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Ghostly Oaks

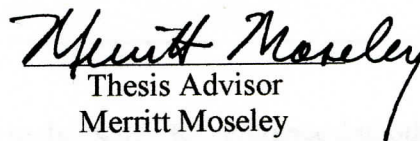
Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Literature at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
~~Fall 2016~~
SPRING 2016

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April 25, 2016

Prologue

[1982]

A stranger's feet kicked through the Parkers' pool. Water splashed over the edge and soaked the dead leaves that had fallen from the old oak tree that was planted long before the present Parkers existed. It had the essence of an antique; the smell of it was warm and loving but it seemed to have an eerie presence, as if the memories it held were only for the eyes of the strong-stomached. The memories of the stranger would hold that true.

His legs were like those of a horse and would make sounds no quieter than a child's cry in a movie theater. But it was the actual child in the Parker's home that created the cry that woke its parents. Mrs. Parker prepared to perform her nightly ritual of crooning and warming milk and checking the bed for accidents but it was in the split second that her child paused to breathe that she caught the sound of a splash coming from the pool in her own backyard. Wishing that it were just her silly paranoia, Mrs. Parker pulled back her child's sun and moon curtains. Normally, she would soak in the sight of the beautiful yard that came with marrying a Parker. He had paid for landscapers to create a garden painted with flowers in all her favorite colors, and he bought exotic grass that was able to stay an emerald green through all the seasons. The yard was shaped in a perfect rectangle with the woods lining the edges; save for the oak tree Mrs. Parker refused to have cut down. The pool was rectangular as well and made for the perfect

centerpiece for their potential guests to admire, or maybe take a dip if they were so bold. The tree stood near the back right corner and served as the woodsy version of a tropical palm tree accent. They hadn't thought to put in patio furniture yet, but since the baby was born, she was ready to dive into her catalogues again.

She didn't so much as glance at the beautiful veranda before she set her sights on the stranger in the pool.

He swam neatly clockwise around the edges with the strokes of an Olympian. From what she could see, he was dressed nicely from his suit jacket down to his loafers. His hair was soaked but she could see that it was full and thick yet grey, as if he was a young man with a heavy agenda. The lights in the pool seemed to highlight his skin, but to a point where it seemed near translucent. His expression stayed focused and it appeared that he was mumbling to himself, though it was impossible to hear over the splashing.

Mrs. Parker froze in the window frame, as if she was the stranger who didn't belong and felt the need to hide. Within another lap, Mrs. Parker scooped up her baby and raced back to her bedroom.

Mr. Parker fluttered his eyelids as his wife and screaming newborn entered. "He's got quite a pair of lungs on him." The average alcoholic would not be so pleased to be woken up in the middle of the night by the ear-shattering screams of an infant, but Mr. Parker was the kind of man who soaked in every bit of happiness from the presence of his loving family. Even before rubbing his eyes they were rimmed red around the hazel. His body had not caught up to his age and even in her state of dread Mrs. Parker had to

admire her husband's neat complexion. He yawned and his whiskey breath spread through the air.

Even in his state of drowsiness, however, he could sense that something was amiss.

Without ease, he sat upright in bed. "What's wrong, love? Is the baby okay?"

In her state of fear Mrs. Parker had lost her words. Bouncing her baby with one arm, she used her free hand to pull her husband down the hall to their freshly made nursery and raised her finger to her lips. As if understanding the gesture, the baby went silent.

In the same steady rhythm as before, the splashing continued. Mr. Parker slowly approached the window and Mrs. Parker watched as his expression grew with curiosity.

"Well would you look at that," He continued to watch, his eyes following the perfect rectangular shape of his pool.

Mrs. Parker lowered her child back into the crib before rejoining her husband at the window. She wrapped her robe tighter around herself and crossed her arms.

"Why is he doing this?"

Mr. Parker put an arm around his wife. "Your guess is as good as mine. We haven't been here too long but this has to be the strangest man in the neighborhood."

A couple of minutes passed in near silence between them as their eyes followed the stranger's laps through their freshly finished pool.

"Well, go get rid of him!"

Mr. Parker chuckled at his flustered wife and kissed her on the cheek. “I’ve been getting a kick out of watching this man go, but if it’ll make you feel safer, I’ll get him gone.”

As he made his way down the stairs, Mr. Parker chuckled to himself again. How strange that a man would so casually go for a swim in a stranger’s pool at this hour. It was far past midnight and the closest neighbors were a good five-minute drive down the road. Either the man was crazy, or he was someone Mr. Parker would love to grab a drink with.

As he felt the soft carpet underneath his feet down the steps Mr. Parker realized he had forgotten his slippers. He knew his wife was growing more impatient by the second so he wouldn’t bother to grab them. This wouldn’t take long, he convinced himself. In the downstairs lobby the moonlight poured in from the tall windows he had built in on both sides of the front door. The circular rug they had purchased from a trip to Brazil lay in the center of the room, welcoming with bright greens and blues whoever would enter. From the middle of the house he could see the living room to his left and the kitchen and dining room to his right. Walls and doors had initially blocked them off, but Mrs. Parker loved open spaces and so he had them torn down and replaced by wooden archways. It was the most modest house he had ever lived in but to Mrs. Parker it was a mansion. That was one of the hundreds of reasons why Mr. Parker married his wife without fear or hesitation. She was the most passionate human being he had ever encountered and was grateful for every inch of the space this home held.

It took the better of ten minutes of admiration before Mr. Parker realized he was just standing in the lobby. He could hear his wife hissing his name from upstairs,

demanding to banish the stranger who was still apparently invading his pool. With a reluctant sigh, Mr. Parker made his way back past the staircase, ready to get it over with and return to his king bed.

At the back door, however, a shiver made its way down his spine. From upstairs the man seemed young and unthreatening. From this view Mr. Parker could see that the swimmer must have been well into his fifties, and his expression appeared utterly blank as if he was thinking of nothing, but if you asked him a question he would know any answer. He had never faced a situation in which he might need to inflict violence, but his usual good sense of judgment was clouded by the curious situation. Mr. Parker had always assumed that this town would only be full of the most kind and welcoming of neighbors but this stranger in the pool might just be the one he would feud with, just like the sitcoms he and Mrs. Parker watched on Sunday nights after dinner. With some hesitation, Mr. Parker took the pistol from the chest that all his guests assumed was used to hold scarves and hats.

He expected the air to be chilling outside but summer held its grasp in the air. But even with the heat wrapping itself around him, Mr. Parker was still layered with goose bumps on his way across the yard. The walk felt like a scene from *The Twilight Zone*. It was his favorite show, and now he was living it. Even though he was now within feet of the pool, the swimmer did not falter in any stroke. Mr. Parker found himself wondering if the man had been part of a high school or college swim team in his youth. Anything to make him seem human.

“Hey stranger.” Mr. Parker approached everything in a friendly manner, even when he was frightened by his company. “May I ask what you’re doing?”

The swimmer carried on as if Mr. Parker didn't exist.

“Look, you're scaring my wife, and you woke my newborn baby. My family is new around here and so I guess we haven't been formally introduced. All my neighbors are welcome for a swim, we just ask that they do it at a decent hour and alert us before paying a visit.”

Still, the swim continued.

“Exactly what is going on here? It is well past midnight and you are fully dressed in a stranger's pool. Do you need help, friend?”

The swimmer's kicked got louder and his mumbling rose to a shout. “All gone, they're all gone! All gone!”

Mr. Parker knelt down by the edge of his pool, pistol gripped with a sweaty, shaking hand. “What's gone?”

“All gone! All of them gone!” The stranger came to a sudden stop and hoisted himself out of the pool at the opposite end from Mr. Parker. In startling swiftness, he burst into a run right at the terrified Mr. Parker.

“What are you doing? Stop!” Mr. Parker began to lift the pistol. “I'm warning you! Don't make me do this!”

He couldn't wait any longer. If the man was a threat and he took down Mr. Parker, then he could get into the house and harm Mrs. Parker and the baby. So, with reluctance, Mr. Parker fired the gun.

The bullet went right through the stranger and crammed its way into the trunk of the old oak tree. The shot of the gun split through the air and echoed through Mr. Parker's ears. He shook while he fired, but now he was petrified. He focused on the

crashing waves of the pool and the echo of the shot. He needed to reassure himself that it had all just happened. He needed to remind himself that he had just killed a man.

