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### **The Screams Left Unheard**

Amelia lived in a small town, which was constantly foggy and overcast, like a cloud of gloom that constantly hung over the city. The sidewalks were mottled with colourful drawings; presumably made by the hand of boredom. Many regarded the drawings as simply existent, however upon peering into the drawings, one can see that they are peculiarly morbid for what is presumably a child's creation. Knives sharp as a stone and thick, red blood glistened in the sunlight. The vulgarity of these drawings is inspired by urban legend; the one we do not speak of, The Slit-Mouthed Lady.

Grandpa Jim rustled the newspaper held in his hand as he stared at the bolded, overlarge typeface staring back at him. "GIRL FOUND LYING IN A POOL OF HER OWN BLOOD DOWN 3rd STREET—" His heart nearly leaped out of his chest upon scanning the pages; and he turned them, hoping for this to be some kind of sick prank, but to no avail. The girl was lying on the cold, hard cement, pale, cold, and lifeless—she could not have been older than 11. Her thin lips were plastered into a grim acceptance though her eyes were paralyzed with fear. The edges of her lips were carved out of her skin, leaving a haunting last smile staring into the camera—a mark left behind by the Slit-Mouthed Lady. The words appeared to just be squiggles on a page and numerous grotesque images filled the page. But he couldn't help but think—he could have stopped this; it could have been him, but what if it was Amelia? The little girl was her age after all—

He stalled; the great oak doors creaked open and in walked Amelia, slinging her pinstriped satchel up and over her shoulder, roughly placing it on the ottoman.

"Hello," breathed Amelia. Her red boots sloshed mud all over the pristine tiles, as her heart pulsed in excitement at the prospect of making a new friend that day. Though she could not quite remember her name, the name Julia seemed to envelope her heart in a blanket of warmth, tugging at her heart in wisps of joy.

Like she was snapped back into reality, an icy wave of water seemed to jolt her awake; as the tiny candle of joy seemed to flicker and dim under the weight of depression that hung over the room. Amelia curiously peered over the frame to her grandpa, who was currently pouring over a newspaper at the table. He looked gaunt and pale as a sheet, his knuckles white from gripping the paper. He roughly placed the newspaper on the table and drew a deep, shuddering breath.

“Yes?” He grunted, slowly lifting himself up from the table. “What is it you want, Amelia?” He crumbled into a fit of hacking coughs, losing grip of the newspaper he was holding as it floated down to the floor with a soft, but resonating thud.

Amelia took particular care walking to the kitchen to approach her grandpa; it pained her to see him in this state. He had always been convalescent after *the incident*, feeling hollow; a shell of his former self. Though she had always questioned as to what *the incident* was, she was always met with a blank stare, as though he was merely existing; with no emotions or memories.

“What happened? I-is everything alright?” Amelia paused for a moment and crouched down to read the paper her grandfather was so fixated on. At this, he shot her a warning glance, rooting her in her place. She let out a long, commiserating sigh and focused her piercing blue eyes on her grandpa, drawing herself up to her full height. She was sick and tired of being discarded away whenever something remotely interesting popped up; it felt like she was just a doll, only talked to on the whim of others. The silence felt like it was pressing down on her body, crushing her body and organs; just like how her emotions were smushed and flattened.

Her grandpa propped himself against the wobbling armrest and gave out a hollowing laugh.

“Sorry Amelia—just reminiscing about something,” Grandpa Jim said. Though he seemed animated, the same light did not meet his eyes. “What did you want to know about again?”

She stared at him pointedly; she knew that he knew exactly what she meant, though was hiding it behind a thin veil of feigned calmness. She desperately wanted to ask him what he was remembering so vividly; but it felt like somebody had clamped a

hand over her mouth, resisting her attempts at speaking, so she resorted to staring at the newspaper, imagining it burning to crisps.

She did not know why, but she knew that it was the cause of her grandfather's suffering. The reins on her thoughts slackened as they began to run free—until a calm voice snapped her back into reality.

“Amelia, I know that you are worried about my well-being, but I am perfectly fine.” He let his arms move freely to prove this point, and he brightened up upon seeing Amelia's heartened expression. “So,” he continued, “how was school?”

Amelia's expression immediately dropped into an unsavory sneer, her mood popped as she knew now that her grandpa would not disclose any more information. She could sense his discomfort from a mile away, yet she pressed on: “I want to know what happened. What was so traumatizing that you refuse to speak of it 30 years later?”

She paused; her grandpa neatly folded the newspaper into quarters and placed it gently on the table. He propped his lips up into a curt smile and repeated the same phrase Amelia had heard her entire life. “It's for your own good, Amelia. I don't want to tell you for fear of what you might do—”

“And so you decide to keep this away from me all these years, leaving me in the dark; wondering if my grandfather is ok?” Came Amelia's quick retort. She couldn't help but feel indignant at the fact that he thought she would do something dangerous; like she was a high-profile inmate that required heavy scrutiny. She opened her mouth again to make another jibe at him but it seemed that her grandfather beat her to it.

“I know that this must be hard, but if you listen to me, we won't have to worry about this!” His voice quivered dangerously, with a hint of pleading in his voice. But he knew that Amelia wouldn't budge; that's just how she was raised. He laughed dryly and thought to himself, he sure raised a defiant daughter, alright. He slithered his arm around the table towards the carefully creased newspaper, trying to hide it from Amelia's sight. It was within reach when both his and Amelia's eyes widened and she swatted his arm away from the clipping and swiftly took it for herself.

