

Inner Demons

Madison Scott-Clary

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Part I

Act 1

Chapter 1

Early August

Sleeping in a new place was always disorienting to Jeff. The fact that it was his same old bed, same old covers, didn't do anything to cover that up. The smell of him lingered on the comforter, which he hadn't had time to wash beforehand, but the smells of the room itself were new. All new.

It would take weeks or months of living there, maybe even longer, before the scents of him and his two children had permeated the place enough to call it their own. Until then, it would be late nights surrounded by the tough odor of latex paint and spackle, of carpet cleaning and of not-his-own memories. Until then it would be lying awake at night, learning the new smells, the new creaks and groans of the new house, finding all of the new patterns in the texture of the ceiling before he could actually manage to let sleep overcome him.

It was Kayla who had adapted fastest out of the three of them. Not only had the seven year-old hustled into the house with more happiness than tiredness (for Jeff) or apathy (for Justin, his older son), but she had immediately found all of the interesting places to hide and sequestered herself in her room, laying on her undressed bed with her colored pencils and a sheet of paper. Jeff had had an additional few days to scope the place out before moving there, but that had been a month and a half ago, and more than once, he found himself calling for his daughter, confounded by unexpected corners.

Justin had had the hardest time, and Jeff suspected that that was an issue of maturity.

As an adult, he'd been through his fair share of moves, and had the benefit of being the one who had gotten the new job out here on the east coast. Justin had been pulled from his junior year of school, where he had established friendships and toiled through countless classes; as a kid (and, Jeff reminded himself, he *was* still a kid), Justin had the benefit of none of this. He may still be adaptive in time, as Kayla had been, but for now, he was stuck finishing out his tenure in high school in a strange and new place, surrounded by new people and with suddenly altered college prospects: what was in-state before was seemingly out of reach within the span of a few short months.

For now, though, Jeff vowed to help his eldest to adapt as best as he could, and maybe rope Kayla into that as well. He would only have a portion of the time with his children that he used to, having gone from being an unemployed single father to the new and improved Dad-With-A-Job.

He had meant to take that time off, as he'd told himself and his kids countless times. A few years of helping to get Kayla into preschool and then into grade school after that, months of helping Justin with his homework. The pay-out from Karen's life insurance had more than covered the fifty grand they had still owed on the house, giving him the leeway to take the occasional consulting gig, but otherwise to spend the time with his kids.

The money hadn't run out, necessarily – not yet, at least – but his patience for being a stay-at-home father had. He loved his kids, dearly so, but the long days alone with only the occasional bit of shopping or consulting to break up the time had been so counter to how he felt he operated best, that when the opportunity for permanent employment with a pretty decent firm had come up, he'd leapt at it. The pay was good, but, he made sure to remind himself, it wasn't about that. It was getting the kids a good chance at life, and getting himself up and moving again.

Being an adult, Jeff suspected, was all about setting up hoops that you would then have to jump through. He envied Kayla, whose duties were simplified to finding the best hiding place in the house and drawing, always drawing.

Jeff wasn't sure when it was that he'd fallen asleep, other than the last time he'd managed to check the time, it was nearing three in the morning, and that the light under Justin's door still hadn't gone out. He'd long since given up policing bed times for his eldest. There were measures – getting up on time, doing well in school – that Justin always seemed to meet or exceed, anyway.

#

Jeff blearily slapped at the alarm that finally got him out of bed, having already silenced his phone and stuffed it under his pillows.

It was only Saturday, but given that he had cut it down to the wire with his new job starting on Monday, he wanted to get at least a few things unpacked before then. He pried himself out of bed and nearly made his way down the hall to the kitchen so that he could make himself coffee, before remembering that he hadn't unpacked any of the kitchen gear yet.

That was dumb.

He sat back down on the edge of his bed and stared at the low barrier of boxes that lined one of the room's otherwise unoccupied walls. The month or two before the move, he and his kids had gone through a culling of the unnecessary, moving unwanted stuff to a mixture of Goodwill, ARC, the humane society (their dog Benji's passing had spurred Jeff on to eventually find and apply for jobs outside of the state), and even the food bank, seeing no reason to move their non-perishables with them on the road trip.

Some part of him had obviously thought ahead, as the box with his robe and pajamas had been on the top row. He had already dug through to get out his PJs, and his robe was laying sprawled on the rest of the boxes. He shrugged it on tiredly and, careful to be quiet, made his way down the hall to the kitchen.

Kayla had yet to reach that point in her life where she slept in much later than eight or nine in the morning, so she woke and surprised him as he was digging through boxes in the kitchen, searching for the coffee machine. The noise of him putting away dishes and silverware as he rifled through the cardboard tower had obviously woken her.

“Morning, daddy,” she said, looking bleary-eyed with mussed-up hair.

“Hey, little blossom,” Jeff said, edging cheerfulness into his voice to cover up the lingering thought that he might’ve tossed the coffee beans with the move, leaving himself with nothing. “You sleep alright in your new room?”

Kayla started, then nodded sheepishly before returning to the apparently important task of looking around the kitchen. “It’s pretty here,” she offered, distracted.

“I know, Kay-bear. It seemed like a good place for us. All finished so we don’t have to do any work.” He shoved another stack of plastic cups up into one of the cupboards. He knew he should be paying more attention to where things were winding up, since there wouldn’t likely be any motivation to move them again, but he suspected that the next box contained the coffee machine, and hopefully a bit of coffee. “Good schools, too. I think you’re gonna like it here.”

“Mmm,” Kayla rolled her eyes. Must’ve learned that one from her brother.

“Finally!” Jeff said, lifting the coffee pot out of the box. It was wrapped around with plastic wrap, crumpled up newspaper stuffed into the gaps to keep the pot from moving around. And, lo, a small tupperware container of pre-ground coffee settled in alongside it. “Past me, I love you.”

Kayla giggled and tilted her head, brushing hair out of her eyes, “What? You’re weird, daddy.”