But where the stranger had just been shot, there were only dead oak leaves.

Chapter One

[Present Day]

Although it carried only two items, Sadie's backpack felt heavier than ever before as she pulled it over her shoulders. The bus driver didn't even come to a full stop but Sadie managed to jump from the last step before the door slammed shut behind her, nearly clutching onto her bag. As the bus took off, a cloud of smoke streamed out the window. While the only other woman at the bus stop choked, Sadie inhaled the stench of the cigarette and felt grateful that the man she had talked to for the hour and a half ride was real, proven by his toxic vice.

Sadie barely had time to pull her hood up before she noticed that dense raindrops were pelting her. For a moment she tilted her head back and tasted the rain. It was crisp and refreshing even in short doses. Although the woman watching her thought of it as a childish gesture, Sadie was parched and had forgotten her water bottle back in Drein, where she had decided to use the last of her money for a bus ticket to Greywynd.

Within a glimpse Sadie could see that not much had changed within the last six years. The town, while small, was lined block for block with stores that were either family owned or closed down. Trees crept into the spaces between the buildings like a gasp of nature claiming its hold on the town, the heights of them overbearing and protective. None of the buildings were built within the last few centuries, and so many of them looked decayed but charming. Sadie was glad to see that the town was still reluctant

on tearing any of them down. She took one more tongue full of rain before entering the heart of Greywynd, hood up and head down.

She spared a few glances upward as she passed through some crowds. She saw no familiar faces and to her dismay the people did not so much as nod their heads while they met eyes. The town she had left years ago was full of people who would even shake the hands of those they were not acquainted to. Not that she blamed them; she couldn't remember the last time she had properly bathed or when she last wore clothes that weren't stolen treasures from thrift stores.

The further she walked, the more Sadie noticed how quiet the place seemed to be. Not even those who were travelling in groups were speaking to each other. The loudest sounds were those coming from the clicking heels on the pavement and the splashing stomps through the puddles. While Sadie took notice to this, she felt the water from the puddles seeping through the weak material in her shoes and sloshing through her socks. It wasn't the most uncomfortable feeling she had gotten, but her soggy toes curled every time her feet made a clear-cut squish sound. As the rain fell harder, she could feel it soaking through her jacket and drenching her chilled skin. All these senses swarmed her until a single scent hit her through her nose. At the end of the block, smoke curled out of the chimney of The Hut. Sadie remembered all too well what the smell must be and realized it was Wednesday.

The Hut was the only grocery store in Greywynd. It was also the most beautiful building. Its roof was dome-shaped and covered in wooden shingles that had acquired moss over time. The building itself was circular and the wood in its structure was a golden brown. Two round windows were placed on either side of the entrance. The door

looked like it belonged on a modest castle, rounded at the top, and on its center was a knocker made of stone, although no one knocked before they entered. Thomas Crane had owned the place with his wife Mary since the two of them were married nearly twenty years before Sadie was born. Mary had died shortly after giving birth to their daughter Linda, and so Thomas had been on his own until Linda was old enough to work in the store. Along the way, he managed to find one of the best bakers in the county, Ms. Lynn. The amount of care she put into baking her goods amounted to the intense care Mr. Crane had put into his store. Everything of hers had a unique, astounding taste, but it was the apple pies she made every Wednesday that became a town favorite. Everyone who knew of Greywynd knew of Ms. Lynn's apple pies.

And it was the smell of those pies that wafted under Sadie's nose. She had to sit down on a bench, labeled with a plaque that read "Donated by the Parker family", to keep herself from collapsing. She wrapped her arms around her waist and groaned. She had grown very aware of the fact that she hadn't eaten in over three days. The pain twisted inside of her. With dread, she remembered that she had spent the last of her money on a ticket back to Greywynd. The closest grocery store was thirty miles away back in Drein, and so reluctantly she looked up at The Hut. It was the last place she would want to steal from, but her blurring eyesight and weak legs told her to get her priorities straight. She groaned as she pushed herself off the bench and hobbled over to the store.

Once inside, she pulled her hood down and distributed her hair equally over each of her shoulders. The tips of it had gotten wet and she realized how badly she needed to get it cut, as she could feel it falling down to her hips. The rain had somehow made her ebony hair even darker and when she tugged at it, a clump of strands gathered in her

hands. She tossed the hair onto the ground and moved through a crowd of people gazing at the magazines displayed at the front of the store.

The first thing Sadie took notice to was the abundance of empty space. The shelves looked as if they were thinning out, with the products either low in numbers or sold out altogether. Brands were mixed together and bottles were turned upside down. Dust lingered around the floor and there was a drying spill of what looked to be orange soda by the refrigerators. The spill had to be days old. Sadie looked over at a mother bouncing her baby on her hip and cringing at the expiration date on a can of peaches.

However, relief rolled over Sadie when she reached the back of the store, which was the dedicated space for Ms. Lynn's bakery. She had a long counter for cutting or kneading or whatever other magic she had to work to perfect her goods. Behind the counter was a large stone oven, big enough to stuff in several loaves of bread at a time. In front of the counter was a display of her finished products that had a line of pies towards the left all the way down to varieties of breads on the right. Even with her greying hair, Sadie recognized Ms. Lynn right away. She was cutting up more apples for yet another pie with energy as if she hadn't missed a wink of sleep through her entire life. Though her back was to Sadie, she could easily tell that Ms. Lynn was smiling. Sadie only hated herself more as her gaze dropped down to the rows of bread. The one closest to her hand happened to be one of her favorite kinds. It was a round loaf of sour dough, and she could feel the heat rising off of it, making Sadie gasp with hunger. Gradually and painfully, she slipped the loaf under her hoody. The bread warmed her concaving stomach and Sadie closed her eyes and smiled. Before she could turn to walk away, however, a firm hand gripped onto her shoulder.

“I’m going to have to ask you to put that back, young lady.”

Sadie turned slowly until she could see the owner of the hand. Unfortunately, it was also the owner of the store. He was just over six feet tall and Sadie had to crane her neck slightly back to look directly at his face. He was perfectly old, looking like he lived a full life and he was ready to leave it behind. His arms and legs looked like they must have been toned and muscular at one point while his protruding belly covered any evidence of a six pack in his past. His hair was the flawless white of blank paper and had barely thinned. His facial hair matched and though it was stubbly, it looked deliberately trimmed up. There were wrinkles just underneath the hair that linked his mustache down to his beard. Those and the ones up by his sapphire eyes signified that he had had many smiles throughout his lifetime. Sadie peered suspiciously at the glow that his skin seemed to be emitting.

In a soft whisper, Sadie asked, “Mr. Crane, is that you?”

The man blinked a few times then leaned forward. “Sadie? Little Sadie?”

“Yes.” Sadie stayed in a whisper and looked around. No one was around them, except for a man looking in the refrigerator full of Ms. Lynn’s specially crafted birthday cakes.

“Sadie!” Mr. Crane’s laugh boomed and he held his stomach like the image of a cliché Santa Claus. “Little Sadie! I haven’t seen you in years! Have you gotten taller?”

Sadie held her arms over her hoody where the bread was hidden. “Nope. Five feet and three inches since the eighth grade.”

“That’s unfortunate. You would have made a great one of those models. Your black hair really makes those candy apple green eyes of yours pop. But I hear you have to

have a dang fair height to model.” Mr. Crane took a step back. He stood under one of the dead light bulbs in the ceiling, and so his glow was only more apparent.

“Mr. Crane, what happened to your store?”

“Oh, well, since Linda took over it hasn’t quite been the same.” He stroked his nose over the bridge. “Ms. Lynn was supposed to retire but without her this place would be dead.”

“Yeah, speaking of dead...” Sadie took two steps back, nearly knocking into a shelf.

“Careful sweetheart! You’ll run into the cereal over there!” Mr. Crane frowned. “Probably expired cereal, anyway.”

“Um, and speaking of expired...” Sadie clutched her arms around herself tighter and the bread crunched underneath.

“Sadie,” Mr. Crane interrupted. “Put that back, now. I wouldn’t want to get you in trouble. You’re too sweet of a young woman to be stealing.”

“Mr. Crane, I don’t have money. Let me have this and I won’t come back again. I promise.” Sadie turned to walk away, but Mr. Crane was in front of her again.

“I can’t let you do that, dear.”