She flourished the paper in her arm with a sense of accomplishment and ran her fingers along the crease to smoothen the now soft piece of paper, letting out a haughty laugh. She could see her grandfather struggling to get the stolen newspaper out of her

hands, and she had almost forgotten about her harbored feelings until they came reeling back in full force once she realized why she stole it in the first place. Renewed with a zeal she did not know she had, she swiftly unfurled the newspaper, overflowing with a morbid curiosity about what could be so haunting.

Her eyes were blinded by the still pearly-white sheen that glossed the newspaper. She willed her eyes to act as a magnifying glass as she squinted and struggled to read the words. Finally, they swam into view, displaying an over-large black typeface that oozed of importance. Her eyes slowly trailed down the page and her eyes softened as she let in a sharp intake of breath.

Staring back at her was a gruesome image, in which a girl seemed to be lying down on the sidewalk, stiff, and pale as a sheet. The area around her seemed to be stained a scarlet red as the scenery was covered in yellow caution tape, bathing the perimeter in a cloud of despair and uncertainty. A crouched figure whom Amelia assumed to be the girl's mother sat by the girl, convulsing with lament, placing a delicate hand on her daughter.

Several heavy, dried tears splotted the pages, making the pages wet and thin. Amelia's heartbeat drew in as she caught up to her breath. *Were these tears Grandpa's?* She slowly looked up to see her grandpa racked with grief, and his eyes dimmed. His wrinkles seemed much more pronounced now, and his cheeks seemed to bore into his face. "I," Amelia said, choking back a sob, "I'm so sorry—I didn't know!"

"But I didn't want you to know, I wanted—" Grandpa Jim started.

"I know," Amelia reassured softly, "You kept it from me to keep me happy." She carefully turned the page and there were pages filled with letters expressing sympathy for the victim and her family, accompanied by pictures of the crime scene and gut-wrenching quotes from her mother, which swiftly changed to vengeful threats. A memorial for the victim continued further down the page and over the other side.

It heartened her to realize how many people can find it in their hearts to truly care about someone that they can only see through a picture and she thought that what her grandfather was doing is just an extension of it. She piped up, put the newspaper down firmly, and strode over to her grandfather, embracing him tightly.

Grandpa Jim felt like the world was melting away, like all of his worries were insignificant when compared to the present. He collapsed into the hug, letting her warmth envelop him, and feeling their heartbeats fall in line with one another, providing him a sensation that he was, even for a moment; grounded.

The moments ticked by in a silence only filled with the faint sound of the radio and birds lightly chirping outside the kitchen window. A gentle breeze rustled the flowers against the window as they squawked, cutting the momentary second of peace short. Amelia let go of her grandfather as she herself slumped down into a chair. She reached her hand out towards her grandfather as he clasped it reassuringly.

Her gaze locked in with her grandfather's, taking in the depths they held. They looked like pools filled with a deep blue hue, swimming with affection and knowledge.

Their fingers untangled and retreated as Amelia let out a breath she did not know she was holding. The discarded newspaper lay forgotten as she pushed herself up from the table, heaving herself upwards as a result of a long day. Amelia dithered on the spot for a moment, pondering whether she should walk away or break the calming silence. She opted to walk away; taking brisk steps towards the wooden doorframe and bade her grandfather goodnight.

Her hair bobbed up and down as she took long strides up the staircase to her room. It groaned and protested under its use, yet she was unyielding; thundering up the stairs in her pursuit of rejuvenating sleep. She sped past numerous paintings, feeling the wind whip against her face. It was freeing. She felt the effects of weightlessness lift her up as she rounded the corner, nearly heaving herself onto her bedroom door before jumping on the bed, resulting in a splitting screech that emanated throughout the house, breaking the stillness that once rested there.

She took a moment to process the pandemonium that just happened, her head spinning from the stress and overactivity. It felt like her head was a frantic bird, trying a break free from a cage. Her back sagged onto the mattress, and her head lolled back, leaving a momentary dent in the mattress. She felt every taut muscle in her body loosen as she once again, found solace in only her heartbeat. Its beats constantly thudded against her chest, like a drum, never wavering.

Her eyes stayed fixated on her bedroom wall, pondering mindlessly about her day. She felt as if a huge weight had been dropped upon her, the weight of knowledge threatening to cave in. Gripping the sheets for comfort, her mind slowly drifted back to the image she saw in the newspaper. It was imprinted onto her brain, the pool of blood, her pale complexion, and the look of paralyzing fear that was plastered onto her face. Her blood ran cold as she hurriedly shook her head back and forth, snapping her eyes shut in an attempt to have it all go away.

She couldn't shake the fact that the Slit-Mouthed Lady could come after her and her family, and it shook her to the core. Suddenly, like a fire was lit at the bottom of her stomach, she felt an overwhelming rush of confidence; vowing to herself that if she could not protect herself, she would at least save her grandfather. Then, as soon as it came, it swiftly extinguished, leaving Amelia drowning in a sea of doubt.

Thoughts about how her Grandpa had shoved her away intrusively barged into her mind, as tears pricked at the edge of her eyes. His stone-cold stare bored into her head as his hardened jawline now seemed to scream of distrust. The untainted figure of Julia floated into her head as her normally gracious smile dropped into a snake-like smirk, barbed with poison dripping from her words. Her words pounded against Amelia's heart as she contemptuously strode away, as the remnants of Amelia's room faded into view. She felt so alone.