Jeff turned and grinned lopsidedly at his daughter. “Weird and tired. I’m going to make some coffee real quick, Kay-bear. Do you know if your brother is awake yet?”

Kayla shook her head. “I peeked last night, he was listening to music on headphones. I don’t think he’ll be up for a long time.”

Part II

Act 2

Chapter 2

Halloween

Just as before, they called him on his cell phone at work. This was the county coroner's office, and could he please come down sometime today before 5:30 to help identify a body. Yes, now would be fine. The sooner the better. Thanks.

Just as before, his heart seemed to seize within his chest. He had taken the time to only dash off a quick email to his boss. There was an emergency. Yes, he'd make up the time later.

Just as before, he left his coat slung over the back of his chair and his computer logged in and unlocked. He jogged to the elevator, punching in the address that he had been given on his phone, but by the time he had made his way from the sixth to the first floor, the anxiety had welled within him such that he sprinted from the building to his truck.

Just as before, he was met with calm professionalism at the door and quietly, efficiently ushered from the entrance to the room where he would view the deceased. No, they could not tell him more. He would have to wait, then speak with the coroner directly.

Just as before, Karen, unmistakable as ever, lay on a clinically cold table, eyes shut, though her nose and jaw were badly disfigured from the car accident, lacerations covering her torso down to her midriff, an ankle oddly angled.

Just as before, he knew her immediately.

Just as before, he ran to her, the shout of anguish already welling up within his chest.

And then he hit a wall. There was no rebound, no noise, nothing to see. He was simply stopped five or so feet from his wife as she lay on the table. He could not go closer, he strained ineffectually, his muscles seeming to go slack as they encountered the transparent barrier before him, not allowing him to go to his wife.

And the coroner's assistant or whomever had guided him there kept asking, "Sir? Is this your wife? Sir? Sir? I need to know if this is your wife. Sir. Are you alright?"

Jeff didn't awake with a gasp, though he did start enough that he felt disoriented as his eyes struggled to make out the darkness of the room surrounding him. And yet, as the disorientation

passed, he felt himself completely awake, as though he had simply never been asleep.

He rolled onto his other side and peered at the glow of the numbers on the clock, willing them to swim into focus.

Three AM. Shit.

It was that awkward period of the night where he knew that, unless he got to sleep immediately, there would be no making up for the lost rest and he would feel terrible all day. And there was no way he could sleep soon.

The pain of losing Karen had slowly left him over the months and years that followed her death, and love for his children had taken over once the estate had been settled and life insurance worked out. Even so, it was possible to bring back that ache with a simple memory, or a dream.

Chapter 3

Early November

“Oh! Kayla! Those are beautiful!”

Kayla looked up, dully at first, from the crocus she had been drawing, one among many, in a sea of graphite. Recognizing the voice as Mrs. Willis, she had brightened and smiled, setting her pencil down and shuffling the papers nervously.

“You think so, Mrs. W?”

Mrs. Willis beamed down to Kayla. “They’re beautiful, dear. Where did you learn to draw like that?”

Kayla shrugged, her feet swinging, crossed at the ankles, beneath her chair. “I just draw a lot. Daddy draws, and so I started drawing, and now it’s just what I love to do.”

“They’re beautiful,” Mrs. Willis reaffirmed, then paused. “The class is scheduled to move to clay tomorrow. Do you want to work with clay? I can let you do clay flowers, if that’s what you like, instead of the slab pottery.”

Kayla, thought about that. The thoughts were crowded with flowers. Perfect curves along petals, the gentle arc of a stem softened by trichomes. Colors that seemed to blur within her head.

“I-” she began, then stopped once more.

Perhaps sensing the remainder of the thought, Mrs. Willis took stock of the rest of the class, drawing inverted images as a study of negative space, though she hadn’t introduced that term yet. Other than a young boy and girl trying desperately not to look like they were talking across the room, everyone was behaving well.

“Come, Kayla. Come with me. I want to have a word with you in the hall,” she murmured quietly.

Kayla flushed, gave one last look to her flowers, and nodded, carefully scooting her chair back from the edge of the desk. She followed after her teacher, mindful lifting her feet too high. It was best to move among flowers in a flowing fashion, with grace so as not to crush any.

Once outside, Mrs. Willis closed the door most of the way after one last look, then appraised her student. “Do you know what an ‘independent study’ is, Ms. Perez-Gray?”

Kayla stared at her feet (surrounded by dandelions – delicate flowers of all yellow on a sturdy stalk) until the words ‘independent study’ caught her attention. “Mmn? No.”

“It means that a student gets to direct their own study into a field that they love.” Mrs. Willis peered down through her glasses at the young girl, “You have an interest – a thing that you love – and you have the will to make something beautiful. Would you like to do an independent study?”

Kayla poked her toe against the linoleum (against the green leaves at the base of a dandelion) and thought for a moment, “What does that mean?”

Mrs. Willis face softened into kindness. “It means that I would give you resources to learn how to draw and paint flowers. Some books, some examples. Georgia O’Keefe... no, not yet. Anyway, dear, I’ll give you some examples and books on drawing flowers, and you and I will come up with some goals for you to reach, and you can work towards that, rather than following the curriculum of the rest of the class. Does that make sense to you, Ms. Perez-Gray?”

The flowers were so fragrant. They smelled like muffins. The color drained from them down into the linoleum, then flowed back into them from the ceiling. Yellow and green – gray – yellow and green.

Kayla nodded.

“Good.” Mrs. Willis smiled brightly. “I’ll write your father a note during class today. You can bring it to him and it will explain what we plan on doing. I’ll leave a spot for a signature at the bottom so that you can have him sign it. Bring it back to me, okay Kayla? So that I know he’s alright with our little plan.”

Kayla felt neither relief nor upset, nor anything really. She was overwhelmed by the heady scent of a field of dandelions, coarsely toothed leaves brushing against her ankles and reminding her that this was good, that this was right.