“You can’t do anything about it anyway!” Sadie realized she had risen to a shout, and she quickly looked down.

The suspicions of the man by the cake rose. Samuel Glace had only been to the store to pick up more soup and peanut butter, but this dirty looking woman with the darkest hair he had ever seen had peeked his interest. When she shouted, however, he

knew enough. Other shoppers further down the aisles had turned to see what was the matter, and so Sam had to step in.

“Yes I can!” Sam jumped in front of Sadie, making her jump backwards.

“Excuse me?” Sadie looked from Mr. Crane to this new obstacle, who no doubt in her mind had overheard what must have looked like a psychotic conversation with herself. He was taunting her.

“I can do something about it.” Sam cleared his throat and widened his eyes, a gesture he had always learned in the movies to mean *play along*.

Sadie looked back to Mr. Crane. He was looking to this new man in the situation with a gentle smile.

“Well hey, Sam. I haven’t seen you around here in a while.” Mr. Crane patted his back without a sound.

Sam kept his gaze on Sadie but replied. “Hey, Tom. I’ve just been busy.”

Sadie’s mouth dropped open. They were interacting, just as Mr. Crane had interacted with her. She nearly forgot about the bread until it fell to the floor, crumbs splaying out around the hardwood.

“Oh great,” Mr. Crane sighed then called out. “Linda, we need a broom back here!”

No one turned their head to him, and no response was made.

“I swear, no one listens to me these days. Ever since I got back from the hospital it’s a dead zone around here.”

Sam chuckled. “Tell me about it.”

Sadie sent her shocked expression towards him.

“Look,” Sam continued, “I’ll pay for this girl, Tom. Don’t worry about it.”

Mr. Crane leaned back and crossed his arms. “Well, there’s a gentleman for you. You’re lucky Sam was here to save your backside, Sadie. I would’ve had to call your parents.”

Sadie scowled. “Yeah, good luck with that one.” She spoke under her breath.

“Come on.” Sam tossed the bread in his shopping cart and grabbed onto Sadie’s arm with minimal force. Sadie followed out of shock.

Sure enough, the stranger had paid for her bread and handed it to her once they were outside. The rain had subsided, but the sun was still hidden behind the grey clouds. The bread had cooled since she had first stuffed it under her hoody, but when she took a bite into it, it warmed her drying mouth. The taste was too overwhelming for her, and so she happily moaned into her next bite.

“Wow.” Sam cringed while he watched this strange woman eat, but he chuckled with amusement. “Lynn’s a great cook but damn. I’ve never seen someone so happy about bread before.”

Although Sadie was thankful that this man had come along to help her legally acquire her food, she couldn’t help but be aggravated by his taunts. “What do you know? At least I appreciate what I can get.”

“Oh yeah? How come I haven’t heard a single thank you since I saved your ass back there?” Sam smirked at her.

Sadie looked up to meet his gaze. He looked not even a decade older than she was, but his light brown hair had some greys mixed in. His eyes were almost as dark as his hair and he was nearly as tall as Mr. Crane. Through his t-shirt and jeans, Sadie could

see that his body was thick, but in a way that wasn't representative of too many trips to the gym or to the ice cream shop. He looked like the kind of man that would give genuine comforting hugs or a bottle of beer if you've had a long day.

Sam noticed the way this woman was observing him and quickly he took the time to glance over her as well. She could've been pretty once, he found himself thinking. But she was lanky and covered in soot. She looked like the hollow and bony image of what used to be a woman. Even her stunning green eyes were surrounded by yellow rather than clean white. When she talked, he could see how dark her teeth were. She needed something more than a bath.

Sadie looked back down to her bread, suddenly very conscious of herself. However, with more time spent in silence, her questions built up until they poured out of her mouth.

“Is Mr. Crane-”

Before she could finish, Sam held a hand up in front of her.

“Yes. He passed on nearly a year ago from a car wreck. Poor man was losing his sight. Now, better question here is, you could see him?”

Sadie continued to chew on the bite she had taken out of the bread while Sam had been speaking. She spoke through her chewed up food. “You could too?”

Sam grimaced while he watched her chew. “Look, how about we go get you some soup to go with that? There's a diner just down the street-”

Sadie shook her head. “I don't need your charity.”

“Alright then.” Sam was never sure how to deal with sensitive women, especially ones that shared his ability. “Would you like to sit down, at least?”

Sadie shrugged and made her way back to the bench from the Parker family. Sam hesitated before he sat down next to her. He hadn't met anyone else with his ability before, and judging by her shock, neither had she. The studying he had been able to do taught him that it was a normal occurrence to be able to see spirits, but to communicate with them was a kind of rare that you could only find in freak shows or insane asylums.

Sam made sure Sadie finished her bite before he asked, "Who are you?"

One of the first lessons Sadie learned as a child was to never give out any information to strangers, but since she had become a nobody, she had no problems responding, "Sadie Oaks. And you?"

"Sam Glace." Normally he would shake hands with an introduction, but Sam could see the dirt underneath her fingernails and the crumbs sticking to her palms. "I've never met anyone else with my gift."

"Gift?" Sadie scoffed. "I'd call it a curse."

"I'll admit at times it's inconvenient-"

"Inconvenient! Ha!" Sadie swallowed the rest of the bread, wishing there was more. "That's an understatement if I've ever heard one. Do you have any idea how difficult it is to hold down a job when half the time you're not even talking to people who are alive? Oh, and did you know that the Wal-Mart in Drein was built on top of a cemetery? A goddamn cemetery! Half of the customers I tended to were dead!"

Not sensitive, bitter. Sam made a note to himself. "It becomes a lot easier to control once you've had proper training. I'm even getting to the point where I can block them out completely if I want to. And I know if they're dead by the-"

"The damn glow. Yeah, I've figured that part out."

The rain was beginning to pick up again and while Sam scrambled to pull his jacket up over his head Sadie sat still and looked wide-eyed down at the pavement. It was a rare occasion to have a real conversation for her. Normally the people she would converse with were homeless or dead. Her social skills were lacking and both of them were very aware of that. She tugged at a loose piece of skin on the edge of her thumb and winced as it tore off.

Sam shuddered and watched the skin fall to the ground. It was like this woman didn't know how to be around real people anymore. He observed the way she tensed whenever a passerby passed too close and the way a group of friends laughing as they walked by made her cheeks turn red. Although he had only gone downtown for some food to fill up the pantry, he began to feel the need to take this woman along as well. He had planned for quite some time to expand his business, and she could, with some training and comfort, become a good addition.

“Do you have a place to stay?”

“Yep.” Sadie kept her eyes focused on the ground.

Sam raised an eyebrow. “Where's that?”

Sadie expanded her arms and twisted around. She hadn't figured out where she would settle for the night, but she was in no hurry to sleep. She wanted to see the rest of Greywynd, not just steal from it. But at some point she would also have to find a change of clothes that weren't soaked and a potential threat to get her sick.

Sam looked around, as if following her gesture. Greywynd had never really been a home to homeless people and he couldn't imagine Sadie out on her own, though he was

sure she had been doing that for a while. When her back was to him, he could see a torn backpack with faded flower print in blue and green.

“What’s in the bag?”

Sadie shrugged the backpack off of her shoulders and hugged it against her chest. This man was too curious for her taste, and even though he had caught her attention with their unique common trait, she started to feel the need to run off. She turned to look for an escape route through the large crowd passing by when Sam put his hand over her arm.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to nag. I’m just so thrown off by meeting someone like me. And if you’d be interested, I’d like you to work with me.”

Sadie felt how warm Sam’s hand was in comparison to her frigid skin and looked up to face him. “Where? What job?”

Sam took her response with hope and spoke quickly. “I started this job a few years ago when a woman requested for me to search her house for ghosts. She knew of my family and me and came to me when she started hearing noises at night after her husband died. Sure enough, it was her husband. So I did a little communication for them, and two hours later, she paid me a hundred bucks. That was way more than my job was paying me, so I asking her to spread my name around to anyone who was facing similar problems. You would be surprised how many people around here want to talk to the dead.