She wrapped her favorite blanket around her body in an attempt to pacify her thoughts. It was bathed a pale pink, dusted with lurid magenta dots. The blanket's warmth radiated throughout her body, rippling in waves of warmth that quelled the monster of anguish chained inside of her.

She took a deep breath and sighed, letting go of all her pent-up emotions like a dam getting rid of water. Her mind seemed to suddenly clear and the answer was glaring back at her; if she had to, she would save her grandfather.

Her eyes felt like there were weights attached to the end of them as she felt a voice inside of her compelling her to sleep. Her bedroom slowly drifted in and out of her vision until she finally rested her eyes; the day was a fading memory, as her consciousness ebbed away.

Amelia's eyes slowly opened only to be shut again upon seeing the room already bathed in sunlight. The innocent baby blue sky and the yellow tinge painting her room only reminded her that she had to go to school again, causing her to groan in frustration. The birds perched outside seemed to stare at her incredulously as if scorning her for her lethargy, much to Amelia's chagrin. She sighed at her plight and lay down once more, taking in the softness of her bed before it was cruelly snatched from her by her responsibilities. She luxuriously stretched, emitting a soft yawn as she forced herself out of bed.

She paused for a moment; as she felt like she was missing something. Dithering on the spot, she shoved it to the side, thinking that it must have been something she told her grandfather. Try as she might, she could not shake the nagging feeling that pinched the back of her head, repeatedly pounding at her conscience. She felt as if a chunk of her brain mysteriously vanished; like a chapter was missing from a book. Her heart raced, as though she may have momentarily forgotten whatever it was, she knew that something was horribly, horribly wrong.

Swallowing down the overwhelming dread that battered her heart, she gingerly twisted the sodden doorknob and carefully tiptoed down the staircase as quiet as can be, as if the slightest noise would result in her death. As she neared the bottom, the fog in her mind seemed to slowly dissipate and what she was forgetting seemed slightly more clear. She took another step, then another, and another, until she had descended to the bottom of the staircase.

Faintly, she could hear frantic breathing coming from the living room; but it felt so light that it may well have been a trick of the wind. Rounding the corner, she could see her grandfather pouring over yet another newspaper, his eyes bloodshot and breaths short and shallow. Yesterday's newspaper lay forgotten and discarded to the side, slightly yellowed and blotches of brown covering the issue from espresso.

Amelia bent over, straining her eyes in order to read in between the tear stains and marks of coffee. Her eyes shot wide open as the realization dawned on her. It felt like a dam broke as all of her memories from yesterday immediately came rushing back to her.

Her legs felt like noodles and her hair stood on end. Holding onto a nearby coffee table, she collapsed onto the floor, taking a place next to her grandpa.

“What is it?” Amelia tepidly asked. She sought to quell her curiosity but cowered when faced with the task of asking.

Her grandpa wordlessly handed the newspaper over, his hand slightly trembling at the task. His eyes once again looked glazed over and wracked with grief. His back had an unnatural curve to it, and it looked as if he was sinking into the ground. He condemned himself for even giving the newspaper to Amelia but then sighed in resignation once he saw Amelia pouring over the newspaper with rapt attention.

Amelia devoured the words in the newspaper with a likeness similar to a fanatic. Her hands delicately moved throughout the paper, gently straightening the creases that daubed it. Her heart was beating against her chest like a drum as she saw the overlarge, black, typeface that commanded the front page. Amelia’s eyes trailed down the page, taking in the numerous paragraphs of black ink that seemed to smother the page. It was only after the paragraphs came to an abrupt halt at the end of the page that she noticed something peculiar about the photographs. They seemed...oddly familiar.

Her eyes shot open as her cognizance of the situation bearishly came into mind. Amelia’s eyes shone with recognition as she realized who the person in the photos was; Julia. Her blood ran cold as her hands became stiff and rigid, dropping the newspaper in shock. Her muscles tautened and her eyes glazed over with tears; Julia was one of the few people she could find solace in other than her grandfather. It was at this moment that the weight of the situation truly began to bear down on her.

Nonplussed as to what to say or even do next, they both sat in heavy silence, meandering around the topic that evidently bid the most attention.

After multiple long, drawn-out moments of silence, Amelia felt her rage uncontrollably bubbling over, popping in small bursts until she finally snapped. She abhorred not having a singular clue as to how and why this is happening, especially when she knew that her grandfather was purposefully withholding information from her.

“What is this,” Amelia gritted her teeth together and seethed. “What is happening?!” She screamed in a fit of hysteria and paranoia, her hands trembling from



a concoction of fear and rage. Her eyes seemed blackened and dark intent seemed to befall upon her form.

Grandpa Jim felt as if a giant creature had swelled inside his stomach; bulbous and slimy, making him feel like he was drowning. His feelings swam around him in a colorful whirlwind, blinding him to his actions. He behaved erratically, fuelled by the rage of his granddaughter and the sudden fog that clouded his mind. He began to press himself forward when his mind drew a blank and everything seemed to come to a screeching halt.

It was then that they noticed the hushed silence that seemed to coat the town. Everything seemed to be blanketed with a charm that immediately quietened every sound made. The silence seemed deafening as the world around them seemed to pause; Amelia's lips curved upwards as her words slithered out in a low and dangerous voice.

"Grandpa, if you don't tell me what is going on, you know what will happen next."

Jim physically recoiled upon hearing these words; it had not been long after she had her last tantrum, and the memory was burned into his brain. He had tried to reason, to be fair, but he feared that his already weak foundation would collapse if another tantrum were to occur. He kept his face calm and collected, his secrets kept behind a tight-lipped smile. He truly did love his granddaughter, but there were boundaries he was not willing to cross.