“I will, Mrs. W.” She smiled at the tickling of the leaves against her, the sensation seeming to pass through her socks and sneakers. “I will. Thank you, Mrs. W. I want to draw more.”

Part III

Act 3

Chapter 4

Tuesday, December 22nd – Evening

Justin didn't show up for dinner.

With the way that the weekend had gone, Jeff halfway expected him to be gone, back to the house across the street. Even so, he made sure he got Kayla fed with some simple out-of-the-box macaroni and cheese with some broccoli steamed in the microwave. He shoveled a quick few bites of dinner into his mouth, knowing that that, as much as his coat, would help keep him from freezing in the deep cold that he was learning would permeate the east coast throughout the cold winter months.

At the coat closet, he was pleased to see Justin's coat missing. His son hadn't talked in days, had barely slept, barely ate, but at least he had the sense to bring his coat with him.

Shrugging into his parka, he leaned down to kiss Kalya atop her head. "Daddy's going to go look for Justin. I'll clean up the dishes when I get back. I won't be long, Kay-bear, he's probably just across the street."

Kayla was silent as she looked up to her father.

Jeff hesitated, then leaned down to give one more kiss against his daughter's forehead. "I'll be back soon, promise."

When the silence continued, Jeff offered a weak smile before turning and twisting the arms of his parka to let it sit more comfortably around his arms. He made his way toward the door as he worked on zipping up.

#

He felt torn between his two children and the seemingly vast difference in their needs. Both had adopted a sort of impenetrable silence since the move, something that they seemed loath to crack while at home. Bringing them out to eat elsewhere would see that silence thaw somewhat, but by the time they made their way back home, they would clam up once more.

Kayla, always the artist, would soon find her way back to the kitchen table with a small sheaf of papers, intensely drawing flower after flower after flower. Columbines, lilies, countless flowers that I couldn't name. They started as simple doodles, spiraling petals around an indistinct core that children have been drawing for what must be centuries, but the more I saw her digging through her book of local flowers, and doing what must've obviously been research on her phone, the more intricate the drawings got.

The drawings were beautiful, sometimes taking up entire sheets of paper with the weaving tendrils of morning glories, sometimes a simple doodle in the corner of a sheet of what might have otherwise been homework. They were never finished, however. She never erased any of the lines that she drew, leading to the correct lines being drawn in darker than the ones that she had deemed in correct. They were never in color, always the simple, shining gray of her mechanical pencil. Often, this added to their beauty in an austere sort of way, but most of the times, Jeff felt vaguely unnerved by the art that his daughter seemed to be churning out. It was cold. It was as lacking in depth as their conversation.

Justin was even more of an enigma to him. He would come home and trudge upstairs to his room and quietly shut the door without a word to his father or sister. He would usually sleep – Jeff would hear him snoring quietly – and stay asleep until after Jeff and Kayla went to bed.

The first few times that Justin had done this, Jeff stayed awake until Justin had woken up, some time around two or three in the morning. When he awoke, Justin would creep downstairs and help himself to a small plate of whatever Jeff had prepared for dinner, head back up to his room, and eat there. Occasionally, there would be music, just barely audible, heard above the soft tink of fork against plate.

Jeff had stopped staying up after a while.

#

Bustling out of the door and shutting it carefully behind him, he stood on the front step of the house under the warm glow of the porch light and stared up. The sky was closed in by a dense layer of cloud, reflecting back a pale yellow glow from the lights of the neighborhood. *It might snow before Christmas*, he thought, *though the sky has been socked in like this for the last week and a half*.

He shook himself out of his reverie and peered across the street without dark-adjusted eyes, struggling to discern any speck of light among the pale framing of the unfinished house, cold in the evening air.

He was frightened, he realized. He had been frightened for months. All of the strange and awful feelings that surrounded living in this new place, all of the ways that his children had withdrawn

from him, made him realize in one shining moment that he had no idea what it was that was going on. No idea, and that terrified him.

He felt his heart drawn to the lonely hulk of the unfinished house. It was painful, not knowing what he could do to help his eldest, and the terror seemed only to build within him. He wanted only to find Justin and bring him back home, wrap his two kids and himself up in a comforter in front of the TV and watch a movie, let them fall asleep against each side of him.

Damnit, Jeff, he shook his head once more and stomped his feet to make sure they hadn't fallen asleep. *Dawdling*. He stood still and huffed out a few more steamy breaths into the night, wondering why it was that he didn't actually want to cross the street. He didn't want to go to his son.

He didn't want to go to his son.

He wanted his son to never have left. He didn't want to go to him.

Justin.

The thought took his breath away. His heart ached for Justin, craved the idea of having him back home, and yet he did not want to go. He was horrified – horrified at himself, terrified of crossing the street. Every bit of his soul strained toward where he now knew his son must be hiding, and yet it felt as though every fiber of his being craved collapsing back into the house behind him, where it might be safe.

Just when he thought he might actually collapse, there was the feeling of something letting go, releasing him. It came with a rush of warmth traveling up his neck to his face, brushing past him in one smooth wave that left him feeling suddenly clear-headed. He stumbled against the jamb of the door and shook his head, clearing the last of the cobwebs away.

He was certain Justin was across the street, now. He was certain that he had to get him.

#

Jeff stumbled off the front stoop and down the path that lead to the driveway, doing his best not to break into a run for reasons that he didn't entirely fathom, himself. He took the corner almost drunkenly and brushed against the passenger side of the car in the drive before finally hurrying down the rest of the way to the curb.

And stopped.

The rebound did make him fall, this time, and he landed back on his rear with his hands catching the last bit of momentum. He sat, stunned, looking at the scraped and raw palms of his hands in bewilderment, as if they had been the fault of all of this.

He had run up against something that had given way only an inch or two before refusing to yield any further, causing him to tumble backwards.

Jeff shakily rose to his feet once again, leveraging himself up with one arm, feeling the cold grit of the concrete below his hand, the sensation familiar from the scratches at the heel of his palm. He stood once more and opened his eyes as wide as he could, as if that might allow him to see what it was that he ran into.

