, the more she realized how much of a burden she was on everyone.

“What if I just wasn't here?” Claire asked herself. Davide could still be alive, Luca and Dad could just have some smidge of a functioning relationship? These

thoughts developed in her head, but then she heard a sound. The signature groan of the kitchen door as it swung open.

The person that exited the kitchen at the time was not the same person that entered, just fifteen minutes prior. Mrs. Partridge walked the kitchen clutching her heart, and collapsed onto the hardwood floor as if she looked back towards Sodom. Claire heard a THUD and rushed downstairs, anxious, yet slightly relieved that her judgement would wait another day.

Marco rushed over to Mrs. Partridge and quickly tried to nudge her awake. "Mama, come on! Wake up! What's the matter?" He quickly tried to pick her up, but was unable to. Being five feet and 5 inches tall had its disadvantages. He swiftly laid her back on the floor. Her eyes were rolled up staring at the inside of her skull, and her heart rate began to slow down.

Marco ran out to the street and shouted "Someone call the fire department e, my ma.. She, uh... Just get a damn car." Marco made sure a friend of his got the message, and ran back inside. He looked around, cautiously curious. Elena got a damp towel and tried to cool a burning Mrs. Partridge, and she put a pillow over her head, but Marco ran back inside to try and find out what happened. He walked in the kitchen, and looked around for the letter.

"Come back in here! I can't take care of her all by myself, please just come back" Elena yelled with a quivering voice. "Marco, please!".

He responded with an eerie silence, meanwhile searching for the letter. The kitchen seemed relatively empty, except for the, well, food, but the letter seemed to not be found. He heard the sound of the fire department approach the house, and ran outside to a Partridge that was very close to death. He rummaged through her apron pocket and found the recently coveted paper.

“Marco, what the f-” Marco quickly interrupted her as the firemen ran into the house to take Mrs. Partridge.

“Something on this letter made Agatha worse than I’ve ever seen her. Something isn’t right. Move aside, let the firemen do their jobs.” Marco took Elena by her arm, and he moved her away from Mrs. Partridge, and she was carried away into a truck and driven to Yonkers Hospital, only a couple of minutes away.

Marco clutched the letter with a tight fist - he didn’t really know how to feel. This woman practically raised him, since he was put in the Kingsbridge Inn long before any of the others. She was the mother figure to him when his biological mother was too busy not caring, and to see someone you love to be so vulnerable, it hurt him deeply. He became the perfect son; he was kind, caring, and was fortunate enough to be too young to go to the car. Davide used to like Marco, as he was also a brother he never had. As Davide’s condition worsened over time, Mrs. Partridge took solace in Marco, and as Davide’s sanity slowly drifted away, his last memories would be watching his own mother replace him with another.

He slowly unfurled the letter, with his curiosity piqued; what could possibly affect her so much?

His eyes started running across the page, darting from side to side, and his frown became more and more exaggerated and he reached the end, and by the end of it, it all made sense. Her son had died, and when she came to this realization, she collapsed, and so on. Marco also made note of a single quote from the end:

“Approximately 20 years of age, with blonde hair”

And shortly came to the realization that Mrs. Partridge made only a few minutes prior. All that anxiousness and fear turned into anger, and he felt his face ready to explode. Claire ran downstairs after hearing the commotion with the firefighters, and asked “What happened? Why were the fire department here? Where’s Mrs. Partridge?” all in quick succession.

Marco slowly tilted his head, and looked at Claire. She sensed the fury in his eyes and felt confused, almost in a “Does he know?” look. His lips were glued shut, and he just looked at her firing flames from his eyes.

“Listen... Marco, are you alright? I’m confused, what happened here?” Claire repeated, slowly losing hope.

“Mrs. Partridge collapsed a few minutes ago, and the fire department just came and took her to the hospital. Other than that, I’m just as confused as you are.” Elena intervened quickly to inform Claire.

Marco had made the assumption that Claire had already looked at the letter, making her as bad as he thought she was, but there was only one way to genuinely find out.