With disregard to her grandfather's pitiful state, Amelia let her morbid curiosity encroach upon her brain, being excruciatingly difficult towards her grandfather, ignoring his growing annoyance with an air of utter superiority.

Unable to withstand his daughter's constant rattling, Jim felt the walls he meticulously built around his brain collapse onto themselves, the stress that had been festering inside him finally overflowing. The rage of what was years of suppression exposed itself in smoldering ruins; forcing him to relive the horrid memory vividly.

His eyes had an empty desolation to them, and it scared Amelia more than she would like to admit. The look of sheer hopelessness seemed to cut through the air like a knife, and suddenly all of her thoughts about school seemed to be minuscule, a tiny dot in comparison to the painting that was the situation at hand.

“Amelia,” Grandpa rasped. “I-I have had something that I had been meaning—no, should have told you a long time ago.” His thoughts were a menagerie as he said this, suddenly regretting even opening his mouth. He felt as if he had gotten stranded on a deserted island with no means of escape. Suddenly feeling a huge weight of pressure instantaneously drop upon his chest, he felt repulsed at the thought of telling her about it. But, as if the words were choked up by the regret bubbling inside of him, he managed to force the words out, to his relief and dismay.

“I’m going to tell you about the incident.”

It seemed that these 8 words had an incredibly profound impact. The revv of cars whizzing by and the low buzz of the yellow fluorescent lights seemed to deafen, the ants scuttling in the kitchen seemed to stop, and it appeared that the world had come to a standstill in order to listen.

Amelia’s face was painted with hope and seemed to be blanketed in a dream-like trance. Was this real? This could just be a figment of her imagination and she would wake up, cocooned inside her wooly blanket and serenaded by the low whirr of the fan. But a prickling feeling at the back of her head told her otherwise. She replayed the words in her head, trying desperately to pick out any flaws to indicate that it was a dream; but secretly hoping it was not one after all. She combed through every second, relishing the fact that that was real as she stared off into the blurred world around her with a vacant look. Her once-inanimated body seemed to animate once more when she felt the tiny vibrations of taps emanating throughout her body, which proceeded to become frantic and hurried once she did not respond. Though she felt a pang of guilt fill the hole that the elatedness gave, she couldn’t help but cling desperately to the last strings of happiness before she was shunted into reality, thus choosing to stay in her trance-like state.

Grandpa Jim was concerned; had he said too much? His granddaughter was staring inexplicably into space with a vacant look that clouded her eyes, her arms lay limp beside her and her mouth hung open like a dead fish. Her face had a hint of confusion, but it seemed to be interrupted by a look of sheer giddiness and elation. The gears behind her head seemed to be worked mercilessly, pushing at a punishing pace to work out a thought. Several prolonged minutes ticked by with Amelia staring

transfixed at the wall when Grandpa Jim felt a primal urge almost forced him to wake Amelia from her trance. He shoved its aggression down, however, left the sticky residue that was the idea. He tentatively walked towards Amelia and gave her a quick peck with his finger. Amelia did not stir. He gave another one, this time more forceful and filled with intent. Again, she did not show signs of acknowledgment. He frantically tapped her multiple times in succession, pleading in his mind for her to wake up, looking at her eyes for signs of consciousness. The fog in her eyes seemed to slowly break up, and her blue eyes began repainting themselves back into full color.

“So,” Amelia quipped. “You were saying..?” Her eyes seemed to be dusted with stars and interest radiated off of her body. Her hand seemed to quiver with excitement and her smile stretched from ear to ear.

Grandpa Jim rested a hand atop his lap and spoke in a slow, measured voice. “Yes, about the Slit-Mouthed Lady.” His body involuntarily shuddered as he said that and Amelia stifled a gasp. The mood in the room had become heavy, and the tension so palpable that it could have been cut by a knife. Nevertheless, Grandpa Jim trudged on, steeling himself to relive the experience one more time.

Just one more time, he told himself, for my Amelia.

“Lets start with who it was,” Grandpa Jim could not bring himself to distinguish her as a person anymore, so he resorted to calling her it.

The world seemed to fade out of view as he narrated the story, and in its stead was a vivid recreation of the world in Jim’s time. Everything seemed to be tainted a light brown, and men wearing crisp business suits briskly strode towards their destination, hurriedly pushing their watch against their face to check the time. The street was loud and clamouring, with Jim standing in the center, with an air of both excitement and confusion. He seemed to be bouncing on the tips of his toes, peering his head over the sidewalk and waiting.

“The year was 1961, and I had just started the 6th grade—just like you. The bus stop to go to school was a little ways away, but all I cared about at the moment was the breakfast sitting before me.” He chuckled fondly at the memory. “I took my own sweet time to eat, and by the time I had finished, I checked the time and realized with horror that I was going to be late—on my first day! I threw on my backpack and shoes and

practically flew out of the door, my mother's rambling about my procrastination becoming quieter and more distant the further I ran."

Young Jim desperately squinted his eyes, hoping with all of his heart for the bus to be patiently waiting for him. He saw a speck of yellow and his eyes glimmered with hope, willing his legs to run faster in order to reach the bus on time. They protested in their constant abuse, yet he pushed on, determined to at least make it on time. His eyes seemed to pierce through the bus, his legs heaving himself forward. He thought that he was going to make it; and reached for the bus before colliding with something and promptly falling to the ground.