“Anyway, I put advertisements up online and in newspapers and I got a lot of responses right away. Everything from wanting to talk to loved ones to just wanting a paranormal experience. One time, I got a call from some sorority girls asking me to attend a Halloween party and find ghosts in their house. I drove an hour to get there and

came back with nearly a grand. I was like you. I used to have troubles at work because all I could see were ghosts running around the stores and restaurants, but now that my job is to see them, it's like I get paid just to talk to people. I've been searching for other people with my gift- sorry, I mean ability, that would join me and we could actually make a business out of this thing. What do you think?"

Sadie thought he was crazy. She had only seen those kinds of groups on TV shows. "So essentially, you would like me to start a Ghost Busters crew with you? Is that right?"

Sam wrinkled his nose. "No, not exactly. I would like to offer you a job, and hopefully better your current situation."

Sadie ran a finger through her hair. Another clump caught in her hand and she quickly tossed it to the side, although she could tell Sam was watching.

"And I could offer a place for you to stay."

The wind picked up and Sadie's tumbleweed of hair passed by in front of them. After that, everything seemed to freeze. The rain came to a halt and the townspeople had all found stores to disappear into.

"Come again?" The offer echoed through Sadie's head but she needed to hear the warming words hit her once again.

"I have a house. It's pretty damn big too. I've been fixing it up to be my official location for the job." Sam took note to give his business a name, now that it might come into existence. "I have plenty of showers and heating and beds and better yet, my fridge is always full."

Sadie thought to herself about how crazy she would be not to take the offer. Most nights, she had been sleeping on the bare ground in alleyways. Most park benches were designated for clean and decent folks only. There was only one time within six years that she had found a place to stay, and she had had nightmares about it ever since.

Somewhere in the outskirts of Drein, Sadie had found a small house, nearly a shack. It was on a road with a dead end and there was tall grass all around it. The boards of it were cracked and the door was nearly off its hinges. It did not seem the least bit welcoming, but she was feeling ill and could barely walk, and so she stumbled to the front door. It looked abandoned and so she was not surprised to find that the front door opened with a slight twist of the knob. She found a crocheted couch and collapsed onto it, and the second her face hit the cushion, she passed out.

When she awoke, a woman was sitting in a chair across from her.

“Have a nice sleep, dear?” The woman was smiling sweetly. Though a few of her teeth were missing in the front, she looked very kind. Her white hair was pulled up into a bun and strands were falling on either side of her face. The dress she wore appeared to have been worn for several weeks in a row. Sadie began to notice a fowl smell, and she couldn’t put a name to it.

“I’m sorry. I thought this place was deserted.” Sadie began to sit up but her head protested.

“That’s quite alright. I can’t remember the last time I had company. Stay a while, relax!” The old lady stood, her movements shaky and hesitant. The cushion underneath her barely moved when she left the seat. “I would make you something to eat, but I’m

finding it more and more difficult to whip anything up these days, could you help me out?”

“Sure.” Sadie rose again and supported herself before walking to the makeshift kitchen. It took up a little corner with a stove, a counter, a sink, and an icebox. “What do you have?”

When she opened the icebox, a swarm of fruit flies flew out. It wasn't the smell from before, but it only made the aroma worse. Sadie covered her face with her shirt and gagged.

“Oh, I'm sorry dear. I haven't gotten the opportunity to clean in a while. Maybe we can just have soup.” The old lady chuckled and motioned for Sadie to close the icebox.

Sadie found soup cans lined up on the counter and picked one with chicken and noodles. A steel pot was already on the stove and so she lit the flame and heated them both some food. The old lady requested she get them both glasses of water from the sink. It had a brown tint, but Sadie was too thirsty to care. Once they finished, Sadie washed their dishes with the brown water.

“You can stay on the couch. My room is over there. Please don't go in there, it's quite a mess and I'm embarrassed. Just knock if you need anything.”

“Okay-” When Sadie turned, the lady was gone. She figured the lady was all too ready for bed and made a quick get away to avoid further conversation.

For two more days, Sadie stayed in the shack house with the old lady. During the day she helped her clean the house and at night they shared soup and went off to bed. But no matter how much she cleaned, the smell only got worse.

On the third morning, the old lady was standing at the front door when Sadie woke up.

“Are you going somewhere?”

“Yes dear,” the old lady smiled, “yes. I think I am.”

“Where?” Sadie rose and rubbed her eyes. The old lady hadn’t left the house a single time since she had gotten there. It must have been something important.

“I’ve wanted company for so long. Not even my daughter would visit me. I haven’t seen a single soul at my doorstep for a long, long time. But you’ve changed that for me. Thank you dear, it’s been a pleasure to have you.”

The old lady turned, and then she was gone.

Sadie blinked several times and slapped her cheeks. The door hadn’t even opened, she just disappeared.

“No...”

Sadie frantically ran to the front door, searching around the yard. Save for the weeds, it was empty. She ran through the house although the lady would have nowhere to hide. Timidly, Sadie walked to the bedroom door. Once it opened, the smell hit her worse than it had since she’d gotten to the shack house. Flies were swarming around the ceiling. Maggots were sluggishly making their way across the floor. Sadie couldn’t hold it in. She turned her head and puked onto a chair. Once she faced forward, she noticed a figure in the bed.

It was above the covers. The decaying body of the old lady was hardly recognizable. She was clothed in the same dress as earlier, but this one clung to the dead

flesh and emphasized her ribs. From the looks of it, the body had been laying out for months. It looked like she was being absorbed into the bed. Sadie turned to puke again.

Sadie found a wallet by the bed and after leaving she found a payphone just up the road where she used some of the change to give an anonymous tip to the police that a Bethany Royce, according to the license, had passed away. Sadie kept the rest of the money and ran for over an hour until she was convinced she was far away enough from the scene.

“Sadie?” Sam wanted to reach out and touch her shoulder but Sadie looked as if she were in a trance.

Once she heard his voice, however, she snapped. “No. I can’t.”

With one swift movement, Sadie slipped her backpack over her shoulders and maneuvered between the crowds. Once she was through them, she broke into a run. The rain hit her eyes but she blinked it away and got around the block before she realized Sam wasn’t chasing after her.

Sam sat at the bench, his jacket falling back over him. He wasn’t sure whether to follow this woman or let her think through the offer. Either way, Greywynd was a small town, and he would have no trouble finding her.

The alleyways of Greywynd were so narrow that Sadie had to suck in her hollow stomach and walk sideways to get past some trash bins. Sometime after she had left Sam, once she had gotten several blocks down, the rain had picked up again. Her fleece jacket was weighing down on her, soaking in more water than she had even had to drink in days. The light from the setting sun gave Sadie just enough vision to put her sights on a

park across the street. A ray hit the corner of a metallic bench, and Sadie immediately made her way towards her bed for the evening.

Relatively, it was luxury. The park took up an entire block and it was surrounded by trees. There were no jungle gyms or streetlights. No policemen scoured its grounds for unwanted and unsightly loiterers. The bench, hardly used, was clear of gum and sap. With a sigh of relief, Sadie sat and unzipped her bag. From it, she pulled a lavender wool blanket and a knit sack that she had stuffed with cotton. Luckily, a tree nearby hovered just enough to soften the rain. It barely dampened the blanket while Sadie lay across the bench, propping her head up with the stuffed sack and covering her body and head with the blanket. After tossing around for the better of ten minutes, she found a perfect position of comfort and shut her eyes.

While she waited for sleep to take her in, Sadie noticed the stench building up under the blanket. She flinched, realizing she had talked to a man for so long smelling like that. Then she thought of Sam.

However unpleasant the discussion their discussion had been, his company was warming. Something about the way his smile bunched up at his eyes felt so inviting, and the way he spoke was soft yet just firm enough to feel genuine. He was, admittedly, very handsome. Sadie realized how many details she could remember about his lips, like their dark rose color and the way they glistened every time he licked them as a makeshift balm. What she remembered most, however, were his arms. They were not threateningly toned but seemed to have some kind of build to them. Sadie thought about what they must feel like when he embraces for a hug.

With a groan, Sadie rolled again, her back pressed against the back of the bench. She struggled to remember the last time she was hugged. She was sure that whenever it was, she took it for granted. She missed hugs. She missed human contact. In a petty gesture, Sadie wrapped her arms around herself. The contact was so light and weak. It wasn't until her eyes began to sting that she realized she was crying. Groaning, Sadie pulled the blanket down from her head and used the edge to wipe her eyes. When she looked up, she froze.