He reached out a hand to touch the air before him, feeling that same sense of resistance: giving for a few inches, and then unyielding.

There was nothing to see, no stretch of clear plastic or anything else that his eyes could discern as he explored the boundary between him and the street.

It had no texture. As far as his stinging fingertips could tell, he was simply pressing against air that would not let him pass. And yet, the tactile sense of a barrier was still there, compressing the flesh of his fingers and lending the sense of touch. He pressed hard, and then harder. Nothing.

Justin.

He had to get through. He had to get to his son and bring him home. He had to reach Justin.

The tentative presses against the barrier became pushes, and then became shoves. He strained against the invisible wall, his anger growing by the second. He threw his shoulder against the boundary and, finding it as unyielding as ever, recoiled once more. More prepared this time, he simply stumbled back against the rear fender of the car, his face a tense knot of anger and frustration.

More.

He had to make it through. He had to get to his son.

His anger became frantic and he alternated between pushing, beating with his fists, and throwing his shoulder against the wall. *To hell with this stupid house, and to hell with all that goes with it*, he raged, clawing at the thin film that kept him standing just at the curb of the sidewalk.

His fingernails compressed against his fingertips, but without friction from the surface of the air, they simply bent and folded against flesh – a gentle ache.

A growl rose within his chest as he threw himself bodily against the wall that kept him within the boundary of his property. He felt the shout well up within him, powered by a burning ember of anger that propelled it from his chest.

“Let. Me. Through!”

And with that, he fell forward.

With the way he had been throwing himself against the wall, he landed on his shoulder with a jarring thump against the asphalt just beyond the gutter. He felt lucky to wind up with only scuffed palms and a bruised shoulder – feeling the resistance give way, he had thrown out an arm and avoided landing on his head against the equally unyielding road.

A hot flush wove over him, this time reaching all the way down from below his collarbones and coursing up over his shoulders and over his face, hotter than before. It was a blush, but so much more, a heat from within intense enough to make his brow prickle with sweat.

#

“Wh...what the hell...” Jeff panted, struggling back to his feet once more, rubbing his shoulder with his free hand. He had no explanation for the barrier that had kept him from the street.

Standing awkwardly, Jeff gave a tentative reach forward, finding no boundary in front of him. Reaching back revealed that the barrier between the gutter and the curb had disappeared, leaving the area filled simply with air. The anger threatened to flare within him once more, but he swallowed the hot ball of emotion, keeping it deep within him. He didn’t want to meet Justin feeling nothing but rage, no matter the forces that might try and keep him from his son.

Justin.

The thought of his son shifted the sting from his palms and shoulder to his eyes. There was the taste of ash in his mouth and a cold numbness that spread over his body, replacing the flush of warmth with the frigidity of the surrounding air.

Swaying slightly, he took a shaky step toward the vacant house. The anger within him was slowly quenched by something more akin to sadness. Jeff initially labeled it anguish or despair, but it was far more base than those words implied.

He was, simply, sad.

He wanted to get to his son – his firstborn – his baby. He needed to do whatever was in his power to retrieve his son. His heart ached for him.

Justin, who had seemed to smile when he was born, though Jeff knew that wasn’t quite true. The sight of a smiling newborn clutching at Karen had been what convinced Jeff that parenthood would be okay.

Justin, who had run so quickly through the living room once he had learned to walk, that he had knocked himself flat on his back when he ran into an end table. The crying had been intense, but that hadn’t stopped him from running.

Justin, who was so excited for his first day of school, that he slipped the tiny stuffed wolf that Karen had given him into his backpack, just knowing that he needed something to share with the other kids. The wolf now lived atop his computer monitor.

Tears were streaming down Jeff’s face, and he stumbled blindly toward where he supposed the house would be.

The sadness moved beyond simple, happy memories of Justin as Jeff found himself weeping openly. The tears flowed as if forced from him, breaths coming in great, heaving gasps, shaking his frame. His sobs were quiet, tinged with the moans of the truly heartbroken.

A few more shuffling steps led him to the center of the street separating his house from the empty structure on the other side. He fell for the third time, landing hard on his kneecaps, feeling the pain shoot up through his thighs and into his lower back. Uncaring, he settled down to rest his rear against his heels.

It was long minutes – he couldn't tell how many – that he knelt there in the middle of the street, simply crying and feeling for his son. Just. . . feeling. Occasional fleeting memories, without words, sharing his heart with his son as he had when the tiny baby boy had first entered the world.

The wracking sobs eventually settled down to a snot-ridden snuffle, and Jeff looked down for the first time in what felt like hours. His hands and sleeves were soaked through with tears torn from him over the feeling that his son had left him months before, when they had first moved east. His jeans were torn, once at each knee.

As he stood, the wave of heat hit him once more. It centered around his midsection and traveled up towards his face, hotter than could be explained by a simple flush of warmth originating within the body.

These are gates. Gates or. . . or rites, or something, Jeff thought.

More.

Breathing heavily, the smoke of burning wood tickling at the back of his nostrils, Jeff gathered all the determination that he felt he had within him and struggled forward once more, moving on from the middle of the street, the place of tears.

#

If these are gates, Jeff thought, panting. *There's gotta be some finite number of them. I'm halfway across the street. I'll make it.*

He felt lame thinking in such terms, but all the same, he levered himself onward, focusing on the will and determination to get to his son. The house was *right there*. All of this pain and strife had been within himself, all he needed to do was cross the street and head between the bare studs next to the doorway. Then he'd be through and there with Justin. . .

Pep-talk complete, he stumbled forward, eyes held wide open and staring straight ahead of himself, looking for whatever would be the next trap to keep him on his toes. None of the ones so far had been visible, but there was no way for him to know that the next one wouldn't be.

The doubts came one by one at first, worming their way past the boundaries set up by the motivational speech. He felt himself worrying about little things, at first, and even paused in his motions to wipe his face clean of tears and, after a moment's hesitation, of snot as well. A father should be strong for his son, should show him the strength that he needed.