A shrill shriek erupted beside him as he snapped his head to see the scream's origin. The girl beside him was a year older than him, her fluttering golden locks swaying in the wind and her porcelain skin was cut by a particularly sharp rock, leaving a gash that dribbled blood. Her face was contorted in a mix of horror and rage, bringing a dainty finger up to touch her face before her mouth pressed into a thin line, and her vibrant eyes became uncharacteristically stone cold.

She promptly stood up, pressed her skirt up against her knees, spun on her heels, and sauntered into the bus, but not without leaving a menacing glare in her wake.

All Jim could see was her sapphire blue eyes boring into him, with a likeness of judging his very existence. As if being woken up by a bucket of cold water, he was forcefully snapped out of his reverie by the spluttering of the bus, signalling that it was going to start. Acutely aware of all the aches he had that seemed to pulse violently, he heaved himself off of the asphalt, before lunging at the bus door right as it started moving. He almost lost his step, however managed to desperately cling onto a tiny handle that seemed to blend into the yellow backdrop of the bus.

Finally getting on the bus, he scoured the vicinity, pointedly ignoring the glares he received from his classmates and instead focusing on finding a seat before his eyes seemed to gravitate toward the girl he knocked down. She was holding a lacy pink mirror directly in front of her with a pronounced frown on her face, poking and prodding at her wound. Tears welled in her eyes as her mouth quivered before she squeezed her eyes shut and gulped.

Jim suddenly felt his body fill up with guilt, a hole of pity cemented in his heart. But he knew that these feelings were abstained by much of the populace, as this was no ordinary person, it was Isabella Turner.

Isabella Turner was known as a vain person, who treasured her porcelain skin and golden locks above all else. She gloated over her flawless looks in front of anyone she deemed inadequately beautiful and hid her poisonous personality behind glimmering blue eyes and a relaxed, gracious smile.

“Isabella had been in a relationship with Lucas Stone at the time, who could not believe his luck as he had a hooked nose, something Isabella deemed inadequate in everybody except for Lucas. Some thought that it was true love, that he had penetrated Isabella’s stone-cold heart; but none thought of Isabella’s ulterior motives.” Grandpa Jim sighed at the recollection. “She used him as bait in order to gain influence with his dad, which would allow her to obtain a scholarship, which she desperately needed.”

Lucas eventually uncovered Isabella’s secret, and the monster inside of him enflamed. He didn’t just love Isabella, he was obsessed. Seeing her through rose-tinted glasses only deepened the impact of her loss, driving him mad with delirium.

The day was peaceful and quiet, the birds chirping on trees, and the whirr of the fans echoed throughout the school. The silence was ripped apart by the piercing bell, at which point students flooded out of their classrooms, an air of apathy lingering in the hallways. Soon, the hallways were deathly quiet, punctuated by the frantic clicking of footsteps.

Isabella barrelled towards the bathroom, unable to control herself any longer. She cautiously looked around to ensure no one was watching before breaking out into a run; not noticing Lucas trailing close behind. Her breath hitched in her throat as she heard footsteps creep up on her. Spinning on her heel, she was met with a desolate hallway devoid of life, a small gust of wind blowing through an open window. Shoving a shadow of doubt down, she reached for the bathroom door, swung it open, and stepped inside, breathing a sigh of relief.

The door gave a small creak behind her as a low, harrowing laugh floated into the room, making Isabella’s heart race. She clenched her fists beside herself in

suppressed fear and apprehensively turned around, painting a small smile onto her face once more.

“Hello, Lucas,” Isabella demurely spoke, “Did you want to talk to me?”

“Yes, about my dad,” Lucas spoke calmly and slowly, but his eyes sparked with malice.

“About that, I-I can explain—” Isabella frantically started, but was interrupted by the piercing cold hilt of a knife jamming against her neck.

Lucas eyed the blistering red scab on the side of her cheek and grinned maniacally. “Not so pretty now, huh?”

He punctuated every word with contempt and each syllable seemed to drip poison. His words seemed to drive daggers into Isabella’s skin, casting a shadow over her form.

The hilt of the ivory studded knife was the last thing she saw before her vision was clouded with searing, white-hot pain, erupting in spasms from the edges of her mouth. She felt her world come crashing down before her as Lucas drove his knife repeatedly into the sides of her lips, extending it into a haunting smile. Blood poured out of her lips and pooled beside her as she felt black spots cloud her vision and sank to the floor. The last thing she heard was, “Who will think you’re pretty now?” before her world faded to black.

“Isabella felt that she could only blame me for what happened to her, so she zeroed into me and attempted to murder me the same way; by slitting my mouth, although she failed, given the fact that I am here now.” Grandpa Jim’s face was shining with sweat, and his hands seemed to be trembling, but he put on a brave face for Amelia. “But I’m afraid that whatever happened last time is happening now too. Like history is repeating itself.” He let out a fatigued sigh, before reaching towards a wooden drawer with an ivory elephant encrusted upon it. His fingers seemed to fit perfectly around the cracks, like the key to a puzzle, when an oddly mechanical noise erupted from its insides and it slowly opened.

Inside were many copies of yellowed newspapers, worn down over time. Their ends were frayed and torn and gave off a scent that reeked of must. Grandpa Jim

patted the newspapers when a cloud of dust lifted off of them, revealing titles that described children being mercilessly slaughtered via mutilation, dated 1981.