A wry smile fell on Marco's face, and he threw the letter on the table. It caught air, and then slowly descended onto the table, swaying backwards and forwards until it reached the table. For a piece of paper, it was extremely ominous, and the moment Claire saw "Kips Bay Psychiatric Ward" on the bottom of the letter, she knew.

"Listen, Marco. I-" Claire began to say, but was swiftly interrupted.

"Am a murderer. You are a murderer. Davide would still be here if you just didn't exist! You selfish piece of human garbage. My BROTHER is DEAD because of YOU. My mother will DIE because of YOU. I want you to leave. NOW." His voice started quivering, and he turned around and his head hung low.

"Marco, please. If you could just listen to me-" Claire tried explaining, but Marco didn't really care.

"Get out." Marco whispered.

"Get OUT." He repeated, lifting the rosewood table and tossing in Claire's direction, who backed up quickly. Her eyes widened and she slowly backed up...

"Elena and Luca are having an affair" Claire said immediately.

“That is a LIE, and she’s clearly doing it to distract you.” Elena said quickly, almost too quickly. Marco looked up at Claire, completely ignoring Elena’s response and said.

“You’re a cancer, you know that? First of all you kill the only real family I’ve ever had, now you’re trying to stop me from having one? That’s rich. That’s really rich. You are a NOBODY. Antonio made you who you are. Otherwise, you would be the ground that I walk on, and your ungrateful self is now trying to lie to me, and say that my own Fiancee, lies to me? Really? Jesus, you’re worse than a murder. What, are you collecting all seven deadly sins? Just go back to your father. I don’t ever want to see your face again.”

Elena looked at Claire and flashed her a quick wry smile, and a wink. Claire opened her mouth to respond but the words just wouldn’t come out. She looked at Marco, but he was too preoccupied convicting his only real brother’s killer.

Claire walked out of the room without saying a word and picked up her coat from the reading room, and walked out of the Kingsbridge Inn. It just seemed like one of those days where it would be colder during the afternoon than it was in the morning, and Claire really wasn’t enjoying it.

She walked out and quickly hailed a cab to Yonkers Hospital, worried about Mrs. Partridge’s imminent situation. She paid no attention to anything else, and her mind was preoccupied; how how she wished that Mrs. Partridge would live. If she didn’t, she’d be an outcast. Marco would never look her in the face again, and the

only people that she had ever known as friends would look at her and regard her as a monster.

Is that really what she was?

An internal dialogue was forming within her head, thinking somewhat dangerous thoughts.

“What if I’m what they say I am?” She asked herself. “Would I be responsible for a death? Would I be responsible for both Mrs. Partridge’s and Davide’s deaths? By logic, I would be. If I had just left the policemen to do their job. Why am I the way I am. If I could JUST LEAVE EVERYTHING ALONE. “

“Uh, Ma’am. Are you alright? I know it’s not my place but you sound a little worried”, said the taxicab driver, in a worried tone. “Do you need anything? Should I stop at a shop, or...?” he then followed up.

Claire heard him firstly and felt comforted for the first time in what seemed to be the longest day of her life. A nobody stranger just offered help, but then he followed it up.

“You know who I am, don’t you? Of course you do. Just stop the car. Please just let me get out.” Her reputation spread around to everyone, and being recognized constantly became a curse.

“Ma’am, I can’t do that.” His accent slowly changed from a dedicated New Yorker to a strong deep Italian voice. “Your father asked me to escort you to the hospital. After that, you’re coming back home.” He said, with a strained voice. She could hear exactly how hard he was going to make it if she tried to escape.

“Fine. Just let me go into the hospital alone. Give me that.” Claire said desperately. She knew the only chance she’d get is if she could navigate the hospital without a huge Italian man tailing her at every corner.

“No can do, cara. You’re staying with me.” He replied.