At first, Sadie thought she might have been seeing a glare from the tears welling her eyes, but when she blinked them away, she saw clearly that there was a man hanging from the tree across her no more than ten feet away. His eyes were wide open, rimmed yellow around his icy blue irises. The t-shirt and jeans he wore were torn and he had no shoes. With the blanket down she realized that the smell had gotten worse, only now she realized that it was a rotten and sour smell. It stung her nose. The wind picked up, turning the rain towards her along with the body. It swung right at her.

Her screams burned her throat. She sloppily stuffed her sleeping gear back into the backpack with the rest of her few belongings and ran. The screams built into sobs. Every few seconds she turned only to see that the body was still swinging in plain sight. At one point her eyes remained locked onto it.

As sudden as a car crash, Sadie ran into a firm body. She shut her eyes and thrashed her arms around, hoping to unceremoniously send the ghost away. She was shocked when she realized that the ghost groaned in such a humane way.

“Oof,” Sam held on tight to Sadie while she flailed but winced whenever she got a direct punch, “calm down. You’re alright.”

When Sadie recognized the barely familiar face she nearly collapsed. Sam held her up, grasping his arms tightly around her and stroking the back of her head.

“You’re okay now, he’s gone.”

The embrace had an immediate calming effect on Sadie and she breathed in deeply. “I’ll do it. I’ll join your Ghost Busters squad. Just get me out of here.”

Chapter Two

The moment Sadie sunk into the leather seat in Sam's truck she slipped into a deep sleep. He turned off the radio and drove as smoothly as he could. She looked peaceful and Sam got a strange feeling that he had become responsible for this woman. Earlier she seemed so strong, but something snapped in her at that park. Now it was his turn to take care of her and be strong for the both of them. Not even while he had had girlfriends did he have this intimidating sensation of responsibility. He couldn't imagine going through seeing the dead on a daily basis alone like that.

As a child his ability had developed rather quickly. Lucky for him, his mother had taken a special interest in it. She was a bored housewife with a passion for her family, and so she did everything she could to provide a paranormal education for Sam. She would find obscure books from the back of the library and read for hours, then lecture Sam on things like how to properly greet a spirit and how to tell whether they have positive or negative energy. Unfortunately, his father did not share the same enthusiasm. Shortly after Sam's eighth birthday, during which the majority of the time he had talked to deceased guests rather than the twenty living ones that his parents had invited, Sam's father left a large sum of cash and a note. It read:

To my dear family,

I love you both passionately, but I cannot be part of such a lifestyle in which the dead have more attention than the living. I cannot see them when you both are not around, and so I am taking that as a sign that I must leave you both in order to regain my sanity before it is gone for good. My love, there will always be a place in my heart for you.

Samuel, you have potential. Unfortunately, you both will not move past this curse Samuel has acquired. I will not tell you where I am going, but I promise that any attempts you make to find me will be futile. Take care of yourselves, and give up this quest to befriend the dead before it is too late. I will miss you both. Think of me no more as a father or a husband, but hold on to the memories we had in which we shared a lively and meaningful life together.

Goodbye.

The letter had not so much as been signed or sealed, and shortly after reading through it a dozen times, Sam's mother set it on fire above the stove before setting to work on making them up some dinner. The cash Sam's father had left for them was just enough to survive, but not enough to maintain the house. Within a month they had moved out, and into a small apartment just behind The Hut.

Sam's mother continued to study his ability and teach him the most that she could, and by the time he was twenty-one, he had a solid grasp on what it meant to be able to communicate with the dead. As practice, he would talk to an old woman in the alleyway who would appear every Wednesday night as the smell of the apple pie began to fade. She would tell Sam stories of her childhood and brag about how her grandchildren would come to visit her someday. Mostly, Sam was interested in studying the ghost he met as a child, back when his family all lived together. Sam's mother claimed he was an unfriendly ghost, haunted by guilt or a heartbreaking memory. Sam vowed he would go back to study that ghost someday and get the answers his family

deserved, since he seemed to be the first ghost that Sam had ever interacted with. So by day, Sam attended school, and at night, he joined his mother for lessons and dinner.

His mother was able to hide her broken heart until it finally got the best of her, and although the police record claimed it was an accident, Sam knew that she had planned to step out into the vehicle that had crushed her to her death. No books or documentaries would tell him why his mother's ghost had not come back to speak to him, but he liked to imagine she was somewhere more serene.

Once Sam turned into the driveway and the gravel road shook the car, Sadie's eyelids fluttered open and she took in the reality that she was heading to what could be a real home. Sam's headlights were dim and so in the dark she could barely see the end to the driveway. She took the time to yawn and stretch.

Sam smiled. "Have a nice nap?"

Sadie tilted her head to the side and a loud popping sound emitted from her neck. "Oh yeah, the best."

"That's good." Sam noticed from the corner of his eye that Sadie was grinning. "I was thinking, since it's getting pretty late, I could give you a really quick tour of the house and then we could have dinner. Does that sound okay?"

Before Sadie could respond, her eyes took in the sight of the house, and she unbuckled her seatbelt and sat forward. The copper-shingled roof, the paper-white paint, and the French windows on both sides of the tall cherry wood door – it was all too familiar. Before Sam could put the car in park, Sadie bolted out of the car and ran past the house to the backyard.

“Hey! Where are you going?” Sam fumbled with his seat belt and followed after her, questioning whether this woman’s sanity was stable enough to take on the roommate role.

Sadie gasped for air once she stopped at the back. Her eyes had not deceived her – she was exactly where she thought she was. The old oak tree stood firmly in place, moving only to give in to the wind. It was the same as she remembered it. Once she got closer, she could see the elegant twists and turns in the bark, and the copper bullet gleaming from within.

Sam stopped just behind her and caught his breath. He could see she was staring up at the tree like it was some kind of predator. “The hell is wrong with you?”

Sadie ignored the bitter question. “How did you get this house?”

“What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I asked.” Sadie snapped. “How did you get it?”

“I had some money saved up from all the paranormal work I’d been doing, then when the house got on the market again no one would buy it because of some accident that took place here.” Sam felt the need to defend himself. “It was my family’s house. We moved out when I was just a kid.”

“Your family’s house?” Sadie raised a brow. “The family who owned it before mine were the Parkers. You said your last name was Glace.”

“It’s my mother’s maiden name.” Sam shook his head. “You lived here?”

Sadie nodded slowly. Cautiously, she turned her head to take in the rest of the yard. The garden was nothing but dirt and weeds, and concrete filled in the space where the pool once was.

Sam took notice to her gaze. "I had to fill it in. The maintenance on that thing would have cost more than the house itself."

Sadie walked over to the concrete, towards the dead center. She could almost feel water beneath her feet, memories haunting her more than ghosts ever had.

It took only three days after moving in for the Oaks family to open up the pool. Mr. and Mrs. Oaks were all too eager to make their daughter as excited about the house as they were. Mr. Oaks had bought it at a ridiculously low price right after receiving his promotion at the logging company.

"Beautiful place, but the sellers aren't asking for much." The real estate agent had said. "Bad divorce or something. I guess they just want to get the hell out of here. Better luck for you, Oaks family."

The pool was empty when the Oaks arrived and it was evidently in need of a cleaning, so before they even completed furnishing the house, Mr. and Mrs. Oaks scrubbed every inch of the pool and had it filled. They noticed instantly that the old oak tree was guilty of shedding its leaves into the pool but they couldn't bring themselves to have it cut down.

"An oak for the Oaks," Mr. Oaks would say.

During Sadie's fifth swim, Mrs. Oaks was getting some work done in the garden after dinner. She was experimenting with mixing in some tulips with the roses that were already planted in when they got there. She was embracing two of her most beautiful creations: her new garden, and her eight-year-old daughter, who, among many other talents, was an excellent swimmer.

Mrs. Oaks wiped her forehead with the back of her glove, leaving a smudge of dirt. "How's the water today, angel?"

Sadie was spinning circles in the center of the pool, her eyes concentrating on something in the air. In her deep focus, she did not reply. Mrs. Oaks chuckled and rolled her eyes. Her daughter's imagination was growing more and more each day; she had even been creating imaginary friends.

Mrs. Oaks looked up when she heard a voice from the pool. "What's that, dear?"

Sadie turned to her mother and stopped. "That wasn't me, Momma. That was Eddie."