Jim's eyes seemed sallow and sunken in when gazing at the past newspapers, but he shoved it to the side and combed through multiple of the same papers, dated '81, '82, and '83. His hands were coated in the dust when his eyes widened a fraction and he pulled out a newspaper with a likeness similar to the day before and today's newspaper.

Amelia snatched the yellowed newspaper from her Grandfather's hands and shook it in the air, relieving it of dust. Placing a delicate hand over her nose, she firmly placed the newspaper on the floor, next to today's issue. She squinted her eyes, trying to see past the scratches and dust marks that made it home.

She noticed a striking similarity between the two newspapers, her eyes widening in horror the further she read down the page. Her finger trailed down the page, shaking more violently the further it slid down the page. Amelia felt her stomach lurch, fear cementing her into her place, and an overwhelming wave of pity for her grandpa washed over her.

"I'm just afraid that she will finish the deed that she had started, and come for me and you," Grandpa muttered, "Just promise me, that if anything happens, choose yourself. Your life matters to me more than anything in this world." His tone had a coating of finality to it, as if forbidding it to be discussed further.

A thick layer of silence seemed to engulf them both, but Amelia found it oddly comforting. She felt as if a warm blanket had been placed over her, placating her emotions and shielding her from the cruelty of reality, like a warm embrace that she didn't want to let go of.

Taking a quick look at the grandfather clock that stood tall in the room, her heart skipped a beat as the thought of running late for school descended onto her mind, unraveling the peace that knitted her brain together.

Her grandfather seemed to pick up on her uptick in stress and chanced a glance at the time, making his once calm and collected face morph into one of anxiety and uncertainty. He furrowed his eyebrows together, glaring at Amelia for letting him ramble whilst clearly knowing that school was upon her.

No later than five seconds after Jim was alerted of Amelia's schooltime, the house descended into pandemonium, its foundations shaking from the frantic scurrying happening inside. Her belongings were haphazardly stuffed inside her bag as she heaved her favorite pinstriped satchel onto her shoulders before her grandfather stopped her.

"Just for a little bit of luck," Grandpa Jim said as he removed a pendant from his neck and clasped it in Amelia's hand before gently placing it around her neck. It was a beautiful, shining amethyst that seemed to radiate energy deep inside her chest. "I love you."

Amelia was in too much of a hurry to respond, so she left a curt nod and rushed out of the door, feet thudding against the solid concrete. She could see her drearily grey school looming in the distance as her heartbeat raced. The streets were deathly quiet as not a single person nor car roamed the streets. For several minutes, all that was heard in the world was the heavy breathing of Amelia and her thundering footsteps en route to school.

Finally crossing the ornate gateway into school, she immediately noticed the absence of students, punctuated by the silence that blanketed the school. Although it was most peculiar, she gulped down her fear, walked the familiar pathway to her classroom, and opened the door.

The classroom immediately came to a standstill, as every stare seemed to bore into her body. The air was thick with worry, and the teacher's face seemed devoid of any color. Anxiety seemed to roll out of everyone in waves, as people sat absentmindedly in their seats, fretting about the safety of their loved ones.

Amelia's eyes wandered across the room, finally landing on her friend's empty seat as the day's newspaper flashed into her mind once more. Her feet seemed to be rooted into the ground as her blood ran cold. Goosebumps pricked her body and tears welled in the corner of her eyes, making her heartbeat race as it felt itself collapse onto itself, leaving a hole of despair in its wake.

She felt like a marionette, her arms stiff and locked; her body jerkily moving itself from one place to the next. A world of grey descended upon her eyes, making her feel desolate and broken. Life had lost its color and the unstoppable marching of time



pushed forward at an unforgiving pace, regardless of how desperately Amelia wanted it to stop.

The morning wore on, painted by the tight-lipped smiles of people passing by each other, and pale complexions. Most stuck to briskly walking in groups, burning her loss into her head, and deepening the gaping hole left in her heart for Julia. Her heart let out another strangulated pulse, this time of longing. Despair suddenly seemed to writhe inside her stomach, smoothly extending its tendrils throughout her body. The walls seemed to slowly close in on her, and her vision blurred as the people around her faded into colorful blobs. Her heartbeat thud like a trapped animal; as if knowing what was about to happen, as her knees gave way and she collapsed onto the cool, tiled floor.

She could hear the frantic muttering of students around her as she felt herself being cocooned inside a circle. Though she could not discern what the others were saying, she could hear a pitch of panic inside their voices before she was hoisted up into the air and carried toward the nurse's office.

Amelia opened her eyes with ease as the scent of lavender wafted into the room. The pristinely white walls gleamed as bottles of disinfectant towered over her. A quaint, flowery vase was situated atop a slightly cracked coffee table, next to various other coloring books. The soft sheets seemed to envelop her whole as they smothered her into the bed.

A smooth, low jazz emanated from the speakers hidden in the walls as her heart perked up; this was grandpa's favorite. The chilled amethyst she received coiled onto itself and shone brightly before dimming. It seemed fragmented, though its glossy sheen remained perfectly still. The silver border looked as if it had aged slightly, and the joyful tinkle the amethyst once gave off was replaced with a stoic, apathetic glare. Clutching it in her hand, she felt the loss of its warm pulse, which used to vibrate throughout her hand.

The loudspeaker suddenly whirled to life, emitting a deafening squeak in doing so. Three prolonged beeps followed consecutively, blanketing the school in a hush and pressing her into the sheets.