Justin.

Jeff took one more step, and then the doubt came two by two, then three by three. What hadn't he done to keep his son safe? Had the move been the right thing for him to do to his family?

No, of course not. The move had been a terrible idea. He should've stepped up his game in contracting back home, or picked up a gig working with a contracting agency rather than on his own. It was stupid to move out here, to this cursed neighborhood, to drag his own children – *his own children* – through this... this nonsense.

He sat down amidst the overwhelming torrent of thoughts. He was just shy of the curb, his next stated goal, but he could barely make it out. The visual signals were coming in, but not being processed by a brain overwhelmed with doubt, with all of the things that he had done wrong to screw this whole damn thing up.

He punched his fist down against the ground, his hand jarred by the ache of the impact with the unyielding concrete of the gutter.

More.

The word glided through his mind, borne on a wave of doubt and anxiety, aimless and yet imperative. *Go. Do. More. Fix this. Rectify. Find the ways you fucked up, Jeff, and undo them, one by one, unwinding this whole shit-mess in one eternal admission that you were wrong. You. Were. Wrong.*

Senseless in his delusion, he let out a shout and buckled at the waist, his face coming down to meet the pavement, right at the edge of the gutter.

It never made it all the way to the gutter: his forehead met the corner of the curb with a sharp crack that took away his breath, his vision, and sent a cold shock through his body.

More.

Jeff moaned and rolled onto his side, both hands racing to his head to clutch at the suddenly throbbing center of pain. His head felt hot. Hot and wet. When he brought one hand away, he saw the glistening darkness of blood on his palm.

Grimacing, he plastered the palm back against his head, covering the swelling bump and the bleeding gash with enough pressure, he hoped, to staunch the flow of blood.

Crawling on knees and one hand now, he made his way up onto the sidewalk opposite his house, still moaning in pain.

The flush of heat took him off guard this time, and he collapsed to his elbow, gagging and retching toward the pavement beneath him. The heat coursed through his body and shook him from his hips up. His insides seemed to shift in the shockwave of the warmth, his lips cracked and his ears chafed, his throat was raw.

Justin.

Oh, Justin.

#

Still feeling his stomach churning, his face flushing hot and then cool as though he was suffering from heatstroke – or perhaps a concussion – Jeff levered himself back to his feet, swaying there and clenching his eyes shut. His senses slowly returned to him as the bright sparks behind closed eyelids drifted away, drifted upwards.

He opened his eyes, blinked and looked about, confused. The sparks were still there.

As his eyes worked to focus, his head still swimming, he saw before him a line of flames, reaching about waist high and flickering up toward the sky, throwing off sparks that drifted along incautious paths toward the sky before winking out.

The fire hadn't been there when he had fallen, nor before that. His view of the unfinished construction had been unobstructed from the street and his porch. It was undoubtedly there, now, and seemingly real, with heat that he could feel against his face and a sickly sweet smell of something – pitch? tar? – reaching his nose.

He stalked shakily to the left, stepping into the grass, but the fire appeared to curve around the side of the house away from him. Experiments to the right proved the same in that direction.

His shoulders sagged as he let out a sad bark of a laugh. "A ring of fire. This is so much bullshit."

Justin, Justin.

He straightened up and, resigned, stepped closer to the fire. The heat lapped against his front, his hands and face bathed in the sense that the fire was expanding out toward him, though the flames wavered simply in the breezeless night before him.

Maybe, he thought. Maybe it's another bunch of nonsense like that invisible barrier. Maybe it's just another barrier that isn't real.

He tentatively reached out a hand toward the flame. Memories came rushing back to him of the thrill of brushing his fingertip through the flame of a candle as a kid, feeling the gentle wisp of something evanescent brush over his skin. He moved quickly, suddenly afraid, and brushed his hand through the flame before him. There was no denying that it was real, that the heat was intense.

He took a step back, then slowly lowered himself to a crouch a few feet back from the flame, regarding the wall before him. It was oddly reminiscent of sitting before a bonfire, and the thought made him frown all the more deeply.

He had been burned enough through his life to have a healthy respect for fire, but it had been the house fire during his college years that had instilled in him an active fear of flames larger than a small campfire and had kept candles and such out of the house.

Tears clouded his eyes and he brushed them angrily away. He had to come up with bravery somewhere, and it wasn't going to come from squatting before the fire as though he were waiting on the perfect roast on a marshmallow.

Keeping in mind the vision of the, feeling the flickering and brush against his skin, he took a few steps back, inhaled deeply of that sweet, burning scent, and took a run at the fence.

He faltered at the last moment. A few steps from the flames, he skidded and stumbled to a stop his feet and ankles skidding forward into the flame, singing at the fabric and leather. Stumbling back, he fell without grace to land on his backside, scrabbling backward to get away from the licking tongues of flame.

The tears came harder and the frustration welled within him, at his seeming inability to get to his son, to rescue him, to save him.

He scrambled back to his feet and, feeling that frustration surge, drew on the energy that it seemed to give him. Once more, he raced toward the flames. They billowed up toward the sky as he was a scant step away from them.

A blast of heat, and he was through.

The heat stayed with him, flowing from within for now, from down near his knees, racing up along his abdomen to flush through his face. His breath came as a gasp of steam, drying out saliva on his tongue.

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The rush of heat had taken his breath from him and the fire had singed at the cuffs of his jeans, making the warmth palpable from his toes to his face. Gate or no, Jeff was openly weeping now, frustration threatening to overtake all other senses within him. All he wanted to do was get to his son, bring him home, make everything okay. He would quit his job, he would move back to Colorado. He would do whatever it would take to make things okay for Justin once more, to have Kayla come out of her shell.

Staggering up to the pallet that served as a stoop to the building, he repeated his affirmations over and over within his head, listing the things he would do to make life whole again, to get away from the demons that seemed intent on taunting them all.