"Oh?" Mrs. Oaks stood and placed her hands on her hips. On her way up, a thorn scraped against her arm. She ignored the sting. "Who is Eddie?"

"I don't know." Sadie pulled her lips to the side as if she was thoroughly questioning now whom she had just mentioned. "He swims here sometimes. Usually at night but I guess he wants to be out here now."

"Ah, I see." Mrs. Oaks held back a giggle. She loved to play along with Sadie and reassure her that she was taking her seriously. "What's he saying?"

Sadie paused, as if to listen. "All gone, they're all gone."

"Who's gone?" Mrs. Oaks furthered the interrogation. She stepped forward towards the edge of the pool and winced as chilly water splashed up from the edge of the pool. Her daughter's legs were so strong but she never knew how she could create such strong waves.

"I don't know Momma. I never asked." Sadie turned to her left and followed in the same circular motion again. "Who's gone, Eddie?"

Sadie continued to swim in circles, suddenly faster. Water soaked around the edges of the pool.

“Sadie, cut that out. You’re making a mess around here.” Mrs. Oaks watched her daughter spin, suddenly feeling dizzy.

“I’m not doing it, Eddie is!” Sadie stopped again and the waves continued.

“Well then, tell Eddie to stop!”

Sadie chewed her lip. “He doesn’t like being told what to do. He’ll get angry.”

“Sadie I mean it. You’re going to make the ground slippery and you could fall and get hurt. Make it stop, now.” Mrs. Oaks hated being stern with her daughter but she knew if she didn’t do it Mr. Oaks would, and his patience was much shorter than hers.

“Eddie, STOP!” Sadie screamed.

In a sudden motion, the waves subsided. The water became eerily calm. Sadie’s eyes widened as she watched the edge farthest away from Mrs. Oaks.

“Momma, he’s mad! Run!”

Mrs. Oaks rolled her eyes but dramatically ran in place. “Oh no, Sadie! He’s gonna get me!”

Sadie frantically waved her arms, causing waves much smaller than the ones from before. “I’m serious Momma, run!”

Before Mrs. Oaks could make another over-dramatic retort, she felt a warm sensation on her back, then a sharp sting, before she collapsed into the pool. She screamed in shock and water filled up her mouth, muffling her desperate cries. Once she hit the bottom, she tried pushing herself up to the surface, only to find the burning on her

back pushing down more severely. After what felt like minutes, the pressure eased and she was able to frantically resurface. She emerged to find Sadie crying out for her.

“It’s okay, Sadie! I’m okay!” Mrs. Oaks lied as she choked out water. “Your mom is just clumsy.”

Sadie knew all too well that that wasn’t true. She watched Eddie menacingly disappear behind the old oak tree and knew that he wasn’t done with her mother yet.

When Sam called out to Sadie for the third time, she realized she had been spinning in circles on the concrete. Sam held his arms out in front of him, as if he was in the middle of telling someone to put the gun down.

“Sadie, what’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a g-” It took every ounce of his maturity he had left not to laugh at himself.

If Sadie hadn’t been at the house, she might have let herself laugh at Sam’s inappropriate pun. But instead she stared at him, not sure if she could find the right words to form a simple reply.

Sam smiled apologetically. “How about I make us up some dinner? I’m assuming there’s no need for a tour now, so it’d be better for you to get some food...and a bath.”

Sadie nodded. She was starving and she could use a cleansing that didn’t come from a bucket with rainwater. Reluctantly, Sadie followed Sam in through the front of the house. The door opened with an exaggerated creak, revealing where Sadie escaped from nearly six years ago.

She was home.

“Shit,” Sam cursed to himself when he reached the kitchen. “Our run-in must have distracted me. I forgot about the rest of the twenty things I had on my grocery list.”

He frantically searched through the refrigerator and the cabinets. A blush spread across his face. The only things he hadn't finished were a nearly empty carton of milk, a pre-sliced cut of American cheese, half a stick of butter, and some Nilla wafers.

“I'm terrible at keeping track of food. Hopefully you can get me on track with that.” Sam scratched the back of his head. “The Hut has got to be closed by now. I know there's some Chinese takeout about twenty minutes up the road. Would you be good if I made a quick trip and brought us back some food? You could shower or nap or whatever you like.”

Sadie noticed how persistent Sam was with the shower. “Yep. I'll be fine.”

“Okay, awesome!” Sam grabbed the car keys from the kitchen counter. “It shouldn't take more than an hour or so. I'll grab a bunch so we'll have leftovers for breakfast. Bet you weren't expecting Chinese in the morning.”

Sadie shrugged. “I wasn't expecting anything, honestly.”

Sam cringed. “Right... Well, settle in. My bedroom is on the far left upstairs. I'm using the smaller room to the right as an office. You can take the room next to mine or at the opposite end. Shampoo and conditioner are in the shower. Left for hot, right for cold- Yeah, you know this already. Have fun.”

Once Sam was out the door, Sadie took in a deep breath and closed her eyes. She appreciated the heat blasting from the radiator, but still felt a chill down her spine. When she opened her eyes, she gaze met the dining room table. It was the same one her mother had bought, the first thing she had ever bought for the house.

When they purchased the house, it was completely empty. Mrs. Oaks was overwhelmed with excitement – she was able to use the leftover budget they didn't use on the house for their furniture. She found the table at an antique store three towns over. It was Swedish with trolls carved into the legs. The storeowner constantly joked about how it was used to ward off any unwanted guests, so they wouldn't have to worry about any bad dinner guests. He was disappointed to see the table go.

Mrs. Oaks held a great importance over having dinner together with her family every night. She tried to never repeat a meal twice – whether she would change up the marinade, or switch up the vegetable combination. Even after a year of living in the house, she was still able to hold up that tradition. However, she was barely able to hold up her sanity.

To Mrs. Oaks, Sadie's imaginary friend had become all too real. Eddie tormented her, whether he would just slam doors while she was home by herself or if he was feeling so bold as to push her into the walls or grab her arm until it burned. Sadie tried her hardest to get him to leave her mother alone, but the pleading only lead to more tormenting. Mr. Oaks had grown very impatient with his family, convinced that Sadie had been playing tricks on her mother and for some reason Mrs. Oaks had been playing along. During their last meal together at the Swedish table, he had had enough.

Mrs. Oaks had prepared a beef stroganoff with a side of broccoli. Mr. Oaks had his gin, Sadie had a glass of chocolate milk, and Mrs. Oaks had forgotten to get herself a drink. They all sat in silence with an unwanted topic hovering in the air between them.

“So, how was your day?” Mr. Oaks asked to anyone, his eyes set intently on his food. Even in her chaotic state, Mrs. Oaks was the best cook he knew.

“I planted some more geraniums...” Mrs. Oaks grabbed some noodles in her hand and pressed them against her lips, eyes wide and looking across the table to her husband.

“Oh please honey, would you refrain from making a mess?” Mr. Oaks cringed and passed a napkin to his wife, which she ignored.

“He hurt me again.” Mrs. Oaks replied quickly. She pulled up her sleeve and held out her wrist, which was stained with a red and purple ring around it.

“Not this again.” Mr. Oaks slammed his fork down on the table. Sadie jumped, and he turned to face her. “Did you do this to your mother?”

Sadie began to tear at the skin around her nail. “No, it was-”

“If you say his damn name again, you’ll be up in your room without dinner tonight or tomorrow. Do you understand me?” Mr. Oaks downed the last bit of gin from his glass.

The Oaks went quiet. Mrs. Oaks rapidly blinked then proceeded to shove handfuls of food into her mouth. The gravy stuck to her cheeks and chin. Sadie couldn’t watch. Eddie had ruined her mother. He had driven her to be this lunatic and it was all Sadie’s fault. It was apparent that for some reason she was the only one who could see him.

Mrs. Oaks swallowed loudly. “Sadie, where is Eddie tonight?”

“Sadie, don’t you dare encourage this.” Mr. Oaks made fists with his hands.

Sadie looked directly at her father but replied to her mother. “I saw him outside earlier Momma.”

“Sadie-” Mr. Oaks’ face was burning.

“Oh good. Maybe he’ll let me sleep tonight.” Mrs. Oaks smiled faintly.

“THAT’S ENOUGH!” Mr. Oaks got up from his seat. “I have heard enough of this Eddie bullshit. Whatever game you two are playing needs to stop. This has been going on for a year. It’s time the two of you grow up.”