The loudspeaker buzzed before making way for a haggard voice, laced with grief and sorrow. "Attention, students. There has been another murder outside of school." His

voice was meek and shallow as his fragility plaited every word. “Teachers, I would like you to—”

His words faded to incoherent mumbles as panic bubbled in Amelia’s chest. Her heart shuddered violently as she racked her brain, desperately trying to be positive, but to no avail. The sheets felt stiff and cold, the fragrance of lavender suddenly stagnant and spoilt. A harsh wind whipped through the window, snapping her out of her reverie and unflagging the mist inside her mind.

Ripping the blankets off of her body, she felt her shoes make contact with the pearly-white floor, her hips enflaming from her earlier fall. The pain pricked at her, pulsating at a nauseatingly slow pace, yet she shoved it down and trudged towards the door. Gripping the metal handle with all the force she could muster, she yanked the door open and thundered down the hallway, her mind racing and drowning in hysteria.

Amelia looked deranged, her face was gaunt and her cheeks looked as if they were stretched across her face. A cut of blood blossomed around her hip, staining her mustard yellow tee a scarlet red. Her body vibrated silently as she took long strides out of the school, her body bent over in exhaustion. Her eyes held a gleam of desperation, clinging to a singular strand of hope as she clutched her amethyst pendant for solace.

The sky overhead was overcast, with ravens patrolling the skies. Amelia’s breath rattled deep inside her chest as she neared her home, the dilapidated, red chimney coming into view.

Her breath hitched. A cacophony of sirens and police exploded around her, yet she stood still, rooted in her place. Amelia’s body shook like a leaf in the wind as she uncontrollably convulsed, tears framing her face. Her eyes shot wide open and were paralyzed with fear. Her last string of hope crumbled as only one word resonated within her chest. Dead.

Grandpa was dead.

All Amelia could see was red; the scarlet blood painted the street and her grandpa’s pained expression burned into her mind. Her mouth felt like it was set on fire as its flames licked the edges of her throat, leaving it dry and scratchy. Tears stung at the edge of her eyes as an overwhelming wave of emotions crashed over her.

Suddenly, a voice erupted from the edge of the thicket, sly and dangerous, it called out in a low voice. "I know who you are. I murdered your grandfather, but I can bring him back." A pair of gleaming red eyes shone from the edge of the forest, tantalizing her to go inside. A trail of carmine-red blood streaked into the forest, reeking of a metallic scent. Her mind fogged over as it seemed to melt into mush, her heart letting out a strangled thump as thoughts of her grandfather towered over her.

The allure of the forest slowly sucked her in as she found herself racing along the blood-stained path, a whimsical glimmer of hope erupting inside her upon hearing her Grandfather's name. The conifers framed the sides of the path as pinecones hung from their branches like chandeliers, adorning the path with a mystical beauty. The scent of pine was heavy in the air as her eyes widened a fraction as the trail of blood came to a halt up ahead in a clearing.

A hooded figure stood alone in the center, her ragged cloak stained with bloody handprints and engraved scratches. The grass around her seemed to wilt and her face was shrouded in an empty black. She stood at a menacing height, her hands clasped behind her back as her head snapped up, her eyes boring into Amelia's soul.

Her eyes seemed to lock Amelia in a vice-like grip, turning her blood to ice. She felt her limbs lock in place as her resolve crumbled into ash. She shakily stepped over the threshold into the clearing, her arms clenched tight by her side and sweat pouring off of her.

The lady looked emaciated, her cheeks stretched tight over her face as her eyes sunk deep into her face. Her cheeks were sallow and tinged a pale yellow as her rotted teeth deformed her face into that of a grotesque monster. Most horrifically, her cheeks had knife marks etched into them, connecting to her lips. They reeked of dried blood, and stitches haphazardly connected them together.

The broken pieces inside Amelia's brain seemed to knit themselves together, as the loose strands of thought that connected them together tattered and pulled them together like a puzzle, and it clicked. It was Isabella Turner, it was the Slit-Mouthed Lady.

The hilt of a knife glinted malevolently in the sunlight behind The Lady's back, as she made to meander ever so closely to Amelia.

Her breath hitched inside her throat as she cautiously backed away, her back suddenly coming into contact with the rough trunk of the pine tree. The sharp bark of the trees dug into her skin as it pricked at her mind to think of something. The amethyst thudded against her now-blackened tee as an image of grandpa writhing in pain, a knife suspended above him for a tense moment before plunging deep into his face flashed into her mind.

Goosebumps mottled her body, yet she stood still; strong and unwavering in the whipping cold. "What have you done with my Grandpa?!" Her emotions leaked out like a pail with a hole inside, her composure teetering on one leg before toppling down with a thud.

The Lady stood perfectly still, her icy cold glare fixated on Amelia's form as words poured out of her mouth like honey. "I'm just here to finish the job." Her voice held little warmth, jutting into the air like icicles protruding from the ground. At this, she erratically lunged forward, the ornate hilt of the knife glinting in the glow of the setting sun. Her mouth opened unsettlingly wide, the loose stitches holding them together snapping as her eyes flashed a manic euphoria.

Amelia's legs moved upon impulse as she frantically dodged the oncoming knife. The knife jammed itself into the tree, violently shaking back and forth in doing so, letting out a low humm. Her heart was thudding inside her chest as she wearily closed her eyes and hunched over her knees. She suddenly felt the weight of the day press down upon her as she sighed her worries away. Step. The soft crunch of the autumn leaves made Amelia stiffen as she whipped her head around, coming face to face with the blazing tip of the Lady's knife. It was stained with the memory of blood. Her Grandpa's blood.