To the left of the door – still locked after all these months – was the gap too small for anyone but Kayla, but to the right was the corner of the entryway, with its gap that, if he sucked in his gut, Jeff would be able to slip past.

He sidestepped the pallet, wary of obstacles, and was rewarded by nearly tripping off the edge of the path leading up to the partially constructed house, his right ankle rolling beneath him.

“Fucking-”

He reached out his hands to steady him, and his right came in contact with one of the studs that he had been aiming to slip between.

Everything went dark.

It was rapid, if not instantaneous. All at once, the dull yellow of the fire behind him, the muted glow from the clouds, the illuminated dial of his watch, all went out. It was complete. It wasn't seeing darkness, it was unseeing.

"Wh-what..." was all he managed to get out before letting out a shout of alarm. He could feel his mouth moving, feel the air rushing between his vocal cords well enough to tell he had shouted, but there was no sound. It wasn't quiet, it was unhearing.

His anger took hold as he clutched onto the two-by-four that made up the stud, touch his last remaining useful sensation.

"Fuck! Fuck you, you fucking piece of shit!" he screamed, tugging and wailing against the sturdy frame of the house. "You can't fucking do this to me! You can't fucking do this to my fucking son!"

Tears streamed hotly down his face as he let out a yell of defiance, none of it audible. The cut across his forehead ached and blood was still dripping down over his cheek, but, though he wiped it away with his sleeve, he could see none of it.

More.

There was a smile within that voice.

More.

Chapter 5

Wednesday, December 23 – Midnight

Kayla's mind was blossoming.

She felt sick to her stomach, having mostly pushed her food around the plate, taking a few bites that she knew she needed. Hunger would eventually win out and she would down a whole meal and then some in a day or two, but for now, the macaroni and cheese, when it wasn't obscured by lilies, looked like a mound of undifferentiated plastic, and the broccoli was too close to blossoming itself to seem appetizing to her.

She took up the time alternating between drawing and pacing back and forth in the living room. She would spend enough time on a drawing to feel it either finished or abandoned, tendrils of morning glories creeping across a page, or slender, crowded stems of snapdragons. When a page was set aside, she would walk from the kitchen to the living room, turn on the television, watch for a few minutes until the vines had thoroughly covered the screen, turn the TV off again, and walk back to the kitchen where she would draw again until the flowers had been beaten back through acknowledgement.

Kicking her feet at the table, head bowed over the was distracted by a light flickering to life at the periphery of her vision. Kayla realized she had lost track of time – it felt late, and she felt more than a little sleepy. Looking up from her paper, he peered around the warm glow of the kitchen, eyes lingering tiredly on the digital clock above the stove. Just a bit after midnight, she realized.

She tore her gaze away from the clock and continued to peer around her for the source of the flickering before her eyes landed on the large picture frame on the wall of the living room opposite the television. The picture was obscured by the reflections in the glass that covered it. Flickering orange, too much contrast.

And no flowers.

It was the last part that got her to lever herself out of her seat. She slipped carefully from her chair and walked delicately through coarse rows of decorative flowers, until she had made her way back to the living room, looking up at the picture. The orange glow was gone, and there were

creepers exploring the edge of the picture frame. Instead, the glass reflected her face, sad flowers of eyes, and a gentle, flickering orange glow lighting up her left cheek.

Turning to look out the picture windows across the street, her eyes going wide. Fire!

Her father had been adamant about raising her to fear fire and he had done a good job of thoroughly instilling that fear. She had had no desire to play with the few flames she had the chance to see throughout her life.

She ran to the window, heedless of the plants beneath her feet – though, as usual, there was no sensation of walking through them – to gape at the fire outside.

It was obvious that there wasn't a fire in the house across the street itself. The flames flickered and rose in a smooth, unbroken ring around the property, crossing the driveway about two thirds of the way down. And in front of it stood a man.

Her father.

She saw him take a step back, get a running start toward the fire, and then, as his courage failed him, skid to a stop inches shy of the flames and fall back onto his rear, hurriedly scuttling back from the fire.

“Daddy!”

She ran for the front door, stepping through rows of flowers, vines reaching in toward her and crowding out her vision. The door was a solid mass of ivy.

Kayla scrabbled frantically at the door, struggling through the mass of green-turned-black in the darkness of the living room. As always she felt only the faintest brush of leaves, but it still took her what felt like achingly long seconds to find the handle and deadbolt. She hurriedly unlocked the door and yanked it open.

She gasped. The whole street was lit by the yellow-orange glow of light. from the flames, and yet, for once, wherever that light shone, there were no flowers, no plants except the cold, greenish-brown of the grass in her yard and the stubbly scrub of the house across the street.

The change was drastic enough to stop her in her tracks. The flowers had been with her for months, something that she had never talked about and had only just started getting used to, and now, for the first time, she could see the ground beneath her feet, could look at the houses on the street and finally understand that clinging vines were not a feature of every building around her, blurring corners.

The flicker of the flames once more caught her eye as her father gathered up his courage once more and this time leapt successfully through the flames.

“Daddy!” she cried once more and raced forward, forgetting about her lack of flowers and racing forward to the end of the sidewalk, her hands balled into fists as she plowed straight through that second barrier, the invisible wall that responded only to anger.

Her body flushed with heat and her arms pumped along her sides, tears flowing hotly down her face as she raced through gate after gate until she came up on the curb, catching the toe of her shoe against the edge of concrete and falling into a rolling jumble of limbs, clothes, and skinned elbows blood flowing down along her forearms.

Shaking, she struggled back to her feet, crying openly as she approached the wall of flame before her, feeling more cautious than before with the smarting pain streaking through her arms.

The heat grew oppressive as she approached the wall of orange, red, and yellow before her, the flames licking quietly at the air and leaving delicate trails of sparks that spiraled up into the night.

She reached out a hand, but the heat seemed to grow exponentially more intense near the flame, so she drew back a pace.