The taxicab drove to the sidewalk next to the hospital entrance, and came to an abrupt stop. Her voice faltered as she tried to object, but he opened her door and pulled her out with arms the size of her head. Only when he was fully extended, could she appreciate just how large the guy was. The more she looked at him, she realized more and more details. His grey beard was interrupted by a scar under his mouth, and his ocean grey eyes showed her a storm. A life full of troubles, worries, and loss, she could feel his soul longing for a means to an end; an escape.

“Stop looking at me. Walk.” he said curtly.

“Who are you? How come I’ve never seen you before. Surely one of my father’s hooligans, but I know all the important ones. Are you that irrelevant?” she said, trying to provoke him. She knew that any harm that fell on her would befall him tenfold.

“You think I’m that easy, huh? Let me tell you, Claire, I’ve seen things you’d never imagine. I’ve seen hundreds of men die in the span of a minute. You can actually feel their consciousness pass through you when you’re holding someone who you considered a brother. You’re holding them, and you’re shaking them, and you’re trying to wake them up, but they don’t budge. Their eyes roll back, and their body goes limp. I don’t care if you think I’m irrelevant, because to me? You’re a joke. You’ve grown up in a world where you wouldn’t have a care in the world, walking here and there, literally stepping on men greater than you’ll ever be, just because of your father.”

“You fought in the war with my father?” She asked, nervously. His monologue was touching, but Claire knew that war made men unstable. She’d seen her father change after the war. He was always soft and gentle before he left. He’d treat her with the utmost respect, treating her like an adult. She always thought that this was the reason for her serious demeanor. Only two years ago, he was sent to the western front, and yet when he came back, he was almost unrecognizable. He was sent back after suffering a gunshot to the gut, but the time on the battlefield made him fragile. It made him unstable. It made him more volatile than anyone she’d seen before, and she made sure to avoid home whenever he was there. He was aging quickly, and she every time she’d go visit, he would be in a worse shape than he was earlier.

“Your father is a hero. He didn’t have to go to war, you know? He made that as a decision himself. He controls this city. He could’ve said no, but his men were

getting drafted, and he said ‘I wont send my men off to war, while staying here and enjoying New York alone’, and he went ahead and joined them” He said, almost admirably.

He slowly opened the hospital door, and pushed her in.

The Hospital

The clock strikes 11 A.M.

“What’s her name?” he asked, showing no emotion.

“What’s who’s name?” she responded.

“Whoever we’re here to see.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“What? We’re here to see someone. You asked to come here.”

“Sorry, I was just visiting the hospital for fun.”

“Claire, if you don’t tell me what her name is right now, I promise you your broken father won’t be able to fix what’s left of you.” He momentarily snapped, and she realized exactly what he was capable of.

“Agatha Partridge. Her name is Agatha Partridge, but we all call her Mrs. Partridge” Claire responded with a long sigh. Maybe toying with him wasn’t a great idea. He walked towards the receptionist, who wore a small white hat, and a loose white nurse gown.

“Morning, beautiful. I just wan-” he tried, but was interrupted.

“Claire, is this guy with you?” The nurse peered over his massive shoulder and addressed Claire.

He turned around and gave Claire a death stare. She felt his eyes literally burning onto her face. She sighed, looked back at the nurse, and said “Sorry, he’s a little shaken up from the war. You know how they are. I’m here to check up on Mrs. Partridge, she was brought in by the fire department very recently, I think.” Responded the nurse.

“Listen...” he looked at her nametag, “Margaret? I just want to see this woman, now. I have an appointment with someone else, so if we could just speed this up? That would be fantastic.” his voice was laced with more emotion than he had portrayed Claire in the past fifteen minutes.

The nurse looked back at him, unimpressed. “Listen, boss. I work in a hospital. I’ve seen bigger, tougher, and scarier guys than you, and I’m still here, and they’re probably rotting in a jail cell. Just sign in here, you can find Agatha in Room 205 on the second floor.” She pushed the record book towards him, and gave him a pen.

“Sorry, do you have a pencil?” he quickly asked.

“I just gave you a pen, use it.” she responded, and walked away to check some records. He started fidgeting with the pen, his giant’s hands finding it difficult to work the thing.