The metallic scent of blood clouded her vision as all she could see was red. Her insides felt tight and knotted as they constricted her breathing, forcing her to let out low, shallow breaths. Her arm acted out of its own accord as it cut through the still autumn air and latched onto the heel of the knife, letting out a low, guttural growl. Her muscles grew stiff as Amelia clenched the knife tighter, a smattering of blood dotting her hand.

The Lady's slender fingers wrapped around hers like tendrils as her hand jerkily moved forward, plunging the knife into the spot she had once been. Amelia's body was keeled over one leg, her hand taut as she held onto the knife with a grip of death.

Sirens wailed in the distance as the Lady's face seemed to sink in panic. Her finger's grip on the knife lessened for a fraction of a second as Amelia weaseled the knife out of her hand and carressed it. She felt the weight of the knife fall perfectly in the indents of her hand, as it's malice coursed through her veins. For a single, horrible moment, Amelia contemplated killing her. Just like she had so mercilessly done to Julia and her Grandfather. Her eyes became stone-cold as she advanced closer to the Lady, the knife held high in the air. The air was thick with suspense as Amelia tantalizingly held the sharpened blade of the knife over the Slit-Mouthed Lady's chest.

The Lady's eyes glazed over with fear as she scrambled away from Amelia, her back thudding against the conifer. Her heart thudded against her chest as her eyes seared with tears. Her wrinkles seemed far more pronounced as her she convulsed in repent.

Strangely, she reminded Amelia of her grandfather, her fragility shining through her lifeless facade. The fear etched into her face made Amelia perceive the dire consequences of what she could have done, as her breath caught in her throat. She wasn't a murderer; she thought as she lowered the bloodied knife to her side, feeling the tip of it prick at her pants.

The sirens drew nearer as streaks of red and blue painted the sky. The trees vibrated, loosening the hold of their colorful leaves as a squadron of men donning black suits with the letters SWAT plastered over their shoulders flooded the clearing.

"Attention, this is the SWAT team, everybody's hands up!" The voice boomed into the microphone as the gunman hoisted their guns on their shoulders and encroached upon the Slit-Mouthed Lady, whose limbs locked with a likeness to a statue.

Amelia hastily dropped the knife in her hand as it clattered on the ground with a resounding thud. Her muscles tensed slightly as she winced, hoping that the others paid it no mind. The knot in her stomach seemed to tighten and constrict her as the officers snapped their heads to glare at her, before softening their gaze upon looking at the trembling girl.

The officers continued advancing on the Lady, revealing a pair of silver handcuffs that glinted resolutely in the fading sunlight. They attached with a satisfying click as the handcuffs biting cold seemed to dig into her skin. A mob of officers surrounded the Lady as she trudged out, bound by cuffs and wrought with grief.

The world seemed to be lighter that day, as the constricting knot inside Amelia's chest began to unravel. She let out a breath she didn't know she was holding as she closed her eyes, reveling in the first true moment of peace. It felt empty, however, punctuated by her losses as the gaping hole in her heart longed for normality. She clutched at the Amethyst pendant her grandfather had given her and repeated his words persistently as she felt a single tear prick at her eye. Just for a little bit of luck, he said.

She made her way out of the thicket as her stomach felt heavy with grief. Tears trailed down her face as she made to peer up at the crescent moon and the smattering of stars, bathing in their ethereal glow. She took one step forward, replacing her grief with newfound hope and determination.

The waning moon dipped below the horizon as the canary rays of sunlight bloomed across the sky. The stars that once speckled the sky now dimmed, overshadowed by the streaks of sunlight. Amelia found herself tracing the route back home, her shaking legs thudding against the concrete. The word 'home' left a constricting feeling inside her chest, coiling around her abdomen and choking out her suppressed sorrow.

The sidewalks were mottled with colorful figures, each sinking deep inside the concrete and emanating a youthful joy. The palette of colors seemed to brighten as she neared her house, finally ending at the driveway.

Amelia clenched her fists beside her and squeezed her eyes shut, desperately willing her brain to let the cacophony of pent-up emotions bubbling inside her subside. She forcibly snapped her head up, taking in the normality of the house. The house's stained yellow exterior seemed to be slightly chipped, although the red roof seemed to be blaring. The olive green hedge bore no signs of death, as the perfectly trimmed grass combined with the spotlessness of the house gave rise to a sinking feeling in Amelia's chest. He truly was gone.

The weight of the statement pressed down on Amelia as her legs felt like noodles. Her arms stiffened as her legs acted on their own accord and strolled over to the door, where she paused. Resting on the blackened doorstep was a copy of the day's newspaper, discolored because of the dust that had settled in the area. It had a glossy sheen over it, and its creases were folded tight over its form.

The memories of the day crashed like a wave over her head as tears brimmed at the bottom of her eyes. The newspaper her grandfather had so ardently been pouring over flashed into her mind as she racked her brain for comfort, placing a hand over her chest for solace.

The black text morphed into squiggles as the only thing she could see was the Slit-Mouthed Lady dead, surrounded in a pool of blood with her face devoid of color. Amelia's cracked lips quivered upward slightly, and the fog that had descended on her mind lifted. She was dead. It was over.

The unending love for her grandfather seemed to pour through her, the hollow inside her heart knitting itself together as it thudded against her chest, her eyes glinting with adrenaline for what was to come. It's what grandpa would have wanted me to do; she reasoned as she steeled her resolve and took her first real step on her own, turning her back on the house as she resolved to never look back.