“D-daddy?” she called out, whimpering slightly at the pulsing pain in her elbows and her desperation.

As suddenly as it had appeared, the ring of flame went out, leaving behind no marks on the ground, no sign that it had been there except for the soft *whoomp* of a fire going out. The heat lingered for a moment longer before the chill of the night air stole in to replace it.

Kayla blinked quickly, struggling with the sudden darkness that had greeted her. The flowers remained gone, but perhaps that was only due to the way the night pressed in around her once more with the fire gone.

She heard a shout, a stream of curses ahead of her.

Chapter 6

Wednesday, December 23 – 1:00 AM

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Chapter 7

Wednesday, December 23rd – 3:00 AM

Jeff clutched at his daughter's hand, then thought better of it and knelt beside her, hugging her protectively against his side. She was still sobbing from the pain and rush of heat.

"Justin? Justin, is that you?" he called out.

There was a rustle from over by the far doorway, the one that led out into what would have been the backyard. There was a form standing, shown only by the dull yellow of far away street-lights against clouds.

Perhaps standing was the wrong word. From his vantage point on the foundation, kneeling next to his daughter, he could see that it was Justin, but his son was... floating? Hovering? His feet were flat, a scant few inches above the ground, but he wasn't touching anything else to keep him from resting on the ground.

"Justin!" Jeff called again. "Come home, Justin. It's daddy. Come home with dad."

Hesitating once more, he tried, "Justin?"

"Osé."

The voice that came from where his son stood was more than just his son. It was as though Justin had whispered the word, but along with that in chorus with the boy was a voice far deeper, far older, speaking perfectly in time with him.

"O-Oh say?" Jeff stammered.

"Osé," the voice repeated, layered above Justin's. "I am. I am Osé."

"Justin, come on, bud," Jeff pleaded.

Kayla interrupted, shouting, "Give us back Justin! Give me back my brother, Osé!"

There was a laugh, and with that horrible sound, a flush of warmth that rose up through father and daughter, starting in their feet and rising through their bodies, singeing hair and robbing them of their breath.

"What would you give, little girl?" The voice sounded proud, jovial. "You have given me your blood. Your father gave his blood. You gave me your will, your trials, your tears. It was not

enough. What would you give?"

Jeff coughed and gasped through the heat. Kayla, recovering more quickly, lept from her father's arms and raced toward where Justin stood.

There was a sharp crack, and Jeff winced instinctively. He cried out, "Kayla! Kayla honey, are you okay?"

His daughter was sitting on the floor, her knees drawn up to her chest and her face buried in her arms. Unhurt, but silent and unmoving. Jeff crawled forward toward her cautiously, unsure of what had transpired in that briefest of moments that he had looked away, though he knew time was different here.

Kayla nodded against her arms, her shoulders shaking with quiet sobs.

"You have nothing to give," the voice purred above Justin's hoarse whisper.

"I... I'd give myself in a heartbeat for my son," Jeff offered, his voice clouded with emotion.

"No." The answer was flat, final. There was no disputing that this would be unacceptable. Justin – Osé – continued after a moment, as though he could not help but gloat, "This battle is not your own, old man. It is long past the time you could have made *that* offering."

Jeff was crying. He was crying and burning, bleeding and struggling to see. He felt anger, felt afraid, felt dirty, desperate, and in pain.

"There is nothing you can give." The voice was purely Osé's now. "This is beyond you. There is nothing you can offer, though I have collected almost all of my toll. He is mine."

"No!" Jeff shouted, sobbing. "No," he said once more, struggling to control his breath.

"He is mine," the voice asserted, growing in volume. "He has always been mine. If I were to leave you now, he would forever be mine. There is only one payment, and it will be mine."

For the first time, Justin's form shifted in the dark. His hands, previously hanging limply at his sides, moved up to his waist and slipped within the pockets of his hoodie. From it, he removed a small object, only a bit larger than a hand.

The hand clutching the object dropped, and the light reflected from the clouds caught it just enough for Jeff to make it out.

A gun.

"Justin! Justin Justin Justin!" Jeff cried, pleading. "Justin, bud, come on. Come on, let's just talk. Justin!"

There was no doubt of intent.

"The only thing that can be given," the voice purred. "Is everything."

Justin's hand lifted the gun in one smooth, sure movement, and placed the muzzle of the barrel against his right temple.

"Everything. And more."

Justin's finger pulled the trigger.

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A sharp report – more of a bang than a roar, from that palm-sized pistol – muffled by hair, skin, bone, and soul.

It was shocking just how quickly everything happened after that.

Kayla, who had been watching through wide, sobbing eyes, had let out a shrill scream and backed quickly across the room, scooting along her backside and clawing at the dirty cement of the foundation with her hands.

Jeff let out an anguished cry and crumpled onto the cold floor.

Justin's body was jerked against the side of the door frame, his feet finally leaving the position where they had been, a few inches above the floor of the house. It fell in a disorganized heap, alternating between stiffness and relaxedness without rhythm on the floor, something slower than twitching, but still without conscious effort.

"No! No no no no," Jeff cried, scrabbling along the floor and tearing his fingernails against the roughness of the concrete below him. He raced over to his son's body and gathered it up into his arms. Still warm, still warm... "No no no no no," he continued, a quiet litany of grief as he clutched his son to his chest.

There was a lot of blood, a stupendous amount of blood.

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More, ever more.

The voice was a shadow of what it once was, barely audible, almost solely within Jeff's head.

Do not ever forget. Always more.

If there was more, it was drowned out by Jeff's sobs and shouts as he rocked with his son held half within his lap, Kayla's screams and tears as she wrapped her arms up over her head and curled into a tight ball.

Part IV

Epilogue

Chapter 8

A Letter to my Daughter

Kayla, my dear Kayla.

My lovely, beautiful daughter, Kayla. My lovely blossom.

I hope that living with your aunt has proven to be good move for you to make. Sometimes, I still have a hard time accepting the fact that that is what is best for you, but in the end, I think that it was healthier for you to move away from here, just as it was healthier for me to stay. I think we each have our own way of grieving.