Mrs. Oaks stood as well and wiped her face with the back of her arm. “I have been asking you, begging you, for months to let us move. We need to escape from Eddie. He won’t follow us if we just leave.”

“Move? You want us to move, after I busted my ass trying to buy this place that you wanted so badly? Now you want me to throw it all away because our daughter has made up some imaginary friend that you’re convinced is real? Have you truly gone insane?” Mr. Oaks looked into his wife’s eyes desperately searching for a chance that this was a sick joke that could finally come to an end.

“Do you think I would joke around about this?” Mrs. Oaks pointed to the bruise on her wrist. “Or this?” She lifted her shirt above her stomach to show red rashes. “Or this?” She turned to display cuts from the bottom of her neck down to the small of her back.

Sadie gasped. “Oh, Momma...”

Mr. Oaks glared at his daughter. “Are you happy? Do you see what you’ve done now? Your mother has gone off the deep end just to play along with your silly games.”

“It’s not a game!” Sadie’s eyes welled with tears and she ran up to her room. Even through the sobs she could still hear her parents’ shouts. At one point she thought she could hear a boom and then a scream, but she had covered her ears with pillows in a pathetic attempt to become blissfully ignorant of the situation.

Now that she was older, Sadie was able to distinguish the sound of a boom as a punch to the face. She slammed her hand down on the table and shook her head, then agreed to herself that it was time for a bath.

Once the steaming water filled just under the faucet, Sadie stepped into the tub and laid back. The bathroom was even nicer than she remembered. The mint green and white tiles were nearly spotless and only a couple of them were cracked. The room was long, the bathtub at the end, creating the most eye-catching part to the room. The legs of the tub were bronze, shaped like tree trunks. The showerhead matched and stretched over the length of the tub to create the feeling of rain when it poured. Even the toilet was thoroughly clean.

Sadie was happily surprised to find that Sam used quality hair and body-care products. She used a dab of the shampoo to create a bubble bath and the green apple scent of it clung to the air. And one point she noticed the water had turned dark and murky, so she emptied out the tub and refilled it with more hot water, than found herself wondering how much the water bill would be. She would have cared more if the bath wasn't so soothing, and so she sunk back and closed her eyes.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed when she heard a banging on the door. She rapidly sat up but before she could reply the door swung open.

"Hey Sadie, the food is- Oh," Sam quickly turned and covered his eyes. A burgundy blush filled his face. "I'm so sorry. I thought you'd be done by now."

Sadie wrapped her arms around herself and some of the bubbly bath water splashed over the side of the tub. “In what situation would it have been okay to walk in on me while I was in the bathroom?”

Sam tried to think of a response but then realized the point was not to have one. “Right, well, dinner is here. Come down whenever you’re ready.” Before he walked out, he added, “I’ll bring you some fresh clothes. They’ll be right outside the door.”

Sam walked out; his face even warmer than it had ever felt in the hottest part of summer. As he walked downstairs, he took note that now that a woman was living with him, he would have to be careful where he walked and when.

Sadie felt herself blushing as well, but did not hurry to jump out of the tub. She sat back and once more and took in the situation. Just one night prior, she had not the slightest idea of where she would be sleeping. Now she had a bed to look forward to, even though it was one that she did not care to ever sleep in again.

After the tub cleared out and she had slipped into Sam’s sweatpants and a t-shirt with a band name Sadie had never heard of, she was able to find a packaged toothbrush. Since the rest of her body was clean, she figured she owed it to her teeth to scrub them as well. It took four rinses but Sadie was able to make them appear less yellow, and more like a dirty white.

At the table, Sam had set out some nice dishes and silverware. He filled two glasses with ice water but also put out some wine glasses in case she was into that. He still had a nice bottle of chardonnay leftover from a date that never happened. The takeout boxes were all lined up neatly with spoons in them for serving. He nearly ordered one of everything: white rice, fried rice, egg rolls, shrimp tempura, sweet and sour

chicken, beef and broccoli, and some other dishes he couldn't even pronounce. He desperately hoped that he hadn't made his guest uncomfortable by walking in during her bath, but her image stuck in his head.

She looked so vulnerable, curled up in the water. Without her baggy clothes on he had seen bones through her skin. He couldn't tell if the darker marks were smudges of dirt or bruises. She was frail, but there was something pretty about her. What little features that she did have left were stunning. Her hair was pitch black, and her eyes were a bright green like grass in the springtime. Her lips were a frosty pink, like the soft petals on his favorite flowers his mother used to plant. Sam found himself wondering, if a girl like that was at one point even more attractive, and she was all alone, did anyone try to-

Sam looked up from the table to see Sadie standing in the entryway to the dining room, leaning against the wooden frame. He realized he had given her his favorite t-shirt but did not regret it at all. It was very loose on her but she looked so comfortable and refreshed. Just one bath seemed to bring some life back into her.

While Sam glanced over Sadie, Sadie ogled the food. It was more than she had had in years, and it all looked so good. She immediately noticed the wine glasses as well.

“Classing up the take out?”

Sam raised his brow but noticed she was looking to the wine glass on her side of the table. “Oh, no, I just didn't know your taste. Are you into wine?”

Sadie bit the inside of her cheek. “I'm not sure, actually. I've never had it.”

Before Sam could look more into it, Sadie took her seat and grabbed the box of fried rice. She poured half of it onto her plate before grabbing the beef and broccoli box and doing the same. Sam chuckled and reached for the white rice.

“It’s nice to see someone who’s as enthusiastic about food as I am, although I’m sure you have a better reason to be this hungry. I’m just hungry all the time.”

Sadie let herself giggle and bit into a spoonful of rice before asking, “Do you live here by yourself?”

“Oh yeah.” Sam opened a packet of soy sauce. “I’ve got this place to myself. Although, I rarely get to enjoy the quiet time. Most days I’m working from morning until night driving from appointment to appointment. Some people are too afraid to see ghosts when it’s dark, and others have no choice. There are spirits who will only come out during the nighttime. Stubborn spooky bastards.”

“The job is that busy?”

“Oh yeah.” Sam bit into the chicken, the tangy sauce dropping over his mouth. He dabbed with a napkin before continuing. “You’d be surprised. The moment I put the word out about the job, I got over twenty calls in one day. I even got myself a fancy appointment book just to keep track of all the jobs I have to do. That’s why I think it’d be great to get someone else on the team. If we split up the work, we’d be able to cover more ground. It’s a job that’ll never go out of business – people are dying all the time.”

Sadie rolled her eyes. “What is it that you do, then?”

“Oh, most everything. I’ve talked to dead relatives about where they’re hiding the family fortune. Like I mentioned before, I’ve been to a sorority’s haunted house party. Sometimes I banish ghosts from the house. That’s a little more difficult, I’ll have to teach you that at some point. I’ve only done it a handful of times. But other than that, it’s mostly communication. People want to know what’s up with the dead, although usually

it's nothing too dramatic. Sometimes they're just lost. Although, I'll tell you right now, I don't do exorcisms, and neither will you. That's a completely different specialty."

Sadie chewed the rice in her mouth until it was just one big glob. She didn't want to ruin her first real dinner in years, but questions upon questions were filling her mind. After chewing piece of broccoli and swallowing it down with clean water, she cleared her throat and looked up at Sam.

"You said the house had been empty for a while before you bought it?"

Sam was afraid of this line of questioning. Now that he knew the previous owners were of relation to Sadie, he was afraid to admit what he knew of them. He filled his mouth with a piece of chicken smothered in the sweet sauce and nodded, then proceeded to fill his glass with wine.

"What happened to the previous owner?"

Sam swallowed hard. "You mean your father?"

"Yes." Sadie set her spoon down and held eye contact.

"Why don't we talk about that later?"

"I need answers." Sadie's heart rate picked up. He was avoiding the conversation, and even with her lack of social skills she knew all too well that that meant something.

Sam sighed. "He was arrested."

There was no food in her mouth but Sadie choked. "For what?"

"Murder." Sam leaned forward and gripped the bridge of his nose. "They never found your mother's murderer but a few years ago he ran into the police station screaming that he did it. They locked him up immediately. That's why the house was so

cheap. No one wanted to live in the house where a murder took place. Rumors spread like wildfire, I mean, I'm not even a hundred percent sure if that's true."