“Listen, Claire. Can you open this thing for me?” he quietly asked her. He seemed almost embarrassed

“Wait, do you not know how to use a pen?” she laughed.

“I can use one, I just can’t write. Just write your name down.” He responded, seriously.

Claire giggled, and looked at him. “Come on, don’t joke with me.” She continued looking at him, and realized he was looking at his feet. Despite his stature, he seemed small at the moment, almost shrinking himself in embarrassment. Her smile faded away, and she felt like repulsive of her own behaviour.

“Ever since I came back from the war, letters just fly off the page. Antonio tried to send me to a specialist, but I can’t do anything about it. Just write your name, and let’s go.” he said, with a renewed sense of confidence.

“I need BOTH your names. Even the tough guy.”, The nurse yelled from the records room. Claire quickly scribbled her name down, and looked toward the behemoth standing to her right.

“You still haven’t told me your name?” Claire said, in a hurry. She looked at him and he sighed, clearly not keen on her knowing.

“William Gibbs. Gibbs with a double B. You already know how to spell William.” She jotted his name down and ran into the staircase. William followed her, but realized she wasn’t excited to see her landlady, she had the intention of escape

“You won’t get far, you know!” he yelled as he ran after her.

She responded with a deadly silence. She quickly opened the door to the second floor, and was greeted by an empty hallway, hearing the heavy thuds behind her. His voice echoed around, and she sprinted down the hallway. Her flats hit the white tiles and she looked around and tried finding a place to go.

The endless corridor was lit by periodic windows, and the sunlight only filtered in to some parts of the corridor. She looked back and saw the door open wide, with Gibbs walking through it. He saw her and smiled; he put his hands to his side and started running. She thought she was miles ahead, but the *thuds* got increasingly louder and louder, until she reached the end of the corridor. It twisted off to the right, and there was another corridor full of rooms. She knew that she couldn’t outrun him, and quickly entered the first room she found unlocked. She ran inside, closed the door, and quickly shut her eyes in relief. She heard his footsteps walk past, knowing that she entered a hotel suite.

“CLAIRE, you CAN’T escape. I’m here, and I’ll search every single room and find you. God forbid, who knows what might *accidentally* happen to your landlady if you disappeared.” He yelled around the corridor, hoping for her to surrender.

She opened her eyes and eyed the room; the walls were a light shade of blue, and there was a grandfather clock on the wall. She turned her gaze to the bed and found a decrepit old man lying on the bed, his thousand yard stare looking at the New York skyline.

“Don’t worry, I won’t say a thing.” he said quietly.

She looked at him, nodded, and ran into the closet. She slowly wondered... why was there a closet in a hospital? Why was there a grandfather clock in a hospital? Why was there an ol-

BOOM

The room’s door flew off its hinges, landing at the hospital bed’s feet. The old man slowly turned his head, completely unfazed.

“Sorry, can I help you? I’m trying to get a nice look at the skyline. I’m very busy these days, you know. Between the sleeping and the eating and the looking, I don’t have time for interruptions like this” he added, sarcastically.

Gibbs walked towards him and looked at him straight in the eye between cuffing him straight in the head and knocking him out. Claire saw this whole interaction through a hole in the closet’s door. She slowly moved her head, careful not to incite any creaks, and moved away. She slowed her breathing, and came to a complete and utter halt.

“Oh Claire! If he dies, that's on you! You know that, don't you? You'll be responsible for the second death today, let's see if you can get a third? I've been gone for a while, but I think that's a hattrick. I know you're in one of these rooms, and you're not quiet enough to leave without me noticing. I can just wait for you.” He laughed slowly, and pulled a rocking chair from the room into the corridor, and began singing a song.

“There's a song I learnt, from some of the Irishmen in the War. I can't sing very well, but only god can attest to how many times I've sung it.

*It's a long way to Tipperary
It's a long way to go
It's a long way to Tipperary
To the sweetest girl I know!*

Do you want me to keep going? Because I can definitely keep going.”

Claire evaluated her options carefully. Realistically, what could she do? She could try and leave her