For me, I needed to stay here and go through the motions of putting life back together. The house is paid off, and the market isn't right for me to try and sell it. I know this isn't the type of thing you want to here, but this is the type of thing that occupies my day-to-day thoughts – “What is the house worth?” “Could I get a decent deal on it in the market?” “Is it worth moving somewhere else within the same town to keep my job, or should I look for something else outside of this little neighborhood?”

I'm sure you're thinking about school, about the friends you've made, and about what you'll make, what you'll do. Everything moves so much faster when you're younger – you have less tying you down to one place, nothing except the grown-ups who seem to make all of the decisions for you.

I've been reading (I know, surprise surprise, right?), and I found your mother's old Bible. The first few pages inform me that it is the “Today's New International Version”, which seems like rather a mouthful to me. I've never read the bible, so I don't know about these things.

Did you know that your mother was a spiritual person? It's something that we had talked about early on during our courtship, but something which never seemed to come up during the time that we were raising you before her death. She wasn't practicing, if I'm getting that term right. She never went to church, and never mentioned her spirituality to either you or Justin as far as I knew. I never stopped her, but it seemed that my belief that there was no God was stronger than her belief in God, because we wound up raising you to be agnostic, and decidedly not Christian.

When she died, when Karen died, my atheism was strengthened. 'How could any just God put any just (for so I thought myself at the time) man through such torture?'

I didn't know the story of Job at the time.

... Well, okay, that's a bit of a stretch. I didn't know the story of Job, true, but I also think that I greatly misunderstood a lot of what went on behind the scenes of Christianity.

I'd been raised by an agnostic and an atheist, and, similar to what I mentioned about you two, the atheism won out. My father's staunch belief that there was no God was stronger than my mother's apathy, and that left me feeling as though there simply mustn't be a God. This is the power that fathers have over their sons.

When Karen died, it was confirmation, in some small way, that my father was right. No benevolent figure, however distant, could allow its creations to feel such pain.

I packed up so much of her stuff after that, because it was causing me so much pain just having it in my life. You never knew her that well – she passed when you were so young – but you did seem to treasure the pictures that I left out of her, the one on my desk, the one on the mantle, and the one on the wall by the stairs.

You were so curious about her. I would tell you stories about how we met, about what it was like raising Justin, about the life that we had together before we had you two. But I never talked to you about her death, except to say that she died, and I never talked to you about her spirituality.

I didn't understand it. I never had understood it, mostly because I had never tried. I accompanied her to church once or twice, before either you or Justin were born, but neither of us were much on the act of attending a religious ceremony like that. For her, it was a private thing, something that informed the way that she interacted with the world, but only on an internal level.

It was only after Justin's death and after you moved in with your aunt that I started to dig through the boxes that I'd hidden away from myself.

I found her bible, old and worn. She had obviously read it quite a bit through the years, and I'd either never noticed or she had read it on her own when I wasn't around.

Finding that little book and seeing the dog-eared pages and the frayed bookmark ribbon sewn into the pages, I realized how little I knew about her and how her faith worked, and that in turn made me realize just how little I had tried to understand her.

Determined, I sat down and began to read. I skimmed over a lot of the genealogy bits – I'd always found those so dry and uninspiring, and never understood why they were in there – and I powered through a lot of the rules and dictates from the early parts of the old testament. It wasn't until I started to get into the stories of the kings and leaders of the tribes of Israel that I learned more about what these stories actually teach.

I had to stop reading for the night once I came across this bit in 2 Samuel:

The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said, "O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you – O Absalom, my son, my son!"

There is pain in the Bible. Real, earnest pain. The stories may just be stories, but the pain is there, and people hurt just as much as they do now. I don't think I'm much at risk of becoming a Christian just because I leafed through your mother's bible, but I think I understand it all a little better now.

Stories like this – all stories, not just biblical stories – teach us how to feel more of the human experience than we feel on our own. They teach us to know one another.

When I realized how little I actually knew Karen, it also made me realize how little I knew you, and how little I knew Justin. The thing that drove him to take his own life isn't something I think I'll ever understand or know. It's so hard to think about, Kayla. So hard. But I think that if there's one thing that I've learned from all that happened, it's that I need to try. I need to try and understand and really know you, because I didn't, with Justin. I didn't try hard enough, and I didn't really know him. I really didn't.

I know that's hard for you, too. I know it'll always be hard for us both, seeing what we saw and having lived through something no one but us can truly know, no one but us will believe. I'm sorry for that, Kay-bear, I really am.

I will be honest and say that I have heard from your aunt. I'm proud of you, Kayla, and all that you've been able to accomplish this last year. I want to see you, I really do, but I understand how difficult it will be for you to come back and visit me here. I'll make my way out there some day, out where it's clean and cool, out where I can walk with you down the block from the school to your house.

The house next door has been demolished, and some corporation has taken ownership of the land in some complex agreement with the homeowners' associataion that I don't understand. I haven't read to deeply into it, truthfully, for reasons that I'm sure you can appreciate. After the investigation, the police had the area cordoned off, and after the yellow tape disappeared, I couldn't bring myself over to the skeleton of a house, or the bare plot of land that it has become.

I know that this is hard for you, Kayla, that it must still be hard. Your aunt Alice has mentioned that you have only just begun talking to her, talking to anyone outside of school. I know that you're excelling in school, but I know that it's proved difficult for you to move on outside of school.

I know that it hurts, Kayla love. I still hurt; I hurt every day. I know that you and I share the problem of the doubt we get when we tell our story. Even so, I want you to keep trying. I want you to keep excelling at school, and I want you to keep trying to open up and make more friends, to open up to Alice. No one means you harm, and everyone is rooting for you to feel better.

I'll see you soon, Kay-bear, I promise. Keep drawing, little blossom. I'll get things sorted out and I'll see you soon.

Love,

Daddy

“End”