Silence passed between them after Sam finished his statement. The food in front of her was beckoning Sadie but suddenly she did not feel hungry anymore. She felt empty, but not hungry. Before Sam could make any comforting words, she pushed away from the tables and sprinted upstairs to her old room. While she collapsed onto the bed, she noticed it was the exact same one that she had left behind, green pillows and all. They practically even smelled the same since she left.

While sitting up to lean back against the headboard, she painfully observed that she had quickly developed a habit of running away from Sam. This man had done nothing but provide for her since early that afternoon, but the news that he carried was too much to handle in front of him. Her own father was in prison. That was not a piece of information that she would have shared with a stranger. And she couldn't explain it to him, but she knew her father was innocent.

After their last dinner together, the Oaks had dispersed into separate rooms. Sadie had disappeared into her bedroom, Mr. Oaks trudged into his, and Mrs. Oaks stayed behind in the dining room. The house was silent until Sadie heard yelling, and the sound of breaking glass. She pressed her ear to the door, afraid that if she opened it she would become part of whatever scene was taking place downstairs.

"Leave me alone!" Mrs. Oaks cried. "You're tearing us apart! You're ruining my family! Leave us alone!"

Sadie could hear banging on the walls, like Mrs. Oaks had been flailing her arms through the air in attempts to hit her target. She was hunting blindly.

Mr. Oaks had done nothing to stop the scene. In an attempt to drown out his wife's pleads and threats, he hummed a song to himself that Mrs. Oaks used to hum to him whenever he couldn't sleep. Sadie could hear that through the wall as well, and the chaotic sounds clashed around her. She ran to her bed and buried herself beneath the covers.

Mrs. Oaks' frantic attacks on Eddie persisted for three hours. Sadie could tell her voice was getting raspy and that she was losing her breath. She wanted so badly to hold her mother and tell her everything was okay, but the majority of her was hoping that her mother's rant would scare Eddie away.

At some point during the night, well past midnight, Sadie heard the backdoor slam shut. Immediately, she went up to her knees and peered out the window next to her bed. From what she could see, her mother was standing near the edge of the pool, screaming into the air.

"Where are you, asshole?" Mrs. Oaks sounded exhausted and hoarse, but she was able to stand up straight and stick out her chest as a mere sign of a threat. "Where are you? Let me see you! Are you scared of me now?"

Sadie tensed. She could not see Eddie anywhere around the yard. With her meager height, she could barely even see her mother. The most she could see was the glowing aquamarine pool.

"Eddie, are you there? Leave me alone! Leave my family alone! Just go-" Before Mrs. Oaks could finish her threat, she suddenly collapsed into the pool. Sadie watched as her mother's body shrunk smaller and smaller the deeper she went. She expected her mother to swim straight back to the top, but something was holding her down. Sadie went

up to her toes to catch a better glimpse, but all she could see was a blur of dark colors smearing through the pool.

“Dad!” Sadie screamed. “Daddy!”

But Sadie could already hear her father’s bedroom door burst open. She could hear him calling to her from down the stairs.

“Sadie, get the phone! Call nine-one-one, just like you practiced at school!”

Before Sadie left her room, she could see her father bursting out to the backyard and kneeling down next to the pool, then diving into it.

But by the time the police arrived thirty minutes later, Mrs. Oaks had been dead for twenty-six minutes.

Sadie could remember the constant police interrogations. She was excused from school for two weeks while her mother’s murder case was investigated. Sadie’s witness statement was the only proof that Mr. Oaks had not been the one to push Mrs. Oaks into the pool, and so they ruled it out as a suicide, making the claim that she was drunk when she jumped into the pool, although Mrs. Oaks hadn’t touched a drop of alcohol since she had been in college.

Even though Sadie had stood up for her father in front of the police, he still blamed her for the death of Mrs. Oaks. He claimed his daughter led his poor wife into insanity. Although he provided food and shelter for Sadie, he had given Sadie no care. He didn’t even worry when she had stayed out until three in the morning to study for an exam and didn’t let him know. He didn’t miss a minute of sleep when she had gotten hit by a car at the age of sixteen and had to spend a month in the hospital. He didn’t even bat

an eye when she returned home in a panic, claiming that a ghost at the hospital had possessed her. He just did not care.

By the age of eighteen, Sadie was sure that leaving home was the right thing to do. Two days after receiving her high school diploma, she packed her backpack with a picture of her family on a vacation to Disneyworld, a box of crackers, a large water bottle, and a blanket that her mother had made for her before she was born. Mr. Oaks didn't so much as look up from his book when Sadie announced her departure. However, he did walk up to the front window and watch her walk down the driveway. Mr. Oaks had always believed that family was the strongest system, but within such a short amount of time, an invisible man tore them all apart.

Sadie held her arms around her stomach and squeezed her eyes tightly shut. The sadness hurt her physically, to think that she had made her way home only to find the last of her family gone. When a tear inched its way through her eyelids, she slipped underneath her blankets and sobbed silently.

Sam was not sure whether to give Sadie her privacy or check in, but he knew she needed to eat. However afraid he was to approach her, he was more than willing to break through the fear to come to her aid. From the pantry he found a tray, big enough to hold a plate full of servings of each food. He filled a large bottle with water then carried it all upstairs. He knocked twice, announced himself, and then slowly entered.

It was completely dark in the room but he could see the outline of Sadie's body hidden underneath the blankets. He could also see them shaking from her sobs. Carefully, he set the tray down on the small wooden desk against the wall.

With his most gentle voice, Sam spoke. “I brought you some food. You don’t have to eat in front of me, but I would like you to have something in your stomach. You can leave the tray outside your door when you’re done and I’ll pick it up in the morning.”

Before Sam turned to leave, he could see the bed violently quiver, followed by a loud sniff. Silently, he groaned. He knew she didn’t want him there but he so badly wanted to be there for her.

“Sadie...” Sam sat on the edge of the bed. The lump of Sadie’s body backed away. “Listen, I know we’re strangers. This is strange for me too. But I want to let you know I’m here for you. You don’t have to be alone anymore.”

From beneath the covers, Sadie’s eyes shot open. She found herself believing him; trusting him. Warily, she emerged from the bed. Sam was smiling at her, and when he leaned over to caress the back of her head, she stayed still.

Sadie’s hair was still wet when he touched it, but his hand stayed steady. Even though it wasn’t much, he was grateful that she allowed him to even get that close. It was like those videos he used to watch where people were able to get up close to a timid animal.

“Will you eat, please? For me?” Sam nodded towards the tray.

“Fine.” Sadie sat up as Sam brought the tray over to her. Her bites were small, but grew as the flavors overwhelmed her taste buds.

Sam cleared his throat and straightened up. “Look, Sadie. I’ll tell you everything you want to know in time. But for right now I want you to feel welcome. If you have anymore questions, save them for once you’re settled in, okay?”

With her cheeks stuffed full of rice and chicken, Sadie nodded. Sam laughed.

“Well, I brought your bag in earlier. It’s in the corner.” Sam got up and walked over to Sadie’s backpack, still damp from the rain. He tugged at the zipper. “What’s in this thing anyway?”

Sadie tensed. Sam lifted his hands rapidly.

“Okay, okay. I’ll bring it to you.”

After finishing her bite, Sadie dug through the backpack. From the bottom, she pulled out the picture of her family. “I haven’t looked at this in months.”

“What’s that?” Sam reached out.

Sadie handed over the picture. “My parents. I’ve been trying to forget I had any in the first place, but that would be difficult to explain.”

Sam smirked at Sadie then looked down at the picture. He audibly gasped and froze when he noticed Sadie staring at him.

“What? What’s wrong?” Sadie sat up straighter.

“Nothing.”

“Tell me.” Sadie leaned towards him, causing some rice to slide off of the plate.

“You promised me, no more questions until you’re settled.” Sam backed up, noticing uncomfortably how close Sadie was to him.

“I’m settled. The backpack is unpacked. Now tell me.”

Sam swallowed. “That’s your mother?” He pointed to the picture.

“Yes,” Sadie nearly choked on her response, “why?”

Sam shifted uncomfortably. “Don’t freak out.” He regretted the words the instant they left his mouth. He knew she would freak out, whether or not she was told not to.

Sadie only leaned in closer.

“That woman, your mother,” Sam couldn’t keep Sadie’s eye contact. He only looked down to the picture. “She’s here.”